

FELLOWSHIP

David C F Wright DD

Often we read in church magazines and on church notice boards an invitation to stay behind after a service or to come to a coffee morning and join in fellowship over a cup of coffee and a chat.

There are churches that have fellowship teas with sandwiches, cake, trifles, tea or coffee. I am aware of some assemblies who have an annual fellowship meeting some of which are, in effect, business meetings. Such meetings are important but the emphasis must be on God the Father and the Lord Jesus.

I have before me a pamphlet from an evangelical church inviting everyone to coffee and biscuits after the service 'so that we can have fellowship and get to know you'.

I know an elder in one assembly who 'invites the saints' back to his house for supper and fellowship after the Gospel service. This has the effect of people forgetting the message and this elder ends the evening with an address of his own in which he has been known to correct the speaker at the evening's Gospel meeting when no corrections were necessary.

Fellowship is not tea, coffee, cake and sandwiches nor is it a chat or getting to know people.

Getting to know people is not fellowship, it is nosiness and/or socialising. The New Testament condemns this. The apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 5.16 writes, "Henceforth we are to know no man after the flesh".

The expression 'after the flesh' refers to man's carnal nature and what is not spiritual. Romans 7. 8 speaks of the flesh being 'no good thing'. Romans 8.8 states that carnality and whatever is of the flesh is sin. The opposite of carnality is the Spirit of God. Galatians 5.17 states that the flesh and the Spirit are contrary to each other. They are at war. Anything of the flesh is corrupt says Galatians 6.8. All that is of the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and a proud life is not of God (1 John 2.16).

The works of the flesh are set out in Galatians 6.19.

At such fellowship, coffee and chat meetings there a lot of probing questions particularly aimed at first time attendees.

Where do you live?

Where have you come from?

What do you do for a living?

Have you any children?

What do you do in your spare time?

What car do you drive?

Have you come to the Lord confessing your sins?

What has the Lord forgiven in your life?

And before you object, I have heard this time and time again. This is intrusive, nosiness and interference and the one being questioned is under pressure to answer. Churches are full of nosey-parkers.

Christian fellowship is sharing the things of God, the Bible and the Lord Jesus

Christians are not to chat or gossip. Chat is informal talk about trivial matters. Gossip is idle talk usually about other people's private lives.

Let me remind you of the type of questions that are asked.

Where do you live?

Where do you come from?

Have you any children?

What do you do in your spare time?

What car do you drive?

What has the Lord forgiven in your life?

Fellowship is not an inquisition. It is not prying. All these questions are worldly minded and not spiritual. If the person wants to give you their address, they will. Why do Christians want to be so nosey?

I shall never forget one lady being asked such questions at a fellowship tea who then stood up and left saying, "Mind your own business!".

Misinformed Christians say that fellowship simply means sharing and therefore this sanctions coffee, chat and getting to know about the circumstances of others.

That is absolute nonsense. It could be heresy because it is contrary to the teaching of the Bible!

We are to know no one after the flesh. Yet some Christians want to be nosey and when they have your personal information they have power and, perhaps, power over you!

The Lord Jesus gave a rebuke, a telling off, to Peter who wanted some information about another disciple. The Lord said, "What is that to thee? Follow thou me".

Nosiness is condemned in the Bible. The men of Beth-shemeth were slain because of it (1 Samuel 6.19). The Levite did not want to help the man on the Jericho road but he was nosey and went and had a good look at him! (Luke 10.32).

The Jews wanted to see Lazarus after he was risen from the dead but did not care about him when he was living amongst them. But these Jews had an ulterior motive to find evidence to condemn Jesus Christ. And, as we have seen, the Lord condemned Peter's nosiness.

What is clear is that Christians are to mind their own business and are not to pry into the lives of other using the bribe of coffee and cake.

Fellowship is not tea, gossip and cake. It is not sharing anything other than spiritual things

Sadly, I have heard Christians say that they want to know personal information about someone so that they can pray for them. Having heard such things, I know from several experiences that the enquirers were just being nosey. If we are genuinely concerned about someone the best person to talk to is the Lord. If we spent the time praying for people we need not conduct a questionnaire about another.

Often this prying is accompanied by, “Do have another cake. I made them specially this morning!”.

If people are really true to the Lord, they will not gossip, interfere or want to know anyone after the flesh. Our contact with each other is in fellowship and spirituality. People gossip and pry because they are secular and nosy. They interfere and become busybodies. Christians are not to follow the standards of the world. We are not to be of this world or love the world or the things in it (1 John 2.15). We are not to have fellowship with the world (1 John 5.19). The word world here is the Greek word kosmos referring to the whole organised world system with its fashions of social, political and religious concepts.

For example, this means that if the majority of people currently believe that homosexuality is not wrong and that living together with someone to whom you are not married is acceptable and right, the Christian accepts that the Bible denounces these things and so the Christian does not conform to the world’s opinion.

Christian fellowship is exclusively about Christ and God the Father (1 John 1. 3). Fellowship is centred in the Gospel (Philippians 1.5). It is not getting to know you. It is not socialising. It is not tea, gossip and cake. It is not talking about Mr Jones’s stammer and his stay in hospital or talking about Rod scoring a winning goal or that Jennifer is going to a new school. These things may be talked about and be of interest, but it is not fellowship!

True fellowship brings suffering (Philippians 3.10), Drinking tea, eating cake and having a chat does not bring suffering. We suffer persecution because we are Christians and our fellowship with God the Father and the Lord Jesus. Often we Christians suffer because of the example of other Christians who are nosy or gossips and who pry and probe into the lives of others.

It is not for you to set this so-called fellowship in motion by questions or gentle persuasion. If someone wants to tell you something, that is one thing but usually pieces of confidential information does the circuit within days.

Friendliness has several components. It is liking people but it is also goodwill and trust. It is giving help and support when asked to do so. It is never hostile or interference. However, this has to be taken in light of Scripture. Consider Micah 7. 5, “Put not your trust in a friend; put not your confidence in a guide; keep the doors of thy mouth from her that lieth in thy bosom”. Job saw that his friends scorned him (Job 16.20). The Lord Jesus called His disciples ‘friends’ but we later read that all His friends forsook Him and fled (Matthew 26.56).

I am aware of some distressing cases because during the ‘fellowship’ of chat it was revealed that a member of a church had committed a serious sin. Before a Church can take any action they must be able to prove the matter. Let us suppose that I am said to be having an affair and am being unfaithful to my wife. It has to be proved. Have I admitted to it? Has the other woman? Has anyone seen us being intimate?

Suspicion is not evidence. That the majority believe adultery is going on is not evidence. The elders’ responsibility may be to interview the accused gently but not accuse him.

Chat and gossip is referred to in Psalm 34.13, “Keep thy tongue from evil and thy lips from speaking guile”.

Proverbs 13.3 endorses this. “He that keepeth his mouth keepeth his life but he that openeth his mouth wide shall have destruction”. If you guard your mouth and tongue, you guard your life. James 1.26 says that anyone who appears to be religious and cannot control his tongue has a vain religion. 1 Peter 3.10 gives a recipe for a good life which results from refraining the tongue from evil and from speaking guile. Titus 3.1 tells us to speak evil of no one... so remember the man who is alleged to be an adulterer! Look at James 4.11 and 1 Peter 2.1.

Guile is craftiness and deceitfulness. To try to extract information from someone, to be nosy and to call it fellowship is guile.

The making of a false report is condemned in the Bible. One of the commandments is that we must not bear false witness. Untrue remarks and lies can destroy an innocent party. Proverbs 11. 9 says that what is said can destroy another and the person who does the destruction is a hypocrite.

Secular friendships are, of course, fine and necessary in our society. But do not call what is secular fellowship.

Fellowship is not coffee cake and a chat!

Although I may be repeating what has already been said I would like to consider more positive aspects of fellowship. Repetition is a device used by schoolmasters and ministering brethren

From the world's point of view and that of secular society, fellowship is the condition of sharing similar interests, ideals or experiences by reason of profession, religion or nationality.

A fellow Christian and I meet together for musical evenings. We share the greatness of Beethoven but that is not Christian fellowship.

Mrs Jones and Mrs Attrill are both Christians and they meet together regularly to make cakes and have a cup of tea but on these occasions they do not talk about the Lord but 'leave these things to Sunday'.

Cake making and drinking tea is friendship and companionship but it is not Christian fellowship. That Christians should have friends is, of course, natural and discernment must be exercised as to their trustworthiness. Remember the passage in Micah.

Christian fellowship is a priority and it is devotedness to the Lord Jesus. It means to exclusively share the things of God the Father and the Lord Jesus in a realistic and active way. In the book of Acts, fellowship is centred on prayer, evangelism and a full commitment and appreciation of the Lord. Fellowship is never shown as worldly, secular, getting to know you, intrusion, interference, gossip and tittle tattle.

Our fellowship is with God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (1 John 1. 3) and the fellowship with have with each other is about the Father and the Lord Jesus (verse 7). Fellowship with each other is not about holidays, home, cars, jobs, people we know, our families or anything of that kind. Fellowship is not secular. It is exclusively about the Father and the Son and nothing else.

Matthew 18 records what the Lord Jesus said that where two or three are gathered together in My Name there am I in the midst and that to bless.

Fellowship is nearness to the God. The two on the Emmaus Road had the experience of the Lord drawing near and, at first, they did not recognise Him but when they did they said, Did not our hearts burn within us when He was with us ?(Luke 24).

Fellowship is the warm and edifying presence of the Lord and closeness to Him. That is fellowship.

The apostle Paul writes that we are called into the fellowship of Jesus Christ. Fellowship includes the fact that the Lord wants fellowship with us and desires our company. Fellowship is not sharing gossip and information with each other over a meal or coffee and cake or in the street.

Moses had the fellowship of the Lord talking to him at the dedication of the tabernacle for example.

Fellowship is communication with and about the Lord.

In Genesis 6 we read that Enoch walked with God. That is fellowship. We also read that God took him which speaks of the rapture of 1 Thessalonians 4 when the dead and those alive will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air and so be forever with the Lord. That is the fellowship of nearness to the Lord Jesus.

To the church in Sardis the Lord spoke of believers who will walk with Him in white. This is the purity of our redemption and our eternal fellowship.

Fellowship has the meaning of belonging. The believer belongs to the Lord and the Lord belongs to the believer. Paul could write to Timothy, The Lord knoweth those that are His.

In John's Gospel the Lord instructs His own, Abide in Me and I in you.

The believer should be so taken up with the Lord that he is not concerned about the lives of others and what they are, or what they are doing. In John 21 Peter asked the Lord, What shall this man do? and the Lord answered What is that to you?

Colossians tells us that in all things Christ must have the pre-eminence.

The apostle Paul tells us we are not to know any fellow believer, or anyone else, after the flesh. Prying and inquisitiveness is out.

There are some who call them Christians who regard fellowship as a social activity and others would describe their churches as a big social club.

Fellowship is nearness to the Lord. Psalm 16.8 says Because the Lord is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. Psalm 145. 18 says that the Lord is nigh to them that call upon Him. Psalm 73 28 states It is good to draw nigh near to God. The anonymous writer to the Hebrews writes Let us draw nigh with a true heart in full assurance of faith.

The believer would rather talk about the Lord than Cynthia's bunions and that awful new hat that Mrs Ravenscroft wore to the meeting. The health of a member of the assembly is important and should be a matter for prayer not gossip. But some people want to know everything about that member's health, a blow by blow account and every single detail and they call it fellowship.

1 Timothy 5 condemns those who are tattlers who are not to speak about things that they ought not to. Such people are idle going from house to house with idle gossip and being busybodies. The churches today are full of people like this.

We have quoted the Psalmist who said, Keep thy tongue from evil and thy lips from speaking guile.

I was in an assembly and left for health reasons. The meeting had a special evening about me later in which I was condemned as a heretic, busybody and that I was in gross doctrinal error. Other brethren examined this report and found it completely untrue and one well-known brother wrote an article entitled Keep the door of my lips in which he quoted Scriptures condemning the attitude of this assembly and exposing their lies.

The Scripture states Thou shalt no bear false witness and Thou shalt not issue a false report

The Bible says that the tongue is sharp as a sword. It can pierce and wound. It is as strong as a bear. It can crush someone. It is as small as a rudder and we steer our way through life largely by what we say.

I have known Pentecostal pastors and charismatics who insist that they can resolve all problems for their members and their families and that anyone with any problem should make this pastor their first port of call. If they don't they are not having fellowship.

J N Darby wrote to a Catholic paper in 1878 saying that fellowship is the most true when we meet together to remember the Lord in the breaking of bread.

Hebrews 10.25 says that we are not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together as the manner of some is. This is a reminder that we need to fellowship with each other in the things of God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 1. 9 reads God is faithful by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

(2912)

© COPYRIGHT David C F Wright DD 1989. No part of this article, however small, may be reproduced or stored in any system whatsoever. It must not be copied, altered or downloaded. Failure to comply is illegal being theft and contrary to International Copyright law and will render any offender liable to action at law.