

Christian Fellowship and Sin

By David Phillips

In 1 John 1, John describes the fellowship men can have with God and Jesus Christ through the Gospel. In 1 John 1:4 he writes, *“This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.”*

Notice that John tells us in verse five that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. Skipping ahead to verse seven, John says that when we *“walk in the light as He is in the light we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin.”* What a wonderful blessing, to be able to have a share with the Father and the Son; to be joined to them and to all of God’s people in fellowship. But as we admire the beauty of this relationship, we must not fail to heed the warning that John also gives in verse six. *“If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.”* If God is light and He is in the light, the darkness is that which is opposite of God. To walk in darkness is to walk in that which is void of and contrary to God and His righteousness. Simply put, darkness is sin. But it is more than that. For when we walk in the darkness we are choosing to be ignorant of God’s righteousness (1 John 2:11) and reject the light of His truth. Darkness is in the world and describes the nature of the world (Eph. 2:12). Therefore when a person walks in the darkness, he is choosing the world over God.

In Amos 3:3 we learn that two cannot walk together unless they are agreed. There are few things in creation that illustrate separation as effectively as the darkness and the light. If we walk in darkness, we are so far removed from the light of God that we have no agreement with Him whatsoever; we have no share with the Father, or the Son, or the people of God. In his brief statement in 1 John 1:6, John shows with great clarity the devastating effects sin can have on a Christian’s relationship with God. The Scriptures are so very clear concerning this matter that we need little explanation outside of the Scriptures themselves.

Rom 2:6-9: *“...who ‘will render to each one according to his deeds’ ...to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness – indignation and wrath...”*

2 Thess. 1:8: *“in flaming fire, taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

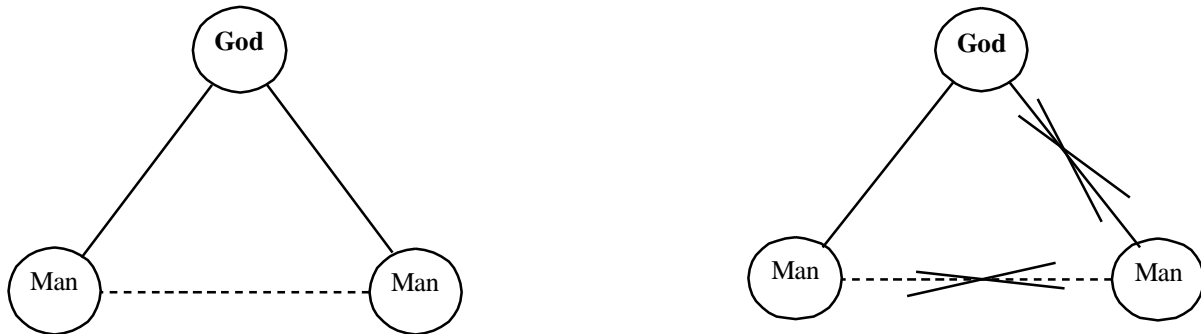
2 Thess. 2:12: *“...that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.”*

1 John 3:8-9: *“He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil. Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God.”*

As frightening as these passage are, they teach us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12), to make sure we are walking in the light, and that we have a right relationship with God in which we strive to overcome sin and live righteous lives.

Nevertheless, there are men who claim to be righteous, but do not fear God. Men who claim to be from God but are not. Men who say that they are in the light, when in fact they are in the darkness. John has made it very clear that such men do not have fellowship with God because they are not in agreement with

Him. As Paul also writes, “*For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?*” (2 Cor. 6:14). But the question many people have difficulty with is this, ‘how does a person’s sin affect his/her fellowship with God’s people?’ Concerning this question, we will bring to mind a principle discussed in one of our past issues. “As John said in 1 John 1:3, “*and truly, our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.*” God is the focal point of every Christian relationship. Without Him Christian fellowship would not be. The following diagrams illustrate this principle.



In the first diagram we see that one Christian’s fellowship with another is dependant upon their common relationship with God. A man first establishes his relationship with God through his obedience to the gospel, then, as a result, he is able to have fellowship with those who show a common agreement through their obedience. This “*like precious faith*” in God and His Son is the joining link between all Christians. It is our fellowship. This right relationship with God is so crucial to Christian fellowship, that when one Christian goes against God’s righteous standard and enters into disagreement with God (via sinful thoughts, speech, and/or actions), that person’s fellowship with God’s people is also severed, as illustrated in the second diagram” (Vol. 3, Issue 41). God is the connecting link between two people. If one person lets go of God because of sin, then the other is no longer in fellowship with that person. This is what happens to our spiritual relationship with people who walk in darkness.

But what of our physical relationships? This is where things get more difficult. The opinion of many in our society is that if a member of a church is sinning, the other members should just let him alone “lest they chase him away.” Because of the fear of hurt feelings, many are blinded to the effect sin has on a congregation when it is allowed to continue unchecked.

However, God teaches us in the Scriptures that Christians’ physical relationship with one another must reflect their spiritual relationship. Since Christians are joined together in fellowship in Christ, they are to also have physical communication with one another wherein they build one another up, teach one another, encourage one another and help one another. But the opposite of this is true as well. If one member severs his relationship with God, then his relationship with God’s people is also severed. Therefore, the physical interaction that the church had with that person must also cease. This command is brought out in several passages.

Matt. 18:15-17: “Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.”

1 Cor. 5:4-7: “In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, 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? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed

Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us."

1 Cor. 5:11: "*But now I have written to you **not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner -- not even to eat with such a person.***"

2 Thess. 3:6: "*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.***"

To "walk disorderly" means to walk out of rank, as a soldier out of step. Christians are to strive to walk in step with God's righteousness. But when a person walks out of step they are in disobedience to God's command; they are walking in darkness.

Please note the kind of action the rest of the members of the church must take toward a brother or sister who will not repent of his or her sins.

- "Let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector."
- "Deliver such a one to Satan."
- "Purge out the old leaven."
- "Not to keep company with...not even to eat with such a person."
- "Withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly."

Why does God expect His people to take such drastic measures? Because the church is the body of Christ. It is the assembly of people who have answered the gospel call to come to Christ in faith and obedience and to be cleansed of sin. Through that cleansing we are able to have fellowship with God. But when a brother or sister chooses to enter into that sin again, he/she threatens the very purpose for which Christ established the church.

Sin is like a cancer. It affects everyone around it. But if that brother is allowed to remain and the church does not withdraw from him, then the whole congregation's relationship with God is in danger, because by having agreement with him, they are showing that they do not agree with God. When the church at Corinth had not withdrawn from a brother in sin, Paul rebuked them in 1 Cor. 5. We must learn from this the need to take sin seriously and to be aware of its effects on the church so that we do not make the same mistake.

Conclusion

Christian fellowship is such a wonderful thing, but it is something that we must take seriously. Sin can ruin everything if we are not constantly striving to remove it from our lives and from the church.

No doubt this subject will bring to mind questions concerning when the church is to withdraw from a sinning brother and how such is to be done. We will discuss these and other questions in the next issue.

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