

Sunday, January 15, 2023 am

CLOSER TO GOD (38)

Fellowship (4)

Churches and Fellowship

Does it matter what a church believes? And does that affect our fellowship with God? What about other congregations known to be teaching or tolerating error/immorality? In this lesson we want to address fellowship as far as the church is concerned.

In addressing the subject of fellowship, we have defined what fellowship is – joint participation or communion with others. We have made a distinction between the secular and Biblical usage of the term. The Biblical usage is always associated with our spiritual relationship and focuses on spiritual matters – NOT social interactions. That is why we need to be careful how we use the word. We have also addressed fellowship with God (1 John 1:3-7) and fellowship with one another. We have noted that our fellowship with one another ought to be based FIRST upon fellowship with God (are all parties involved in fellowship with God to the best of our knowledge?) In our last lesson, we discuss who we may and may not have Biblical fellowship with. In this lesson we want to spend a few minutes talking about the church (i.e. local congregation) and fellowship.

I. The Bible and congregational fellowship

- a. AS we consider this, we MUST remember what fellowship is to be about as noted in the above remarks. Fellowship needs to FIRST be with God and our fellowship with one another is based upon that. I want it noted, as far as its usage is concerned – there is NO difference whether you speak of individuals or congregations. BOTH need to be in fellowship with God BASED on obedience to His word.
- b. Since the church belongs to God, we, as a body, ought to seek fellowship with Him. We have established that fellowship is dependent on obedience.
- c. What constitutes a church in fellowship with God?
 - i. Simply stated they are respecting God's pattern in all areas including organization (respecting local church autonomy), worship, work (limited to the pattern we have in scripture), purity (what do they tolerate?) and teaching (are they teaching the truth on matters of faith?).
 - ii. It is a church that stands for truth – sound teaching. The word sound means “healthy”. 2 Timothy 1:13 – hold fast the pattern of sound words. John 8:31-32 – abide in His word. A church that proclaims the whole counsel of God.
 - iii. And conversely rejects error. Continually scripture warns against false teachers and teachings – cf. 2 Peter 2:1-3, 2 Corinthians 11:13-15, 1 Timothy 4:1-3, 1 John 2:18-19, Matthew 7:15-16, etc.
 1. Ephesians 4:14-15 – we are to be grounded so that we are not “tossed to and fro...”
 2. The elders at Ephesus were to beware of wolves – Acts 20: 17, 26-32.
 3. Titus 1:9-11 also gives this as a responsibility of elders.
 4. Preachers also expose false teachers and error - 2 Timothy 4:2-4.
 5. 1 Timothy 6:3-5 – if one does not consent to “wholesome words” – withdraw from such.
 6. Ephesians 5:11 – have no fellowship with unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them.
 7. 2 John 9-11 – “do not receive him...”
 8. Romans 16:17-18 – note those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which you have learned and avoid them...

9. It is IMPORTANT that we understand this distinction. A part of preaching the whole counsel of God is exposing false doctrine and false teachers.

iv. It is a church striving to maintain unity and purity – 1 Corinthians 1:10ff, Ephesians 4:3, 1 Corinthians 5:6-7, etc.

II. Can a congregation be out of fellowship with God?

- a. First, let us understand that just because a church wears the name of Christ does not mean it is a church faithful to God and thus in fellowship with Him. Recall Matthew 7:21-23 – it is not enough to profess His name, we must do His will. While applied to individuals, the principle can also apply to churches. So, if a church is practicing or teaching that which is contrary to God’s word, how can it be the “church of Christ”?
- b. Consider the 7 churches of Asia
- i. Revelation 2 & 3 lists 7 different congregations in that region. Each was unique and faced its own problems and issues. We can learn a great deal from studying these 7 churches. Of the 7, 5 had serious problems. ALL 5 were called upon to repent or face God’s wrath. IN order:
 - ii. **Ephesus** – Revelation 2:2-5 – in reading this you notice many good qualities associated with the church. They were “sound” in teaching and purity. They did NOT tolerate error, false teachers and sinful behaviors. BUT, “you have left your first love” – evidently, their fire was not as strong and it was just a matter of time before things would deteriorate. They were told to “Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand...” That “lampstand” represented fellowship with God and Christ (cf. Revelation 1:9-20). They were in DANGER of forfeiting their fellowship with God.
 - iii. **Smyrna** – Revelation 2:8-11 – was commended with nothing sinful addressed. Simply, they reminded to remain faithful until death and then be rewarded.
 - iv. **Pergamos** – Revelation 2:13-16 – we have a church that is commended because they held fast to the name of the Lord and did not deny Him even in persecutions. BUT, they had in their midst those who held to “the doctrine of Balaam” which included fellowship with idols (cf. 2 Corinthians 6:14-17, 1 Corinthians 10:19-20, etc.), and OTHERS who were holding to false doctrine (the Nicolaitans – doctrine unknown). BUT notice, there is NOTHING said about error being taught. They just compromised and IGNORED the errors. They were told to repent.
 - v. **Thyatira** – Revelation 2:18-26 – like Pergamos they had those practicing error, but they ALSO ALLOWED it to be TAUGHT. Likely the error was challenged by some (she was given time to repent), but it was ignored and continued. The Lord was preparing to judge them unless they repented. Worthy of note in this congregation, there are those who were faithful (vs. 24-25) and they were encouraged to endure. Their place in such a congregation is a subject for another time. But EVERYTHING we have said about fellowship ought to be considered.
 - vi. **Sardis** – Revelation 3:1-5 – a church with a good reputation among others as being alive, but to God she was dead (or close to taking her last breath). They were challenged to strengthen what remained and to repent.
 - vii. **Philadelphia** – Revelation 3:7-12 – like Smyrna, nothing negative is said about this church. They are called upon to continue faithfully.
 - viii. **Laodicea** – Revelation 3:14-21 – nothing GOOD is said about this church. They were “lukewarm” and thus the Lord was repulsed by them. They are told to repent and heal themselves before it is too late.
- c. What about Corinth? Some have contended that Corinth was filled with problems, but it was still described as “the church of God” (1 Corinthians 1:2).
- i. While that is true, at what point did Paul say it was acceptable for the church to CONTINUE in their ungodly behaviors.

- ii. At what point did Paul merely “suggest” that they repent of their sinful actions?
- iii. The way Paul addressed their various errors is an indication they NEEDED to change! He was giving them corrective instructions they were EXPECTED to follow.
- iv. And in 2 Corinthians we find some changes and they are commended because of that.
- d. It is possible for a church to never teach error but still be unsound –
 - i. Yes. Several of the above examples demonstrate this.
 - ii. When a congregation REFUSES to speak up AGAINST error (or error on certain subjects), how can they be considered sound? When a church refuses to practice Biblical discipline, how can it be considered sound?
 - iii. Corinth ignored the immorality of the man in adultery – 1 Corinthians 5:1-2. They were told to repent.
 - iv. Ephesus – “lost its first love” – according to the text they never taught anything erroneous. In fact, they didn’t tolerate error in their midst.
 - v. Pergamos had those who “held to the doctrine of Balaam” which included committing fornication and associating with idolatrous practices. They did not expose the error.
 - vi. Why is this a big deal? Hosea 4:6, “*My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.*”
 - vii. When you fail to deal with false doctrine – whether in practice or teaching, you are NOT proclaiming the “whole counsel of God”. That is when wolves can come in and exploit the flock. That is when a congregation can become weak and vulnerable.
 - viii. 2 Timothy 2:4:2-4 – there are churches content to “tickle the ears” of its members. Faithful preaching MUST include reproof and rebuke when needed (cf. 2 Timothy 3:16-17)

III. **Can there be fellowship outside of a local congregation?**

- a. There are some who contend that fellowship is only applicable to the local church you are a part of. But in scripture we find examples of fellowship beyond that of one’s local work.
- b. When relief is sent – churches had fellowship with one another IN THAT WORK. Romans 15:26-27, 2 Corinthians 8:3-4
- c. When supporting preachers in other locations – fellowship clearly exists. Philippians 1:5, 4:15-16
- d. Galatians 2:7-9 – James, Peter and John gave Paul and Barnabas “the right hand of fellowship” though working in different places.
- e. 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 – there is a sense in which each Sunday, ALL who partake of the Lord’s Supper are in fellowship with one another. “We, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread”. This is why, IF one in another place is in fellowship with God, we ought to welcome them into our fellowship – cf. 1 Peter 2:17, “love the brotherhood” which is a reference to brethren everywhere.
- f. *The point of this section is to understand that fellowship IS a broader subject than just the congregation you work with.*
 - i. You cannot reason, “Yes, I know they are practicing (or teaching or tolerating) error, but since it is not in my congregation, I can accept them.”
 - ii. Such is in violation of 2 John 9-12, Ephesians 5:11, 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1, etc. - texts we have already discussed.
 - iii. Furthermore, do NOT think that if you persist to fellowship those error that it will not affect you. 1 Corinthians 5:6 – a little leaven; Proverbs 6:27 – Can a man take fire to his bosom, and his clothes not be burned?; 2 Corinthians 6:14ff – do not be unequally yoked...; 1 Corinthians 15:33 – evil company corrupts good habits. And of course, 1 Corinthians 5:11-12 – anyone named a brother...; etc.

IV. **Are there churches (congregations) we should not have fellowship with?**

- a. Consider: If both individuals AND churches should be in fellowship with God, and it is possible for either to forfeit that fellowship – by practicing, teaching or tolerating error – should we consider that before we “extend the right hand of fellowship”?

- b. IF for some reason a church is NOT in fellowship with God, whether in action, teaching, or tolerance and we are aware of their conduct, HOW should we respond to such? Do we just ignore it or should we avoid our association with such? Remember Ephesians 5:11, etc.
- c. What if you find yourself in a congregation that is practicing or teaching error?
 - i. You need to seriously consider what the Bible says about fellowship as we have discussed.
 - ii. What is your motivation? There are some working with congregations that are trying to correct them of their errors and/or to keep further error from creeping in? God “gives time to repent” (cf. Revelation 2:21), and so should we. Are they willing to engage in open-minded discussion? But does that last forever? Clearly there needs to be a timeframe and evidence of progress.
 - iii. What if you are dealing with the rebellious and those who refuse to repent? Understand that in such circumstances fellowship cannot continue.

In this lesson, I have tried to establish that Biblically, whoever you are associating with is a matter of fellowship. That is why you need to be aware of what is true and what is NOT true. If others are practicing error – teaching it, practicing it or tolerating it – we need to consider our fellowship with them. You MAY choose to be in fellowship with such, but do NOT think that such will NOT have a bearing on your fellowship with God. Souls are at stake. With whom do you choose to have fellowship? Think about it!