

The Boundaries of Fellowship

There is no greater blessing on earth than being in Christ Jesus. Romans 3:24 says that redemption is “in Christ.” Romans 8:1 adds that there is no condemnation to those who are walking faithfully “in Christ.” True life is “in Christ.” (I Corinthians 15:22). Victory is “in Christ.” (II Corinthians 2:14). Indeed, ALL spiritual blessings are “in Christ.” (Ephesians 1:3). Galatians 3:27 teaches that one gets INTO Christ by immersion (Galatians 3:27). When one who has heard the Gospel, believed in Jesus as Christ, repented of his sins and confessed his faith in Jesus as Christ rises up from the waters of immersion, he becomes a new creature (II Corinthians 5:17) and is added to the body, or church, of Christ by the Lord Himself (Acts 2:47).

Among the manifold blessings that come with being in Christ is the fellowship that Christians enjoy with other Christians. Think of the numerous “one another” passages in the New Testament. “Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another.” (Romans 12:10). “Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.” (Colossians 3:13). “Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do.” (I Thessalonians 5:11). Many more verses could be cited, each of which would only add to the fact that God intended for Christians to enjoy and benefit from each other’s fellowship.

The question is sometimes raised, “Can a Christian have spiritual fellowship with anyone?” By asking that, the person is wanting to know if there are any boundaries to fellowship or does God allow Christians to participate in spiritual endeavors with anyone. When the question is posed in more detail, it typically centers around matters of worship and joint participation in good works. “Can a Christian worship with any group, even if that group does not abide in the doctrine of Jesus Christ?” “Can a Christian join in with any group in mission or benevolent efforts, even if that group’s existence is not authorized by the Lord in the New Testament?” These are questions that are worthy of answers.

As seen in I John 1:3, the fellowship of which God approves is triangular in nature. John wrote, “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.” If we were to draw out this triangle, we would see John (himself a faithful Christian) in the lower left corner, his readers (other faithful Christians) in the lower right corner and the Lord at the apex. This is true fellowship that is recognized by God. If either of the human parties at the bottom were to break the lines going toward God by virtue of disobedience to Him, the triangle would cease to be fully connected and, of necessity, the line between those two human parties would have to break for it to be Biblical fellowship. In other words, if one Christian were to leave God, because his fellowship with God would have been broken, the fellowship with the Christian(s) who are walking faithfully with God would also need to be broken by those who are walking faithfully. This is clearly taught in I Corinthians 5:9-11 and II Thessalonians 3:6-15. When determining whom we may fellowship, we must first be sure that we are walking with God according to His inspired Word and then we must be sure that the other person or group is walking with God according to His inspired Word. Anything short of that might have the two humans connected, but without authority from God, that would lead only to physical rather than spiritual fellowship.

The New Testament plainly proclaims that there are boundaries to spiritual fellowship. Besides those passages regarding the severing of fellowship cited in the previous paragraph, Ephesians 5:11 warns, “And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them.” In this verse, “unfruitful” is used metaphorically to represent that which does not produce what God expects it to produce. A faithful Christian produces the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) through the Word of God (Colossians 1:5-6). Those who have not obeyed the Gospel cannot produce this fruit because they are not branches connected to the true vine, Jesus Christ (John 15:1-9). Individuals who are not members of the church for which Jesus shed His blood are unfruitful. Religious organizations that exist without New Testament authority are unfruitful.

Going back to Ephesians 5:11, we now consider the word, “darkness.” Again, the Greek word is a metaphor for, as Thayer’s Lexicon says, “ignorance respecting divine things and human duties, and the accompanying ungodliness and immorality, together with their consequent misery in hell.” In the previous paragraph we learned that fellowship is limited to those in Christ because only those in Christ can produce spiritual fruit for Him. Now we see more detail regarding this as we note that fellowship is limited to those who know God’s Word and are walking in a manner that is consistent with that Word.

One more point regarding the boundaries of fellowship as seen in Ephesians 5:11 is made based on the closing words of the verse: “but rather reprove them.” The Greek word translated, “reprove” is in the imperative mood, meaning that it is a command. Someone is to be reprovved or corrected. That someone is anyone who is spiritually fruitless and walking in disobedience to the Lord. Reproving is the exact opposite of approving. While some, even in the church, would have us open our arms of fellowship to any person or group who simply acknowledges God or who believes that Jesus is Christ, this passage teaches that those who have not obeyed the Gospel and thus are not “in Christ” not only should not be approved for fellowship, but should in fact be reprovved and corrected for their disobedient ways.

Now it’s time to make some practical application of these Bible facts. Can a congregation of the Lord’s church accept into fellowship an individual who has obeyed a doctrine of salvation other than that which is taught in the New Testament? To be even more specific, if one is convinced that he was saved before immersion for the forgiveness of sins, may he be taken into fellowship? Since he is not “in Christ,” the answer would be “no.” Since he is not “in Christ,” he is unfruitful and still in darkness. He needs to be corrected (taught the truth) lovingly and plainly in an effort to help him see that he is still outside of Christ.

Can a congregation of the Lord’s church engage in fellowship with religious organizations in matters of benevolence, missions or even worship? To be even more specific, can a congregation of the church of Christ join in with denominations in spiritual endeavors? Since denominations exist without God’s authority (for Christ has but one body, Ephesians 1:22-23) and thus are not “in Christ,” the answer to this would again be “no.” Fellowship is joint participation but it is much deeper than that. It is such an intimate relationship that the Greek word so translated was also used to describe the relationship between a Christian and Jesus during the Lord’s Supper (I Corinthians 10:16). The Lord communes with us and us with Him at His table. Through Paul He delivered a stern warning in regard to profaning that time of communion by having our minds on other matters (I Corinthians 11:27-29). Are we to imagine that the same Lord who disapproves of us violating our fellowship with Him in communion approves of us violating the principles of fellowship that He has given us in regard to those here on earth?

Taking this discussion one step further, can a congregation of the Lord’s church have fellowship with another congregation of the Lord’s church if that latter congregation has begun to teach and practice doctrines that are not authorized in the New Testament? Once again, the answer is “no.” Jesus was prepared to withdraw His fellowship from His church in Ephesus due to their disobedience (Revelation 2:4-6). Those who walk “disorderly” (II Thessalonians 3:6), even entire congregations, have crossed the boundaries that God has established and have ventured outside the field of acceptable fellowship.

Solomon exhorted, “Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set.” (Proverbs 22:28). The word for “landmark” indicates a boundary. The Lord has always determined the boundaries of fellowship. Not a one of us has the authority to change those boundaries. True fellowship is a tremendous blessing that helps us overcome our daily struggles with the world. May we cherish, honor and protect it by ensuring that said fellowship is that which is approved by the Lord.

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