

False Teaching and Fellowship

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The issue of false teaching and fellowship is not a new one. The following is approximately two pages from an eleven page article, published in January, 1975, that I commend for your consideration.

All of us must accept the fact that we have fellowship (live and work and worship with) brethren with whom we differ (sometimes radically) on many things. There is no way around it. It has always been true, and I think we all know it always will be.

The grace/fellowship doctrines being advocated and accepted by some are an effort to settle the fellowship problem. It is an unscriptural solution, to be sure, and therefore an unacceptable one. But the fact that we reject it, does not mean that we have settled the fellowship issue. Thinking this is likely one of the greatest dangers in the present controversy.

The writer then discussed a debate between Cecil Willis and Jesse Jenkins over individual support of schools operated by brethren, that teach the Bible. He gave long quotes of statements made during the debate urging brethren not to divide over the issue, although Jesse had affirmed that individual support of such schools was unlawful, therefore sinful. Each of them asked the other to preach in the congregation where he worshipped after the debate. The writer continued:

It is both easy and correct to say that unity must be based upon the word of God. Just about everybody agrees with this, but upon whose understanding of it? Mine or yours? When we mention such issues as a college Bible department, the war question, the covering question, etc., it is very convenient to say this or that is a 'personal matter,' or it is not a congregational matter, or it is a matter of opinion, or it does not affect our salvation. These expressions may or may not be correct. In some cases they amount to 'cop outs.' Sometimes they are what we say when we don't know what else to say. Just what do we do when some say a matter is personal and others say it is congregational? Others say, 'I just take the Bible for what it says.' Well what does it say? That is the real problem: determining what it says. Now, I am not saying that we cannot see the Bible alike; I am saying we do not!

It is obvious, then, that we need more enlightenment on the unity and fellowship questions. Several questions need to be answered. Here are

just a few: (1) Where is the focus of unity and fellowship? (Does it transcend congregational lines?) (2) What are its essential elements? (3) Of what does it consist? (does it consist of 100% agreement on everything? If so, where does it exist?) (4) If it can exist in absence of 100% agreement, then what disposition do we make of disagreements as 'private,' 'personal,' or 'non-essential,' and others as 'congregational,' 'essential,' and 'tests of fellowship'? (Are these matters settled by individual conscience, or does the Bible lay down clear rules by which to settle the matter?) (6) What part does one's attitude play in determining whether or not he can be fellowshipped? (7) Must the local church withdraw from every brother who persists in either believing or practicing anything the preacher and/or leadership consider to be 'tests of fellowship,' even though many consider it otherwise? (What about the covering? Smoking? Sunday night communion? Weddings and funerals in the church building? Qualifications of elders? Women teachers? Bible classes? Disagreements about how to attain unity? Can brethren have unity who disagree upon how to have it?) (8) Can we claim unity with those whose meetings we refuse to announce or attend and whom we could not use in the services where we attend?

These are some of the questions to which we need to address ourselves. Volumes have been spoken and written on this subject, but these questions never receive definitive answers, indeed they are seldom addressed, yet many continue to apply their dogmatic inconsistent rules on the matter of fellowship. Admittedly, it is much easier to apply the 'rules' than to answer the questions. Too many are content to make high-sounding philosophical speeches about unity filled with pleasing platitudes all the while ignoring the fact that division is rampant all around us. The discussions of the past year have added almost nothing to our scriptural knowledge on the subjects of unity and fellowship. It has been a negative approach to the problems involved. Now we need some positive, definitive answers we can live with. I challenge able brethren among us to address the subject and deal with the problems that usually are left untouched. Most of us know what has been preached on the subject for the past hundred years. What we need most is some practical application of the principles. Show us the plan, but also give us the directions. We have had enough of preaching one thing and prac-

ting something else; it is high time we begin harmonizing what we say with what we do, or what we do with what we say. And if we are unable to do either, stop acting like we have all the answers. (*Torch*, January, 1975, by James P. Needham)

At the 2000 Florida College lectures I spoke on the subject of false teachers. I had not read brother Needham's article when I prepared my lecture, but he said basically the same things I did, only better. Although I make no claim of having all the answers, I want to make some observations and applications of the principles he set forth, noticing some false solutions to the fellowship issue and then some principles that should be applied.

False Solution #1

We cannot fellowship anyone who teaches anything false. One wrote that "anyone, without regard for age, experience, scholarship, wealth, relationship, friendship, religious fervor, who does not teach the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, is a false teacher...Anyone who preaches false doctrine on any subject...has no fellowship with God." Brother Needham said that if we must have 100% agreement in order to fellowship one another "where does it exist?" The only one in fellowship with God by this definition is the one who makes the rule. Like brother Needham, "I know of no two brethren who agree on everything." That's what 100% demands.

False Solution #2

If a brother teaches anything that would cause someone to sin, then we can have no fellowship with that teacher. On the surface this seems hard to disagree with, but think about it carefully. Can we apply that consistently? Should the person who believes that women must be veiled when they pray, withdraw from everyone who teaches or practices differently? Some seem to think they should, but should those who do not believe that first Corinthians 11 teaches that women should be veiled under all situations, withdraw from all who teach falsely on that issue? (Remember that if you answer either of these in the negative, according to some brethren, you are teaching "unity in diversity.")

Some who do not believe the veil is binding, say that neither wearing nor not wearing it is sinful. But, is it sinful to bind something as a law that God has not bound? What about killing for the government (whether as a soldier or policeman)? Should those who are conscientious objectors withdraw from everyone who teaches or practices what they believe to be wrong? Or, should those who believe that the conscientious objectors are making a law were God did not

make one, withdraw from them? What about the person who believes that in some situations an individual may divorce for some cause other than adultery and remain unmarried? Would sin result if a person believed that teaching and practiced it? What about the person who teaches that a wife must stay with her husband even if he kills her, unless he commits adultery? Is he making a law where God did not, therefore sinning? Some say that those who disagree on the latter subject are "in the same ball park," because they do not believe that a person can divorce and remarry except for fornication. Now, must we decide whether a sin is "mortal" or "venial," and who makes that list?

It is a lot easier to ask the questions than it is to set forth scriptural and consistent principles on the subject. We need to understand what brother Needham meant by saying that unity in diversity, as set forth by some, is unscriptural and yet the apostle Paul taught unity in diversity. Without that understanding we are guilty of doing the same thing institutional brethren did when they labeled those with whom they disagreed on some subjects as "anti." I am anti some things, as is every one of them, but that does not make me "anti." Every one of us practices "unity in diversity," but I do not practice what some brethren mean by that expression. What is the difference and what are some principles that apply to our disagreements?

Principle #1

We must acknowledge the fact that the Bible plainly teaches that both Rome and Corinth had unity in diversity (Rom. 14; 1 Cor. 8,10). Brethren in Rome knew that they had different faiths on the matters of eating meats and keeping certain days. Brethren in Corinth knew they had different convictions on the matter of eating meats that had been offered to an idol. It was not wrong for them to discuss their differences and show the "dangers" of the practice of the other, but they could fellowship one another without fellowshiping actions they believed to be wrong (sinful). Franklin Puckett said it this way: "There may be many things in which people can commonly share while at the same time they may be unable to jointly participate in other things. A denial of fellowship in one realm does not always exclude a sharing together in other realms. On the other hand a granting of fellowship in one thing, or in some things, does not require or justify an extension of fellowship in everything" (*Gospel Guardian*, Aug. 6,13,20, 1970).

Principle #2

Some differences have no practical effect on our activities. We should guard against being so argumenta-

tive about every difference that we violate the “weightier matters of the law,” and contribute to the destruction of brethren. Congregations have been destroyed by constant arguments about every difference. For example, what is “the gift of the Holy Spirit” in Acts 2:38? As long as we have studied this verse, brethren still have different explanations about the gift. Some believe it is a personal indwelling, others that it is not. What practical difference does it make in our service to God? What effect does the current discussion of how God created (which is not new either) have on one’s faith in God or service to Him? Yes, differences should be discussed, but is every difference a matter of fellowship? If we make it so, every local church will be destroyed.

Principle #3

Differences must not involve me in the practice of what I believe to be wrong. Paul taught the Corinthians not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers, nor fellowship lawlessness (2 Cor. 6:14-17). Not every yoke with a sinner is an unequal one. Not every participation with a person in error is fellowship of lawlessness. Paul did not tell the Corinthians they could do nothing together until they agreed on everything, nor that they could participate in activities they believed to be wrong. Here is where the unscriptural “unity in diversity” fails to apply truth. That doctrine says you can participate in what you believe to be wrong, and need not strive to conform to pattern authority. Paul taught those who believed that it was sinful to eat meats offered to idols not to participate in that action. Should they have warned that “the student takes things farther than the teacher, so you may cause people to worship the idol because of your action”? That may have been worthy of consideration, but the Holy Spirit did not teach that conclusion. It was not sinful for them to eat unless their eating caused a brother to participate in violation of his conscience.

Principle #4

Whether the teaching or practice involves individual or congregational action is important. It is not right to practice ungodliness, because it is individual activity (1 Cor. 5:9-11; 6:9-11), but there are many differences that brethren have had through the years (and probably will in the future), that do not necessitate withdrawal of fellowship. Whether an individual keeps Christmas as a civil holiday, goes trick-or-treating on Halloween, etc., should not disrupt congregational unity. The only way it could is if brethren take the position that anyone who differs from their 100% knowledge of the truth is unworthy of fellowship. When it comes to things we do together, such as the worship or work of the church, we must agree that the

things we do together are right, because each one participates in the action.

Principle #5

Does it involve me in compromising with the teaching or practice of evil or error? Here is where the rubber meets the road. Some think that if a brother holds a conviction that I believe to be wrong, I am participating in his error, if I fellowship any of his teaching. This is selectively and inconsistently applied, because we all fellowship teachers who believe some things that we believe to be error. If we didn’t, we would fellowship no one, but we must not fellowship the person in the teaching of the error. Brother Needham asked: “What part does one’s attitude play in determining whether or not he can be fellowshiped?” I believe, and all of us practice, that it makes a difference. If Jesse Jenkins had felt obligated to preach his convictions against individuals supporting schools every time he got in the pulpit where Cecil worshipped, my conjecture is that the fellowship would have been interrupted, or at least not extended again. Was this “unity in diversity”? Yes, but was it unscriptural? They didn’t think so, and neither do I.

Principle #6

I must determine whether my fellowship in a congregation, or with an individual, restricts my ability to teach the truth and oppose evil and error. My teaching must be true to what I believe the truth reveals, but does God expect me to teach on it until they “shape up or ship out”? What about the vegetarians in Rome or the non-idol-cooked-meat-eaters in Corinth? Did those who knew the truth need to bring it up in every Bible discussion until everyone understood the truth? If they did, they were contentious, which is a work of the flesh (Gal. 5:20).

Conclusion

My conclusion is that I will not fellowship any teaching or practice that I believe to be wrong, although I do fellowship individuals who believe and practice things that I believe to be wrong. I do not participate in their error or evil. If it is the nature of those things discussed in Romans 16, 1 Corinthians 5 or 2 Thessalonians 3, I must withdraw from them. Many issues are difficult, but the sinfulness of causing division among brethren is not even debatable. We have an obligation to walk in love, which requires that we put the best construction on what others say and do, rather than the worst. “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity” (Psa. 133:1). In order to do that, we must “seek peace and pursue it” (1 Pet. 3:11).  