

Mountain Fellowship

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One of the signs of a child becoming a teenager is that they begin to really exert their independence. In doing this, of course, kids drive their parents crazy, for they no longer accept the "yoke of bondage" by which the parents have been trying to guide them. We all had to go through this process. Sometimes it is important to be able to stand alone. As Christians we know that with God we are a majority, and that we can do anything through His strength. But this isolation is not something to be desired, or sought out, like the hermit monks of old. We must seek fellowship with others of similar purpose and faith, so that we can strengthen each other and help each other through the rough times.

One of the real problems with personal exercise programs is that people do not like to exercise alone. It is much better to exercise with someone else who understands our problem, and is trying to accomplish the same thing that we are. This is why health spas and gyms are such big business. But fellowship is not just confined to religion or exercise: just consider Alcoholics Anonymous and Weight Watchers.

We all know that exercise is much easier to tolerate when it is made into a game. We can't really make a game out of our spiritual development, but it is clear that we can stimulate each other's growth by fellowshiping together. The concept of the church being a family is strongly emphasized in the New Testament. Indeed, this seems to be one of the fundamental reasons for a regular assembly. God's unselfishness is shown in the fact that he asks for us to help each other, and not just to worship him. Usually we are exhorted from the pulpit to attend worship or God will get us. But in Hebrews 10.25, God delivers his reason for us to "not forsake" the assembly: *'Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another.'* (NIV) And in the verse before this He says, *'Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.'* (NIV) We must try to think of ways with which we can motivate and comfort each other. One of the words translated 'comfort' in the New Testament is the Greek word 'paraklesis', which is defined as the help that not only puts an arm of comfort around a man, but which sends him out again into battle with the strength he needs to face the world.

Besides the fellowship of having fun playing a game, there is also a tremendous fellowship value when sharing difficulties. It was in this way that the people of Israel became a nation. I remember camping trips from my youth when it was so bitterly cold and wet that we just huddled together near the fire. Once in later years we went camping with only a hammock and a thin sheet of plastic over our heads; a storm came up and we nearly froze. But we all got together and re-strung the hammocks around the fire and hovered there all night long. In these difficult situations we do things for each other; we share things from our pack that will make each other more comfortable. We carry part of another person's load, and we laugh together about it later. But we forever after that consider ourselves part of a whole. This has been described as mountain fellowship as opposed to the fellowship of the plain.

We might think of this also as being more than a fair-weather friend. Our fellowship must be a help at all times, good or bad. Unfortunately what we really have sometimes is the **illusion of fellowship**; we think we have support from those around us, but when times get hard it is gone. The apostles, for instance, pretty much melted away from Christ when He was arrested. He went into court alone to face His destiny. But later these same apostles forged the greatest fellowship that will ever be. And we are privileged to be offered membership in that fellowship, which is the church. We must remember, though, that there is a commitment involved. It is all for one and one for all, no matter how bad things get. This fellowship is a true weave of those who believe in God's Goodness and act with that Goodness towards each other no matter what.

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