

### Introduction:

There is no doubt “fellowship” is a biblical word and it is a biblical injunction. We are supposed to have fellowship and be in fellowship. Today, however, we hear the word “fellowship,” even from Christians, in areas where the Bible never used the concept. Churches build halls to house meals and other social gatherings and call them fellowship halls. Christians get together to play basketball, softball or even ultimate Frisbee and call it fellowship. Christians gather for a meal and someone inevitably thanks God for the time of fellowship we are having. God, however, never once used the concept of Christian fellowship to describe any of these things.

The English word “fellowship” comes from the Old English and Norse words that literally mean “one who lays down money in a joint enterprise” (Oxford English Dictionary). The English word and the Greek words it translates carry the idea of joint participation. That being said, I understand that “fellowship” and the words it translates are not solely spiritual words. They have a secular meaning and can accurately be used in those ways. If you and I are playing a game together, eating a meal together or just sitting in the same building somewhere, then there is a sense of fellowship, joint participation, that we do have in that. However, modern religion and even more and more Christians are missing what God has asked of us spiritually when it comes to fellowship with one another. We see the word “fellowship” in the Bible, then we hear people call eating together a form of fellowship and think because we have eaten together we have done what God has asked. That is just not true. For just a few moments, let’s examine how the New Testament uses the concept of fellowship. The New Testament uses six words in the same family related to the concept of fellowship—*koinonia* (19 times), *koinonos* (10 times), *koinoneo* (8 times), *sunkoinoneo* (3 times), *koinonikos* (1 time), *metoche* (1 time). Altogether, these words are used 42 times in the New Testament, translated in various ways. However, there are basically four headings under which the words for fellowship are used. Let’s look at those and see what God has asked of us regarding fellowship. I am going to go ahead and let the cat out of the bag. Notice very carefully as we look at these that never once does the New Testament refer to eating together or being together socially as fellowship.

### Discussion:

- I. Sharing in similarities
  - A. Fellowship is used to describe sharing similar qualities. For instance, **Hebrews 2:14** speaks of God’s children sharing in flesh and blood.
  - B. **I John 1:3-7** uses this same concept on a spiritual level. When we share the quality of walking in the light, we have fellowship with the apostles, the Father, the Son and with everyone else who walks in the light. However, if we walk in darkness we do not share this quality and we have no fellowship with the apostles, the Father, the Son or those who walk in the light.
  - C. If I understand **II Corinthians 13:14** correctly, it demonstrates this same kind of similarity. If we are in the Holy Spirit, that is, if we are following His words and submitting to His will we all share in that quality of being in the Spirit. We have a fellowship with one another and the Spirit.
  - D. **Philemon 6** provides an interesting illustration of this principle. Paul talked about Philemon sharing his faith. As Philemon teaches others about his faith and produces that same faith in them, they share the quality of faith and have fellowship through that.
- II. Working partners
  - A. This concept probably most aligns with the etymology of our English word “fellowship,” that is, “one who lays down money in a joint enterprise.” The New Testament speaks of those who work together on a project as partners in fellowship with one another.
  - B. This is seen in secular work in **Luke 5:10**. Peter, Andrew, James and John were partners in their fishing business. Thus, they were in fellowship. Even though the Bible recognizes this secular use, we must not think the fellowship God wants from us spiritually is a business relationship. Rather, this use merely demonstrates the meaning of the word itself.
  - C. Paul used this in a spiritual sense to talk about those who were working partners in the gospel. In **II Corinthians 8:23** he described Titus as his partner and fellow worker. In **Philemon 17**, Paul used the same concept to talk about his relationship with Philemon.

### III. Joint participation in an activity

- A. This third heading is really a modification of the last. When people participated jointly in some activity, they were considered in fellowship. That is, they were considered partners in that work. Sometimes this was a good thing; sometimes a bad thing.
- B. In **Philippians 1:5; 4:15**, Paul described the fellowship he had with the Philippian church because of their material support of his preaching. Even though they were not traveling as partners like Paul and Titus, they were partners in the work.
- C. In **I Corinthians 10:16**, we see the only time the New Testament relates fellowship to eating. The Lord's Supper is a sharing or fellowship in the body and blood of the Lord. Because we all share in the one bread, we are one body.
- D. This concept is used to also describe the fellowship we have with Jesus, the apostles and each other when we participate in the same suffering for being Christians. **II Corinthians 1:7; Hebrews 10:33; I Peter 4:13** all speak of the sharing of suffering in which Christians participate. When we endure persecution we are in fellowship with all those who have suffered for the sake of Christ. We are in fellowship with Christ Himself who suffered.
- E. Not all joint participation is good. In **I Corinthians 10:18-20**, Paul was concerned about the Christians who had come out of paganism who still ate at the idols' temples. When they ate in the temples of idols they were in fellowship with demons and idolatrous altars. Then we see **Ephesians 5:11; I Timothy 5:22; II John 11** and **Revelation 18:4** that speak of taking part in sins with others or being in fellowship with their sin. We must not have this fellowship.

### IV. Helping those in need

- A. One of the forms of fellowship in the New Testament that I doubt many of us ever think of as fellowship is in helping those in need. When we provide materially, through money, food, clothes or in some other way, we are in fellowship or are sharing with them.
- B. Consider **Romans 15:26; Galatians 6:6** and **I Timothy 6:18**. All of these have to do with sharing our goods with others in need. When we take food to those who are ill or grieving, when we provide clothes for those who are destitute, when we provide material assistance to those in need, we are having a sense of fellowship with them.

### V. Applications

- A. *We must take care what we call fellowship.* As I said earlier, by the definition of the word itself, there are a great many things that are fellowship. However, not all of those things are the fellowship expected based on the New Testament text. Eating a meal together, except the Lord's Supper, is not New Testament fellowship. Playing a game together is not New Testament fellowship. No, it is not sinful to use the word like this. However, the danger in using this term so loosely is that we believe we have done what the Bible says when we haven't. Allow me to illustrate the problem with another biblical word—baptism. The word itself just means immersion. It is absolutely true that if I fall out of the fishing boat I have been immersed and, just based on the word's definition, been baptized. However, that is not the New Testament baptism that saves. If we started using this term for every action that could be connected to its technical definition, eventually we will lose sight of what is truly the baptism the New Testament requires of us thinking we have been baptized according to Scripture when we have not just because the word can be technically used. The same is true in fellowship. When we continue to use this term loosely in the context of our relationships and work with one another, we can believe we have fellowshiped as the New Testament requires when we haven't.
- B. *We should spend time together socially, but that is not New Testament fellowship.* **Acts 2:46-48** demonstrates the New Testament Christians spent time with one another outside of their assemblies. They spent secular and social time together. Yes, we need to do that. However, that is never called "fellowship" in the New Testament. Further, understanding that concept we see that social time together is the work of individuals, not the congregation. The church's job is not to make sure Christians spend time with one another in social settings. This is one of the grave mistakes of misunderstanding fellowship. Because fellowship is often a congregational issue, when socializing is labeled as fellowship, folks believe the church is responsible to make

sure we socialize. That is simply not true. Socializing, while a responsibility of the individual Christians, is not the fellowship a local church is to provide.

- C. *We must work together.* As we attend together, we are in congregational fellowship with each other. However, I think it was important to note that fellowship carried an active connotation. There were not supposed to be silent partners. Granted, each partner has different abilities and therefore different responsibilities. However, if we are going to teach the truth about “fellowship” it is not enough to say it is joint participation in spiritual work. We need to emphasize that it is joint *participation*. We must participate, actively partnering with other Christians to accomplish God’s work. We really aren’t fulfilling God’s desire for fellowship unless we really are becoming active partners in the work at hand.
- D. *We must help those in need.* Considering all we have seen about fellowship throughout the rest of the New Testament, we see that the fellowship to which the disciples were devoted in **Acts 2:42** was not the eating of meals together, but the sharing of possessions with one another. Granted, having a needy brother or sister into your home for a meal would be fellowship as you shared God’s blessings to you with them. But it would be fellowship because you are sharing with them in their need, not just because you are eating together. One of the issues we see about fellowship is that those who have God’s blessings should share with others that don’t. God has not blessed us so we might hoard our blessings and climb society’s ladder. He has blessed us so we might share or be in fellowship with those who are in need. Biblically, on a congregational level, we see fellowship in this sense is limited to those who are Christians. Nowhere has God authorized the local church to become a welfare center for any and all who have need. That is not the role of the local church. At the same time, we as individuals should do good to all men as we have opportunity (**Galatians 6:10; I Timothy 6:18**).

### **Conclusion:**

I have been teaching this kind of message for years. It almost never fails that within the week following a message like this I will be at someone’s house or a get together and the person leading the prayer before we eat will thank God for the opportunity to fellowship with the brethren. It becomes very frustrating for a preacher to encourage people not to do something that has become so ingrained. However, I hope to encourage you, don’t let the modern religious idea of fellowship tarnish your Biblical understanding. We should spend time together socially, but that is not New Testament fellowship. And let us never think that because we have spent time together socializing that we have fulfilled God’s expectations of fellowship. Let us make sure to have fellowship God’s way.

## Fellowship

### *For further personal study*

To help you study the points of this lesson further to make sure the things that were said are so (cf. **Acts 17:11**), I am listing the six words connected to “fellowship” in the New Testament, along with all of their uses (42 total). The word beside the reference is the word that translates the Greek Word in the English Standard Version. Please note, that the New Testament never once uses any of the words for fellowship to describe spending secular, social time together. Further, with the exception of the Lord’s Supper, the New Testament never uses any of the words for fellowship to describe eating meals together.

#### *Koinonia* (Strong’s Greek 2842)

Acts 2:42—fellowship  
Romans 15:26—contribution  
I Corinthians 1:9—fellowship  
I Corinthians 10:16—participation (2x)  
II Corinthians 6:14—fellowship  
II Corinthians 8:4—taking part  
II Corinthians 9:13—contribution  
II Corinthians 13:14—fellowship  
Galatians 2:9—fellowship  
Philippians 1:5—partnership  
Philippians 2:1—participation  
Philippians 3:10—share  
Philemon 6—sharing  
Hebrews 13:16—share  
I John 1:3—fellowship (2x)  
I John 1:6—fellowship  
I John 1:7—fellowship

#### *Sunkoinoneo* (Strong’s Greek 4790)

Ephesians 5:11—take part (take no part)  
Philippians 4:14—share  
Revelation 18:4—take part

#### *Koinonikos* (Strong’s Greek 2843)

I Timothy 6:18—ready to share

#### *Metochē* (Strong’s Greek 3352)

II Corinthians 6:14—partnership

#### *Koinonos* (Strong’s Greek 2844)

Matthew 23:30—taking part  
Luke 5:10—partners  
I Corinthians 10:18—participants  
I Corinthians 10:20—participants  
II Corinthians 1:7—share  
II Corinthians 8:23—partner  
Philemon 17—partner  
Hebrews 10:33—partners  
I Peter 5:1—partaker  
II Peter 1:4—partakers

#### *Koinoneo* (Strong’s Greek 2841)

Romans 12:13—contribute  
Romans 15:27—share  
Galatians 6:6—share  
Philippians 4:15—partnership  
I Timothy 5:22—take part  
Hebrews 2:14—share  
I Peter 4:13—share  
II John 11—takes part