

## FELLOWSHIP

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### *About the author...*

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## Introduction

A few years back, I ran into several people who said, "You have drawn your little circle of fellowship and that is sinful." I always countered with, "Well, you draw a circle of fellowship, too." They would deny such until I asked them, "Do you fellowship with the drunkard, murderer, immoral and ungodly?" Of course, their answer was, "No!" I would reply, "Well, you have a circle of fellowship, and what makes yours right and mine sinful?" It often took them a while to answer, if they could.

In the matter of fellowship, God has drawn the "circle" of our association, and it is futile for us to make fellowship elastic. Fellowship is based upon the grace of God and is extended on God's terms (His Word) as a foretaste and expression of heavenly fellowship. As there will be some that will not participate in heaven's blessings, there are some that should not participate in the church's fellowship. As closely as possible, we must mirror God's Word in our congregational fellowship and personal fellowship with those about us.

Do you believe in Universalism? That is, that all people, no matter what their beliefs or practices, are acceptable and right with God. If there are no limits to fellowship, every person who has ever lived is in fellowship with God and with every other person who has ever lived. Would you accept that Hitler, Judas (Acts 1:15-20), Jezebel (1 Kings 16:31; Revelation 2:20), Diotrephes (3 John 9), Hymenaeus and Alexander (1 Timothy 1:19), etc. are all acceptable to God in their ungodliness and are our brethren in the Lord? This is Universalism in its worst extreme. This theory ignores the difference between godliness and ungodliness, suggesting that both are equal before God and man. It ignores the righteousness of God and His attitude toward sin (1 John 1:5-7). It ignores the fact that justice is a righteous act and that it would be unjust to allow evil people to go unpunished and righteous people to go unrewarded. Universalism is false! If you cannot accept Universalism, you must admit to some limitations of fellowship with God and His people. Just what those limitations are and how far we can extend fellowship is the issue.

Please note that fellowship with God is equated with salvation. Anyone who is in fellowship with God is surely in a saved position (1 John 1:7; Hebrews 12:22-23). It may well be that some in the local congregation may not be in fellowship with God (1 Corinthians 5:1ff – the church permitted a sinner to be in fellowship unto Paul instructed otherwise). Likewise, some may be in fellowship with God while the church refuses to fellowship them (3 John 9-10; Revelation 2:24; 3:4). The membership list should never be equated with the "general assembly" of those "spirits of just men made perfect"

and who are “enrolled in heaven.” We may make mistakes, but God never does. So, while heaven’s fellowship is beyond our concern, we are required to exercise care and concern in the local, congregational fellowship (2 Corinthians 6:17; Ephesians 5:11). It needs to be clearly pointed out that it is the right (obligation) of the local church to control its membership and who is included. We must “judge righteous judgment” (John 7:24), or “judge a tree by its fruits” (Matthew 7:20). When Saul (later, the apostle Paul) “assayed to join himself to the disciples” in Jerusalem (Acts 9:26-28), he was excluded until information was given about his conversion that made him worthy of inclusion. Congregations are not required to accept every person merely because they express a desire to be a member. Congregations can exclude people from their membership who are not worthy (1 Corinthians 5). Principles upon which God would have us to extend or limit fellowship must be determined from the word of God. Our goal is to avoid including anyone among our number that God would exclude and to avoid excluding anyone whom God would include. We want our local fellowship to mirror, as closely as possible, the fellowship that God extends. (Roberts 1-2)

### Definitions of Fellowship

To understand fellowship, we must have an accurate and working definition of the word as used in the New Testament. This is the basis for any fellowship.

A. Thayer’s Definition:

1. Koinonia (noun) – “fellowship, association, community, communion, joint participation...2. Fellowship, intercourse, intimacy...3. A benefaction jointly contributed, a collection, a contribution, 2 Corinthians 8:4; 9:13; Romans 15:26.”
2. Koinoneo (verb) – “to come into communion or fellowship, to become a sharer, be made a partner...”
3. Metoche – “a sharing, communion, fellowship; 2 Corinthians 6:14” (352).

B. W. E. Vine’s Definition:

1. Koinonia (Greek: noun): “(a) communion, fellowship, sharing in common (from koinos, common)...(b) that which is the outcome of fellowship, a contribution, e.g., Romans 15:26; 2 Corinthian 8:4.”
2. Koinoneo (Greek: verb): “to have fellowship, is so translated in Philippians 4:15, RV; for AV, “did communicate.”
3. Metoche (Greek: noun): “partnership, 2 Corinthians 6:14.
4. Metoche (Greek: verb): “Hebrews 2:14 – sharing” (233).

### God’s Word Limits Fellowship

There are some obvious things in which Christians CAN HAVE NO FELLOWSHIP. Here is a list of scriptures which tell us the limits that God has given:

1. 1 Corinthians 5:5: Immoral people.
2. Romans 16:17; 2 John 9-11: Doctrinal heresy.
3. Matthew 18:15ff: Impenitent sinners.
4. Titus 3:10; 1 John 2:19: A factious man.
5. 2 Thessalonians 3:6: Those who walk disorderly.
6. Ephesians 5:11: Those who participate in the unfruitful works of darkness.

7. 2 Corinthians 6:14-18: those associations that cause us to share with those who deny God or God's word.

There are some obvious things in which Christians CAN HAVE FELLOWSHIP. Here is a list of such things:

1. We have fellowship with God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit: 1 John 1:3; 1 Corinthians 1:9; John 15; 2 Peter 1:4 (partake of divine nature); Philippians 2:1.
2. We have fellowship with Christ through keeping His commandments: 1 John 2:3-6; Matthew 28:18-20.
3. We have fellowship with brethren: 1 John 3:7. This is expressed as a "partnership" (metoche + qualifier):
  - a. Fellow prisoners – Romans 16:7;
  - b. Fellow workers – Romans 16:21;
  - c. Fellow partakers of gospel – 1 Corinthians 9:23;
  - d. Fellow partakers of body – 1 Corinthians 10:16-17;
  - e. Fellow partakers of promises – Ephesians 3:6;
  - f. Fellow partakers of grace – Philippians 1:7;
  - g. Fellow servants – Colossians 1:7; 4:7;
  - h. Fellow partakers of glory – 1 Peter 5:1.

Basically, fellowship is a participation or sharing in the things God has authorized. This may be classified as (1) having a share in: Philippians 1:5; 4:15-17, (2) giving a share to: 2 Corinthians 9:13, or (3) sharing with: Acts 2:42; Galatians 2:9; 1 John 1:3. This would extend to all people and all things which are approved by God and which are authorized by the word of God. A good question to determine whether or not we might have fellowship with a person or thing is to ask, "Would God share in this with me?" (Roberts 3-4).

### Faulty Standards of Fellowship

Some extend fellowship to all that hold to the deity of Jesus. We are told that participation in error does not sever fellowship so long as we accept Jesus as the Son of God. This would make a distinction between "gospel" and "doctrine." Some determine that if you accept a "core gospel," you are in fellowship with God and no "doctrine" will sever this fellowship. However, this is an unscriptural distinction based on faulty definitions. Both gospel and doctrine are used interchangeably in the scriptures and our fellowship with God and our brethren is determined not only by what we believe about the "person" of Jesus (His Deity), but also what we believe about what He taught (Matthew 28:18-20). It is not possible to worship Jesus as Lord without doing what He says (Matthew 7:21). This loose attitude toward fellowship based solely on the deity of Jesus would compromise every distinctive facet of the church of Christ which we comprehend by the "doctrine of Christ" (2 John 9-11).

Some want to include everyone in fellowship who are members in a denomination. These would suggest that membership in a denomination is equal to fellowship with God. Such people make no distinction between the church which belongs to Christ and denominationalism. They also accept anyone of any denomination regardless of the creeds and moral values of that church.

First of all, we need to see that denominationalism is not equal to New Testament Christianity. Though a church existed in the time of the apostles (Acts 2:47; Romans 16:16), no denomination existed until sin entered the church (1 Corinthians 1:10-13) and division was condemned. No modern

denomination existed in the time of the apostles. The first denomination was the Roman Catholic Church (1 Timothy 4:1-3; 2 Timothy 4:1-4; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12), followed by the formation of Protestant denominations, beginning with Luther. Fellowship with God is found in Christ and His body, the church (Ephesians 1:22-23; 4:4; 5:23; 1 Corinthians 12:13), not in denominations started by men.

Secondly, extending fellowship to all that are in denominations would involve us in fellowship with immorality and religious error of every kind. Some denominations permit women to take leadership positions condemned by God (1 Timothy 2:12ff); others include immoral people in their membership (adulterers, homosexuals, abortionists, etc.); some allow, even promote, evolution, premillennialism, faith only, once-saved-always-saved, and other errors to be taught. Additionally, every denomination has a creed book in addition to the word of God to which it subscribes and by which it governs its members. Accepting fellowship with denominations involves accepting human traditions and human creeds which are not inspired from God and which contradict the scriptures.

We must remember that fellowship is determined by God's will and not ours. The church belongs to Christ (Romans 16:16; Acts 20:28) and he sets the terms of salvation and fellowship. What we do in extending fellowship is but an acknowledgement that Christ is head of the church (Colossians 1:18; Ephesians 1:22-23) and that we are seeking to act as He would wish us to do. Using personal feelings and emotions as a standard for fellowship is a faulty standard. (Roberts 2-3).

### Proper Standards of Fellowship

Fellowship is possible, but it must come on God's terms, not man's. So, what are God's terms? THE BIBLE! God inspired the Bible as a pattern for man to follow. When we submit to His regulations, we are brought into salvation and guided through life to heaven.

God has listed His terms for fellowship in Ephesians 4:3-6:

*Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.*

When we agree on these seven steps, then God will tie us into fellowship and we can walk together. However, if we deny even one of these, then we deny fellowship with God, the Bible and His church.

1. One Body. In Ephesians 1:22-23, Paul told them that the body is the church. Hence, one body means only one church.
2. One Spirit. This is the Holy Spirit. Sure, there were other spirits (i.e. demons, etc.), but there was/is only one right Spirit to follow.
3. One Hope. The Spirit calls us to have one hope, the hope of heaven.
4. One Lord. Though there are many masters that vie for our submission, only one Master deserves it. It is the Lord Jesus, who suffered and died for our salvation.
5. One Faith. The faith is the message that produces faith in the heart (Romans 10:17). It is the faith that was delivered once and for all (Jude 3).
6. One Baptism. Of all the baptisms mentioned in the Bible, only one is right in the sight of God for the present era. That one baptism is immersion in water to wash away sins (Acts 22:16).

7. One Father. He is Jehovah God, the Creator of the Universe, Giver of Light, Saver of Souls. Only by submitting to the will of the Father can we be saved (Matthew 7:21-23). God has promised that if we speak the same “things” and the “things” we speak are the truth about these seven steps, then we will have fellowship and be united.

### Conclusion

What is the end result of speaking the same thing about the seven steps of unity? First, we gain fellowship and unity with God. John wrote his first letter because he wanted all believers to have fellowship with the Godhead (1 John 1:3). Second, we gain fellowship with others who speak these things – the church. Third, we gain strength from our common pursuit of heaven. Solomon said, “And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken” (Ecclesiastes 4:12).

Imagine standing arm in arm, hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder for the Lord! We would be able to take on the wiles of the devil and raise the righteousness of our nation (Proverbs 14:34). Combining our efforts, we could reach out more effectively to the lost and pluck them from the fire (Jude 1:22-23). The great product of fellowship is a massive workforce for God that will affect change in our world, our community, and our lives.

### Works Cited

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