

# Limited Fellowship

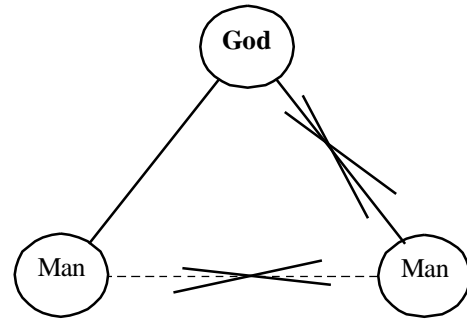
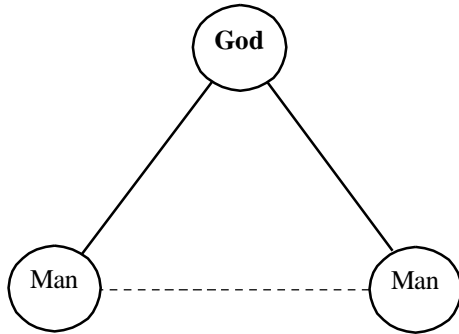
By David Phillips

In the previous issue we discussed what may be considered the basics of Christian fellowship: that it is established by a common faith and obedience in gospel. The principle set forth in the title of this article, however, is a bit more difficult to grasp. One reason for this difficulty is that the Greek words for fellowship, when taken out of their scriptural context, are very broad in their applications. *Koinonia*, which is the word most often used in the Scriptures, simply means “a sharing in common” (Vine’s). If we only take into consideration this very broad definition, then fellowship can be applied to the sharing of absolutely anything. It can apply to two people having a meal or a group of men moving furniture into a house. It can also be applied to two people committing fornication or the sinful practices of a cult. There are really no limitations as to what we can apply the word fellowship. With no limitations or no specific conditions or boundaries with which to define this term, the sharing of anything, whether sinful or not, constitutes fellowship.

There is, however, one rule or guideline which limits a person’s ability to have fellowship with another. That guideline is found in Amos 3:3 which simply states, “*Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?*” Without agreement two people cannot share anything in common. If two people trying to work together are not agreed on the goal and method of their efforts, they cannot have fellowship. If they want to eat a meal together but cannot agree on one place in which to eat or what type of meal to eat, their disagreement will hinder their ability to share that meal.

Because of this very basic principle a person can make his fellowship with others as broad or as narrow as he desires. He can say that he will have fellowship with people who dress one way, but not another way. He can say that he will have fellowship with people who act one way verses another way. Whatever characteristics he chooses to disagree with, that disagreement becomes a limitation for his fellowship. Therefore, while this word can be use in a very broad sense, it can also be used in a very specific and limited sense, depending on a person’s standard of what he will or will not agree with.

When one approaches the Scriptures having a grasp of this principle, he will be better able to understand the nature of Christian fellowship. For when it comes to Christian relationships, God is our ultimate standard. As John said in 1 John 1:3, “*and truly, our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.*” He 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. As Peter said, *"To those who have obtained like precious faith with us by the righteousness of our God..."* (2 Pet. 1:1). This *"like precious faith"* in God and His Son is the joining link between all Christians. It is our fellowship. This relationship is also described in the Psalms, *"I am a companion of all who fear You, and of those who keep Your precepts"* (Ps. 119:63). 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 speech or actions), that person's fellowship with God's people is also severed, as illustrated in the second diagram. Therefore, it is written, *"...withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us"* (2 Thess. 3:6). And again, *"Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God...If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds"* (2 John 9-11). When we acknowledge that God is the center of Christian fellowship, we will be better able to see the distinction between what is and what is not a part of that relationship.

### **What Does NOT Constitute Christian fellowship?**

Having laid out these essential principles, we are now ready to answer this very important question concerning the limitations of Christian fellowship. The first and most obvious answer to this question is sin. Sin is lawlessness; it is disobedience to God's law. When we walk in sin we cannot have fellowship with God or with His people because we are not in agreement with God. Therefore, John said, *"If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth"* (1 John 1:6).

Secondly, because of what is written in 2 John 9-11, where error is being taught there can be no Christian fellowship. Error occurs when people say and teach things that disagree with God's word. It also occurs when we use Bible words in ways that God does not use them. For example, in the Scriptures baptism referred to immersion. When a person was immersed in water, they were baptized (Acts 8:38-39). That is its definition. But when the Catholic Church began baptizing infants they used baptism to refer to sprinkling or pouring, contrary to God's word. By misusing that word error was spread. According to 2 John 9, those who use baptism in such a way do not have fellowship with God.

This same thing is true of fellowship. We have already established that though fellowship is a very general term outside of the Scriptures, it can also be used in a very restricted sense, depending on a person's standard. In the Scriptures, God uses fellowship in a very restricted sense and when we use this word to refer to religious activities and principles today we are appealing to His standard. That means that we must limit our use of this word according to God's use of it in the Scriptures.

Today there is much error being taught concerning Christian fellowship because people grossly misuse and misapply this word. In the Scriptures God only applies fellowship to His people in two ways. 1) In a general sense He uses it to refer to the relationship between all Christians with one another and between Christians and God (1 John 1:3-7). It is a general description of their common agreement in the gospel according to the will of God. 2) The most specific way in which God uses this word is to refer to a specific kind of work being done within the church. For example, in 2 Cor. 8:4, the Macedonians joined in the “*fellowship of the ministering to the saints.*” Also, in Gal. 2:9, James, Peter, and John extended the “right hand of fellowship” to Paul and Barnabas for the preaching of the gospel. Here again, their fellowship applied to the work or preaching, and not one specific act

In both uses cited above, fellowship is a description or condition of their relationship, not a single act or deed. To illustrate, if a person were to hold up a single piece of wood or a single nail, they would not say that it is their house. Rather, a house is a combination of many pieces of wood and nails and other materials working together. In a way, the word “house” is a description of the relationship between all of those materials as they are put together to make a complete structure. It is the result of many things working together. This is how God uses the term fellowship. It is a relationship between people as a result of their common efforts toward a single goal. We cannot take a single act and call it fellowship because that is not how God uses the term in the Scriptures.

So how are people misusing this term today? It is common among many churches to refer to the sharing of meals as fellowship. Some refer to playing basketball and even going fishing as fellowship. They believe that any kind of interaction between brethren constitutes Christian fellowship. They say that if two brethren are talking together as they walk down the street that they are “fellowshipping” one another. What is wrong with this? They are contradicting God’s use of the word. Read through the New Testament Scriptures and see where God refers to a meal as fellowship. You will not find any. Why? Because that is not how the term is used. Eating a meal, playing basketball and going fishing, do not constitute or establish Christian fellowship.

When Christian families join together for a meal they are in fellowship, but the meal has nothing to do with that fellowship. They each could be sitting in their own homes and still be in fellowship. Why? Because they have a common relationship as Christians and as members of the same congregation according to which they are working together to do the Lord’s will. That is the source of their fellowship. Therefore the term “fellowship meal” is unscriptural because it indicates that somehow eating food is the source of Christian fellowship, when in fact it is not.

The truths and applications we can derive from this point are many and far reaching. However, there is not space here to deal with all of them. No doubt many questions will be brought to minds as well. It is the purpose of this author to deal with many of those questions over the next few issues of this bulletin. Fellowship is a Scriptural term that all Christians must strive to understand because it is an essential part of our relationship with God and with one another.

In next week’s bulletin we will be discussing some of the nuances of what is and what is not Christian fellowship. We will also be making some applications concerning the works being done by many churches which are erroneously referred to as fellowship.