

BASIC BIBLE PRINCIPLES

FELLOWSHIP

We are told in Acts 2 that the 3,000 who were baptized on the Day of Pentecost “continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and *fellowship*, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers” (v. 42). From the beginning of the first-century ecclesia there was such a thing as fellowship amongst believers; but what was it? The original Greek comes from a word meaning ‘common’, and fellowship therefore refers to believers having things in common, sharing together.

But what do believers have in common? It is, of course, the things that they believe. Notice that doctrine precedes fellowship in the above statement; believers have fellowship with each other on the basis of agreed doctrines. These doctrines are not originated by man; it is the apostles’ doctrine which unites believers together, that is, the things the apostles taught, as revealed to them by the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Fellowship with God and Christ

1 John 1 adds another dimension to the idea of fellowship, speaking of believers having fellowship with God and Christ. The Apostle John says, referring to his apostolic ministry to declare the truth concerning Jesus Christ: “that which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have *fellowship* with us: and truly our *fellowship* is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ” (v. 3). In this chapter the fellowship that a believer has is depicted as being fourfold:

- “with the Father”
- “with His Son Jesus”
- “with us [the apostles]”
- “one with another” (v. 7).

Fellowship here comes from acceptance of the teaching of the apostles. Those who accept that teaching enter a special relationship with God through Jesus Christ. All who do this are in fellowship with each other.

Entry into fellowship

How does a person come to have fellowship in these ways? At Pentecost it was those who believed the teaching of Peter, and responded to his appeal to repent and be baptized, who were in the apostles’ fellowship. By baptism a person becomes associated with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is consequently forgiven his or her sins, and stands in a new relationship with God and Christ (Col. 2:13,14).

This relationship with Christ through belief and baptism is central to the idea of fellowship. There is a unity between Christ and his believers which is expressed in a number of different ways in Scripture; for example:

- Believers are “one in Christ”, and thus part of the seed of Abraham and inheritors of the promises made to him (Gal. 3:26-29)
- Christ and the believers are collectively considered as one person, with Christ as the head and believers as the body (Eph. 1:22,23)
- Christ is “the true vine” and believers are “branches” (Jno. 15:1-6)

Keeping in fellowship

Baptized believers continue in fellowship by regularly partaking of bread and wine as a continued act of association with Christ’s work of salvation. Those baptized on the Day of

Pentecost “continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers”, “breaking bread from house to house” (Acts 2:42,46).

The Apostle Paul writes: “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? For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread” (1 Cor. 10:16,17). The word translated ‘communion’ is also translated ‘fellowship’; believers renew their fellowship with Christ and with one another by partaking of the emblems together.

Believers also retain fellowship by holding fast to the apostolic teaching they believed at their baptism, and behaving in ways appropriate for those who are Christ’s. Those who cease to do these things are no longer truly in fellowship: “If we say that we have fellowship with Him [God], and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth” (1 Jno. 1:6). Doing the truth implies both believing the true doctrines taught by the apostles and following a way of life in accordance with them. Nevertheless, through weakness all sin, and for those who “walk in the light . . . the blood of Jesus Christ [God’s] Son cleanseth [them] from all sin” (v. 7).

Keeping in fellowship also involves keeping separate from those who are in darkness. In 2 Corinthians 6:14-18 Paul, writing to those who had come away from idol worship, sets down principles of separation based upon baptized believers being God’s people, saying, “what communion hath light with darkness?”, where ‘communion’ is the word for ‘fellowship’.

Maintaining true fellowship

Certain practical steps are needed in order to maintain true fellowship. The main ones are:

- Ensuring that those who are baptized know and believe the doctrines taught by the apostles. This involves careful instruction from the Scriptures, and an interview to confirm that these doctrines, and the way of life which should follow, are known and understood.
- Having a common understanding of what the doctrines taught by the apostles actually are, the document containing this understanding being called ‘The Statement of Faith’.
- Agreeing that certain things are incompatible with being in true fellowship, for example involvement in military service or politics, or wrong behaviour towards others.
- Expecting that those who are baptized become members of an ecclesia which accepts the above principles before they can break bread.
- Ensuring that those who cease to “walk in the light” because of wrong beliefs or behaviour are no longer permitted to break bread with the ecclesia.

The above things represent our best attempts to maintain true fellowship, but do not always operate perfectly due to human weakness.

The responsibilities of fellowship

The fellowship which brethren and sisters have together is truly a wonderful thing, uniting believers from all parts of the world, from all walks of life and of all ages and both sexes. This special relationship of believers one with another brings with it responsibilities towards each other. The Greek word translated ‘fellowship’ and connected words are translated in a number of other ways, some of which illustrate these responsibilities. Here are some examples:

“ye [the Philippian ecclesia] have well done, that ye did *communicate* with my [Paul’s] affliction” (Phil. 4:14);

“But to do good and to *communicate* forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased” (Heb. 13:16);

“. . . *distributing* to the necessity of saints; given to hospitality” (Rom. 12:13);

“. . . your [the Corinthian ecclesia’s] liberal *distribution* unto them [the needy Jerusalem ecclesia], and unto all men” (2 Cor. 9:13).

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