



The Dynamics of **CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP**

church of Christ, Georgia Avenue
Singles Ministry Bible Study
September 21, 2007

Learning Objectives

1. The student will know what “Christian fellowship” means.
2. The student will know why Christians are to fellowship with one another.
3. The student will know when Christians are to fellowship.
4. The student will know with whom Christians are to fellowship.
5. The student will know how Christians are to fellowship.

Introductory Observations

There has been much discussion and debate in recent years regarding “fellowship” and “dis-fellowship” in the Lord’s church. Many struggle to understand who they are to fellowship with and when they are to withdraw fellowship from an individual or congregation. As it does with all spiritual matters, the key to an appropriate understanding lies in a thorough examination of the Bible’s teaching on the subject. When we understand the fellowship that God calls the Christian to, the concept of dis-fellowship becomes far clearer. In reality, the difficulty that we are seeing currently in the church does not result from a lack of direction; it grows from the unwillingness of some to embrace “thus saith the Lord.”

I. WHAT DOES “CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP” MEAN?

There are three Greek words translated “fellowship” in the New Testament. The most often used is *koinonia* (2842), which means “association, joint participation, intimacy, or communion.” *Koinonia* is used 20 times and is translated “fellowship” 12 times. A similar word, *koinonos* (2844), means “a sharer in anything” and is used 10 times in the New Testament. In the KJV, it is rendered “fellowship” only once (1 Cor. 10:20). It is also translated “partaker,” “partner,” and “companion.” The third word, *metoche* (3352), appears only in 2 Corinthians 6:14. It is translated “fellowship” and, according to Vine’s Expository Dictionary, means “partnership.”

Our English word “fellowship” means the same as the New Testament Greek terms. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines fellowship as “the condition of sharing similar interests, ideals and experiences, as by reason of profession, religion or nationality,” “a close association of friends or equals sharing similar interests,” and “friendship; comradeship.” Webster’s includes the following: “a union of peers: fraternity.” Having considered the various dictionary definitions, we might define Christian fellowship this way: “the condition of intimate association, partnership, friendship and sharing between Christians that results from their common profession,

religion, nationality, interests, ideals and experiences.” Admittedly, this definition is not perfect, but it presents a fair amalgamation (combination) of the nuances of the term.

II. WHY SHOULD CHRISTIANS FELLOWSHIP WITH ONE ANOTHER?

Intimate association, partnership, friendship and sharing should be natural for Christians because we share common interests, ideals and experiences. We are interested in serving God, having a home in heaven and encouraging others to do the same. Christ is our ideal; we follow Him (Mark 1:17; 1 Cor. 11:1) and hold Him up as our perfect example (Phil. 2:5; 1 Pet. 2:21). Also, as Christians, we share a unique set of experiences. In order to become Christians, each of us, no matter our walk of life, was baptized into Christ and called to live a new spiritual life (1 Cor. 12:13, Rom. 6:1-4) complete with new challenges (2 Tim. 3:12). Common secular interests, ideals and experiences naturally draw people together. So much the more, Christians’ shared spiritual interests, ideals and experiences ought to draw them to one another.

Our union and fraternity is a natural outgrowth of the fact that, though distinct geographically, linguistically, racially and culturally, all Christians share a profession, religion and nationality. The word “profession” is often used as a synonym for “occupation,” but it also means “an open declaration of religious faith.” Together, we openly declare that Jesus is our intercessor, the Messenger and Messiah of the God of heaven (Heb. 3:1, 10:19-23). The word “religion” refers to a system of worship. Together, Christians exalt Jesus and worship His Father in spirit and in truth, endeavoring to practice pure and undefiled religion before God (Jam. 1:26-27) while avoiding will worship (Col. 2:23). As a people with a unique profession and religious system, Christians worldwide comprise a separate and distinct nation (1 Pet. 2:9), more diverse than any other and without physical boundaries.

In the end, Christians should fellowship with one another because we seek the same things and do the same things. We have the same Father (John 1:13). We serve the same Master (Matt. 23:8; John 10:16). We are bought with the same price (1 Cor. 6:20). We are members of the same body (1 Cor. 12:27; Gal. 3:28). We walk the same way (2 Cor. 5:7; Phil. 3:16); and we are heirs of the same inheritance (Rom. 8:17; Gal. 3:29). These similarities and others draw us to one another. As we individually and corporately obey the Lord, we are gathered together in His spiritual family (Matt. 12:50). Consider the reasons that physical family members “fellowship” with one another. Spiritual family members have all of the same reasons and then some.

III. WHEN SHOULD CHRISTIANS FELLOWSHIP WITH ONE ANOTHER?

As the church of the New Testament, we are bound to follow the approved example of the first century church. In Acts 2:47, we read that, when the church began, Christians continued steadfastly in, among other things, fellowship (*koinonia*). The word translated “steadfastly” is *proskartereo* (4342). According to Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, in this context, it specifically means “to give constant attention to a thing.” So then, the first converts to Christianity constantly fostered “the condition of intimate association, partnership, friendship and sharing between Christians that results from their common profession, religion, nationality, interests, ideals and experiences.” We should also be steadfast, constant, ever working to build intimacy and comradery with our fellow Christians.

IV. WITH WHOM SHOULD CHRISTIANS FELLOWSHIP?

The Bible clearly prohibits Christians from being in “fellowship” with non-Christians. We are told that we should neither fellowship with devils (1 Cor. 10:20) nor unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14). Moreover, we are instructed to “come out from among them” (2 Cor. 6:17). Our interests, ideals, experiences are distinct from devils and unbelievers because our profession, religion and spiritual nationality are different. Because we are in fellowship with God and they are not, we can only get so close to them. How intimate can we be with someone who is consistently rebelling against God if we are consistently endeavoring to serve God? “No man can serve two masters” (Matt. 6:24a).

By definition, Christian fellowship is fellowship between Christians. However, our ability to fellowship with one another is conditional. There are times when, despite the natural desire that we have for intimate partnership with our brothers and sisters in Christ, we are forbidden by the Lord from doing so. It is important to remember always that Christians are, first and foremost, called to fellowship with God the Father (1 John 1:3) and God the Son (1 Cor. 1:9). Through the call of the gospel (Phil 1:5) and the influence of the Holy Spirit (Phil 2:1), we have fellowship, not only with God, but with one another. Therefore, proper fellowship between Christians and proper fellowship with God are co-dependant (1 John 1:3). When we are all right with God, we will all be in close partnership with one another (1 John 1:7). However, when either our vertical communion and partnership with God or our horizontal relationship with our fellow Christians is disrupted, the other is necessarily disrupted (Matt. 5:23-24).

The Bible’s prohibition on our having fellowship with rebellious Christians is no less clear than the commands regarding devils and unbelievers. In the name of Jesus Christ, the apostle Paul commanded the Thessalonians to withdraw [fellowship] from “every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us” (2 Thes. 3:6). He instructed Timothy to “withdraw” [fellowship] from “any man” who taught false doctrine and did not agree with the words of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 6:3-5). He wrote to the Corinthian saints “not to keep company, if any many that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolator, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such a one no not to eat” (1 Cor. 5:11). Why would a Christian be commanded to avoid even the basic companionship that comes from sharing a meal with such a persistently rebellious, unrepentant Christian? The answer is found in 1 Corinthians 5:13, where Paul referred to him as a “wicked person” and told the saints to put him out.

Whether Christian or not, we are not at liberty to fellowship with unholy people or unholy practices (Eph. 5:11). Of course, all will not be unanimous in obeying the Lord’s directive to either put unrepentant, rebellious sinners out of fellowship or withdraw from them. Such a refusal is itself sinful. The child of God cannot sacrifice the truth of God’s word to maintain intimacy with one who continuously breaks it. It is right to desire fellowship, but one should not sacrifice fellowship with God to maintain it with any man. Who then are we to have Christian fellowship with? Faithful Christians.

V. HOW SHOULD CHRISTIANS FELLOWSHIP?

Having considered the meaning of Christian fellowship, its importance and its parameters, one must give thoughtful consideration to how it should be done. All too often, Christians substitute a “fellowship meal” for “fellowship.” It is natural and appropriate for Christians to eat together; however, we are not in close partnership and communion simply by eating with someone. So then, there is more to Christian fellowship than having a meal together. There must be a joining together of common interests, ideals and experiences. As always, the scriptures provide the blueprint.

Perhaps the most basic aspect of Christian fellowship is corporate worship. We obey, serve and exalt the same God. At the appointed times, every Christian is commanded to assemble together to share in worshipping Him. Consider Hebrews 10:23-25. The Hebrew writer says that, as we assemble, “hold fast the profession of our faith,” consider one another, provoke one another to love and good works, and exhort one another. One way that we do these things is through joining in song to God (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). Notice that, in these aspects of fellowship, the Christian is mentally and emotionally joined together with his fellows.

We are also to be joint partners in carrying the gospel into the world. When Jesus gave the command for His disciples to preach the gospel to every creature in every nation, it was a corporate charge (Mark 16:15; Matt. 28:19). Paul says that, “We are labourers together with God” (1 Cor. 3:9). Clearly, God expects us to be close partners in the work of reaching the lost. Consider the fellowship that James, Peter, John, Paul and Barnabas enjoyed as they partitioned the work of evangelizing. The Bible says that James, Peter and John extended the right hand of fellowship to Paul and Barnabas as they agreed that one group would go to the Gentiles while the other would concentrate on the Jews (Gal. 2:9). Even as they were separating physically, going to work in different geographic areas, there was still an intimate sharing in the work; they were partners.

We can also foster “the condition of intimate association, partnership, friendship and sharing between Christians that results from [our] common profession, religion, nationality, interests, ideals and experiences” by serving together (2 Cor. 8:4), studying together, praying together (Jam. 5:16), suffering together (Phil. 3:10), enduring together, and playing together. This list is not exhaustive. The key is that there must be a joining together of our minds and a unity of spirit as we press forward in the work of the Lord and the hope of His return.

Concluding Observations

The end of Christian fellowship is that the God of heaven is exalted, men and women are drawn to Him, and precious souls are saved (Acts 2:47). It is imperative, therefore, that we maintain our common, scriptural profession (doctrine - 1 Cor. 1:10), religion (system of worship - John 4:24), and nationality (church of Christ - Rom. 16:16). If so doing, we will naturally and consistently be drawn to one another as we maintain our fellowship with the Lord. Insofar as we are able under the law of liberty (James 1:25), Christians should work together, eat together, pray together and play together, all for our edification and encouragement here on earth and in preparation for our mutual heavenly reward. However, because the glory of God among men, our own souls’ salvation, and the eternal destiny of the souls around us are affected, for better or worse, by our fellowship, we cannot fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, even if they are performed by one who is called a “brother.”

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