

Relationship as a basis for Christian Unity and Fellowship ... a question of salt

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A common folk adage on the Balkan Peninsula claims that before two individuals can say they are friends, they have to eat a kilo of salt together. One won't find this bit of folk wisdom word-for-word in Scripture, but the elements of the saying certainly hold true in relationships that reflect Christian unity and fellowship. The weight of this kilo of salt carries the sense that a relationship has to be formed between individuals — a heart connection characterized by time together, shared experiences, shared meals and honest interchange — before they can claim to have a real relationship. These time-taking, commonplace steps have to be walked out before two or more people can call themselves “friends” or claim to share Christian fellowship and unity. If this isn't so, then that unity and fellowship are very shallow. The road that takes us to fellowship and unity that is of a divine nature, the kind characterized by agape, unconditional love, is paved with the stones of philadelphia love, a brotherly affection that is based on quality communication and personal trust.

To hold to the common thread we are knitting in this symposium, I want to make this well salted relationship between Christ-following friends synonymous with Christian unity and fellowship.

Truth, as found in this folk wisdom, often enough, finds its worth on the anvil of everyday experience. Life itself is a heavy hammer, pounding relentlessly, leaving little place for what sounds like wisdom, but in the long run, isn't wisdom at all. It just sounds good enough to be embroidered on a piece of cloth, framed and hung in the kitchen.

I am a man who thrives off of and drinks deeply from the relationships I share with my brothers and sisters in Christ. The friendships that give me the most life are the ones that have enjoyed the test of time and distance, hilarious laughter and solved misunderstandings, worshipping Jesus and time at table, in short ... the salting that life shared together produces.

Some near hits and embarrassing misses

Shared doctrines and common theology, just as denominations and like traditions, have often been hailed as the tie that binds together the hearts of men in Christian love, brotherhood and unity. This writer humbly protests. While our watertight doctrines and lofty theology are necessary for the packaging and passing on of eternal, life changing truths, they have served as poor cement to hold people together. Instead, they have offered us banners to rally under, flags to wave and convenient, if inadequate, labels to wear. Doctrines and theologies help us and serve us, just as our denominations (or non-denominations) and traditions serve to define us ... but they have not served to unite Christians. Neither have they been the seeds that have produced a harvest of unity and fellowship. It would seem that doctrines divide more brothers and sisters than they unite and theology, no matter how sublime, does not bind together the hearts of men and women with cords of love. How many bitter divisions exist inside the unified fronts of our denominations and traditions? I don't have fingers and toes enough to count the splits and divisions that exist today.

Recently, I shared a cup of coffee, sugared rather than salted, with a young man visiting our church plant. He has a past in heroin addiction and all the darkness that that entails and presently struggles with a gambling addiction. As I sipped coffee with this brother, he explained something very basic to me. It wasn't our church's thoughtfully prepared sermons on the power of the cross and the grace of God that kept him coming back, even though they delighted him. Neither was it our carefully worded doctrines or illuminating theology that we've spent so much time forming that reached his heart. Rather, it was the relationships he formed through honest, confessional conversations and sharing agape meals after our services with other grace-given sinners that caused his heart to feel at home in our midst. This young man is not an exception. Rather, he and countless others like him are the majority. Relationship rates high. Relationships build and preserve Christian unity. Relationships enable us to overlook a multitude of sins. Doctrines and theology, denominations and traditions boast, at best, a bronze medal.

I've placed high hopes on prayer gatherings where I've joined hands with other brothers and sisters from other churches to pray for unity. We had our differences, but our united vision for a city-wide church was from the same page. Brothers and sisters lifted hands and prayed in languages earthly and angelic and begged for and proclaimed unity in our midst, but that unity has, to this day, remained allusive. After many painful months of gatherings, fervent prayer and the predictable prattle that characterizes such gatherings, we concluded that what we needed most was to have a barbeque, a meal where we sat down, ate, talked, laughed and shared life and salt together. We were brothers and sisters, no doubt ... but we were not friends. Where there is no friendship and no bond built on good

communication and trust, love cannot cover a multitude of sins. We needed to eat and drink together if we were going to keep up this business of praying. We had to build a relationship if we were going to build God's kingdom together. Sometimes, in these relationships in Christ, even a kilo of salt is not quite enough.

Paul's relationships

Few men in Scripture walked, talked and acted with greater authority and power than the apostle Paul. As a Jew and as a Christian, he commanded respect and wielded great authority and power. He wasn't a man who backed down or shied away from conflict or adversity. He seemed to meet it head on with passion and a faith in God's destiny for his life. Yet, it was not this grace giftedness and Holy Spirit power alone that endeared him to the early Christian community of his day ... and to us. Paul was a man who knew the worth of relationship. Paul had been with Jesus in a mystical way. His communion with the Savior was more akin to ours than to Peter's or his other contemporaries. Paul enjoyed a close communion with his risen Lord from the mystical Damascus road encounter to the tragic end of his life in Rome. But this isn't the kind of relationship I'm referring to in this writing.

Listen to Paul's language as he writes a community of believers with whom he had gone the distance and shared the saltiness of meaningful Christian community.

I Thessalonians 2:7-8 "... we were gentle among you as a nurse taking care of her children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our very own selves, because you had become very dear to us."

I Thessalonians 2:11 "... for you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory."

And again in 1:19 he writes,

"For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and our joy."

Paul is not waving his badge of apostleship in this letter as in other places. He doesn't point out his functional or God-ordained authority as he writes them. Instead, as he addresses them, he evokes his relationship with the Thessalonian believers to gain entrance into their hearts. This is the basis on which he urges them to receive and believe his teaching. The Thessalonians and Paul had eaten a lot of salt together.

We, just like the Thessalonians, place ourselves under the authority, under the headship and leadership of the people with whom we have relationship. Authority bears the most weight and is the greatest blessing when it is experienced in a communicating, trusting relationship. A community of Christ followers can be one in heart and mind with someone with whom they have a relationship of trust and love. Authority alone wears thin where there is no relationship to bear its great weight.

One has only to look at the language Paul used with his disciples or apprentices to understand the kind of relationships he kept. He refers to the young itinerant evangelist Titus as “a true son to me in the faith we share” (Tit 1:4). We see an even deeper relationship with the young evangelist, Timothy. He calls him a “true son to me in the faith we share,” (1 Tim 1:2,18), “a dear son to me” (2 Tim 1:2; 2:1). Mixed in with Paul’s apostolic instructions to his young apprentice are fatherly encouragements, advice on how to take better care of himself (1 Tim 5:23) and how to behave himself (1 Tim 4:12-16). Paul didn’t just consider Timothy his protégé whom he needed to “show the ropes” as he was climbing the apostolic ladder. His language reveals how there was much more than that there. Paul knew Timothy’s family well (2 Tim 1:5) and was present at important moments in Timothy’s life (1 Tim 1:18, 4:14). He even exhorts the troublesome Corinthian church to show special care for his young helper (1 Cor 16:10-11). Paul’s heart connection to Timothy is described in tender tones. The battered and tough apostle treasured Timothy’s tears for him and remembers with a father’s heart the time when he himself laid hands on Timothy to impart to him what he himself had received (2 Tim 1:3-4). This was a relationship conceived in salt.

Paul’s faithful coworkers were often ready to sacrifice their lives for this passionate apostle. With great emotion and praise he mentions his trusted partner in ministry, Barnabas (Ac 9:27), his dear fellow workers, Tychicus (Eph 6:21, Col. 4:7), Onesiphorus (2 Tim 1:16-18), John Mark (2 Tim 4:11) who he had learned to appreciate over time, and his coworkers Apollos, Priscilla and Aquila and others who, very likely, possessed strong personalities, power and authority.

Jesus’ actions as time was running out ...

Jesus’ very act of sitting down at table with his boys for the Passover meal is an act too often passed over. There were more disciples at the table than at the cross. Even today, while Jesus’ invitation to us is to take up our crosses and follow him he still invites us to a table to commune with him and with one another. It’s the table, not the altar, where we eat salt. It’s in relationships that we are “perfected in unity.” (Jn 17:23)

A closing word from Peter

The apostle Peter characterizes relationships of fraternal affection and brotherly love or communion birthed in salt in his ascending pyramid of graces and Godly character traits in 2 Peter 1:5-8; these, like salt, are essential in our quest to flavor our lives with fellowship through the one Spirit: “Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The “brotherly kindness” in this portion of Scripture is the philadelphia love that paves the way to agape love.

These kinds of relationships: those formed at table, in quality communication and mutual trust, those strong bonds built over time, are the paving stones of the path that leads us into the perfected, well-salted unity Jesus prayed for in John 17. From our relationships formed in fraternal love, we move forward into the agape of God.

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