

Sunday, January 22, 2023 am

CLOSER TO GOD (39)
Fellowship (5)
Churches and Fellowship (2)

As we continue our theme from 2022, “Closer to God”, we continue to address the subject of fellowship. We have defined what fellowship is based upon its Biblical usage, noted how true fellowship must first be with God and our fellowship toward one another ought to be based upon that fellowship to the best of our understanding. Then last week, we began a study of the church and fellowship. We noted that the ought to be a correlation between that and fellowship with God and one another. In other words, fellowship within a local congregation should be based upon the Biblical definition of fellowship. We discussed some factors to consider to determine if a church (congregation) of Christ is in fellowship with God. These included: 1) Do they respect God’s pattern in all areas of operation (work, organization, worship, admittance, and teaching)? 2) Do they stand for truth and are thereby sound (spiritually healthy)? 3) Do they reject both the teaching and practice of error among its members?

We then began to examine the question, can a church (congregation) be out of fellowship with God? We noted the 7 churches of Asia, emphasizing 3 of them – 1) Ephesus which had “left its first love” and was directly warned if they did not repent their candlestick (fellowship with Christ – ch. 1) would be removed; 2) Pergamos which had in its midst those practicing error with NO indication that they taught against it or dealt with it; 3) Thyatira which had not only those practicing error, but some who were allowed to teach their error. ALL of these were told to repent, and while not directly stated in each case, the clear warning was that they would fall out of fellowship with God if they did NOT repent of their errors. Understand, the letters were written with the purpose of CORRECTING those errors so that they could be “sound” in faith and practice. That leads us to our study today. We want to continue to address the possibility of a church being “out of fellowship” with God.

I. Churches and Fellowship (continued)

- a. 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). This may be given to advocate fellowship with those teaching or practicing error, either WITHIN a congregation or other congregations. But there are some things we ought to consider with Corinth.
 - i. It IS true that Corinth had all sorts of error. In 1 Corinthians we find division, immorality (an adulterous relationship), brethren suing each other (division, maligning the church in society), fellowshiping those practicing idolatry, selfishness (they did not care about how their actions affected other brethren), Jealousy, error in worship, and false doctrine concerning the resurrection, etc.
 - ii. BUT, at what point did Paul say it was acceptable for the church to CONTINUE in their ungodly behaviors. Did he merely “suggest” that they repent of their sinful actions?
 - iii. Consider the following from 1 Corinthians:
 1. 1 Corinthians 15:1-2 – NOTICE he notes he had preached the gospel to them which they received and “*in which you stand, by which you are saved, IF YOU HOLD FAST the word I preached to you – unless you believed in vain.*” NOTICE their standing was conditional.
 2. He called on them to repent – 1 Corinthians 5:1-8 – warning them that they needed to cleanse the church and REMOVE the one in immorality.
 3. He warned them that if they did not repent, he could come with a rod (cf. 1 Corinthians 4:21), though he did not want to. 2 Corinthians 13:2 – if they did not change, “*If I come, I will not spare.*”

4. He was concerned about their ignorance – some 10 times in 1 Corinthians Paul used the phrase, “Do you not know” CHALLENGING them that they ought to know better – 1 Corinthians 3:16 – “... You are the temple of God and the Spirit of God dwells in you?”, 5:6 – “a little leaven leavens the whole lump?”; 6:2, 3, 9, 15, 16, 19 – constant reminders; 9:24 – “...those who run in a race run to win...” The point – Paul wanted them to LEARN and apply what they learned.
5. 1 Corinthians 12:1, “Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be ignorant...” Why did Paul write? To CORRECT their errors and misunderstandings.
 - iv. 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.
 - v. Did Paul recognize Corinth as a faithful church when he wrote? All I can say is he recognized them, but considering what he writes about he is clearly concerned about their standing before God. Something else to consider in this, WHEN you know of someone in error, is the first step to withdraw or mark them? NO! First is to go to them and try and CORRECT their errors. Withdrawing (severing fellowship) is a last resort, but STILL needed (cf. Titus 3:10 – reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition. This is consistent with Matthew 18:15-18). The same is true of the churches in Revelation 2 & 3, they were WARNED to repent OR be rejected by the Lord.
 - vi. And in 2 Corinthians we find some changes and they are commended because of that (though there are also other issues that arise – but Paul addresses them as well).
- b. 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)

II. **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 (another congregation) are practicing (or teaching or tolerating) error, but since it is not in my congregation, I can accept them.”
 - ii. Such is still 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.

III. 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, 2 John 9-11, 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. Consider, IF we know they are in error and we associate with them, based upon God’s word, we are fellowshiping error.
 - 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!