

# That We All May Be One: Fellowship

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This is the 3<sup>rd</sup> in a series of messages by the elders, designed to encourage all of us – to share and participate with one another in faith and love— so **“That We All May Be One.”**

I really appreciated Bob’s lesson on the Old Covenant – how it introduced God’s great legal platform, i.e. the **Ten Commands** as the foundation of – all written codes of law... placing Jehovah God as the one and only Lord of the Universe and setting the standards for proper conduct – between all peoples of the world.

This First Covenant **was** perfect – but it was not intended to provide the scheme of redemption – for our failure to keep God’s law.

This gives us ample reason to focus on the “Better Covenant,” – with “Better Promises” based on the “law of faith” – that **does** makes provision – for our redemption unto Salvation.

Therefore, I am anxious to hear Bob’s next lesson on – God’s New Covenant with His redeemed people.

It is most interesting to follow – these progressive relationships of God with His people – throughout the ages of the world.

Our lesson this evening will move ahead to begin considering – some of the superior benefits of God’s New Covenant – with His Holy Nation, i.e. His own special people, – designated as a Royal Priesthood.

We will consider an important factor – for complying with the Lord’s prayer – **“That His Church May Be One.”**

In **Acts 2:42**, we find 3,000 newly converted believers in Jesus – continuing steadfastly in four things;

- 1) **the apostles teaching**;
- 2) **the fellowship**;
- 3) **the breaking of bread**, and
- 4) **prayer**.

Without a doubt, these are very important elements – in the establishment and continuing growth – of the Lord’s church, which includes our congregation.

It is interesting to note all four activities that – engaged the constant attention of the early church involved:

- 1) **sharing** of the teachings of God among the believers;
- 2) **sharing and participation** of the believers with one another;
- 3) **sharing and communion** of the believers in the sacrificial death of Jesus; and –
- 4) **communion** in praise and prayer with God.

Notice the common thread – that weaves it all together is – the **sharing, participation and communion** between God and all believers in Jesus.

This draws our attention to the importance – of the Fellowship mentioned in **Acts 2:42**.

Considering the theme – **“That We All May Be One”** – it seems most profitable to study “The Fellowship” – as a very important factor of the Lord’s church – in the 1st century and, also today.

You know, as elders, Bob and I really love and care – for each member of the Lord’s family at Riverside Road.

We love you because you are God’s VIP, i.e. a **Valuable Investment Potential** – purchased by Christ – at a great price – and added to the Divine Fellowship of His church.

We are all one in Him – as we serve each another in love and as your elders – we are comfortable in – this divine partnership with you.

We must all realized that God has brought us all together for the purpose of learning more perfectly His will for our lives– that we might be more like the Master.

And it is important to keep in mind – all members of our congregation – are **not** in the same stages of sanctification and maturity – in our knowledge of the Lord – and each one has different gifts to share – in the building up of the body of Christ.

In composing this lesson, we want to acknowledge – the use of information we deemed to be edifying – from various sermons and lessons by others – including Eric Rogers, Rick Sparks, Thomas Dennis, – Richard Riggins and others.

First, we need to understand the meaning – of the word Fellowship as used in the Bible.

Its English connotation is a combined form of two words: **fellow + ship**.

“Fellow” is derived from the Old Norse word *falagi* – which meant a comrade or a partner in a common partnership. It conveyed the meaning of a fellow comrade – or, *someone who lays down something besides, i.e... one who makes a commitment* – like 2 people laying down their money – for the purpose of entering into a partnership.

This is the meaning of our Anglo- Saxton word fellowship, i.e... a partnership with one another – with each person investing something in that partnership.

This is what the word Fellowship in **Acts 2:42** is all about.

It is important to notice that the word “ship” – is a suffix that is added to a noun to create a new noun – that indicates a **state or condition** – related to the original noun – which generally **denotes persons**.

By adding the suffix “ship” to the nouns – companion, apostle, elder, and friend – we have new nouns – companionship, apostleship, eldership, and friendship.

These indicate the **state or condition – in which persons hold things in common**.

In other words, it is that – which is shared or held in common that creates – the companionship, apostleship, eldership, friendship – or in our case, the fellowship of believers in the Lord’s church.

The Greek word *koinonia*, – from which fellowship is translated in the New Testament, – is derived from *koinon*, the word for **“common.”** *Koinonia* signifies that which is shared – by the whole church at large; and – that which is shared and held in common – is what creates the fellowship.

This same *koinonia* word is used in **Luke 5: 10** – where we are told that James and John were – common partners with Simon Peter in the fishing business. Now, if we know anything about the nature of Peter – we can safely conclude that these 3 men didn't always – agree upon all matters of life, or even techniques in fishing. But **still** they were partners – mutually engaged in a partnership –for the purpose of sharing and pursuing common objectives – i.e. success in their fishing enterprise.

In regard to Fellowship, I'm sure most of us have heard – this noun mistakenly, used as a verb – in a way we **never** use any of the other ship-words.

Husbands, have you ever been asked – if you “companionship” your wife?

Is it proper to say that Bob and I “eldership” each other?

Did Matthias “apostleship” the other 11 apostles?

Do you friendship your coworkers?

Why is the word “Fellowship” used in this way?

Isn't it more proper to talk about “being in fellowship” or “out of fellowship – or being called into the fellowship?”

A search of the Bible concludes these are the proper uses of the term fellowship. We never see the word Fellowship used as a verb – showing action or the occurrence of a happening.

**Fellowship is a state or relation.** All who enter into that state or relation are in the fellowship. So, whatever brings a person into the relationship – brings that person into the fellowship.

Therefore, being baptized into the Lords body – brings us into the fellowship in the Lord’s Kingdom.

It is important for us to keep in mind that – the primary connotation of *koinonia* is – that of **sharing something with somebody**, i.e. participating in the work of the church with others – rather than just an association with them.

**We must understand that the fellowship is not simply a casual relationship.**

*Christian fellowship is much more than an association of people – because; it involves planning, participating and profiting – in a partnership, wherein, each member is a **VIP**, – a **valuable investment potential** to share and be shared – in common for the spiritual well-being of all.*

I’m going to repeat this because it is critical for a proper understanding of Fellowship.

*Christian fellowship is much more than an association of people – because; it involves planning, participating and profiting – in a partnership, wherein, each member is **VIP**, – a **valuable investment potential** to share and be shared – in common for the spiritual well-being of all.”*

The special connection of the spiritual *koinonia*–type relationship is found in **1st Corinthians 8:23** – where Paul referred to Titus – as his partner and his fellow helper.

Similar words are used in the New Testament – to describe this unique relationship in Christ.

Three different terms are used in **Eph 3: 6** –

Fellow-Heirs – i.e. participants in the same inheritance

Fellow-Members – i.e. united in one body

Fellow-Citizens – i.e. partakers with all Christians of the benefits of the Gospel.

In **Phil 2: 25** –

Fellow-workers i.e. laborers together for the Lord

Fellow-soldiers i.e. Comrades in the fight of faith.

In **Rom 16: 7** –

Fellow-prisoners – i.e. sharers in Christian persecution.

In other words Christians share with one another – in all aspects of the Christian life – they are not simply associates – who happened to be there – they have fellowship together – because of their commitment to a common cause.

The fellowship of **Acts 2:42** is a good example of true *koinonia* which can only exist between true believers.

Notice the state of the fellowship of the early Christians in – **Acts 2:44, “... All who believed were together, and had all things in common...”**

What a beautiful picture of true Fellowship – as these true believers shared all things with each other – while praising God continually and – having favor with all the people.

We know this pleased the Lord because – he daily added those who were being saved – into the “*koinonia*” fellowship of the church.

The New Testament is replete with references – to the sharing in a common state under the New Covenant, i.e. – sharing in a common faith (**Titus 1:4; 2 Peter 1:1**); sharing in the common salvation (**Jude 4**); or sharing in common promises (**Ephesians 3:6**).

Redeemed believers also share –

- in common responsibilities (**3 John 8**),
- in common experiences (**Acts 4:32**), and
- in common privileges (**Hebrews 13:16**).

Christian fellowship has 2 sides, or directions.

The divine side is a vertical relationship – comprising unity with and participation in – the life and death of Christ through the Spirit.

The human side is a horizontal relationship – comprising unity and communion with brethren – whose mutual relations have been transformed by the Spirit.

This emphasizes the **KEY** role of the Holy Spirit – in bringing together heaven and earth – and one another – in the *koinonia* fellowship “That We All May Be One.”

**(1 Cor 12: 13)**

This helps us to understand **Philippians 2:1-2** – where *koinonia* is designated as the “fellowship of the Spirit” – and is used in conjunction with – encouragement in Christ – consolation of love, and – tenderness and compassion.

These, Paul said, should motivate the Saints to be – “*like-minded, having the same love, and being one in spirit and purpose.*”

This unity is made possible by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit – in all who sustain a covenant relationship to God.

This is God’s way of helping us deal with – our human weakness in understanding spiritual things – as we strive to be one.

While, we believe, God wrote the Bible – to be understood by human beings – this does not mean it is all milk – without some things hard to understand.

In these areas, Peter warned that people who are untaught and unstable can twist the scriptures to their own destruction.

Therefore, we must use special care in areas we don't understand alike.

Having different opinions and beliefs about things has been a common human trait of all humanity – yes, even in the early church that had all things in common as described in **Acts chapter 2**.

We only have to look ahead to **chapter 6** – to find out that they also had disagreements – concerning community conduct – among themselves as Christians.

But they were still one in the fellowship of Christ.

No doubt, we all agree the apostles were in the fellowship. In the **Galatians 2: 9**, Paul said, that Peter was one of –the 3 apostles who gave him the right hand of fellowship.

But yet in **verse 11**, *“when Peter came to Antioch, Paul opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong.”*

Paul did not sanction Peter’s course of action – but they were both in the fellowship.

In Corinth, it is certain God did not endorse – all the actions of the members of His church – but they were in the fellowship (**1 Corinthians 1:9**) – except the fornicator for a time until he repented of his sin.

The **14th chapter of Romans** makes it plain there were varying degrees of knowledge and different opinions held by those in the early church.

Notice **verse 1** opens this chapter by saying *“as for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.”*

In other words, we should not make a test of fellowship out of personal scruples or opinions as described in **verses 2 and 3**, *“One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.”*

Such disagreements should never be allowed –to cause strife or lead to divisions in the body of the Lord.

At this point it is important to restate from our 1st lesson that we are discussing areas of disagreement that we should allow our brothers or sisters to hold.

These are not areas that deny the expressed facts of the gospel of these we would have to be in full agreement about or else we wouldn't even be in the fellowship with Christ.

We want to share with you, in our own words some thoughts about *koinonia* fellowship – made by Brother Rick Sparks several years ago – that have helped us to understand – some of the difficulties regarding the concept of fellowship.

In this regard, the elders are in agreement with these thoughts or else we wouldn't be restating them.

Brother Rick understands the word fellowship to be used in two different senses – which we need to keep in mind when discussing fellowship.

Quite often people are willing to talk – about only one of these senses or the other – and in some cases – they insist that their sense is the only sense – in which fellowship should be used.

The Bible teaches there is one sense – in which Christians exercise **no** control of their fellowship with other Christians.

While in another sense it is plainly taught that Christians **do** exercise control of their fellowship with others.

The **1st sense**, where we have **no** control of the Fellowship involves the state into which we have been called the state we share with all other Christians in the universal church.

We share a relationship and a responsibility with other Christians purely on the basis of the fact that we have individually responded to the gospel of Christ.

I.e., when a person is born into the family of God they don't really know all the other members of God's family if they do, they had nothing to do with putting them there.

This is entirely the work of the Lord to add redeemed believers into the fellowship.

Therefore, as Christians, we exercise no control in the process of admitting others to the fellowship when they are added by the Lord to the church. But we know that ***“God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Corinthians 1:9).***

Therefore, in this process we are fellow partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel (**Ephesians 3:6**). We have been grafted in and have become partakers with the believing Jews (**Romans 11:17**) – whether we liked it or not.

The **2nd sense**, where we **do** have control of our fellowship – is in the area where the Bible clearly teaches – that we may individually extend fellowship, – we may withhold it – or we may even withdraw fellowship.

Paul told the Ephesians to – ***“... have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness – but rather expose them” (Eph 5:11).***

John's message is clear that – ***“If anyone comes to you and does not bring the doctrine of Christ, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds” (2 John 10 – 11).***

Paul instructed the Galatians that – ***“The one who is taught the word is to share all good things – [or, extend fellowship] with the one who teaches him” (Gal 6:6).***

These verses clearly show that individual Christians – in these circumstances, have the right to control – their fellowship with others – by extending it – withholding it – or withdrawing it.

Therefore, in this sense a Christian does have control – over their fellowship, or partnership with others in the gospel.

In **2 Corinthians 8:4**, Paul tells how the churches of Macedonia were, ***“begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the poor saints...”***

This is not something these Macedonian Christians had to do. It was their choice to participate in the alleviation of the problems of their Christian brethren in Judea. It was under their control to extend their fellowship – to the Jewish Christians to the extent of their liberality.

Remember in the **2nd chapter of Galatians**; – Peter, James, and John gave Paul and Barnabas – the right hand of fellowship. I believe, on their human volition – they made the choice to extend – fellowship to Paul and Barnabas. And, I'm sure their decision was based on godly criteria.

In summary, the 2 areas or senses of fellowship are –

- 1) Christian fellowship as a state – which is coexistent with the universal kingdom of Christ, and –
- 2) The fellowship, which we can extend, withhold, or withdraw.

The latter fellowship extended is relatively limited – and normally more local in application.

Now let's focus on inter-congregational fellowship – wherein we as local members have the right to extend – withhold, or withdraw fellowship.

I want to pick up where we left off in the 1st lesson – about our differences in understanding the Bible.

As Brother Rick stated, when we have an opinion – or a judgment about the scriptures – we believe we are right.

And I certainly hope we believe in every position we take – if we don't – we are false teachers right along with the Pharisees.

I will quote this paragraph from Rick's sermon – to set up the rest of this lesson.

*“None of us would say that every false position – taken by another person makes it impossible – for us to be in fellowship with him.*

*For all of us have – our own little doctrinal deviations which we can tolerate.*

*So for all of us it is not a question – of whether we can be in fellowship – with someone who is wrong – but it's a question of which subjects he can be wrong about– and still be in our fellowship. And there is the rub. It's here that our thinking often becomes fuzzy – because it is colored by our past experiences and relationships.”*

This draw attention to the difficult question – “Where do we draw the line?”

At this point, we would like for someone –to outline very clearly and concisely and positively –just how to straighten out all these issues.

You know, if this could've been done –it would've been a long time ago.

Many have tried, but the problems –of not being able to understand the Bible alike are still with us. And, therefore, we still have questions – concerning with whom we will be in fellowship.

We should never blame the composition of the Bible – The problem lies in the variables that are involved – in the human and, yes, even Christian, mind.

The question of where to draw the line of fellowship – is always a matter of subjective judgment.

No matter where we draw the line – except in areas of “clearly expressed facts of faith,” – there will always be questions – where human judgment must be exercised – making answers doubtful – because of the great possibility of human error.

And, of course, there will be some who disagree – about what are “clearly expressed facts of faith.”

In regard to the question of being in fellowship – with someone with a different opinion from ours – we must render our judgments with the – utmost charity toward all – and, of course, with malice toward none.

Too many times the assumptions we make for argumentation – with those of differing opinions – are set up so that we know how it's going to come out.

And maybe we are not quite as fair with them – as we would like for them to be with us.

In discussions regarding opinions with other Christians – whether in private or from the pulpit – **our attitudes are very important.**

In this regard, I want to read a section of a sermon – given by Brother Tom Dennis several years ago – dealing with fellowship between congregations. Many of the thoughts, we believe, apply to fellowship –between individual Christians within a congregation.

*“Concerning fellowship between congregations – whether a certain congregation is faithful or not – I've concluded that each of us must follow after those things that we believe the Bible to teach – humbly acknowledging that we are all subject to error – but ever striving to increase in knowledge – and lovely reasoning with those we come in contact with – both sinners and Saints – making gracious allowance for their views and their opinions – and endeavoring to teach them the way of the Lord more fully – and then leave final judgment to the Lord.*

*I cannot see how we can accomplish – our aim of contending for the faith if we compromise with sin – or if we share in fellowship – with that which we believe to be wrong.*

*On the other hand, we can so isolate ourselves – that we cannot reach people. Exactly where to draw the lines at all times – becomes a matter of judgment.*

*I suppose a good many of our congregations have some points – in which I would at least question – and some have points with which I most definitely disagree. Yet, I do not disfellowship them all for all these things – but rather feel that they are in need of instructions many times regarding these matters.*

*The very fact that each congregation of the church of Christ – is autonomous and that the church exists in – so many nations and cultures and environments – gives rise for opportunity – for some variations among congregations.*

*Yet each is to be submissive to the word of God.*

*I think it only natural for us to feel more comfortable – more relaxed with brethren with whom we agree. But yet we owe it to others to make allowance – for their convictions.*

*The degree to which brethren can disagree – and still maintain compatibility depends – greatly on the importance of the subject – on which they are disagree – and the character of those involved in the disagreements.*

*Attitude is such an important thing. Mature brethren can disagree without being ugly about it. I tell people that if they can't work together –work separately – but work – and don't spit on each other.*

*Don't be hateful – just because you disagree. Combat sin – and not the brethren – with whom you are in disagreement.”*

We believe these are some excellent thoughts that – should be considered in our quest “That We All May The One.”

Also, we will conclude this lesson by summarizing – some additional thoughts presented by – Brothers Rick Sparks and Tom Dennis – concerning the degree which brethren can disagree – and still maintain compatibility and fellowship.

It is very important that we consider the difference – between – **holding a belief** and **putting it into practice**.

It is interesting to note when we review – the history of the church over the past 150 years – when lines of fellowship have been drawn – they are usually drawn over – **what we do**, not **what we believe**.

We believe that in matters of belief that we hold personally – as long as we don't allow it to be a chip on our shoulder – and become factious about it – most brethren are willing to allow us – to hold that belief – even if they think we're wrong – and they still allow us to be in their fellowship.

Now, this is true in most areas of belief – but not when we get into beliefs – that deny clearly expressed facts of faith.

As previously stated, we must be in full agreement – on these facts of faith – else we wouldn't be in Christ to begin with.

Failure to allow our brothers and sisters – to hold beliefs we disagree with – will only lead to the splintering of ourselves – into very small and **ineffective** fragments.

We believe in our congregation we do a fair job – of allowing each other to hold beliefs that others disagree with.

And so long as we do not insist on practicing these beliefs – most of us are quite comfortable.

But, it is an entirely different situation – when we try to put into practice – these beliefs upon which there is disagreement.

Immediately, we face several problems – when a person begins practicing their belief – which others cannot conscientiously do – as a matter of faith. In this area we must be very careful not to cause – our brother or sister to stumble or to violate their conscience.

For example –

Suppose someone believes – that the use of instrumental music – in the public meetings of the church is all right.

As long as they only hold it as a belief – they can remain as a part of the congregation.

We can – and should – study with them about it – but may never come to the same conclusion.

However, as long as they don't insist – upon actually using an instrument in the church – we don't see that we have a major problem.

Now in regard to the use of instruments – with hymns in our homes – some of us may not believe in this – while others of us believe it is okay.

In this area – we owe it to others – to make allowance for their convictions – and we must all work together – to help each other be fully persuaded in our own minds – in regard to what we practice.

Another issue of disagreement – that should never have caused division – is the use of individual cups in the communion service.

I know none of us were involved – in the improper handling of the situation on either side – but there should have been more loving consideration – and **submission to one another** on both sides – to have prevented a division of the body of Christ.

We need to point out that this line of reasoning – does not require a person to remain silent – about what other people believe or practice.

In fact, our love for them requires – that we address the issue – discussing it in meekness – in consideration of the Scriptures.

The point is, we individually need to maintain – just as much fellowship as our brother or sister will allow – as long as it does not require us – to teach something we believe to be false – or, to engage in what we believe to be a wrong practice – or, to endorse unscriptural doctrine or practice.

We **must not** compromise our convictions to attain unity – and we should never cause others – to violate their conscience in the things we do.

In the area of fellowship, we need to recognize – that fellowship, in general, is an individual matter – therefore, our attitude is such an important thing – and, more importantly – our attitude must be prompted – by a heart that is loyal to God. **2 Chronicles 16:9** teaches us – *“that the Lord strongly – supports those whose heart is completely his.”*

In regard to continuing steadfastly in the fellowship of the Spirit – I'm going to read another short comment by Brother Tom.

*“We should never expect perfection in our brethren – but we should encourage one another – to strive toward perfection.*

*We have to make allowance for the fact – that our brethren are just as human as we are. We must be careful with our judgments – not to expect more of others than we do of ourselves. **Final judgment belongs to God.***

*We are just to be helping one another along the way. The proper love for one another helps us – to maintain this attitude of fervent love for one another – realizing that charity covers a multitude of sins.”*

And, the elders agree with Brother Tom's comments.

As we conclude our thoughts about fellowship we should also consider another “ship” word – **Followship**.

If we can get our **followship** in order and be more seriously interested in following Christ and then check our egos at the door – many questions about fellowship will take care of themselves

The elders love you.

You are our brothers and sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ and we pray God that we all “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (**Eph 4: 3**) and to practice loving sensitivity to all children of God (**1 John 5: 1, 2**) “**That We All May Be One**” to the glory of God.

May God bless our congregation in faithful obedience to Him.