

More on Fellowship

Commentary for September 9, 2008 — Are Your Neighbors Your Family?

Below is the text of a short article by Dr. Ernest L. Martin from May 1976. In 1997 Dr. Martin wrote "[What Is True Fellowship?](#)" which you should also read or re-read. That article comes to the same conclusion as this short presentation.¹ Read and learn from Dr. Martin's 1976 article:

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Those of us who make up the human race are social creatures. God made us that way. Implanted within us is a desire to have friends and loved ones with whom we can share the fortunes of life. We want to lean on people in our periods of difficulty and reap the rewards of helping others in their times of need. Most also have a yearning to belong to compatible social groups with whom we can intimately identify. Only a small minority of people elect to live in isolation from others. This is why so many seek fellowship. This is not wrong, yet we need to use wisdom in accomplishing the task. We should know where true fellowship begins, as well as knowing how to achieve a balanced and pleasing association with others. Fellowship should lead to an enrichment of life among our associates as well as ourselves. To engender a proper fellowship, one must begin with a starting point. And strange as it may seem, many people seem to overlook the obvious place to begin.

Fellowship Starts with You

Each one of us should be a pleasant person to be around. This is especially true if one claims to be a Christian. We should try to be a happy, balanced, sincere, honest, and loving person. The attributes of God's Spirit actively working in a person's life would ordinarily produce these necessary virtues. Such a person would normally have a deep respect for God and also for himself. Some have been told that an individual must hate himself as a despicable and worthless wretch in order to be a Christian. This is not only erroneous teaching, it is devastating to one's Christian development. Christ plainly taught us to love others as we love ourselves (Matthew 22:37). It is not bad to show self love. Indeed, it is incumbent that we do so. Such love gives us the practical experience with love that helps us to show a proper concern to others. If we hate ourselves, we would be prone to demonstrate the same hatred to our associates. This is wrong. Each person needs to have a love and respect for himself.

We should have self-respect even when the common demerits of life afflict us. In spite of faults, Christians should realize that God has made us to be His children. We need to have faith (confidence in God) that our sins have been fully dealt with by Christ. They should no longer plague the conscience and cause us to be heavy hearted.

"Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin that does so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us."

• *Hebrews 12:1*

Christians must lift up their heads, abandon guilt feelings, and cast aside every weight that might cause them to hate or disparage themselves. Though sins certainly do beset us, these should never allow us to lose respect for ourselves. Sins certainly need to be repented of, but once this is done, forget them. Christ has cleansed His people and we need to believe it!

1. See also my short Commentary titled "[Fellowship Question.](#)" DWS

When a person thankfully acknowledges what Christ has done for him, and appropriates His saving grace into his life, this should bring his personal relationship with God into assured harmony. He should then pursue an active campaign, with God's help, to develop himself into a happy, balanced, sincere, honest, and loving person. One should exercise real faith that this can and will be done in his personal life. Proper fellowship must begin with the person loving himself. I do not mean to have a selfish love, but I do mean a love which causes one to respect the self. This is the starting point. Once this is done, the person is ready for a fellowship that can become a profitable experience to others and to himself.

Introduce Yourself to Your Family

One's prime affection should begin with the family. Big mistakes have been made by certain Christians who feel they must initially seek out other Christians of like doctrinal beliefs for their fellowship. This is not sensible. Your first allegiance for fellowship must be with members of your immediate family whether they are professing Christians or not. Paul gave us teaching which helps to illustrate this principle.

“But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house [kindred], he has denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel.”

• 1 Timothy 5:8

This scripture shows we must attend to the needs of our families (and material needs should not to be our sole focus).

There are some exclusive religious organizations that cause their members to abandon this essential fellowship with families. Some of us adopted religious beliefs which drove us into a social closet. Those outside the organization, even if they were family members, became “heathen” — almost “untouchables.” Hard feelings developed. Suspicions and distrusts appeared. The normal things of life became anathema to some. Birthday parties were avoided. Family dinners were shunned because the food might be “contaminated” (even though this antisocial attitude was contrary to the express command of Paul — 1 Corinthians 10:27). In some cases marriages were dissolved, children were rent from parents, or parents even disowned their children. What uncharitableness!

These things occurred because of a wrong approach to fellowship. True, sometimes being a Christian causes the disruption of families (Matthew 10:21, 35), but such a severance is only necessary when the essential factors of Christianity are at stake, not when someone had the nerve to send the “true” Christian a Christmas card. Anyone who abandons a fellowship with his family simply because they are not a part of his exclusivist religious organization, is violating the principles established by our Lord who thought nothing of eating with the publicans and harlots (Matthew 11:19). How can one be a light to others, if he thwarts any normal association with his family and retreats from the ordinary people of the world by becoming a “righteous hermit” within the cloistered quarters of his self-centered religious society? No wonder we have religious misfits in the world. The first priority for fellowship must begin at home with one's relatives. If one has not learned this principle it is useless to export any proper fellowship elsewhere.

The real Christian should not only try to win his family to himself by his honesty, goodwill, sincerity, and Christian love — but his desire should be to extend to others the same courtesies. Though he will not consent to the ways of harlots and publicans, he ought to be like our Lord and show a love to all people. One need not love people for what they do wrong, but one should love people for who they are — the potential sons and daughters of the living God.

Anyone who does not love and respect all people in the world is not worthy to be called a Christian. And how can one show love to people if he never comes in contact with them? Even Paul made it clear that we are not to avoid people in the world (1 Corinthians 5:10). There is nothing wrong even with having friends who don't profess Christianity (1 Corinthians 10:27).

Such friendships could help others come to a proper relationship with God. The Christian should try to have friends with all types of people. We can learn lessons of life from them. Paul did (Romans 1:14).

Yet, some people want only a fellowship among those who share their own religious convictions. They are exclusivist. And what a shame it is. They had become so accustomed to a seclusion among themselves, that they want to perpetuate their dyed-in-the-wool clannishness. Some have said "We now have 'the truth' and we only wish to assemble with others who have 'the truth.'" This may sound good on the surface, but God says Christians are the salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13). Should our chief motives be directed toward gathering the salt into one place? Alright, put a teaspoon of salt on one part of your steak and eat it. You will never do it again. The Bible consistently says the normal geographical disposition of Christians is to find them scattered like salt (1 Peter 1:1). Many have wandered from place to place without settled homes (Hebrews 11:38). This is the lot for many Christians.

This does not mean that we wish for an abandonment of groups which share a common religious bond. No, not at all. Actually, such groups can be a great blessing to those who meet together. But we do feel that it is wrong to concentrate all efforts into such groups at the expense of other fellowship responsibilities which must be made towards family and neighbor. After all, the great majority of people in association with us are scattered individuals and it is impossible for them to meet with others of like doctrinal beliefs on any regular basis. Yet all people, even the scattered, can have a fellowship with their families, neighbors, and others. This is a part of Christian living. This is what we wish to encourage, but not to leave the other undone (Hebrews 10:25).

The Neighborhood Is Your Fellowship

We certainly wish people to meet together who have a like faith in Christ if they are able to do so. That is a blessing none should denigrate. But this is not the ultimate responsibility which Christ has given the Christian. There is presently a more needful commission. Look around us. We should make friends of our neighbors as best we can. We need to be a light to all.

Christ commanded that we love God, but also our neighbors (Matthew 22:36–39). A lawyer once asked Christ a question: **"Who is my neighbor?"** (Luke 10:29). This query was asked because many of the Jewish religious leaders considered themselves to be the elite of God — the ones who were morally and spiritually elevated above the common people on the street. A "neighbor" to them was no doubt one of their own righteous peers because they would not dare associate with "sinners" (Matthew 11:19). Do we wish to join the Pharisees and be a part of the spiritual aristocrats who stay aloof from their real neighbors? We do not have to ask who our neighbors are. We all know them. They are the people next door and across the street. They are the people we meet at work. And by extension, they are all the people with whom we come in contact. The Christian's responsibility is to love and help these "neighbors."

The whole world is your neighborhood. You can only help people when you associate with them (1 Corinthians 5:10). Re-introduce yourself, as a Christian (but as a sound minded Christian) to neighbors. Get involved in community efforts which can help your neighborhood. Do not isolate yourself into a close-knit religious fellowship that is content with its self-centered and exclusivist ("we are the ones who have the truth") syndrome. The truth is, none of us has all the truth. And when some denominations appraise themselves as the "true church of God," you should know they cannot be right. Just look at their past and present errors which have plagued even those so-called "true churches of God." It should be self-evident that none of us has all the truth. We will all be more spiritually healthy when we realize that fact.

The responsibility of the real Christian is to all the world. Our Lord died for the world, not just for us. Let us not retreat from the world and sequester ourselves into the same type of

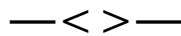
erroneous exclusivism which some of us have experienced in former denominations. This is not proper. It is not time to retreat from the world, but to go into the world and entreat it.

The real Christian needs to be expansive, not exclusive. The way to proper fellowship is to first get ourselves into a harmonious relationship with God, restore the fellowship which we need with our families, our immediate neighbors, and finally with all the people with whom God allows us to meet. It is not that we should appear overly religious with people (Ecclesiastes 7:16) — nothing puts a normal person off more than this. But we do need to be kind, honest, balanced, and a loving person who radiates his Christianity without sanctimoniousness.

Let us realize where our responsibilities lie. It is the job of the Holy Spirit to convict the world of sin (John 16:8) not ours. God does not demand of us that we be without fault either. All the Christian is expected to do is to present a proper behavior before those he meets (1 Peter 3:1–2). Christ is adequately able to perform the conversions.

The exclusivist Christian may say “We must gather together or perish in the world,” but the mature Christian says “we must gather together the world into our parish.”² If we do, we can have the real fellowship that Christ wants us to have. Fill up your desire for fellowship by looking towards your own families, your own neighborhoods and communities, and don't forget to meet with those of like religious faith when possible. It is a big world out there and your “neighbors” need you!

Ernest L. Martin, 1976
edited by David Sielaff



We are instructed to love our neighbors “as ourself,” which one of the basic commandments (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 5:43–48, 19:19, 22:39; Mark 12:28–34; Luke 10:27; Romans 13:9–10; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8). Self love is a given. We should love ourselves. It is good to love ourselves properly. Nevertheless, we cannot live for and to ourselves alone:

“For none of us lives to himself, and no man dies to himself. For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's.”

• *Romans 14:7*

“Look to yourselves, that you may not lose what you have worked for, but may win a full reward.”

• *2 John 1:8 (Revised Standard Version)*

Increasingly we will learn to stop living for ourselves alone, and begin living for others:

“For the love of Christ constrains us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but [live] unto him which died for them, and rose again.”

• *2 Corinthians 5:14–15*

By serving others we serve God and Christ. By living for others, we live unto Christ. Let us begin now. For you to do so will not only please God and benefit others, but it shall also give you (if your attitude is correct) great reward.

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2. Some use such an understanding as an excuse to participate in pagan holidays, rituals, and gatherings, doing things that others do or for sociability. We are told to **“Learn not the way of the heathen, ... For the customs of the people are vain”** (Jeremiah 10:2–3). The apostles Paul (1 Corinthians 10:14) and John (1 John 5:21) told Christians to keep from idols and idolatrous ways.