

What Does Fellowship Mean?

From the beginning of the New Testament era marked by the church born in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, the concept of fellowship and ministry within the local church is clearly seen both in church history as well as expounded in detail in the pages of the New Testament.

The book of Acts recounts the beginning:

Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Acts 2:41-42 (NKJ)

This short passage, while concise, is eminently instructive as to the nature and practice of the early church. It provides an outline of the pattern which God has designed for His church which the epistles later amplify and develop.

The Requirements for Fellowship

1. Trust and Obey (*Then those who gladly **received** his word were **baptized**...*)
In contemporary times, even as in the days of the early church, the local assembly is to be comprised of those who have trusted in the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ (the "received" of Acts 2:41 is synonymous with "believed," cf John 1:12) and have been baptized. While baptism is not a requirement for entrance into the universal church and as such neither should it be for the local church, nevertheless it is a natural and expected step of obedience for the new Christian. In other words, the normal pattern for incorporation into fellowship in the local assembly is to receive those who have trusted in Christ and who have been baptized in His Name.
2. Sound Doctrine (*they continued steadfastly in the **apostles' doctrine***)
In this same passage we likewise find that the Christian should maintain sound doctrine. While certainly minor differences may exist concerning peripheral aspects of doctrine, historically five fundamentals have been affirmed as essentials of the faith:
 - The inspiration of the Scriptures
 - The deity of Christ
 - The virgin birth
 - Salvation by grace through faith in the substitutionary atonement
 - The Second Coming of Christ

These doctrinal principles, as a minimum, must be acknowledged and believed by those in fellowship at South Plains Bible Chapel.

3. Holy Living (*It is written, "**Be holy, for I am holy**"--1 Peter 1:16*)
Although not specifically addressed in Acts 2:41-42, other portions of Scripture teach yet a third requirement for fellowship in the local church, that is, a consistent Christian walk without serious moral offense. The Bible declares the local church to be the temple of God, with particular emphasis placed on the individual Christian's duty to maintain the holiness of God's institution (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). Those who flagrantly disregard the Bible's call to purity and obedience are to be removed from fellowship (1 Corinthians 5).

The Responsibilities of Fellowship

1. Shared lives through attendance
The Book of Acts describes the first local churches as comprised of Christians who "*steadfastly continued...*" These words are especially significant in light of the persecutions which were shortly to befall them (Acts 8:1). In spite of the extreme danger, the early Christians showed a remarkable dedication to meeting with their fellow believers and sharing their lives with one another. Attendance at the meetings of the church was understood as an essential aspect for their personal growth as well as ministry within the family of believers. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews reiterates

this important truth: *not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together...but exhorting one another* (Hebrews 10:25).

Interestingly, the breaking of bread is among the four activities in Acts 2:41-42 emphasized as integral to normal church life (*And they continued steadfastly...in the breaking of bread*). Although this expression of corporate worship is oftentimes neglected in contemporary Christianity, at South Plains Bible Chapel we believe that in modern times just as much as in biblical days God seeks those *who worship Him in spirit and truth* (John 4:23). As a result we worship the Lord in the breaking of bread every week and strongly encourage all those who are in fellowship to join with us.

2. Submission to the direction of the leadership
The Christian in fellowship places himself under the godly guidance and discipline of the elders and leaders of the church. The book of Hebrews exhorts the Christian to: *Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves, for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it joy, and now with grief; for that is unprofitable for you.* (Hebrews 13:17)
3. Sharing financially
The New Testament metaphor most frequently employed for the church is that of a family. The Bible teaches that an individual's first responsibility is to care for his own family (1 Timothy 5:8). The same principle applies in the spiritual sense. Although certainly there are many causes worthy of support, the Christian's primary responsibility is to his own church.

The Privileges of Fellowship

1. Incorporation into a loving, caring body
Acts 2:41-42 contains the first usage of a term vital to the Christian's spiritual well-being and growth: *And they continued steadfastly in...fellowship*. The word fellowship is translated from the Greek *koinonia* meaning "to hold things in common." Paul describes the Christian concept of *koinonia* in his epistle to the Philippians: (be) like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. (Philippians 2:2).

Koinonia is the expression of local church life in which God has called us to love and care for one another as members of a family. This is shown in diverse and encompassing ways such as mutual support (Galatians 6:2), edification (1 Thessalonians 5:8), and love (1 Thessalonians 4:9). Paul declares: *If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it* (1 Corinthians 12:26).
2. Opportunity for service
God has gifted each Christian in a specific way for the purpose of glorifying His Name and for the furthering of His plans for the church and for the world. The principle instrument for the outworking of the individual's spiritual gift is the local church. *But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all* (1 Corinthians 12:7).
3. Spiritual Care
God has designed the local church to be governed and led by a group of men divinely chosen by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28). The Bible admonishes these elders to watch and shepherd those who have been entrusted to their care as those who will give an account (Hebrews 13:17). The elders of South Plains Bible Chapel take this responsibility seriously and seek to diligently protect, guide, and equip the Christians whom God has called into fellowship in the assembly.
4. Exercise of Priesthood
In Old Testament times a distinct class of persons (those of the tribe of Levi) was appointed to offer sacrifices and to mediate between God and men. Following the death and resurrection of Christ and as illustrated by the rent veil, God has now declared that every believer in Christ is to be a priest to God (1 Peter 2:5, 9). Among those "sacrifices" which the Christian may offer are those of praise (1 Peter 2:5) and thanksgiving (Hebrews 13:15). In contrast to the Levitical order, every member of the local fellowship is encouraged to function in a priestly manner (offering praise, worship, and prayers to God) excepting only that the audible expression of worship (apart from singing) is restricted to the brethren.