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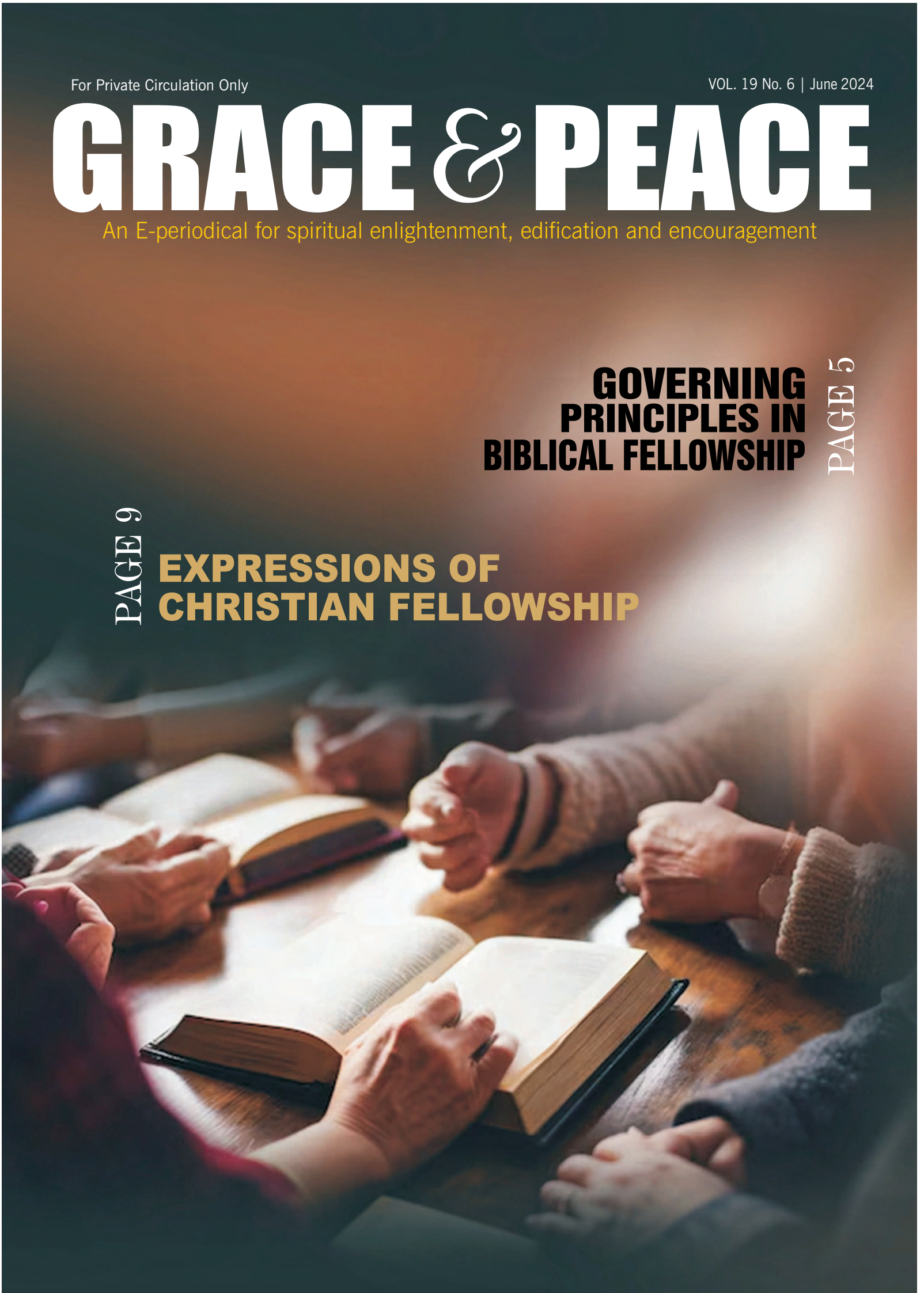
An E-periodical for spiritual enlightenment, edification and encouragement

**GOVERNING
PRINCIPLES IN
BIBLICAL FELLOWSHIP**

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FELLOWSHIP: FRAGRANT AND FUNCTIONAL

Fellowship is one of the blessed privileges of a born-again child of God. Not only are we in fellowship with the triune God, but with one another too. This unique relationship among the people of God emanates from our partnership with the Lord Jesus Christ (1Cor. 1:9).

Partnership

We know many business firms and even governments have effectively used partnerships for the successful execution of various ventures which were otherwise difficult, if not impossible. Without the active and faithful involvement of each partner, no projects by those partnership undertakings would be successful. That is true with Christian fellowship too. It is high time for Christian believers to consider the significance of a believer's partnership with Christ so that ultimately the 'projects' of the Lord Jesus Christ will be accomplished efficiently.

Often, our consideration of fellowship is confined to local church associations or the participation in the Lord's Supper only. However, our consideration of biblical fellowship in this issue of Grace & Peace brings out various aspects of fellowship described in the New Testament.

Exploration

We begin with a survey of fellowship experienced by the early church from the writings of Dr. Luke. Pointing out the true meaning of ekklesia and the basis for true Christian partnership, the writer proves that it should be a natural, spontaneous outcome of conversion. In other words, a weak and disturbed fellowship is a sign of an unhealthy Christian life that needs urgent treatment.

While dealing with the basic principles that should govern the biblical fellowship, **Bro. Aby Kuruvilla** briefly touches upon various vital facets of fellowship.

Though briefly, his reference to fellowship even with those who disagree with us needs to be taken note of.

Though as an outline, **Bro. David** beautifully divides Psalm 122 into 8 vital aspects of fellowship, which will benefit any serious Bible student.

From the story of Christ washing the feet of the disciples **Bro. Biju Itty** brings out the practical reflections of Christian fellowship. He does not mince words while exposing the hypocrisy of those who give great lectures yet refuse to intervene and help those who are in trouble.

The seven conditions required to enjoy uninterrupted fellowship with a local assembly presented by **Bro. John Lee** is brief yet covering most of the important aspects of New Testament Church truths.

Finally, on fellowship **Bro. Tom Johns** deals with the most common cause of hindrance to fellowship and the way to restore it. He asserts that when we display the fruit of the Holy Spirit, all obstacles to fellowship will disappear.

Restoration

An article that calls for weepers based on the Lord's words and a gospel meditation on the sufferings of our Saviour are fitting conclusions for this discussion.

It is our prayer that as you go through these pages, may the Lord bless and guide you to value and enjoy our partnership with the Lord Jesus more than in the past; so that each one of us sincerely long and sacrificially and contribute to a healthy and strong assembly fellowship.

May the Lord continue to bless and use all those who faithfully labour behind this humble effort. And thank you so much dear readers for your encouraging responses and prayers.

NTK

BELIEVERS' FELLOWSHIP

One of the unique characteristics of the early church, as Dr. Luke describes in the book of Acts, is their commitment to fellowship with one another. Luke says, “They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.” (Acts 2:42). Fellowship for them was not just confined to their gathering together or breaking of bread as many would consider today; it was a vital, living experience that affected every aspect of their spiritual life.

EXPRESSIONS

Notice the number of ways their fellowship was demonstrated:

1. They remembered and worshipped the Lord together, taking part from one bread and one cup, Acts 2:42; 20:7, 11; 1Cor. 10:16, 17.
2. They prayed together repeatedly, in favourable as well as unfavourable circumstances, Acts 2:42; 1:14; 4:24, 31; 12:5.
3. They served the Lord together, preaching and teaching God's word, Acts 2:43; 4:33; Gal. 2:9; Phil. 1:5.
4. They shared their resources, ministering to the needs of the saints, Acts 2:44, 45; 4:32–35; 11:29, 30; 2Cor 8:3, 4.
5. They often gathered together to rejoice together, encourage and edify one another, Acts 2:46, 47; Heb. 10:25.
6. They suffered together, sharing the sorrow and pain of one another, Acts 4:24; 5:18; 8:1; Rev. 1:9.
7. They comforted each other with their presence, prayers, and letters, Acts 4:23; 11:23; 12:5; 2Cor 1:6, 11; 1Thess. 3:1, 2; 4:18, etc.

Of course, there are many more such manifestations of believers' fellowship referred to in the New Testament. Their fellowship was true, practical, and visible. The repeated instructions in the New Testament regarding believers' responsibility to 'one another' reveals, how much God values saints' fellowship with one another. (cf. John 13:34; Rom. 13:8; 14:19; 15:5, 7; 16:16; Eph. 4:32; 5:21; Col 3:16, etc.).

MEANING AND THE BASIS

What was the reason behind such active fellowship among God's people in the first century? To understand the value and significance of a believer's fellowship, we need to consider the meaning of the Greek word 'koinonia' which occurs around 20 times in the New Testament. It refers to 'holding or sharing something in common'; it may be a person, place, or

ideology. Apart from fellowship, 'koinonia' is also translated, as sharing, association, partnership, participation, etc. There are numerous associations of like-minded people because of their shared goals, values, culture, etc. However, it is sad to notice that many so-called Christian congregations also end up as such associations or clubs, which do not have any living expressions of spiritual fellowship taught in the New Testament.



True Christian fellowship, on the contrary, is based on our sharing of the Lord Jesus Himself. Notice what Paul wrote to Corinthians, "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." (1Cor. 1:9)

We have been called to share Christ, His life, nature, etc. The implications of this fellowship are manifold. We are in partnership with the Lord Jesus Christ in His goodness, interests, and purposes (Heb.3:14; 1Cor. 3:9; 2Pet. 1:4). It happened at our conversion, when Christ the hope of glory began to dwell in us (Colo. 1:27). By virtue of the same indwelling, we also share the Father and the Holy Spirit (cf. 2Cori 13:14; 1John 1:3; Phil 2:1).

It is this sharing together of the triune God that makes the foundation for our fellowship with one another. Because we all share the Lord Jesus Christ and His qualities, we are partners together in Him, as Paul puts it, 'we are workers together with God' (1Cor. 3:9; 2Cori. 6:1). Apostle John who sincerely longed for fellowship among the saints makes it very clear, without this vertical relationship, there cannot be a horizontal fellowship that is true and from the heart (1John 1:3, 7).

LONGING

A truly born-again believer will have a spontaneous hunger and thirst for fellowship with God as well as His people. It is the natural outcome of the regeneration and the indwelling of the Spirit of God. Whereas, a false believer who does not have the experience of conversion takes fellowship casually and even abandons it at a convenient time (1 John 2:19)!

The example of Saul of Tarsus who was transformed miraculously by the special intervention of the risen Saviour on the way to Damascus is remarkable. When he reached Jerusalem, no one was ready to receive him, fearing his past atrocities against Christians. Yet we read, 'he tried to join the disciples' (Acts 9:26). The cold and indifferent response of those Jerusalem saints did not diminish the zeal of Saul in connecting with the church at Jerusalem. Heb. 10:25 is a rebuke to those who neglect the assembly fellowship for simple reasons.

There are certain people, who by nature prefer to stay alone. That may be part of their natural temperament. Experts say that even that distinct personality has its benefits. Yet the word of God very clearly states that the Lord saves us individually and places us in the Church, where we are no longer alone. We have become part and parcel of a company of God's people, like a brick in a building, connected vitally. (1Cor. 3:9).

Above all, we are part of the body of Christ and we cannot survive independently. We cannot isolate ourselves from the fellowship of God's people. As members of the body of Christ, we ought to function together, interdependently (1Cor 12:12, 27). The effectiveness of our life and testimony will be in proportion to our ability to make use of this mystical relationship.

OUTCOME

Both Dr. Luke and Apostle John refer to the increased joy as one of the major results of a sweet and healthy Christian fellowship (Acts 2:46; 1 John 1:4). As iron sharpens iron, a believer's fellowship edifies, encourages, and comforts one another (Pro. 27:17; Ecc. 4:9, 10). While writing to the believers in Rome, Paul says, "I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift, so that you may be established—that is, that I may be encouraged together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me." (Rom. 1:11, 12).

Paul was very well aware of the mutual benefits of a believer's partnership. That's why he made every effort to connect with God's people wherever he went (Acts 9:26; 20:17; Rom. 15:23, 32; Phi. 1:8; 2 Tim

1:4) and associated with others in the service of God (Acts 15:36; 16:3). He always appreciated the partnership of fellow-believers in his gospel efforts (Phil. 1:15; 4:15, 16; Gal. 2:9; Rom. 15:26; 2Cor. 8:1).

Yes, true fellowship benefits all involved. As Luke mentions further in Acts, the unity and partnership of God's people leads to effective testimony and spiritual growth (Acts 2:47; John 17:21). Even the Lord Almighty Himself will shower His choicest blessings among such godly saints (Psa. 133:1).

EVALUATE AND ENHANCE

Do we value this spiritual fellowship one with another? Do we take conscious steps to maintain this partnership and thus enhance the fruitfulness of our life and service to the Lord?

Never forget, our fellowship will be healthy and strong only in proportion to our fellowship with the triune God. Any deviation from the Lord and His word will affect the effectiveness of our communion with one another (1 John 1:6). Remember also, any failure in this partnership with Christ is a loss to His purposes, and thereby it is grieving to the heart of God.

Let us examine our personal, intimacy with the Lord and His people. If there is any failure, let's confess as Apostle John exhorts. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness", 1John 1:9. And also, let us express our spiritual fellowship through practical ways so that it will encourage one another and enrich the work of the Lord (Philemon vs. 6 and 7).

NTK

GOVERNING PRINCIPLES IN BIBLICAL FELLOWSHIP

Biblical fellowship is not simply friendship or socializing. Let us briefly study this topic under the following headings:

- a. Fellowship between a believer and God
- b. Fellowship of the local church
- c. Fellowship with other believers
- d. Fellowship with unbelievers

1. FELLOWSHIP BETWEEN A BELIEVER AND GOD

“And truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ” – 1 John 1:3. The first and foremost fellowship a believer has is with God. This fellowship is desired and initiated by God who has called us unto the fellowship of his Son (1 Cor. 1:9). It is a fellowship of intimacy that will be perfected on that day when the Bridegroom will return for his Bride (John 15; 17:23,24).

John emphasizes here on both the Father and the Son to counter false teachings against the deity of Jesus Christ. In this dispensation, without acknowledging the person of Christ Jesus, one cannot truly claim fellowship with God (Heb. 1:1).

Fellowship with God needs no mediator in a human or ‘saint’, for through Christ we have access by one Spirit unto the Father (Eph. 2:18).

If this fellowship is affected due to sin or the lack of communion, the other areas of fellowship will also be weakened.

2. FELLOWSHIP OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

“[Christ] is the head of the body, the church” – Col. 1:18. He must be preeminent in the corporate fellowship of the saints. Not a doctrine, such as “Baptists”; not a human name, such as “Lutheran”; not an ideology, such as “Protestant”; not even “Brethren”. The scriptures simply teach that we are to be gathered unto His name (Matt. 18:20).

Christ being the chief corner stone, the assembly is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20). Assembly fellowship is characterized by saved and baptized believers who steadfastly continue in the apostles’ doctrine. John concurs that this is a fellowship of truth – “that which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us” (1 John 1:3). Notice the order of things in Acts 2:42 – “the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread.” This order must not be changed for relations, ritualism, or for the reputed.



Practically, they who are welcomed to the fellowship must be ready to submit to the doctrine upheld by the assembly. Note, that they are welcomed to the fellowship and not the table (Acts 9:26-28). The Lord's supper is not an open table.

John describes three failures (or, in his words, 'darkness') arising out of deception that affects the sanctity of the fellowship – personal failure (1 John 1:6-10), doctrinal failure (1 John 2:8,19-23; 4:1) and social failure (1 John 2:11; 3:7-12). The sanctity of the fellowship must be maintained in all aspects because the Lord dwells in the midst.

3. FELLOWSHIP WITH OTHER BELIEVERS

Every true believer is part of the body of Christ, and therefore, is in fellowship with every other believer, having been united by the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 4:4).

However, with the spread of Christianity over the centuries, denominations have also increased (Matt. 13:32). Consequently, we need to be careful of our like-mindedness in doctrine to have a meaningful spiritual fellowship.

3.1. BELIEVERS WHO DIFFER IN DOCTRINE

While some may have good relationships with those who differ in doctrine, areas such as spiritual meetings, ministry, marriage, etc. require the parties to agree in doctrine for a spiritually compatible functioning (Matt. 9:17; 2 Cor. 6:14; Amos 3:3; Matt. 18:19).

Spiritual endeavours without compatibility in doctrine will have limitations and contrasts. If their gospel is not the same as what we preach (Gal. 1:6-9), or if their church is not likeminded, the ministry is weakened, and its eventual purposes are not fully realized. We are not to join hands, especially, with those practising false doctrines. "Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness" (Eph. 5:6-13; Gal. 3:1; 2 Cor. 2:17; 2 John 11).

3.2. BELIEVERS WHO ARE LIKEMINDED IN DOCTRINE

In the apostolic times, like-minded churches were in happy fellowship with each other, although each local church was autonomous. Notice how apostle Paul could collectively address the "churches" (2 Thess. 2:14; Gal. 1:1). They were all receptive to the teaching of the apostles.

Practically, this was seen in how they received saints, provided help to the needy, partnered in the work of the gospel, etc. (Rom. 16:2; 3 John 8; 2 Cor. 8:1-4; Phil. 1:5). This was a fellowship of love enjoyed under the yoke of doctrine.

4. FELLOWSHIP WITH UNBELIEVERS

"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.

Having been brought into a fellowship of holiness with God and his people, we must not get entangled in partnerships with the world. This is not just a word of advice, but a command for believers to follow.

This doesn't mean we do not keep any contact with the world. We are to keep 'company' (i.e. 'to mingle' or 'associate') with them (1 Cor. 5:9,10). But let us remember we have been chosen 'out of the world' and are not 'of the world' (John 15:19).

CONCLUSION:

Biblical fellowship is broadly governed by the principles of intimacy, truth, love and holiness. Let us examine if our fellowship is rightly based and God-honouring.

OUTLINE-1

CHAIN OF FELLOWSHIP

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|------------------|
| I. Fellow Heirs—of one inheritance. | Ephesians 3:6 |
| II. Fellow Members—of one body. | Ephesians 3:6 |
| III. Fellow Partakers—of one calling | Ephesians 3:6 |
| IV. Fellow Citizens—of one Home. | Ephesians 2:19 |
| V. Fellow Laborers—of one Master. | Philippians 4:3 |
| VI. Fellow Soldiers—in one warfare. | Philippians 2:25 |
| VII. Fellow Prisoners—with one Hope. | Romans 16:7 |

OUTLINE-2

Bro. David Manchala Hyderabad

EIGHT ASPECTS OF 'FELLOWSHIP'

Psalm 122

There are many 'ships' available to sail in our spiritual journey! They are Lordship, Headship, Membership, Stewardship, Worship, Sonship and 'Fellowship' and many more... It would be good if we meditate on these fundamental truths from God's Word. Here, in our article, we will study an outline from Psalm 122 on 'Assembly Fellowship'.

Man lost the fellowship with God in the Garden of Eden. But, thank God by Christ's work on the Cross of Calvary, fellowship with God has been restored. When we accept Jesus Christ as our personal saviour and Lord, we enter into the family of Fellowship i.e. Fellowship with the Father and Fellowship with the Son Jesus Christ (1 John 1:3) and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 13:14). Hence, this fellowship is secure and eternal. But, in our lifetime we have to maintain 'Assembly Fellowship' (Acts 2:42 - They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayer)

Psalms 120-134 are called 'The Psalms of Ascent' (s) have also been called 'the Song of Degrees', 'the Pilgrim Songs', as well as 'the Gradual Psalms'. They are named this because of the phrase appearing before each psalm. Each is called "a song of ascent" at the beginning of the psalm. The Hebrew term is 'maʔalot' which means "going up."

Psalm 122 gives us several features of 'Fellowship'. Psalm 122:8,9 - "For the



sake of my **brethren** and **companions**, I will now say, "Peace be within you." Because of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good."

In the Old Testament all Israelite men were commanded to appear Three times a year for annual feasts (Exodus 23:17). During that time, they assemble in Jerusalem and fellowship with one another. But, today we as New Testament believers gather around our Lord Jesus Christ and fellowship with one another.

1. **Anticipation of the Fellowship** - "Let us go into the house of the Lord." (v.1 NKJV)
2. **Attendance for the Fellowship** - Our feet have been standing (v.2 NKJV)
3. **Attraction of the Fellowship** - Jerusalem...which is bound firmly together (v.3 RSV)
4. **Ascent of the Fellowship** - to which the tribes go up (v. 4 RSV)
5. **Attacks on the Fellowship** - Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers!" (v.7 RSV)
6. **Authority of the Fellowship** - to give thanks to the name of the Lord. (V.4 RSV)
7. **Activities in the Fellowship** - Worship, Word and Prayer (v.4, 6,7)
8. **Aspirations for the Fellowship** - I will seek your good (v. 9 RSV)

May the Lord help us to continue steadfastly in the Assembly Fellowship!

"When you meet frequently the forces of satan are annulled and his destructive power is cancelled in the concord of your faith."

-Ignatius of Antioch

ANECDOTE

The Black Door: PREFERENCE FOR THE KNOWN

Several generations ago, during one of the most turbulent of the desert wars in the Middle East, a spy was captured and sentenced to death by a general of the Persian army. The general, a man of intelligence and compassion had adopted a strange and unusual custom in such cases. He permitted the condemned person to make a choice. The prisoners could either face the firing squad or pass through the Black Door.

As the moment of the execution drew near, the general ordered the spy to be brought before him for a short, final interview, the primary purpose of which was to receive the answer of the doomed man to the query: “What shall it be—the firing squad or the Black Door?”

This was not an easy decision and the prisoner hesitated, but soon made it known that he much preferred the firing squad to the unknown horrors that might await him behind the ominous and mysterious door.

Not long thereafter, a volley of shots in the courtyard announced that the grim sentence had been fulfilled. The general, staring at his boots, turned to his aide and said, “You see how it is with men; they will always prefer the known way to the unknown. It is characteristic of people to be afraid of the undefined. Yet I gave him his choice.”

“What lies behind the Black Door?” asked the aide. “Freedom,” replied the general, “and I’ve known only a few brave enough to take it.”



PRACTICAL-1

Bro. Biju Itty, Gujarat

EXPRESSIONS OF CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP

By washing His disciples’ feet, Jesus demonstrated the practical aspect of Christian fellowship. Paul elaborates, “And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were

sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of God.” So now we have been brought into fellowship with God. And John writes, “Truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ”. But

Peter said to the Lord, “You shall never wash my feet!” And He answered him, “If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me”. Meaning, “you have no share in companionship with Me”, or “you can’t be My partner in what I am doing.”

Also, He commanded that “you should do as I have done to you.” But the sad reality today is that instead of our Lord’s example, we see the example of Pilate being followed. One wonders whether instead of washing one another’s feet, are we washing our hands of our brethren? Splendid suggestions and expert opinions are dished out to those in difficulty. But if we refuse to be involved with them beyond this, or to take responsibility and bear each others’ burdens, we are failing in our partnership with our Lord Himself.

Our fellowship with the invisible God is reflected in our dealings with our brethren whom we see.

1. Fellowship implies walking together in agreement (Amos 3:3)

We have a common ground with our brethren to walk together. Salvation through faith in Christ is that solid common ground. May nothing else prevent our fellowship then. And whenever the need arises, let us willingly walk the extra mile to fulfill the law of Christ.

2. Fellowship involves devotion to each other (Acts. 2:42)

The early disciples continually devoted themselves to fellowship with each other. They spent their time for this, and shared

their resources, and were like family. But trouble arose in the daily distribution, because the Hebrews neglected the Greek-speaking widows. And then it no longer felt like family. But “religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” (Jas.1:27 [NIV]).

3. Fellowship insists that we should walk in the light (1 John 1:6)

“He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now” (1 Jn. 2:9 [NKJV]). He is a liar and is deceiving himself that he is born again. He cannot be in true fellowship with Christ, and yet habitually hate or work against his brother. He is blinded by that hatred and doesn’t know where he is headed to. “Whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?” (1 Jn.3:17)

4. Fellowship induces self-examination (1 Cor. 11:34)

We are warned about God’s judgement, if we eat and drink from the Lord’s table without self-examination. Some in the Corinthian church were guilty of despising the church of God and shaming those who had nothing. What a pathetic scene it must have been when they came together to remember the Lord! If we expect our Lord to be present there, we have to be in agreement with each other. This fact should induce self-judgment.

5. Fellowship inhibits fellowship with demons (1 Cor.10:20)

We must realize that the Gentiles sacrifice to demons and not to God. “What fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness?” We are commanded to come out from among them and be separate as a holy and special people for God. He does not want us to have fellowship with demons. There is no scope for a dual partnership. Dare we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Or are we

stronger than He? We are members of the body of Christ, and therefore our carelessness in this matter will affect our brethren too. Those who disregarded this, displeased God and their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.

Fellowship is, therefore, a deliberate effort that the Lord expects from each true believer. And we must express it towards our fellow-believers, for we have the communion and fellowship of the Holy Spirit to help us.

PRACTICAL-2

Bro. John Lee, AP

UNINTERRUPTED FELLOWSHIP

“And they continued **steadfastly** in the apostles' doctrine and **fellowship**, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers” Acts 2:42.

We found in the New Testament at least Seven Conditions required for uninterrupted fellowship in a Local Assembly.

1. Salvation

Personal Experience: The fundamental requirement is having a personal experience of God's salvation through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is evidenced by the account in Acts 2:41. “Then they that gladly received his word were baptized and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.”

True Believers: Assemblies consist only of genuine believers or saints, known by their fruits and credible testimonies (Matthew 7:16-20; James 2:17). The Christian fellowship is not possible with unbelievers.

2. Testimony

Profession and Evidence: A clear profession of faith must be backed by a lifestyle that reflects this belief. Mere verbal affirmation is insufficient without testimony.

A Letter of Commendation: A believer moving to a new locality should bring a letter of commendation or be personally recommended by trusted individuals in the assembly. (Acts 18:27; Romans 16:1-2).

3. Doctrinal Soundness

Sound Doctrine: Assemblies must reject those holding false doctrines and ensure that new members are free from such influences (Revelation 2:14-15).

Doctrinal Clarity: While not requiring a comprehensive theological exam, it is vital

that prospective members are clear of false teachings from previous associations.

4. Moral Soundness

Moral Integrity: Individuals involved in significant moral failings should not be received into fellowship. The Bible outlines specific behaviours that warrant exclusion from the assembly (1 Corinthians 5:11).

Resolution of Past Issues: Those with past moral or financial improprieties must have addressed these issues before joining the assembly, adhering to scriptural standards for marriage and other moral concerns.

5. Desire

Genuine Aspiration: A personal desire to join the assembly must be present, driven by God's leading (Acts 9:26; Philippians 2:13).

No Proselytizing: The desire should be voluntary without external pressure, ensuring that it aligns with God's will.

6. Commitment

Full Integration: Joining the assembly means a full and permanent commitment

to its fellowship and responsibilities, not just occasional participation (Acts 2:42).

Active Participation: As shown by Paul's consistent involvement with the believers in Jerusalem, members should be actively engaged in the life of the assembly.

7. Comprehension

Understanding of Commitment: Prospective members should have a basic understanding of the assembly's purpose and principles. Elders should educate them sufficiently to make an informed decision (Matthew 28:19-20; Psalm 119:102).

Informed Reception: Assemblies should communicate openly about those seeking fellowship, allowing the congregation to raise concerns and ensuring a well-informed reception process.

These seven requirements ensure that those seeking to join an assembly are genuine, morally and doctrinally sound, and fully committed to the fellowship's responsibilities and privileges.

MEDITATION

Bro. Tom Johns, Dallas, TX

HINDRANCES TO CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP

“**A**nd they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool[c] of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.” Gen. 3:8-10.

BROKEN FELLOWSHIP

The first instance of broken fellowship is found in Genesis 3 at the first advent of sin into the Garden. The first two chapters of the Bible and the last two chapters of the Bible [Rev. 21 & 22] are pictures of unbroken fellowship with God and mankind. In between these two sections, we have 1185 chapters which are strewn with the stories of broken fellowship: between God and man and between man and man.

What was lost in the Garden will be restored only in the eternal state and until then God's people live under constant tension and unfulfilled longings. The great British poet John Milton who lived in the early 18th century composed the following lines in his epic poem, *Paradise Lost*.

Of Man's First Disobedience, and the Fruit
Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal taste
Brought Death into the World, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
Restore us and regain the blissful Seat. [Paradise Lost 1:1]

While we anxiously wait for the 'Greater Man, restore us and regain the blissful Seat.' We struggle through this life trying to fulfill our calling to maintain fellowship with each other. Acts 2:42 and several other portions of scriptures exhort us to do so.

Yet, we often fail in this regard. What are some of the hindrances we face? Let me summarize those, though not exhaustively here. Each needs individual attention with illustrations from the Bible but let me just highlight one primary cause that could by default could eliminate the rest.

HINDRANCES TO FELLOWSHIP

Sin and guilt, unforgiveness and bitterness; lack of transparency; faith and practice; personal conflicts; misplaced priorities; lack of spiritual commitment etc., are some of the contributing factors creating hindrances to proper fellowship with God and men. Among all such listed vices, the sin and guilt stand out as the primary cause and until that is removed, nothing else could flourish or even begin to germinate.

GUILTY AS CHARGED

Guilt is the result of having violated a specific rule or law. When we cross a moral, ethical, or legal line, we are guilty. This is true even if we did not know a line was crossed. Guilt is primarily a state or condition, not a feeling. According to the Bible, we are all guilty before God [Romans 3:10 & 23.]

What God did in the garden by covering the shame and nakedness of Adam and Eve was a picture of what He would do thousands of years later to cover the guilt of everyone who trusts in His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. [Romans 10:9-10].

Unbelievers stand guilty before God in that they have not trusted Christ as the Savior. Unbelievers experiencing feelings of guilt should let those feelings lead them to Jesus Christ who can declare them guilt-free. Their guilty feelings are necessary and are designed to create in them a desire for forgiveness.

In them the promise of Romans 8:1, “therefore there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,” becomes a reality. God has placed all our sin on His own Son as we read in 2Cor. 5:21. He has taken the righteousness of Christ and granted it to us. That divine exchange guarantees our acceptance by God and eternal life with Him.

All of us who are saved by the grace of God are called by Him for the purpose of being sanctified. 1Thess. 4:7, “For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification.” We are challenged in that passage to remain true to this calling by displaying the fruit of the Spirit, listed in Galatians 5:22.

When we are displaying the fruit of the Spirit in our lives the rest of the hindrances to fellowship will gradually disappear. We can also take it to heart that “He who had began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.” [Phil. 1:6] May God grant us His continued mercy to this wonderful end.

PRAYER

Nelson Thomas

NEED WEEPERS!

On the way to crucifixion, the Lord Jesus Christ told the lamenting women of Jerusalem to weep for themselves and their children (Luke 23:27,28). It was not a sarcastic comment or a rebuke. As He was going to complete His mission on earth shortly, it was one of His last instructions to the people – mourn for their land and their offspring.

PRESENT CIRCUMSTANCES

Today, as we look around the globe, don't we see the same terrible situation everywhere? Evil has penetrated into every aspect of human life that many tend to think this is the norm. On one side, in

the name of freedom and tolerance, all kinds of wicked ways are allowed in society; and on the other hand, religious extremism has been growing to the extent of mass murder and destruction as never before.

Unexpected and unimaginable tragic events are being unfolded in different places. We have come to realize that there is no safe place on the face of the earth. At any moment anything can happen anywhere. Many are so worried and confused thinking about what to do and where to go for protection.

In the midst of such chaos and perplexity, what is our responsibility as Christians?

We definitely know what is happening, and we are sure that our Lord has the answer for all the problems. However, we cannot stay cool and quiet with that faith, doing nothing.

If we have any concern for our generation, then it is high time for us to consider weeping. The Lord is calling upon every Christian to pray with tears that our land and our children may be spared from such anarchy and devastation.

In fact, weeping is part of the hellfire experience (Matt. 8:12; 15:42; Luke 16:24). Nevertheless, the Lord Jesus exhorts us to weep today. He even promised blessings to those who mourn now and pronounced woes upon those who refused to do so. "Blessed are you who weep now"; "Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep." (Luke 6:21,25). That means, weep today and rejoice later or rejoice today and weep tomorrow!

PAST EXAMPLES

The Word of God says much about the tears of the saints and how God responded to them. We can notice that all the great servants of God wept during their service. Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet. Seeing the state of his people and Jerusalem, he wept much (Jer. 9:1,2; 8:18,21,22; 13:17).

The Lord Jesus Christ also wept seeing the terrible state of Jerusalem as well as the sufferings of mankind (Luke 19:41; John 11:35). Apostle Paul says to the elders of the Ephesian assembly that he served among them with many tears (Act 20:19,31). His writings also were born out of tears (2Cori. 2:4).

No, wonder the Psalmist states, "He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him." (Psalm 126:6).

Tears are an essential part of our spiritual life. This is particularly true in connection with the work of God; weeping is its basic ingredient! Without tears, there is no success, no fruit and no rejoicing.

RESULTS IN THE PAST

How does the Lord look at our tears? Plenty of examples show that God does take our tears very seriously. Our cry to Him will never go to waste. He measures and stores our tears in a container (Psa. 56:8). He will answer us graciously as we pray with weeping (Isa. 30:19,20; 38:5).

Notice some examples:

- Hagar and child cried; God saw it and did the needful, Genesis 21:16,17.
- The Israelites in Egypt cried; the Lord heard and came down to save them, Exodus 3:7.
- Israel cried out when the enemy subjugated them; the Lord heard and provided a deliverer, Judges 3:9.
- Hannah poured out her heart with tears; she found the answer, 1 Samuel 1:10.
- Hezekiah cried bitterly, and the Lord answered his prayer with miraculous healing, Isaiah 38:5; 2 Kings 20:5.
- The Jews mourned with fasting at the danger of ethnic cleansing and found a miraculous escape, Esther 4:3.

So many scripture portions give us enough light on the need for special prayers with weeping and even fasting. As Mordecai reminded Esther, it is our responsibility to act today, for God has placed us in our respective locations for that very purpose (Esther 4:13,14).

Alas, so many Christians, seem to be just lethargic and apathetic; they just take life casually. Where is the result of the daily Bible readings, weekly sermons and all kinds of so-called spiritual activities? What progress or change is taking place in the lives of Christians today? The major reason is the unresponsive and indifferent attitude of evangelical Christians (Jeremiah 7:13,23,24).

LOOK AHEAD

Beloved Christian believers, wake up! Our indifference is costly. Consider seriously the state of affairs today and of the near future. Let us open our eyes and see what is happening around us. Where are we heading to? Let's waste no time, but plead with the Lord God Almighty to intervene. If we refuse to do that, the Lord Jesus foretold the consequences (Luke 6:25).

The Lord is calling upon His people everywhere to break their hearts, confess their sins and come to Him weeping (Jeremiah 3:21–25; 6:26b; 7:29b; Joel 2:12). He is searching for weepers, people who will intercede for the new generation and for their land. Let us understand the condition of the church today and make use of every opportunity to call upon the Lord.

On another occasion, the Lord Jesus said, "This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting." (Mark 9:29). There are occasions when we need to take spiritual activities seriously. A higher level of spiritual exercise is needed to face the ever-increasing satanic tactics. Prayers with tears are one such area that we should not neglect.

DIVINE TOUCH

However, tears come only out of pain and intense feeling. A heart touched and broken by the wonderful work of the Spirit of God using God's precious Word is the basic requirement for true weeping before God. Without this divine touch, our tears may just be a show and have no value!

Psalm 84:6,7 show that all those who trust in the Lord have to go through the valley of weeping, but as they face it joyfully, they go forward with increased strength. That means, weeping is part of our spiritual path, which results in more power. Only at a later stage do we come to understand that the painful occasions in the past and the tears we shed have contributed to our blessing.

The Lord also promises that He will wipe away all our tears one day (Isaiah 25:8). The Psalmist says, "Weeping may stay for the night, but joy comes in the morning," (Psalm 30:5).

CONCLUSION

All over the world, we see spiritual services being degenerated into entertainment programmes. Talented men and women perform to entertain the audience. All are happy, for the artists get an opportunity to perform and the listeners enjoy it.

In the midst of such a mind-set, the word of God is calling upon us to weep! It may look contradictory, but the past examples prove its necessity. Also, the present times demand it!

Our tears will never go to waste. Let us weep for our children today and not later. Cry for the local assemblies, especially the leadership. Dear reader, when was the last time you prayed with tears?

NTK

GOSPEL

Michael Browne, Bath

CHRIST THE SCOURGED

"Many a time they have afflicted me from my youth," Let Israel now say— "Many a time they have afflicted me from my youth; Yet they have not prevailed against me. The plowers plowed on my back; They made their furrows long." The LORD is righteous; He has cut in pieces the cords of the wicked." (Psalm 129. 1-4)

PAST AFFLICTION

Israel looks back to a history of affliction and grief imposed by their enemies from earliest times, verse 1. In present trials they remember past sufferings and draw comfort from the fact they already survived generations of national persecution, 'Yet they [their enemies] have not prevailed against me', verse 2. They liken their afflictions to a pitiless plough scoring its long furrows across the back of their agony, verse 3.

This was written more than three thousand years ago, but foreshadows Israel's tortured cry during the 'time of Jacob's trouble' (Jere. 30:7) as they await national liberation by the Hand of the righteous LORD delivering them from 'the cords of the wicked', verse 4. This will be fulfilled at the Second Advent.

PROPHETIC SUFFERINGS

Yet through the corporate voice of a tormented nation rises the prophetic cry of another. It is the sob of Messiah Himself as He suffers beneath the terrible Roman flagellum (a whip of leather thongs with slivers of bone and metal tied to them) as 'they made long their furrows' across His lacerated back.

When the wicked and unrighteous command of Pilate, John 19.1, had been carried out, the bloody weals across Christ's bared back resembled the long furrows of a ploughed field. Terrible imagery! No matter what Israel had suffered, it could not be compared to the unparalleled agony of Israel's Messiah. 'Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow, which is done unto me, Wherewith the LORD hath afflicted me in the day of his fierce anger.' Lam. 1.12

PRESENT WORSHIP

Oh what glorious wounds they are to the redeemed of the Lord today. What grateful clouds of incense-worship ascend to our God and Father when we call to remembrance those blessed sin-healing stripes, 1 Pet. 2.24.

Isaiah too prophesied of these same redemptive sufferings when he wrote, 'But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed' Isa. 53.5.

'Dear suffering Lamb! Thy bleeding wounds, with cords of love divine, have drawn our willing hearts to Thee, and linked our life with thine.'

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