

A Study of Scriptural Fellowship

By Paul R. Blake

Introduction:

- A. Introduced and Defined
 - 1. Why the recent focus on fellowship?
 - 2. What does the Bible word mean?
 - 3. How does the Bible use the word?
- B. Discussion about the proper bounds of fellowship goes back to Bible times
 - 1. Much discussed throughout history
 - 2. Topic of much interest during early efforts to restore N.T. Christianity in this country
 - a. Addressed in Thomas Campbell's Declaration and Address
 - b. In Alexander Campbell's Lunenburg Letters
 - c. In Daniel Sommer's Sand Creek Declaration
 - d. In numberless sermons, articles, and books over the centuries
 - 2. Limits tested in controversies over use of instrumental music and missionary societies
 - a. Again tested with Premillennial and institutional controversies
 - b. Recently over divorce and remarriage and brotherhood societies issues
 - 3. To my understanding as a student of church history, there has never been an extended period of time absent the discussion of fellowship
- C. The same polar arguments are still being made that were made nearly 2000 years ago
 - 1. Some defended right of brethren to receive one teaching some doctrinal errors or engaged in some sinful practices
 - 2. Others teach that fellowship must be broken over any variance in teaching or practice regardless of the nature of the teaching or practice
 - 3. Fortunately, the truth does not exist at the extremes of human opinion; the truth is found in God's word

I. DEFINITION OF FELLOWSHIP

- A. Fellowship: The Word Family
 - 1. Fellowship (Greek word koinonia) (koine Greek means common Greek)
 - a. Used of an association or close relationship
 - b. also refers to generosity, a gift or the act of sharing in something
 - c. "To share" or "give a share" (koinoneo)
 - d. "Partner, companion, sharer" (koinonos)
 - e. "Joint" participation - both noun and verb form plus prefix "with"
- B. Forms used in the Bible
 - 1. Dictionary Definitions Help, But... Let's look at the appearances of the word in the Bible to help us understand its meaning and use
 - 2. Uses in Septuagint (LXX)
 - a. Lev. 6:2 - "fellowship" refers to something held in common; a pledge

- b. Job 34:8 - “goeth in company with...” suggests an association of implied approval
 - c. Prov. 28:24 - “companion of destroyer” - “partaker with an ungodly man”
 - d. 2Chron. 20:35 - “joined” - “entered an alliance”
 - 3. General Uses in New Testament
 - a. Heb. 2:14 - reference to sharing in humanity
 - b. Luke 5:10 - denoting those who were “partners” in fishing
 - c. Matt. 23:30 - likeness between Pharisees and prophets’ killers
 - 4. In each case, denotes association based on common goals and in common action
- C. Use of Term in Spiritual Association of Believers
 - 1. 2Cor. 6:14-16

II. WHAT IS FELLOWSHIP?

- A. Let the Bible define itself
 - 1. Yoked - implies a common work
 - 2. Fellowship - denotes “share” in action
 - 3. Communion - common word for “fellowship”
 - 4. Concord - implies harmony of thought
 - 5. Portion - having a part together with others
 - 6. Agreement - a union of purpose
 - 7. Agreement in principle leading to common action in spiritual work
- B. What common principles and action?
 - 1. 2Cor. 6:17 – 7:1
 - a. We can agree on what God says about holiness and practice it
 - 2. Eph. 5:3-12
 - a. We can agree on what God says about sin and avoid it
 - 3. Rom. 1:32
 - a. We can agree on what God says about those who choose sin and error and avoid becoming partakers in their sin
 - 4. Rev. 18:1-5 - We can agree on what God says about the fate of those who preach and practice sin and error and avert that fate by avoid partaking in their sin and error
- C. Knowing the fate of those who practice sin and preach error is also reserved for those who share with them in it; why would one elect to partake in it? What benefits are derived from fellowship with sin or error?

III. NEW TESTAMENT EXAMPLES OF FELLOWSHIP

- A. Fellowship in Suffering
 - 1. Phil. 3:10; 1Peter 4:12-13; Heb. 10:32-33; 2Cor. 1:5-7
 - 2. Each shared common principle & action
- B. Fellowship in preaching the Gospel
 - 1. Phil. 1:3-7, 4:14-16; Gal. 6:6
 - 2. Paul and the Philippians had fellowship even though they were not in the same congregation, and had geographic separation

C. Fellowship in Benevolence

1. Rom. 15:25-27; 2Cor. 8:1-5, 9:12-14; Rom. 12:13
2. Brethren had “fellowship” despite distance
3. Based on common faith and action in Christ

D. Condemned fellowship

1. 1Cor. 10:14-21
 - a. Not to commune with idolatry in thought or action; communion of believers is with Christ
2. 1Tim. 5:22; 2John 9-11
 - a. Three groups condemned in this passage:
 - 1) One going beyond doctrine of Christ
 - 2) One not bringing doctrine of Christ
 - 3) One aiding erring teacher is partaker

E. Fellowship in the same faith

1. Philemon 4-7; Rom. 11:11-24; Acts 18:24-28
2. The foundation or basis is provided by God
3. 1Cor 1:9; 2Cor 13:14; 1Peter 5:10; 2Peter 1:4; Gal. 2:7-9
4. Common principle is set by the will of God
5. Common action is engaged in by those who follow the will of God

IV. NECESSARY CONCLUSIONS

- A. Fellowship exists only in common principle and application
- B. Fellowship does not exist between righteousness and truth and sin and error
- C. Defined principles and specified actions are found in God’s Word and may not be modified or reduced to increase fellowship
- D. General principles and unspecified actions permit individual applications and may not be modified or restricted to decrease fellowship
- E. Variations in applications among individuals in general principles with unspecified actions do not mandate an end to fellowship
- F. There is a difference between fellowship with God and fellowship among Christians; fellowship with God is decided by God; fellowship with one another is determined between one another.
- G. There is a difference between fellowship with individuals and fellowship with congregations; fellowship between congregations and persons outside of the congregation is decided at the congregational level; fellowship between individuals is decided at the individual level.
- H. Fellowship at the collective level may never be determined for others by any organization outside of the local church; fellowship at the individual level may never be determined for the individual by anyone other than the individual; partisanship is not a scripturally acceptable basis for fellowship.
- I. The duration of fellowship among Christians is affected by individual rates of growth, levels of knowledge, effectiveness of the teacher, and personal assessment of the individual
- J. Fellowship continues to exist when conscientious brethren mutually labor harmoniously to understand difficult matters

K. Citing personal judgment in choosing fellowship with an impenitent errorist or sinner does not exclude one from criticism by others who have already ended fellowship with him.

L. There is a difference between legitimately warning disciples about brethren persisting in sin or error and demanding that others end their fellowship with them. The first is scripturally commanded, and the second exceeds the authority of the one making the demands.