

August 1, 2021

## The BIBLICAL View of Fellowship

“**Fellowship**,” without a doubt, is one of the most heart-warming words in the Bible. When we painfully acknowledge the fact that “*all have sinned*” (Rom. 3:23), that sin alienates man from God (Isa. 59:1,2), and that “*the wages of sin is death*” (Rom. 6:23), then the very thought that **we** can be in fellowship with **God** is both awe-inspiring and soul-thrilling!

However, “*fellowship*” is one of the most badly abused words in the Bible. Now-a-days, it seems that multitudes, including many of our own brethren, are determined to take this word from its spiritual realm and use it to describe every social and recreational activity which the fertile minds of men can conceive. For some reason, many appear to believe that anything done under the auspices of a local church, or a combination of local churches, is a “good work” if they can label it in the category of “*fellowship*,” and in some way use the word “*fellowship*” to describe the action taken.

Lest any should think this writer has “lost his marbles” with regards to the limited realm in which “*fellowship*” is used, you are encouraged to read all the passages wherein this word appears. In particular, please note:

Acts 2:42 — “...in the apostles doctrine and **fellowship**...”

I Cor. 1:9 — “called unto the **fellowship** of his son..”

2 Cor. 8:4 — “...the **fellowship** of the ministering to the saints.”

Gal. 2:9 — “they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of **fellowship**.”

Eph. 3:9 — “And to make all men see what is the **fellowship** of the...”

Phil. 1:3,5 — “I thank my God...for your **fellowship** in the gospel from the first day until now.”

“Phil. 2:1 — “...if any **fellowship** of the Spirit..”

Phil. 3:10 — “and the **fellowship** of his suffering...”

**I John 1:3** — “that ye may have **fellowship** with us, and truly **our fellowship** is with the Father...”

I John 17 — “But if we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have **fellowship** one with another...”

In each of the preceding Scriptures *“fellowship”* is used to refer to spiritual things — not to that which is carnal, social, or recreational in nature. Also in each of the preceding Scriptures, *“fellowship”* is used to denote the kind of joint participation, association, or communion which is pleasing to God and beneficial to those whose work and relationship are thus described. Admittedly *“fellowship”* (the word) is also used four other times in the New Testament, and in those instances the *“fellowship”* referred to is condemned. We now note the four passages where *“fellowship”* is so used:

I Cor. 10:2 — *“...I would not that ye should have **fellowship** with devils.”*

2 Cor. 6:14 — *“for what **fellowship** hath righteousness with unrighteousness..”*

Eph. 6:11 — *“And have **no fellowship** with the unfruitful works of darkness.”*

I John 1:4 — *“If we say that we have **fellowship** with him and walk in darkness, we lie...”*

### **“Fellowship” Does NOT Mean:**

**1. Common Meals.** At least, it does not as it is used in the Scriptures. For that matter, we read of Jesus eating with sinners (Luke 15:2). Was that a “fellowship meal?” Was Jesus having fellowship with sinners? Paul, aboard a ship, ate with some 275 other people, most of whom were not Christians, Acts 27:35-37. Was that a “fellowship meal?” Was he having fellowship with sinners?

**2. Halls or Large Rooms.** Where in the Bible was *“fellowship”* ever used as an adjective to modify a hall or a large room? Moreover, to describe a room where both saints and sinners eat together as a “fellowship hall” is to badly misuse and abuse a good Bible word. If **any** room in a “church building” can legitimately be called a “fellowship hall” it would have to be the room where all the saints assemble to study the Bible, hear the gospel proclaimed, praise God in *“spiritual songs,”* and partake of the Lord’s Supper, eating the unleavened bread which is *“the **communion** of the body of Christ,”* and drinking the fruit of the vine which is *“the **communion** of the blood of Christ”* (I Cor. 10:16).

### **“Fellowship” — Its Definition**

*“Fellowship”* is most often translated from the Greek KOINONIA. W.E. Vine defines it as: (1) “Communion, fellowship in common,” (2) that which is the outcome of fellowship, a contribution, e.g. Rom. 15:26; 2 Cor. 8:4” (**An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words**, page 420). Joseph Thayer defined KOINONIA as “fellowship, association, joint participation, intercourse” (**Thayer’s Lexicon**, page 352). Thayer further elaborated, applying it in three categories: (1) “The share which one has in anything, participation.” (2) “Intercourse, fellowship, intimacy (as reflected in Gal. 2:9, Acts 2:42; Phil. 1:5; I John 1:3,7,” and (3) “A benefaction jointly contributed, a collection, a contribution (as in 2 Cor. 8:4; 2 Cor. 9:13).”

When we “boil” these definitions down, it seems that “*fellowship*” primarily has a two-fold meaning: (1) A state or **relationship**, and (2) **joint participation**. Hence, Christians are people who have been “*called into the fellowship of His Son*” (I Cor. 1:9). “*Fellowship*” that denotes a state or relationship of saints who continue “*in the apostles doctrine and fellowship*” (Acts 2:42), jointly participating in those things peculiar to their state in Christ and their relationship as Christians.

### **Fellowship is First Vertical**

That is, man on earth can have fellowship with all three Persons of the Godhead. He may have fellowship with the **Father** (I John 1:3), with **Jesus Christ** (I Cor. 1:9), and he may have fellowship with the **Holy Spirit** (Phil. 2:1; 2 Cor 13:14). “Vertical fellowship depends on two factors, namely:

**1. God’s provisions.** God provided Christ (John 3:16), the gospel (Rom. 1:16), and the church (Eph. 3:3-5,10-11).

**2. Man’s response to God’s provisions.** Man must believe the gospel (Mark 16:16), repent of his sins (Acts 2:38), confess his faith (Acts 8:37), be baptized into Christ (Acts 2:38; Gal. 3:27), and “*walk in the light*” (I John 1:7).

“Vertical fellowship is thus a divine-human arrangement. The **provisions** are wholly of God. The **response** is wholly of man.”

### **“Fellowship” is also Horizontal**

We may have fellowship with others who are in fellowship with God (I John 1:3). Of course, if others engage in those things which will sever their fellowship with God, then we must not remain in fellowship with them (cf. I Cor. 5). Also joint participation in **teaching error** (Rom. 16:17), **practicing error** (Eph. 5:11; I John 1:6,7), or **endorsing error** (2 John 9-11) must therefore be avoided, for those things sever one’s fellowship with God.

Hence, when we look for a local church with which to identify, we should: (1) Look for a congregation which respects the authority of Jesus Christ, refusing to go beyond the doctrine of Christ (2 John 9-11), and (2) a congregation wherein all collective action engaged in is in keeping with a “thus saith the Lord.” Of course, fellowship with others involves more than just casting one’s lot with a particular congregation, for if fellowship involves “**joint participation**” (and it does!), then each member must be actively involved (jointly participating) in the Scriptural work and worship of the local church. To refuse to so act is to refuse to have fellowship (joint participation) with those who are in fellowship with Jesus Christ. Consider ye well!

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—B. Witherington