



What is “Bible Fellowship?”

By Keith Greer

In most Bible-authority discussions, especially those involving brethren, the subject of fellowship arises. This occurs because some try to use fellowship as authority for the church to promote social activities. Such authority would condone fellowship halls and eating in the building for what is commonly called “bible fellowship.” We must ask: is this what the scriptures teach?

First, let’s define the word “fellowship.” It means “a mutual sharing, partnership, joint participation, communion.” This is spiritual fellowship as the word is used in the scriptures. In a partnership between God and brethren, there must be an understanding of the things in which we partner to accomplish a common goal or purpose. “From whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.” {Ephesians 4:16}

In Bible fellowship, each member works in harmony with every other member to achieve a common goal, and every member has a function to perform. Sadly, the fellowship subject is greatly abused in the religious world, and among brethren. For some, it includes not only fellowship halls, but potlucks, youth rallies, hayrides, gyms, recreational activities, chili suppers, pancake breakfasts, and a host of other events. Churches engage in these social and secular practices and group them under “bible fellowship.” All these events turn into periods of mutual fellowship and edification. Brethren have become enamored with such ventures, calling them “good works.” What we need to see is that these folks may have fellowship, in the general definition of the word, but they do not have the fellowship defined in the New Testament. Remember this one point – the scripture never uses the word fellowship in the physical sense – only the spiritual.

Let us examine how the scriptures use the word fellowship. I hope we can all agree that we must have a “thus saith the Lord” for everything we do in religion. And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.” {Colossians 3:17} According to the scriptures, there are three areas of work – evangelism, edification, and benevolence – in which the church can scripturally engage. Please read Ephesians 4:11,12. All work in which the church, as a group, engages must fit into one of these three categories. Where do the social items discussed earlier fit?

Evangelism? This would be the “salvation army” approach to reaching the lost. We fill their bellies, get them in, then give them the gospel. The problem – the magnet for drawing men to God must be His word. “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, And they shall all be taught by God.” {John 6:44,45} How must we attract men to Christ? How do we convince them they need to change their lives?

Evangelism? The gospel calls us into Christ. “To which He called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.” {2 Thessalonians 2:14,15} Where is God’s power to convict the lost soul to convert to Christ? “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.” {Romans 1:16} There is no scriptural merit in using social means to attract men to Christ. It may get more people into the building, but they are not drawn by spiritual food, but through their physical senses. If we use social means to gain souls for the Lord, we will have to continue, and get better at it, in order to keep them! So social activities do not fit into evangelism.

Edification? What does this word mean? Defined, it means “to build up, promotion of spiritual growth and development of the spiritual body.” Notice how the scriptures use it. “So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”

{Acts 20:32} At Miletus, Paul told the Ephesian elders that the “word of God” would build them up. “I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesied; for he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive edification.” {1 Corinthians 14:5} Paul wrote to the church that all things should be done to edify (1 Corinthians 14:26). There are other verses we can examine: Acts 9:31; 1 Corinthians 10:23; Romans 14:19; Ephesians 4:29; 2 Corinthians 12:19. These passages have something in common. In each of them, the “building up” was a spiritual “building up”. Why would this seem odd, since the church is a spiritual body that does spiritual work? Where are the passages that tell us that edification was accomplished through social means? Those who desire to use this argument must produce for it authority from God’s word. If it isn’t there (and it’s not), the conclusion is simple – we shouldn’t do it!

Benevolence? Defined as “to perform kind and charitable acts; gift given out of generosity.” In the scriptures, all church benevolence was for “needy saints.” Please read 1 Timothy 5:8-16; Acts 6:1-6; 2 Corinthians 9:1,2; Acts 9:37. Helping with the physical needs of saints who are needy is the only benevolent work for which the church has authority. Soup kitchens, day care centers, homes for unwed mothers, etc., in no way fit the New Testament examples of benevolence.

Please check out all your Bible’s references to the word fellowship. You will not find it once used in a physical sense. Now, some of our brethren are content to just eat in the building (potlucks, special meals, etc) and that, they tell us, is all they do. But, where will they draw the line? Some have told me, “I would object strongly to building gyms, family life centers, and the like.” My questions – why and how? If you can have potlucks, special meals, showers, wedding receptions, etc., why can’t you also build gyms and family life centers. All would fall under the same reasoning. How do you think those who engage in these other activities started? Error and apostasy are gradual processes. When you open the door, everything comes in. All of these things stand and fall together. Those who opposed them in the 50s warned of the danger and where it would lead. One has only to look around to see the justification for these men’s fears. Those who are considering this position need to ponder the question: do you want to open that door? Are you ready for what will follow?