

# Three Ships: Fellowship, Membership, Companionship

4-26-15 AM

Often the problem of mishandling our spiritual relationships comes back to cause many problems among brethren. Associations and relationships that are questionable create disharmony, and the potential for enabling those who are in error or in sin is rather profound.

## I. Understanding Fellowship

One of the more mis-applied words from the Bible is the word "Fellowship". It is defined in I John 1:

*1 John 1:5-7 This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.*

From this passage we receive the following definition: Fellowship is the relationship between people who are walking in the light. Walking in the light has a number of different synonyms in Scriptures. John calls it walking in the truth in III John 3-4; Paul calls it walking by Faith in 2 Corinthians 5:7; It is the same thing as abiding in the doctrine of Christ in II John 9-11; it is seeking the things of Christ in Colossians 3:1-2; we can even say it is the same thing as "Brotherhood" from Matthew 12:50. It may be best summed up in 1 Thessalonians 4:

*1 Thessalonians 4:1 Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more.*

Fellowship exists whether we are together or apart:

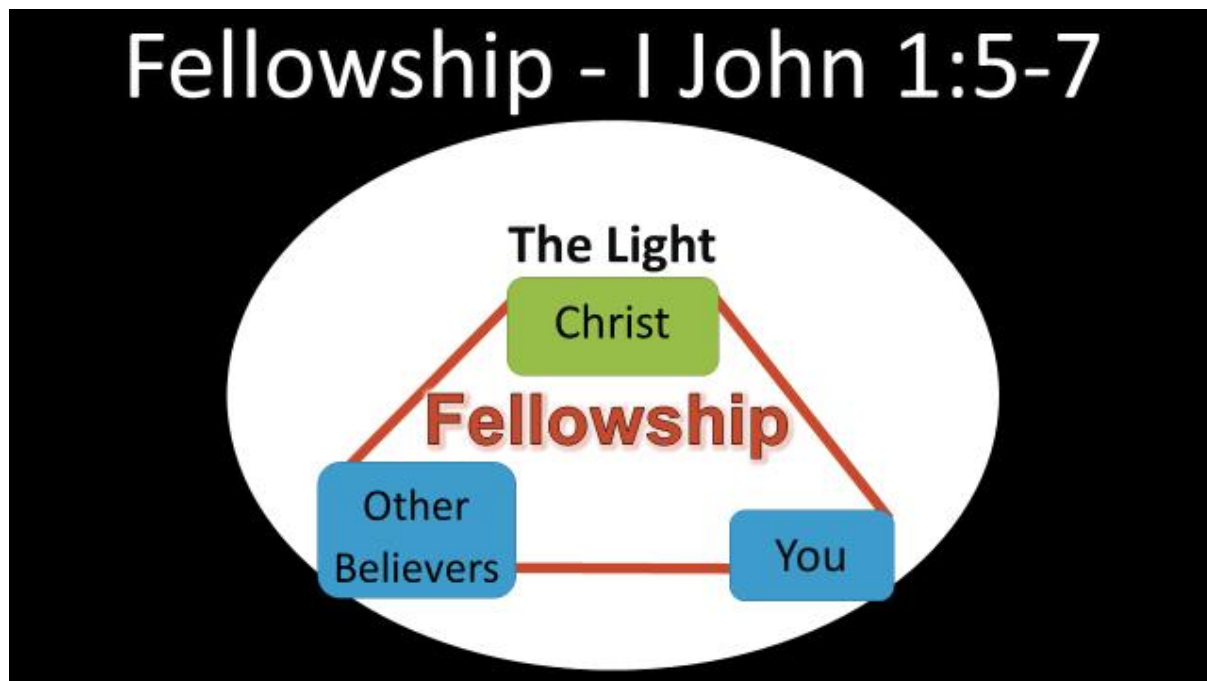
*Philippians 1:27 Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel;*

We can also make some conclusions based on I John 1:5-7 and these other passages. First, we neither "offer" nor "deny" fellowship; since it exists based on a relationship that is based on our obedience to God, it cannot be extended by will or retracted at will. It is either there, or it is not. Consider the words of Paul:

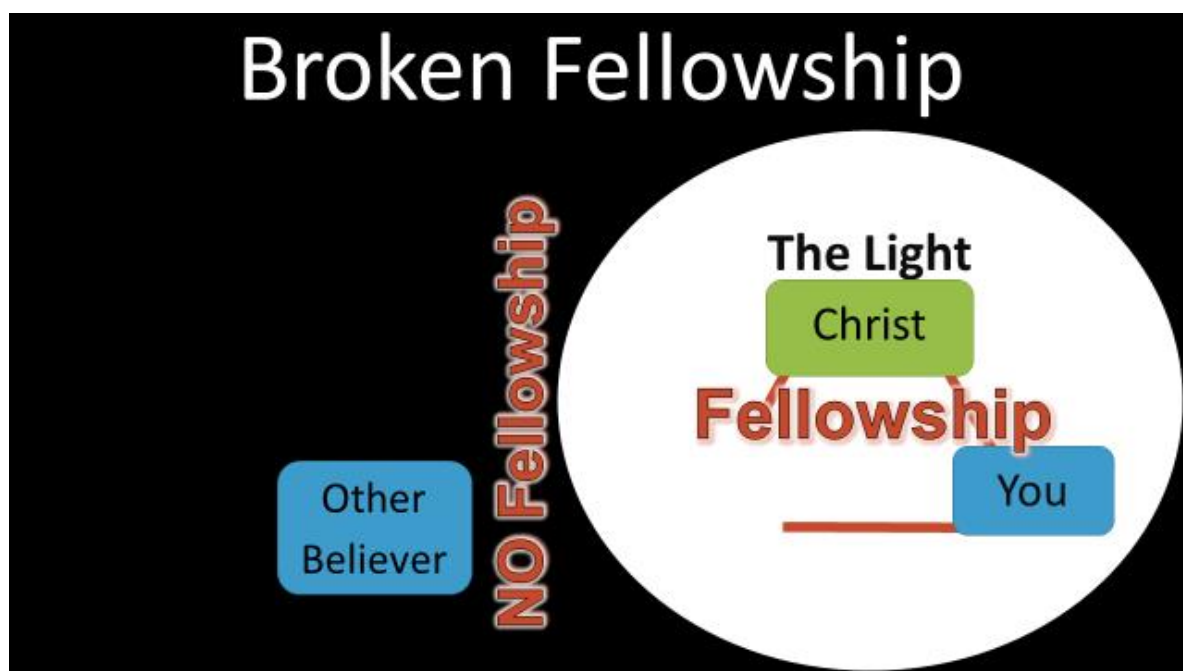
*2 Corinthians 6:14-16a Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols?*

We often try to say that in the Bible, *love* is a verb, not a noun. In the same way we should say that *Fellowship* is NOT a verb, but a noun. It is a condition of existence. It is either there or not, based on the actions of persons. As a noun, Fellowship either *exists* or not based on actions we engage in as Christians.

If we walk in the light, there is fellowship between ourselves, Christ and others who walk in the light. Fellowship is the name of the bond between Christ and believers in Christ. Here is a diagram to demonstrate this:



Second, if someone choose to be out of the light, then there is no fellowship with them if we are in the light. If we attempt to force fellowship with them, it necessarily renders us out of the light, since Christ CANNOT fellowship with darkness. We are either in the light and total fellowship to the light, or in the darkness and total fellowship to the darkness. There is no middle ground.



You can now see what these are common mistakes about Fellowship:

1. That we have a choice about with whom we have fellowship.
2. Fellowship is NOT membership, and Fellowship IS NOT association, but they are meant to follow Fellowship

## **II. Understanding Membership and Fellowship**

Within the local congregation, we describe our relationship as one of membership instead of fellowship. This is because fellowship speaks to a spiritual relationship between ALL believers (even those deceased, because they are in the light, are in fellowship with us; think of Fellowship as = Universal church Membership). Membership speaks to our relationship in the local church.

*1 Corinthians 12:12,20 For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ..... But now indeed there are many members, yet one body.*

Membership is NOT fellowship, but it is a reflection of the understanding of Fellowship. This can be confusing, so we will restate it several ways. We have the relationship of membership with those local believers with whom we believe we also have Fellowship. While Fellowship is the existence of a relationship, membership is one of two manifestations of fellowship (the other being the Christian association). MEMBERSHIP is the local church manifestation of FELLOWSHIP. It is specifically described and defined in Scripture.

We see an example in I Corinthians 5:1-8 that the church in Corinth had a member (MEMBERSHIP) with a person with whom, because he was in sin and walking in darkness, they had no spiritual relationship (FELLOWSHIP). Paul instructed them to cause their membership to align with their fellowship, or they would not be in fellowship with Christ.

Therefore, from this account, MEMBERSHIP is rather strictly defined as those persons with whom we have an immediate joint position with in a local congregation. While someone might make the case that we are members of the universal church, and therefore membership is with any believer, we want to separate this because (1) Scripture uses membership to describe local church relationship, and (2) Fellowship describes the universal church relationship.

Because MEMBERSHIP is a manifestation of FELLOWSHIP, we do not have a choice with whom we are to have membership. However, since we have an ability to define membership, it is possible that we may choose to have membership with someone we do not have fellowship with; if so, then we choose to have fellowship with darkness and not light, and sever our relationship with Christ.

Finally, when the congregation makes the decision (after using the prescribed method, Matthew 18 or I Timothy 5) to remove membership (because someone does not have fellowship), our membership in the local church requires us to accept and enforce that decision. Paul's admonition to church discipline in I Corinthians 5:4 was based on the assembly's authority to withdraw. If you do not agree, then it must be made clear. Otherwise, we are guilty of failing to submit to one another, a constant commandment of the local church (Ephesians 5:21, I Peter 5:5). We also may be guilty of endorsing sin (Romans 1:32).

### III. Understanding Companionship and Fellowship

Outside (and perhaps also inside) the local church we have associations with other believers, as well as associations with unbelievers. However, we are still told that our associations are not to break the concept of Fellowship. Scriptures use the word “associate” (I Corinthians 5:9, II Thessalonians 3:14) to describe interactions and relationships with believers that may or may not be part of our membership in the local body. It speaks to a personal, not congregational association.

While the word is not used, COMPANIONSHIP precisely defines the condition of keeping company (2 Thessalonians 3:14, I Corinthians 5:9, 14), or association (company = companion = companionship). Note that Scriptures also use the word “partake” and “participate” in the same context (Ephesians 5:7, 11, I Corinthians 10:21); we might also use PARTNERSHIP to describe this condition. Therefore we are using COMPANIONSHIP as the condition of keeping company/participating.

*(NOTE: there is some confusion over the rendering of Ephesians 5:11 and the word “sugkoinoneo”. The KJV and NKJV uniquely render it “fellowship”, while NASB & ESV render it “participate”. The word itself implies something different than fellowship, more to say “action in a condition” like fellowship. In most KJV/NKJV locations variations of the word are translated as “partaker”, making it an action, not a condition. See Romans 15:27, Galatians 6:6, Philippians 4:15, I Timothy 5:22 et al).*

Association can be described in many ways. We might define it as engaging in a social activity as it seems to be described in I Corinthians 10:27. We might describe it as the engagements we have with brethren who are not members of our church, but we interact with them in social standings. We need to carefully state here (and again later) that ASSOCIATIONS are not the work of the church, but are a personal work; this even applies to membership relationships (as we will see momentarily in I Corinthians 5:11). However, this is NOT the church at work, it is our engagement apart from the church’s work.

Scriptures clearly delineate here on the difference between the association with the believer and the unbeliever. Both are acceptable, but there is a different standard for termination for those associations. This difference causes many brethren confusion, as they may question why it is that, for example, they might have two friends who engage in the exact same worldly lifestyles, and can have an association or relationship with one, but because the other (in this example) was once a believer, they cannot have association with the other.

In other words, we have worldly associations with people who have never obeyed the Gospel, and are therefore sinners.

*1 Corinthians 5:9-10 I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.*

Then in the next statement Paul makes it clear that we are NOT to associate with those who are brethren (Paul identifies such as a brother in 2 Thessalonians 3:15 “Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother”) in the very following verse:

*1 Corinthians 5:11 But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner--not even to eat with such a person.*

These sentiments are restated in I Timothy 1:20 and Matthew 18:17. The context here is to the local church withdrawing from the man in sin among them. But Paul's greater point speaks to the fact that these are things that they already ought not to have been doing. We need to understand that this is not a passage that suggests that until the local church acts on someone's error, we are free to engage in association.

Companionship reflects our personal choices in whom we associate with. What must be made clear here is that it is a personal choice; it is not a congregational choice, and so long as the choice is made with an understanding of the principles of Fellowship, it is one which we should not judge amongst ourselves? One might choose to associate with a brother who is in error on institutionalism, while another may decide that this is not acceptable; there is no place to judge so long as both have made the decision based on a common understanding of who is in Christ and who is not. This is NOT a matter of Romans 14, but instead it reflects that there is some means to interpret how to apply association (as implied in Jude 22-23).

Now we need to make clear – this is NOT the issue of Membership or Fellowship, things we CANNOT personally dictate or determine. Thus when someone has been withdrawn from by the local church in which our membership lies, we have no authority to apply our own discretion to such a decision. Discretion in association lies ONLY with associations outside the local congregation (Membership) and MUST follow the guidelines of Fellowship.

#### **IV. Why Handling Associations is Complicated With Fellowship**

When we speak about association, we do so attempting to follow the pattern that is in the Bible. For example, we are told in 1 Corinthians 5 that “not to associate” with an immoral brother means not to eat with such a one:

*1 Corinthians 5:11 But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person....not even to eat with such a one.*

We parallel this with 2 John which tells us not to receive a doctrinally unsound (inferred to be a teacher):

*2 John 1:10 If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him.*

But we already have seen that we may eat (associate) with one who is not a Christian, one whom we are to understand we do not have fellowship:

*1 Corinthians 10:27 If any of those who do not believe invites you to dinner, and you desire to go, eat whatever is set before you, asking no question for conscience' sake.*

*2 Corinthians 6:14 Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?*

With the unbeliever we have a very different qualification for association. That is, does it promote worldliness or godlessness to have an association with an unbeliever (for this point we define an unbeliever as one who has not obeyed the Gospel). We are told clearly and often that engagements with the world lead to negative consequences in the life of a believer:

*1 Corinthians 15:33 Do not be deceived: "Bad company corrupts good morals."*

It is difficult to make personal applications regarding associations with unbelievers because we must personally discern when an unbeliever is having undue influence on us.

We know that Prisca and Aquila brought Apollos in while he was a teacher of false things (Acts 18:26). This need to distinguish between brethren in error and false teachers is one referred to many times (Jude 22-23; 2 Timothy 2:24-26). In other words, we might accept association with those who would be willing to learn, but reject those who are set in their doctrines.

Ultimately, we personally make decisions as to whom we will have associations with apart from membership. Meaning, this is not a work of the church, to determine with whom we are to have an association. The exception of this rule would be the person whose membership was withdrawn; because this was a work of the local body (of which we are a part) we must uphold this work:

*2 Corinthians 2:6 Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which was inflicted by the majority.*

It is difficult to make personal applications regarding associations with believers who may be false teachers because we must personally discern whether they are in error but teachable, or they have no desire to come to the truth.

Perhaps there is one passage in particular that we need to consider in our personal associations:

*Jeremiah 23:14 Also I have seen a horrible thing in the prophets of Jerusalem: they commit adultery and walk in lies; they also strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns back from his wickedness. All of them are like Sodom to Me, and her inhabitants like Gomorrah.*

Is our association with someone *strengthening evil hands*? Are we by having friendships with unbelievers driving them towards righteous conduct, or giving them support (enabling) them to continue in their error? We see in many situations when we refuse to withdraw personally from those in error we are in fact enabling them to remain in sin. Consider the possibility that we offer aid to God's enemies, as Jehoshaphat was accused of in (2 Chronicles 19:2. Consider that we lift up the hands of wicked men as pointed out in Ezekiel 13:22. So the obvious point is while association is a personal choice, we must exercise GREAT wisdom in associations; we risk causing a soul to be lost and we risk aiding the enemies of God.

*Proverbs 17:15 He who justifies the wicked, and he who condemns the righteous, both of them alike are an abomination to the LORD*

If we truly loved the lost, we would show "*mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh*" (Jude 23). Sadly, too many of us love our relationship and the personal engagement someone gives us more than we love them. Like enabling a drug addict with gifts of money, we give them the ability to continue in their addiction (to sin) rather than depriving them of the ability to continue our association provides. Thus, as the prophet said, *no one turns back from his wickedness*.

It is difficult to make personal applications regarding associations with one who has fallen away because we must personally discern if they have indeed fallen away, sometimes in the absence of action by the local church.

## **V. Conclusions**

Fellowship is defined by Christ through Scripture, so that we can have no personal interpretation of that idea. Membership is defined within the local church and is meant to follow the lines of fellowship in the local context. Association is left to the individual Christian to determine, and should reflect the desire to be Godly and to love others.