

# Fellowship: A Spiritual Relationship

By David Phillips

Christian fellowship is rooted in our common faith and submission to the gospel. Our agreement is manifest through our common efforts to do the works defined therein. As discussed in the previous issue, we cannot take just one work or one deed and say that that is our fellowship (i.e. fellowship meal, fellowship study, fellowship game, etc.). God does not use the term in that way in the New Testament. Rather, our fellowship is the relationship we have with one another as a result of our common relationship with God. We are fellow heirs of His promises, fellow laborers in His kingdom, and brethren having God as our Father.

It is important for us to learn how God uses the term fellowship because if we misuse it or use it to refer to things which God does not, we run the risk of speaking error. Therefore, in order to “speak where the Bible speaks,” let us consider some of the passage in which God uses the word fellowship.

Acts 2:42: “*And they continued steadfastly in the apostle’s doctrine and fellowship...*” Notice that Luke does not attribute that fellowship to any one activity. In the context and in other passages throughout Acts, Luke shows that their fellowship originated from their common relationship in Christ, and involved various aspects inherent in such a spiritual relationship: teaching and learning the apostles’ doctrine (2:42), breaking of bread-Lord’s Supper (2:42, 46), praising God (2:47), sharing with and caring for the needs of one another (2:44; 4:32), and praying (Acts 2:42; 4:24). Because their fellowship in Christ, they “*continued steadfastly*” in all of these things.

1 Cor. 1:9: “*God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*” This “call” comes through the preaching of the gospel, and only when we answer that call are we able to have fellowship with Jesus Christ. “Christians are called to fellowship (participation) with the Son...They are lifted up to be His fellows. They enter into a spiritual communion with the risen Lord” (Kittel, vol. III, pg. 804). Only when we come to Christ by faith and have our sins washed away by His blood can we enter into such a relationship with Him.

2 Cor. 8:4: “*Imploring us with much urgency that we would receive the gift and the fellowship of the ministering to the saints.*” This joint participation was firmly rooted in their common faith. Such a close spiritual bond necessitated their sharing in physical the needs of their brethren, “*that there may be equality*” (vs. 13-14).

Gal. 2:9: “*...they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.*” Here, the shaking of hands was an expression of acknowledgment of Paul’s fellowship with the others in their common faith in Christ, and that the gospel which Paul believed and preached was identical to that of James, Peter, and John, and therefore they were fellow laborers in the same cause.

Phil. 1:5: “*for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now.*” This was the participation in the gospel which the Philippians had from the time of their conversion (1 Pet. 1:3). Such a fellowship was manifest through their efforts to walk according to the gospel in all things and through their common efforts to spread that gospel (Phil. 1:6).

Phil. 2:1: “*...if any fellowship of the Spirit...*” All who are converted share in the same Spirit, for they live in the Spirit and, inasmuch that they heed the instruction of God’s word, they walk in the Spirit

(Gal. 5:25). Paul's exhortation is that if such a unity and fellowship exists then let all strive for like-mindedness in the Spirit (vs. 2, 3).

### **Focusing on the Spiritual**

The passages discussed above are by no means exhaustive of God's use of fellowship in the New Testament. However, they are enough to show where the emphasis is placed in Christian fellowship. We must observe that in every case in which fellowship is applied to matters of a religious nature, the emphasis is always on the spiritual. Christian fellowship is a spiritual relationship, established by a spiritual bond in Christ, by faith. Our fellowship is our joint share in Christ, manifest in our joint efforts to live like Christ.

Those who have followed this series of articles from the beginning may have noticed some repetition concerning this point. Such repetition has been intentional, for one cannot stress enough the spiritual nature of Christian fellowship. We must have a firm understanding of this, for there are many carnally minded who seek to diminish the spiritual aspect of fellowship and exalt the physical.

The understanding that some have concerning fellowship is that it is an activity, not a relationship. Therefore, they believe that fellowship takes place only when Christians are physically doing things together or are sharing in physical substance and/or activities. As a result of such thinking, many congregations have lost sight of the spiritual aspect of the Lord's work, seeking rather to emphasize the physical relationship between their members. Therefore, instead of stressing the preaching of the gospel whereby souls may be saved, they spend their resources building gyms, dining halls, and various other recreational facilities. When the congregation comes together for a meal, they call it a "fellowship meal," believing that somehow their fellowship is established in the sharing of physical food rather than their spiritual service. Compare this picture to that developed in the New Testament Scriptures. It is not difficult to see that the two do not match up. Why? Because the fellowship expounded upon in the New Testament is spiritual, whereas the fellowship sought after by many Christians and churches today is in every way carnal.

In John 6 Jesus teaches us to seek the spiritual and not the physical. In John 6:1-14 He miraculously fed five thousand. In verse 26 He shows that the emphasis of that miracle was on His power over nature, not in the meal itself. However, the multitude that was fed sought Jesus, not because they were impressed by His great power, but because their bellies were filled. "*Most assuredly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled*" (John 6:26). He then exhorted them in verse 27, "*Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him.*" Throughout the remainder of His discourse in John 6, Jesus shows that those who come to the Father partake, not of physical food, but of spiritual, which is the body and the blood of Jesus Christ. Through Christ and our communion with Him we have eternal, spiritual life. Therefore He said, "*I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world*" (vs. 51). The purpose of this discourse was to draw the minds of His hearers away from the physical and to direct them toward the spiritual. This is the emphasis that we must have in our minds when we think of Christian fellowship.

In 1 Cor. 10:16 Paul uses this teaching on the flesh and blood of Christ to illustrate our spiritual communion with Christ. "*The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?*" Communion comes from the same word from which we get fellowship. In this context Paul is contrasting our communion with Christ with the communion of the Jews with their altar and the communion of the idol worshippers with theirs. His point is in vs. 21-22, "*You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the*

*cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons. Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy.*" In other words, if we proclaim through our eating the Lord's Supper that we have fellowship with Christ, then when we eat of the Jewish and idolatrous sacrifices we proclaim fellowship with those things as well. But we cannot have fellowship with Christ and these others, therefore we must refrain from things sacrificed to idols.

Paul's discussion here on our communion with the Lord is perhaps the closest the Scriptures come to connecting Christian fellowship with a single activity. Let us understand, however, that the emphasis in the Lord's Supper is in every way spiritual. The Lord's Supper is merely a representation of the spiritual, eternal relationship we have with Jesus Christ. It is a symbol of our fellowship with Jesus, which we have through His body and His blood. It is a reminder of His death (1 Cor. 11:26), through which we have everlasting life (Rom. 5:10), as Jesus taught in John 6, "*Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day*" (vs. 54). Therefore, even though the Lord's Supper involves unleavened bread and the fruit of the vine, those physical elements represent the ongoing, spiritual communion we have with Christ. They are a proclamation of the fellowship we have through His literal flesh and blood. Our fellowship is based on our spiritual relationship, not the physical elements.

### **Respecting God's Spiritual Standard**

Throughout the New Testament God strives to draw our minds away from the physical in order that we might comprehend the glorious, spiritual truths that are revealed through Christ. "*...that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints...*" (Eph. 1:17ff). One glorious truth that we must come to understand is our fellowship with God and with His people. But in order to fully understand this beautiful relationship, we must learn to respect God's spiritual standard. The church is the body of Christ, Christians are fellows with one another, joined and united in Christ as one man (Eph. 2:14ff). In this relationship we have communion with the Father and with the Son. Because of this fellowship all Christians are able to be "*perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment*" (1 Cor. 1:10). But we cannot appreciate the beauty of this relationship if we limit our understanding of fellowship to the carnal, temporal elements of this life. We must look beyond our bellies to the spiritual food in Christ. We must look beyond worldly entertainment in order to seek the spiritual works we have in Christ through His gospel. When we join hands in service to the Lord, then we will truly reap the benefits of Christian fellowship.

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