

INTRODUCTION

The Challenge We Face

In a ground-breaking study on American culture, *Habits of the Heart*, author Robert Bellah warned that “much of what has been happening in our society has been undermining our sense of community at every level. We are facing trends that threaten our basic sense of solidarity with others.”¹

What are these trends? They can be summarized in one word: *expressive individualism*. Expressive individualism describes the tendency to believe that the most important things in life are *my* personal fulfillment, *my* self-expression, *my* truth, *my* authenticity, etc. We often hear expressive individualism sloganized as:

“You be you.”

“Be true to yourself.”

“Follow your heart.”

“Find yourself.”²

While these slogans rightly point out the importance of personal choices and identity, they betray a deeper tendency to make viewpoint and feelings of *the individual* to be the standard for right and wrong, success or failure. As Christians living in such a culture, it’s easy for these concepts to slip into our minds and hearts, like deadly chemicals seeping into our drinking water.

Maybe they already have.

Our primary concern with expressive individualism is not what it does to America, but what it does to Christianity, and more importantly, to the witness of Christ in the world. We are called to be *Christ’s body*, which, if it means anything, means that we are to have an undying commitment to the

¹ Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), xxxvi.

² Trevin Wax, “Expressive Individualism: What Is It?” The Gospel Coalition, accessed August 30, 2022, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/expressive-individualism-what-is-it/>.

Christian community that takes the form of the local church—loving each other, caring for each other, being with each other.

The gospel of Christ provides the resources for building and maintaining such a community. When people believe the gospel, they receive Christ's Spirit, who indwells them and stirs their hearts to love each other. This is what the Apostle Paul calls "the unity of the Spirit"—the unity among believers that has been brought about by God's indwelling Spirit.

But Paul mentions "the unity of the Spirit" in a particular context—urging his readers to strive to maintain that unity. The same disintegrating forces at work in American culture were at work in 1st-century Greco-Roman culture as well. Like the early Christians, we also must "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3).

This Study

In the atmosphere of such expressive individualism, the goal of this study is quite radical: to explain and apply what it means for Christians to pledge themselves to a life of togetherness—what the New Testament calls "fellowship" (1 John 1:1-3).

To accomplish this goal, this study concentrates on eleven key components of Christian fellowship:

1. Our walk together
2. Our devotion
3. Our salvation
4. Our daily bread
5. Our spiritual worship
6. Our gatherings
7. Our spiritual gifts
8. Our words
9. Our generosity
10. Our hope
11. Our witness

The material is formatted to be used in a group setting with a leader who can summarize the key biblical concept and guide a discussion so that the participants will talk about it together and connect the concept to practical living.

My hope for this study is best expressed in the closing words of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the

love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Corinthians 13:14).