

THE REFLECTOR

OCTOBER 1979
Vol. 19/No. 10

"The Fellowship Question"

Distinctions, among offenders, must be made

The correct solution to a problem is not always the simple solution. It would simplify matter greatly if we could just not fellowship *anyone* whom we believe to be in error on *any* point. But the Bible teaches differently.

"And on some have mercy, who are in doubt (DIKRINO - *discern*); and some save snatching them out of the fire".¹ "And of some have compassion, making a difference; and others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire."²

Even taking into account textual difficulties with this verse, one is still forced to conclude that not all offenders should be treated alike. There are some who are obvious rebels, while others are honest doubters. Their doubt is due to an underdeveloped discerning power, not out of a desire to go their own way rather than God's.

Paul made distinctions: "Warn the unruly (disorderly), *comfort* the feeble-minded (faint-hearted), *support* the weak."³ Not everyone who errs is *walking* disorderly, nor is he *walking* in darkness, nor is he *walking* after the flesh. Such is not his purpose and general practice. His "errors" are exceptions and not the rule for him. He is quick to turn from an error when he is convinced of it. We have to be discriminating in our fellowship.

It is here that fellowship becomes tricky. It is the part that I approach with fear and trembling. It is the part that gives me the

most problems. I cannot always know a brother's heart: his purposes, intentions, and capabilities. Nor can I always know his opportunities to know and to do. Yet, I must make some judgments based on what I do know, judging from the fruits that I can see.⁴ It sure would be easier if I could just mark off everyone who differs with me, then I would not have to worry about having to get along with most of my brethren. However, I think most of us agree, if we are honest, that we can and do *fellowship* some brethren with whom we differ, while rejecting others.

I would like to point out some things, based on what I believe the Bible teaches, that I believe should make a difference.

**GOSPEL
MEETING**
H. E. Phillips
OCT. 29-NOV. 4
7:30 P. M.

Questions Worth Considering

1. *When is one "walking"?* Those who walk in darkness are unworthy of fellowship.⁵ Those who walk disorderly need to be disfellowshipped.⁶ So, any consideration of the fellowship question would be incomplete without a study of "walk" (PERIPATEO), as used in the New Testament. Thayer says it means *'to make progress ...; Hebraistically, to live'*.⁷ The idea is that of practice, persistence, progress, living -- rather than isolated, unintentional incidents.

One is not *walking* in light simply because he may generate a spark occasionally. One is not *walking* in truth simply because he may believe and practice a point of truth here and there. If so, then the devils would be walking in truth. They believe the truth on some points.⁸ We cannot fellowship folks simply because we may hold some things in common.

Conversely, one is not *walking* in darkness simply because his light may flicker occasionally. If so, we are all in trouble.

One is not *walking* disorderly ("not keeping rank, insubordinate...describing certain church members who manifest an insubordinate spirit"⁹) simply because he may miss a step now and then, all the while showing a willingness to correct.

The idea of walking is that of having a purpose in that direction that translates into a general practice. When one is walking in the light, it is his purpose and general practice to do acts of light. That is his rule. There may be exceptions to the rule (sins), but he confesses them and presses on in the light.

When one is walking disorderly he shows a "spirit of insubordination". That is his rule, in spite of the fact that he may be in step at times. He shows his determination to go his own way by refusing to submit to instructions so plainly stated that they leave him little or no room for misunderstanding. The words, "if any would not work, neither should he eat", were so elementary that offenders could not be excused on the grounds of a lack of ability to discern -- or being "weak in the faith". One who still refused was walking disorderly.

Even in matters not so easily understood, those things that require growth to see, one can manifest a disorderly spirit. If he admits that he sees that the Bible teaches it but he still wilfully walks contrary to it, he is disorderly. He must show a spirit of subordination -- a desire to keep rank, a purpose to obey God in all things, even

though he may fall short at times in some things.

When he demonstrates the opposite spirit (by word or deed, the only measuring sticks we have, since only God knows the heart) we must warn him and if he does not repent -- disfellowship him. But because he has not grown to see even points of truth that we may (or may think) see does not mean that he is walking disorderly. This raises the next question that we believe deserves more consideration than it sometimes gets:

2. *How does one arrive at the truth on the matter under consideration?* You say, "By studying the Bible". Of course! But, is the truth on every subject taught with equal plainness and simplicity, thus taking little or no discerning power to see? Or, does not some things take a discerning process (sorting out) based on what is plainly stated? Discerned truth is no less truth than that which can be plainly read, without having to discern -- it just takes a bit more time, effort, and ability to reach it. It is no less "of faith" (coming from the word of God¹⁰) because we had to do some discerning to determine what the Bible teaches on the subject. Yet, a brother whose discerning ability has not developed to see the point is not necessarily disorderly or unruly (unless he refuses to study the matter) -- like one who flies in the face of simple statements or tries to circumvent them.

I believe that smoking is wrong. I believe the Bible teaches that it is wrong. My "anti-smoking" position is a matter of faith with me, because I believe the word of God teaches it. I also understand that "there is not in every man that knowledge"¹¹ -- "knowledge that belongs to the more advanced"¹² Even when I point him to the passages which led me to my conviction, he may still have to grow some to see the truth, though it is as clear as a bell to me. The truth on smoking is simply not stated as plainly as it is on baptism, idolatry or adultery.

The one "disfellowshipped" in 1 Cor. 5 was clearly flying into the face of truth plainly stated. Fornicators cannot inherit the kingdom of God.¹³ A brother who insists on fornicating is flying in the face of such elementary stated truth that it becomes a matter of either accepting it, rejecting it outright, or straining to get around. I believe the same is true of Matt. 19:9. Such a one is "unruly" and must be dealt with accordingly. I must not continue to fellowship him, once it is proven that he has in fact

violated this plain teaching. So, as a practical matter, it seems to me that if the whole church is to concur in the fellowshiping of one of its members, it would need to be in a matter so clear that even those "weak in the faith" could see even at their early stage of growth.

The matters of Romans 14 and 1 Cor. 8 required growth in the ability to discern. Those "weak in the faith" were not yet able to make proper distinctions. DIAKRINO (to discern) and DIAKRISIS (a discerning) are used twice in Romans 14 (vs. 1, 23). The margin of verse 23 reads, "*or, discerneth and putteth a difference between meats*", instead of "doubteth". Their weakness was in their ability to make proper discernments. It is the kind of discerning that increases with time and experience.¹⁴ God is in a position to know if one has had time and experience enough to be able to discern the truth in such matters. God know's another's growth level, I may not. He appears to be trying to obey God, hence what he does he does "unto the Lord".¹⁵ The Lord knows all these factors and will judge accordingly.

I will, as Paul did, teach one the truth (what I know and am persuaded -vs. 14) but I will "receive", not "judge" or "despise"; in other words, I will fellowship him -- leaving him to stand or fall before his Lord. We should be able to study and discuss (thus, furnishing opportunity to further discern) without choosing up sides.

But, when a truth is stated with such simplicity (remember there are things hard to be understood¹⁶), that a Christian, at any growth level, should be able to understand -- refusal to accept this constitutes insubordination and such must be warned¹⁷ and withdrawn from if they do not repent.¹⁸

3. *What effect does the matter have on the very nature of fellowship?* Fellowship, by its very nature, is togetherness, partnership, peace. A "factious man" or one who "causes divisions"¹⁹ threatens the very nature of fellowship between brethren and must be dealt with accordingly. He must be rejected for the sake of the entire partnership (congregation). Some are factious in their dispositions: selfish, disgruntled, disagreeable, and discord sowing. One may show no patience or forbearance. What he believes may indeed be the truth on the subject, but he insists that those who are "weak" accept the truth that he has discerned as the price of fellowship, even when the "weak" brother's error in discernment does not infringe upon

his service to God. Or, the "weak" brother may refuse one the right to believe and express his convictions to the point of being factious.

Congregational fellowship, by its very nature, depends on all parties being able to participate in congregational activities in good conscience. No practice over which we conscientiously differ (one conscientiously believing it wrong, another conscientiously believing it right) can be introduced into our unified activity (congregational action) without destroying fellowship. Hence, brethren have been able to differ on a variety of things (yet, having no fellowship in them) that had to do with their individual relationships to God, outside the realm of congregational action (in which all members have fellowship), without breaking fellowship with one another. When it becomes a congregational matter it necessitates agreement that it must or at least may be done by all parties. "*Can two walk together, except they be agreed?*"²⁰ Hence, one who introduces a practice into our collective activity against my conscience and insists that it stay there in spite of my conscience and that of those with whom I am in partnership cannot enjoy my partnership (fellowship) any longer. He has broken the fellowship regardless of how conscientious he may be.

If a brother decides that he cannot fellowship me then I cannot be in fellowship with him. It takes two to share.

Whom, then, may I fellowship?

I must choose spiritual partners from one of two classes of humanity: (1) Those "*within*", called "*brothers*"; or (2) those "*without*", "*of this world*".²¹ Those within are children of God. Those without are not. They are not brothers. They have not been baptized into Christ.²² They, by no stretch of the imagination, can be said to be in the light. I cannot fellowship these.

Of those whom I may call "brother", I can fellowship those with whom I am in perfect agreement (if I ever find them).

I can fellowship brethren with whom I am not in perfect agreement if:

1. They will fellowship me.
2. They show every indication that they are walking in the light (not sinless, but striving to be).
3. Their "error" appears to be from "weak

ness in the faith" rather than a spirit of insubordination.

4. They are not factious either by their dispositions or by having a position that forces a break of fellowship (division).

I have explained these things more fully earlier. I urge you to go back and read again the section on "Questions worth considering."

No, I do not have "all the answers" on fellowship. You may think that I have none of them. I have presented these thoughts for what they are worth, if they help, I am thankful. If they merely confuse and already confused situation among brethren, I am sorry, and pray for wisdom to come to a better understanding. I believe that what I have written is the truth, or I would not have written it. But, if I know my heart, I am open to further study. --EDITOR

⁷See Col. 3:7

⁸Cf. Jas. 2:19

⁹Expository Dictionary of N.T. Words-W.E. Vine.

¹⁰Rom. 10:17

¹¹See I Cor. 8

¹²Thayer's Lexicon

¹³1 Cor. 6:9; Gal. 5:19-30

¹⁴Heb. 5:14

¹⁵Rom. 14:6

¹⁶2 Pet. 3:16

¹⁷1 Thess. 5:14

¹⁸2 Thess. 3

¹⁹Titus 3:10; Rom. 16:17,18

²⁰Amos 3:3

²¹1 Cor. 5

²²Gal. 3:26,27; Rom. 6:3,4

FOOTNOTES:

¹Jude 22,23 ASV

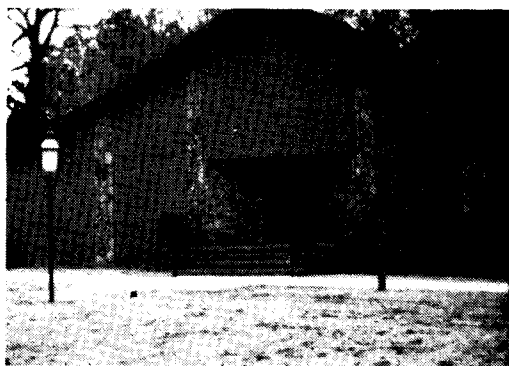
²Jude 22,23 KJV

³1 Thess. 5:14

⁴Read 1 Cor. 5

⁵1 John 1:6-10

⁶2 Thess. 3:6



A monthly publication of the **Fultondale Church of Christ** meeting at 2005 Elkwood Drive, Fultondale, Alabama. Our mailing address is 3004 Brakefield Drive, Fultondale, Alabama 35068.

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Second Class
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AL 35068

SCHEDULE OF SERVICES

SUNDAY:

Bible Classes	9:45 AM
Worship	10:45 AM
Worship	6:30 PM

WEDNESDAY:

Ladies Bible Class (Oct-May)	10:00 AM
Bible Classes	7:30 PM