

FELLOWSHIP

THROUGH belief and obedience of the Gospel we are privileged to have fellowship with the Lord Jesus. We can even be his friends if we will obey all his commands. This scriptural use of the words is quite in harmony with the meanings they bear when employed in merely human relationships. Fellowship is on the basis of one definite cohesive capacity or profession; friendship is more, comprehensive. Fellowship may bring together the most diverse individuals so long as they conform in the one particular. A fellow of the Royal College of Organists must be an expert with the organ, but his religious and political opinions are of no consequence. The fellows may be of such diverse temperaments, tastes, and connections that they could not agree together for an afternoon, and they could never form real friendships. These diversities do not matter in the least so long as they have passed the test which gives them fellowship.

This principle holds good in the fellowship of the Truth. The most completely different temperaments are drawn together; men who on a worldly basis could never even be acquaintances meet at the one table as fellows and brethren. In the world they might be at the opposite ends of society; at the Lord's table they are equals, for they are fellows on the same basis. Here, however, the Truth transcends all other kinds of fellowship. It is an entity so complete and so beautiful that when properly apprehended it can break through all barriers and fuse the most divergent temperaments. Under the influence of the enlightened love that it brings, individual differences are moulded towards a common ideal and men become friends of each other because each is trying to be the friend of Christ.

It would seem that this fellowship is a matter too sacred for the adjudication of man. Only the Lord can give the privilege, and only he can take it away. In the final sense this is certainly the case; but as custodians of God's Truth, members of the Church of Christ are called upon to take such disciplinary measures as may be necessary for the preservation of purity in both doctrine and practice, even to the extreme of refusing fellowship to offenders.

We are given explicit instructions as to the principles by which we must be guided in these matters, but we are necessarily left with a considerable margin for judgment in the application of those principles. We are told to withhold fellowship from those who do not accept the full truth regarding Christ's redemptive work, and we are instructed to withdraw from those who are guilty of disorderly walk.

An example is given in the treatment of an offender. In the church at Corinth there was a man who committed a sin, exceptionally vile even for that city of loose morals. We are told that the brethren were puffed up perhaps using the sin of the erring brother as an effective background for a gratifying exhibition of their own virtue. Their proper attitude should have been one of sorrow because of the wrong done and the necessary severance that must follow.

Quite definitely the apostle instructed the brethren to withdraw from the offender—for that is plainly involved in the words, “hand over to Satan.” With equal clearness the apostle indicates that the first object should be the purging and correcting of the transgressor that he might eventually be saved.

In the latter-day history of the Truth there have been several divisions caused through the introduction of a false doctrine. As brother Roberts pointed out not long before his death, the main divisions were caused by attacks on the fundamental truths of Christ's redemptive work. The “no will” theory was in effect a denial of Christ's trial and perfect obedience. The “renunciation” theory was in effect a denial that “Christ came in the flesh.” The “theories of inspiration” attacked the Word and therefore made a direct attack upon Christ. The divergent views regarding resurrectional responsibility were never treated as serious until in an attempt to formulate a coherent theory it became plain how closely the matter was connected with the redemptive work of Christ.

There have also been many cases of withdrawal from individual members for individual offences. In many cases the right spirit has prevailed, the right effect has been produced; the transgressor has been delivered from overmuch sorrow and “in the spirit of meekness” has been restored.

On the other hand, it must be sorrowfully confessed that there have been divisions over matters that should never have caused any trouble and there have been times when the right spirit has not prevailed. Moreover, there has often been great confusion of thought as to the principles which govern fellowship, and there is danger that brethren may be led into grave errors in their attempts to be consistent. If, therefore, we can have a little clear thinking and speaking on this matter many may be helped.

First, we can state positively that no rules can be laid down in such a manner as to spare us all trouble in the application. The most illogical opinions regarding fellowship have been expressed just when brethren have tried to be most logical. Sometimes one has attempted to draw up a series of propositions on such lines as these:

- (1) To do thus and so contravenes the law of Christ;
- (2) One who contravenes the law of Christ is not fit for fellowship;
- (3) Therefore, however painful the duty, we must withdraw from him;
- (4) Those who refuse to support a motion for withdrawal are defending wrong-doing, and therefore are partakers of the evil deeds;
- (5) Therefore we must withdraw from them too.

Even such crude reasoning as this would be accounted sound and logical by some. It is possible that many brethren might examine the propositions for some time before they

detected the fundamental error. That error turns on the meaning of the word fit. The fact is we are none of us fit for fellowship with Christ if our personal record is to be the test. A man who was among the greatest of the prophets testified that he was not fit to untie the thong of the Lord's sandal. Where, then, do we stand? If we were to take fitness in that sense no brother or sister of intelligence would ever dare to withdraw from anyone, while at the same time daring to claim the fellowship of Christ. We are not left to our own sense of fitness, however. We are given instructions that we must withdraw from those who are disorderly; not withdrawing in the spirit of self-righteous men preserving ourselves from contamination, but with the hope of saving the offender. It certainly does not follow that every offence against the law of Christ must be punished in this way, for in many things we all offend. We have to deal with each case as it arises, asking the question, "What would the Lord have us do?" and acting faithfully to the answer of our conscience. We can readily agree on the principles involved. When a member transgresses we may all agree that some disciplinary measures are necessary; but if we make use of our powers at all, it is improbable that we shall all agree in our judgment as to the exact course to take. In such matters we all have to be "subject one to another," which is the beautiful scriptural way of putting the idea harshly expressed in the modern phrase that "majorities must rule." When there is no difference of principle but only variability of judgment in the application of a principle, this subjection in love one to another is the only workable method.

This brings us to another point in connection with which there has been much confusion of thought. Some brethren have reasoned as if withdrawal from a transgressor was the only way of expressing disapproval. It has been repeatedly assumed that if a brother is hesitant to the point of weakness in supporting a motion for withdrawal, he is necessarily weak in his views of the error that has called forth the motion. If he argues against cutting off from fellowship, he is regarded as supporting the sinner in his evil way.

I suppose it has always been so in this unreasonable world. Little more than a century ago, men were hanged for sheep stealing in this country. At one time boys of sixteen were hanged for stealing as small a sum as five shillings. If I say that such punishment was wrong am I supporting thieving? No one would say so now; but, doubtless, at one time such charges were brought against the first men who suggested counsels of moderation. And after the milder men had protested with wearying re-iteration that they condemned thieving as fully as any of their neighbours, critics would come back with a repetition of the charge, "These men say it is right to steal."

I am sorry to use such a crude illustration, but if it serves to clear the thoughts of any distressed reader the roughness may well be excused.

There are many scriptural ways of dealing with the offences of brethren. Withdrawal, or cutting off from fellowship, is the most drastic of all. We may intreat brethren, or reprove them privately, and so leave the matter. In some cases of error everyone would agree that

nothing more is needed. We may take others with us, and finally bring a matter before the ecclesia. We may, as an ecclesia, rebuke an offender “before all, that others also may fear,” or, finally, we may if we feel confident that this is what the Lord would approve-cut the offender off from fellowship.

Are we to make it a test of fellowship that there must be unanimity of judgment as to the appropriate method of dealing with an offender?

When we withdraw from a member for prolonged absence from the table is there to be a division, and an extension of cutting off, because all cannot agree that the time has come for action? Are we to cut off those who refuse to support one of these painful motions because of some real or fancied special circumstances in the case? Assuredly not. These are not matters of principle but of application, and the proper course is for all of us to be subject one to another.

Finally, to make this matter as plain as words can make it, let us briefly review the history of the last thirty years in the Brotherhood.

It is about thirty years since the ecclesias throughout the country began to treat certain offences more severely than had been their wont. It was argued-quite soundly, as I think—that for a brother to take a course which bound him to an alien or any body of aliens was a more serious offence than any ordinary failure in a moment of temptation. Among offences of this class, marriage with an unbeliever is, perhaps, most prominent. It is certainly condemned most directly in scripture, and it has unquestionably been of more frequent occurrence than any other sin of similar character. This will serve as well as any matter to illustrate the point, and as I have been urged by a worthy brother to make my position quite clear on this subject it will be well to make this choice.

At one time the general practice was to reprove or rebuke any who offended by marrying outside the Truth, but to go no further than rebuke. In some ecclesias—I believe it was so in London—the rebuke took a public form. Marriages of brethren and sisters were announced to the meeting with appropriate words of goodwill and commendation to the blessing of God. Marriages outside the faith were only referred to that grave disapproval might be expressed.

Nearly thirty years ago the Leicester ecclesia passed a resolution deciding to go further and to withdraw from offenders. I supported that resolution in a very intemperate speech which, for fiery zeal and merciless condemnation, would be hard to beat.

May I assure the brethren that while I would never think of using such language now, I feel a horror at the bare idea of marriage outside the Truth such as the ignorant and zealous stripling could never have felt. It is a sin against the law of Christ, a sin against the life partner, a sin against the children; and in addition to all this it is a renunciation of the greatest

joy that life has to offer. If the more drastic rules of later days have saved any young people from this fatal error in the establishment of their homes, surely the severity is justified.

There is, however, a grave danger that growing severity may go too far. It may come to be regarded as the test of soundness in principle, and then weak men will vote for harsher measures than they think are right in the effort to appear strong. When Christ was writing on the ground before he spoke, what would have been our attitude if we had been called upon to express an opinion? We might have been merciless for fear of merciless accusations.

When an ecclesia changes its constitutional practice in dealing with certain offences, all members must certainly be loyal in the sense of not opposing the constitutional action. A faithful brother will not remain a member of the ecclesia if he feels that a matter of principle is involved. He will not be coerced into doing wrong. If, however, it is not a matter of principle, but only of application, he will be subject in love to the others.

Now in these matters which have caused such agitation there is not any difference as to the principle. All recognise that it is wrong to marry an alien or to enter bond service to Gentile power. It is true that in the stress of argument some have even appeared to defend unholy marriages, but the extremes of heated discussion should not, be treated too seriously. In quiet moments all agree as to the fault; even the offenders admit it. We cannot reasonably require that a brother who has married outside the Truth shall say that he is sorry. To ask for such a confession is going too far. Usually, however, he will admit the principle that he has violated. He will recognise that he has given way to a human passion, and in the grip of that passion has broken the law. But while we all agree on these principles there never has been and there never can be unanimity as to the disciplinary measures the Lord would have us take in all these cases. Some of the best and strongest of brethren have urged that we should rebuke offenders with all humility, but not cut them off from the one anchorage that can save them. The Lord has left us to judge for ourselves in these applications of his principles, I know of no workable method but the scriptural one of being subject to one another in love.

It will be a sad day for the Truth if any considerable body of brethren shall ever insist that in future there shall be no liberty of conscience. That when a decision has been reached to treat certain offenders in the most drastic way permitted to us, all who have any scruples as to the correctness of the ecclesial decision must stifle them, must actively support the drastic action and confess that it is not only a permissible action but right, without any mental reservation whatever. Such a demand as this is certainly entirely new in the latter-day history of the Truth, although it is not new if we review the bitter history of past ages.

We may mention one more matter in which there has been confusion of thought. Some have suggested that they may be forced into a position in which they have only a choice of two evils. They say that they may be forced into withdrawing from one section or another, although in neither case do they feel that the withdrawal is right.

It is not true that you can be placed in such a dilemma. You never are forced to cut off any whom you regard as sound in the Faith. To do so would surely be a terrible sin, far worse than the error of those who act with honest but mistaken zeal. You may be forced into a position in which others will cut you off, but that is a different matter altogether. The wrong done is not your responsibility, and if you maintain the right spirit, presently the fever will pass away and wounds will be healed.

There is only one sound course in this matter of fellowship. Stick to “true principles,” and do not strive about “uncertain details.” Pray for divine guidance, but do not neglect the divine guidance which is near, in our memories and on our shelves. Try to keep in their proper place the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith. Then, when there is a difference of judgment in the application of principles, and you have to record your vote on a motion for withdrawal, vote for what you think is right though your dearest friends should cut you off for it.

Islip Collyer

From: The Christadelphian Magazine
Volume 60, Number 708, June 1923, pages 261-265.