Definition and Problems in Church Fellowship

Introduction

Good fellowship in church is important. Is it more than just talking together? How is church fellowship different from meeting with people outside the church? What breaks apart fellowship? This study seeks to answer these questions.

Definitions of Church Fellowship

“The grace (favor and spiritual blessing) of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the presence and fellowship (the communion and sharing together and participation) in the Holy Spirit be with you. Amen (so be it).” II Corinthians 13:14

This verse ends the book of II Corinthians. Paul blesses the Corinthian church with good fellowship. Fellowship comes from the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and God’s presence. Fellowship he says is in the Holy Spirit and is communion, sharing together and participation.

When Christians gather for fellowship, they must relate to one another in a spirit of grace. They must view each other with favor and be encouraged with spiritual blessing. Knowing how to relate with grace comes from knowing the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus didn’t criticize or accuse those in trespass of the law. Instead he gave them grace and taught the people how to relate to one another in love. Rather than condemn the sinner, Christ died on the cross for the sins of others taking the punishment on Himself. To deal with each other in a spirit of grace following the Lord Jesus Christ, Christians must give favor to each other and spiritually bless each other.

God’s love is felt through the love of people for one another. Christians know that they must love their brother who they have seen in order to love God who they have not seen. God gave His love to people by giving His Son Jesus on the cross as a sacrifice for the way people had acted against Him. God’s presence must be felt among Christians to have fellowship. Where two or three Christians are gathered, God’s presence is there.

Fellowship is in the Holy Spirit. There Christians are able to share together about their joys and sorrows, feeling for one another. Christians are able to participate together in activities when they have fellowship. Communion, both in the spirit and by sharing food, brings fellowship between people. Communion at the Lord’s Supper brings fellowship together as Christ is present forgiving sins and freeing people to relate to one another.

There is another verse that gives further definition to the concept of fellowship. This verse is from the book of Philippians and is a part of the introduction in the first chapter. Paul is thankful for the new church’s fellowship and expresses it to the Philippians.
“[I thank my God] for your fellowship (your sympathetic cooperation and contributions and partnership) in advancing the good news (the Gospel) from the first day [you heard it] until now.” Philippians 1:5

Church leaders need sympathetic cooperation. The preaching and directions to the church members requires the members to follow with a feeling of oneness and unity for the church to have fellowship. Giving money as contributions to support the leaders and those in need develops fellowship in the church organization. Having things in common not only provides for the church but is required for everyone to be of one mind. Fellowship is further developed when church members participate to the point of partnering the church in its efforts to hold everyone together.

The church effort is mainly to advance the good news, the Gospel. Fellowship by feeling for the efforts of the leaders, by supporting with contributions the operation of the church and by actively one-on-one partnering the church in the activities of the church body brings the message of life in Christ to the people of the church.

Life in Christ holds the essence of fellowship as people who are held in the forgiveness of sin hold each other in favor and blessing feel the love of God.

The Use of Fellowship in the Church

“What we have seen and [ourselves] heard, we are also telling you, so that you too may realize and enjoy fellowship as partners and partakers with us. And [this] fellowship that we have [which is a distinguishing mark of Christians] is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ (The Messiah)... [So] if we say we are partakers together and enjoy fellowship with Him when we live and move and are walking about in darkness we are [both] speaking falsely and do not live and practice the Truth [which the Gospel presents].” I John 1:3,6

The same apostle who wrote the Gospel of John wrote the letters of John. In his first letter, John states that Christians fellowship as partners and partakers. Partners are on equal footing with one another. They work together for a common goal. They hold each other in high regard. Partakers share together the things that they have in common. They partake of communion together. They are active in groups together. This equal sharing is the use of fellowship that marks a Christian. John also says that this use of fellowship is not only between church members but also church members and their leaders. Fellowship can be used in this way because it is with the Father and His Son Jesus Christ.

A little later in the letter, John says that partakers must use fellowship in the light of the Gospel. If the church member is living and moving and walking in darkness, they are speaking falsely and not practicing the Truth of the Gospel. Sin keeps church members in darkness to one another and there is need of forgiveness for the sin to come into the light of fellowship with each other. This forgiveness that is experienced in fellowship is the Truth of the Gospel.
Another use of fellowship is called the right hand of fellowship by Paul in his letter to the Galatians.

“And when they knew (perceived, recognized, understood, and acknowledged) the grace (God’s unmerited favor and spiritual blessing) that had been bestowed upon me, James and Cephas (Peter) and John, who were reputed to be pillars of the Jerusalem church, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, with the understanding that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised (Jews). They only [made one stipulation], that we were to remember the poor, which very thing I was also eager to do.” Galatians 2:9,10

Paul says the right hand of fellowship is given when a church member is perceived, recognized, understood and acknowledged that God’s grace, his unmerited favor and spiritual blessing is on the church member. This means when the church member is recognized as a Christian. The pillars of the church, church leaders or member who support the church fully, give their right hand to the newly recognized church member in a hand shake.

The handshake is a use of fellowship for the commissions of the newly recognized church member. A purpose is a part of the handshake, perhaps a role in the church family. The role might me simply an agreement to act in unity with the church. Or the role might be an official position in the church. The right hand of fellowship is often given when a new Christian joins the church as an official member.

The right hand of fellowship comes with only one stipulation, that the church member so recognized must remember the poor. Recognition of a Christian is a good feeling and one of righteousness. So that pride doesn’t enter into the role that the person is to have, the person so recognized is instructed to remember the poor.

The use of fellowship is to bring people into being a part of the church. People become partners and partakers and are given the right hand of fellowship to involve them in the group fellowship of the church.

Completeness Concerning Fellowship

“Therefore those who accepted and welcomed his message were baptized, and there were added that day about 3,000 souls. And they steadfastly persevered, devoting themselves constantly to the instruction and fellowship of the apostles, to the breaking of bread [including the Lord’s Supper] and prayers. And a sense of awe [reverential fear] came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were performed through the apostles (the special messengers). And all who believed (who adhered to and trusted in and relied on Jesus Christ) were united and [together] they had everything in common;”
Acts 2:41-44

The first church was founded in Jerusalem. The above scripture verse from Acts tells what happened. There was a substantial influx of new believers in the salvation of Jesus Christ into the church. Three
thousand people were baptized and became a part of the new church. To form into a group, the people listened to the instruction of the apostles, their leaders, united in fellowship with them, ate together including celebrating the Last Supper, and prayed together. Even though they were a larger group of new believers, they were able to find unity by persevering steadfastly in belief, adhering to, trusting in, and relying on Jesus Christ to forgive their sins. Because of this relationship to Jesus Christ which all the new believers shared, a sense of awe came upon the group and the apostles, their leaders, were able to perform many signs and wonders. To complete their group dynamics, the new church began to collect shared things, holding possessions in common.

This new organization structure, given here by God, is the basis for all our organizations today. Not all of our organizations are churches. Some are businesses, partnerships and corporations, some are non-profit organizations, charities and benevolent groups, and some are just groups of people, community groups and neighborhood groups. They all practice in some manner the four components of an organization presented here. There is instruction on the policies and programs of the group by the leaders. There is some way of the members of the group meeting together in fellowship. The people of the organization eat together in some manner. And there is some way of talking to the authorities about the needs and interactions of the group. The organization unifies about the performance of the leaders and hold possessions in common for every person to use as suits their needs.

So how is church fellowship different from meeting with people outside the church? A Christian church performs a worship service with the purpose of instruction, fellowship, communion and prayer. The formal assembly for worship brings forgiveness of trespasses that is unique to churches. The atoning sacrifice of Christ’s death on the cross is the central concept to forgive sins. God’s relationship and principles are taught to restore the sinner to righteousness. Organization that are not churches depend on this restoration to righteousness by churches done by instruction, sermons and lessons from the Bible, fellowship, sharing together and participation, eating together, including the formal ritual of the Lord’s Supper to remember Christ’s death and participate in it, and prayers, formal corporate prayers to God by the church leaders and members.

Instruction, communion and prayer complete fellowship to form a church. There is one last component given in the next scripture verse.

“For, as I can bear witness, [they gave] according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability; and [they did it] voluntarily, Begging us most insistently for the favor and the fellowship of contributing in this ministration for [the relief and support of] the saints [in Jerusalem].” II Corinthians 8:3,4

Paul comments on the fellowship found in contributing for the ministration of the saints. In his letter to the church at Corinth, Paul says the members gave voluntarily, some according to their ability and some beyond their ability. The church wanted to send money to the Jerusalem church for the relief and support of their leaders and members. Outreach such as this, brings unity to a group of people as they strive together to fulfill a need outside their own church. Fellowship is developed when the church leaders and members meet together to contribute to a saint, someone or group that is striving for the
application of the Gospel. Giving to a person or group outside the church develops fellowship with that person or group and the giving church. Concern for the welfare of people outside the church develops godly people as the church with their living expresses this concern.

Fellowship is complete when in the presence of God, church members are instructed together, take communion together, pray together, and contribute together to a common cause.

Problems in Fellowship

This study will present four problems in church fellowship and their solution. This first in a situation of broken fellowship.

“But it was you, a man my equal, my companion and my familiar friend. We had sweet fellowship together and used to walk to the house of God in company... [My companion] has put forth his hands against those who were at peace with him; he has broken and profaned his agreement [of friendship and loyalty]. The words of his mouth were smoother than cream or butter, but war was in his heart; his words were softer than oil, yet they were drawn swords. Cast your burden on the Lord [releasing the weight of it] and He will sustain you; He will never allow the [consistently] righteous to be moved (made to slip, fall or fail). But You, O God, will bring down the wicked into the pit of destruction; men of blood and treachery shall not line out half their days. But I will trust in, lean on, and confidently rely on You.” Psalm 55:13,14,20-23

These scripture verses taken from a Psalm written by David, describe a situation in fellowship were the agreement of friendship and loyalty was broken and war between before known friends was the result. David describes the friendship as one between equals. The two individuals are called companions and familiar friends. Fellowship between them was sweet and the two friends used to go together to God’s house. The broken fellowship was disguised for a while with smooth words, softer than oil, but the underlying emotion was war and with words like drawn swords.

What should someone in this situation with a friend now an enemy at war with him, do? David presents the solution to cast the burden, release the weighty feeling of it, on the Lord. He gives confidence in this solution saying the Lord will sustain and never allow the consistently righteous man to be made to skip, fall or fail. David says God will bring the person who he says is wicked to destruction as men of blood and treachery do not live out half their days. In the meantime trust in, lean on and confidently rely on the Lord.

This means in church to bring the matter to the attention of the elders, either in prayer or in person. The church elders will bring the war down and to an end. Be obedient to their ruling and guidance to correct the situation. Through prayer for a return to a state of one mind and heart in the church, the church can correct the break in the fellowship and bring everyone right with God again. Honesty and integrity about what went wrong is necessary to repair the breach in commitment.
The second problem to be presented, concerns iniquity amongst the church members.

“Shall the throne of iniquity have fellowship with You – they who frame and hide their unrighteous doings under [the sacred name of] law? They band themselves together against the life of the [consistently] righteous and condemn the innocent to death. But the Lord has become my High Tower and Defense, and my God the Rock of my refuge. And He will turn back upon them their own iniquity and will wipe them out by means of their own wickedness; the Lord our God will wipe them out.” Psalm 94:20-23

These scripture verses describe a throne of iniquity. Iniquity is sin or wickedness that binds up a person. A throne of iniquity expresses the problem that the people are so caught up in the sin that they are proudly on a throne, trying to rule over it. In their pride, the people caught up in the sin band themselves together trying to rule over the sin or wickedness. They attack the consistently righteous and even condemn the innocent.

This is quite a problem for the church because it involves many people caught up in the sin. To free everybody the church members must again turn to the Lord. David, who wrote the psalm, says to call on the Lord as a High Tower and Defense. A high tower is a place of safety from enemies and a place of defense from attack. God must be seen as a Rock in the situation. The church members must call on God to be the refuge from the band of people who comprise the throne. The Lord God will turn back the iniquity on those involved in it and wipe out the wickedness through its own means.

Once again the church must rely on the elders to be the place of safety for the church members. Through the knowledge of God that the elders have, the throne of iniquity can be turned back on those involved and wickedness wiped out through its own means. As David did, the elders call upon the Lord to be the defense for the church members and on God to be the refuge for the church members. Then the Lord God can keep the iniquity on those involved and remove the wickedness by using its own way.

The third problem to be presented is about diabolical spirits.

“Consider those [physically] people of Israel. Are not those who eat the sacrifices partners of the altar [united in their worship of the same God]?” What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is [intrinsically changed by the fact and amounts to] anything or that an idol itself is a [living] thing? No, I am suggesting that what the pagans sacrifice they offer [in effect] to demons (to evil spiritual powers) and not to God [at all]. I do not want you to fellowship and be partners with diabolical spirits [by eating at their feasts].”

I Corinthians 10:18-20

Paul writes to the church in Corinth about eating including the Lord’s Supper. In the tenth chapter he describes communion and talks about sinful eating. As he claimed that a person did not need to follow the Jewish customs on eating he needed to clarity how Christians were to eat.

First, Paul states that when the Jews ate their sacrifices in the temple they became partners with the altar and united with the god of that altar. He emphasizes that food offered at an idol altar is not
changed and doesn’t really amount to anything because the idol is not living. However he feels that even though the idol involved is not living, demons become a part of the altar. And Paul does not want Christians to have the fellowship and partner with diabolical spirits. His advice is not to eat at idol feasts.

In the United States there are not many idol temples as in other countries. But if having eaten at a place that does include an image in their establishment, the Christian can realize that Jesus casts out demons. Though prayer, a Christian can be find discernment and relief from diabolical spirits.

The fourth problem in church fellowship involves unbelievers.

“Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers [do not make mismatched alliances with them or come under a different yoke with the, inconsistent with your faith]. For what partnership have right living and right standing with God with iniquity and lawlessness? Or how can light have fellowship with darkness?” II Corinthians 6:14

In his second letter to the church in Corinth, Paul cautions the church that unbelievers cause problems in church fellowship. He says mismatched alliances and different yokes, tasks or job, inconsistent with the Christian’s faith cause the difficulty. A Christian must have a sense of integrity to avoid this problem. Unbelievers are out of right standing with God and unity cannot occur in the alliance or job.

A partnership cannot occur between righteousness and lawlessness. So fellowship does not work between believers and unbelievers any more than light can be a part of darkness. Iniquity which is sin or wickedness is the state of the unbeliever and will cause a break in fellowship unless cleared by belief in Jesus Christ. The partnership of fellowship can only occur when there is a common belief in Christ.

Conclusion

Church fellowship is defined between church members as communion, sharing together and participation. With church leaders, fellowship involves sympathetic cooperation, contributing and partnership.

Church fellowship is used to bring about partnering and partaking in the activities of the church. To become a part of the church, the right hand of fellowship is given.

Church fellowship is made complete by instruction, eating together and prayers. The fellowship involved in contributing to the needs of people outside the church, makes lasting relationships.

Four problems in church fellowship must be watched so that fellowship is not broken. The problems are discussions that become war between the members, iniquity defined as sin or wickedness amongst the members, eating such that members are not united with God, and unbelief by the members of the church.

Good fellowship is from the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and presence of the Holy Spirit.