

Growing
a
Joyous
Church

A Biblical Basis for
Christian Fellowship

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PREFACE

A decline in the number and percentage of church members participating in worship and fellowship in many Christian churches during the last quarter of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first century have resulted in serious problems for many sectors of the contemporary church. In many local congregations an erosion of participation has created conflict, confusion, and disappointment to faithful members of the church, and anguish for pastors and lay leaders who seek desperately to provide ministry to dwindling congregations. Christian fellowship has suffered, and one of the results has been a decline in the effectiveness of the ministries of the church.

Fellowship is here defined as persons being together, or seeking to be together, in order to share similar interests and experiences. When the Christian dimension is added, and fellowship becomes Christian fellowship, the interests and experiences that are shared are those related in some manner to the spiritual lives and experiences of the participants. This is not to imply that all conversation is churchly in nature or that all activities are religious in nature. Participants in Christian fellowship share the full range of interests and activities consistent with the Christian lifestyle. An observation made by the Apostle Paul might well serve as a guideline for Christian fellowship.

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if

it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully. (Romans 12:3-8)

At the denominational level this deterioration of fellowship has resulted in a tendency toward isolation of Christian bodies from one another, which in turn often has resulted in the failure of denominational bodies to communicate or cooperate with one another in evangelistic, humanitarian, and missionary ministries. It also has resulted in a waste of money, personnel, and other resources through needless duplication of ministries in some geographic areas while other geographic areas have been left without critically needed ministries. Yet another unfortunate result has been the growth of misunderstanding and distrust of one another. At the same time, the world has become ever more spiritually impoverished.

The reasons for the deterioration of fellowship are many. The fast-paced, technological lifestyle of the twenty-first century has contributed to transiency in interpersonal relationships. The worldwide availability of low-cost telephone and internet-based communication systems has revolutionized the way people live, particularly in the developed nations. The explosion of social media and texting have virtually completed the development of a global community, often to the detriment of an awareness of human and spiritual needs within one's own community. Face-to-face communication has given way to electronic communication, and a decline of the two-parent traditional family has left many individuals alone and lonely in their busy, crowded communities. Soaring crime rates, fueled by a growing national hunger for illegal drugs, along with a growing fear of terrorism, have engendered a lack of trust in one's fellow human beings. Corporate and personal greed have endangered the national economy as well as that of countless individuals and families. Never before has there been a more crucial need for a revival of Christian fellowship on which to base a return to national, corporate, and personal sanity.

Christians throughout America and around the world think of themselves as "People of the Book." They look to the Holy Bible as the source of their faith, the handbook for their creed, and the guide for their lives. Though substantial differences exist among the various Christian bodies as to points of emphasis, manner of interpretation, and means of application,

the teachings of the Bible are held by most to be authoritative for faith, life, and practice. The points of agreement among Christians regarding the Bible far outweigh the points of difference. Christians who seek a common ground for Christian fellowship and the pursuit of mutual objectives can find such common ground in the Scriptures. Unfortunately, that does not appear to be happening in many places.

Throughout Christian history, people have taken many approaches in utilizing the Scriptures to solve the problems facing themselves, the church, and the world. Many open the Bible with preconceived answers to their questions and problems, and they search the Scriptures for some passage, verse, or fragment that seems to verify those preconceived answers. Upon finding such “verification,” the human answer then is taken as God’s answer. Some Christian groups have chosen to base fellowship with others upon absolute agreement with a chosen system of Biblical interpretation. Christian fellowship is easily destroyed by such theological rigidity.

Most serious students of the Bible study the Scriptures first, without preconceptions, hoping to find therein a word from the Eternal that will be meaningful for the present. Such is not an easy approach, for skills in Biblical scholarship are bought at a high price of long-term dedication and extensive study. But in the belief that this is the appropriate method, and that it works, this is the approach taken by this writer.

The thesis of this study is that God has provided three basic foundations upon which modern Christians can and should build if they are to experience Christian fellowship in the Biblical sense. Furthermore, these foundations are interrelated. Each forms a major theme of the Bible as well as for individual Christians and for the Church. Each of these three foundations for Christian fellowship will be examined in detail after an introductory chapter examines the causes of broken fellowship and sets forth the biblical terms for restoration of a joyous Christian fellowship and growing a joyous church.

The first of the three foundations for Christian fellowship is an Old Testament theme, but it carries over into the New Testament and finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. This foundation, *A Covenant Relationship with God*, is explored in chapters 2 through 5. The Biblical concept of covenant is examined first, along with the kinds of covenants to be found in the Old Testament. This is followed by a more detailed study of the Covenant of Law, centered in the Ten Commandments, which forms the basis for the religious practice of the Hebrew people in the Old Testament. The New Covenant,

which was revealed initially by God through the Prophet Jeremiah, then focuses on the transition from a religion of law to a religion of grace. The fifth chapter provides a summary of the concept of a covenant relationship with God as foundational to Christian fellowship.

The second of the three foundations for Christian fellowship is at the heart and soul of the New Testament and stands as the basic tenet of Christian faith. This foundation is *The Lordship of Jesus Christ*. The Lordship of Christ as the central foundation for Christian fellowship is explored in chapters 6 through 9. First to be explored is Scriptural evidence that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of God's Covenant of Law with his people. Then the life and teachings of Jesus provide an example for Christian fellowship. In addition to the witness of the Gospels, several passages from the New Testament Epistles are examined to demonstrate the witness of the early church to Christian fellowship through Christ. The ninth chapter provides a summary of the concept of the Lordship of Jesus Christ as foundational to Christian fellowship.

The third foundation for Christian fellowship is at the heart of the writings of the Apostle Paul. This foundation is *The Spirit-Filled Life*. The significance of living a Spirit-filled life is explored in chapters 10 through 13. First to be examined are the teachings of Scripture describing the Holy Spirit as God's gift to his people through the church. The next chapter reviews the work of the Holy Spirit and the impact of that work upon Christian fellowship. Then the focus turns to the "Fruit of the Spirit" as described by the Apostle Paul in his Epistle to the Galatians. Finally, the teachings of Scripture about the special gifts of the Holy Spirit are examined. The thirteenth chapter provides a summary of the concept of the Spirit-filled life as foundational to Christian fellowship. The final chapter of the study provides a summary of the Biblical foundations for Christian fellowship, the responsibility of the individual Christian to foster such fellowship, and the positive consequences of a restored Christian fellowship.

This study represents the author's understanding of the Biblical message concerning Christian fellowship. Extensive footnotes throughout the text have been given to direct the reader to scripture references and other documentation. This study has been developed and written for the benefit of serious students of the Bible, both lay and clergy, who are seeking fresh insight into the message of the Bible for these troubled times. It is also directed toward those who are suffering the consequences of broken fellowship and who wish to be part of a growing, joyous church. The message of

the Bible is a message of love, hope, and joy. Christian fellowship has been severely damaged in the modern church, but it is not dead.

Scripture references and quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible.