

Abuse of Fellowship

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The nature and realm of fellowship have been controversial questions for many years. The desire to incorporate various denominations into the fellowship of the church has been partly responsible for the early debates on the question. The present day efforts to acquire unity while holding divisive doctrines and practices have caused many discussions on fellowship.

It is not my purpose in this article to discuss the many questions at issue on the subject of fellowship. I want to consider some abuses of fellowship among brethren today. Space does not permit all the abuses to be discussed in this article.

In order to speak about the abuse of fellowship, it is necessary that we know what fellowship is. Perhaps the first abuse we could mention is that many do not understand what the term means and how it is used in the New Testament. The following definitions are taken from *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary, Unabridged*.

The English *fellowship* is from two words: fellow and *ship*. The first word *fellow* is defined: ". . . a companion, partner, from Ice. felagi, a partnership, fellowship . . ."

- "1. A person with whom one is habitually in company; a companion: an associate; an accomplice; a comrade; a mate.
2. An equal; one of the same kind; one equal to or like another; a counterpart; one of a pair or of two things used together and suited to each other."

The second English word is *ship* which is defined: "A suffix from AS. scipean, to shape, used as in AS. as a termination to denote condition, office, dignity, art, or profession: as, lordship, scholarship, friendship, stewardship, horsemanship, governorship."

Fellowship is defined:

- "n. 1. The condition of being an associate, mutual association of persons on equal and friendly terms: communion; companionship, familiar intercourse; intimate familiarity."
- "2. The state or condition of having a common share: partnership; joint interest; as, fellowship in pain."
- "3. A body of companions or fellows; an association of persons having the same tastes, occupations, or interests; a band; a company."

The English word *fellowship* means ". . . To associate with as a fellow or member of the same church; to admit to fellowship; especially, to Christian fellowship; to unite with in doctrine and discipline."

I have given this extended definition of the English word *fellowship* because many people do not understand what we mean when the word is used.

W. E. Vine gives the Greek words *koinonia*, *metoche*, and *koinonos* as nouns translated by fellowship, communication, communion, contribution, companion, partaker, and partner. He says of *koinonia*: "(a) communion, fellowship, sharing in common (from *koinos*, common), is translated communion in I Cor. 10:16; Philm. 6, r.v., fellowship; for A.V., communication; it is most frequently translated fellowship; (b) that which is the outcome of fellowship, a contribution, e.g., Rom. 15:26; 2 Cor. 8:4 . . ." (*Expository*

The Greek *Koinonia* is translated in the New Testament by: Fellowship, Contribution, Communion, Distribution, Communication, Communicate and Partaker.

The sharing of something with another may or may not depend upon conditions on my part. Men may share in common something in which they had nothing to do in bringing it about. "Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil" (Heb. 2:14).

The word "partakers" is from *koinoneo* which means "to have a share in common with someone else." Other kinds of fellowship depend upon the conditions given in the word of God. The fellowship in Christ, revealed in the New Testament, is conditional. "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

Bible fellowship essentially relates to three things: authority, unity, and discipline. The authority of Christ is the only basis of fellowship among brethren in the Lord. That authority is his word revealed to us by the apostles and inspired men of the New Testament. Any abuse of the authority of Christ is an abuse of the fellowship that grows out of it.

Unity requires the following: 1) Relationship of persons in common relationship to Christ. 2) A standard of thought and conduct to the same work. 3) Common labor in authorized work. 4) Common bonds in Christ - "Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son" (2 John 9). 5) Common hope, the ONE hope. We are instructed to endeavor "to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). Partnership, sharing and communion are within this unity of the Spirit. Now to consider some abuses of fellowship. *Abuse* means to use wrongly; to misuse; to hurt by treating badly; mistreat.

1. Some abuse fellowship by trying to build it upon conflicting doctrines. "Can two walk together, except they be agreed?" (Amos 3:3). The advocates of the broad canopy of fellowship to include all differences of those within the "Restoration Movement" do not use the word in a scriptural sense. They often create some situation in which efforts are made to force the admission of fellowship, but they do not prove anything but prejudice. The appeal should be to the word of truth: "What saith the scripture?" An effort to make one appear inconsistent by some scenario does not prove scriptural fellowship with false brethren and false doctrines.

The basis of fellowship is with God. "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3). Fellowship with God is in the light (1 John 1:5-7; Col. 1:13,14). It is based upon the word of God (Psa. 119:105; John 17:20; 2 John 9-11). It is not the personal liberty to set one's own standard for fellowship.

2. Some abuse fellowship, at least in practice, by trying to force it with persons and doctrines expressly forbidden in the New Testament. There can be no fellowship with devils (1 Cor. 10:20). There is no fellowship with unrighteousness (2 Cor. 6:14). There can be no fellowship with the works of darkness (Eph. 5:11; 1 John 1:5-7). There is no fellowship with false teachers (2 John 10,11; Gal. 2:5). There can be no fellowship with the disobedient to the doctrine of the apostles (2 Thess. 3:6,14). There can be no fellowship with immoral men and women (1 Cor. 5:11-13). There can be no fellowship with the factious man or woman (Rom. 16:17).

Because some man or woman was at one time faithful and strong in the Lord, does not mean that a guaranteed life-long fellowship must be maintained with him/her regardless of spiritual standing with God. When men depart from the Lord, fellowship must be withdrawn from

them.

3. Some abuse fellowship by ignoring its necessity in the church and the work of the gospel. The right hands of fellowship should be extended to all those who walk righteously before the Lord, and who are engaged in the proclamation of the gospel of Christ (Gal. 2:9). This encouragement and support are important among brethren. The contribution (fellowship) to those who preach the gospel is often neglected. Paul said that those who preach the gospel should live of the gospel (1 Cor. 9:14). The church at Philippi had fellowship with Paul in the gospel from the beginning (Phil. 1:5). He said that no church "communicated" (fellowship) with him concerning giving and receiving, but Philippi only, and they sent once and again to his need (Phil. 4:15). This fellowship is required by the word of Christ. In fact, the contribution is fellowship. It is an abuse of fellowship to ignore it or pervert it, i.e., use such contribution for social, political and sensual purposes to the glory of men.
4. Some abuse fellowship by not withdrawing the fellowship when impenitent sin reigns in the hearts and lives of some in the church. The New Testament plainly teaches that brethren should withdraw themselves from immoral brethren (1 Cor. 5); from disorderly brethren who will not obey the doctrine of the apostles (2 Thess 3:6); from false teachers (Rom. 16:17; Gal. 2:5); and from those who will not obey the teaching of the apostles (2 Thess. 3:14). It means to discipline the sinful brother or sister soon lest he become hardened and influence others in the local church (1 Cor. 5:1-5).

Withdrawing ourselves from the unfaithful and disobedient is explained in the word of God. It means to deliver to Satan (1 Cor. 5:4,5; 1 Tim. 1:20; Luke 22:31). It means to take away from among the faithful that impenitent person (1 Cor. 5:2). It means to purge out the old leaven: get rid of the evil person from among you for the purity of the whole church (1 Cor. 5:7). It means not to keep company (social contact) with the impenitent sinner (1 Cor. 5:11; 2 Thess. 3:14). It means not to eat with them in a social meal of any kind (1 Cor. 5:11). It means to put away that wicked person from among you (1 Cor. 5:13). This action is described as "punishment" which was inflicted by many (2 Cor. 2:6). It means to withdraw yourselves from that sinful person (2 Thess. 3:6). It means to mark and avoid the false teachers (Rom. 16:17; 2 Thess 3:14).

By ignoring the action of withdrawing from the impenitent sinner, we not only make no effort to make him ashamed to turn him back to the Lord, but we make ourselves sinners by encouraging him in his sin. The Lord gave a command for this action. "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us" (2 Thess. 3:6). Some abuse fellowship when they do not honor the discipline administered scripturally by such church. By entertaining them as if nothing had happened, and by talking to them about how wrong the church was to discipline them, such people become as evil as that wicked person was disciplined.

Sharing a commitment to the work of the Lord requires each one to participate to the extent of his ability and opportunity. The word of God is the standard by which we operate together, sharing work and blessings, and endeavor to "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." We abuse fellowship when we try to make it something unauthorized in the New Testament.

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