

Saturday, February 4, 2012 – Fellowship is a Doctrinal Issue

There is a trend in the church of Christ toward extending "the right hand of Christian fellowship" to almost everyone in sight, with little regard to the beliefs and/or practices of those to whom such extension should be made.

Fellowship refers to sharing in common or jointly participating with others. Those who stay in fellowship with apostates are in fellowship with their errors. God has **never** approved of His children's having fellowship with His enemies. "Some" fellowship with sin and error is not an option. The consistent rule of Scripture is **no** fellowship: "**Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness**" (Eph. 5:11; 2 Cor. 6:14–18). In these passages, both the Lord and Paul addressed fellowship with unbelievers, but the teaching is the same concerning apostate brethren: **Receive him not into your house, and give him no greeting: for he that giveth him greeting partaketh in his evil works** (2 John 10–11; 1 Cor. 5:9–11; 2 Thes. 3:6).

There is danger in fellowshiping those who are not in fellowship with God. Those who teach error and/or practice false doctrine are not in fellowship with God (2 John 9). As I have already mentioned, Paul warned, "**And have no fellowship with the unfruitful workers of darkness, but rather reprove them**" (Eph. 5:11). Paul did not say we could have a little fellowship with error; he did not say we could have much fellowship with error; he said **NO** fellowship. Brethren who encourage by their words and by their behavior fellowshiping denominations and those who have gone out from us have departed from the Truth. We cannot fellowship such without becoming partakers with them in their evil ways (2 John 11). Fellowshiping those in error is a departure from Truth; it is a departure from God.

Numerous brethren continue to find themselves in liberal congregations and are not sure what to do. When God announced the coming destruction of "Babylon," He warned His people: "**Come forth, my people, out of her, that ye have no fellowship with her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues**" (Rev. 18:4). This warning applies to God's people in the "Babylons" of every age, including the many apostate congregations of our time that have rebelled against Heaven. What can/should they do? The answer from Scripture is clear: "**Come forth, my people....**" Many good brethren have obeyed this warning and have left such corrupt bodies in recent years, but I believe thousands of unhappy saints yet remain in them. The Heavenly voice warned God's faithful people to "come forth" because they must "have no fellowship" with Babylon's sins. Those who stay in a liberal congregation are in fellowship with its errors.

An excellent article written several years ago offers some profound insight into this subject. I provide many parts of it below for your consideration...

Contributing money on the Lord's Day is one means of fellowship with a congregation. Contributors in an immoral church help support false teaching from its pulpit, liberal missionaries, and all of the erroneous doctrines and practices of that church, even if they object to them. Liberal elders and preachers (and most Christian university administrators) pay little attention to verbal opposition. The one language they understand is **M-O-N-E-Y**. We cannot eradicate the current digression so many congregations now manifest, but it might be significantly slowed if thousands of objecting brethren would "come forth" from them and cease supporting them financially. Besides their financial **fellowship**, good brethren who remain in a bad church also implicitly **endorse** the congregation's errors. All of the objections one might offer to digressive elders and preachers begin to sound hollow and insincere after a while when one stays in spite of the doctrinal departures. Merely registering objections is insufficient. Verily, as long as one is a member of an apostate church he is endorsing its apostasy. **For this reason** John forbade extending any indication of encouragement or endorsement to false teachers; to do so is to have fellowship with their evil works (**2 John 10–11**).

Revelation 18:4 furnishes additional sound reasons why saints should flee modern "Babylons."

- **To Support Truth and Righteousness:** One who remains in a digressive church not only supports error, but he robs God and His faithful people of the fellowship and support due them. Not only should one **not** want to support false doctrine, he should greatly desire **to support** only sound doctrine. As long as one remains in a liberal church, he robs God (and His faithful people) of time, talents, money, and every means of his support and endorsement. This reason alone should be sufficient to cause one to "come forth" from an apostate group.

- **To Save One's Soul:** One should flee a liberal congregation for the sake of his own soul. Remaining in a "Babylon" church makes one subject to God's eternal judgment against it. As already noted, although Lot objected to Sodom's sins, had he remained in it he would have perished with its perverted populace. Similarly, for the sake of spiritual survival, every Christian who objects to the errors in his "home" congregation should leave it. We all need to be in a congregation that constantly urges us to honor God's Word in everything we do. We need to hear error identified and refuted. These things will help us to serve Christ faithfully and reach Heaven at last. In a liberal church, not only are none of these found, but their opposites abound.

• **To Save One's Children:** Parents of small children who remain in an apostate congregation are short-sighted. They (especially fathers) have the responsibility to nurture their children "in the chastening and admonition of the Lord" (**Eph. 6:4**). Parents who stay in a liberal congregation fail in this duty, even if they teach their children correctly and provide a good example at home. Lot lost at least two daughters and their families in Sodom's destruction. Although he urged, "Up, get you out of this place," they had been so influenced by their surroundings that they refused his plea (**Gen. 19:12–14**). Lot sacrificed them by foolishly rearing them in Sodom. Some today are as obstinate as Lot even if it means the loss of their children to error. They, as Lot did, continue to linger when they should have fled (**vv. 15–16**).

Otherwise good parents in liberal churches may at home point out the errors the children are encountering in "Bible" classes and worship assemblies, but eventually those children will figure out that their parents are being hypocritical to stay in such a church. If parents want their children to grow up with any semblance of strong convictions in the Truth, they dare not linger in a liberal congregation.

My family and I have left multiple congregations because it became obvious the elders felt they "knew best" in spite of the clear teachings of the scriptures. (CD)

In spite of the numerous compelling reasons why Truth-loving brethren should have nothing to do with an apostate religious body, a large number of them continue to do so, offering various excuses.

• **We Can Help:** "We don't agree with what's going on, but we hope we can correct these things by staying." Admittedly, some congregations have not reached the "point of no return" in their digression. In such cases, those who are zealous for the Truth should stay and "**contend earnestly for the faith**" (**Jude 3**). However, when congregational leaders have obviously succumbed to liberalism, it is practically impossible to reclaim them. To them, those who criticize erroneous doctrine or practice are just pesky "trouble makers."

• **Family and Friends:** "Although I don't approve of this congregation, I can't leave my kindred and best friends." We should all possess "natural affection" (**Rom. 1:31**). However, **all** other affections must be secondary to one's affection for the Christ and His Word (**Mat. 6:24, 33; 10:34–36; 22:36–37**). We correctly appeal to members of denominations to come out of those sinful institutions, even if it means sacrificing family and friends. It is no less appropriate to appeal to brethren whose family ties and friendships bind them to digressive "churches of Christ."

• **Too Much Invested:** “I have been a member of this congregation for years, and I have invested too much money and time to walk away from it.” It is painful to lose investments, but it is sometimes necessary. Spiritual issues far outweigh mere material ones. That one is so concerned over money or time is a “dead giveaway” that the priceless treasure of Truth and one’s eternal destiny are not one’s priorities (**Mat. 6:21**). One whose house is in the path of a raging flood is a fool if he tells would-be rescuers he has invested too much time and money in it to leave. In both cases, these folk have **already** lost their “investments” **whether they go or stay**. The member of the liberal church has lost his “investments,” and by remaining in it, he compounds those losses. He had better be concerned with the far greater loss of his soul if he continues to support error and sin (**Mat. 5:30; 16:26; 2 John 9–11**).

• **Fear of Division:** “I don’t approve of the corruptions and innovations I see in this congregation, but I might cause division if I leave.” One should be cautious and concerned about division, but one dare not favor a false “peace” or “unity” above Truth and godliness. Liberals have falsely accused many a devoted saint of “causing division” when all they did was stand for the Truth and object to unauthorized doctrines or deeds. I confess to encouraging division **when the Truth is at stake**. Our Lord is “the Prince of Peace” (**Isa. 9:6**), but He rules with a “sword” that is often divisive (**Mat. 10:34; Luke 12:51–52; Eph. 6:17**). When some in a congregation refuse to submit to God’s Word and others are determined to do so, division is inevitable. The Lord anticipated such divisions, and they have His blessing (**1 Cor. 11:19**). **Those who have abandoned the Truth are the culprits in such cases**, regardless of accusations to the contrary. Brethren should not let the “church divider” charge intimidate them.

• **Nowhere to Go:** “I don’t agree with the preaching and practices of this congregation, but where can I go?” This problem especially perplexes those who live where the only congregation designated “church of Christ” has apostatized. In such cases, it is time to begin a new congregation. Brethren in hundreds of places did so a century or more ago when digressives forced the instrument and the missionary society into almost every congregation. Many sacrificed greatly as heartless heretics, operating as religious bullies, forced them to choose between compromising or leaving.

Those faithful spiritual ancestors understood the spiritual application of Solomon’s words: “Better is little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and trouble therewith” (**Pro. 15:16; 16:8**). Some of these godly folk began congregations in their homes with only their own family unit as members, but they were determined to be faithful to God. The time has come again to demonstrate such grit and character for those in unsound churches who would “worship in spirit and truth” and maintain a “good conscience”

(**John 4:23–24; Heb. 13:18**). While the modern innovations are more varied than those of the past, they represent the same kind of rebellion against New Testament authority. God-fearing brethren who live in areas where sound congregations exist have **no excuse for remaining in unsound congregations**. They cannot sincerely ask, “Where can I go?”

• **We Like the Youth Program:** “Many of the things being done in the church here are unscriptural, but it has a large group of children the ages of ours.” As I suggested earlier, having children should be a compelling reason for **leaving**, rather than for **staying in** a liberal church. What parents “gain” in peers and programs for their children they more than lose to the harmful influence, emphasis, and teaching, as already enumerated. It would be far better for one’s children to be reared in a congregation that provides wholesome doctrine and spiritual emphasis with only one or two others (or even none) their ages than in a congregation with a multitude their age where Scriptural teaching and example are absent. Remember Lot’s folly—and losses.

• **No Perfect Congregation:** “I know this congregation has many problems in doctrine and practice, but so did the church in Corinth, and Paul still called it a ‘church of God.’” Liberals have so often repeated this prattle to justify their apostasies that some otherwise sound brethren now parrot it. Such is a classic illustration of comparing “apples” with “oranges.” True, Paul addressed the defective Corinthian brethren as “the church of God” (**1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1**), but this is hardly the end of the matter. The **principal aim** of Paul’s letters to them was to **correct those errors and their purveyors**. He believed—correctly—that the church was salvageable. Most of the Corinthians were penitent (**2 Cor. 7:5–16**), and Paul warned the few who were not that he would deal with them when he arrived (**12:20–21; 13:2–10**). Had the church refused his reproofs, he could not have continued in fellowship with them and been consistent with his own teaching (**Rom. 16:17–18; 1 Cor. 5:11–13; Eph. 5:11; Tit. 3:10; et al.**) or with the Lord’s (**Mat. 7:15–16; 15:13–14; 16:6, 12; et al.**). One who concludes that Paul’s address of the Corinthian church as “the church of God” somehow justifies a congregation’s apostasy is sorely mistaken.

Paul dealt with these errors as soon as he learned of them—before their perpetrators had become entrenched and had gained unbreakable control. Unlike many present-day error plagued congregations, the Corinthian errors did not represent a long-standing pattern of liberalism and disregard for the Truth. Numerous faithful brethren have again and again exposed and rebuked the errors of modern apostate congregations, only to see them resolutely march further into radicalism. Unlike the Corinthian church, there is no realistic hope that they will return to the Truth. Anyone who would appeal to the

Corinthians as an excuse for apostasy and/or for remaining in an apostate church should be ashamed.

In appealing for good brethren to leave bad churches, I am not encouraging “sheep-stealing.” I am simply encouraging godly men and women to have the courage of their convictions and to make Truth their priority. Although it may require sacrifice, the Lord’s command to them is: “Come forth, my people, out of her, that ye have no fellowship with her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues” (**Rev. 18:4**).

We all need to heed these words for our very soul could be at stake.