

## "Fellowship" Halls

by Bill Crews

Many years ago someone sagely remarked, "The less religion a church has the bigger 'fellowship hall' it will take to run it." Even more years ago someone else started using the word "**fellowship**" in a way completely foreign to the New Testament, and that meaning has spread until now nearly all churches and church members use it in that sense. In fact, I would venture to say that most church members cannot even tell anyone how the New Testament uses the word "*fellowship*," but that they think of social activities such as games, parties, entertainment shows, banquets, breakfasts, luncheons, dinners or suppers, outings, trips, picnics, and recreational activities when they hear and use the word. As someone else put it, "*People have been so conditioned by the religious practices of our day that they can just smell the coffee and doughnuts when they hear the word 'fellowship.'*"

It was not so in the first century, and it will not be so to the diligent Bible student when he comes across the word in the New Testament. Both our English word "*fellowship*" and the various New Testament Greek words that are translated "*fellowship*" have the meaning "*association, communion, joint participation, share.*" In what? That must be determined by the context of each passage. We are called by God into the fellowship of His Son (1 Cor. 1:9). Philippians 2:1 and 2 Corinthians 13:14 both speak of the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. We can have fellowship with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ, only if we walk in the light (1 Jn. 1:3-7); to that end John wrote the words of that epistle. Christians are warned against having fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness and called upon to reprove them (Eph. 5:11). Paul and Barnabas were given the right hands of fellowship by Peter, James and John (Gal. 2:9). Christians by suffering for Christ are to know the fellowship of His sufferings (Phil. 3:10). Christians by sending financial support to a preacher of the gospel are having fellowship with him in the furtherance of the gospel (Phil. 1:3-5; 4:14-18). The word for fellowship is used of a contribution from Christians to needy saints (Rom. 15:26; 2 Cor. 8:4; 9:13 -- "*contribution*"). Fellowship of the New Testament sort cannot exist between righteousness and iniquity, light and darkness, a believer and an unbeliever (2 Cor. 6:14). First century Christians continued steadfastly in the apostle's teaching, in fellowship, in the breaking of bread (put for the Lord's supper, just as in Acts 20:7), and in the prayers (Acts 2:42).

Today many churches build what they call "**fellowship halls**" or "**fellowship buildings**" (and now "**family life centers**") to accommodate their social and recreational activities, and even hire "**fellowship ministers**" to plan and supervise such activities. But such activities fall outside of the realm of scripturally-authorized congregational work. The Greeks and the Romans were very much into feasting, games, contests, exercise, and entertainment, and they built baths, pools, gymnasiums, theaters, and stadiums to accommodate such; but churches of the Lord were into assembling together for worship, teaching, exhortation, edification, and they provided places to accommodate such. They were primarily interested in glorifying God and saving lost souls. They did not resort to gimmicks and carnal means to attract or keep the people. The gospel of Christ and the blessings that come through it are all they had and all they needed to offer the world.

Beginning in the 18th century various seminary or theological professors and church "*clergymen*" began to question the basic tenets of their own faith -- the existence and nature of God, the deity of Jesus, the

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