

Fellowship

Module 3.8

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

John 13:34–35

It should come as no surprise that the biblical principles of “fellowship” are principles that the Charis Fellowship are deeply committed to. These principles not only direct how we interact with those inside our local churches, but also direct how we interact with other churches; both those inside the Charis Fellowship and within the broader Evangelical community.

In the English Standard Version (ESV), the word fellowship appears eight different times in the New Testament and based on this relatively small number of instances one may be led to conclude that biblical fellowship, while important, is not widely written about. However, this is a perfect opportunity to emphasize why the grammatical aspect of hermeneutics¹ is so important. The ESV translation may only use the word fellowship eight times, but, the Greek word *κοινωνία*, from which “fellowship” is translated, appears 19 different times. Furthermore, the word grouping around *κοινωνία* appears 45 different times.²

As we consider the totality of what the New Testament says about “fellowship” we must begin by recognizing that “fellowship” has both a vertical and horizontal dimension. In fact, the horizontal dimension of fellowship begins with, and flows from, the vertical dimension. To say it another way, biblical fellowship with one another only happens when we first have fellowship with God, through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Regarding this vertical dimension, Paul writes that God has called us “into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 1:9); and that there is “the fellowship of the Holy Spirit” (2 Corinthians 13:13).³ The Apostle John states that, “our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3). To put one’s faith and trust in Jesus

¹ See Module 3.2

² Κοινωνός (“Partner”—DBL Greek. 10 times). Κοινωνέω (“Share, Do Together”—DBL Greek. 8 times). Συγκοινωνός (“Partner, Sharer”—DBL Greek. 4 times). Συγκοινωνέω (“Associate With”—DBL Greek. 2 times). Κοινωνικός (“Ready Sharing”—DBL Greek. 1 Time)

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Christ is to be brought into fellowship with the Triune God of the Bible, and this is the very heart of the gospel.

Because of the vertical dimension of fellowship there also exists a horizontal dimension. As members of the body of Christ, we now live and move interdependently with all other members of Christ's body.⁴ Paul writes to the Philippians and tells them that he joyfully prays for them "because of your partnership (κοινωνία) in the gospel from the first day until now" (Philippians 1:5). John writes that the point of his first Epistle is "so that you too may have fellowship with us," (1 John 1:3) and that when we walk in the light "we have fellowship with one another" (1 John 1:7). The gospel of Jesus Christ binds us together in fellowship, and we, as those bound together, also experience fellowship with one another as a blessing.

In his short letter to Philemon, Paul points to these two truths as he writes about Onesimus. In verse six he states, "...and I pray that the sharing (lit. fellowship κοινωνία) of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ." Paul desires that Philemon receive Onesimus back as a brother (vs. 16) and as a partner (κοινωνός) (vs. 17). To state it another way, Paul desires that Philemon treat Onesimus as a brother that he is bound to, and a partner that he is blessed by.⁵

Fellowship is not simply something that happens within the second largest gathering space at our churches (the room we commonly call the "fellowship hall"). Fellowship is the deep, committed, caring, and supporting relationship we are called to have with all believers. It is "standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side" and remaining fearless in the face of opposition and persecution (Philippians 1:27-28). It is being bound to and blessed by those within the body of Christ.

Therefore, as the Charis Fellowship we *"affirm our obligation to love and respect one another, and to practice the 'one another' exhortations. As a result, we commit to work together to resolve our differences, for the good of individuals, churches and communities."*

To correctly understand this part of our commitment to fellowship we must honestly acknowledge that relationships are hard work. Because of the believer's present fight

⁴ See Module 3.7

⁵ Hermeneutically speaking, and contrary to popular opinion, Philemon 6 has nothing to do with "sharing your faith with unbelievers." While it may be true that sharing the gospel with unbelievers causes our relationship with the Lord to grow, this is not a truth of this text. Philemon 6 is a command given from one believer to another believer about how a third believer should be treated *because* he is a believer. "Sharing your faith" with unbelievers is not in view within this passage.

with indwelling sin, there still exists in all of us a tendency to be unloving, unforgiving, petty, easily angered, etc. However, where differences and disagreements occur we individually, and collectively as a Fellowship, seek to resolve them in ways that obey and glorify Jesus Christ. Our commitment to fellowship is one that seeks to put into practice the 59 “One Another” statements of the New Testament.

Secondly, *“we affirm the responsibility of local churches to govern their own affairs while urging those churches to live and serve in community, and interdependency, with our churches”*. Technically speaking, the Charis Fellowship is not a denomination and consequently does not have an authoritative hierarchy that makes decisions for individual local churches. As a result, Charis Fellowship churches exist in a hybrid model of church governance that allows them to “govern their own affairs” while being urged to operate interdependently with our Charis Fellowship churches.

For example, when the Charis Fellowship became a charter member of the Charis Alliance and its delegates subsequently approved the Commitment to Common Identity, the individual churches within the Charis Fellowship also needed to approve the Commitment to Common Identity before this document became official at the local level.

Without question, this model of organizational structure provides moments of tension within a Fellowship such as ours. The benefit to a local church is the ownership of their own governance and that there is not a denominational leader or body of leaders making decisions for a local church.⁶ The drawback is, in part, navigating the moments when local churches choose not to embrace or support what the delegates at the National Conference have approved.⁷ In such instances our commitment to *“resolving our differences, for the good of individuals, churches and communities”* becomes crucially important.

Lastly, our shared commitment to fellowship means that *“we affirm that the mandate and urgency to fulfill the Great Commission leads us to seek ways to cooperate with one another, and with likeminded Christians on the local, regional, and global levels”*. We believe that our churches are not to be exclusively independent but rather interdependent with other local churches; collaborating with others to proclaim the gospel.

⁶ For example, one local Methodist church saw their long-time and beloved pastor transferred to another church because of this man’s credentials and the church growth that had occurred underneath his leadership. Against the church’s desires, the district council found and brought in a new pastor to lead them.

⁷ For example, a Charis Fellowship church may choose to not acknowledge the Commitment to Common Identity as the “statement of faith” that has been approved by the delegates at National Conference.

The Charis Fellowship is not the only group of churches who love Jesus, believe in the gospel, and pursue making disciples. We are one of many biblical denominations and fellowships that exist, and we believe that there are appropriate times to partner together for the glory of Jesus and the sake of the gospel. However, the exact form that this takes place is left up to the wisdom and discernment of local church leaders.

To summarize how the Charis Fellowship functions and operates can be done most effectively in one word: relationships. We are a group of believers, organized into local churches that have been united with God the Father in relationship because of the work of Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Because of this relationship, we secondly exist in relationship with one another and have agreed to work cooperatively together for the glory of Jesus Christ and the sake of the gospel.

Without question, there exists distinction within our Fellowship at the local church level. However, there also exists a tremendously high degree of unity towards, and with, one another. If this unity were to ever be lost, or if our commitment to continually pursue this unity were ever to wane, our Fellowship would at best be less effective and at worst cease to exist.