

# What Is Christian Fellowship?

By David Phillips

**F**ellowship” is a principle that is essential to a Christian’s relationship with God and with His people. The sad reality, however, is that this word as it is commonly used in the religious world today does not carry the same meaning as it does in the New Testament Scriptures. As a result, many Christians are mistaken in their understanding of what it means to have fellowship. In this article we are going to examine how *fellowship* is used in the New Testament and consider examples where Christians had *fellowship* with one another so that we may better understand how to practice it today.

The Greek word from which we get fellowship is *koinonia*. It is used 20 times in the New Testament and has been rendered “Fellowship,” “contribution,” “distribution,” “communion,” and “communicate.” The KJV translates it *fellowship* in Acts 2:42, 1 Cor. 1:9, 2 Cor. 8:4; Gal. 2:9; Eph. 3:9; Phil. 1:5; Phil. 2:1; 3:10; 1 John 1:3, 6, 7. Vine defines the word as “communion, fellowship, sharing in common.” Another Greek word which is translated *fellowship* is used only once in the N.T. and is found in 2 Cor. 6:14. It is defined “fellowship” or “partnership.”

If we take the basic definition of *koinonia* outside of its scriptural context we can apply it to just about anything which two or more people share in common. Today many people in the religious world use this word in a very general, physical sense. However, we will not discuss those misuses here. Our concern in this article is merely to understand what Christian fellowship is according to the Scriptures. We will deal with what it is NOT in the next article.

In the Scriptures, fellowship is the communication Christians have with one another as a direct result of their common faith in Christ. In 1 John 1:3 John tells us, “...*that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.*” That which John and the other apostles “*have seen and heard*” was Jesus Christ. They have witnessed Christ’s death and resurrection and they bore witnesses of it to all the world. Their purpose for preaching that gospel was so that we “*also may have fellowship with [them].*” Thus, before we can have Christian fellowship we must first believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Since the apostles had fellowship “*with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ,*” we too, through the gospel, are able to have fellowship with the Father and the Son. Therefore, the kind of fellowship Christians are to have with one another must begin with a common knowledge of the life and teachings of Christ as revealed through His gospel. As it is stated in Amos 3:3, “*Can two walk together unless they are agreed?*” Without this common knowledge and faith in gospel there can be no Christian fellowship.

Though sharing a common faith in the gospel is essential, the very definition of *fellowship* requires an active participation in order for it to be accomplished. Two people may sit in the same car together, but they are not riding together until the car begins to move forward. It is the same with fellowship. The common faith shared between two or more people brings them into fellowship only when all are actively working toward a common goal. Every passage where this word is mentioned forces us to make this conclusion. Acts 2:42: “*And they continued steadfastly in...fellowship...*” 2 Cor. 8:4: “*...the gift and fellowship of the*

*ministering to the saints.” 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.”*

In 1 John 1:3 John said that his fellowship is with the Father and the Son. In 1 Cor. 3:9 Paul said that those who preach are “*fellow workers with God.*” Here again illustrating how their fellowship was accomplished through their working (sharing) together in a common goal.

Christian fellowship today must be founded on these same principles. Though we may apply the term fellowship to any kind of sharing (sharing meals, business endeavors, etc.), *Christian* fellowship is established only through common faith in the gospel and it is accomplished only when we are actively working together in the works defined by that gospel. The following passages define the kinds of works which constitute this fellowship.

- 2 Cor. 8:4—Ministering to the saints: Christians in Macedonia had sent aid to help the churches affected by a drought in Judea. Through their efforts and contributions they had fellowship with Christians from other areas who were also ministering to those saints.
- Gal. 2:9—Preaching the gospel: Peter and John were preaching the gospel to the Jews. They gave Paul and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship as they preached the gospel to the Gentiles. Their fellowship was based on their common efforts in the preaching of the gospel.
- Phil. 1:5, 6—Working in the gospel: The Philippian Christians were diligent to work in the gospel and therefore had fellowship with Paul who was doing the same.
- Phil. 3:10—Suffering of Christ: As Paul preached the gospel he suffered many things, just as Christ did. Therefore he had the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings.
- 1 John 1:6, 7—walking in the light: Walking in the light means walking in truth, righteousness and godliness. John said that when we are active to walk in the light then we have fellowship with God. But if we walk in darkness (sin, error) then we no longer have fellowship with God.

How else might Christians work together according in order to have this fellowship? In a congregation Christians accomplish this when they are working together to worship God in spirit and in truth. They have fellowship when they work together to take care of those in need among them, when they are spreading the gospel in their local area, and when they are struggling against sin and error. All of these things constitute Christian fellowship.

When we see true fellowship practiced among members of the church it is one of the most beautiful things on earth. We can accomplish this today, but it requires true faith in Christ—active faith. It requires that Christians set aside some of their busy schedules in order to pursue the things of God as a unified body, putting the kingdom first in their lives.

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