

**CHRISTIAN  
FELLOWSHIP:**

*ARE THERE  
ANY LIMITATIONS*



*CURTIS A. CATES*

# GRACE AND FELLOWSHIP:

## *ARE THERE ANY LIMITATIONS?*

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**E**very accountable being who is blessed with eternal life in heaven with God will be there as the result of God's amazing grace (Eph. 2:8-9). From the first century onward, all faithful preachers have proclaimed the unmerited favor of God upon those sinners who meet the conditions of pardon, and some of our greatest hymns praise God for His divine mercy. And, throughout the ages, one of the great blessings of God's grace has been fellowship with the Sacred Three and with other faithful children of God. However, fellowship has its limitations. If grace (and thus fellowship) had no limitations, then all men (good and bad, obedient and rebellious, moral and immoral, et al.), would be saved. However, God's unmerited favor is regulated by His law (Isa. 2:2-3; I Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2; James 1:25; 2:12; Titus 2:11-12; I John 3:4; Rom. 1:5; Heb.

5:8-9; etc.). Grace and law are not mutually exclusive; no one can reject God's law without rejecting His grace and fellowship!

Never in the history of the world has there been such a multiplication and proliferation of religious doctrines, practices, and groups as today. Those professing to follow Christ (to be "Christians") are divided as never before. And yet, the question is asked, "Are they not one; are they not all covered by God's grace; does not love demand that we excuse division, compromise, the commandments of men, and any lifestyle of man's choosing?" Someone has written:

He drew a circle that shut me  
out-heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.  
But love and I had the wit to win:  
we drew a circle that took him in.

The crux of the matter, dear reader, is **not** if and where you and I draw the circle; it is rather, has God drawn the circle, and if so, where has He drawn it?

The matter of fellowship (extending and withholding [or withdrawing] it) has to be based upon the absolute standard of faith and practice, the Word of God. Holy Writ is the sole authority governing the

basis of fellowship and the limits of fellowship (Col. 3:17). And, before one begins avoiding and "writing off" **divine** regulations in order to excuse deplorable division and digression, he had better "go weigh." "...do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than He?" (I Cor. 10:22).

In the first century, the Lord's church was a visible, recognizable institution. Was it composed of fragments of tens or hundreds of man-made organizations? Was it an ecumenical hodge-podge of countless religious groups, all teaching different doctrines with countless aims and purposes? To defend such is to be confused relative to Bible fellowship.

Christian fellowship is a tremendous blessing to mankind, a wonderful source of great encouragement; it has great rewards. It is such a blessing because God knows what is in man; He created man in His image (Gen. 1:26-27). Being incurably a worshipful creature, man is the "one who looks upward" (*Anthropos*, man-Greek), and he is not satisfied and fulfilled until he worships and fellowships his Creator. And, God has not willed that man be

constantly embroiled in controversy and strife; we are called unto peace. Such demands regulation and limitation. Amazingly, some have proposed that unity and fellowship are possible in the midst of division and controversy-agreement and oneness are not important ("unity in diversity"). What saith the Scriptures?

### Fellowship Defined

**F**ound seventeen times in the American Standard Version, the word "fellowship" is most often translated from the Greek *koinonia* and its cognates. It is defined by Thayer as "fellowship, association, community, communion, joint participation, intercourse" (p. 352). Moulton and Milligan's **Vocabulary** says the word indicated "especially...the closest of all human relationships." Kittel defines the word, "It expresses a two-sided relation...emphasis may be on either the giving or the receiving. It thus means 1. 'Participation,' 2. 'Impartation,' 3. 'Fellowship,'" (v. 3, p. 798). The word does not appear in the Scriptures only as a noun (indicating a condition, state, or situation) but also a verb (*koinonco*)

(indicating something to do to fulfil and to maintain fellowship). In others words, fellowship is not just a relationship; it is also a function-what one must do to maintain that relationship. Thus, we must maintain faithfulness (doing that which is authorized by God-and only that which is authorized-else fellowship is hindered, perverted, or broken). Webster defines fellowship as:

...the state or relation of being a fellow or associate. Companionship of persons on equal or friendly terms; frequent and familiar intercourse.

It means partnership, working together agreeably, having one common goal toward which we strive in harmony together. It means peace, which is the absence of conflict (Rom. 5:1). "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity" (Psm. 133:1). "And I do all things for the gospel's sake, that I may be a joint partaker [partner] thereof" (I Cor. 9:23). Think of the homogeneity involved in the fellowship of Christ-minded brother and sisters. If there is no agreement, there can be no fellowship!

In light of the above, fellowship means endorsement. If a person is living in and/or teaching error, and I compromise and sacrifice the truth by fellowshipping him, I sin (Rom. 1:28-32; II John 9-11). Some would have us believe otherwise. Can you imagine, dear reader, brethren defending as harmless and even fellowshipping in the use of mechanical instrumental music in worship and yet claiming to oppose it? That is happening in the church today! Fellowship with the denominations is endorsement; it is to sanction their error. How can one be consistent and bid Godspeed to sinful innovations, teachings, and practices? To sanction an unauthorized, sinful practice is to sin. There are limits, to be sure!

### **Fellowship Described And Illustrated**

**T**hough-provoking, powerful praise and descriptions are given in Holy Writ of fellowship. Amos challenged sinful Israel with this rhetorical question, "Shall two walk together, except they be agreed?" (Amos 3:3); they were sinful and, consequently, were not walking with God.

"I will visit upon you all your iniquities," God warned (Amos 3:2). What a contrast this disunity was to the unity and fellowship described in Psalm 122.

David rejoiced to go into the house of Jehovah, to worship in the assembly (122:1). Notice the unity and fellowship, "a city that is compact together." Do you see the cohesiveness, the oneness? (vs. 2-3). What brought it about? Was it not the Word, the "ordinance for Israel"? (v. 4). Did not **all** the tribes go up? "Even the tribes of Jehovah?" Did they not assemble in the same place, worshipping the same God, in the same way? Did they not also lift up their thoughts together in prayer, out of love for the house of God? (vs. 5-6). No wonder they were blessed with peace and prosperity (v. 7); no wonder they are termed **brethren** and **companions!** (v. 8). Does this give some insight into what God expects and demands today?

David praised fellowship and unity in Psalm 133 as good **and** pleasant (v. 1). Some things that are good are not pleasant, and vice versa. But, unity is both good and pleasant. Like the anointing, sacred oil that sanctified Aaron's whole

body, so all of the spiritual body, all brethren are to be of one heart. It is like the wonderful, refreshing morning dew of Mt. Hermon, which covers all of the lesser mountains and hills also. The precious fellowship made possible through God's grace begins with Him, and flows down through Christ, through the Holy Spirit, to all members of the body of Christ.

Psalm 119:63 beautifully describes the agreement which is necessary for biblical fellowship; "I am a companion of them that fear thee, And of them that observe thy precepts." They hear and heed one voice, the Lord's (cf. Song of Solomon 8:13).

The fellowship of God's people is emphasized and illustrated in the Old Testament. Moses set forth blessings in the law to be pronounced from Mount Gerizim for those obedient to God, and cursings from Mount Ebal (Deut. 27:11-25).

Cursed be he that confirmeth not  
the words of this law to do them.  
And all the people shall say, Amen  
(Deut. 27:26).

Note the oneness commanded. Note the same principle set forth in the New

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Testament, the one(s) who deviates from the law of Christ being accursed of God (Gal. 1:6-9).

Observe some examples of unity and its pleasantness in the Word. Upon returning from captivity, "the people gathered themselves as **one man** to Jerusalem" (Ezra 3:1). "...**all the people** gathered themselves together as one man...and they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the **law of Moses** which Jehovah had commanded to Israel" (Neh. 8:1,8). "...we are brethren," Abraham told Lot (Gen. 13:8). Study the significance of "brother" and the fellowship it entailed in Ahab's sparing Benhadad's life (I Kings 20:31-34); fellowship is not destructive. Think of the fellowship between a shepherd and his flock of sheep, used by Nathan to make his appeal to and convict David (II Sam. 12:1-13). What kind of partnership and oneness must have characterized Paul, Aquila, and Priscilla when, being "of the same trade, he abode with them, and they wrought; for by their trade they were tentmakers"? (Acts 18:3). I will tell you how close they were; "...who for my life laid down their own necks,"

Paul later wrote of them (Rom. 16:3-4).

How close was Paul's fellowship with his beloved Philippians, who "sent once and again to my need"? (Phil. 4:16). Were they sharers, partners in every soul Paul saved, every congregation he established? He was in constant gratitude and remembrance of their "fellowship" in the gospel (1:5; 4:15; et al.). How close were the brethren in Jerusalem, characterized by being in "one accord," "gathered together," having "all things common," sacrificing for one another, characterized by "gladness and singleness of heart," "all with one accord"? (Acts 1-5). What closeness and partnership was demonstrated and felt when "James and Cephas and John...gave to me [Paul] and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship"? (Gal. 2:9-10). That would indicate equality, association, joint responsibility, partnership, sympathy, and agreement, would it not?

Great blessings are in store for those who maintain biblical fellowship, including being anchored to Christ, prevented from backsliding, maintaining contact with the blood of Christ and constant cleansing,

bearing one another's burdens, having more opportunities for bringing the lost to Christ, and living in hope.

### **God's Word The Basis Of Fellowship**

**O**nly God (based upon His very nature and His will) has the authority to determine the limits of fellowship. There is a God in heaven (Dan. 2:28); consequently, "the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps" (Jer. 10:23) or, for that matter, with whom he associates and has partnership. The fellowship of God and of His people crosses all boundaries (Gal. 3:26-28), and yet it has limitations. The Psalmist was a companion of only those who "keep thy precepts" (Psm. 119:63), only those who fear Jehovah (Psm. 33:8; 34:9; 72:5). "Teach me thy way, O Jehovah; I will walk in thy truth: Unite my heart to fear thy name" (Psm. 86:11). Take note of the connection between fearing God and walking in truth and companionship (cf. Eccl. 12:13-14).

We are "called into the fellowship" (I Cor. 1:9), we are "called...through our

gospel" (II Thess. 2:14), and we are to have "fellowship in the furtherance of the gospel" (Phil. 1:5); thus, the gospel (the apostles' doctrine in which we have fellowship, Acts 2:42) is that in which we must continue (I John 1:6-7). Those not abiding in the Word are **not** Christ's disciples (John 8:31). Thus, to have fellowship, one must **know** the truth and **abide** in it (8:32). And indeed, one can know and obey and walk in truth (Rom. 10:17; II Cor. 5:6; 4:13-14; 5:1; John 6:69; II Thess. 2:10-12; I Tim. 4:16; I John 2:21; II John 4). John rejoiced that Gaius' soul prospered and that he "walkest in truth" (III John 3-4). Any one denying this is a false teacher and has God demanding the impossible (Prov. 23:23; Eph. 1:13; II Tim. 3:7; I Tim. 4:3; et al.). "I rejoice greatly that I have found certain of thy children *walking in truth*, even as we received *commandment from the Father*" (II John 4). The Word of God is the only way to unity, not based upon the unauthorized creeds and innovations of men. What divides the religious world is not what the Bible teaches but what it does not teach. We are commanded "to keep the unity of

the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). We are to “be of the same mind in the Lord” (Phil. 4:2). “...speak the same thing...that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfected together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (I Cor. 1:10). He who violates this unity, oneness, and fellowship, “sowing discord among brethren,” is guilty of one of seven sins which are an “abomination” to the Lord, which “Jehovah hateth” (Prov. 6:16-19).

“The seed is the word of God” (Luke 8:11). When disunity exists, one knows that the seeds of men have been planted (Matt. 15:9,13); for, as in the natural realm, the Word produces only “after its kind”—simple New Testament Christians. Which denomination or sect will the adulterated seed, the Word of God, produce? NOT ONE! When people “will not endure sound doctrine” (II Tim. 4:2-3), watch out! Disrupted fellowship is **sure** and **certain** to follow. But, when sound doctrine is taught and heeded, unity and fellowship are the natural result; it will not require a “unity meeting” to make it so!

## **Bible Principles Which Demand And Bespeak Limitations Of Fellowship**

**T**he Lord in His verbally, plenary, infallibly inspired Word sets forth numerous principles and relationships which demand boundaries of fellowship. Some of these follow:

**One, God's people are in fellowship with God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit.**

"...our fellowship is with the Father, and with his son Jesus Christ" (I John 1:3).

"...ye were called into the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord" (I Cor. 1:9).

We commune with the body of Christ (I Cor. 10:16). We are in "fellowship of the Spirit" (Phil. 2:1), "the communion of the Holy Spirit" (II Cor. 13:14). Therefore, we must fellowship *only* whom and what the Lord fellowships and authorizes.

**Two, fellowship with God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit is only in Christ, in His body.** Man is reconciled "in one body unto God through the cross"; it is "through him we have our access in one Spirit unto the Father" (Eph. 2:16-18). Christ is the one mediator between God and man, And in none other is there

salvation; for neither is there any other name under heaven, that is given among men, wherein we must be saved" (Acts 4:10-12). Eternal life is "in God's Son"; therefore, "He that hath the Son hath the life; he that hath not the Son of God hath not the life" (I John 5:10-12).

To be "in Christ" is to be in the body, "one body in Christ" (Rom. 12:5). To be in the one body is to be in the church, "the church, which is his body" (Eph. 1:22-23; cf. Col. 1:18). To be in the church is to be in God's family, His household, "the house of God, which is the church of the living God" (I Tim. 3:14-15). Only sons of God can have fellowship with God and with the other members of the family of God (Gal. 3:26; Heb. 12:7-9; Hosea 1:10).

All spiritual blessings are in Christ (Eph. 1:3), as is salvation (II Tim. 2:10). Only "in the church" is the Father glorified, "in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 3:21). Does that not limit fellowship, dear reader?

**Three, fellowship with God demands separation from the world.** God can neither fellowship nor even look upon evil, He is so righteous—infinately

righteous. "Thou that art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and that canst not look on perverseness" Habakkuk said of God (Hab. 1:13). Solomon pleaded for ability to "discern between good and evil" (I Kings 3:9); one in fellowship with and blessed by God, David wrote, must "Depart from evil and do good; Seek peace and pursue it." Why? "The eyes of Jehovah are toward the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayers" (Psm. 34:14-15).

Christians are forbidden to fellowship the world; in fact, the command is, "Come ye out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, And touch no unclean thing: And I will receive you" - now notice - "And ye shall be unto me sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty" (II Cor. 6:17-18). Why such strict requirement? "...what fellowship have righteousness and iniquity?" (II Cor. 6:14). The emphatic statement of Paul is to come out and remain separate and apart; cease to fellowship the world.

Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor

adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God (I Cor. 6:9-10).

God refuses to be in fellowship with one who loves and is joined to this world (I Cor. 6:15-20; I John 2:15-17). "Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him neither knoweth him" (I John 3:6). Note the contrast between the lusts of men and the will of God (I Peter 4:1-6). Godly living is required; worldliness is **not** to be fellowshiped. To be sure, it is not fellowshiped by God (I Cor. 5:9-11). Does this limit fellowship?

**Four, fellowship with the Sacred Three is characterized by light, to which darkness is hostile and antagonistic.**

...God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and

the blood of Jesus Christ his Son  
cleanseth us from all sin (I John  
1:5-7).

The forces of light and darkness are incompatible; hence, there can be no partnership between them. Walking in spiritual darkness rules out fellowship with both those who walk in the light and with God. The Christian (one who walks in the light) must not only "have *no fellowship* with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather even reprove [convict] them" (Eph. 5:11).

Notice what light is, as described by Paul:

Be not therefore partakers with them; for ye were once darkness, but are now light (for the fruit of the light is in all goodness and righteousness and truth), proving what is well pleasing unto the Lord (Eph. 5:7-10).

Read what the fruits of darkness are, as listed in Ephesians 5:3-6. They bring wrath from God, do they not? Contrast the pure and lovely qualities of light with the impure and ugly character of darkness. How can anyone feel there is joint

participation, sharing, partnership, companionship between these two opposites? What is our responsibility? It is first to get out of darkness into the light and, then, to determine whether an activity in which we become engaged is a work of light or darkness and whether a person is walking in light or darkness. Does that make sense? Christ came into this world to bring light (John 1:4-13). He promised, "I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness" (John 8:12). Thayer defines light (I John 1:7, et al.) as "truth and its knowledge, together with the spiritual purity congruous with it" (p. 662). Dear friend, would we not be in deep spiritual darkness and hopelessness were it not for the Scriptures? How does one get into spiritual light? Light versus darkness demands limitations, does it not?

**Five, the people of God are the "called out," the church.** We are called out of the world, "sanctified [set apart, CAC] in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, *with all* that call upon our Lord Jesus Christ *in every place*" (I Cor. 1:2). "...who delivered us out of the power of darkness,

and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of his love; in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col. 1:13-14). Does not "all who call upon the name of Christ" limit fellowship?

**Six, a person must meet the conditions of entering fellowship with God.** One is not saved by God's grace alone, though without it, no one could be saved. Were we saved by God's unmerited favor alone, all would be saved, "For the grace of God hath appeared, bringing salvation to all men" (Titus 2:11). But, notice the conditions: "...instructing us, to the intent that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly and righteously and godly in this present world" (Titus 2:12). The Lord "tasted death for every man" (Heb. 2:9), making it possible for all accountable beings to "call upon the name of the Lord" and be saved (Joel 2:32; Rom. 10:11-12). However, calling upon His name is not just crying out "Lord, Lord" (Luke 6:46). It is to trust and obey. The demons acknowledged the deity of Christ and trembled (James 2:19), yet were lost.

The alien sinner must hear the Word,

since "belief cometh of hearing" (Rom. 10:17). No one can call upon the Lord's offer of pardon if he is ignorant of that offer and of the conditions of calling (Rom. 10:14-16; John 6:44-45; cf. II Thess. 1:6-9).

The alien must believe the Word, believing in God (Heb. 11:6) and believing in Christ as His Son (John 8:24-31). And, this faith is "joyful trust...conjoined with obedience" (Thayer, p. 511), not a dead, inactive "faith" (James 14:26; Matt. 7:21-23; Heb. 5:8-9).

The believer must then repent of his sins, dying to the love and to the practice of sin (Rom. 6:1-2), crucifying the old man of sin. The alternative is to perish (Luke 13:1-5; Acts 17:30-31; 3:19; 2:38; et al.). Repentance demands ceasing to walk in sin, leaving sinful situations (Col. 3:5-10; Eph. 2:1-6). One insisting on persisting in his sinful ways is not a fit subject for baptism, which puts one into Christ.

The penitent believer must confess that Christ is the Son of God, deity, as did the Ethiopian nobleman (Acts 8:37; cf. Matt. 10:32-33; Rom. 10:9-10). Timothy confessed before witnesses that same confession which Christ confessed before Pontius

Pilate (I Tim. 6:12-13); He confessed His Sonship.

The person then is to be baptized in water for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38). "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned" (Mark 16:16). One refusing to be scripturally baptized is a disbeliever. He fails to become a child of God, for "Except one be born [spiritually, CAC] of water [baptism, CAC] and the Spirit [led by the Spirit through the Word, CAC], he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). One becomes a member of God's family, the church/kingdom (I Tim. 3:15; Matt. 16:18-19) by the new birth. Thus, he is added to the Lord's family, or household; he does not "join" the church, or family of God. Dear reader, when did you become a member of your human family? At birth? When did you "join" your human family? You did not join it, did you? The same is true of God's spiritual family. Any church one has to join is not the church Jesus built. This, my friend, is how we are called into one body (Col. 3:15; Eph. 4:4-6). Please read the examples of

conversion in the book of Acts. Question: How did each one call upon the name of the Lord? It was through trust and obedience, was it not? Notice that the blessing (remission of sins, salvation, rejoicing in forgiveness) **always** followed the penitent believer's having been baptized, i.e. the Pentecostians (Acts 2:36-41), the Samaritans (Acts 8:12), the Ethiopian nobleman (Acts 8:36-39), the household of Cornelius (Acts 10:47-48), Lydia and her house (Acts 16:14-15), the Philippian jailor (Acts 16:30-34), the Corinthians (Acts 18:8), Saul of Tarsus (Acts 22:16). Note that Saul was in the act of calling (a participle) when he arose, was baptized, and washed away his sins.

The man who had died to the love and to the practice of sin, that dead man (mentioned earlier in this discussion), is now buried in the watery grave of baptism, where he contacts the blood of Christ (John 19:34; Rom. 6:1-4); he is then raised a new creation, ready to walk in newness of life (II Cor. 5:17). That very act also places him into Christ, where fellowship is (I Cor. 12:13; Rom. 6:3-4; Gal. 3:26-27). His name

is written in the Book of Life, and he is in the family of God, in fellowship with all other faithful saints. Sadly, not all have "obeyed the gospel" (Rom. 10:16, KJV). The plan of salvation limits fellowship, does it not?

**Seven, fellowship is governed by the authority of Christ and of His apostles.** Our Lord is now reigning at the right hand of God while David sleeps, per the prophecy to David in II Samuel 7:12-13. The church/kingdom was established during the days of the Roman Empire (Dan. 2:44-45), at the time when Christ ascended to the Ancient of Days (God) and received the kingdom and power (Dan. 7:13-14; cf. Acts 1:9-11; Psm. 24:7-10). God would not alter His promise to David, and He did not (Psm. 89:3-5,27-29,33-37,49). Christ is reigning-now! His reign began on Pentecost of Acts 2 (Acts 2:29-36) and shall continue until Christ comes again, destroys His last enemy (death), and delivers up the kingdom to God (I Cor. 15:20-28).

The apostles, Christ stated, would in the regeneration (the gospel age, the time

when Christ would sit upon His throne, the time when men would become new creatures, II Cor. 5:17) sit upon twelve thrones (places of authority) judging the twelve tribes of Israel (spiritual Israel, the church [Rom. 2:28,29; Gal. 6:15-16], the Israel of God). They would be given a kingdom as and when Christ was given it (Luke 22:28-30). They would be judges inasmuch as they would bind and loose what had already been bound and loosed by God (Matt. 16:18-19; 18:18), and they would by their divine revelation remit or retain sins, according to whether or not people accepted God's offer of pardon through His grace, by either obeying the gospel or not obeying it. Neither the apostles nor Christ could tamper with the divine will and revelation of God, which He gave to Christ, and which Christ showed to His apostles through the Holy Spirit, and which the apostles reveal to us through the inerrant, inspired Word. Certainly, then, neither synod, nor council, nor any other religious body or individual can add to, take away from, or substitute for the Holy Word (Deut. 4:2; Prov. 30:5-

6; Gal. 1:6-9; Rev. 22:18-19). No wonder, then, that the requirement is "Preach the word" (II Tim. 4:2); "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God" (I Peter 4:11); "...contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3)! No wonder the Jerusalem church "continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching (doctrine, KJV)" (Acts 2:42)!

Did Christ lower His standard to the rich young ruler when he started away, telling him He changed His mind; that he could sell only half of what he owned and give it to the poor (Matt. 19:16-22)? Was it a lack of love that Christ refused to lower the standard? "And Jesus looking upon him loved him" (Mark 10:21). Christ loved God and His will supremely; He would not "water it down"! Did the apostles have authority to weaken the force of God's inspired message in order to broaden the limits of fellowship in order to include more people? Some will lower the sacred and divine standards to include seemingly anyone. They neither love nor respect God and His divine regulations. Is

“every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God” important? (Matt. 4:4). We must have New Testament authority, apostles’ doctrine, for everything we do in religion (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 15:24; II John 9-11; Col. 3:17). The question should be, *Is it authorized?* We have fellowship *only as long* as we walk in the light of Scripture (I John 1:7).

Do we not get the idea from the above that God determines what **truth** is, not man? “Sanctify them in thy truth; thy word is truth” (John 17:17). We do not get together and confer and decide and determine what truth is going to be (and our resulting beliefs, practices, and boundaries of fellowship), and then expect God to accept that determination. How many articles have you read, classes have you heard taught, sermons you heard preached wherein God hardly got a word in edgewise, not even His plan of salvation? Such is a waste, a grave and present danger, and worse than useless. Elders, just how is the person in the pew going to find the truth, believe it, obey it, and sell it not? (John 8:32; I Peter 1:22-

25). To try to build fellowship on the guesses, speculations, wishes, and opinions of men is impossible; it is but folly! It is to be "tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine"; it is to be following the various silver-tongued, crafty, wile, most deceptive pied pipers (Eph. 4:13-15). What a beautiful contrast it is to have the **truth** spoken in **love**-stability, maturity, oneness, fellowship, partnership, security, hope! Only thus can we be "perfected into one" through the truth, as Christ prayed (John 17:20-23). Dear friend, does the apostles' doctrine limit fellowship?

**Eight, the child of God can apostatize from the truth, can so sin as to be lost eternally.** The Lord commands, "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee the crown of life" (Rev. 2:10). Some would have it read, "Even if you are not faithful unto death, I will give you the crown of life anyway." Why was a crown awaiting the apostle Paul? Was it not because he had faithfully "fought the good fight," "finished the course," and "kept the faith"? (II Tim. 4:6-8). You tell me, would it be waiting for Paul had he *not*

maintained faithfulness? (I Cor. 9:27).

Talking to "brethren," Paul warned, "...for if ye live after the flesh, ye must die (spiritually, eternally-CAC), but if by the Spirit ye put to death the deeds of the body, ye shall live" (Rom. 8;12-13). "Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" (I Cor. 10:12). One's name can be removed from the Book of Life (Exod. 32:32-33). One having "escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ" can be "again entangled therein and overcome" and be eternally lost (II Peter 2:20-22). One can depart from the truth, removing himself from the gospel of Christ into a perverted gospel, becoming cursed of God (Gal. 1:6-9). Question: Can God maintain fellowship with such rebellious, sinful, and wicked souls? To ask the question is to answer it! Why warn of grievous wolves, false teachers, if fellowship is not jeopardized and souls endangered thereby? (Acts 20:29-32; Gal. 2:4-5; Eph. 5:11; I John 4:1). Have we forgotten the seriousness of this matter, dear friend? If **God** cannot fellowship such

apostasy, **how can we?** Unlawful activity, whether immorality or false doctrine or unauthorized worship, destroy fellowship! Do any limitations of fellowship exist here?

**Nine, the reason why the church exists (among other things) is for the very purpose of fellowship.** God wants fellowship with His offspring (e.g., John 4:23-24; Matt. 23:37; et al.). We are God's spiritual household (I Peter 2:5,9); in fact, we are also the bride of Christ (Isa. 62:5; Rom. 7:4; Eph. 5:22,32). And we need the fellowship of each other (I John 1:6-7). I need your encouragement, and you need mine (Gal. 6:2). This fellowship restrained Christians from returning to the world and to Judaism (Heb. 10:22-25), and encouraged sacrificial work and giving (Acts 2:42-47). The church cannot long live and prosper without fellowship and unity. It can do without, in a splendid way, the innovations of men, false teachings, sowers of discord, immoral living, materialism, dictators in the eldership, wolves in sheep's clothing, but it cannot long survive without oneness, companionship, one mindedness, and mutual love. Does one observe limits

on fellowship in these matters?

**Ten, in order to maintain being a part of the peaceable kingdom, the mouths of false teachers must be stopped.** That is the responsibility of the elders, as specifically charged in Titus 1:9-11, who are to be “able both to exhort in the sound doctrine, and to convict the gainsayers.” Brethren, this does not mean to be a haven for ravenous beasts, wolves who would scatter and destroy the sheep (Acts 20:29), nor does it mean sending the lambs to such wolf sanctuaries and strongholds as the Nashville Jubilee, Inc., and the Tulsa “Soul-Winning” (?) Workshop. We must be ever alert to the tactic of the liberal—to remain in the “fellowship” (if allowed to do so; he is already out of fellowship with God) of the church and to pollute, defile, corrupt, and destroy. Dear reader, do you believe for a moment that Christ spoke of the enemy coming and sowing “tares also among the wheat” so that we could be encouraged to sow a few tares ourselves, to bring in the enemy for special workshops and seminars, “gospel” meeting and “youth rallies” so he

can sow more tares, to ridicule those who are sowing wheat and trying to dig up, root out, and warn against the tares, to water, fertilize, and cultivate around the tares? (Matt. 13:25). Unfortunately, the writer knows of some elders who spend much of their time defending the enemy of truth in the pulpit. Is that one of the qualifications of elders? (I Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-6). Does this not indicate limitations of fellowship?

### **Limitations Of Fellowship Applied**

**T**he reader has no doubt perceived by now that God has placed boundaries around the fellowship of the saints; thus, there are certain definite teachings, practices, and persons who are outside of those prescribed boundaries. In other words, there are certain things which God *cannot* and *will not* fellowship; those *very same* things cannot be fellowshiped by His faithful children (who are in fellowship with Him).

**There are certain lifestyles that neither God nor His children can fellowship.** This would certainly include

the immoral. The Corinthian church was commanded in no less than two epistles of Paul *not* to fellowship the child of God who had his father's wife, in which they had persisted because of a lack of love (I Cor. 5:1-13). Thankfully, before Paul wrote II Corinthians, they had withdrawn fellowship from him, resulting in his repentance and restoration (II Cor. 2:3-11). God's plan of discipline works, the naysayers to the contrary notwithstanding. We must not allow evil leaven to spoil the whole lump! "...have *no fellowship* with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather even reprove them." What is included, among other things? Are not fornication, all uncleanness, covetousness, filthiness, foolish talking, idolatry, etc.? (Eph. 5:3-11). Are not also the works of the flesh included? (Gal. 5:16-21). All these works had to be renounced when the Corinthians obeyed the gospel (I Cor. 3:9-11), for "...what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial?" (II Cor. 6:14-18). What concord had God with lying, murder (including abortion), homosexuality, pride,

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etc.? (Rom. 1:29-32). See also Revelation 21:8.

**Neither God nor His children can fellowship unbelievers.** Those who refuse to have God in their minds, He gives up on (Rom. 1:28), for the disbeliever is not pleasing to Him (Heb. 11:6); he is condemned already (John 3:18), and shall be lost in the last day (Rev. 21:8; II Thess. 1:6-9; Mark 16:16). He is characterized by God as a fool (Psm. 14:1). God would have him repent but cannot force him to do so (II Peter 3:9). This would include the evolutionist, who disbelieves God's divine Word about creation, which untenable, unscientific, and non-biblical hypothesis would undermine faith in the Genesis creation account.

**Fellowship cannot take place with those who teach false doctrine.** Any teaching which would lead one into sin, which would lead one to endorse and perform unauthorized acts is within itself sinful and false. Why? It is because to be disciples indeed, we must "abide in" Christ's Word (John 8:31-32). Will we not be judged by the Word of Christ? (John

12:48). Might we not become “partakers of other men’s sins”? (I Tim. 5:22). We should try to win apostate brethren back, but when we have exhausted all reasonable effort, they must be cut off (Titus 1:9-11).

Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them that are causing the divisions and occasions of stumbling, contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned: and turn away from them (Rom. 16:17).

A factious man after a first and second admonition refuse; knowing that such a one is perverted and sinneth, being self-condemned (Titus 3:10-11).

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition (inspired tradition, CAC) which they received of us (II Thess. 3:6).

And if any man obeyeth not our word by this epistle, note that man, that ye have no company with him,

to the end that he may be ashamed  
(II Thess. 3:14).

Paul delivered two brethren to Satan (withdrew from them). Why? Because they "made shipwreck concerning the faith"—and, Paul identified them (I Tim. 1:18-20). Alexander did Paul much evil; he withstood Paul's words (II Tim. 4:14-15). Hymenaeus and Philetus were marked because of erring and teaching false doctrine (II Tim. 2:16-18). Let those who argue that false teachers are to be fellowshipped and not marked argue with God!

**Fellowship cannot take place with those who practice (and with those who teach/defend the practice of) false doctrine.** Such false teachings (doctrines) would include the following:

**1. *Modernism*,** which is the contention that the Bible is scientifically, geographically, and historically inaccurate; that it is certainly not infallible because it is full of contradictions within; that Christ is not the only begotten Son of God, born of the virgin, raised bodily from the grave the third day; that Genesis is but

myth; that there is no absolute truth; et al. Of course, tied to this is "theological liberalism," which many of those who claim to be Christians have drunk deeply—and swallowed! Some are in so-called "Christian" universities.

**2. *False Religions fellowshipped*** (which Christ said would be rooted up, come judgment day), the teaching that fellowship is superior to God's law, that love for one's fellowman takes precedence over love and loyalty to God's expressed limitations; the substitution of union that man desires for the unity as God and Christ are one (according to Christ's prayer in John 17:20-23); the accepting of *anyone* into fellowship (whether or not he repented of sins, whether he had confessed Christ as the Son of God-or some other man-made confession-or even confessed Him at all, or whether he was baptized for the remission of sins-or was baptized simply to "obey God," or "because" God had saved him earlier through faith only, or to "join the church," or-now get this-was not even baptized, immersed at all, but was sprinkled or had water poured upon him,

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or had received "Holy spirit baptism"). To say the least of it, this would have had Paul fellowshipping the Judaizers, would it not? If baptism (or the lack of scriptural baptism) is not an issue, certainly binding circumcision would not be. And, did not Paul love the Judaizers?

The core/bull's eye gospel teaching is an "open fellowship" heresy-fellowship anyone who believes in the deity of Christ. Brother Rubel Shelly teaches, defends, and practices the doctrine.<sup>1</sup> Dear reader, is one who had not been baptized scripturally my brother, is he a son of God? Are we to ignore all of God's limitations of fellowship? No! We must draw lines at scriptural baptism, leaving out unbaptized sectarians. And, the idea that there are sons of God in denominations (churches established by men) is misleading; anyone who has gone into denominationalism is a *disinherited* brother. The Lord's church is not a denomination. Dear reader, you know that the seed does not produce all of this religious division. To promote such division is to fight against Christ (Matt. 12:30), and it is to reject the authority of

the Word (Rom. 1:16; II Tim. 3:16-17; II Peter 1:3; et al), and it is to call God's commands as non-essentials. Would the Lord sanction and fellowship such a rejection of His will; would we provoke Him to jealousy? How can the Lord's people engage in prayer breakfasts, "unity" worship services, "youth crusades," etc., with sectarians? Did Christ engage in such with the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, et al., in His day? Did the first century church?

**3. *Innovations in worship practiced and defended***, such as (1) mechanical instrumental music (which practice adds another element in the worship, tantamount to adding fried chicken and gravy to the Lord's Supper; the Lord authorized singing from the heart (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; et al.); what God has not authorized is not permitted (Col. 3:17); (2) choirs and solos (which are not authorized in the worship assembly; the singing is to be congregational, reciprocal); (3) the Lord's Supper anytime, any day of the week, or several times a year (the Lord's Supper is commanded "upon the

first day of the week” [Acts 20:7], which, of course, binds every week observance on the Lord’s day); (4) women teachers, preachers, leaders (which is a violation of God’s prohibition in I Timothy 2:12, “But I permit not a woman to teach, nor to have dominion over a man, but to be in quietness”); (5) preaching the doctrines, opinions, and philosophies of men (which violates II Tim. 4:2; I Peter 4:11; et al., and is expressly forbidden in Matthew 15:9 and Colossians 2:8; this would include the “social gospel”).

**4. Error on marriage, divorce and remarriage**, that non-Christians are not amenable to Christ’s law, or that baptism sanctifies and makes scriptural an unscriptural marriage, or that one can be forgiven of an unscriptural divorce and remarriage without repentance. These teachings ignore that Christ is Lord of all and that all will be judged by His Word, showing responsibility to it (John 12:48; Acts 2:36; Acts 17:30-31); that baptism cannot be scriptural without repentance, and no one repents who persists willfully in his sin; that adultery is not a one time

act but rather a lifestyle-one lives in adultery (Eph. 2:1-6); and/or that the Corinthians had to get out of adulterous situations to be forgiven (I Cor. 6:9-11). God's universal law on marriage is well stated in Matthew 19:9.

**5. *Direct operation of the Holy Spirit***, which teaches that one is convicted, converted, and/or led by the Holy spirit working directly upon the heart, separate and apart from the Word of God. However, the Bible teaches that the power in conviction, conversion, and leading is the gospel, God's power to save (Rom. 1:16). Never has the Holy Spirit worked directly on the heart of any person to save him; the Holy Spirit has always worked through "the word of the Spirit which is the word of God" (Eph. 6:17). We are called through the gospel, we believe as a result of hearing the Word, and we are saved by obeying the gospel (II Thess. 2:14; Rom. 10:17; Acts 2:40-41; Titus 2:11-14). One is Calvinistic error, the other Bible doctrine.

**6. *Miraculous divine healing, tongue speaking, et al. today***, which is

taught by the Pentecostals and other "holiness" groups. Those familiar with the Bible recognize that miraculous signs and wonders were performed by the apostles and by those on whom the apostles laid hands (Acts 8:15-21; II Cor. 12:12) in order to confirm the Word (Mark 16:17-20; Heb. 2:1-3). When the last apostle died and the last one on whom they laid hands died, the miracles ceased in natural order. Why? It was because the perfect law of liberty had been completely, fully revealed (James 1:25) and there was no longer need for the miraculous (cf. I Cor. 13:8-13 and Eph. 4:8-16). God's people cannot fellowship neopentecostalism and holyrollerism.

7. **Grace only**, which advocates that God's grace is unconditional and is accessed by faith only (of course, this is a self-contradiction). God's grace is conditional, as noted earlier. Some who were once in God's fellowship are now advocating and pushing the Calvinistic teaching with such statements as, "It is a scandalous and outrageous lie to teach that salvation arises from human activity. We do not contribute one whit to our

salvation.”<sup>2</sup>

**8. *Missionary societies***, which are human organizations to do the work of the church, another example of loosing where God has bound. It is a rival to the church and a law-making body. The church is the “pillar and ground of the truth” (I Tim. 3:15). No man-made rival organization is needed, for when brethren in the first century “went about preaching the word” (Acts 8:4), the whole world heard the gospel (Col. 1:23; Rom. 10:18).

**9. *Change advocates*** (change agents), who are dissatisfied with the Lord’s organization, work, worship, et al. of the church and clamor for the Lord’s church to be “rethought.” They cry out for a “faith for *today*,” “the church for our age.” They will give us “a theology for the *21st century church*.”<sup>3</sup> Dear reader, the divine pattern, or blueprint, for the church was bound and loosed in heaven (as noted earlier); it is not subject to change. Any change in that which is perfect (James 1:25; II Tim. 3:16-17) causes it to become imperfect and corrupt, thus the warning in Holy Writ not to add to, take from, or

substitute for the Word. The Bible is full of people who tried to tamper with and change the worship, organization, teaching of the Lord's people—and the disastrous results (Gen. 4:1-16; I Cor. 10:1-12; Lev. 10:1-7; Gal. 1:6-9; Rev. 2:14-16; et al.). Some would restructure the church.

**10. *Anti-ism***, which is binding where God has loosed, making laws for God. The Pharisees and Essenes were condemned for so-doing in the New Testament. Some have opposed such matters as multiple containers on the Lord's Table, located preachers, Bible classes, using prepared graded literature, and owning a meeting house. Additional speaking where the Bible has not spoken is the opposition that has come in the last number of decades to the support of orphans' homes, to the helping of non-saints out of the church treasury, to cooperating in evangelism and benevolence, and to eating a common meal in the meeting house of the church. When this is bound upon other Christians, fellowship is broken, for the Bible does not express such opposition. As brother Gus Nichols used to say, a person who binds

where God has loosed places himself on a level with Christ, who alone has all authority (Matt. 28:18; Col. 1:18). There is no place for either liberals or radicals in the Lord's church-extremists.

**11. *Unscriptural designations for the church***, which give "honor" to some religious act, or some man, or some doctrine. The bride of Christ is to give honor to Christ, not to His best man (John) or to some other man. If we would "call Bible things by Bible names, and do Bible things in Bible ways," we must use scriptural designations for the Lord's body (Rom. 16:16; I Cor. 1:2; Acts 20:28; et al.). And, God's people should individually wear the name Christian (Isa. 62:2; Acts 11:26; I Peter 4:16).

This by no means is an exhaustive list of false doctrines which mitigate against and destroy fellowship, but they must be guarded against, opposed, and exposed.

**Fellowship cannot take place with those who sow discord among brethren.** Those who believe, teach, and disturb the peace of the church and lead members into false doctrine are to be

marked (Rom. 16:17). After due process (trying to get them to return to the truth, to repent, to cease and desist from disturbing the church, "after first and second admonition"), the factious man is to be refused (Titus 3:10). Otherwise, some souls are lost and the peace of the congregation destroyed (I Cor. 1:10-13), and we become partakers in his false doctrine (II John 9-11). Does not such "wax worse and worse?" (II Tim. 3:13). God hates the sowing of discord (Prov. 6:16-19).

Sometimes dictators, "Diotrephes," those "who loveth to have the preeminence" (III John 9), or fanatics, or gossipers disturb the peace of a congregation and must be disfellowshipped (II Thess. 3:10-14) as is the person who "walketh disorderly" (II Thess. 3:6).

**Fellowship cannot take place with one who has sinned (a personal trespass) against another brother and will not repent.** The offended brother is to go to him privately, then take several others, and then take the matter to the church. "...if he refuse to hear the church

also, let him be unto thee as the Gentile and the publican" (Matt. 18:15-17).

**Fellowship cannot take place with one who hates his brother.** He that "hateth his brother is in the darkness even until now" (I John 2:9-11).

### Conclusion

**T**he question is often asked, "How long do we attempt to work with false teachers and wayward brethren trying to get them out of their error?" We should try to teach them; if that effort fails, then they must not remain in our fellowship. How long does God fellowship the wilfully disobedient? How long do the faithful try to salvage a congregation in which they hold membership which is bent on going into apostasy? When realistic hope of turning matters around are gone, does not one begin bidding Godspeed to the error? (II John 9-11).

Brethren, personal friendships-even kinships-must never be allowed to cause one to continue to fellowship an individual or a congregation who persists in false doctrine and in unauthorized worship which would lead the church into apostasy.

As soldiers of the cross, we must never compromise with or lend encouragement to the enemies of the cross (Matt. 12:30). The idea that we can deliver people from man-made doctrines and innovations by joining them in these unauthorized acts is untenable. One attempting to extricate another from quicksand had best stay out of the quicksand! Let us rescue those who have departed from the faith, if possible (James 5:19-20; Gal. 6:1).

The beauty of fellowship, love, and unity in the church of Christ is but a foretaste of the heavenly fellowship to be experienced with all the redeemed, with the angels, and with the Godhead in heaven itself. May we all promote that type peace and love.

### Endnotes

1 Curtis A. Cates, **The Core/Bull's Eye Gospel Concept Refuted** (Memphis, TN: Cates Publications, 1994).

2 Rubel Shelly, "Arbeit Macht Frei!" **Love Lines** (Nashville, TN: Woodmont Hills Church of Christ, October 31, 1990).

3 Curtis A. Cates, **The Second Incarnation: A Pattern for Apostasy** (Memphis, TN: Cates Publications, 1992), pp. 20-22.

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