

What About Christian Fellowship?

By [Wayne Jackson](#)

Every serious student of the Bible is aware of the emphasis on fellowship within the sacred volume.

At the point of our conversion, we are called into fellowship with God, with Christ, and with the Holy Spirit (1 Jn. 1:3; 1 Cor. 1:9; 2 Cor. 13:14). And of course, there is the blessed fellowship that saints enjoy with one another (1 Jn. 1:7).

When the Lord prayed that all of his disciples might be “one,” he implied the warm fellowship that should prevail among them (Jn. 17:20-21). Happily, we later read that the disciples “continued steadfastly in the apostles’ teaching and the **fellowship**” (Acts 2:42). Indeed, the “multitude of them that believed were of one heart and soul” (Acts 4:32).

There are thus many positive aspects of New Testament fellowship. But there is also a negative side to consider.

The Negative Side of Fellowship

The Scriptures also approach fellowship from the negative vantage point.

God’s child is to have **no fellowship** with the unfruitful works of darkness; rather, he is to reprove them (Eph. 5:11). How can light and darkness, righteousness and iniquity share in the same fellowship (2 Cor. 6:14)?

While it is true that we cannot leave the world and avoid all association with the wicked (1 Cor. 5:10), we must recognize that intimate evil companionships can, and frequently do, corrupt good morals (1 Cor. 15:33).

Accordingly, the biblical teaching regarding fellowship also demands an awareness of the converse postures of **non-fellowship** and **withdrawal of fellowship**.

In the matter of fellowship and particularly in its limitations, there are extremist views (as there are with many subjects). Some see almost no limitations to fellowship, even in the broad realm of “Christendom.” They participate spiritually with a variety of religionists with no pangs of conscience whatever.

Others appear to have fellowship with scarcely any except a chosen few with whom they are in agreement in virtually every minute detail.

Surely, the truth lies somewhere between such extremes.

The application of biblical principles relative to fellowship is not always easy. However, there are **general scriptural guidelines** that help us in drawing some reasonable conclusions.

General Principles of Christian Fellowship

The Scriptures clearly teach that we cannot fellowship, i.e., partake with, people in their sins.

Paul warned Timothy not to be a partaker (*koinoneo* — related to the term rendered “fellowship”) of other men’s sins (1 Tim. 5:22). It is thus always wrong to share in the wickedness of others.

We cannot avoid some association with the people of the world (1 Cor. 5:10). Indeed, such is not even desirable, for without some mingling with our neighbors, how can the leavening influences of Christianity ever be brought to bear upon them (Mt. 13:33; 5:13-16)?

Nevertheless, one cannot join in common **religious observances** with those who are not Christians.

Scripture has circumscribed the sphere of our spiritual fellowship. John says there is no fellowship with God for those who walk in spiritual darkness (1 Jn. 1:6). Moreover, fellowship “with one another” is restricted to those who “walk in the light” (1 Jn. 1:7).

To Eat or Not to Eat ... Meats Sacrificed to Idols?

Did you ever wonder why Paul, within the context of 1 Corinthians 10:14-33, both **allowed** and yet **forbade** the eating of meats sacrificed to idols? Certainly he was not contradicting himself. Rather, he was addressing **two different situations** — different contexts, if you will.

Since there was nothing intrinsically evil in meat that had been offered to an idol (1 Cor. 10:19, 23), there was no sin in eating such, providing it was not offensive to the consumer's conscience (cf. Rom. 14:23; 1 Cor. 8:7) and as long as it did not create a stumbling block for others (1 Cor. 8:9; 10:23ff).

And so, under the proper conditions, in a **social** setting, a Christian could eat meat that previously had been offered in pagan worship.

However, the child of God was charged not to have fellowship with the heathen in his sacrificial **worship** feasts (1 Cor. 10:18-22), for to do so was to partake of the very essence of paganism.

It might be added that one ought to be very careful about his formal association with non-Christian groups even in contesting moral issues (e.g., abortion, pornography, etc.), lest he give the world the impression that the differences between the body of Christ and non-biblical sects are trivial. Christians are perfectly capable of opposing evil on their own. This is all God asks of us.

Fellowship Limits on Brothers in Christ

The New Testament also teaches that certain spiritual conditions can require a limitation of fellowship **even within the body of Christ**. The collective teaching of the New Testament regarding church discipline clearly suggests this.

Preliminary to a discussion of the reasons for fellowship limitation, however, two observations need to be made.

First, discipline covers a wide range — from simple teaching to the ultimate withdrawal of fellowship. It may, therefore, be administered incrementally. Or perhaps it would be better to say that fellowship restrictions must be adapted to the needs of the individual.

For example, one person — an impenitent drunkard — may need to be disfellowshipped formally (1 Cor. 5:11). On the other hand, another person with a drinking problem, but who is sincerely struggling to conquer it, may not need withdrawal but may need to be restricted in class teaching or serving in a public capacity.

Discipline, therefore, can take various forms, and most folks understand this.

Second, though the act of withdrawal is a congregational process that is to be consummated in the public assembly of the local church (1 Cor. 5:4), it needs to be recognized as well that non-fellowship can be as wide as fellowship. This means that if we recognize that fellowship can extend past the local congregation, even so non-fellowship **certainly can extend beyond the borders of a local congregation**.

The notion advanced by some, that a rogue brother may not be chastised beyond the boundaries of the local church without another church's autonomy being violated is foreign to the truth. Paul judged the fornicating brother at Corinth from Ephesus, more than 200 miles away (1 Cor. 5:3; 16:8).

Restrictions of Fellowship

Within the church of the Lord, fellowship may be restricted, to one degree or another, from the following general classes.

The rebelliously immoral

In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul clearly states that impenitent immoral persons, e.g., fornicators, drunkards, and extortionists, are worthy of church discipline. Such characters are to be “delivered unto Satan” (1 Cor. 5:5), or “put away” (1 Cor. 5:13), for their own soul's sake (1 Cor. 5:5), and for the protection of the church (1 Cor. 5:6-7). The church of today is woefully remiss in this duty.

Apostates

Those who “fall away” (Lk. 8:13) or who “depart from the faith” (1 Tim. 4:1) are surely subject to some degree of discipline.

Formal withdrawal of fellowship may not be appropriate for a babe in Christ who almost immediately leaves the faith (such a one may not even understand the significance of the act), but for those who have matured somewhat, and then depart, discipline surely should be exercised (2 Thes. 3:6, 14-15).

Teachers of false doctrine

Inspiration instructs us to “turn away from” those who teach divisive doctrines contrary to apostolic truth (Rom. 16:17). A heretic, after proper admonition, should be rejected (Tit. 3:10).

Hymenaeus and Alexander made “shipwreck of the faith,” and Paul “delivered them unto Satan” (which means he severed fellowship with them — cf. 1 Cor. 5:5) that they might be taught not to blaspheme (1 Tim. 1:19-20).

But the problem with this is. How does one determine **which teachings** are significantly erroneous to warrant disciplinary action? When brethren hold opposite viewpoints on various points of Bible interpretation, quite obviously **someone is in error**.

But the question may be: **Is that error of such serious consequence as to be a threat to the eternal welfare of others?**

Let us consider several matters.

What Issues Should Cause an Errant Teacher To Be Withdrawn From?

At the point of the death of a Christian, does his spirit enter into paradise or go directly to heaven?

Good and respectable brethren have differed over this question, and someone is wrong about the matter. But surely it is not an area where a refusal of fellowship must be involved.

Which English translation of the Bible should one use? Though I am personally inclined to the American Standard Version (1901), should I refuse fellowship with one who uses the RSV or NIV — **on that basis alone?** Surely not.

How then shall we decide **when** to limit fellowship due to incorrect teaching? I would like to suggest the following possibilities.

Possible Criteria for Fellowship Limitation

First of all, one must take a careful look at the **person** advocating the false doctrine. Is that person perhaps new in the faith and simply teaching error out of innocent ignorance? Does he have a gracious attitude that manifests itself in a willingness to discuss the subject and learn?

Or is the person a teacher of considerable experience who ought to know better? Does he persist in his error even after considerate brethren have tried to show him the Lord’s way more accurately? These are extremely important considerations.

Second, what are the implications of the teacher’s doctrine? May I suggest some areas that I believe should be of concern.

The nature or character of Deity

Some error reflects upon the nature or character of the Godhead. Those, for instance, who teach the “dispensation” notion that the Jewish rejection of Christ was a **surprise** to God are reflecting upon the foreknowledge of God. This is a woefully dangerous error.

Some have alleged that Christ was initially created by God and that he, therefore, does not possess a divine nature equal to the Father’s. This is a heretical concept that undermines the Lord’s claims regarding himself.

Attacks on Scripture

Some error attacks the credibility of the Bible as an infallible revelation from God. There are teachers who allege that the Bible contains contradictions; that there are jars and clashes between the Gospel accounts. Genesis 1 is promoted as mythological. The Bible and the theory of evolution are said to agree on almost all issues, etc.

Doctrines such as these are radical indeed and propagators of them should be neither supported nor commended.

Insufficiency of the New Testament

Any error that undermines the finality of New Testament revelation is worthy of censure.

For example, those who argue for miraculous gifts and continuing revelation for this age are contending for a form of **subjective** religion that ignores the completed, authoritative New Testament. When this is accepted, virtually anything goes in religion.

Should teachers of such ideas be bidden Godspeed? They should not.

Corruption of God's plan of salvation

What shall be said of those who deny the Lord's clear plan of salvation and who obliterate the concept of the distinctiveness of Christ's church?

Some teachers have publicly advocated that Christians should extend fellowship to those "baptized" as infants, to those who have been sprinkled instead of immersed, and to those who endorse the idea of salvation by faith alone.

Others have announced that the "church of Jesus Christ" is but one of many sectarian groups, hence active association ought to prevail across denominational lines.

Shall teachers who propose such ideas be accorded the same status as those who are faithful in their instruction? How can such be?

Corruption of Christian worship

How shall we view those who publicly argue that the New Testament establishes no pattern for acceptable worship?

For them, the Lord's supper may be eaten whenever the notion strikes one, and the use of mechanical instruments of music in Christian worship is a matter of indifference. Shall such teachings be allowed to go unchallenged? Does the Bible teach that altering God's plan of worship is of serious consequence? Take a good look at Leviticus 10:1-2.

Compromising what Christ taught regarding morality

What should be our posture toward those who, by their anti-biblical ideas, promote, encourage, or, at the very least condone, immoral acts such as adultery? Should the blanket of "toleration" be thrown over them indefinitely?

Let us look carefully at a Bible passage which speaks directly to this point.

In his letter to the church in Thyatira (Rev. 2:18ff), Christ, though commending these brethren for some things, nonetheless said of them, if one may paraphrase somewhat:

"I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess; she teaches and seduces my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed to idols. And I gave her time that she should repent, yet she had no inclination to repent of her fornication. Behold, I will throw her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her — into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works. And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he who searches the mind and heart: and I will deal with each one of you according to your works."

Concerning this dramatic context, several important things may be noted.

There was, within the church of Thyatira, an influential woman who is called Jezebel. The choice of the epithet, Jezebel, would suggest that she was similar in character and teaching to that ancient queen who corrupted Israel (1 Kgs. 16:29ff; 2 Kgs. 9:30ff).

This prophetess (she doubtless claimed to teach with divine authority) was persistently seducing and teaching the saints to commit fornication and to become involved in pagan rituals.

As wicked as she was, the Lord had given her time to repent, but his patience had been ignored by this evil woman, hence, judgment was imminent.

But here is another matter. Christ had a strong rebuke for the brethren in Thyatira because they continued to tolerate (*apheis* — present tense) her false teaching (Rev. 2:20). Surely, we ought to learn something from this inspired narrative.

What can we learn? Well, this. Just as there were those of the ancient church who, by their misguided teaching promoted adultery, even so, in the modern church there are those who are doing the same thing. By their anti-biblical doctrines regarding divorce and remarriage, they actually encourage men and women to continue in adulterous arrangements.

How long can the church go on tolerating compromising views such as these? The church has been patient with some teachers who advocate the ideas sketched above, yet they show no sign whatever of changing their corrupting views. Should we ignore their corrupting influence forever? Indeed not.

Limiting Fellowship

It is this writer's strong conviction that **limited fellowship** should be extended to brethren who have drifted into the kinds of error outlined above. But exactly what do I mean when I suggest that fellowship to them must be limited?

In some instances, the local churches with which such people are identified should discipline them and, if necessary, even withdraw fellowship from them. Sadly in most cases, this has not been done. The congregations themselves frequently are led into the errors of these men.

What, though, can be done when a church will not discipline its wayward minister? Here is what can be done — other Christians can apply disciplinary pressure.

Though formal withdrawal of fellowship is principally a congregational matter, since, as we mentioned earlier fellowship extends **further than the local church**, so can **limitation** of fellowship as well.

Consider the following.

Limitations of financial support

One form of fellowship is financial support. When Paul commended the saints at Philippi for their "fellowship in the furtherance of the gospel" (Phil. 1:5), he was thanking them for their generous financial help in his ministry (cf. Phil. 4:14-17).

If churches would cease to support teachers who go into error, some of the rogues might be brought to repentance. Certainly, their influence could be curtailed.

Alert others of digression

A form of discipline can be exercised by making the brotherhood aware of the unsound teaching that comes from a man's pulpit or pen.

Christians have a right to know where a teacher or preacher stands on fundamental issues before they use his services. Some brethren complain about the **gossip journals** that are devoted **exclusively** to muckraking, and justly so.

However, if more responsible brethren would muster the courage to kindly and forcefully chastise erring teachers, there would be no need for vigilantes.

Limit the audience

If schools, churches, and journals would cease to use men who are openly known to advocate **radical ideas** or cause division, some of them would “get the message.” A preacher with no audience, or a writer with no outlet, is an impotent creature indeed.

Conclusion

We are making a plea for firm balance within the Christian brotherhood. On the one hand, one should not call for wholesale head-hunting; that is, that we withdraw from every brother with whom we may disagree regarding various points of Bible interpretation. Such a fanatical approach has fragmented the church and made Christianity a reproach before an unbelieving world.

On the other hand, it is equally foolish to shut one’s eyes to blatant false teaching that undermines the spiritual and moral foundations of the church. And the various doctrinal aberrations reviewed above do just that.

Let this admonition, therefore, go forth to those of the new-theology / new-morality cults and to those who may be toying with the notion of teaching these novel theories.

The faithful will not let it pass. We love you, and we do not intend to abuse you. But neither will we use you. We will not extend our pulpits or our periodicals to you. We will attempt to stop your influence for evil. And we will continue such pressure until there is repentance, or you pass from our midst.

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Scripture References

1 John 1:3; 1 Corinthians 1:9; 2 Corinthians 13:14; 1 John 1:7; John 17:20-21; Acts 2:42; Acts 4:32; Ephesians 5:11; 2 Corinthians 6:14; 1 Corinthians 5:10; 1 Corinthians 15:33; 1 Timothy 5:22; Matthew 13:33, 5:13-16; 1 John 1:6; 1 Corinthians 10:14-33; 1 Corinthians 10:19, 23; Romans 14:23; 1 Corinthians 8:7; 1 Corinthians 8:9, 10:23; 1 Corinthians 10:18-22; 1 Corinthians 5:11; 1 Corinthians 5:4; 1 Corinthians 5:3, 16:8; 1 Corinthians 5; 1 Corinthians 5:5; 1 Corinthians 5:13; 1 Corinthians 5:6-7; Luke 8:13; 1 Timothy 4:1; 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15; Romans 16:17; Titus 3:10; 1 Timothy 1:19-20; Genesis 1; Leviticus 10:1-2; Revelation 2:18; 1 Kings 16:29; 2 Kings 9:30; Revelation 2:20; Philippians 1:5; Philippians 4:14-17

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