

The Will of God Unites and Divides

Understanding the Will of God (Part 6)

Introduction

- A practical and debated doctrine faced by Christians is that of “fellowship,” which ironically has created much division in various churches.
- The designation that we will use to identify the specific error of overextending fellowship is “open fellowship.”
- In this study, we will examine the history and validity of the “open fellowship” concept, comparing it to the Bible and noting how it relates to the will of God.

Background

- While it is not within the scope of our study to fully defend the following concepts, these are essential to the discussion of fellowship:
 - Objective truth is real and attainable.
 - God has revealed His truth in the Bible, and it can be trusted and understood – Jn 17:17; 2 Tim 3:16; Eph 3:3-5.
 - Unity is possible and expected – Jn 17:20-21; 1 Cor 1:10.
- Without recognition of these foundational ideas, common understanding and real progress are impossible.

History

- The concept of “open fellowship” is not new but has merely been initiated by different specific issues.
- Christians have asked questions regarding the extent of biblical fellowship with major discussions occurring at pivotal times in “church history”:
 - Apostolic = Judaizers and Gnostics – see 2 Jn 10-11; 1 Jn 2:19
 - Reformation = Catholic-Protestant and Protestant-Protestant
 - Restoration = Christian-Sectarian and Christian-“Christian”
 - Postmodern = Christian-“Christian,” Christian-Sectarian, and Christian-Anything

The Nature of Truth

- Due to the influence of denominationalism and postmodernism, many do not recognize the existence of absolute truth but such is really self-defeating.
- It is vital, therefore, that we understand that absolute truth exists and naturally creates “lines of fellowship” (e.g. truth vs. error, right vs. wrong).
- The Bible claims to be the revelation of the truth of God (i.e. the will of God) that can be understood—even collectively – Jn 17:17; Eph 3:3-5; 1 Cor 1:10.

Biblical Fellowship

- We are not left to ourselves to determine the definition and extent of biblical fellowship but are directed by God Himself through the Scriptures.
- The word “fellowship” means “joint participation” and well-translates the words used in the New Testament (Gr “koinonia” and “metoche”) – see Acts 2:42; 2 Cor 6:14.
- “Fellowship,” by definition, therefore, requires commonality or sameness. Without this, authentic fellowship simply cannot exist.

Biblical Fellowship

- The New Testament uses the words for “fellowship” in the following senses:
 - secular or physical – Lk 5:7, 10; Heb 2:14
 - spiritual – 1 Jn 1:3; Acts 2:42; Rom 12:13; Phil 1:5; 3:10; 1 Cor 10:16
 - sinful – Eph 5:11; 2 Jn 11
- (Interestingly, there are no occasions where the word “fellowship” describes social interaction.)

Conclusions and Applications

- When we examine all of the New Testament passages that utilize the words for “fellowship,” we come to the following conclusions:
 - God does not fellowship sin – 2 Jn 9; Gal 1:8; 2 Cor 6:14.
 - Fellowship with God is only possible through Jesus Christ – Jn 14:6; 1 Jn 1:7-9.
 - We are expected to promote biblical fellowship – 1 Jn 1:3; 2:9.
 - We are not permitted to fellowship sin and error – 2 Cor 6:17; 2 Jn 10-11; Eph 5:11.

Conclusions and Applications

- Only when we agree on the revealed will of God (e.g. salvation, worship, work, organization) can we have fellowship with one another – 2 Jn 9-11; Eph 4:3-6.
- This does not mean that we agree on everything (permissive will) but that we agree on essential things (unchangeable and intended wills) – see Rom 14.
- If, after we have patiently taught others, they refuse to conform to the will of God, we must dissociate ourselves from them – Rom 16:17-18; 1 Cor 5:1-13; 2 Jn 9-11.

Conclusions and Applications

- It is not enough, however, simply to remove the rebellious, we must also promote fellowship in the local church. What, therefore, can each of us do?
 - All of us can learn to be more humble, gentle, patient, tolerant, and loving, promoting peace – Eph 4:1-2; see v 29.
 - All of us can learn to be more convicted and courageous, upholding the unity of the Spirit – Eph 4:3-6; see vv 14-15, 25-27.
 - All of us can learn to be more submissive and supportive of church leaders, being equipped by them for service – Eph 4:11-13.