

Podcast Episode 2: Fellowship Diversity

QUESTION: As Christian fellowships are formed, they all seem to be very different. In what ways should they be similar, and in what ways is it OK for them to be diverse?

DENVER: Religion, when it exists, always exists in its true form as a community of believers. Community is required. If we don't have a community then we cannot be willing to mourn for those that mourn. We cannot comfort those that stand in need of comfort. We cannot stand as a witness to one another of God at all times and in all places. We cannot bear one another's burdens that they may be light, as is required by the gospel and by the covenant of baptism. None of this can be done without fellowship.

However, we do not need a new church. The only thing we need is a community of fellowship.

We need to renew a community-- not an organization, but a fellowship. Not a hierarchy, but a group of equals. The community needs to be renewed.

This is in Doctrine and Covenants, section 19: *"I command you that you shall preach naught but repentance,"* [D&C 19:21] and then 29: *"And thou shalt declare glad tidings, yea publish it upon the mountains, and upon every high place, and among every people that thou shalt be permitted to see. And thou shalt do it with all humility, trusting in me, reviling not against revilers. And of the tenants thou shalt not talk, but thou shalt declare repentance and faith on the Savior, and remission of sins by baptism, and by fire, yea, even the Holy Ghost"* [D&C 19:29-31].

That's the gospel. That's what needs to be preached. That's what needs to follow.

But there are tenants. There are tenants to the faith. And those we are commanded also to search into, but not declare as doctrine necessarily. The things about which we need to have unity and absolute agreement is the Doctrine of Christ.

It's necessary to allow creative solutions to be independently functioning among different groups. There was not a single "new testament church." There wasn't, okay? There were "church-es." Each of the twelve, and Paul, established different churches with markedly different emphases. Petrine churches emphasized authority and order. Johanian churches emphasized love. Pauline churches emphasized both evangelical fervor and gentile participation. Jacobian

churches emphasized charity. They were all adapted to teach of Christ. There wasn't a central hierarchical command and control. In fact, there is a book and the title of the book really says it all-- it's *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind*.

The idea of a universal catholic church was imposed some centuries later, and it was adopted as the title "catholic" or "universal" in order to try and achieve a missing ingredient of diversity.

The fellowships ought to have diversity. We should not think it as impossible to have godliness with diversity. Nor should we assume that a one-size-fits-all solution is going to work among different groups. There are some groups in which there are a lot of children and the emphasis needs to be directed towards the needs of the children. There are some groups that are primarily childless adults. They need to emphasize what suits them. Every one of them needs to adapt to whatever the local conditions are and to have the freedom to do that, as was once the case with the "church-es". The beginning of the restoration they were called "church-es," plural. They were not called "a church." They were societies of believers in different locations, and they governed themselves differently and locally.

We cannot bear one another's burdens without fellowshiping with one another. And bearing one another's burdens presumes that you know what the burdens are that someone else carries. Which means that I have been patient enough, I have been attentive enough, I have been friendly enough, and I have been trusted enough that I can find out what the burden is that they bear.

We are supposed to help one another get through this ordeal of mortality. And it is an ordeal. It is not easy. Even the people that you think that you envy-- if you were living inside their world you would find out that they have burdens they are carrying as well.

Fellowshipping allows us to bear one another's burdens. And bearing one another's burdens implies a whole universe of connectivity, trust, confidence, friendship and affection between one another before you get to the point that you even know what their burdens are. But that is supposed to be a blessing, and part of what it means to worship together. Worshipping together by assisting one another allows all of us to feel a great part of what it is that Christ is and does. It allows us to know who we worship, and it allows us to know how to worship Him, and it allows us to know what makes us one with one another.

We should learn how to be loving and equal with one another. The idea of equality is resisted by a lot of skeptics who accuse me of wanting authority and control, when I despise control, but I absolutely welcome fellowship, equality and worship with one another.

This isn't easy. But it is godly to pursue.

I heard someone comment about how all these fellowships that are gathered here are remarkably diverse. That's because people are diverse. God went to the trouble-- He went to the trouble of making every single tree here absolutely unique. There isn't one that is like the other. There isn't a snowflake that is like another. I would venture to say that when we finally get the mechanism with which to measure and recognize, we will realize there isn't an atom that is the same.

We are all humans. There is not one of you that is the same. Should a fellowship be put together with a cookie-cutter that says this is what you must do and this is what you must not do, when in fact, the needs are so diverse from one to another? I mean, there ought to be diversity. There ought to be uniqueness. There ought to be recognition of what each group has in terms of contributions, and what each group has in terms of needs. And it ought to be flexible enough to do that.

That is not a bad thing. That is a normal thing. Try to envision yourselves as a temporary family-- a temporary gathering together of members of a family. If you don't have some wonky aunts, and some curious uncles (in fact, maybe an uncle or two that you want to keep the kids away from), I mean every family has some strange folks in it. Consider the fellowships nothing more than an extension of that, and try and love one another.

The fact is that there are going to be those that through their behavior in fellowships, are going to disqualify themselves from being able to be gathered, because they are just not the kind of people that can live in peace one with another. That also is a good thing.

And then there are others who come to the fellowships, and their primary interest is in what they can take, what they can get. And there are others who come with the only idea in their heart being what can I give, how can I serve. And even they may not be able to give or serve much, that's what's in their heart. And you can all recognize that. You can all see that in people. Those are the kinds of people from which the Lord is going to gather and build Zion.

No one in Zion is going to be a threat to someone else. Can't be. It defeats the purpose of it all. To be able to live in peace with one another means that you literally are harmless to one another. And the diversity in which you find yourselves, and the ability to bump the corners off one another in fellowships, those are healthy, good, normal things. And hopefully they run their course, and eventually result in people becoming smoother and becoming easier with one another.

There's some people I admire immensely. And they're tough personalities. And they're difficult to deal with. And there are other people who are hard to deal with because they are too easy

going, and they really need to speak up more. They have more to add, but they won't do it until you coax it patiently out of them. And if you don't figure out that you've got to coax it patiently out of them, you are missing the treasure that this person represents. In your fellowships, think of one another as members of a family, and then work out your issues-- because that's how you grow into being a community.

The foregoing remarks are excerpts from a regional conference Q&A session held at Big Cottonwood Canyon, UT on September 20, 2015; from Denver's *40 Years in Mormonism Series*, Talk #10, entitled "Preserving the Restoration," given in Mesa, AZ on September 9, 2014; and a Q&A session entitled "A Visit with Denver Snuffer" held on May 13, 2015.