

Preacher's Pen points

What is Biblical Fellowship?



Recently a visitor took umbrage at my comments from the pulpit that it was not the church's work to provide social and recreational activities for Christians or non-Christians. He pointed out to me at the door that the NT Christians had "fellowship" with one another and the church should provide for it. Our friend is not alone in this "understanding" of the word "fellowship". If you asked many religious people the question, "What is fellowship?", the answer would be that it is "fun and food", the enjoyment of sharing in social activities with others. I have seen numerous church bulletins advertise a "fellowship" dinner in a "fellowship" hall. Is this a Biblical use of the term "fellowship"?

Paul's use of "fellowship"

Paul taught that that God is responsible for calling disciples "into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." (1 Co 1:9) He urged the Corinthians not to be "bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? (2 Co 6:14). His final benediction to the church was that the "grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit" (2 Co 13:14) might be with all of them. He commented that his work in teaching Gentiles resulted in James, Cephas, and John giving to him and Barnabas "the right hand of fellowship," that he might go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. (Ga 2:9) He urged the Philippians to work together on the basis of the "encouragement in Christ, ...the consolation of love, ..the fellowship of the Spirit" (Php 2:1) He counted among his gains in Christ "the fellowship of His sufferings" (Php 3:10). He prayed that "the fellowship" of Philemon's faith would become

"effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake." (Phm 6)

John's use of "fellowship"

John wrote, "What we have heard that we proclaim unto 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 Jn 1:3). He taught his readers that this fellowship with God was based on walking in the light: "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 Jn 1:6-7)

Luke's use of "fellowship"

Luke described the fellowship of the early church in the context of their spiritual life. It accompanied their devotion "to the apostle's teaching...and to the breaking of bread and to prayer." (Ac 2:42)

Conclusions

In no Biblical text is the term "fellowship" ever used to refer to social recreational functions. Instead it is predominantly reserved for the higher spiritual sharing we all experience through faith in God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit, and secondarily used to describe contributions to gospel teachers and the needy. Properly understanding and using Biblical terms prevents us from altering the mission God has given to the local assembly. Misusing them lead us into error. It is no more a Scriptural usage of terminology to call a recreational event "fellowship" than it would be to call swimming "baptism". Think about it!

—Johnny Felker