

Chapter 1 - What Is Fellowship?¹

THEY DEVOTED THEMSELVES TO THE APOSTLES' TEACHING
AND TO THE FELLOWSHIP,
TO THE BREAKING OF BREAD
AND TO PRAYER.

—Acts 2:42

The very first account of the New Testament Church highlights the importance of fellowship. Luke described this Body of believers, newly formed on the day of Pentecost, as people “devoted to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42).

We’re not too surprised that Luke mentions their attention to the apostles’ teaching. After all, isn’t one of the main purposes of a church service to listen to the Word of God taught by men ordained of God? And we would also expect these brand-new believers to devote themselves to prayer, for the Word of God and prayer are the two primary God-given means for building us up in the Christian faith. But what about this matter of fellowship? Luke says they “devoted themselves . . . to the fellowship.” They didn’t just have fellowship; they *devoted* themselves to it! They gave it a priority in their lives along with prayer and hearing the Word taught.

Then consider what the Apostle John wrote to fellow Christians in 1 John 1:3: “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us.” May have fellowship with us? Wasn’t it Christian growth John was concerned about? Didn’t he want these believers to have assurance of their salvation and to walk in obedience to God’s commands? Why was he so concerned about fellowship?

Now consider us—the modern-day Christians. We, too, are concerned about fellowship. Many local churches like yours and mine even have a room called “fellowship hall.” In our church it’s used for a variety of purposes, but its position adjacent to the church kitchen reveals its primary use. It is a place where “food and fellowship” is enjoyed on many occasions. We all look forward to those times of passing pleasantries over coffee and doughnuts on Sunday morning, or sampling Mrs. Smith’s famous cherry pie at the potluck dinner during the church’s annual missions conference.

Christian student ministries on campuses are also interested in fellowship. An event is often described as “a time of food, fun, and fellowship.” I have even heard of students being warned about having too much fellowship, so it must be a popular activity. Yes, we modern-day

¹ Jerry Bridges, *True Fellowship*, (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1985), Chapter 1, pp 13-23.

Christians, just like those early believers from the day of Pentecost, are eager to devote ourselves to fellowship. There is only one problem: We have lost sight of the biblical meaning of fellowship. We are devoting ourselves to the wrong thing.

Fellowship, as it is described for us in the Bible, is much more than Christian social activity. It is more than enjoying food together, or playing games in a Christian atmosphere, or chatting with one another about the events of the past week. This doesn't mean that there is no place for such activities. It is just that they are not true fellowship. They may, if entered into for the right purpose, contribute to fellowship, but in and of themselves they are not fellowship.

Many Christians have recognized that there is a deeper and richer meaning to the biblical concept of fellowship. They are not content with the idea of mere social activity. Among these people it is not unusual to hear someone say, "Let's get together for some fellowship." What these people usually mean is, "Let's get together to share with each other from the Bible and pray together." Or perhaps these people bring each other up to date on how God has been working in each of their lives. These certainly are important spiritual activities, and they are certainly a part of biblical fellowship. Yet even these activities fail to capture the rich, full meaning of the fellowship described to us in the New Testament.

Once we discover the full meaning of New Testament fellowship, we'll understand why Luke spoke approvingly of the fact that those Pentecost believers devoted themselves to it. We'll also understand why John was so eager for his readers to have fellowship with him. And we will see why the idea of fellowship as a term for Christian social activity utterly empties the word of its New Testament meaning.

The Greek word for fellowship is *koinonia*. It is translated several ways in the New Testament: for example, "participation," "partnership," "sharing," and, of course, "fellowship." These various uses of *koinonia* convey two related meanings: (1) *to share together* in the sense of joint participation or partnership, and (2) *to share with* in the sense of giving what we have to others.

Relationship

Each of these two meanings can be further divided under two subheadings. To share together in the sense of joint participation refers primarily to a *relationship* that we as believers have in Christ. This is the fellowship to which John called his readers: "What we have seen and heard we declare to you, so that you and we together may share in a common life, that life which we share with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3, *New English Bible*). Fellowship is sharing a common life with other believers, a life that we together share with God the Father and God the Son. *It is a relationship, not an activity.*

Those first Christians of Acts 2 were not devoting themselves to social activities but to a relationship—a relationship that consisted of sharing together the very life of God through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. They understood that they had entered this relationship by faith in Jesus Christ, not by joining an organization. And they realized that their fellowship with God logically brought them into fellowship with one another. Through their union with Christ they were formed into a spiritually organic *community*. They were living stones being built into a spiritual house (1 Peter 2:5), fellow members of the Body of Christ. As William Hendricksen said, “Koinonia, then, is basically a community-relationship.”² It is not primarily an activity; it is a relationship.

If we miss the fact that koinonia denotes first of all a community relationship in Christ among all believers, then we miss the most significant aspect of true biblical fellowship. We must grasp the idea that fellowship means belonging to one another in the Body of Christ, along with all the privileges and responsibilities that such a relationship entails.

Partnership

Koinonia also means to share together in the sense of partnership. Both classical Greek writers and New Testament writers used *koinonia* to refer to a business partnership. Plato spoke of the dissolution of a *koinonia*—a business partnership.³ Luke used a form of *koinonia* to refer to the partnership of Peter with James and John in the fishing business (Luke 5:10).

In the spiritual realm, Paul regarded himself as a partner with his dear friend Philemon, and he thanked God for the Philippian believers’ partnership in the gospel (Philemon 17, Philippians 1:5). And when Paul went to Jerusalem to dispute with the legalists over the necessity of circumcision, he said, “James, Cephas, and John. . . accepted Barnabas and myself as partners” (Galatians 2:9, NEB). The concept of fellowship as a spiritual partnership is firmly embedded in the New Testament use of koinonia.

Whereas relationship describes believers as a community, partnership describes them as the principals of an enterprise. A business partnership is always formed in order to attain an objective, such as providing a service to the public at a profit for the partners. In the same way, the concept of a spiritual partnership implies that it is created with the objective of glorifying God. Just as all believers are united together in a community relationship, so we are all united together in a partnership formed to glorify God. God is glorified when Christians grow in Christlikeness and when unbelievers are brought into His Kingdom. Biblical fellowship, then, incorporates this idea of an active partnership in the promotion of the gospel and the building up of believers.

² William Hendricksen, *Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1962), page 94.

³ Hendricksen, page 93.

Communion with others

The second primary meaning of New Testament *koinonia* is to share with others what we have. Just as *sharing together* has two sub-meanings (relationship and partnership), so *sharing with* has two sub-meanings. The first of these can be called *communion* with one another. Although we usually use the word communion as a term for the Lord's Supper, it is here used to mean communicating intimately or sharing with one another on a close personal and spiritual level. It may be the mutual sharing among believers of what God has taught them from the Scriptures, or it may be a word of encouragement from one believer to another. The key element is that the subject matter is focused on God as well as on His Word and His works. As J.I. Packer said, "It is, first, a sharing with our fellow believers the things that God has made known to us about himself, in hope that we may thus help them to know him better and so enrich their fellowship with him."⁴ This, of course, is what we usually have in mind when we say, "Let's have some fellowship together." According to Acts 2:42, the first believers who were gathered into the Church on the day of Pentecost came from "every nation under heaven." Prior to their conversion they would have related to one another like billiard balls, constantly colliding and bouncing off one another. But immediately after coming into the community relationship of the Body of Christ, they began to experience *koinonia* and to value its effect in their lives. The *New English Bible* says in Acts 2:42, "They met constantly to hear the apostles teach, and to share the common life." The *New International Version* says, "They devoted themselves . . . to the fellowship." They couldn't get enough teaching, fellowship, and prayer.

Those first Christians from the day of Pentecost were all Jews. They were steeped in the Old Testament Scriptures, but as they listened to the apostles' teaching and were enlightened by the Holy Spirit, they began to see those Scriptures in a new way. They were daily gaining a new understanding of them. And as they individually learned from the apostles' teaching, they shared with one another what they were learning. This is fellowship: sharing with one another what God is teaching through the Scriptures.

How different is our present-day concept of fellowship? Take those typical times of "coffee fellowship." We discuss everything else *except* the Scriptures. We talk about our jobs, our studies, our favorite sports teams, the weather—almost anything except what God is teaching us from His Word and through His workings in our lives. If we are to regain the New Testament concept of fellowship, we must learn to get beyond the temporal issues of the day and begin to share with each other on a level that will enhance our spiritual relationships with one another and with God.

⁴ J.I. Packer, *God's Words* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), page 195.

Sharing material possessions

As we examine the account of these early believers' attitudes, however, we see that they did not limit their concept of *koinonia* to sharing with one another only spiritual things. They also shared their material possessions with those in need (Acts 2:44-45).

One of the most common usages of *koinonia* in the New Testament is this sense of sharing material resources with others. For example, Paul urges us to "share with God's people who are in need" (Romans 12:13). In 2 Corinthians 9:13, he speaks of "your generosity in sharing with [others] ." The writer of Hebrews urges us to "not forget to do good and to share with others" (Hebrews 13:16). The word "share" in these passages is a translation of *koinonia* in either its noun or verb form. A willingness to share our possessions with one another is a very important aspect of true biblical fellowship.

Sharing our possessions with others should be a natural consequence of our realization that biblical fellowship denotes both a relationship and a partnership. Paul said that all parts of the Body should have concern for one another (1 Corinthians 12:25-26). We will be concerned for the needs of others in the Body only to the extent that we see fellowship as primarily a mutual relationship in Christ among members of the same spiritual organism. The fellowship of sharing with those in need is more than just showing compassion or benevolence to those in need. Even unbelievers do that. The fellowship of sharing possessions within the Body is a tangible recognition that we are in a community relationship with one another and that when one member of the community suffers, we all suffer together. When a parent meets a need of one of his children, we do not think of that act as an expression of benevolence but as an expression of relationship. It is both his privilege and his duty to meet that need because he is the parent. In the same manner, believers have both a privilege and a duty to share with each other as fellow members of the same Body.

Similarly, in a partnership the partners share in both the income and the expenses, both the assets and the liabilities of the partnership. No one ever establishes a business partnership where one partner takes all the income and another pays all the bills. They share alike in both the positive and the negative. It should be the same way in the fellowship of the Church. Because we are partners in the gospel, we need to *share* with one another, realizing that we are not owners but only stewards of the possessions God has entrusted (not given, but entrusted) to us.

We see the application of this principle of partnership in 2 Corinthians 8:13-14: "Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need." Paul envisioned a continual flow of believers' possessions toward those who have needs. This is an outworking of *koinonia*, an important expression of true fellowship.

Paul was urging the Corinthian believers to have *fellowship* with Christians they had never even met and never would meet: the poor among the believers in Jerusalem. They were not going to have coffee and doughnuts together with these people in need; they were going to dig down into their pockets to help meet the needs of these believers who shared together with them a common life in Christ.

In this first chapter we have seen that *koinonia* is used in the New Testament to express four different but related dimensions of fellowship:

- Community relationship
- Partnership
- Communion
- Sharing material possessions.

The first two are dimensions of fellowship as *sharing together*; the second two, as *sharing with* one another. It is because we share together a common life in Christ that we are called on to share with one another whatever we have, both spiritual and material resources.

We will explore the implications of these four expressions of fellowship in subsequent chapters. Before we do, however, we will look at the foundation for our fellowship with one another: *fellowship with God*. It is important that we take time to lay this foundation, because we cannot have meaningful fellowship with one another unless we are individually experiencing vital fellowship with God.



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