

TRUE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP TODAY!

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Many true Christians today do not have a true church to attend regularly. They are unable to fellowship with those of like mind. What can they do about today's lack of fellowship? And what is the fellowship they can have?

Fellowship With God and Jesus Christ

No human relationship compares to the spiritual relationship true Christians can have with God the Father and with Jesus Christ, His Son. So real is this experience that John wrote: "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full" (1 John 1:3–4).

There is spiritual fulfillment as we fellowship with other Christians. This is because the motivation behind such association is obedience to the truth, by the power of God's Spirit (1 John 1:6). The moment truth is cast aside, however, this fellowship ceases.

Even though we may be scattered, unable to assemble together, we are not alone. Jesus told His disciples, "I will not leave you comfortless . . ." (John 14:18). He said, ". . . I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee" (Hebrews 13:5). Those who are courageous—willing to stand up for God's truth, which never changes—can take comfort in the words, ". . . so I will be with thee: I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee" (Joshua 1:5). Whereas many of us are unable to gather with others for fellowship, it must be remembered that our true fellowship is with God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ.

Jesus foresaw this when He said, ". . . the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23–24).

In reality, all true Christian fellowship begins with God and Jesus Christ. Jesus said, ". . . If a man love me, he will keep my word: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him" (John 14:23). While fellowshiping with other Christians is a blessing, human fellowship will be largely meaningless unless the basis for that fellowship is a spiritual relationship with God and Jesus Christ. The entire basis for fellowship with other Christians is obedience to God's Truth!

There have been historical periods when true Christians were scattered, unable to maintain contact with one another. When the spiritual breakdown of the first-century church

occurred, John told the brethren, ". . . if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another . . ." (1 John 1:7). Although these Christians were unable to have Christian companionship and regular church services, they remained in fellowship with God and Jesus Christ, continuing in the truth once given them.

Likewise today, while many of God's true people are geographically separated, unable to attend regular church services, they are not separated spiritually. As long as they maintain the Truth and have contact with God and Jesus Christ, they have true fellowship. Fellowship with spiritual brothers and sisters in God's Church is wholly contingent upon a right relationship with God. Those spiritually united with God are spiritually united with God's children, regardless of physical location.

Our first responsibility is to God. "God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:9). We must obey His commands and adhere to the truth. Our second responsibility is to our brethren. If our relationship with God is right, we can then truly do good to those of the household of faith (Galatians 6:10).

Convocations and Fellowship

We all need fellowship. There is a human desire in each of us to have contact with others of like faith. Such contact is helpful to round out one's character and personality. Sharing concepts and spiritual experiences, in communication with others, fulfills a basic human desire. We enjoy sharing things with others. Those who prefer isolation generally lack broadness in their ideas and concepts. They often fail to relate to the emotional needs of others, and they are generally selfish.

Life's experiences become most meaningful when one has contact with others. It is in expressing outgoing concern for others that one truly has the opportunity to apply the Bible principle of giving. Remember, Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

God has provided a way, in spiritual relationships with others, whereby man can learn to apply the principles of Christian giving and sharing. God knew that man, left to himself, would fail to attain godly character. Therefore, God purposely ordained "set times" for His true people to fellowship and learn the meaning of appreciating one another. In Leviticus, chapter twenty-three, God said, "Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, Concerning the feasts of the Lord, which ye shall proclaim to be holy convocations, even these are my feasts" (Leviticus 23:2).

"Convocation" in the Hebrew means a calling together, an assembly called together, a sacred convocation called together (*Gesenius' Hebrew and English Lexicon*, p. 504). Paul elaborated on the significance of this when he said, "And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching" (Hebrews 10:24–25). God's Word places great emphasis upon fellowship and godly instruction. Man was never intended to be an individualist. It is only by contact with others that his light can properly shine.

We should, therefore, meet only with others of like faith. Those of like faith are in harmony. Psalm 133:1 says, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" Fellowship with close Christian friends can be a memorable occasion. Sharing mutual experiences, discussing common spiritual interests, and relating triumphs and trials can be rewarding. It is as the Bible states: "Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up" (Ecclesiastes 4:9–10).

Many brethren who would have succumbed to worldly temptations, eventually abandoning the faith altogether, have remained on the right path as the result of a close Christian friend. A shoulder to lean on, an encouraging word of sympathy, a smile of understanding, or even a sharp rebuke is an identifying sign of a true brother in Christ. Let us not take our brotherly influence lightly.

Those who refuse to attend God's convocations—because they do not wish to learn the fundamentals of true Christian fellowship—are failing to qualify for God's Kingdom. An essential part of the Christian life is to ". . . consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works" (Hebrews 10:24).

Christian Fellowship Not Always Possible

Regular, weekly Sabbath services constitute a period of time when true Christians can meet with those of like faith and practice the principles of serving and sharing. But what happens when there is no minister to conduct Sabbath services? What should one do when there are no other Christians with whom to fellowship? How can a Christian fulfill the obligation to meet with those of like faith, under such circumstances?

Many of the prophets and righteous men of old were often unable to meet with those of like faith. Elijah believed he was alone. God told him there were seven thousand more who had not bowed the knee to Baal (1 Kings 19:10–18). Yet, Elijah did not know who they

were or where they were. Elijah did not have the opportunity to meet and fellowship with these true followers of God.

The faithful of God were often scattered, persecuted, and abused. "... They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented" (Hebrews 11:37). Few, if any, had an opportunity to meet in fellowship with others of like faith at regular spiritual services. Jesus said, "Behold, the hour cometh, yea, is now come, that ye shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave me alone . . ." (John 16:32). So there are times when God's people are scattered, unable to meet together and unable to fellowship with one another. God understands this. The Bible makes it plain, there will develop situations preventing regular church services and spiritual fellowship with others. God's Word presupposes the true Christians cannot always fulfill the command of Hebrews 10:25, which says not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together.

At such times, Christians must rely on much personal Bible study; spiritual instruction via tapes and printed material; personal correspondence; and, of course, God's annual Holy Days.

Fellowship With the World?

Should scattered Christians who are lonely seek spiritual fellowship with the world?

The Bible emphatically says NO!

James said, "Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God" (James 4:4).

A Christian's spiritual fellowship should be only with those of like mind. Therefore, a Christian should withdraw from fellowship with those churches or individuals who either 1) refuse to obey God's Truth, 2) depart from doctrinal truth, or 3) begin to teach and practice sin.

You need to ask yourself why you fellowship with the people you do. Associations which result from job contacts, neighborhood and community relations, hobby or sports clubs, hospital or nursing-home visits, or even occasional visits with the elderly or infirm in their homes, are generally not of a spiritual nature. The motivation behind such contacts seldom carries spiritual overtones. But, when we look at associations which result from spiritual friendship—when the likelihood of doctrinal or behavioral influence is definitely

there—it is time to take heed. True Christians should not fellowship with those who proselytize and attempt to influence others by introducing doctrinal error, or practice a lifestyle which is condemned by God's Word. To fellowship with such individuals indicates condonation of these acts.

When there is doctrinal or behavioral influence contrary to God's Word, the true Christian must withdraw. Jesus said it would be the majority who would follow the pathway to destruction. Few, it seems, are willing to choose the difficult and narrow path (Matthew 7:13–14).

Fellowship With Unbelievers?

Should those called of God, converted, and led by the Holy Spirit continue to fellowship with those who teach and practice doctrinal error? Should they assemble with those who no longer believe God's Truth? Should the true Christian fellowship with those who have departed from revealed doctrine and now hold to false teachings? What would God have the true believer do? Should he withdraw from such associations, continuing in spiritual fellowship with God and Jesus Christ until such time as God makes physical fellowship available?

Note the Bible instruction to those who perceive the extent of apostasy which has taken place in the Church of God: "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark [take note of, notice] them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them" (Romans 16:17).

Jesus said anyone not willing to put Him first was not worthy to be His disciple (Luke 14:33). This means you must put Him before those with whom you associate. If your desire to fellowship with others exceeds your desire to obey God's Truth and live by every word of God, you cannot continue as a true disciple of Jesus Christ!

Note this statement from Paul: "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel [unbeliever]? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you" (2 Corinthians 6:14–17).

And again, this statement, ". . . have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them" (Ephesians 5:11).

Those who place obedience to men or organizations above obedience to God's Word commit idolatry! No idolater will be in God's Kingdom (1 Corinthians 6:9–10). The true servants of God must flee idolatry.

Remember, a little leaven leavens the whole lump (1 Corinthians 5:6). The Scripture tells us, "Make no mistake about this: 'bad company is the ruin of good character'" (1 Corinthians 15:33, *Moffatt*).

Paul tells us: "I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world. But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat. For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from yourselves that wicked person" (1 Corinthians 5:9–13).

Here is ample Scriptural warning to prove that true Christians should not fellowship with those who pursue doctrinal error and evil practices. Continual association with those who do not obey God will eventually ruin one's character. John tells us, "If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds" (1 John 10–11).

A Time of Trial

We are living in trying times. True Christians are being tested as never before. Where is your loyalty? Is it toward the God who called you into His Truth? Or toward an organization of men? Only you can make the choice. Jesus said His way would be difficult and narrow—and few would find it (Matthew 7:14). Broad, acceptable, and easy is the way to destruction. The majority will choose the latter way (Matthew 7:13). But remember: If you are willing to obey God—no matter what you may have to give up in this life—God promises magnificent glory. Giving up friends, for the sake of His Truth, will prove to be a very significant sacrifice!

May God help you to make the right choice!