

The Church You Can About in the Bible The NT Concept of Fellowship

Intro: In my last few lessons in this series I've spoken about the rise of the social gospel movement and the dramatic changes that it brought about in how churches viewed their mission. Instead of seeing the church as God's agency for preaching the gospel, edifying the saints, and assisting in the preservation of God's people, many churches expanded their work to include providing for the social and recreational needs of both Christians and non-Christians.

The architecture of the churches reflected this change. Instead of facilities designed primarily for teaching, churches built what they labeled multi-purpose buildings that included things like gymnasiums, exercise equipment, sports facilities, and what they termed "fellowship" halls.

For many years such things were totally absent from churches of Christ; and in fact, they were actively opposed. Consider this quote by B.C. Goodpasture in the Gospel Advocate Annual Lesson Commentary:

It is not the mission of the church to furnish amusement for the world or even for its own members. Innocent amusement in proper proportion has its place in the life of all normal persons but it is not the business of the church to furnish it. The church would come off a poor second if it undertook to compete with institutions established for the express purpose of enteratining people. It would make itself ridiculous if it entered into such competition. Again, it is not the responsibility of the church as such to furnish recreation for its members. A certain amount of recreation is necessary to the health and happiness of the individual. All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, it is said; and rightly said; but it is not the function of the church to furnish the play. The church was not established to feature athletics. Rather it emphasizes the principle that "bodily exercise is profitable for a little; but godliness is profitable for all things; having promise of the life which now is and of that which is to come." (1 Tim. 4:8) Sometimes one would conclude, from the emphasis given to recreation, that godliness is profitable for a little, and that bodily exercise is profitable for all things.

For the church to turn aside from its divine work to furnish amusement and recreation is to pervert its mission. It is to degrade its mission. Amusement and recreation should stem from the home rather than the church. The church, like Nehemiah, has a great work to do; and it should not come down on the plains of Ono to amuse and entertain. As the church turns its attention to amusement and recreation, it will be shorn of its power as Samson was when his hair was cut. Only as the church becomes worldly, as it pillows its head on the lap of Delilah, will it want to turn from its wonted course to relatively unimportant matters.

However many churches of Christ have changed their views on this subject and have become actively involved in church-sponsored social events and recreation.

“It’s Superbowl Time in Tennessee ... F. church of Christ ... will host the area wide Superbowl party ... Come join us for food, fellowship, and fun – and the Superbowl on a huge, giant, very large and serious screen. There will be surprise door prizes – footballs, jerseys, T-shirts, and more. ... Pizza and other wholesome junk food and drinks.”

It has been difficult for many people to see the inappropriateness of churches sponsoring and providing for this kind of activity, since they see the word “fellowship” often in Scripture, and they assume that this word refers to things like dinners, parties, sports, games, and other fun activities. In fact, in most church bulletins today you will see an ad something like this:

Many churches now even use the word “fellowship” as a synonym for a social meal planned and provided for by the church. “There will be a fellowship after the morning service, etc.”

But is this what God had in mind when the Holy Spirit speaks of “fellowship” in the Scriptures? Let’s take a careful look at this topic together.

The word “fellowship” today

Clearly the word fellowship is used in modern society for times of social enjoyment. Consider these definitions from the American Heritage Dictionary:

The condition of sharing similar interests, ideals, or experiences, as by reason of profession, religion, or nationality.

The companionship of individuals in a congenial atmosphere and on equal terms.

A close association of friends or equals sharing similar interests. Friendship; comradeship.

The financial grant made to a fellow in a college or university.

The status of having been awarded such a grant.

A foundation established for the awarding of such a grant.

Today most churches are using the word “fellowship” in the sense of “companionship of individuals in a congenial atmosphere and on equal terms.” And in particular they find this an appropriate description of times of association with food, fun, playing sports, or other entertaining activities. In many cases people point to the NT word “fellowship” as proof that the work of the local assembly is to plan and provide such occasions for fun and recreation. Does the Bible teach this? Let’s see what the NT teaches about “fellowship.”

“Fellowship” in the Greek NT

Let’s go back to the Greek text and discover the word that stands behind many of the passages that speak about the fellowship of Christians.

The word is “koinonia.” It is built on the root “koinos” meaning “common.” The noun “koinonia” is used 19 times in the NT and

predominately translated in the NASB by the word “fellowship” and once by the word “participation.”

The noun “koinonos” refers to a person in fellowship with others. It is usually translated “partner” or “sharer.” It also has a compound form with the same meaning.

The adjective “koinonikos” is used to describe the character of a disciple. It is translated “ready to share.”

The verb “koinoneo” is used to refer to the action of having fellowship. It is usually translated by a form of the verb “share.”

Thus, the fundamental concept of the whole word-group is the sharing of something or the partnership in something.

This is of course not the only word for sharing in the NT; but for this study, it will be enough to consider only this word since it is the word most frequently translated “fellowship” in the NT.

A survey of “koinonia” texts

First, the term “fellowship” describes the spiritual sharing or partnership we have with God as His children.

God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Corinthians 1:9)

what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:3)

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. (1 John 1:6-7)

What these verses make clear is that as we “walk in the light with God” we become partners or sharers with Him in that light. This “fellowship” is sharing in the character of God. Thus Paul wrote: *Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? (2 Corinthians 6:14)*

Second the term “fellowship” is used to describe our sharing in the blessings of God.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. (2 Corinthians 13:14)

If therefore there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, (Philippians 2:1)

These “of” constructions are difficult in Greek, since they may be viewed either objectively or subjectively. In either case Paul is speaking either about the sharing of God’s Spirit by those who have become Christians; or, he is speaking of sharing in what the Spirit bestows upon believers.

Certainly when we hear the message of the gospel and obey it we become sharers or partners in the gospel and its blessings. Paul gave thanks for the Philippians...

in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now. (Philippians 1:5)

Ordinarily Paul gives thanks for the spiritual life that the gospel produces in those to whom he writes. He may refer to the same here or more specifically to their “partnership” with Him through financial support.

Likewise the early church enjoyed this “fellowship” that results from hearing and obeying the apostolic message.

And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. (Acts 2:42)

As Christians we, in the Lord’s Supper, declare our common sharing in the body and blood of the Lord.

Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ? (1 Corinthians 10:16)

We could Scripturally say that we have a fellowship hall in which we eat a fellowship meal. This is our fellowship hall; and the Lord’s Supper is our fellowship meal.

But this fellowship with Christ may also involve not only sharing in His character but also sharing in His sufferings:

Sharing in the sufferings of Christ

that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; (Philippians 3:10)

This fellowship is also a:

Sharing in the Lord’s work and the life of faith.

As we live the principles of the gospel and engage in the good work of the gospel, we become partners with all others who so live that life.

what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:3)

We can sense a partnership that we have in teaching the gospel to others.

and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we might go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. (Galatians 2:9)

As we contribute to those who teach the gospel we may be said have “fellowship” with them in the gospel. Paul told the Philippians they had “done well” to “share” with him in his afflictions; and observed: *“And you yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with*

me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone; for even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs.”
(Philippians 4:15–16, NASB)

We see that obeying the gospel results not only in shared work, but also a shared faith:

and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ’s sake. (Philemon 6)

In these many texts the “fellowship” of Christians is the sharing we have in the Lord, in the blessings and work of the gospel. But this fellowship is describe in yet one other way.

Sharing with those in need

One should not be surprised that the word for “fellowship” which means “sharing” would be also used for the sharing of their material wealth for the benefit of others.

When the Philippians heard about the collection being made for the needy in Jerusalem Paul says they were...

begging us with much entreaty for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, (2 Corinthians 8:4)

For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. (Romans 15:26)

Remarkably the very gift itself could be referred to as a “koinonian” (a sharing).

Because of the proof given by this ministry they will glorify God for your obedience to your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for the liberality of your contribution to them and to all, (2 Corinthians 9:13)

And do not neglect doing good and sharing; for with such sacrifices God is pleased. (Hebrews 13:16)

Here again the sense of sharing our financial blessings we others comes to view.

By taking this careful view of the usage of the word in the NT, we can see that in no case is fellowship used to describe Christians eating or engaging in recreational or entertaining activities together. To seek to use the Biblical word “fellowship” to support the church provision of these things is to mislead those who do not know the difference between the modern term and the Biblical term.

But what about the idea of social fellowship?

It is clear that the spiritual relationship of Christians has a social dimension. When people love one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, they may also enjoy being together socially and sharing meals together.

Though never referred to as “fellowship,” we can see that the first Christians spent time together and ate together in their homes.

“And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart,” (Acts 2:46, NASB)

Clearly this activity is marked out as taking place in the context of personal association and not church work. It is an activity of the home and not of the assembled church.

When the Corinthian church turned the Lord's Supper (a proper activity of the assembly) into a common meal, Paul urged them to recognize the proper place for such things:

"Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God, and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you." (1 Corinthians 11:20–22)

Paul surely had no objection to Christians eating together; but he regarded that to be an activity for their houses, not the assembly of the church.

Remember once more the point I made in an earlier lesson, that the Scriptures urge Christians to fulfill their unique abilities to their families and not seek to transfer these to the church (1 Tim. 5:16). Just it would be my responsibility to take care of my widowed mother, so it would be my responsibility to provide the social and recreational needs of my children.

The fact that Christians ate together in a social setting supported the disciplinary practice of withdrawing from the unfaithful brother.

"But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one." (1 Corinthians 5:11)

Thus Christian eating together can be a sign of acceptance and approval. Refusing to eat with such a one can send a strong message of disapproval for unrepentant sin.

Conclusion: The Scriptures provide every encouragement for Christians to enjoy each other, to spend time together in common interests, taking meals, enjoying sports, etc. However it does not make these activities the responsibility of the local congregation to provide. Its mission is unique and spiritual.