

## Barriers to Fellowship

John wrote regarding fellowship, "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." (I John 1:3). A few sentences later he said, "But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin." (I John 1:7). We learn from these passages that Biblical fellowship exists where two or more people are united with God in faithful obedience to Him. A faithful Christian's fellowship with God means salvation along with all of the other spiritual blessings that are only in Christ (Ephesians 1:3). A faithful Christian's fellowship with other faithful Christians means joy, relief, and encouragement. Abundant blessings are to be found in true, Biblical fellowship and yet we find that at times we erect barriers that hinder our fellowship and thus choke out its blessings.

The first century church faced one of these barriers in the form of Christians who were attempting to bind doctrines that God had not bound. In Acts 15 we read about some who were insisting that circumcision as it had been commanded in the law of Moses was necessary for salvation (Acts 15:1,5). Peter was very clear in his denunciation of this effort to bind what God had not bound. "Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?" (Acts 15:10). Limited space does not permit a lengthy treatment of how we today mimic those in the first century who were going beyond the Word of God in their efforts to bind unauthorized doctrines. Suffice it to say that we still have the trouble. The solution to the issue today is the same as it was back then. We must appeal to the New Testament to determine what is binding and what is not and we must do so in an honest, open manner, free of preconceived notions and prejudices.

Another barrier to Biblical fellowship is fear. We see this in Galatians, chapter two. Peter had been freely fellowshiping with Christians from a Gentile background until brethren from a Jewish heritage showed up. Galatians 2:12 says that Peter withdrew and separated himself once those individuals came to town. Fear of what others thought caused not only Peter to sever fellowship but Barnabas and others as well (Galatians 2:13). Paul affixed the label of hypocrisy to their actions and roundly rebuked these saints for their deeds, going so far as to say they were not walking according to the truth of the Gospel (Galatians 2:14). Is it possible that we ourselves allow fear to hinder our fellowship like Peter did? Just because a faithful Christian looks different or has a different background than we do does not mean that we should shun him or her. The key words are "faithful Christian." That's what undergirds our fellowship. As long as that person is faithful to God, he or she is in full fellowship with God. To avoid him or her for any reason is, in the words of Paul, both hypocritical and not in accordance with the Gospel.

The most significant barrier to fellowship is, simply, us. You and I get in the way of fellowship. We do this through our own disobedience. I Corinthians 5:11 says, "But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person." In the context of rebuking Christians who were lazy busybodies, Paul wrote, "And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed." (II Thessalonians 3:14). If we continue in sin, be it one of those just noted or any other transgression, we are guilty of breaking fellowship with God and thus are deserving of faithful Christians breaking their fellowship with us. We dare not live under the false notion that God permits us to live as we please. We must abide in His will (II John 9). Going beyond His will or coming short of it erects an impenetrable barrier that can only be removed by our repentance and humble petitioning to God for forgiveness.

True, Biblical fellowship is too magnificent a blessing to miss, yet miss it we will if we allow these barriers to stand in our way. May our love for God and our desire for eternal fellowship with Him rule our hearts so that we allow nothing to get between us and fellowship with Him and His faithful saints.