

Fellowship Between Christians and Churches

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“Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: for he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds.” (2 Jn. 9-11)

“Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.” (2 Tim. 2:19)

“Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? and what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? and what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty” (2 Cor. 6:14-18).

1.

Separation from the False, Fellowship with the True

All true Christians and sound local churches must remain absolutely separate from all false Christians and false churches, having no spiritual fellowship with them. This is the Christian’s sacred duty before God. Fellowship must never be maintained at the expense of purity of doctrine and holy practice.¹

In our day false Christians and churches abound. There are very, very few true believers and sound churches of Christ. All over the world the Lord’s people find themselves very isolated from other brethren in the Lord. And questions then arise: what biblical principles should guide us when it comes to fellowship between Christians and churches? And what about true churches which are not *precisely* the same as us in all particulars? Which doctrines and practices, if any, may we overlook for the sake of fellowship, and which ones are essential for fellowship to be maintained?

These are serious questions in the minds of serious Christians, desiring to please their Lord in all things. But many struggle to find answers. After all, this was not a problem in the early Church! The apostolic age was not plagued with a multitude of false churches and denominations. In that age there was brotherly fellowship between the churches of God, and between individual Christians from different churches. The apostles established local churches wherever people were converted, and the members of those churches all continued in the same apostolic doctrine (Acts 2:42). John Dagg correctly said, “A happy intercourse might subsist between the churches, if they were all walking in the Spirit, sound in faith, correct in order, and careful in discipline. Such a state of things existed, to a great extent, in apostolic times. Christian men passed from one country to another, and found, in every place, that those who professed the name of Christ were of one heart and one soul. The members of one local church were, in general, welcomed to the fellowship of every other church.”² It was only as time went by that false churches began to appear and multiply.

Today the situation is very different. How, then, are the teachings of the New Testament to be applied to a day such as ours? Indeed, what are the teachings, exhortations and warnings which should guide us and inform our thinking and our approach to such an important and weighty matter as Christian fellowship, in this ecumenical age of abounding wickedness, false churches, false brethren and heretical doctrines?

It is the duty of Christians to joyfully receive in the Lord, into their hearts and affections, those who give evidence that they are brothers and sisters in Christ. This does not mean denominations should be formed. Denominationalism is unbiblical. It did not exist in the apostolic age. Each local church should be autonomous and independent, subject only to the Lord and His Word (Acts 14:23; 20:32). But even so, each sound church should enjoy fellowship with other sound churches, wherever opportunity exists. This communion between true brethren and churches should consist of a number of things: prayer for one another (Eph.6:18); assisting one another financially and in other ways (Acts 11:27-30); and wherever practical, even enjoying fellowship together from time to time – either by individuals from one sound church visiting another when they are in the vicinity (Acts 20:6,7, Rom.16:1,2), or even by two or more sound churches, if close enough geographically, coming together for fellowship on occasion. All true believers in Christ are part of the same body of Christ, the Church universal. Although they meet in different localities as members of particular local churches, they are brethren, one in Christ.

But the key words here are “true” and “sound”: true Christians, sound in the faith; true churches, sound in the faith. If they name the Name of Christ, do they abide in the doctrine of Christ (2 Jn. 9-11)? And do they depart from iniquity (2 Tim. 2:19)? These two questions are all-important.

2.

Reasons for Differences Between True Believers and Churches

This can be extremely confusing and troubling for many a child of God. Here we are not considering the obviously false churches, of which there are so many in our day, but rather those which appear to consist of true brethren, and to be genuinely seeking to maintain sound doctrine and practice – and yet which hold to certain doctrines and practices which are not biblical.

That which troubles and perplexes thinking Christians as they contemplate the reality of the differences which so often exist between churches and Christians, is: why has the Lord permitted this situation to develop? Why are not all the Lord’s true churches *exactly the same* in all matters of faith and practice? The Lord Jesus Christ is the great Head of His Church, and its great Shepherd. He is sovereign and all-powerful. Why then these differences?

There are reasons for this state of affairs, which we are able to discover as we examine what the Word of God teaches.

Reason No.1: No Infallible Pope, but God’s Infallible Word

First: the Lord, in His infinite wisdom, did not leave His people with an infallible *pope* to reign over them, but with His infallible *Word*.

It was not the Lord’s will to create a worldwide hierarchical structure, with one man ruling over it from the top. Nor was it His will for a group of men to do so either, like the board of directors of a company.

Before the New Testament was complete, the Lord Jesus Christ raised up the apostles to lead His Church during that period when the Scriptures were still being written. They, and the New Testament prophets, being inspired by the Holy Spirit, revealed the will of the Lord to His people. As it is written, “And they [i.e. the believers] continued stedfastly *in the apostles’ doctrine*” (Acts 2:42). They were “built upon the [doctrinal] *foundation* of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone” (Eph. 2:20).

The apostles and prophets taught the churches by proclaiming the truths which they received from Christ Himself. And in the process of time their teaching came to be written down as the New Testament Scriptures. When, therefore, the apostles passed away and the apostolic age (the first century AD) came to a close, they left behind a complete body of teaching, which we call the New Testament Scriptures. The apostles’ teaching was now in written, permanent form, divinely inspired

by the Holy Spirit. “That which is perfect” had come (1 Cor. 13:8-12)!³

This means that although apostles and prophets are no longer given, we still have the very same teaching which the early Christians had. It is contained in the pages of the New Testament. It is perfect, complete and sufficient (2 Tim. 3:15-17). And we are to continue in this apostolic doctrine, just as the early Church did (Acts 2:42).

The Lord, who knows what is best for His people, has given His Church His infallible Word and His infallible Holy Spirit. And no doubt He did it this way so that His people would not rely on a man, or on man’s fleshly wisdom, but solely upon the Holy Spirit to teach them through His Word, which is perfectly adequate (2 Tim. 3:16). Each Christian is to carefully and diligently search and study the Bible for himself (Jn. 5:39; 2 Tim. 3:15). If the Church had been given some man as a pope, to rule from the top down and to declare what is true and what is false, there would be no need for any Christian to read and study for himself. But this would not be good for us. We need to search and study the Word ourselves, in order to grow spiritually (1 Pet. 2:2).

Reason No.2: Christians Growing All the Time

A second reason is that all Christians are growing in grace and in the knowledge of Christ, and are at different stages of growth in spiritual matters. 2 Pet. 3:18 says, “But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.” Just as a child grows in the knowledge of earthly, natural things, so a child of God grows in the knowledge of spiritual truth. He grows in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, His Gospel, and His will. 1 Jn. 2:12-14 says that some believers are “little children” in the faith, some are “young men”, and some are “fathers”. This has nothing to do with one’s age in years, but with spiritual maturity.

Within a local church there must of necessity be full agreement between the members. A local church simply cannot function properly without such unanimity. This agreement between the members is stated in 1 Cor.1:10: “Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.” The same truth is taught throughout the New Testament. Full agreement between the members of a local church is essential to the peace of the church.

But there is a difference between full *understanding* of various doctrines, and the *acceptance* of them. When we say that there must be full agreement between the members of a local church, this is not to say that each and every member will understand all the doctrines of the faith to the same extent, for all are at different levels of growth and understanding. What may be very clear to one is not always as clear to another. Not every member will understand every doctrine to the same extent; but none should oppose them.

And since this is true even within a local church – that the members are at different stages of spiritual growth and understanding – it is certainly true when we compare believers between one church and another! The members of a local church all hear and learn the same things; they receive the same biblical instruction, week by week; yet even so they are all at different stages of growth. How, then, are we to expect all true churches, separated from one another, with their own pastors, backgrounds, etc., etc., to be precisely the same in all points of doctrine and practice?

Reason No.3: Imbibing False Teachings

There is a third reason why there are differences between churches. After the apostolic age, as time went by corrupt, false, counterfeit “churches” arose, holding to various false doctrines and practices; and some of these errors came to be held even by genuine Christians and churches. And because all believers are at different stages of growth, some make better progress at ridding themselves of these false doctrines and false practices than others do.

Reason No.4: Teaching Love and Patience

And there is a fourth reason. It is to teach all true believers to *love all other* true believers, and to be patient with them, even if they differ between themselves on some things. These are constant lessons we need to learn.

The Proper Balance

Obviously, then – since for the reasons given above, we are not to expect full agreement on every single point between all true churches – if there is going to be fellowship between true churches we have to tolerate in others, to some extent, what we would not tolerate in ourselves. We must never turn our backs on the truth which the Lord has made it known to us, but we must recognise that other Christians may not as yet understand all things precisely as we do. We are all learning and growing in the Lord. This is just the reality of it.

We must oppose all who teach damnable heresy, or whose conduct is ungodly, for they are not true brethren. But wherever we find a church which is, overall, doctrinally sound, whose members are striving to live godly in Christ and obey the commandments of the Lord, we must act according to the judgment of charity and treat it as a true church of Christ. We are certainly able to enjoy fellowship with them, recognising them joyfully as our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Whenever the Gospel is truly preached we must rejoice that this is so, even if the one preaching it does not as yet understand all things precisely as we do. This is seen from Mk. 9:38-40: “And John answered him, saying, Master, we saw one casting out devils in thy name, and he followeth not us: and we forbade him, because he followeth not us. But Jesus said, Forbid him not: for there is no man which shall do a miracle in my name, that can lightly speak evil of me. For he that is not against us is on our part.” This man was obviously a disciple of the Lord Jesus, even though he was not a member of the apostolic band. Many “follow not with us” who are yet genuine servants of Christ, and we must rejoice in their work for the Lord, even if there are some things about it which are defective. After all, we are not without errors and faults ourselves!

This does not mean that we should not expose the errors of one who is a brother in Christ. Error must be opposed no matter where it is found (Gal. 2:11). Nevertheless, even where we have to oppose a true Christian’s doctrinal errors, we are still to rejoice for the truth he does preach.

We will at times have doctrinal differences with other believers. But even so, if they are truly converted, giving evidence of being our brethren in the Lord, fighting the same foe, we are on the same side – the Lord’s side – and we should praise the Lord for it. They are our brethren, albeit “brethren in the other ship” (Lk. 5:6,7)?

We must be zealous for the truth, holding it fast and not budging an inch in defending it (Jude v.3; Phil. 1:17; Tit. 1:9). But at the same time we must be big enough to recognise that the Lord has His true followers out there, who are growing in grace and in the knowledge of Christ (2 Pet. 3:18) just as we are, but who are at different levels of understanding on various issues. We must be wise enough to “judge between cattle and cattle” (Ezek. 34:22); to discern the difference between the true and the false brother.

3. What is Essential for Fellowship Between Christians and Churches?

Accepting, then, that all Christians are at different stages of understanding and growth, what is essential for fellowship between churches and Christians, and what is not? In other words, where do we draw the line?

In these evil ecumenical times, when all kinds of professing churches are holding “fellowship” with one another, ignoring differences of doctrine and practice, enthusiastically holding hands and saying that doctrine does not matter and all that matters is love, it is not surprising that many of the Lord’s flock, desiring to remain separate from such satanic counterfeits of true unity, are confused as to where to draw the line.

It is necessary to ascertain, as far as possible, who are *genuine* Christians and who are not. We must “try the spirits whether they are of God” (1 Jn. 4:1). If they are not, then our duty is clear: we must not join in fellowship with them. But if they are, then we must receive them as brethren, even though they may not be precisely in agreement with us on every single matter of doctrine and practice.

Two tests must be applied: the test of doctrine, and the test of conduct (or what the Bible calls fruit). “Free intercourse and mutual confidence between the churches is very desirable, and every one should labor to promote it; but purity of doctrine and practice should never be sacrificed to effect it” (John Dagg). These are two sides of the same coin, and we must not focus on only one. Many appear to live outwardly godly lives who are heretics in doctrine; and many are sound in doctrine who live ungodly lives.

4.

Doctrines Essential for Salvation Are Essential for Fellowship

There are certain doctrines of the faith which are essential to be known and believed for salvation; and thus they are also essential for fellowship between professing Christians. If a man rejects these, he is not as yet a true Christian – it does not matter what other truths he may hold, nor how godly his life may appear to be.

But let us be clear. This does not mean that we are saved by an intellectual acceptance of certain doctrines! We are saved solely by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:8,9). But it is Christ as He is revealed in the Gospel, and thus there *are* doctrines which are basic to the Gospel, and without which there is no Gospel at all. A person must have at least some understanding of the basic truths of the Gospel, pertaining to the nature of God, the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, repentance toward God, and faith in Christ.

Rom. 6:17 says, “But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you.” We believe in Christ unto salvation – yet this verse says we have obeyed from the heart a form of doctrine! John Gill has some excellent comments on this: “By *the form of doctrine*, is meant the Gospel, which is the *doctrine* of the Scriptures, of Christ and his apostles, and is sound and according to godliness; and is a *form*, or contains a summary and compendium of truths, and is a pattern or exemplar, according to which ministers are to preach, and people to hear and receive.... This form of doctrine was *obeyed* by them; by which is meant, not a mere obedience to the ordinances of the Gospel; nor a bare hearing of the doctrines of it, and giving an assent unto them; but an embracing of them by faith for themselves, so as to lay hold on Christ in them, submit to his righteousness therein revealed, and be willing to be saved by him, and him alone, in his own way; and this is the obedience of faith... And this obedience did not lie in words, or proceed on mercenary views, and in an hypocritical way; but was *from the heart*; and was real and sincere: and good reason there is why a hearty, cheerful, and voluntary obedience should be yielded to the Gospel”.⁴

To believe with saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, we have to know who He truly is, and what man’s true and terrible condition really is. “For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Rom. 10:13) – yes; but so many quote this verse and ignore the next one: “How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard?” (v.14). In order to believe in Christ, *men must know who Christ is*. This means they must know the truth regarding Christ and His great salvation, i.e. the *true doctrine* about Christ!

1 Cor.15:1-4 says: “Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; by which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory [“hold fast”, as the marginal note puts it] what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures”. In these words we have the Gospel presented in a nutshell. It is only briefly stated, and there is certainly more to it than this, but even so these verses contain essential aspects of the Gospel: that Christ died for sins (which means it is necessary to know who Christ truly is; what sin is; etc.); that He was buried, and resurrected (which must include the basic reasons for his death, burial and resurrection); etc.

When the Ethiopian eunuch desired to know who Isaiah was prophesying about in his great book, Acts 8:35 says, “Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus.” Jesus Christ must be preached to the lost! And this takes time. Philip’s sermon was not some short, “Just believe in Jesus” nonsense, as is so commonly preached by many today. He *began* at the Scripture in Isaiah, but he did not stop there. He went on, preaching fully and comprehensively about the Lord Jesus Christ, His Person, work, etc.

And faith in *this* Christ – the Christ revealed in Scripture – is necessary: “And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water: what doth hinder me to be baptized? And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God” (vv.36-37). This man believed with all his heart in the One Philip had been preaching about in such detail. He believed the truth about Christ – which means he believed “the doctrine of Christ” (2 Jn. 9). He could not have been saved without believing the truth about Him. For there are numerous false Christs, but only one true Christ of God. Ask a Papist if he believes in Jesus Christ and he will say yes – but it is “another Jesus” (2 Cor. 11:4), a false Christ, not the Christ of God. Ask a member of the Jehovah’s Witnesses cult, a Muslim, or even a Satanist, if they believe in Jesus Christ, and all will answer yes – but not one of them believes in the true Christ as He is revealed in Scripture.

When the Philippian jailor asked Paul and Silas, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” they replied, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house” (Acts 16:30,31). But again this was not merely some brief statement, given in a vacuum and without any context to it. For it goes on to say, “And they spake unto him the word of the Lord, and to all that were in his house” (v.32). They properly explained to Him who Christ is and what He came to do. They preached those doctrines about Christ, sin, salvation, etc., which are necessary to be known and believed for salvation. To believe in Christ, to truly and savingly believe in Him, *we must know who He is*.

Thus there *are* doctrines which must to some extent be known and believed before one may be saved. They are such doctrines as the following: that all men are dead in their sins, deserving of hell; that there is only one true God; that this one true God exists in three divine Persons (the Trinity); that God the Father gave His only begotten Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to die in the place of sinners; that Christ is both God and man; that He is the only way to the Father, and eternal life, and there is no salvation in any but Him; that Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life, died on the cross in the place of sinners, rose again from the dead, and ascended back to heaven, where He lives forever; that doing good works will not earn salvation for anyone; that to be saved a man must truly repent of his sins, and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ with all his heart.

And for fellowship to occur, there *must* be agreement on these doctrines!

However, again it is vital to be crystal clear. All this is not to say that a man must have a *full and perfectly clear* understanding of all these things before he can be saved. Even after many years of walking with the Lord, believers are still learning and growing daily. “A perfect knowledge of Christ is not necessary to true faith: otherwise true faith would be impossible” (John Dagg). The basics must be known and understood; but the finer points and the deeper aspects of these essential doctrines may

not be known before conversion.

A man must know, for example, that God is a Trinity; but in order to be saved he does not need to have a perfect grasp of *all* aspects of the great doctrine of the Trinity. That would be expecting too much, and would be utterly unreasonable. After all, even a young child may be saved (2 Tim.3:14)! Yet a child is unable to understand the finer points of the deep things of God. But if he is truly saved he will receive them as he matures in understanding. And this is true of any other believer as well. Salvation is the same for adult or child: by God's grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.

5.

Other Doctrines Essential for Fellowship

There are also doctrines which, although not essential to be known and believed for salvation, and which may not be understood until after conversion, are nevertheless of such a nature that no true child of God, *once he is properly taught them*, will reject or oppose them. They are doctrines which have to do (for example) with the being of God in His three Persons, the Scriptures, salvation, etc. There is in fact no true Christianity without them – and therefore they are essential for fellowship to occur as well. A man who claims to be saved, and yet rejects them once he has been taught them, must not be received as a Christian. “Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, *hath not God*. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, *receive him not* into your house, neither bid him God speed: for he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds” (2 Jn. 9-11).

It is one thing if someone is merely ignorant about such doctrines of the faith, due to lack of teaching. No Christian on earth has perfect knowledge of all the truth of God's Word, and each one is learning and growing all the time. As was stated above, even a child may be saved from his sins (2 Tim. 3:15), and yet children are unable to grasp and understand many of “the deep things of God” (1 Cor. 2:10). But it is quite another thing if one who professes to be a Christian *has* been taught these doctrines of the faith, yet still rejects them and opposes them. His rejection of God's Word reveals a heart far from God. The child of God loves Christ and His Gospel, and therefore longs to learn more and more about the Lord and His truth, and to grow in grace and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3:18). He will always welcome further knowledge. “A perfect knowledge of Christ is not necessary to true faith: otherwise true faith would be impossible.... But the true believer delights in Christ, just so far as he has knowledge of him; and desires to know more of him, that he may be more filled with his love” (Dagg). His prayer is like that of Elihu in Job 34:32: “that which I see not teach thou me.”

Let us consider just a few examples.

The Divine Inspiration of the Scriptures

There is the doctrine of the divine inspiration of the Holy Scriptures. One does not have to clearly grasp the truth about precisely how the Bible was divinely inspired before one can be converted to Christ. But will a converted man reject and deny the truth on this matter, once he is taught it? Of course not. To do so would reveal an unregenerate heart. For it is from the Bible alone that we derive our knowledge of the true Gospel. If the Bible is not divinely inspired, then we have no infallible standard, and one man's teaching is as good as another's. And if we do not know precisely which books are inspired, then we may not yet have them all, and of those which we do have we may be mistaken about some of them. Nothing would then be certain.

Therefore, spiritual fellowship with those who deny this truth would be sinful fellowship.

The Fuller Revelation of the Person and Work of Christ

There are doctrines pertaining to the Person and work of Christ our Lord and Saviour, the *deeper* aspects of which a man would not necessarily know before the Lord draws him to Himself – such as

Christ's eternal Sonship, to give just one example. But having been converted, once he is properly taught this truth would he then reject it? No! To do so would be to embrace heresy even when the truth has been presented to him. And should fellowship be maintained with such a one? No, certainly not.

The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit

There is the truth regarding the Person and work of God the Holy Spirit. Before a man is converted, he may not know all that much about the Holy Spirit. After all, we are saved by faith in *Christ*, and it is Christ, in His Gospel, who is preached to the sinner. Although the Holy Spirit is mightily at work in our salvation, one simply may not know that much about Him before being drawn to Christ. Some men Paul met in Ephesus were true Christians (Acts 19:1); but they said, "We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost" (v.2). Now they had certainly heard of the Person of the Holy Spirit, from the Old Testament Scriptures and from John the Baptist's teaching. But they knew nothing about His extraordinary and miraculous gifts, which were given in those times. Their knowledge of the Holy Spirit and His work was partial and incomplete, but they were still true believers.

But should anyone, professing conversion, who denies the Deity, Personality or work of the Holy Spirit, be accepted as a Christian? Certainly not! For He is a divine Person within the Godhead. And without His work none can be saved, for He applies the saving benefits of Christ's death to the soul. Spiritual fellowship with such a person would be contrary to the will of the Lord.

The Doctrines of Sovereign Grace

Then there are those doctrines which are known as the doctrines of sovereign grace: predestination and election, total depravity, Christ's particular redemption, God's irresistible grace, and the final perseverance of the saints. Arminianism is the name given to those who deny these truths. It is the predominant theology of our times, and is false. Arminians claim that man has a completely free will; that Christ died for all men and women without exception; that a person may choose, of his own free will and at any time he likes, to follow Christ; and that a true Christian is able to lose his salvation at any time if he is not careful.

These are serious doctrinal errors. And this being so, there are some who assert that no Arminian is a true Christian. But this is an error. A man may indeed be converted, even though he may not as yet understand all aspects of the full and free salvation which the Lord has wrought. This point has been made above.

A man may be brought under conviction of sin, repent, and call upon the Lord Jesus Christ to save him, with that repentance and saving faith which are the gifts of God to His elect. But because of false teaching he receives, or no real teaching at all, he may not understand the restricted, limited meaning of the word, "world", as applying only to the elect; or the true meaning of election, irresistible grace, etc. A full understanding of these things, however, is not an essential requirement for salvation. We are saved by faith in Jesus Christ, after all – not by the amount of scriptural knowledge in our heads!

Essentially the sinner must know something of who Christ is; something of the lost state of all men without Him; and that salvation is only by faith in Him. He needs to know this much, at least, because salvation is by faith in Christ, and how shall he believe in Him of whom he knows nothing? But more than this he does not have to know in order to be saved. He has to be *taught*. He has to *grow* in the knowledge of Christ (2 Pet. 3:18).

Let us suppose the following scenario. We meet a man, a professing Christian, who is Arminian in theology. He has never been properly taught the truth about the doctrines of grace. And yet he gives every indication of being a true believer, a godly man, sound in the faith in many other respects, a man who loves the Lord and desires to live in a way that is pleasing to Him, forsaking the world.

But once the full truth is properly taught to him, a true Christian will not remain an Arminian forever.

He will come to receive and embrace the truth. It may take some time, depending on how deeply he imbibed the error, or how soundly the truth is taught to him. But in time he will come to accept it with joy. For the doctrines of sovereign grace are an integral part of the entire doctrine of salvation. Salvation itself is impossible if any one of them is not true. Therefore, if they are rejected after they have been properly expounded, the truth of the Gospel is itself being rejected. And the one who rejects it reveals that he is not a true brother in Christ, and we are not to fellowship with him in spiritual matters or in worship.

The Cessation of Extraordinary Gifts and the Bible's All-Sufficiency

What about those within the Pentecostal/Charismatic Movement? Are they all still dead in their sins? Or is it possible that some of them are truly converted?

There are huge numbers of people in this movement who are so immersed in so many false doctrines that they do not even possess a rudimentary understanding of the most basic and fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith, necessary to be known and believed for salvation. Sound doctrine means little or nothing to them. All they are concerned with is experience. There are those who deny the Trinity; others proclaim baptismal regeneration; others teach that Jesus suffered in hell, was tortured by demons, and had to be born again; etc., etc. Such people are by no means true Christians. They are heretics and cultists, just as much as Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses are.

However, there are a few – a very few – who hold to many fundamental doctrines of the faith but who are essentially identical with other Arminians. They differ with them when it comes to such specifically Pentecostal doctrines as the false “baptism of the Spirit” and their false assertion that miraculous gifts are still given today; but in almost all other respects they are essentially Arminian. Therefore what is applicable to Arminians (see above) is applicable to them as well.

Certainly they are in error concerning the gifts of the Spirit, etc. But these are not what the Bible calls “*damnable* heresies” (2 Pet. 2:1). What one believes about speaking in tongues or miraculous healing, for example, is not essential to salvation. One does not go to heaven or hell based on what one believes about such things, even if such beliefs are erroneous.

But what about their denial of the Bible's all-sufficiency? After all, when one accepts so-called tongues-speaking and prophecies as being messages from the Lord for today, in effect one is denying the all-sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures. And this is a very serious matter.

Again, we have to make a clear distinction between those within this movement who are heretical on various points and clearly unregenerate, and those who, although mistaken in their views of the gifts of the Spirit, are simply untaught or falsely-taught Arminians, among whom some might be truly converted.

Now this latter class of Pentecostals have always asserted that the Bible is divinely inspired and is all-sufficient. Although they believe that prophecies are still given today, they maintain that these are not absolutely essential to anyone, but are a secondary type of revelation, subordinate to Scripture. This is very inconsistent, it is extremely poor biblical exegesis and thoroughly incorrect doctrine. But in itself it does not mean a man is necessarily unconverted, and some who are true Christians may hold to it out of much ignorance, being weak in the Scriptures and babes in understanding, at least for a time, until properly instructed in the truth.

But until they forsake Pentecostalism, fellowship is impossible. It would be absolutely contrary to God's will.

6.

Holiness of Life an Essential Fruit of Salvation, Thus Essential for Fellowship

Then there is all that the Bible teaches about holiness of life, separation from the world, etc. As we

saw previously, *conduct* is just as important as sound doctrine. Is holiness optional for the child of God? Absolutely not. When it comes to Christian conduct, a man who lives an ungodly, worldly life is simply not to be received as a Christian, no matter what he claims to believe. God's Word is absolutely clear: "Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity" (2 Tim. 2:19); "let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1); for "*without [holiness] no man shall see the Lord*" (Heb. 12:14); "God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation *through sanctification of the Spirit* and belief of the truth" (2 Thess. 2:13); "Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God" (Jas. 4:4); "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 Jn. 2:15); "For a good tree bringeth not forth corrupt fruit; neither doth a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. For every tree is known by his own fruit. For of thorns men do not gather figs, nor of a bramble bush gather they grapes.... And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say? "(Lk. 6:43,44,46).

Christians are holy people. They obey their Lord. They live so as to please Him. They depart from that which is sinful. They live lives separated from the world and its ways. When a man claims to be a Christian, yet lives an unholy life, he is not a Christian. That is all there is to it.

It is true that every child of God is always learning and growing, which means we are not to expect *perfect* conformity to all the commandments of the Lord. After all, we ourselves are far from such perfection, and indeed sinless perfection will only be a reality in heaven. But even so we must expect to see, in any true child of God, a holy life, and a desire to be even more conformed to Christ and His Word; and thus a humble submission to His Word, a willingness to be taught more of the Lord's ways, and a ready and willing desire to repent whenever he learns that what he has been doing is not right before God.

Will a woman who is truly converted continue to dress immodestly? Will a truly converted man continue to use filthy language? Will a child of God live as a drunkard, or in fornication, or in sodomy? Will he defend and justify such evil practices? It is impossible. And these are just a very few examples. The point is that the Holy Spirit works within every child of God, that he may be conformed to the image of Christ in all things. Believers are holy people. They separate themselves from the world and its ways.

7.

Other Doctrines of the Faith

In Matt.28:19,20 the Lord Jesus said, "Go ye therefore, and teach [make disciples of] all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you". We have looked at the doctrines essential to salvation, and also at other doctrines which have to do with the being of God, the salvation of men, etc., which a true Christian will embrace as he is taught and increases in understanding.

Lastly, there are those which have to do (for example) with matters of church government; interpretation of prophecy; what are called the Lord's positive commandments (i.e. not His absolute moral commandments); etc. And on these things brethren in the Lord do not always see eye to eye.

For example, some churches practice infant "baptism" instead of true believers' baptism; some practice open communion instead of strict communion at the Lord's supper; some hold to a particular form of church government, and some to another; some belong to a denomination instead of being independent; some follow what the Scripture says about head coverings and some do not; some hold to a certain interpretation regarding the fulfilment of prophecy, and some to another; etc., etc.

The mere fact that someone has a false understanding of any of these doctrines does not, in itself, mean he is unregenerate and unconverted, or that we cannot fellowship with them. All Christians are learning and growing spiritually all the time, and each one at a different pace. This is why the Lord gives the churches teachers! They are to teach the "all things" of which Christ spoke. And this is why

we are not to expect all Christians to be precisely the same in knowledge and understanding. For this reason, concerning doctrines such as these we must be tolerant and patient, and receive such people as brethren when they give us reason to believe they are, even though they may not see eye to eye with us on all these matters.

But there is a mystery here. Let us take the doctrine of baptism as a very glaring example. Many paedobaptists have been genuine, godly Christians, even though they have erred on the matter of baptism. Now when a man rejects the biblical teaching of believers' baptism and claims it is right to "baptize" babies, and yet we receive him as a brother in Christ because in other matters he is sound in doctrine and godly in conduct; why do we not receive another man as a brother in Christ who (for example) rejects the biblical teaching of the Trinity, or the eternal Sonship of Christ? After all, the teaching on baptism appears so straightforward compared with the doctrine of the Trinity, which appears much more complex. Why then may we at times receive as a brother the one who does not hold to what appears easier to grasp, but will reject as a brother the one who does not hold to what appears far more difficult?

The reason is that such truths as the eternal Sonship, the Trinity, etc., lie at the very *heart* of the Gospel of Christ. These are among the great matters of the Gospel. Without them there is no Gospel at all. The soul of every true believer delights in them, according to the knowledge of them to which he has attained. He receives them with faith and joy: such great truths as the being of God, the Person and work of Christ, salvation by grace through faith, etc. These are aspects of the "doctrine of Christ" (2 Jn. 9) which, if rejected, reveal that a man is not a true Christian, as we have seen.

Other doctrines of our faith may to our natural reason seem as if they should be easier to understand and accept, but often the believer is in more darkness on these than on the ones which are more difficult, yet which are a fundamental part of the "doctrine of Christ". That this is often the case may seem to natural reason a strange thing, and so it is; for we are dealing with spiritual matters, not natural ones.

This was clearly understood by earlier generations of believers. The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith, for example, correctly stated: "All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all (2 Pet.3:16); yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, by the unlearned, in a due use of ordinary means, may attain to a sufficient understanding of them (Psa.19:7; 119:130).

This is the reason why (for example) a Christian may clearly perceive that baptismal regeneration is a damnable heresy, but may hold to the error of infant baptism all his life! He rejects the damnable heresy that a baby can be regenerated by water; yet he does not see through the heresy that baptism is not for babies at all. Why is he able to clearly see the one, but not the other? It can only be attributed to the grace of God, enlightening him on that which is essential, but leaving him in darkness (though natural reason would assume it would be easier to understand) concerning that which is not essential to salvation. Both baptismal regeneration and infant baptism are heresies. But the former is a damnable heresy, the other is not.

8.

When Some Members of a True Church are Unregenerate, and Hold to Heresy

Even in a true local church there may at times be some members who sinfully hold to heretical and damnable false doctrine. For example, some in the church at Corinth were actually denying the doctrine of the resurrection from the dead (1 Cor. 15:12)! But where this is the case, the *church itself* may still be a true church of Christ, because it officially maintains and proclaims sound doctrine, despite having some within it who reject the truth (although they should *not* be there, and should be removed from membership once they are known and if they persist in such heresy).

In addition, a church may officially maintain a number of false doctrines and practices, and yet *still be*, overall, a true church of Christ – depending what those false doctrines and practices are (as shown above).

Yes, either through lack of teaching, false teaching, or lack of watchfulness on the part of the pastors over the flocks, certain false doctrines may creep in, sinful practices may come to be overlooked, and unregenerate people may be accepted into membership. It may still be a true church of Christ, overall – but it is teetering! Let us be clear on this. It is on the very edge. What, then, should be done?

There is only one thing to be done: it must be urged to true repentance!

We are certainly not to fellowship with such a disgraceful assembly. Not while it is in such a state. The people there should be urged to repent or face the Lord's wrath (2 Cor.13:1,2,5). If the church repents, all is well; but if not it must be *shunned*, for the candlestick is removed. It must no longer be treated as a Christian church – for it is not.

In other words, we are to treat such an assembly as we would treat an individual who professes to be a Christian, but who maintains serious false doctrine and/or lives in an ungodly manner. He may be still dead in his sins, a false professor; or he may be a true Christian, albeit backslidden. We are to urge him to repentance. If he repents, he is to be received as a brother. If he does not, he is to be rejected as an unbeliever, regardless of the profession of faith he makes.

In Summary

In summary: to fellowship with other professing Christians and local churches, we must be certain of the following:

First, are they sound on the doctrines essential to be known and believed for salvation? This excludes the vast majority of churches in our day.

Second, are they also sound on those doctrines which have to do with the very being of God, the salvation of men, etc.? Again, this excludes the vast majority of churches today. If they are not, we must seek to teach them the truth. And if they reject the truth after hearing it, we are not to receive them as brethren.

Third, do they live holy lives, separate from what is of the world, the flesh and the devil? Once again, the vast majority do not.

It is one thing to accept that within such churches there may at times be a few true Christians, who are there through ignorance and lack of sound teaching. But any true Christians within them should be firmly exhorted to obey God and *separate from* such places. We should not be joining with them in fellowship! *Our* sole duty is to urge them to repentance and to separate, and *their* sole duty is to do so!

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ENDNOTES:

1. See *Separation from False Christians and Churches* (pamphlet), by Shaun Willcock, and *Separation from False Churches* (MP3), by Shaun Willcock. Bible Based Ministries, 2020. Both available as free downloads from our website: www.biblebasedministries.co.uk.
2. *Manual of Theology and Church Order*, by J.L. Dagg. Gano Books, Harrisonburg, Virginia, USA, 1982.
3. *That Which is Perfect* (MP3 series of sermons), by Shaun Willcock, Bible Based Ministries. Available freely on our website: www.biblebasedministries.co.uk.
4. *Exposition of the New Testament*, Vol. II, by John Gill. Commentary on Rom. 6:17. The Baptist Standard Bearer, Inc., Paris, Arkansas, USA, 1989 reprint.