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In the Fellowship (July 1961)

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Maybole, Scotland, in the year 1895

In approaching this subject we desire to remember that not a few believers are exercised before God as to this matter—believers who are honestly seeking to know and carry out the mind of the Lord in the things that pertain to “the fellowship.” We also desire to remember that when a certain practice has prevailed for years it becomes so established as one of “the things most surely believed among us,” that to question the scripturalness of the practice is viewed by many as nothing short of self-will. Nevertheless, seeing we claim to go by The Book, we do not see how any one can object to our testing the practice by that which is written. If it stands the test, then we shall have cause to praise God for having discovered where we were in error. We know that practices which it took long to learn may take a considerable time to unlearn; and we know that when we have rigidly observed a certain practice for years, we are chary of anything that would interfere with the even tenor of our ways.

As believers professedly meeting in the Name do not claim finality in the matter of light on the Written Word, we count upon the grace of Christ in our brethren to bear with us while we endeavour to test, by the Scriptures, that expression so well-known among us —”In the fellowship.”

When a stranger arrives at the door of the place of meeting on a Lord’s-day morning, the question is asked,

“Are you in the fellowship?” We know what is meant by the question. It does not mean the fellowship of all saints. It means, “Are you in one of the assemblies which we acknowledge, which we recognize?” If the brother can furnish evidence that he is in such a company of believers, he is held to be in the fellowship, and is therefore at once conducted to his place at the table. But if the stranger cannot furnish evidence to that effect, he is not treated as “in the fellowship.” There may be evidence that he is a child of God, adorned with the beauty of holiness, rich in the Christ-like spirit, and manifestly in fellowship with God. All this counts for nothing if he has not joined us, and is not walking in the path which we hold to be according to God. We are simply stating what is a very prevalent practice.

The question now before us is a very simple one, “Is there Scripture for such a practice?” So far as we have been able to discover, there is not. “In the fellowship,” in the usual acceptation of the phrase, means the fellowship of a certain section of the people of God. It means, “Have you joined us? If you have joined us, we will at once give you your place at the table. If you have not joined us, then you must take a back seat.” Is there any Scripture to support such an interpretation of “in the fellowship?” We have not succeeded in finding any. We admit that we were startled when a certain esteemed brother pointed out some time ago that there was not such an expression in the Scriptures as “in the fellowship,” and that “the fellowship” is never used in the Scriptures in the restricted sense to which we have been referring.

When Scripture speaks of “the fellowship,” it becomes at once clear what the Spirit of God means by that term.

Take I Corinthians 1:9, for example: “God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord.” You thus see that “the fellowship” if we take the phrase from Scripture, is that fellowship into which God has called every one of His redeemed. This is the fellowship which God has formed. We have here the scriptural phrase, “the fellowship,” and we have the thing which God means when He uses the phrase. Is it not startling that we mean quite a different thing when we use that phrase? No doubt long usage has accustomed us to it. That must not hinder us, nevertheless, from seeking to have the mind of God as to what is really meant by “the fellowship.”

If we turn to the phrase, “the fellowship of the Holy Spirit” (2 Cor. 13:14, the same word translated “communion”), we find that it is “with you all,” and the “all” embraces “all that in every place call on the name of the Lord” (1 Cor. 1:2). Thus “the fellowship of God’s. Son” and “the fellowship of the Spirit” take in the whole family of God. Have we not been acting as if “the fellowship” were a tiny section of that family? Is it not the case with us that we have been attempting to form a fellowship instead of recognizing, and rejoicing to recognize, that fellowship which God has formed?

What lamentable failure has followed every attempt to form and define a fellowship. In every case it has been termed “the fellowship”; and sometimes there have been two, three, or more, existing at the same time, all claiming to be the fellowship! Yea, and with all these sad object-lessons before us, we are such slow learners that some are making a fresh beginning to build again after the same pattern, to form something to be called “the fellowship.” Yet there are those, and their number is

increasing, who in all these things are hearing the voice of the Lord, saying, “How long will ye mourn for Saul, seeing I have rejected him?” (1 Sam. 16:1). In other words, “How long will you mourn after a fellowship which you can form and define and call the fellowship. When it is a fellowship which excludes many who, according to their light, are seeking to please the Lord Jesus, and a fellowship which, time after time, has been broken into pieces?”

We must have God’s thoughts as to the fellowship, and we shall find His thoughts in His Word. Traditional customs cannot deliver us at this time. The reasonings of men cannot avail. We must get back to the simplicity of The Book. We must have “Thus saith the Lord” for the ground on which we stand.

The great movement of sixty years ago concerning the principles of fellowship was truly a remarkable revival of truth. Its outstanding features were the oneness of all believers, the one great gathering Name, the one fellowship, and the one test of fellowship, namely, “Are you in the fellowship which God has formed, and are you sound in faith and practice?” Never was a movement ushered in with clearer marks of its divine origin, or with greater promise of power and blessing. Soon, alas, through jealousy of party leaders, and as a bulwark against alleged defilement, the basis of fellowship was narrowed down to a mere section of the saved.

From that time the movement was bereft of that beautiful and heavenly characteristic, the recognition of all who were Christ’s. Many have wondered at the calamities that have followed; and the question has been asked, “Is the sword to devour for ever?” But we do not

wonder that such have been the results of an attempt to “form a fellowship,” however good the intention might be.

The narrowing of the basis of fellowship was the fatal error. There were sects innumerable at that time, and God did not want another sect. He wanted a people who should rise clear above the din of sects and parties, and enter into His thoughts about His redeemed, and rejoice to recognize every member of the heavenly family!

There are those who have been enabled by grace to go on for many years on those blessed and heavenly lines; there are those who are longing for the simplicity and the power of that bygone time. That simplicity and that power may still be ours. But like Abraham of old, we must pitch our tent where it was at the beginning (Gen. 13:3). We must be brought into touch with the great heart of love that beats on yonder throne, and thus enter into the Lord’s thoughts as to what it is to be “in the fellowship.”