

WHAT IS BIBLICAL FELLOWSHIP?

by
Carl B. Hoch, Jr.

The following statement has often been made in pulpits across the land, "After the evening service, we will all gather in Fellowship Hall for a time of fellowship." The congregation later mills about in a crowded room with tables laden with food and children running to and fro. People find some close friend and begin to discuss how their favorite team is doing, where the fish are biting, how bad things are in the government, domestic frustrations, perhaps the latest gossip, and maybe a choice criticism or two of the pastor or youth leader. This activity is called "fellowship". Or is it?

One must ask whether what is reserved to a special room, after the "evening evangelistic service", consisting mainly of everyday chit-chat and sometimes "acceptable" Christian sins like gossip and backbiting can really be called biblical fellowship. The writer would contend that this common practice in our churches is far from the biblical term, *koinonia*. Just what is *biblical* fellowship?

First, fellowship is sharing. The various words involved in the fellowship word-group come from a common Greek word meaning "to share" or "to have in common with". The concept is an active one and involves a positive communication and response between two or more people.

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This interaction is clearly indicated in such a passage as Galatians 6:6: "Let him that is taught in the word communicate unto him that teacheth in all good things." The NASB renders this verse, "And let the one who is taught the word share all good things with him who teaches."

Some other words listed in the Greek dictionary by Arndt and Gingrich as translations of the Greek verb are: "participate", "take an interest in", "give or contribute a share", and "make one a partner in".

It should be noted that there is a dynamic thrust to the word, fellowship. Fellowship is not some detached take-it-or-leave-it thing. It is a close relationship between people in either a good or a bad sense. II John 10-11 uses the verb in a bad sense, "If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God-speed: for he that biddeth him God-speed is *partaker of* (shares in) his evil deeds." John thus warns believers against sharing in the evil deeds of any who do not teach a proper view of the Person and Work of Christ.

Secondly, fellowship is sharing something. As one examines the various passages in the New Testament dealing with fellowship, one finds that there is a content to fellowship. This content is restrictive in its scope. The content of the fellowship is reserved to the Lord and His activity through His church. A passage illustrating this limitation is I John 1:1-4. John begins his epistle by underscoring the importance of apostolic eye-witness verification of the revelation of God as found in the Word, Jesus Christ. John insists on the actuality of the Person of Jesus Christ in terms of His openness to investigation. He maintains that his apostolic message is grounded in the Word made flesh. John and the other apostles have shared God the Father as He has revealed Himself in His Son, Jesus Christ. In turn, John can now share his experience with his readers so that there might be a mutual joyful interaction.

Other passages expand the scope of fellowship. But even these passages do not extend fellowship beyond the Lord and His work. I Cor. 1:9 speaks of believers being called unto the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. The communion about the Lord's table within the assembly of the saints is itself called a fellowship in I Cor. 10:16. The cup and the loaf are both called communion (fellowship). In Phil. 3:10 Paul states that his aim is to have a share (fellowship) in

Christ's sufferings. It would seem on the basis of II Cor. 13:14 and Phil. 2:1 that fellowship is in the Holy Spirit and is associated with grace, love, comfort, mercy, and compassion.

Paul specifically speaks of fellowship in the gospel in Phil. 1:5 and warns against attempting any fellowship whatsoever with unbelievers in II Cor. 6:14. The underlying presupposition is that an unbeliever does not have anything in common with the believer in the most vital of all areas: the gospel.

Acts 2:42 indicates that the assembly of the saints is the place and time of fellowship. The aspect of community so inherent in the New Testament concept of the church substantiates this fellowship-centered purpose for the gathered saints. This same verse includes three other elements along with fellowship: doctrine, breaking of bread, and prayers. Some commentators have suggested that the breaking of bread (probably culminating in what we call the Lord's table) and prayers were component parts of the previously mentioned fellowship. Whether this is what Luke intended, one cannot be sure. But it would seem precarious to exclude Bible-teaching and preaching, the Lord's table and prayer from the realm of fellowship and make fellowship some thing that we have in a special room, after the regular church service, somewhat equated with coffee and high calorie donuts, and having a communication not much above the level of the football stadium or the ladies' lounge.

In addition, Rom. 15:26, II Cor. 8:4, 9:13 and Heb. 13:16 include financial sharing in the practice of fellowship. This, in many instances, is a forgotten motivation today. A lot of giving is practiced out of a sense of obligation rather than out of an awareness that giving can be a real sharing with other saints.

It should be evident from the usage of the words for fellowship in the New Testament that fellowship is both multi-faceted and yet restrictive in its scope.

Third, fellowship is sharing something with someone. We have seen that the basic idea in the word fellowship is that of sharing. J. Y. Campbell has written a very valuable article in the Journal of Biblical Literature entitled, "KOINONIA and Its Cognates in the New Testament" (reprinted by Brill in 1965 as *Three New Testament Studies*. Campbell studied the fellowship word-group in

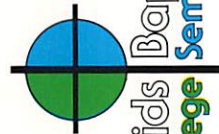
more than twenty writers, ranging in date and character from Pindar to Dio Cassius. He observed, on the basis of his investigation of nearly six hundred occurrences of the three words used for fellowship that the primary idea expressed with these words was not that of association with another person or other persons, but that of *participation in something in which others also participate* (Italics mine).

It is important, consequently, to emphasize that this sharing revolves around something: the Lord and His work through His church. But it is also important to observe that in the passages where sharing takes place that the sharing is done with fellow-saints. The something- Christ and His Work- is most important. But the someone is also important. In a very real sense only Christians can have true biblical fellowship since they alone can share the Someone about Whom all biblical fellowship revolves: the Lord Himself. Christ is the common denominator of all God's people. Campbell pointed out that the addition of the preposition "with" to the verb in the New Testament suggests that the idea of association with someone else was not always felt to be expressed plainly enough with the simple verb. The compound verb, therefore, reinforces and accentuates the sharing with someone concept.

Unbelievers can share sports, school, business, dating, and other daily activities. But only Christians can share Christ. Without creating a false dichotomy between sacred and secular, let us however realize that there are many things which Christians can share as *people*, but that there is a restriction of the list of what they can share as *Christians*. Let us not waste our precious time when we gather together as Christians sharing things we can share elsewhere as human beings.

In summary, true biblical fellowship is sharing the Lord Jesus Christ with other Christians. Let us realize that we have fellowship whenever we gather together to worship the Lord, pray together, sing together, study His Word, and relate to one another what the Lord has done for each one of us. Let us endeavor to deepen that fellowship with fellow believers and let coffee and donuts remain what they are: refreshments!

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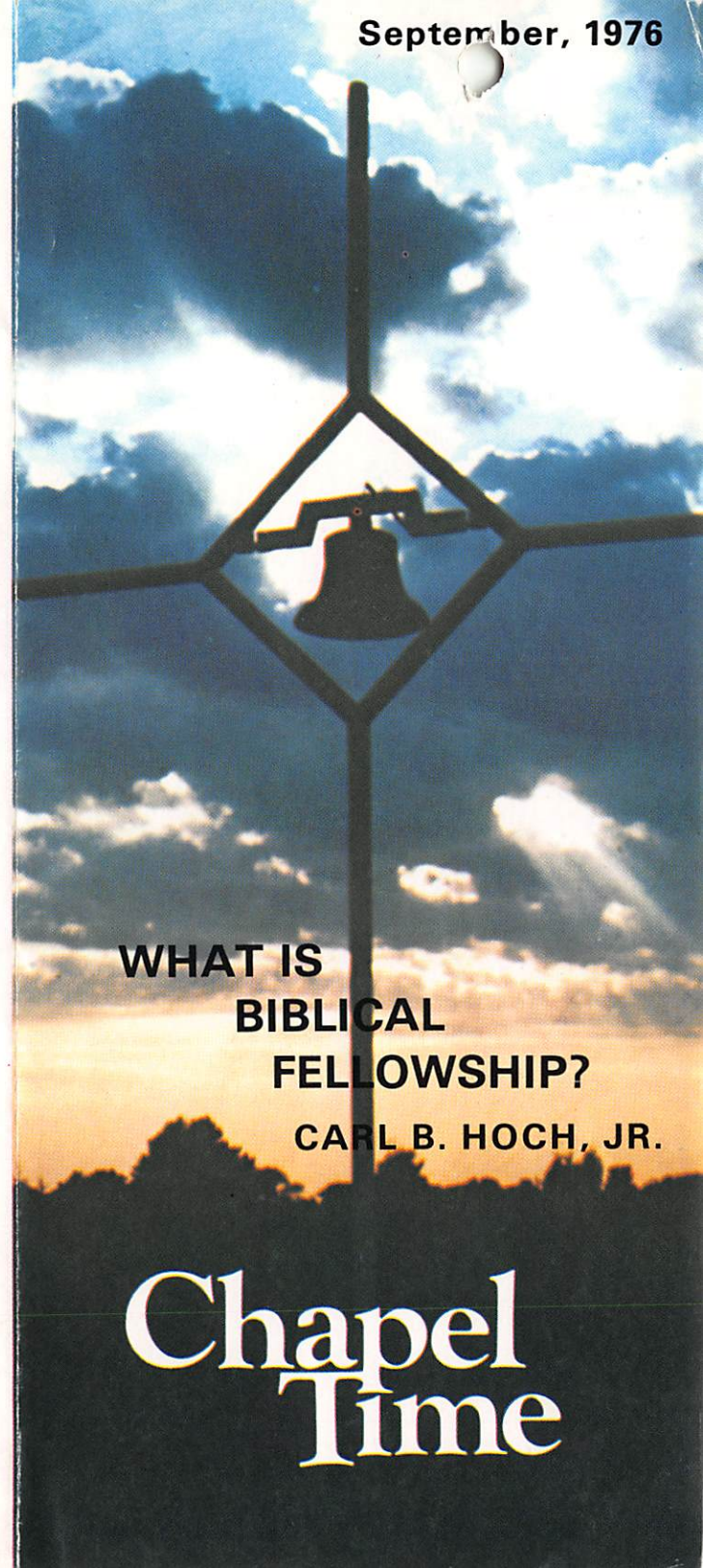


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