

The NT Concept of Fellowship

Intro: In today's bulletin I have written some things about "fellowship". In my brief article I mentioned that a visitor took umbrage at my suggestion that the purpose of the church is not to minister to "felt needs". By that I meant that the church's mission is not determined by what people in the world think the church needs to do for them (such as provide dinners, recreational activities, childcare, etc.), but what God in His word has taught us to do as a church (preach the gospel and provide for worship and spiritual edification).

Perhaps it would be useful to spend more time looking at the details that led me to the conclusions I set forth in the article, viz., that "fellowship" in Scripture refers primarily to sharing in spiritual blessings and then only secondarily sharing with others of material things. It is never used in the Scripture of dinners, recreational activities, or other social functions as it is commonly used by the denominational world and by many brethren today.

The word "fellowship" today

*Clearly the word fellowship is used in society for times of social enjoyment.
American Heritage Dictionary*

The condition of sharing similar interests, ideals, or experiences, as by reason of profession, religion, or nationality.

The companionship of individuals in a congenial atmosphere and on equal terms.

A close association of friends or equals sharing similar interests.

Friendship; comradeship.

The financial grant made to a fellow in a college or university.

The status of having been awarded such a grant.

A foundation established for the awarding of such a grant.

Today churches are using the word "fellowship" in the sense of "companionship of individuals in a congenial atmosphere and on equal terms". And in particular they find this an appropriate description of times of association with food and conversation. I have no objection to using the modern definition to describe social get-togethers; but this is not the way "fellowship" is used in the Bible. To take advantage of this common confusion of terms is to mislead those who do not know the difference between the modern term and the Biblical term. Some point to the NT word "fellowship" as proof that the work of the local assembly is to plan and provide such occasions for fun and recreation. Does the Bible teach this?

"Fellowship" in the NT

Let's go back to the Greek text tonight and discover the word that stands behind many of the passages that speak about fellowship of Christians.

The word is "koinonia" and it has a number of related terms. The noun "koinonia" is used 20 times in the NT and predominately translated "fellowship".

The adjective *koinos*” primarily is translated “common or unclean”.
The verb “*koinoo*” is translated “defile or to be common (in the sense of unholy).

The verb “*koinoneo*” is translated “to be a partaker, or communicate”

The adjective “*koinonikos*” means is translated “willing to communicate”.

The noun “*koinonos*” is translated “partakers, partners, fellowship, companions)

This is of course not the only word for sharing; but for this study it will be enough to consider only this word since it is frequently translated “fellowship”.

A survey of “*koinonia*” texts

Sharing with God

God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Corinthians 1:9)

what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:3)

If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. (1 John 1:6-7)

Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? (2 Corinthians 6:14)

Sharing in the blessings of God

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. (2 Corinthians 13:14)

If therefore there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, (Philippians 2:1)

what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:3)

Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ? (1 Corinthians 10:16)

and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God, who created all things; (Ephesians 3:9)

Sharing in the sufferings of Christ

that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death;

(Philippians 3:10)

Sharing in the Lord's work and the life of faith

begging us with much entreaty for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, (2 Corinthians 8:4)

and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we might go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. (Galatians 2:9)

in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now. (Philippians 1:5)

and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake. (Philemon 6)

And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

(Acts 2:42)

Sharing with those in need

For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. (Romans 15:26)

Because of the proof given by this ministry they will glorify God for your obedience to your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for the liberality of your contribution to them and to all, (2 Corinthians 9:13)

And do not neglect doing good and sharing; for with such sacrifices God is pleased. (Hebrews 13:16)

Conclusion: By taking this careful view of the usage of the word in the NT we can see that in no case is fellowship used to describe Christians eating or engaging in recreational or entertaining activities together. Nor, would it then be an appropriate label for a building used for such purposes.

It is clear that the spiritual relationship of Christians has a social dimension that manifests itself in spending happy times together. The Bible describes this dimension in different terms—not fellowship but “taking their meals together house to house” (Ac. 2:46). Clearly this activity is marked out as taking place in the context of personal association and not church work.