

THE SCRIPTURAL CIRCLE OF FELLOWSHIP

The church of Christ was formed on the Day of Pentecost when the disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ were all baptized into one body by the Holy Spirit. (*Acts 2, I Corinthians 12:13*) This was divinely authenticated by a sound like a violent wind that was loud enough to draw a large crowd of onlookers. The Holy Spirit visibly descended on the disciples in tongues of fire, and enabled them to speak to the onlookers in languages in which they were not previously conversant. The circle of believers enlarged that day as the Lord "Added" those who were converted to Christ and baptized. It appears that whoever confessed the Lord Jesus Christ was immediately accepted into the circle of Christian fellowship. And what a fellowship it was, even to the unselfish sharing of their material goods.

When the gospel was sent to the Gentiles, God confirmed His acceptance of them by sending the Holy Spirit to them just as He had to the Jews at the beginning. (*Acts 10 & 11*) The Christian circle of fellowship embraced them on that basis. The Judean Christians sent Barnabas to encourage the new Christians at Antioch. (*Acts 11:19-24*) And when Jewish prejudice threatened the fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians at Antioch, the Apostle Paul strongly condemned it. There was to be neither Jew nor Gentile, but simply the church of God as the only circle of Christian fellowship. (*Galatians 2:11-15 & 3:28*)

The Book of I Corinthians was written to "The church of God at Corinth...with all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." It teaches that Christians compose the body of Christ collectively, and each Christian is individually a member of that body. (*I Corinthians 12:27*) That body is the church. (*Colossians 1:18 & 24*) Each Christian has a God-given place to fill in the body of Christ. Everyone that truly acknowledged Jesus as Lord was to be considered a needed and valued member of the one-and-only body of Christ, to be loved and respected as a precious part of the Christian circle of fellowship. (*I Corinthians 12:4-31*) On the other hand, unbelievers (*II Corinthians 6:14-16*) and people who claimed to be Christians whose behavior was grossly inconsistent with that claim (*I Corinthians 6:9&10*) were not to be accepted as members of the body of Christ.

The Book of Romans addressed "All who are beloved of God in Rome." (*Romans 1:7*) This included many individuals, probably from several different assemblies of Christians there. There was the church in Prisca and Aquila's house. (*Romans 16:3-5*) Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobus, Hermas, and the brethren with them appears to be another assembly in Rome. (*Romans 16:14*) Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them probably represented yet another assembly in the area. (*Romans 16:15*) These Christians were all to receive one another into the Christian circle of fellowship because Christ had received them. (*Romans 15:7*) They were to do so in spite of spiritual weakness, degrees of faith, or differing opinions. (*Romans 14:1-9*) And they were to respect each other's consciences and encourage each other in their Christian pathways instead of judging one another's peculiarities. (*Romans 14:10-23*)

Christians visiting unfamiliar areas were to be received into the Christian circle of fellowship there when they were understood to be reasonably upright Christians. Word of mouth (*Acts 9:26-28*) or letters of commendation (*Romans 16:1-2 & II Corinthians 3:1-2*) were helpful, but there are no Scriptural injunctions that accreditation was necessary where there was no reason to doubt the visitor's reality. Any who came with doctrines inconsistent with fundamental Christianity were not to be received into the circle of fellowship as Christians. To encourage such impostors in any way was to share in the guilt of their seduction of Christianity. (*II John 9-11*)

The Christian circle of fellowship was to be pure. When Ananias and Sapphira contaminated it with hypocrisy, they were abruptly removed by an apostolic penalty of death executed by the Lord Himself. (*Acts 5*) Simon, the converted sorcerer, was urged to repent of his religious covetousness under threat of a similar fate. (*Acts 8:9-24*) Many Christians at Corinth were ill and a number of them had even died because of the unworthy way in which they had been partaking of the Lord's supper. (*I Corinthians 11:30*)

Wicked people who were not so precipitously removed by the Lord were to be put out of the Christian circle of fellowship by their local assemblies on Christ's authority. They were to be excommunicated for the destruction of their flesh for their own spiritual good, (*I Corinthians 5:5*) to inhibit the spread of their unholy ways, (*I Corinthians 5:6-8 & Galatians 5:7-10*) and to demonstrate that the Christian circle did not share in their guilt by approving of

their behavior. (*II Corinthians 7:8-13*) They were not simply put out of their assemblies, but were excluded from the entire circle of Christian fellowship. Other Christians were not to associate with them in any way. (*I Corinthians 5:9-11*) Such disciplined Christians were to be received back into the Christian circle of fellowship if and when they repented of their wickedness. (*II Corinthians 2:6-11*)

The church of Christ was not faithful to the principles of Christian fellowship prescribed in the Scriptures. As individual love for Christ deteriorated, Christianity embraced the world. Virtually all resemblance to the Scriptural circle of Christian fellowship was lost as the professing church slowly sank all the way to the depths of medieval Roman Catholicism. As Christians began to awake from the spiritual slumber of the Dark Ages, different factions of the Reformation gradually recovered various Scriptural truths interspersed with varying amounts of human error. Denominational sectarianism developed, with many opposing circles of Christian and not-so-Christian fellowship.

But even in the divided condition of the church today, Christians are not left entirely without Scriptural guidance. The seeds of sectarianism were addressed in the Scriptures long before the widespread deterioration of the Scriptural circle of Christian fellowship. We would do well to derive our own course of action from such Scriptures.

The Christian circle of fellowship at Corinth became polarized into factions that considered themselves followers of the doctrinal emphasis of various Christian leaders like Paul, Apollos, or Cephas. (*I Corinthians 1, 3:3-6 & 4:6.*) After a first and second warning, those who carried such distinctions to the point of actual division (*Greek: "Hairetikos"--"Causing division"*) in the Christian circle of fellowship were to be rejected as self-condemned sinners. (*Titus 3:10*) In avoiding the error of venerating human leaders, some ended up isolating themselves as the faithful ones that followed Christ alone. Such sectarian behavior was condemned right along with all the other divisions in the Christian circle of fellowship. Christ is not divided, and following Him does not cause unscriptural division within His body. (*I Corinthians 1:13*) We need to be careful, then, that we do not betray the unity of the body of Christ by limiting our circle of fellowship to those who agree with our particular viewpoints. Excluding other godly Christians purely on the basis of ecclesiastical differences is nothing short of heresy.

On the other hand, the Apostle Paul warned Timothy to separate himself from those who had strayed so far from the truth that their doctrines were destructive to the faith. (*II Timothy 2:16-22*) The issue was not whether or not they belonged to Christ. People contending for such significantly erroneous doctrines had no place in the Christian circle of fellowship. Those who wished to serve the Lord were urged to separate from such dishonorable people and all other forms of iniquity, and to pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. We should, then, exclude those who insist on serious doctrinal aberrations, and welcome all who call on the Lord out of a pure heart into the Christian circle of fellowship.

When Diotrephes gained control of Gaius's assembly, he refused to receive godly brethren from elsewhere that might be a threat to his own preeminence. (*III John 5-12.*) He even put those who did receive such brethren out of the Christian assembly. But despite the threat of excommunication, Gaius was encouraged to continue helping such brethren because of their faithfulness. No individual or assembly was ever exhorted in the Scriptures to receive anyone simply because they were "In fellowship" somewhere else. In every case in point they were urged to receive or reject others because of their personal qualifications. Our circle of Christian fellowship, then, should include every faithful Christian, rather than just those "In fellowship" with our particular coalition of assemblies.

The Scriptural circle of Christian fellowship is beautifully described in the first chapter of I John. The Apostle John had companied with the Lord Himself on earth. He was proclaiming what he had seen and heard to us so that we could share in the fellowship of those who fellowshiped with the Father, and with His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. John would be overjoyed to have us join in this Christian circle of fellowship. But it was a holy fellowship because God was holy. Those who walked in darkness and did not practice the truth had no part in this circle of fellowship. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another. (*I John 1:1-7*) The Christian circle of fellowship, then, should include every reasonably upright member of the body of Christ who walks in the light and does not disqualify himself by unholy doctrines or practices