

Scriptural Fellowship

Introduction. Discussion about the proper bounds of fellowship goes back to Bible times. It has been a much discussed topic throughout history. Fellowship continued to be a topic of interest during early efforts to restore New Testament faith in this country. The limits of fellowship was tested in controversies over the use of instrumental music and missionary societies. It was tested again with the institutional controversy and will continued to be contested throughout the history of the Lord's church when brethren are determined not to "hold fast to the form of sound words" (2 Timothy 1:13).

I. ***Biblical Definition Of "Fellowship"***

A. The definitions of the word "fellowship."

1. "Fellowship" (*koinonia*).
 - a) The word is used of an association or close relationship.
 - b) The word also refers to generosity, a gift or the act of sharing in something.
2. "To share" or "give a share" (*koinoneo*).
3. "Partner, companion, sharer" (*koinonos*).
4. "Joint participation."
5. Fellowship is the state, condition or quality of persons (or things personified) being companions, partners or sharers together in some action, benefit or relation which is common to all the participants.
 - a) The term is not limited in its use to some single relation, arrangement or function. It may be used to describe many relations of both individuals and groups of individuals in different arrangements and functions.
 - b) However, regardless of its variety of uses, it always retains the basic meaning of a common sharing together, a joint participation as partners in whatever is being considered.
6. To have joint participation with someone, of itself, does not prove anything as to the rightness or endorsement of that joint participation.
 - a) Two men may be at opposite ends of an issue and "jointly participate" in debating their differences. It does not mean they are "in fellowship" with one another for there is certainly no joint approval nor acceptance of each other.
 - b) The fellowship we are interested in is a working together, mutual acceptance and approval, a harmony and unity as we serve God. Also, there are rules about how this fellowship is established, how it is maintained and under what conditions we may accept disagreement without its affecting fellowship between brethren.

- B. Uses in the Septuagint (LXX).
 - 1. Leviticus 6:2: "*fellowship*" -- refers to something held in common; pledge.
 - 2. Job 34:8: "*goeth in company with*" -- suggests an association of implied approval.
 - 3. Proverbs 28:24: "*companion of a destroyer*" -- denotes being a partaker with an ungodly man.
 - 4. 2 Chronicles 20:35: "*joined*" -- shows they entered an alliance.
- C. General uses in the New Testament.
 - 1. Hebrews 2:14 -- reference to a sharing in humanity.
 - 2. Luke 5:10 -- denoting those who were "partners" in fishing.
 - 3. Matthew 23:30 -- likeness between Pharisees and prophet's killers.
 - 4. In each case, denotes association based on common goals and in common action.
- D. Attempts to redefine fellowship.
 - 1. Some say we need not agree on doctrinal principles to have fellowship.
 - 2. Some say we may have fellowship in areas where we act together without the aspect of endorsement.
 - 3. Some have defined "fellowship" as dealing solely with action in a local church.
 - 4. Some now use the term "association" to avoid defense of "fellowship" per Bible use, yet defend actions involved in "fellowship."

II. **Use Of Term In Spiritual Association Of Believers**

- A. An illustration of fellowship (2 Corinthians 6:14-16).
 - 1. Yoked -- implies a common work.
 - 2. Fellowship -- denotes "share" in action.
 - 3. Communion -- normal word for "fellowship."
 - 4. Concord -- implies harmony of thought.
 - 5. Portion -- having a part together with others.
 - 6. Agreement -- a union of purpose.
 - 7. Hence, agreement in principle leading to joint or common action in spiritual work.
- B. Common principles and actions (2 Corinthians 6:17-7:1).
 - 1. We must be holy as God is holy (1 Peter 1:16). We must be cleansed and separated from sin (Romans 1:32; Revelation 18:1-5).
 - 2. Does this mean a common principle and action of saints to sin? No! We must maintain holiness and come out from sin!
 - 3. Is there any lesson for us in acceptance or tolerance for sin and error?

- C. Fellowship in the broader context of the Bible.
1. Ephesians 5:11 -- No fellowship with the works of darkness.
 2. 1 Timothy 1:18-20; 2 Timothy 2:16-18 -- Reprove teachers of error who lead astray.
 3. Jude 3-4 -- Contend for "the faith" when others oppose.
 4. Throughout the Bible:
 - a) No case of instruction to receive teachers of error.
 - b) No case of instruction to receive practice of sin.
 - c) No case of instruction to receive diversity of morals.
 - d) No case of instruction to receive diversity of doctrine.
 - e) Whether the Old Testament or the New Testament, God's people were always told to correct their doctrinal or moral problems.
- D. New Testament examples of fellowship.
1. Fellowship in suffering (Philippians 3:10; Hebrews 10:32-33; 1 Peter 4:12-13).
 2. Fellowship in benevolence (Romans 12:13; 15:25-27; 2 Corinthians 8:1-5; 9:12-14).
 3. Fellowship in preaching the gospel (Philippians 1:3-7; 4:14-16; Galatians 6:6).
- E. Condemned fellowship.
1. 1 Corinthians 10:14-21.
 - a) We are not to commune with idolatry in thought or action.
 - b) The communion of believers is with Christ.
 2. 1 Timothy 5:22.
 - a) We cannot partake of other men's sins.
 - b) Doing so equals impurity.
 3. 2 John 9-11.
 - a) The one going beyond the doctrine of Christ is condemned.
 - b) The one not bringing the doctrine of Christ is condemned.
 - c) The one aiding the erring teacher is a partaker and is condemned.

Conclusion. As we study the subject of fellowship, we need to keep in mind that the issue is not should we be longsuffering to reach the sinner. We must be longsuffering to all (1 Thessalonians 5:14). The issue is not should we love the sinner. We must love all men (Matthew 5:43-48; 1 Thessalonians 3:12). The issue is not the tolerance of and permitting of differing levels of growth. We all recognize that there are differing levels of growth (1 Peter 2:2; Hebrews 5:12-14; Colossians 1:9-11). We also must keep in mind that fellowship does not preclude every difference. If no inherent sin exists, we may receive one another (Romans 14:1).