

On The Nature of Fellowship

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Introduction: I have been asked to define the word “fellowship” and how it is used in the New Testament. This is a broad topic, and what I want to do is not just give lexical definitions, but think of the nature of fellowship, the concept of fellowship, as we find it in Scripture. We will start with a lexical definition and then draw out the nature of the idea.

I. Fellowship (*koinonia*) Defined

- A. Wendell Willis notes, “The *koinōnía* word group was widely used in the early centuries of the Christian era (and before) and referred to a variety of situations and topics: joint undertakings in war and civic life, marriage (or sexual relationships), cultic life, business partnerships, friendships, and clubs. Before Plato, the proverb ‘friends have all things in common’ points to sharing as establishing or manifesting a field of relationships¹.”
- B. Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich show that the term is used of “close association involving mutual interests and sharing, association, communion, fellowship, close relationship.”² The term could be used of any number of relationships because it is a “common bond of life that unites.” They further show how it can refer to the “attitude of good will that manifests an interest in a close relationship, generosity, fellow-feeling, altruism.”
- C. The idea can also be that of a “sign of fellowship, proof of brotherly unity, even gift, contribution,” as in Romans 15:26.³
- D. The concern here is focused on the nature of our spiritual fellowship in Christ, and this is a special, narrow usage. Paul refers to a “fellowship” or “partnership in the gospel” (Phil 1:5). It is “fellowship with the Spirit” (Phil 2:1) and “fellowship of the Holy Spirit” (2 Cor 13:13). He speaks of being “called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Cor 1:9). It is “participation in the faith” (Philemon 1:6).
- E. This is a special, intentional partnership in the matters relating to God, the Son, the Spirit, the faith, and the work of His gospel.
- F. To one degree or another, we all make judgments about the extent of our fellowship in terms of churches with which we worship and others with whom we will associate. Fellowship is a multilayered concept that requires some clarifications.

¹ Wendell Willis, [“Fellowship,”](#) in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, and Astrid B. Beck (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 460.

² William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, et al., [A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 552–553.

³ Ibid.

II. Observations on the Nature of Fellowship

- A. Fellowship is relational, and the primary relationship is with the Lord (1 Cor 1:9).
 - 1. If we have no fellowship with God first, then determining fellowship with others is pointless. God determines the means and boundaries of this fellowship.
 - 2. A starting point as the measure of a true disciple based on Jesus' authority (Matt 28:18-20).
- B. Fellowship with others should be seen from the vantage point of first having that fellowship with God (cf. 1 John 1:3).
- C. Only God knows the true status of those who are His (2 Tim 2:19). While we can make limited judgments based on Scripture that others are following the Lord and in fellowship with Him (and vice versa), we are not the final Judge.
- D. Scripture speaks of sins that will keep people from inheriting the eternal kingdom, and many of these sins are outward and obvious to others (Gal 5:19-21; 1 Cor 6:9-11; cf. 1 Tim 1:8-11).
 - 1. When we know that our fellowship involves something overtly sinful or the promotion of the sin, then we must avoid that (Eph 5:11).
 - 2. Continued fellowship with the Lord requires continual adjustments and confession of sin (1 John 1:5-10).
 - 3. If we are unrepentant and refuse to confess to God, we will have no reason for hope (Heb 10:26-27).
- E. In any given congregation, there will likely be those who are doing what is right and those who need to repent of persistent sins (e.g., Rev 2:18-29).
- F. As it concerns other people, our primary arena of fellowship is the local church. While there are implications that expand beyond that, the local arena is the one in which we make most decisions and have most interaction (1 Cor 1:10; ch. 5).
- G. While local fellowship can somewhat change as people come and go, fellowship with God is foundational and constant, not just occasional (1 John 1:5-10; Rom 8:1-2). We must never place fellowship with people above fellowship with God.
- H. There are actions that bear the marks of fellowship as participation in something related to serving God together (Phil 1:3-5; 4:15-16; 2 Cor 8:3-4; 9:13; Rom 15:26).
 - 1. In the broad sense, then, God determines those who are in fellowship with Him. In the narrower sense, we choose by our actions those with whom we have fellowship or to whom we make overtures of fellowship (Gal 2:9).
 - 2. In the broad sense, we control far less than we do in the narrow sense.
 - 3. It is not my job, nor is it possible for me, to determine the boundaries of the entire circle of fellowship worldwide.
 - 4. Fellowship is not about groupings of congregations (per a typical denominational model), but of individuals in Christ.
 - 5. While local churches ought to be concerned about their practices as they come under the authority of Christ, there is no universal activation of a web

of churches with earthly headquarters or universal controllers.

6. Some may wonder about the role of the meeting recorded in Acts 15. We need to remember that this directly involved the apostles as they were dealing with a specific issue affecting the relationships of Jews and Gentiles, a matter which had greater implications beyond Jerusalem and Antioch. However, the situation here shows us apostolic authority, given directly by Jesus, at work.
- I. Some actions may or may not be indicators of fellowship, depending on the context in which they occur.
 1. Eating a meal with another can be fellowship in the broad sense, but is not in itself having special, spiritual fellowship (Luke 5:29-32; 1 Cor 5:10).
 2. Christians did eat together because they were in fellowship with one another and the Lord (Acts 2:42-47). The food or material stuff did not create the fellowship. The fellowship existed in the Lord foundationally first, and this gave those actions greater meaning (as one might expect from familial relationships).
 3. The fellowship is the continued relationship in Christ; the meals were a natural outgrowth of such a relationship that was present prior to the meal and would continue after the meal.
 4. This is an important distinction because a Christian can eat with and share material blessings with unbelievers without that being an indication of thinking that unbelievers are in fellowship with God.
 5. As family, we will share material blessings and care for one another's needs. We can deepen our relationships with one another through joint participation in many things, including eating, but the underlying spiritual fellowship is due to our first being reconciled to God.
 6. This is also why Paul would make the point in 1 Corinthians 5 not to associate or eat with immoral people who are supposed to be Christians yet refusing to repent. Once we have shared in Christ as His people, we cannot turn from the Lord and then expect everything to be as it was.
 7. We have a special fellowship with Christ and one another in partaking of the Lord's Supper together. Paul refers to this as a "sharing" in the body and blood of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 10:16-17).
 8. The point is that fellowship is the underlying relationship we share with God and His people, regardless of the occasional activities we might share together. Those activities take on greater meaning because of our fellowship, but the fellowship exists and continues beyond those actions and occasions.
- J. Concerning how to handle disputes and differences, the first question should not be, "Is this a matter of fellowship?" Such a question may make us anxious and quick to line up and divide, which is not a good first move. Rather, the question ought to be, "What is the truth?" (Acts 17:11).

1. Seek peace, study together, and love one another so that all efforts to stay unified in Christ are maintained.
2. My experience is that “matters of fellowship” generally take care of themselves in time when we act with “all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:2-3).
3. If people must go their own way, this, too, will happen in its time; yet that should be the last resort, and we should continually pray for one another that we do the Lord’s will and not our own.

III. Excursus 1: When we Differ

- A. Love is to be the underlying attitude (John 13:34-35).
- B. The goal is unity based upon truth so that God will be glorified (Eph 4:1-3).
- C. Assume the best motives in your brothers and sisters (1 Cor 13:7).
- D. As far as it depends on you, be at peace (Rom 12:18).
- E. Seek to understand and be understood (Prov 18:2).
- F. Pray for those with whom you differ (Col 4:2-24).
- G. Be merciful, kind, and forgiving (Eph 4:31-32).

IV. Excursus 2: Lines of Separation

- A. When matters of liberty and conscience are pushed on others, division is inevitable (Rom 14).
- B. Divisive people are to be marked and avoided (Rom 16:17-18).
- C. Those who practice immorality without repentance are to be marked (1 Cor 5). This includes false teachers (2 John 9-11; 1 John 4:1; 2 Peter 2:1-3; 3:17; Acts 20:26-32; 3 John; Jude).

Conclusion: Just as loving God comes first, then loving neighbor, so fellowship with God comes first, then fellowship with others according to what is approved in Scripture. Fellowship is relational and intentional, forming a significant part of our lives of service in the kingdom of God. We want to cherish and nurture this. We also need to be careful to maintain fellowship and unity through God’s truth.