

—ROBERT HARKRIDER ANSWERS A VERY IMPORTANT QUESTION—

Question: How does one determine with whom to have fellowship?

Answer: Because of the many differences of convictions among baptized believers this question is of supreme importance. Why is it true that some who hold different views are regarded as faithful Christians whereas others are not?

First, let us examine the meaning of "fellowship." In one sense of the word, fellowship is a relationship which only God can extend or deny. As one obeys the gospel he is called into "the fellowship of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Cor. 1:9). God alone has perfect knowledge of all "them that are His" (2 Tim. 2:19). But this is not the only aspect of fellowship. While God alone extends salvation (hence this idea of relationship in Christ), there is another sense of fellowship over which man must exercise control. This second sense of fellowship is that of partnership and is extended by man either within a local congregation (1 Cor. 5) or on an individual basis (Gal. 2:9).

In this latter sense of the word "fellowship," each individual must determine with whom he will have spiritual partnership. We must strive not to make the mistake of having fellowship with some God would not (as in 1 Cor. 5) or of refusing those God would have (as in 3 John 10). However, we cannot know the heart of another as God can, therefore our fellowship must be extended or withdrawn on the basis of what we can know — the words and actions of others.

Furthermore, since this idea of fellowship is one of joint participation, our own personal convictions are involved. If we should share with another in any action we conscientiously believe to be wrong, then we would sin (Rom. 14:22-23). True, self-righteousness must be avoided, and charity and longsuffering must characterize our attitude toward those with whom we differ. However, we would sin should we transgress God's word as we understand it (John 12:42-43; 1 John 4:1; 2 Pet. 1:3; Acts 20:28-30; 2 Tim. 4:2-4).

A simplified guideline to follow is that fellowship must be extended to all baptized believers only when such fellowship does not involve us (cause joint participation) in:

(1) Teaching error (Romans 16:17; Titus 3:10-11; Gal. 1:6-8)

(2) Practicing error (Eph. 5:11; 1 John 1:6-7; 1 John 2:19, 29)

(3) Endorsing error in others (2 John 9-10; 2 Thess. 3:6, 14)

Unity may be attained within a local congregation even when some members may hold different convictions. If these convictions are of a private nature and do not involve congregational action, then others in that congregation may be at peace without violating their own conscience which is different. For example, congregations throughout the land have members who hold differing views regarding capital punishment, the covering, and other similar subjects that can be held individually without forcing the same conviction and practice upon every other member in the congregation.

However, when congregational participation is necessary then every member of that congregation becomes involved with the decision of his own fellowship (joint participation). For example, instrumental music in worship would violate my own conscience, thus I could not have fellowship in a congregation that practiced such. Churches that support human institutions from their treasury and are involved in unscriptural oversight of elders would likewise involve the conscience of every member who regularly contributed to the Lord at that place. I could not be a member of a church involved in "socials" because I know the church has no business doing the work of the home. Therefore I would be in sin in such a congregation because I would be involved in unscriptural work and worship (John 4:24; Matt. 15:9; 1 Cor. 10:20-21; 2 Cor. 6:14-17).

—Robert Harkrider.