

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 26 August 2001

No. T0177

Speaker: Mr. Ernie Brown

The Early Church (Acts 2:42): Fellowship

This is the second of four sessions looking at that grand verse, Acts 2:42. It tells us that the early Christians “continued stedfastly in the Apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.”

Last time, we noticed that there are four major elements in the verse. Their close relation is very clear. The fundamental concept addressed in the verse is the fellowship, Christian fellowship. That puts the other three elements into proper perspective. It is the Apostles’ doctrine that regulates the fellowship. The breaking of bread is the greatest privilege and sweetest expression of the fellowship. Prayers sustain us in the fellowship, that is, in the good of the fellowship.

In our first session, we considered the Apostles’ Doctrine. Today, we turn to the Fellowship itself.

Really, before we think in any detail about the subject, we would do well to read:

- Acts 2:41–47
- 1 Corinthians 1:9 and 10:16
- 2 Corinthians 13:14
- Philippians 1:5
- 1 John 1:3

Since that is not practicable, in the limited time we have available just now, I really would recommend that we all do just that as soon as circumstances permit. In the meantime, we shall refer to relevant verses as we go along.

Fundamentally, fellowship is all about sharing things in common. 1 John 1:3 tells us, and it is true for all real Christians, that is, believers on the Lord Jesus Christ: “That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.”

This statement confirms what the grammatical construction of Acts 2:42 implies. The fellowship to which we are called is fundamentally what the Apostles in the first instance enjoyed. It is therefore fair to call it the Apostles’ Fellowship. It drew them closer together than any natural or earthly tie ever could. As for them, so for us. In being drawn to the Father and the Son, we are drawn closer to each other. That is, we have fellowship together in the enjoyment of a common bond.

Features of the fellowship

When we examine the Apostles’ Doctrine, to learn about the many aspects of the Apostles’ Fellowship, we read about such things as:-

- The fellowship of God’s Son - 1 Corinthians 1:9
- Fellowship with the Father and the Son - 1 John 1:3
- The fellowship of the blood of Christ - 1 Corinthians 10:16
- The fellowship of the Holy Spirit - 2 Corinthians 13:14
- Fellowship in the gospel - Philippians 1:5

These terms are complementary to one another. They are certainly not contradictory.

When the Apostle Paul speaks about the fellowship **of** God’s Son, he is drawing our attention to the fact that the Son of God is the focal point of the fellowship. He is central to it. Indeed, He is vital to it. Without Him, there would be no true fellowship to enjoy. It concerns Him, His interests, His honour, His glory. We can only have part in it because of our relationship with Him.

When the Apostle John says in 1 Corinthians 1:9, "Our fellowship is **with** the Father and **with** His Son Jesus Christ", what is he telling us? He is saying that we have been brought into a spiritual realm where we can live in the enjoyment of an intelligent appreciation of that eternally subsisting relationship between the Father and the Son, that is, God the Father and God the Son!

In chapter 10:16 of that epistle, Paul says we have part in "the fellowship of the blood of Christ." That is, we have a relationship with God because the blood of Christ was shed on our behalf. Our sins have been forgiven. We have been brought near to God through the death of His Son. The distance caused by our sins has been removed. There is now no barrier between ourselves and God. We have a relationship with God. We are His dear children. We now know Him as our Father, because we are linked with His Son Who is alive from among the dead. We have a new life that could never have been ours unless Christ had died and risen again. 2 Corinthians 5:15 says, "Christ died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him Who died for them, and rose again."

Turning to 2 Corinthians 13:14, we have, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all." As with every Christian blessing, true fellowship can only be enjoyed in the power and energy of the Holy Spirit. There was no way that we could have made ourselves right with God. If we are right with God, it is through the death of His Son, made good in our souls by the Holy Spirit. It is just as true that there is no way that we can maintain in our own strength, or enjoy and appreciate by our own power, the fellowship to which we have been called. It can only be in the power of the Holy Spirit of God. By the way, aren't you glad that is true? The more we get to know ourselves, through grace, the more we realise how weak, how inconsistent, how unreliable we are in ourselves. This is true of even the best of us, even at the best of times. How thankful we need to be that everything that is good and wholesome and lasting is only ours on the basis of the value to God of the work of Christ, made good and enjoyed in the power and energy of the Holy Spirit. So, as to the enjoyment of the fellowship to which we are called, it is the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

There is a well-known phrase, "The family that prays together stays together." I'm sure you have heard it, and agree with it. In a similar vein, I would say, "Christians who work together are much more likely to stay together, and enjoy their fellowship together." One fundamental reason for the Lord leaving us here is that we might work together, spreading the good news of the Christian gospel, that "Christ died for our sins, according to the scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised again the third day, according to the scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:4). Paul gives thanks to God that the Philippians did just that, having what he so happily calls "fellowship in the gospel" (Philippians 1:5). It cannot be without significance that it is the Philippian Epistle which says so much about joy. I am sure that we Christians wouldn't spend half as much time bickering with each other and falling out with each other if we spent more time having fellowship in the gospel, winning souls for Christ. Neither would there be time for getting into doubtful relationships with the unbelieving world, which, fundamentally, still wants nothing to do with Christ, or those who seek to be true to Him. More spiritual joy would be experienced, and that in itself would be a grand witness to the effect of the grace of God in us.

Impediments and Inhibitions to the Fellowship

This brings us to another important consideration. In all honesty, we must face up to the fact that there are certain things that impede or inhibit true Christian fellowship. I shall mention but a few.

Firstly, and high on the list must be the spiritual condition of our own soul. If we aren't close to the Lord in the communion of our own soul, we should not be surprised if we don't get on with each other. That is, the fellowship suffers.

Secondly, and also high on the list, keeping the wrong kind of company. By the way, have you noticed that we can usually tell how we are getting on spiritually by who we get on with? There is something terribly wrong if we find ourselves getting on too well and having too much in common with out and out unbelievers! No harm in it? There is certainly no good in it. This applies to both relationships and activities. Of course, there is a tremendous difference between witness and fellowship. Witness is one thing, a good thing, a very necessary thing. Fellowship is entirely different. Sadly, if there is a differential between the spiritual interest of two individuals, the tendency is nearly always for there to be a levelling down to the lower spiritual plane, rather than the reverse.

How do we know how far to go? What will keep us in the right state of soul to establish a proper balance? Basically, it is the Apostles' Doctrine which sets the standard. It alone can enable us to keep the balance. In Acts 2, it was the oral teaching of the Apostles. For us, it is the full canon of scripture, with particular emphasis on the New Testament Epistles.

Scripture speaks very plainly of the dangers of an unequal yoke. Indeed, it is put even stronger than that in 2 Corinthians 6:14, "**Be ye not** unequally yoked with unbelievers." Then in 1 John 2:15, "**Love not** the world, **neither** the things that are in the world." If I make it plain that I want no fellowship with worldly people, they will very soon

make it plain that they want nothing to do with me. For that reason, when we start a new school, a new job, form a new friendship, move to a new locality, the sooner we let people know that we are believers on the Lord Jesus Christ, the less likely we are to get entangled in unsuitable relationships. It will also be that much more straightforward to testify to our personal faith in Christ, and be a spiritual help to others.

It should not be necessary to say so, but disloyalty to our local spiritual home, and the Christian brothers and sisters there, would certainly inhibit the local fellowship. There should be no place, either, for expressions of discontent, grumbling and the like. As for out and out rebellion, it is totally contrary to the very concept of fellowship. This does not mean, of course, that we must not deal with problems that arise. Rather the reverse. True fellowship involves being ready to deal with problems in a spirit of Christian grace while the problem is still a small problem. Otherwise, the small problem will escalate into a big problem, and that much more difficult to resolve. This is not in any way the same as nit picking and indulging in carping criticism all the time.

Loyalty to the Fellowship

This brings me to this absolutely vital matter of loyalty, and what I mean by the term spiritual home. Loyalty, in any sphere, is to be highly commended. No less in Christian fellowship! For what it is worth, my advice would always be this. Decide, in good conscience before the Lord, what, and where, your spiritual home should be. Only the Lord can tell you that. Conviction, and not convenience, must be the overriding consideration. Before you finally make your mind up, satisfy yourself that the Christians there are really and truly making every honest attempt to be obedient to what scripture teaches as to how Christians should behave, in every aspect of their lives and service. Having made your decision, identify yourself fully with your spiritual home. Throw yourself into it wholeheartedly, hook, line and sinker; lock, stock and barrel; in for a penny, in for a pound. Be fully committed. Don't stay on the fringe. As fully as time permits, join in all its activities, bearing in mind that you have a lot to learn. Remember, also, that if you don't put much into it, you shouldn't be surprised if you don't seem to be getting much out of it.

It would be a sorry thing if you regarded your natural family home as merely a dormitory and a restaurant. It would be even worse if you regarded your home as only a dormitory, eating elsewhere most of the time. At the very least, you would almost certainly lose your appetite for home baking and home cooking. You could hardly in reality call yourself an active member of the family if you lived like that. I firmly believe that the spiritual counterpart is even more true. Let us be fully involved in every possible way with our local Christian brothers and sisters, and the local fellowship will be all the better for it.

Residual Questions

1. Am I being absolutely honest with myself when I call myself a Christian? Am I really and truly a believer on Him? Are my sins really forgiven? Have I really put my personal faith in Christ? Once that basic matter has been sorted out, I can ask myself the following additional questions about fellowship.
2. What do I contribute to the local Christian fellowship?
3. Is my home open to weary travellers? Those who are sad? Upset? Lonely?
4. If a visitor arrives unexpectedly, do I make sure that I speak to him or her and make sure he or she feels welcome?
5. If someone has an obvious problem, do I quietly do what I can to help?
6. Do I consider other people's views? Do I act in a way that doesn't offend those with whom I am allegedly in full and happy fellowship? Do I think it is rather smart to do and say things that offend and upset them?

Finally, what I trust you will accept as a word in season. Time is short. The Lord is coming soon. There is so much to do. Have what fellowship you can with any Christian you meet along the way. It is wonderful to meet someone you have never seen before, and realise you have so much in common because you are both trusting in the same Saviour. What a tribute to the grace of God you have both experienced. But, please. As far as regular, practical fellowship is concerned, charity begins at home. Throw yourself wholeheartedly into all possible activities in your acknowledged spiritual home. Pull your weight. Be fully involved. You will then enjoy the blessing of the Lord in the fellowship you enjoy with those who are like-minded in the faith.

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