

SORTING OUT THE FELLOWSHIP QUESTION

In every generation of the Lord's church, issues arise that will lead some away from the faith {1 Timothy 4:1-3}. As these issues develop, there will always be some who will want to find a way to continue in full fellowship with those who have espoused that which is not in harmony with divine truth. While their intentions are good, there are clear and unmistakable precepts that deal with fellowship which are ignored. It is with deep concern for the ultimate outcome of such actions that this material is prepared.

Hear-say is not adequate evidence for honest investigation. Many who have approached the subject of Fellowship have only heard about what certain men are teaching, and have never given careful consideration to what was actually written. In correspondence with a fellow gospel preacher, I was asked to: "State the parts of the articles {in Christianity Magazine} that show that brother {Ed} Harrell has "promulgated the doctrine of open fellowship with error on the basis of Romans 14." In fact, you'll find that his discussion of Romans 14 was relatively brief. His aim was to wrestle with how we have dealt with division over the years on many issues: premillennialism, institutionalism, the war issue, etc., etc."

After careful consideration of the actual statements made in Christianity Magazine by brother Harrell, I was deeply troubled by the way in which he approached the subject. Since when do we argue on the basis of "this is the way we have always done it?" This is the way the institutional people argued the orphan homes, and we said that even if it IS the way we have always done it, it does not make it right! Unless I have overlooked something, there was a sad lack of Scriptural evidence for the way to deal with such differences between brethren. Furthermore, it troubled me greatly to see him group such things as Premillennialism, institutionalism, the war issue, etc. in the same category {along with the wearing of the veil}. This is the trick used by Cecil Hook {FREE IN CHRIST} and many others as a camouflage for accepting error because we cannot all agree on everything. Where is the line drawn? Where do we STOP tolerating religious error within the congregation? Or do we stop? In his exchange in GOSPEL TRUTHS with Dudley Ross Spears, he wrote: "Dudley objects to my admission that I have fellowship with those who

teach what I believe to be wrong on matters of "considerable moral and doctrinal import." {First Response} Then, in the third response he wrote: "I would not have fellowship with anyone who clearly teaches error;" Is he implying here that there are some doctrinal and moral truths that he is not sure that he is sure of? Or has he painted himself into a corner? If he believes someone to be wrong in a matter of "considerable moral and doctrinal import" and continues to have fellowship with them, how could he "not have fellowship with anyone who clearly teaches error"? He makes somewhat of a deal about consistency on the part of those who question his teaching, and where is the consistency in his teaching? In fact, how can he question the consistency of those who question his teaching? As we go on, we will see a specific application of his erroneous views on fellowship.

My brother questioned my suggestion that "countless numbers of precious souls" were being adversely influenced by the teaching of the false doctrines of compromise with error. My question to him was, "Would even ONE be an acceptable number?" His response was that I intimated that everyone who read brother Harrell's articles was a "mind-numbed robot" and would accept what he said without any investigation. My response was a reference to Matthew 18:6 and Romans 14:21 with regard to the weak brother who is not a "mind-numbed robot" but who might easily be led astray by such an appealing error. When we preach, write or teach, we have to consider that most likely there will be those who are weak in the faith in the audience, and avoid anything that might cause them to stumble.

Let me show you an example of what the teaching of Ed Harrell has done for the cause of Christ in the Northwest. The following is an excerpt {the whole of which is available for your consideration} from a letter sent by Jack Gibbert on 5 October, 1993 to Jim and Frances Flemming, all of Washington State: "Jim and Frances what you are introducing to this area will be remembered as the Northwest's answer to the Piano at Midway, Ky. The view espoused by brother {Harry} Osborne is not unknown to this area, in fact those who hold it have been welcomed into and are present in every congregation up here. However the attitude held by brother Osborne, which will be laid out Sat. evening during your meeting ("Fellowship, Error & Romans 14," gee), has not

been welcomed and is excluded. The shame of all this is that you have been caught up in the typical politics of east coast "Church of Christism" which seeks to get everyone marching to the same drummer, and that drummer is this preacher, or that preacher, and this paper or that paper. The openness of free study and discussion in the Northwest is virtually unknown in Texas, and the East coast. Anyone back there who studies for themselves lives in fear of speaking out because they will be marked as unsound and withdrawn from. The few, like **Ed Harrell, and Dee Bowman** who have the courage to speak out against the attitude of men like Harry Osborne, (even though they would agree with Osborne's conclusion) are marked as "liberal" because they don't get on the bandwagon and mark those who disagree with them. Men like Osborne are dividers of brethren and they care not one whit who they hurt to accomplish their brand of righteousness." It is important to note that brother Gibbert is using the reputations of brethren Ed Harrell and Dee Bowman to strengthen his position. The results of brother Osborne's teaching, along with the work of many other faithful gospel preachers, has caused a number of sound congregations to emerge in the Northwest. Not because of brother Harrell's teaching, but in spite of it. If things had been allowed to go on as they were, which brother Gibbert perceived to be the way brothers Harrell and Bowman said it should be, there would have been no progress made in the advancement of truth whatsoever. So what about the areas where the vast majority are laboring under the misconceptions taught by brother Harrell concerning fellowship? As we can see from the material in this article, he advocates continued fellowship with men such as Homer Hailey, so what would you expect those who follow him to do?

Further, we find Glen Lovelady using the teaching of brother Harrell to beat J.T. Smith over the head on the subject of Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage in the July, 2000 issue of Gospel Truths, Page 18(162):

"We have preachers like Ed Harrell that try to show that we can *differ over matters of opinion*; and then we have preachers like J.T. Smith and his group who think that whatever they say is The Gospel Truth,..." "And if you will Receive it," this is why Ed Harrell and others have put some of this issue

under Romans 14.”

While my brother didn't think you could find “100 people in the United States who actually read the whole series of Ed's articles,” we must conclude that it has made the rounds among those in California who subscribe to the heresy taught by Glen Lovelady – and who knows how many more?

There is no doubt that people have repeated things about brother Harrell which are not based in fact. It is my conviction that we should never repeat anything about another which cannot be documented. In my lessons on fellowship which I have used in Gospel meetings, I use EXACT QUOTES from the pen of brother Harrell, along with quotes from Rubel Shelly and others. Truth does not need misrepresentation in order to stand the test! Furthermore, when a man publishes what he believes on a subject, and it becomes public knowledge, it does not require one to approach the individual privately in order to ascertain what they believe. If there is any doubt, certainly a personal confrontation is in order.

In this regard, many who want to continue to use brother Harrell for Gospel meetings have maintained that they “do not believe brother Harrell advocated "continuing fellowship" with brother Hailey.” The claim is that “he questioned whether or not we should mark Homer Hailey as a "false teacher.”” In this regard, the question is often posed: “If we decide he is a "false teacher" in what sense do we apply that decision?” Then they ask why some of his most vocal critics not only use his books, but also advertise them for sale in their magazines!” My question on this point is: Does this mean that using a man's books, or quoting from him indicates that it is permissible to use him for a gospel meeting? If so, could we use Albert Barnes, Adam Clarke, Joseph Henry Thayer, or W.E. Vine for a gospel meeting? Simply using a man's reference books or even quoting from him is not tantamount to having fellowship with him as would be the case if he was used for a gospel meeting. Brother Harrell says: “It is perfectly proper that some congregations have not, and would not, invite Homer Hailey to preach because of the position that he holds on this subject. Others, rightly I believe, have decided to use him in spite of the difference.” (CHRISTIANITY MAGAZINE,

November 1988, page 6/326) Does a congregation have “fellowship” with a preacher when they support him in preaching the gospel? (Philippians 1:5) Paul would say so. Is brother Harrell advocating “continuing fellowship” with brother Hailey when he says that he concurs with those who have “decided to use him in spite of the difference?” Most assuredly so.

One of the methods used to avoid dealing with the implications of the Biblical teaching on fellowship is to question the way in which fellowship takes place. One brother asks: “In what sense do I "continue" or "discontinue" fellowship with Homer Hailey?” His contention was that “the institutional brethren have had a field day with some of us on just this point. They are the ones who have bound churches together so that they can continue their sponsoring church arrangements. We have argued vigorously that fellowship is local and stops there; that the only other fellowship possible is fellowship in the universal and that is decided by only by God Himself, not you and I. Therefore, we argue, the universal church cannot be activated nor divided. There are divisions between individuals, but that is an individual matter.” The answer to this is contained in Philippians 1:5. A congregation has fellowship with a preacher whenever they support him to preach the word. Whether it be locally or abroad, matters not. Thus we must “discontinue” having fellowship with brother Hailey by not supporting him to preach. This has nothing to do with the universal church being activated, and it is not ONLY an individual matter. As an individual, you can discontinue having fellowship with brother Hailey the same way John says to do in 2 John 9-11. Do not bid him “Godspeed.” Again, nothing to do with the church universal, or any violation of congregational autonomy.

Since, as noted above, brother Harrell has become widely noted for his many sermons and writings on the subject of Fellowship, I dare say that those who do not know where you stand, and *do* know what brother Harrell is teaching would find you suspect, to say the least, if you appeared to endorse him. Frankly, every one I have talked to about this {the majority of which do NOT subscribe to FOCUS} have called it in question. In a correspondence with brother Bobby Witherington concerning brother

Harrell, he wrote: “Inasmuch as bro. Harrell is currently (in the mind of brethren generally) most identified by his misleading series of articles on fellowship, and his continued defense of bro. Hailey, then the EFFECT of using him to write for FOCUS will be that of FOCUS (perhaps inadvertently) championing the cause for which bro. Harrell is most often identified.”

A concern voiced by some is that some will want to send out the thought police and start marking all those who disagree with us. I find the idea of the “thought police” to be an attempt at exaggeration to detract from the real issue here. As I stated above, we need to understand the principles of Romans 14, as well as all Biblical teaching on Fellowship, and make proper application of them. When someone {elder, preacher, etc.} in the congregation holds error in their heart on the subject of the guilty party remarrying, it will sooner or later become an issue. It did in the congregation at El Cajon! This is a congregation where they practiced what brother Harrell preaches on fellowship, and brother Hailey was allowed to preach his false doctrine on MDR without any public rebuttal. Now, look at this excerpt from a letter I received from one of the members there after the elders decided to accept a couple into membership who were living in adultery: “Thanks for the note, and for your prayers. Once again I've seen the folly of opposing error while fellowshiping it. When will we learn? When will we stop worrying about what people will think of us if we stand firm for the truth? If they hated our Lord, why should we expect any more consideration? To agree to disagree is to arm the ticking time bomb. Someday a real live case is dropped on your doorstep and then it's not an academic question anymore (as though it ever was). That's what has happened here. The agreement to disagree evaporated quickly in the face of a couple who desperately needed a strong, clear, and unanimous leadership to the truth. We let them down. We let the truth down.” HERE is the fruit of what brother Harrell is advocating! And it is not “the fruit of the Spirit.” Brother Witherington observed in his letter to me that the efforts to put MDR in Romans 14 “...originated because so many brethren in so many places felt obligated to defend bro. Hailey regardless of the cost. This has become a NATIONAL problem; it is not simply a local issue. And those who defend bro. Hailey,

and those pulpits and papers which promote the influence of the defenders of bro. Hailey, must bear their share of the blame for the mess we are in!” This is from the pen of a man who is a longtime friend of both brother Hailey and brother Harrell.

Division is odious! But as sad as it is, sometimes you have to amputate the gangrenous leg to save the body! And when we are no longer willing to honor the line for fellowship which is drawn by the Lord through the Holy Spirit {Ephesians 5:11; 2 John 9-11}, local congregations are doomed to destruction, with countless souls lost as a result.

Gailen Evans