

Why Christians must continue to meet together in the Covid era



Why Christians must continue meeting together in the Covid Era 30th August 2020 Pastor Roy Summers Romans Chapter 16

Masks hinder communication!

A week or so ago I was shopping in Aldi. I put the eggs, carrots, whatever, on the conveyer belt and smiled at the cashier—as you do! - and she smiled back. Both of us were wearing face masks, so when I started packing my shopping I said to her, “Isn’t it a good thing we can smile with our eyes!” And she nodded in agreement! But then I asked her why she was wearing a face mask when she already had a Perspex screen in front of her; and this is where the conversation unravelled because I did not understand her answer! I *thought* she said that she was protecting someone at home - but as she kept on trying to explain herself, I did not understand what she was saying because I could not lip read and the conversation came to one of those mis-communication ends! And I realised - what we are all learning – that face masks hinder human communication - because we use so many non-verbal cues and signals to get our message across, as well as our words.

One study back in the 1960’s concluded that when we talk to each other, only a tiny 7% of communication comes through the actual words we speak, 38% comes through the way we say those words, and a whopping 55% comes through body language! God has designed us to communicate with each other, not just through words, but through the whole of ourselves.

In fact sometimes we must believe body language *more* than words: If someone came into your office one morning in a red-faced huff, slammed his bag on the desk, plonked himself in a chair and began to stare blankly out of the window, we’d come to the conclusion that something was wrong. And if he answered the question, “How are you?” with “I’m fine!” we’d believe *the body language* instead of the *words!*

Well, as I was praying this week about what to share with MPC on the last Sunday before my three month sabbatical, that little inconsequential supermarket exchange got me thinking about *Christian fellowship*, brothers and sisters in Christ sharing with one another in the Covid era.

With all the restrictions on us, how can we enjoy meaningful fellowship – which is not only a deep spiritual need, but a New Testament command? This morning I want to apply the teaching and wisdom of Scripture to this question: How can we have meaningful fellowship, Covid era?

It seems to me that Christians have three fellowship options before us:

(1) We can disregard the law and go back to meeting the way we did before the pandemic. But I cannot see how that ties in with the commands of Scripture to obey the governing authorities, such Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2.

(2) We could give up fellowship altogether until a vaccine is found or the virus has disappeared. Just stay in our houses on our own, see no-one? No we must not do that because it does not satisfy a deep spiritual need – or the commands of Scripture - to meet with one another. As a church pastor, I worry that some believers might plump for this option and say “I’m giving up on fellowship until the storm is past.” Scripture does not allow that.

No, the way forward, I believe is to work out new ways of meeting one another under the present restrictions, praying that they will soon pass.

(3) We work out new ways of fellowship under the restrictions. This sermon is about all of us working out new ways of meeting one another and enjoying fellowship – until the storm has passed.

And perhaps the most important thing I am going to say this morning, is this: I believe that one reason the Lord has allowed Covid is to challenge his people to use their homes for fellowship much more than they ever have in the past. Homes in the Early Church were the main meeting places for Christians, and we need to recover that habit or tradition in our day.

What I want to do is first to show you, from the Bible, how important fellowship is. I know many of us won’t need convincing, but since we live in an individualistic age, we all need reminding of our need of one another. And then I am going to suggest a few practical ways we can continue to enjoy fellowship under present restrictions.

(Even a year ago, I could not have dreamed preaching a sermon like this! But how times have changed and it is our task to apply God’s unchanging word to our strange situation today.) Let’s begin by reminding ourselves why we need to meet other Christians in person.

(A) Why do believers need to meet together in person?

(1) Christians must meet together because we have been made in the image of God. The first reason is because God has created us in his image (Genesis 1:27), and just as he is a social being, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit living in eternal unity and friendship and love with one another, so we are social creatures designed for relationship with God and one another.

What God said to Adam, “*It is not good for the man to be on his own*” (Genesis 2) is true of every human being. We are not tigers or giant pandas who are able to live solitary lives and were not made in the image of God: we were made like God who is a social being.

(2) Christians must meet together because Jesus set the example for us. And Jesus, the perfect man, set the example for us. At the start of his short three year ministry, “*Jesus appointed twelve—designating them apostles—that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach...*” (Mark 3:14) The most perfect man ever to grace this planet, needed people around him, to encourage him and to support him, because both in his divine nature and now in his human nature, he was a social being. If you and I really think we can go it alone, live without other believers in our lives, we are putting ourselves above Jesus, are we not!?

(3) Christians must meet together because the New Testament believers met together “Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.” (Acts 2:46) “Greet the church that meets at their house (Priscilla and Aquila) (Romans 16:5)

(4) Christians must meet together because individual Christians in the NT are only said to be one part of a bigger whole Each of us is only *one brick* in God’s temple (1 Peter 2) with Jesus as the most important capstone or cornerstone, each of us is only one brick needing all the other bricks. Or each of us is just *one part* of a human body, an arm, a leg, needing all the other parts, with Jesus as the head “*The body is a unit though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body.*” (1 Corinthians 12) You never find an arm or a leg walking down the pavement on its own do you? The thought is both humorous *and grotesque*. And in the same way there is no such thing as a New Testament Christian who is able make it on their own without other Christians around them. The hand needs the leg, and the arm needs the feet, and we all need the Head who is Christ.

(5) Christians need to meet together to maintain our spiritual zeal Fifthly, Christians need to meet together to keep up their spiritual zeal. Take a hot coal out of a fire and soon, on its own, it grows cold. “*Let us consider how we may spur one another on to love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage each one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*” (Hebrews 10:25) It is easy to backslide and drift away when we are on our own, but Christians around us stir up our zeal.

(6) Christians need to meet together to grow properly. In the sixth place Christians need to meet together to grow up properly. Any one of us can become imbalanced on our own. One particular teaching can become all important in our minds and before we know it we have blown a molehill into a mountain. I remember *one young man* from my days as a pastor up north, who thought that the only issue that mattered in the church was *which translation of the Bible* you read. This was quite literally *all* he talked about - not baptism, not the fruit of the Spirit, not sanctification, not love, not the cross, not Jesus, just Bible translations! And while what translation we use is *important*, it’s not *all important*. (In the English language, in fact, we are spoilt with *many* good and accurate translations. So many people today still have *no translation*). Without fellowship imbalance can happen to any of us. We need people around us to challenge us and correct us and even rebuke us, so that we can grow straight. “*Speaking the truth in love we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is Christ. From him the whole body joined and held together by every supporting ligament grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*” (Ephesians 4:15-16) Do you remember the film “The Elephant Man” from 1980? That’s what you and I will look like spiritually, if we do not have meaningful fellowship. But if we surround ourselves with loving and meaningful Christian friends we’ll grow to be like Jesus more each day.

(7) Christians need to meet together to shine the Gospel! In the seventh place, Christians need to meet together *to shine the Gospel* to a lost and needy world. If you had come to one of our Sunday morning gatherings before lockdown, you would have found *all kinds of people* in our school hall: old and young, middle class and working class, men and women, boys and girls, single and married, blue collar and white collar, people from Poland, Brazil, someone from a tiny little island off the west coast of Africa, and even the odd American here and there! Most of these people would have nothing in common with each other out there in the world. But they actually love one another, and have been drawn together in this amazingly diverse community called the church,

united around Jesus Christ their Great Shepherd, and his Good News which is for all people! *“You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus... there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”*. (Galatians 3) There are few more wonderful demonstrations of the power of the Gospel than a lounge or a *school hall* filled with people from all sorts of backgrounds united in Christ Jesus and his Gospel. We need to meet together to demonstrate the power of the Gospel to a lost and needy world.

So Christians must meet with one another:

1. Because we are made in the image of a social God
2. Because Jesus set the example and gathered 12 men around him
3. Because NT believers met together
4. Because Christians are described as just one part of a building or a body.
5. To maintain our spiritual zeal
6. To grow properly not lopsided
7. To shine the for-all-people Gospel to a lost world

(B) How can we do this?

But how can we have meaningful fellowship today? I have three suggestions to make here.

(1) Let's get our thinking straight

First, let's get our thinking, our doctrine, about fellowship straight.

(a) Fellowship is essential. Are we convinced from the Scriptures that fellowship is not an optional extra but an essential? I hope so! ? If you do not believe that believers need person-to-person fellowship, you need to change your thinking, or repent, repenting is a change of mind. And then you need to find fellowship.

(b) Fellowship is about believers meeting together not where they meet. Then, still about setting our thinking straight, let's remember what fellowship actually is: fellowship is believers meeting together, it's not about *where* they meet. It is a great mistake to think that because we can't have fellowship because we can't meet *in a building*. That is to confuse the church with bricks and mortar. *“Where two or three are gathered in my name there I am with them.”* (Matthew 18:20), said Jesus. Church is wherever 2 or 3 Christians meet together. The Government hasn't banned fellowship, it's just banned certain sized gatherings. Two families or individuals can still meet up in a home – that is fellowship, 6 people can meet up in a garden or open space – that is fellowship, and so on. New Testament fellowship can still happen because fellowship is simply believers meeting together - *anywhere*.

(c) Church is not family. And, still getting our thinking straight, this is for those of us who enjoy the high privilege of living in a Christian home, let's remember that *family is not church*. It is wonderful to be part of a Christian family, but there is a danger in then thinking that our family is all we need, and to become comfortable and inward looking! Jesus saw his “family” as a wider than Mary and his brothers: *“Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?”* Pointing to his disciples, he said, *“Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”* (Matthew 12:48-50)

We need more Christians in our lives than our flesh and blood Christians! Brothers *Peter and Andrew* needed the other ten disciples, and so did brothers *James and John*.

There are many blessings to fellowship beyond our family circles. Apart from the fact that we will become a more balanced Christians - because every family will have its weaknesses and blind spots as well as its strengths - when you get on in years the weight of old age won't fall only on your own family members.

When my father was confined to a nursing home, many Christian friends came to see him and help him. Of course we six kids played a major part, but what a joy to think that the burden of old age was spread out over the whole church!

So in this pandemic the first thing, we need to get our thinking about fellowship straight: (a) fellowship is absolutely vital, (b) fellowship is about meeting believers wherever that might be, and (c) for those of us who are blessed with Christian families, church is wider than family. Let's get our thinking about fellowship straight.

(2) We need to take personal responsibility for fellowship

The second way we should respond to our need for fellowship is to take personal responsibility for fellowship.

A friend from another church rang me in the middle of the pandemic complaining that their church wasn't organising enough fellowship for him or for single people on their own. I pushed back! "how many years have you been a Christian?" (It was decades!) "then", I said, "you organise the fellowship for yourself and for those who need it. Don't wait for your leaders to do that, you take responsibility! On Monday go for coffee in town with brother A and sister B, on Tuesday invite brother C into your home, and so on." He needed someone to remind him that Christians aren't *consumers* and churches aren't *service providers*, and that we must each take personal responsibility for fellowship. He agreed—because I was right!

(Of course the church does have some responsibility for encouraging fellowship:

At MPC, we have organised *home groups* and small groups all during the week, mainly on Zoom moment. We have kept our *Sunday morning* worship and teaching service online, [and we would encourage all our folk to maintain the habit of keeping Sunday morning set apart for worship, in preparation for the time when we can all meet up again]. And on Sunday mornings we're able to meet up "in spirit!" if not in body. And on four Sunday afternoons this October, God-willing, we're going to try a few larger meetings. Watch space. The church does have a responsibility to help it's members to enjoy fellowship, don't get me wrong, but in our present era, when the church's help is limited, the Lord is highlighting our personal responsibility for fellowship: let's each one of us take personal responsibility for our own fellowship! So how can we do that?

1) Let's be faithful in our homegroups

Zoom is not ideal, but it is better than nothing. And if you struggle with seeing all those faces, just listen in, you don't need to turn on the screen, just treat Zoom like a phone call with 10 people!

2) Organise your own fellowship meet ups – using your home where you can. You can invite one other family unit into your home for a meal or a coffee. Or you can go out to a coffee house for fellowship! I do this all the time, not only because I am a pastor, but because I need fellowship

myself. (So much so that my wife has in the past complained about the amount of money I spend on coffee! And so I have had to find the cheapest coffee houses in the city!) Organise your own fellowship! Don't wait for others, take the initiative!

And, as I said earlier, I wonder if one of the biggest challenges the Lord is bringing to the church through Covid is the *use of our homes* for fellowship. All the churches of the NT met in homes! If the Lord has given you a home, seriously consider stewarding it, using it as a base for Christian fellowship. And when we do that, let us especially look out for brothers and sisters who are on their own and welcome them into our homes. Don't leave it to Mike or to the other elders! And it is wonderful to see the church already doing this!

Are you with me brothers and sisters? (a) we need to get our thinking straight, then (b) We need to take personal responsibility for fellowship

And finally,

(3) We need to pray for our leaders and for our nation

It is not an easy time for our national leaders, because they are in uncharted waters themselves. We can pray that they will lead us wisely; that they will take into account the mental and spiritual well-being of their citizens as well as their physical well-being; and we can pray that an ethical vaccine would be found soon. These are good prayers to lift to our Father in heaven.

And for our nation, let us pray that through this pandemic, many people would turn to God, and out of their loneliness and fear find hope and comfort in the Gospel, because "God our Saviour," says Paul in 1 Timothy 2, "*wants everyone to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. (what truth Paul?) There is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men.*"

May the Lord help us to respond to his Word this morning and may he build his church in these trying times.