

# The Matter Of Fellowship

The matter of fellowship has long been debated, especially among the brotherhood. Some say there is no need to withdraw fellowship from someone walking in error. Others say it is important to do so. We will now look at what fellowship means, the issue of fellowship, especially Romans 14, and finally we will look at why one would be withdrawn from.

Fellowship means that we are in accord or joint participation with someone or a group of people which would be a local church in this case. An example of this would be the first Christians in Acts 2:44-47, *"Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved."* The early Christians were in constant contact with one another. However, in some cases, when a brother was erring in some way, the congregation would withdraw their fellowship from him. Such is the case in 1 Corinthians 5 which we will discuss later. Withdrawing fellowship from an erring brother means you decide to no longer have association with them. He is no longer in agreement or even part of the congregation in which he was previously located. In a more general sense this person may be marked (Romans 16:17), so Christians as a whole will not have fellowship with them.

The issue of fellowship, especially in the church, is simply a misunderstanding of one passage of scripture in Romans 14. We will now examine this to see what is meant in Paul's writing. Vs. 1 says, *"But him that is weak in faith receive ye, yet not for decision of scruples."* Some see this verse and say Paul is allowing us to accept those that are in sin and have fellowship or agreement with these individuals. The question that stands at issue is who is Paul describing as the *"weak in faith"*? Are they in sin or not? If we look at the context we find that Paul is not talking about those in sin, but rather those with a weak conscience. He goes on to say in vss. 2-3, *"For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables. Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him."* We know God does not receive someone living in sin (1 John 1:6), so clearly Paul is not saying we should receive and have fellowship with those in error. He is speaking of matters that do not matter one way or the other.

Paul was discussing two different types of groups who were Christians: the strong and the weak in faith or conscience. The weak was reluctant to eat meat sacrificed to idols. If the weak in faith ate meat thinking it was sinful, even if it was not, he would defile his conscience and sin (Romans 14:23). The strong in faith, however, knew that an idol was nothing (1 Corinthians 8:4) and it was alright to eat meat sacrificed to an idol. This would cause the strong to look down on the weak and think of himself more superior to the one who would not eat meat. This is Paul's point in vs. 1: the individual with a strong conscience should receive the one with the weak conscience.

Here is where the error concerning fellowship takes place. Some want to say Romans 14:1 is talking about moral and doctrinal issues, especially doctrine. However, Paul was not speaking of something that mattered concerning someone's doctrine. Rather, he was speaking of something that did not matter. Whether one ate meat did not matter within itself. He was speaking strictly about the conscience, not moral or doctrinal issues. Therefore, one cannot use Romans 14 to justify fellowship with one who is erring in doctrine or morality. In fact, Romans 14 is about the only place one could possibly seek to justify fellowship with one in error.

We find in many places that we are to withdraw fellowship with those in error. First, in 1 Corinthians 5:1-6, we find a moral issue and what the church was commanded to do about it. There was a man who had his father's wife (vss. 1-2). The church was commanded by Paul in vss. 5-6, *"Deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?"* In this passage, not only is the command given to withdraw from this person (*"deliver such a one to Satan"*), but there are two reasons why. First, that the individual would repent and be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Second, this individual, the little leaven, would not influence the whole lump to go down the same path. In 1 Timothy 1:18-20, we find those that were shipwreck concerning the faith: *"This charge I commit to you, son Timothy, according to the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, having faith and a good conscience, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck, of whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme."* In this context, *"faith"* is used in a different sense than in Romans 14. We find the phrase *"the faith"* used which would be referring to the gospel. Therefore, this is a doctrinal issue and Paul said he withdrew from these two individuals, Hymenaeus and Alexander. In 2 Thessalonians 3:6 Paul says, *"But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord*

*Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us."*

Finally, one more statement can be made about fellowship with those in error. We know from Acts 2:47 the Lord adds the saved to the church. It contains those who are bound for a life in heaven. This is the purpose of the church. In Revelation 21:27, speaking about heaven, John writes, "*But there shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie, but only those who are written in the Lamb's Book of Life.*" No person walking in error will be in heaven because anything sinful would defile it. And if the church is for those headed to heaven, if someone does not belong in heaven, they do not belong in the church! We must keep ourselves pure as individuals and we must keep ourselves pure as a church. Anything less than this is absolutely not acceptable to God, and it never will be!

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