

The Extent of Fellowship

Inquiries continue to come regarding the extent of our fellowship. Should it include only those who agree in your group, all the fragmented groups of the Stone-Campbell Movement, all who immerse “for the remission of sins,” all who immerse in obedience to Christ, and/or the broader scope of believers? If the answer were simple, we would not still have questions. Two volumes rather than two columns are needed to treat this subject.

If we give acceptance and approval to any and all who make some far-fetched claim to being children of God, then Christianity becomes meaningless. However, recognition of persons as followers of Christ is not necessarily an approval of all they believe and practice.

Let us begin by recognizing that our fellowship is with individuals rather than church groups or systems of doctrinal interpretation. All who are saved in Christ are in fellowship. God, not we, creates the united fellowship. God has not received us due to our being in “the right church.” He, rather than the church (people), is the center in whom we are fellows. That unity with God is in spite of our diversity, for no individual or church is without fault. Justification means that we are accounted as right when we are not!

After his exhortation in *Romans* 14 for non-judgmental acceptance of other disciples who have differing convictions, Paul further requires, “Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you” (15:7). Since no one can claim to have been accepted by Christ on the ground of his goodness, freedom from sin, full knowledge of all truth, and doctrinal correctness, a person dare not demand those qualities of others. He is misguided, prejudiced, and conceited in attempting to do it. That has not kept us from doing it, however!

Although we in the Stone-Campbell Movement have splintered into numerous rejecting groups, various groups consider the very name *Church of Christ* to be a sort of holy umbrella for acceptance. In any congregation, in any group, there is not uniformity of doctrinal beliefs, spiritual growth, or moral conduct. Yet, because they are in “the right church,” they are accepted in fellowship. Can a person be in such a group without approving, sanctioning, and condoning those conditions?

Since “erring brethren” are the only kind that exist, we have no choice than to be in fellowship with them. But there is a difference between fellowship and approving, sanctioning, and condoning. A person who disavows the sins practiced by others of his fellowship is not guilty of their sins. Otherwise we could not be in fellowship with anyone else, unless we found a perfect person(s). And there’s no chance of that. Believers are all sinners accounted as perfect by the grace of God. (I have not jotted prooftexts, for you are familiar with the Scriptures.)

Regardless of the group they may be in, there are three things preventing the fellowship of individuals. Flagrant immorality and idolatry (2 Cor. 5:9-12) is contrary to our call for sanctification, hence, they are intolerable. Denial of the basis of our salvation, like denying that Christ came in the flesh (2 John 7-11). We are saved by the Gospel (not the apostolic writings); so denial of any factor of the Gospel is a denial of the basis of salvation. Since God makes us one in Him, a person who binds his interpretative

convictions on others becomes a rejecting factionalist, thus creating division, which is destructive God's work (Titus 3:9-11).

The scores of differing beliefs within your group are minor, you may think, but there are weightier matters that prevent fellowship with those in other groups. Well, let us compare, or contrast, some of our "errors"! Of the "They" and "We" choices listed below, which are better or worse?

They do not fully understand the purpose of baptism.

None of us fully understands all the purposes of baptism. Neither did early converts understand fully, for Romans 6:3-4 and Colossians 2:11-14 were explanations written to people who had already baptized.

They claim salvation by faith apart from works but then obey.

Many of us claim salvation through obedience to a supposed code of law. Which course is further off course?

Others wear names like *Church of God or Assembly of God*.

We wear the name *Church of Christ*. One is a Biblical as the other, but no name is given for the saved (church) to wear.

They make use of choirs, solos, quartets, etc. in worship.

We have insisted on congregational singing exclusively, making silence of Scriptures into law. Paul makes a better case for solos than congregational singing (1 Cor. 14:26).

They let women in proper decorum pray and prophesy in the assembly. (1 Cor. 11)

We dogmatically forbid women to pray and prophesy in assemblies in spite of Scriptural permission.

Others recognize a unity in spite of diversity of convictions.

We, while being diverse in our congregations, have demanded unity by conformity to the particular scruples prevailing in that congregation.

That is enough to illustrate the point. Now, who is "righter" – They or We? Neither can boast of being so right as to be accepted because of it. If we are accepted at all, it will be by grace rather than our correctness. So why should I reject others because I think they are off course on interpretations while I depend upon God to accept me in spite of my misinterpretations? We are not giving license here to insincerity or arrogance before God. We are speaking of humble believers serving God to the best of their understanding – just as you do.

I have the right to my own conscience but not the right to bind my convictions on others. When others do things in religion my conscience will not allow, I do not have to participate with them in violation of my conscience. However, others cannot violate my conscience. Only I can do that. I can teach what I think is right, but if I bind my convictions on others I become a divisive judge making law of my interpretation. It is not the person who eats meat (exercises his liberty), for instance, who is divisive, but the person who rejects and condemns him for eating meat is the divisive one (Read *Romans 14* again!). It has been hard for us to face that fact.

Isn't it ludicrous that groups who deny fellowship with Baptists, for example, are overjoyed for them to visit their services and participate fully. Brothers and sisters, that also is fellowship!

It is high time for us who have claimed to be a unity movement to take some conciliatory steps. Individually, we may express disagreement with persons of other

churches (and in our own!) while emphatically expressing loving acceptance of them as fellow servants of the same God and Savior. We can let the same God who judges our own flaws and those in our own group take care of the judging of their individual flaws.

Our congregations should reach out to the Assembly of God across the street and the Baptist Church down the street and apologize for our rejecting and opposing them. We can let them know that doctrinal differences will no longer prevent us from working with them as a united force in accomplishing God's work on earth. Such unity of action glorifies the God whom we all serve rather than the denominations in which we may be serving. []