

Extending Fellowship

Genesis 18:22-32; Mark 7:20-32; Acts 11:9-18



Fellowship is about living in and as God's family. Family is important to God, as much or more than it is to us. Family was the first institution on earth, ordained by God. God calls us to family and to fellowship. How far does family go? What are the limits of this family? How and to whom do we extend the reach of this fellowship?

Abraham's motives were mixed. He was concerned about the future of his nephew. With the news that Sodom would be destroyed, he sought a way to protect Lot and his family. Oh, Abraham was concerned for others, but especially for his own kin. He bargained with God to protect Lot, seeking to avert the destruction of the city. Surely, Lot would not be the only righteous one in Sodom! Perhaps if there were 50 righteous persons there, God would divert impending doom. 45, 40, 30, 20, 10, Abraham bargained with God to lower the threshold to a seemingly insignificant number.

It would seem that Abraham's actions were in part a ploy. Even so, they belie a truth he seems to have accepted. If his only concern had been Lot's welfare, his bargaining would have been purely selfish. Tempered with concerns for a larger band of righteous individuals, his request would be more selfless and more worthy. The bargaining displays this mixture of motivation. He knew his concerns for the welfare of others should be broader, but at heart they were limited to his nephew.

Peter had acted against his ingrained impulse of established Jewish taboos. It had taken some time for God to prepare him for the moment. He had witnessed Jesus dealing with all sorts of people he would have considered unworthy. Now the vision prompted him three times to accept a new degree of God's love. God wanted him prepared to view and accept those he had considered defiled as loved by God. Peter was to do more than accept the theoretical idea that God loves everyone. He was to act the part of one who accepted this truth. He was to accept the company, shelter, and food of one no self-respecting Jew would have deemed acceptable.

To this point, the gospel had been growing, but only among Jews. Sure, it had included the Hellenistic Jews as well as those from Palestine. That had caused an uproar culminating in the selection of the first deacons, determining that all be accepted and treated equally. Cultural differences were set aside in that instance, but only under a determined effort. This, however, was a wholly new reality. Taking the gospel of Jesus Christ to non-Jews and accepting them in fellowship was a difficult step.

We are reminded elsewhere that Peter struggled with accepting the weight of this decision.¹ Extending the full fellowship of the gospel to gentiles was no light matter for him. It was difficult to overcome the fear of accusation from a vocal faction of Jewish believers opposed to accepting Gentiles. God's call to extend fellowship to any and all who would heed the gospel was not a popular concept. God's desire that all believers live in the quality of fellowship recorded in the beginning chapters of Acts was a hard standard to achieve. There were too many who found comfort in belonging to a higher order than some less worthy group.

¹ Galatians 2:11-14.

Jesus' actions often worked against the definitions of propriety. He broke various taboos that kept people separated into classes and levels of worth. The caste system of India was not the Jewish norm, but there was enough of its mentality prevalent to find Jesus breaking taboos in speaking and ministering to various castes around him. We find Jesus meeting the needs of Jews and Gentiles, men and women, sinners and righteous, acceptable and unacceptable in society's eyes.

As Jesus taught about cleanliness and uncleanness, acceptable and unacceptable, he addressed issues of the heart. He taught that our decisions govern the acceptability of our actions. He then proceeded to demonstrate by touching deserving lives of people who lived outside the ritual purity norms. The Greek woman's faith could not be measured by her standing outside Jewish norms of propriety. The people of Decapolis were unworthy by any Jewish standard, but Jesus sought them out as recipients of God's grace.

Though Abraham never seems to grasp the full concept, his words point to God's sense of family as greater than his own. This is the issue Peter struggles to grasp as well. God's definition of acceptable, worthy, and family is much larger than our own. We want to define family so as to exclude those with whom we are uncomfortable. We use a concept of family that limits those for whom we should plead and intercede, fellowship and share food, and invite into our lives. This is not our express purpose, but it is the very human norm of determining who is inside or outside our circles of fellowship.

Jesus would call us to a different definition of family. He calls us to a whole new concept that does not depend on external definitions and categories of exclusion. Through faith in Christ Jesus, we now belong to God's family. We have entered a new arena for fellowship. The whole of God's family is our family. Whether Gentile or Jew, speaking Greek or Aramaic, healthy or diseased, wealthy or poor, educated or illiterate, liberal or conservative, Baptist or not, belonging to Christ, makes one our family and we are theirs.

As for Peter, this concept of God's family calls for a radical change in our lives. It calls for a new definition of those for whom we should extend our fellowship, love, and care. It calls for reaching far beyond our standard expressions of loving and caring. It is a tough way to live.

Our definition of selfishness takes on a broader meaning. What I would do for my child, would I do for a family member I have never met and whose language I cannot speak? What I would do for one living under my roof, would I do for the new person in the neighborhood? Do I have the courage and the commitment to the gospel of Christ Jesus to fellowship as family with those my society tells me are unworthy or unacceptable for my association?

It is indeed a wonderful thing to be part of God's family. It is also a challenge to live up to Jesus' standards of family conduct. Peter found it difficult and uncomfortable to extend fellowship to Gentile believers. Faith required him to give up his old norms of conduct, extending fellowship beyond accepted limits and norms. He knew he would be called to account for his actions. He knew that a change in the extent of his norms of fellowship would make others uncomfortable. If Peter was to enjoy participation in God's family, he needed to accept all of God's family.

Are we ready to extend fellowship to the whole family? If we truly belong to God, our family is much larger than we might dare to imagine. What will the next family reunion look like?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*