

THE EXTENT OF FELLOWSHIP
at the
Lord's Table

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The Extent of Fellowship at the Lord's Table.

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A paper appeared some time ago in OUR HOPE, entitled "The Limit of Fellowship at the Lord's Table." I would desire to follow this with another: "The Extent of Fellowship at the Lord's Table." That dealt with the negative side of the question, this rather with the positive; that, with what we did *not* express fellowship in the breaking of bread; this, with *whom* we do.

This has been suggested by meeting again and again, an idea that the Lord's table is the peculiar expression of fellowship, not only between the individual saints composing a local assembly, gathered together to the One Holy Name, but of a peculiar circle of these assemblies. When we break bread, we do so in fellowship with certain assemblies of Christians and not in fellowship with certain others.

Now, my reader, permit me to ask: Are you truly simply willing to be governed by the plain Word of God in these matters? Can you, whilst giving due honor to all, yet take your stand with firm feet on God's Holy Word, and in no spirit of carnal independence or self-sufficiency, but of love and confessed need, let your thoughts be governed, your conduct regulated, your course marked out entirely by that word?

Again and again, you and I, in our life's history, have needed its reproof; and what is true of individuals is true of companies or gatherings of such fallible individuals. Companies of believers may get unscriptural thoughts, and may need to be recalled to the truth. Surely no one with the slightest knowledge of the history of the church would think of questioning this.

How often we hear such an expression as "A—— Hall" is not in fellowship with "B—— Street" or "C—— Place" is not in fellowship with "D—— Avenue," and so on,

through all kinds of intricate discriminations and divisions, till the simple sheep of Christ are utterly bewildered, and, for the most part, only those the least spiritually minded have the most intelligence in all this ecclesiastical jargon of the day.

Let me ask : Are certain particular and select assemblies in fellowship with one another in Scripture to the exclusion of others ? Was the assembly in Rome, for instance, in fellowship with that in Corinth, but not with those in Galatia ? Let me be bolder : is fellowship such as is expressed at the Lord's table, said to be between assemblies as such, at all ? Mark carefully the words ; I say not between *saints*, but between assemblies as such ? My thought will be made clearer by a few more questions.

Are assemblies members of the Body of Christ ? Is an assembly anywhere, at any time, said to be an "eye," or an "ear," or a "foot" in that Body, or to take any such place or relationship ? Are assemblies dependent on assemblies ? Let us be as simple, and sure, and clear on this as is possible. I deny that they are said to be in such relationship in Scripture at all. Who and what *are* dependent on each other ? Clearly the members of the Body of Christ, for the human body has been "fearfully and wonderfully made" to picture beautifully and perfectly this constant interdependence and harmony, and the mutual need of the various members of the mystic Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, all dependent on all. Eye needs hand, hand calls for foot, and so on, no member being so feeble as not to be necessary ; no independence anywhere. But are "assemblies," as assemblies, members of the Body of Christ ? Whoever they be that are so called, they have become so by being baptized by one Spirit into the one Body (1 Cor. xii). Are assemblies baptized by the one Spirit ? Never, never is it so put in Scripture. For by One Spirit are "we all baptized into one Body." "We all" does not refer to assemblies, but individuals (see verse 27). As soon may we assert that assemblies, as such, and not individuals, are "quickened" or "born again," as that they are baptized by one Spirit into the one Body. Further, see how the Apostle closes this illustration :

"Now ye are the Body of Christ." "Ye"—those whom he had already addressed as "the assembly of God which is at Corinth," are the Body of Christ. Not a *part* of it; but the *whole* as perfectly representing it in Corinth.

This truth strictly applied in this connection excludes the very idea of fellowship between assemblies as such. One "Body of Christ" in fellowship with *another* "Body of Christ!" Are there then two? There is but One, and you cannot speak of fellowship between *one*.

But further he goes on, "And members in particular," *i. e.*, each individual believer is a member of that Body—and here we get the thought of fellowship quite correctly brought in—he is dependent upon and in fellowship with *every other believer*; first, in the local gathering, and then in the assembly in its broader aspect, as including all indwelt by the one Spirit. For whilst there is but One Body there are many members.

Nor does the fact of "assemblies" or "churches" being found in Scripture in any way clash with this truth. There are those who would seek to justify the present confusion in the multiplicity of opposing sects and divisions by this. They say that the churches we now see, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, etc., etc., only correspond to the churches recognized in the Scriptures. It is a foolish and grievous distortion of those holy writings which everywhere condemn unsparingly, all that speaks of division in the One Body of Christ. There was no division, no difference at all, between the Church of God at Rome and the Church of God at Corinth. They were one absolutely. The mere physical *accident*, as we may say, that distance separated between Corinth and Rome, was the only cause that made each the representative of the One Church in its locality. Can any honest man say that it is that same cause, of *the accident of distance*, that separates between the church of the Baptists on one side of the street and that of the Methodists just across the same street? Or one company of "Brethren" and another company vigorously excluded by these, perhaps in the same village? It is difficult to determine whether the folly or the evil of such a plea is the more pronounced.

But this confusion between assemblies and individuals is one root at least of the whole error of Sectarianism. Christians, believers, saints, are, according to the Scriptures, in fellowship with one another. Speaking of the normal condition; every individual composing the Body of Christ on earth at one time is dependent upon every other individual. Each individual takes the place of needing and being needed by every other member of the Body at large. Each individual is, as it were, a finger, a foot, an eye; and when I break bread in remembrance of the Lord Jesus and to show forth His death, it is never in fellowship with assemblies elsewhere or anywhere; never with "A— Hall," "B— Street," "C— Avenue;" never with Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Baptists or Brethren, but with *all saints*, recognizing every real, true saint (not every mere professor), as a member of that one Body represented by the one loaf on the table. My fellowship is not limited to any company anywhere, or any select circle of such assemblies, but wherever there is a clearly evidenced saint; no matter how unenlightened, how involved still in the terrible confusion of the day, how mixed up in what I may believe to be still unscriptural, unless of such character as to be absolute wickedness—in spirit and in principle, I take in that saint as in "the fellowship" expressed at the Lord's table.

This, indeed, faithfully and practically carried out, breaks through all mere human divisions between saints. This, indeed, destroys these human fences against our brethren. Never mind, don't mourn over these barriers; there is always good use for the material of which fences are made. One may find good use for the fences elsewhere. Build up out of them stronger defences against the world, against wickedness, against the evil doctrines of the day that are sapping the foundations of the faith.

With what infinite complacency must our enemy Satan behold the present state of affairs.* Saints with much intelligence in the truth, and indeed on this account peculiarly fitted to cope with the subtle errors of the day, yet through his successful wiles, here they are, carefully and solemnly mounting guard *against each other*; aiming their

blows at each other, fighting with each other ; and terror-stricken, not only if one goes over to the enemy, into evil, into worldliness ; but if one ignores these barriers between the companies they have formed, and goes to some other saints !

And all this time life is passing for each individual ; a life nevermore to return. Opportunities are lost, that shall lessen the joys of heaven for each. Error grows apace, and for each one of us the chances of striking blows at it are passing away forever. Surely the enemy laughs ; and what, may we ask, oh ! what must be the emotions of our Lord Jesus Himself ?

Let us destroy all fences that are not of God, and so shall we be in a position to build the stronger all that *are* ; and to strengthen the wall against clear wickedness. And none need pretend that it requires any more subtle discernment to discover this, than it would do to put a thistle in the mouth, and to be uncertain if it were a *fig* or a *grape* one were sucking ! Would *that* be difficult ? The simplest know and can eventually discern actual wickedness, whether in doctrine or in conduct, or in such a clear, willful companionship with these as to evidence a similar character ; and when it is discovered, then let the fences go up against it instantly, and let wickedness be on the other side of the fence.

But wherever you have a table in fellowship with certain assemblies only, there you have as sectarian a table as any in Christendom ; an unscriptural position, that will involve all kinds of sorrow, shame, division, inconsistencies, yea, and *sin*. No table purporting to be the Lord's should be spread except for, and in fellowship with, all saints—every member of the Body of Christ, every true child of the family of God ; nor should the slightest barrier be placed around that table, that would hinder, or cause to stumble, the youngest, weakest, simplest believer, but these, it must be pressed, can only be known by a life of holiness and love. We cannot corporeally break bread in more than one place at a time, but in spirit and principle, we should be breaking bread every first day of the week ; not in fellowship with this " Hall," that " Street,"

this "Avenue," or any select circle of assemblies, but with *every believer* (not evidenced clearly as a wicked person, or shut up under priestly examination as suspected of actually being such) in every place. If I proclaim myself a Baptist, and as such break bread with Baptists, then am I clearly a sectarian pure and simple, as recognizing and acting on the falsehood of a division in the One Body of Christ. So, if as an Episcopalian I break bread with Episcopalians, or a Methodist with Methodists, or a Presbyterian with Presbyterians ; and let it also be said with equal emphasis, if as a "Brother," in fellowship only with certain individuals whom I recognize out of the mass of true saints as "Brethren," then am I equally sectarian, to say the least of it ; but still more clearly, if I avow myself in communion with a certain set of assemblies of these "Brethren" only, the way the word is spelt makes no difference, if by it is crystalized, in it is involved, under it is covered, a division in the One Body of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is blessedly true that there have ever been a large number, in all these sectarian positions, who rise above them in their hearts ; their condition—the spirit is unsectarian in spite of their position.

If, however, as a simple brother in fellowship with all brethren (the words not being spelt with capitals that make them distinguishing, but with small letters, that cover all born of God), I break bread not to express a communion of conviction as to any matter less than that solemn and affecting scene on Calvary, then is there no sectarianism, for I recognize and act on the *truth* of the One Body; then is holiness maintained, and love to all saints too ; the terrible danger of Phariseeism, ever characteristic of the last days, is minimized ; there is no thought of superiority over other believers nourished, for our oneness with them is practically owned.

It may be well to say here again, that whilst it is clearly the normal thing in Scripture to welcome heartily all believers (Rom. xv: 7), yet we *may* surely have to refuse those whom we may yet believe to be true believers. We do not say that a man is not a believer when we refuse him fellowship, God only, it may be, knows as to this; but we

do say that he has so connected himself with wickedness as to be really a wicked person, irrespective altogether of the faith of his heart. The impure, wicked man who was sunk-en so low in uncleanness in Corinth, evidenced afterwards that he was a true child of God (2 Cor. ii: 7), but he cer-tainly was not evidencing it before. So, if a man comes with such fundamentally wicked doctrine as vitally to affect the Person or Work of Christ, we must be careful not to let any hope we may have—that, notwithstanding this, he may be after all, a true believer—govern our action. As long as he wilfully communes with clear wickedness of whatever character, he cannot commune with the Lord's people. It is the right place, indeed, for every child to be in the house with the family, but if any child insists on bringing with him a poisonous snake he must be told that he cannot have the companionship of his brethren and the snake too ; he must decide with which he will part com-pany. But, apart from this, we speak of what is normal.

Does my reader ask, "What then, do you counsel?" I can but repeat an old saying : "Do not go one step before your faith, nor a step behind your conscience." If you are in association with a system avowedly and confessedly sectarian, and you plainly see it in the light of God's Word (1 Cor. i., etc., iii., etc.) to be displeasing to Him, drop the association at once, without further parley, or you will surely lose the light you have. But, you say, "I shrink from leaving my brethren who are still there." Quite right ; nor do you really do so in God's sight, nor ought you to do so—this must carefully be maintained—you only leave the evil thing that separates and divides your brethren ; you are as much one with these brethren as ever, and that communion must be kept up as far as possible, consistently with clear obedience to God's Word. You should never be where you cannot freely welcome all who evidence by holiness in conduct, purity in doctrine, and a spirit of love, true faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

But if you are with those who claim this, who profess to be where all true Christians may be welcomed, and yet, in practice, refuse many such, and have their own circle of select assemblies "in fellowship," then, as far as my light

goes, I can see no scriptural reason for doing more than see to it that you hold not "the truth in unrighteousness," but maintain your divinely given privilege, nay, responsibility, to evidence your unity with every clearly evidenced member of the Body of Christ; and it will probably not be long, if you are faithful, before either your protest will have its effect in false barriers cast down, or the embarrassment will be so felt as to result in your being forced or placed outside those barriers, as so many have been. *Then* see to it that your heart keeps warm towards these who thus act, as towards all. All need all; each needs each; and none can do without any. Whilst this truth governs you, let no one frighten you with the vain cry of "independency."

May our Lord Jesus look with His own compassion on His scattered, bewildered flock, preserving from everything that would grieve His Spirit, either by association with wickedness or separation from saints. May He give His beloved people to secure the hallowed enjoyment even of the very last hours, of personally communing with Himself in full recognition of need that *simply cannot live without Him.*

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