

Part Seven: “Body Life Disciplines”

“The Bible knows nothing of solitary religion.”
(John Wesley)

The corporate spiritual disciplines are simply those which are shared by the members of the body. In fact, one could use “body life disciplines” or “koinonia disciplines” as appropriate alternatives, the latter being in reference to the Greek word used 19 times in the New Testament which means “having in common” or “joint participation.” All of these terms are useful, pointing to the important fact that the ultimate effectiveness of the Church requires the working out of each member’s personal spiritual disciplines.

Every Christian has an intensely unique relationship with God. He is saved by God’s grace through his personal belief in the finished work of Jesus with the subsequent fruits of that believer’s life being judged on his personal responses to God. Nevertheless, this same Christian has also been baptized into a body and has become part of God’s forever family. He is thus an integral part of the whole Body of Christ as well as being an individual son or daughter of the King. Naturally then, each believer’s spiritual disciplines will be connected to his interaction with others – even when he is unaware of it. And, like all the personal disciplines we have discussed, these body life disciplines find their foundation and methodology in the Scriptures, their empowerment in the Holy Spirit, and their purpose in being faithful to shine forth God’s character.

Here is a more specific breakdown of how it works. The koinonia disciplines are personal spiritual disciplines that 1) serve other believers, and/or 2) are shared by other believers, and/or 3) that are seen by others, including nonbelievers. In that third category is the Church’s common witness to the world regarding the truths of God, the wonder and beauty of transformed lives, and the Lord’s graciousness expressed most importantly in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Remember also that these koinonia disciplines are not exclusive to the programs of the church building in your neighborhood. We hope they will be exercised in the church, of course, but when the Spirit is moving, the corporate disciplines will be practiced also in small groups, in combined church fellowship (i.e., a denomination, a community outreach like the Life Chain or an evangelistic campaign), a missionary organization supported by individual Christians all over the country, the aggregate testimony of the universal Church to a watching world, and so on.

“Though true Christianity uniquely involves a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, it is also a corporate experience...Christians cannot grow spiritually as they ought to in isolation from one another.”
(Gene Getz)

Without doubt, the four most mentioned corporate disciplines are those mentioned in Acts 2:42: listening to the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayers (plural). These certainly make a good start to the subject. However, I believe that Acts 2 should be understood as a “narrative” section rather than a “normative” section. In other words, it is a description of what happened at that time and not necessarily a mandate for what Christians must always, everywhere, and forever require in their various church assemblies.

One reason for this conclusion is that the word “fellowship” does not tell us exactly what activity the immediately post-Pentecost church in Jerusalem engaged in. Since the Greek word is used in so many different “sharing” actions, we can’t assume to know just what their fellowship involved, let alone feel required to try and follow their practices. Second, there are several other details in the context surrounding this verse which describes things that very few Christian congregations today would deem obligatory. For instance, must we experience miraculous signs and wonders? Will there be an unusually intense reverence for God occurring in every soul? Should we, like the Jerusalem Christians in that moment of history, hold all wealth and possessions in common? Must we be going from house to house for meals? And what about worshipping daily in the Temple? So, again, looking at Acts 2 (including verse 42) can give us ideas and inspiration for how corporate disciplines can work, but it shouldn’t be interpreted as mandatory and certainly not as comprehensive.

Please consider another, more directly relevant Scripture for the practicing of body life disciplines. It is Hebrews 10:25. It is a verse, as you well know, frequently used by preachers to remind their congregations to make it a priority to do just that; namely, congregate. But here too, the context is critical to seeing the whole picture. Why assemble together at all? The text makes it clear. The assembling together should be marked by personal (and corporate) purity, by steadfast faith even in trial and temptation, by a heart moved to encourage the body, and a powerful, ongoing consideration of how to stimulate the brethren thus assembled to love and good deeds.

“Satan always hates Christian fellowship; it is his policy to keep Christians apart. Anything which can divide saints from one another he delights in. He attaches far more importance to godly intercourse than we do. Since union is strength, he does his best to promote separation.”
(Charles Spurgeon)

It is a challenging text, to be sure, as it presents church life as being a great deal more intentional and interactive than it normally is. Indeed, the passage emphasizes that the real value of the assembling together is what happens afterward; that is, in the lives and ministries of Christians as they go from the meeting place back into the world. How do we then decide what should make up the koinonia disciplines for our day and respective cultures? The starting point is to

remember the threefold definition given earlier. The corporate disciplines are personal disciplines that serve other believers, that are shared by other believers, and/or that are seen by others as a witness of the body’s shared commitment to God.

The teaching of the Word is a given. It’s emphasized in Acts 2:42, of course, but that’s just one of numerous examples from the New Testament showing the priority of teaching God’s Word as a corporate discipline. Indeed, it is foundational to all of the other body life disciplines, a priority that fits with the whole Bible’s insistence on growth, encouragement, correction, and training in righteousness coming from the Word. God’s giving the Church the gifts of preachers and teachers also underscores that priority. And yet teaching isn’t supposed to be relegated to the Sunday morning pulpit. For God also blesses local assemblies through the teaching of elders, the

mature saints who instruct the younger ones, and all of the mutual admonition and encouragement that believers owe each other.

No, the Sunday morning sermon is just a beginning, not an end. And even in the Sunday assembly, the ministries of teaching and “stimulating one another to love and good deeds” can include testimonies, drama, missionary reports, and (as I have observed in churches in Belarus, Russia, and Poland) poetry and additional, shorter sermons presented by the elders and other laity. Koinonia disciplines exercised in the assembly can also include reading aloud the Scriptures and creeds, corporate confession, news of ministry opportunities, and many more. Sunday church need not (and should not) be a one-man show. The principled, guided involvement of church members should enhance the educational impact of the Sunday service.

Of course, in most churches of the West the Sunday service are not usually a one-man show anymore. In fact, if there is a star in the spectator-oriented experience of the modern church service, it is the lead musician, the person we incorrectly label the “worship leader.” Why is that term incorrect? Well, because genuinely biblical worship is a whole way of life and not merely a brief involvement in singing and/or the singing of a small group. Worship is abiding in Christ and devoting one’s time, treasure, and talents to the service of the Savior. And though corporate spiritual disciplines can certainly include the assembly engaging in music of various sorts, the amount of time, attention, and passionate devotion that is regularly invested in “worship music” is way out of whack with New Testament models.

Remember, those four items from Acts 2:42? Music, you might note, wasn’t one of them. Nor was music mentioned in any of the Acts 2 description of the Jerusalem church. Other narratives from the New Testament (and the centuries of church history following) do mention singing but when they do, it is to usually say that the assembly sang a hymn -- one hymn (Taken from the words of Scripture), without instruments, without sound systems, without mood lighting, without ear plugs. Quite a contrast to the elaborate, expensive, performance-driven “worship music” that now takes center stage (and a lot of time) of so many of our church services today, right?

I’m afraid that among the most sorely neglected body life disciplines are ministries to “the least of these” and support for the laborers in God’s harvest fields. Is your church or other team of believers actively serving the cause of the unborn endangered by the barbarism of abortion? And what of the tragically marginalized of modern society: seniors; people facing severe challenges of economics, disaster, or health; persecuted believers? And are we involved enough in helping missionaries, Bible translators, and relief workers who provide the liberating news of the gospel along with helping immediate physical needs? Let’s start making these matters a priority in our giving, encouragement, prayers, and assistance.

And that preoccupation with music has exacted a lot of damage, not only in the divisions caused by the “worship wars” within our assemblies, but because it has led too many Christians to believe that worshipping God is merely (or, at least, primarily) the brief, emotional experience that comes from listening to a performance of the church “worship team.” But again, the Bible

presents worship as the well-invested pilgrimage of obedience, service, and stewardship over all of the Christian's life.

But whatever your opinions on the above points, the true disciple of Jesus realizes that the authentic worship of God must go beyond the one's initial instruction, beyond the music, beyond the Sunday service. Worship must reflect a life fully spent pursuing the Lord's purposes. And when applying the corporate disciplines, worship must pursue the goal of stimulating "love and good deeds" among the brethren. For instance, one who truly "leads" the church in worship would be leading the saints into such crucial corporate disciplines as prayers together, small group fellowship, mentoring, public witness and outreach, supporting mission activity, elders praying for the sick, older women teaching younger women, inter-church cooperative actions, visitation to the lonely, ministry to widows, teaching the young, public baptisms, church discipline, and anything else involving two or more believers gathered in Jesus' Name. So love

"Our love to God is measured by our everyday fellowship with others."
(Andrew Murray)

one another. Honor and serve one another. Pray for one another. Bear one another's burdens. Lead exemplary lives before the brethren. Present a unified witness of holiness and grace before the watching world.

And, of course, never forget that your personal disciplines must be sincere and consistent before your involvement in corporate disciplines will be of any value to God. But if you are growing and worshipping and serving through the power of the Spirit, you will be a powerful help to your forever family of fellow Christians.

"One Final Word"

Spiritual disciplines are *not* works which can earn one's salvation. Make no mistake about it; sinners can only receive spiritual life by trusting in the death of Jesus Christ as a holy payment for one's sins. Indeed, at the very moment when that decision is made to trust His substitutionary sacrifice, God graciously forgives that person's sins -- completely and forever. But while spiritual disciplines are not *the beginning* of the Christian life, they are most certainly *the outworking* of the Christian life once begun. And thus, they are of critical importance for the believer.

As we have seen in these brief pages, the purposes of biblically-based spiritual disciplines are for the Christian to grow closer to Jesus, to overcome the temptations and trials that threaten the successful Christian life, to be more consistent and effective ambassadors for the Lord, to expect greater power and intimacy in prayer, and to wisely lay up treasure in the world to come. Therefore, if we truly desire to be loyal stewards of God's grace; to be "doers of the word and not hearers only;" and to one day hear the words of our Lord, "Well done, My good and faithful servant," spiritual disciplines will remain intensely valuable to us.