

True Fellowship

Church As Community



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Art Katz

David
2000

True Fellowship

Church as Community

by
Art Katz

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by Art Katz

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About The Author

Art Katz was born in Brooklyn, New York, of Jewish parents, and raised during the Great Depression and turbulence of World War II. Dropping out of high school, Art became a merchant seaman, and was later drafted into the Army and stationed in post-war Germany. He later taught at an Oakland high school. Shattered by the disillusionment and horror of the Holocaust perpetrated against his Jewish kinsmen, Art embraced Marxist and existentialist ideologies as the solution to the vexing human predicament.

Hitchhiking through Europe and the Middle East while on a leave-of-absence from the teaching profession, the cynical and unbelieving atheist, anti-religionist and anti-Christian, was radically apprehended by a God who was actively seeking him. The actual journal of that experience, *Ben Israel – Odyssey of a Modern Jew*, recounts Art's quest for the true meaning to life, which climaxed significantly and symbolically in Jerusalem.

Art attended Santa Monica City College, UCLA, and the University of California at Berkeley, earning Bachelor's and Master's degrees in history, as well as a Master's degree in theology at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota. With his speaking ministry spanning nearly forty years, Art sought to bring the radical relevance of the Bible's message to contemporary societies, both secular and religious. With several of his books translated into major foreign languages, Art traveled frequently and widely as a conference speaker and prophetic voice for the Church until his death in 2007.

Acknowledgments

The presence of a divine reality in the earth is surely one of the great cries of our times. In His wisdom, God intends that this reality be formed and fashioned in a corporate expression of His people, who desire and seek for the glory of this reality through a divinely ordained relatedness that can best be described as true fellowship. The contents of this book is by no means an exhaustive attempt to describe that reality, but it will, in measure, allow the reader to be apprehended by some of the essential elements that God is seeking to establish in the life of His people.

Little or nothing is mentioned on the subjects of church structure and government. Others have written more adequately on such themes, but few have attempted to probe and explore Paul's words: "To Him be the glory in the church."

The material for the book was compiled and edited from Art's spoken messages on the subject of fellowship, given at different times and places during his ministry years. Special thanks to Jeannie Clink, Thomas Lei and Bryan Purtle for their needful help and watchful editing skills in the final proofing, to Linda Dunaway for her careful transcribing of many of the audio tapes, and to Chuck Schmitt for the cover design.

Simon Hensman
Laporte, MN
April, 2009

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Author's Preface

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious oil upon the head, coming down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard, coming down upon the edges of his robes. It is like the dew of Hermon, coming down upon the mountains of Zion; for there the Lord commanded the blessing - life forever. [\[1\]](#)

Dwelling together is much more than coming together for meetings; it is a daily relationship, an integration of life with the brethren in which we share the awareness of our imperfections and struggles in the faith. In the midst of that dynamic of life, God has commanded the blessing of the glory of His life. After thirty years of community living, I know that this is not an easy reality to obtain. There is a necessary redemptive suffering that is intrinsic to dwelling together, and makes that dwelling possible; it is called the cross.

In the final analysis, every issue in the walk of faith is the issue of the cross as the experience of suffering. Humiliation is a suffering, and when God called us to establish a community, I knew that I knew that I knew: "You have had it, Katz. This is going to be for you humiliation and suffering. You are going to be found out. You are going to be living closely and intensively with other people on a daily basis in which your defects, your shortcomings, your sins and your failures will be revealed." But out of that matrix of life, the possibility of a reality was able to break forth that can best be described as true fellowship.

May these pages communicate to the reader something of that reality, and particularly the glory of that reality. And may we, with the apostle Paul, be able to say in our deepest hearts, "to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen." [\[2\]](#)

Introduction

From the inception of my salvation, and into the first four or five years of it, I intuited that something was wrong in contemporary church life. Where was the power of God? Where was the glory? Where was the apostolic reality? Where was the “kingdom come”? Why could we not say in our generation as the saints of old said in theirs: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”? Why were we trying to induce people to “accept Jesus” on the basis of the benefit that would come to them for accepting Him? Why were we not speaking to them in the context of a soon-coming King as Judge over His kingdom? Could it be that there was no actual kingdom at hand being made visible before them that would have given us the authority to press that issue?

The Lord’s reply was to bring us to Minnesota, to a property that had previously been a Boys’ Camp. When I stepped over the link chain that hung across the entrance to the property, the Lord spoke four things into my spirit: “Dominion. End-time teaching center. Community. Refuge.” It was the beginning of a revelation of His kingdom that had its outworking in hardship, anguish of soul, and the terrible disappointments and frustrations that can only come to us in true church experience. I marvel at the naiveté of Christians who think that church is a place where they are going to be mollified or coddled. When rightly understood, church life is the very place in which God, in His wisdom, has reserved His most exquisite forms of redemptive suffering in order to bring us more rightly into the knowledge of Him and His purposes. That has been my experience, and I would not trade it for anything.

The church is called to be the “pillar and support of the truth.”^[3] To think that we can come to this character with others on the basis of a Sunday service and mid-week Bible study is to completely fall short of God’s intention for the church. To come to this reality is going to take a people who recognize that church is not established for our enjoyment, but for His glory, and that it is an all-consuming, total requirement for which our jobs and careers are but secondary enablements.

We all suffer from an inadequate view of the church. We have allowed the world to relegate the church to a Sunday afterthought, a kind of Christian cultural requirement that somehow serves the purposes of those who might obtain some benefit from it. The world does not see church life as any more important than many other institutions that serve the purposes of mankind. Therefore, we need to have our understanding opened to an apostolic way of considering what the church should be in the purposes of God.

Most fellowships of today are essentially an aggregate of individualities; we sit alongside each other, but we are not yet together in the biblical sense of that word. We do not yet constitute that wholeness or completeness. We do not yet reflect the genius of the unity that is in the Godhead itself, where the Son does everything for the Father, likewise the Spirit for the Son, and the three are One. When we come to that kind of

corporate unity of deferring one to another, the principalities and powers of the air will know it; but God first needs to reveal to us how deep-seated our individualism, self-will and rebellion are.

The powers of the air captivate the souls of men, rooting them in time, and blocking from their consideration the things that are eternal. We cannot come to freedom from this evil influence by ourselves alone. Separation from the world is a painful process, and those evil powers are pervasive and strong. It is only through the support, the encouragement, the prayer, the wisdom, the counsel of others and the atmosphere that we generate together as the community of God's people that we can live and maintain that freedom without being sucked back into the power of the world. The provision of a closely-knit body of believers is one of God's principal means to enable His people to overcome those powers. The sons and daughters of God are those who overcome the world, the flesh and the devil, and there is no place more conducive for being or becoming this kind of people except in such an intensive setting.

There is not a living soul whose life is totally free from deception. Our lives need to be submitted to the examination of God through the brethren in Christ. It will be a painful revelation, but rather the pain now than the unspeakable pain of learning at the judgment seat of Christ that we were living a delusion. We may have thought ourselves to be spiritual, while all along we were far removed from the spiritual authenticity and reality we assumed we had. The Lord is not going to indulge our romantic or wistful view of what we think true spirituality is. His gracious provision is an environment in which the true condition of our hearts, and the things that would not otherwise have been recognized, have the greatest possibility of being revealed to us.

The quality of our fellowship with the Lord vertically cannot be any better or more authentic than our fellowship with the brethren horizontally. We cannot have the one independent of the other, and we cannot have the one out of proportion to the other. How many of us think that we can, and love to be solitary and isolated saints, having some kind of imagined and euphoric relationship with God privately, but hardly having any patience at all for the believers who make up His Body? How can we cherish the Head more than the Body, and how can we honor the Head outside of the Body? It is like the vertical and horizontal beams of the same cross, and the one is in exact proportion to the other, thus saving us from exactly that soulish thing we would love to indulge, namely, isolation, separateness and privatistic living.

God has called us to the fellowship of Himself, to the fellowship of His sufferings and to the fellowship of believers, and we are not going to see great grace and authority if we are not authentically related in the Body and with the Head. In other words, we cannot have true vertical relationship with the resurrected and ascended Lord independent of an actual and existential one horizontally in His Body.

The way our typical Sunday services are constituted serves a purpose and suffices to a certain degree, but falls short of serving the ultimate purposes of God, and it is these purposes that I want to contend for. As the conditions of the world become more extreme and polarized, people are going to be forced to choose more radically for or

against God. We are in that painful interim between a conventional Christendom and the apostolic entity that God is wanting established again.

Chapter 1

Church as Community

In order to adequately fulfill the magnitude of end-time demands, God's people are going to be called upon to exhibit a quality of character beyond what we presently know in our comfortable, cultural and conventional Christianity. This brings to the forefront of our consideration the issue of a matrix of intensive life together as a mode of present living. Whether it is actual living communally on the same property, or living in close proximity, neither of these are to be thought of as ends in themselves, but rather as a means to a larger end, namely: "To Him be the glory in the church."^[4] Paul lets that statement stand without any explanation as to how that glory is going to be obtained, but leaves it for us to search out the meaning and make the application.

We need to consider becoming a community in the sense of a closely-knit integration of a shared life together. If a group exceeds the numbers by which intensity and truth of relationship are feasible, then it cannot, in my opinion, attain to true fellowship. A generalized congregation of three hundred, five hundred or a thousand cannot achieve what I am suggesting. Sadly, large membership is the great emphasis today, and constitutes a moving away from God's very provision for our ongoing sanity and sanctification.

Through years of intensive community experience, I have gained a view of church that has revised my understanding of the meaning of that word. In our time, church has become a misnomer, not just in fundamental and evangelical Christianity, but even in the finest forms of Pentecostal and Charismatic life. If our whole church experience is confined essentially to a Sunday service and Wednesday evening bible study, then it has become a caricature and distortion of God's original intention. If we have come to measure the success of a fellowship by how much we like the services: whether they are pleasant, whether the music is enjoyable, whether the preaching is good and how good the programs are, then we already have a faulty view of the church. However much we may applaud any of these aspects of a service, we need to understand that that very standard of measure is the indication of how far we have departed from the Lord's understanding of the glory of the church. We can conduct superb styles of Christian church services by accommodating the desires and tastes of our congregations, but we will never demonstrate the kingdom of God on that basis.

Church as community suggests a band of souls sharing a common pattern of life and spirit, seeking as their first motive the manifestation of God's glory in the earth through the relationships established in the intensity of daily life together. When we established

the beginnings of a community in northern Minnesota, we hardly knew what church as community meant. In the anguish and enormous humiliations, and in the terrible defeats and failures of all of our pet evangelical convictions, which burst like a bubble in the reality of the demands of an intensive life, something began to dawn on us. Though we did not understand it at first, we caught a glimpse of some of the essential elements that allow for the glory of God in our midst.

I am an enemy of any kind of utopian or social experimentation. The kingdom is too glorious a reality to be marred by men as something they can create or perform. This is the reason many communities dissolve. We came into community in complete ignorance of how to do it, and that ignorance was our saving virtue. The Body of Christ is synonymous with the kingdom of God, and neither of those realities was ever intended to become institutional. Both are living organisms, built and established relationally with God and with each other. To put it another way, the glory of God is the expression of His life organically administered, through the brethren, by His Spirit, to each other. In true fellowship, the brethren are made perfect, through daily relationship, through encouraging one another and often through rebuke and confrontation:

But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. [\[5\]](#)

What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. [\[6\]](#)

But if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. [\[7\]](#)

Church as community is radically and excruciatingly demanding, and yet, in this environment, there is the glorious possibility for this kind of existential fellowship with believers. As I have said, we do not have to be on the same property, although that should be preferred, but we do need to be in an intensive, frequent, honest, open-hearted and committed relationship with God's people. It will be agonizing before it is blessed, and painful before it is glorious.

In the daily life of the community, our supposed love for God is tested to the full by how much love we show for the brethren. In the wisdom and genius of God, we are saved from insisting that we can enjoy an exclusive relationship with God, while, at the same time, living separated from the brethren. Our love for God is revealed in the way we express our love to the brethren. It is because of that joining with the brethren and because God is joined with us in that kind of covenant relationship that we see the daily unfolding of His life. This unfolding will likely be slow, painful, clumsy, time-consuming and often wasteful, but the end thereof opens up the possibility for His glory to be in the church.

There is nothing more important than destroying romantic illusions and fantasies about what we think church as community is. The idea of joining a community of believers lends itself to either total rejection, for fear of becoming a heretical sect, or it is

seen as some kind of romantic illusion of tripping off into the rustic wilds. These are terrible distortions, and if there is any romantic idealization of what community is going to confer, or mean for us, we are already in the place of unreality and deception. The enjoyment and appreciation of Christian fellowship with all of its failures and inconveniences, while we are in the process of growing up together, is a much more realistic view of church as community.

Conducting our lives on a daily basis in close proximity to others guarantees that there will be tensions, misunderstandings, individual subjectivities, struggles and differences of opinion. Our disrespect for one another, our rebellion toward authority, our innate selfishness and insidious self-justifications are all revealed. It is a painful but necessary revelation of our hearts. We have to pass through a valley of disillusionment of what we think true fellowship is, what we as God's people are, and not the least, what we ourselves are capable of. In fact, the most painful revelation we need to face is the truth of our own condition. True fellowship is the courage and the willingness to be with one another and bear with one another in all of the above conditions.

There is an ideal, but there is also a reality, and poison is injected into the fellowship when someone comes to a community on the basis of an ideal. If we seek anything more than Christian fellowship and that "more" is a projection of our own imagining and romantic hopes, then we introduce a leaven into the whole corporate lump, and by so doing, the seeds of destruction of that fellowship will have been sown. To one degree or another, we are all dreamers and idealists about what we think community ought to be, and if it does not become that, we become disillusioned.

In community, our vain illusions will be quickly shattered. But disillusionment is a grace from God, and the only way to be disillusioned is unhappily a painful way, but far more painful and far more disastrous is to continue in an illusion that is unreal, and which, at the judgment seat of Christ, must be revealed as false. The disillusionment is not just with others; it is recognizing things about yourself that you would not have otherwise been compelled to experience or to see. When it does reveal itself, can we then bear the pain of watching the unraveling of the illusions of another, knowing that we are not to falsely comfort them, or intervene, thus interrupting the redemptive process of God? Can we let the mortification have its full work, and bear the stink of it, while we are alongside that suffering person?

The church is the "pillar and support of truth,"^[8] and if it is not that, then it is not the church in any true way. Truth has got to be unsparing and total. We cannot allow latitude for illusions and idealism, or any other kind of humanistic tendency. Church as community serves the purpose of putting those things to death. More than one community has been dissolved because the people could not survive the disillusionment. They were unprepared for it, and when it came, it took them by surprise and became the end for them because they had wanted to hold on to their illusions.

If we cannot endure a look of indifference, or a seeming rejection, or if we find ourselves reacting in a touchy and hypersensitive manner, how then are we going to be overcomers in the crisis time of the last days when the wrath of the powers of darkness

will be ventilated against God's people in a concentrated way? If we have protective little self-centered egos underlying an outward appearance of spirituality, we will find ourselves constantly hurt, but better to recognize that now, and to submit to the sanctifying work of God in an environment of true fellowship.

Community as Organism

We cannot come into community with our own agenda; we simply come in obedience. It was the same call to Abraham: "Go forth...to the land which I will show you."^[9] We come as the broken people of God, desiring to relinquish any strength which we might have in ourselves, and look to Him for the unfolding of the life together, day by day, as it pleases Him to bestow. The things that have their origin in God must have their outworking by the impartation of His life, given to those who are called together, and who respond in obedience to the direction of God.

The worst thing that anyone could do is establish community as a system in a pre-packaged way. By that, we will have contradicted the very spirit of community. Anything that is a system is antithetical to God in every point and particular. System suggests something man makes in his own wisdom and organizational ability, based on his own values, for the purposes of his own efficiency and success. Denominationalism is religion as system; it operates through a hierarchy of men and officers who have charge over districts and spheres of influence. We will be continually tempted to systematize our church life and bring it under human arrangement. Though it may have begun rightly, it can harden and stiffen in its forms and become an institution with a life unto itself, and thereafter, the whole issue becomes the perpetuation of the fellowship or the institution.

In antithesis to this, God has a purpose for the church that completely eclipses this mindset. He totally ignores the wisdom of the world, considering it foolish, and establishes a set of values, which in the eyes of mankind seem totally threatening, offensive, and will likely rub them raw. In the community of God's people, Christ is the Lord and center of all. It is He who mediates the life. He is King, and His Lordship is pervasive over all. His Lordship is not a body of rules that He sets down; but rather, it is something we learn of Him in the walking out of the life of faith.

The world values efficiency and utility, but in the kingdom, the values are the obtainment of godly character through whatever cost that might entail. God's main purpose is character growth, corporate life, the relationship by the Spirit, bearing one another's sufferings, and the instruction that comes to everyone because of all that. It is naïve to expect that everyone walks fully by the Spirit. A system based on efficiency will need rules and regulations to enforce it, thereby making it a legal system of telling people what to do and how. There is a tension of needing to have some measure of order and coherence, and yet not enforcing or requiring it, or else we would prevent the subtle tendrils of self-interest from being exposed. For example, was the failure of one of the families to pay their monthly rent actually due to poverty, or was their lifestyle and mindset of such a kind that paying rent was given little or no priority?

By the very nature of community, one's lifestyle comes under close scrutiny. The groceries we buy, the cars we drive, and the indulgences we insist we need are observed by those around us, who are committed to call us to account. It is amazing what people will spend their money on, even seeming legitimate things, but at the same time ignoring their financial responsibilities. There is a terrible tension while we patiently wait for believers to grow up to a place of maturity and responsibility, while yet resisting the temptation to try to have that measure of order by imposition.

God is concerned with optimum character development, which cannot be compelled, defined or structured. What men will do freely before God, unobserved by man, is where the real foundations of character are laid. God is interested in what is wrought in the interaction with the brethren when selfishness, vanity and pride surface in the working out of issues that come up. The "Sunday Church" mentality can easily become a mere convenience, but community is profoundly inconvenient; it is the going from "house to house daily breaking bread"^[10] and working through issues, tensions, difficulties and misunderstandings. It is amazing how easily these are expressed, and how quickly they can bring to nothing a relationship that has been years in the making; all the more reason, therefore, to be in a place of daily vigilance, prayer and dependency upon God.

The violating of one's privacy will test us to the depths of our being. In community our privacy will be invaded; we will never know when someone is going to come to the door for some requirement. One of the great tensions is in discerning how much time belongs to the family and how much to the brethren. How much should we be apart from the community, and how much do we give ourselves to the purposes of the community? It is not stated as some written credo, but something that needs to be worked out as the days unfold. We should profoundly desire the autonomy of families with the father as the head and the integrity of the family unit, but some of the deepest forms of selfishness have been hidden under the supposed sanctity of family: "Well, I cannot come to the meeting because of the children." How much has that been used as an excuse for people who really do not want to assemble together, and are employing the sanctity of family, as well as other values, as a cover behind which to hide?

Everything about true fellowship needs to be mediated from heaven by the Holy Spirit; it was so at the inauguration of the church and needs to be so now.

And behold, I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city [Jerusalem] until you are clothed with power from on high.^[11]

The Spirit was never given for us to do great acts that would distinguish us as individuals. He was sent to be the power and enablement for the corporate life together out of which those acts would then flow. In coming into community, it takes only a few weeks before you realize that you are not the nice guy you thought you were. True fellowship is based on His life, His resurrection life, which is His power, and yet there are so few who live in that realm, or who actually desire to. In fact, our present Christianity and conventional lifestyles, however well-meaning and disciplined, rarely require us to cross over into that realm, but as soon as we come into a testing relationship with each

other, we will find that we will need to know the reality of His life.

Let God make community in His own image, not what we think it should be. It may well be that His image for each of us is unique to ourselves, and the thing that most deters true fellowship from fulfillment is our insistence that the fellowship should conform to our image. May God give us such a heart for truth and authenticity, and to be made corporately into His image, for it is this that glorifies Him.

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