

6. FELLOWSHIP

IN 1918 the first world war came to an end, and the anxieties inseparable therefrom were lifted from the minds of the brethren and sisters. It was, however, not long before other troubles began to press themselves upon the ecclesias. Soon after the conclusion of the war it became increasingly evident that in the brotherhood there were fundamental differences on the subject of fellowship.

Since the early days of Bro. Roberts this subject had been regarded as of vital importance and the brethren, with few exceptions, had recognised the responsibility of maintaining purity both in doctrine and practice. That was the accepted basis of fellowship existing amongst us.

The Scriptures are very plain and unmistakable in regard to fellowship. It is one of the outstanding doctrines of the New Testament, although much confusion has been introduced into the subject. A brother who took a prominent part in the events of 1923, to which we shall refer later, said he would withdraw from any who held wrong doctrine, but would not do so from any merely on a matter of fellowship. This entirely overlooked the fact that fellowship is a doctrine.

An Important Subject

What is doctrine? It is the *act* and the *substance* of teaching, and consequently the doctrine of fellowship is, in other words, the Spirit's teaching upon the subject. We feel that this subject is of such importance, and has had such a vital place in the Truth's history during the past hundred years, that we propose to reproduce to some extent the substance of what we said in 1921 on the subject, and then in the next section to show how laxity in regard to the doctrine of fellowship was the fundamental cause of the ecclesial division of 1923.

The original word, translated *fellowship* in the Authorised Version, occurs frequently in the New Testament, and is variously rendered —Fellowship, Communion, Partaker.

The following are examples in which the original word has been thus rendered:

“That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1, 3).

“Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?”
(2 Cor. 6, 14).

The word here translated “communion” is the same in the original as that rendered “fellowship” in the verse just quoted from 1 John 1. The same original word is translated “partaker” in the following passage:

“The elders which are among you, I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness to the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed” (1 Peter 5, 1).

Those and the rest of the passages where the word occurs give these ideas as the true meaning of fellowship: Companionship; Agreement; Communion; The possession of something in common.

Here we quote definitions of fellowship from the pen of Bro. Roberts, in entire agreement with the foregoing ideas contained in the original words. He says:

“To have fellowship is to be ‘fellow of,’ or to be ‘one with,’ therefore to have ‘communion’ or union together.”

Again:

“Fellowship is cordial and loving union, springing from oneness of mind in Divine things.”

Further:

“The basis of fellowship is unity of mind, or identity of belief.”

These definitions of fellowship are in harmony with John’s pronouncement :

“But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another”
(1 John 1, 7).

The basis of true fellowship is, therefore, the teaching of the Spirit —the light —as exhibited in the Apostles’ doctrine. When we accept this teaching, and render the required obedience in baptism, we at once establish our fellowship, not only with John, and those of his mind, but with the Father and the Son. So long as we walk according to this teaching, true fellowship is maintained. If we turn unfaithful to it, ceasing to walk in the light, either in doctrine or practice, we break off the fellowship, whatever we may claim to the contrary.

Apostolic Communion

Let us here emphasise the fact of our fellowship being “one with another”: that it exists between the brethren and sisters, the children of God, as well as between themselves and the Father and the Son.

The following passages of Scripture make this aspect of the subject clear:

“Then they that gladly received his word were baptised: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2, 41-42).

From this statement it is evident that these newly baptised believers of the Truth had fellowship with the Apostles, or “one with another.” A further illustration of the same truth is to be found in Philippians 1, 5, where we have the record of Paul’s thanksgiving to God:

“For your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now.”

They were believers of the one faith, being united in the Apostles’ doctrine, they were in the enjoyment of fellowship one with another. We desire to emphasise this aspect of the subject, because it has been alleged that we do not fellowship the brethren, our fellowship being (it is said) only with the Father and with Jesus Christ. This is a mischievous and unscriptural doctrine, and is destructive of the basis of true fellowship: for if it were true, unity of mind, or identity of belief amongst those who gather at the Table of the Lord would be rendered non-essential.

It is very clearly laid down in the Scriptures that continuance in fellowship is dependent upon “walking in the light.” There are many profitable and instructive thoughts which arise from a consideration of this statement, each having an intimate connection with the subject. What is involved in the statement is made plain by the Apostle in the chapter we are considering, for he says, as stated in verse 5:

“God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.”

God is the centre, the source or fountain of that light, and those who are privileged to have fellowship with him must walk in the light, for Paul says :

“What fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?” (2 Cor. 6, 14).

Jesus Christ was a manifestation of that light of which John speaks; he said of himself:

“I am come a light into the world” (John 12, 46).

Also:

“I am the light of the world” (John 8, 12).

This is the light in which we must walk if we desire fellowship with God, and the only means by which we can now be brought into contact with that light is through the Scriptures —the inspired Word of God —of which it is written:

“Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path” (Psalm 119, 105).

“The entrance of thy words giveth light” (Psalm 119, 130).

Basis of Fellowship

From these testimonies it is evident that to “walk in the light” is to exhibit a mental and moral likeness with God and his Son. Such as have attained to this condition are thereby constituted children of light, and have fellowship with the Father and the Son, the basis of this fellowship being unity of mind in relation to Divine things revealed in the Scriptures. Hence, we have those many injunctions with which we are familiar, enjoining upon us Purity of Doctrine, Sound Speech, Uncorruptness, Holiness of Walk, and many other similar commands. For this reason, too, error, or darkness, and practice which is contrary to his mind, alienates from God’s fellowship.

“God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not the truth” (1 John 1, 5-6).

To be unsound in doctrine is to walk in darkness, and if, whilst so doing, we say we have fellowship with God, we lie, and do not speak the truth.

We are all well acquainted with the many apostolic exhortations and commands touching this subject. Here are just a few:

To Timothy, Paul wrote:

“Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine” (1 Tim. 4, 13).

And further:

“Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this, thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee” (1. Tim. 4, 16)

To Titus, Paul also wrote:

“But speak thou the things which become sound doctrine” (Titus 2, 1).

“In all things showing thyself a pattern of good works: in doctrine showing uncorruptness, gravity, sincerity” (Titus 2, 7).

These are only a few of the many passages of Scripture which clearly enjoin upon us: Purity of Doctrine, Unity of Mind, Identity of Belief, in the things of the Truth. Where these do not exist, there is darkness, and not light; confusion, not communion. The basis essential to

fellowship is absent, for darkness can never be “fellow of” or have communion (common union) with light.

Mental and Moral Unity

Our hope is ultimately to become partakers of God’s own incorruptible glorious nature —to be like him. The Scriptures are, however, very plain regarding the fact that “*mental likeness*” must precede “*physical likeness*”; it is only by manifesting present mental and moral unity with God that unity of nature can eventually be realised. This aspect of the matter is beautifully stated by Paul, in writing to the Ephesians, as recorded in ch. 4, 1-3:

“I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

And in verse 11, the Apostle continues:

“And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (Eph. 4, 11-13).

Our hope is to become constituents of that “perfect man” community; that assembly of spirit-beings, equal unto God; incorruptible; God dwelling in us by his Spirit; when our fellowship with the Father, then perfect and complete, will have reached the consummation purposed by him.

Let us, then, not be forgetful of the fact that the Apostle tells us it is to be realised through “unity of the faith.” Consequently, there rests upon each of us in the Truth the responsibility of seeing that in the ecclesias there is purity of doctrine and of practice; unity of faith, uncorruptness, sincerity; on no other basis is true fellowship one with another, purposed by him.

The application of these vital principles to the ecclesial division of 1923 must now be considered.