

THE ASSEMBLY MESSENGER

Proclaiming the Timeless Truths of the Church to a New Generation of Believers

Volume 99-24

Dear Reader

Before leaving the question of *reception* we would be remiss in not touching upon a related question which has resulted in much disagreement among Christians who would otherwise be in general agreement with the things written in these Newsletters. This is the question as to whether Christians, not normally in fellowship with us, should be received *on an occasion* to break bread, even though they don't agree with the principles of gathering we believe to be Scriptural, and intend to return, as quickly as practical, to the position and group where they normally break bread. The term that has been coined to express this concept is *occasional fellowship*.

It is argued that to not allow other Christians to break bread with "us" would be sectarian, making agreement with "us" the requirement for breaking bread. People speak of the godly lives of their friends and relatives in groups without a Scriptural foundation, who come to visit, and that "we" must receive those whom Christ receives. Passions run high! Let's not look at this from the human emotional standpoint, for our emotions can lead us away into every sin, but from the Word of God. We needed the background of the last few months of the Assembly Messenger to tackle this question properly. We will not repeat all the Scriptures we looked at in those previous Newsletters.

Occasional Fellowship

The answer to the question is "yes ...but." It is absolutely true that "being of us" is not a Scriptural requirement for reception and, therefore, an assembly should consider every case separately on its own merits. We do not believe it to be right to simply *assume* that one coming with such a request, cannot break bread because he is not "among us."

But, we must hasten to add the qualifier, that every case *must* be judged according to *all* the principles of reception given in Acts 2:42, 1 Corinthians 5 and 10, 2 Timothy 2, and elsewhere, as we have seen in the previous issues. From the Word of God we see the Scriptural requirement to be a *very carefully guarded table*, with fellowship for all those known as believers, walking in truth and righteousness, in separation from moral or doctrinal evil, and not ecclesiastically associated with anything contrary to the Word of God. Sad to say, today, those requirements of Scripture (which we have looked at extensively) exclude many or most Christians.

Let's now look at some more detail, beginning with J.N. Darby's last known letter on the subject. We quote him because so many of his earlier letters are used by some in an attempt to promote careless "occasional fellowship."

But we must remember that no man is infallible, and even the most gifted and godly men change their mind or modify their expressions as more knowledge is obtained over a lifetime. God's Word is the only unchangeable criterion.

J.N. Darby's 1881 Letter:

"The meeting for the breaking of bread *in principle* the meeting together of all Christians in the unity of the body of Christ. Every Christian, then, has a right to share in it. But at the same time, *in the present state of Christianity*, we are called to maintain scrupulously, faithfully and with zeal, the holiness of the Lord's table (2 Tim.2:22). Now the assembly is in no way a voluntary meeting of Christians who have chosen the assembly, for in that case it would be a sect. It is, *so far as such a thing is possible now*, the meeting of all the members of the body of Christ. We must have sufficient evidence that those who desire to take part in it are true Christians and that their walk is moral, Christian. Now if they habitually meet with those who deny the truths of Christianity, they are defiled; and it is so also if they meet where immorality is allowed.

Difference in ecclesiastical views is not sufficient reason for shutting out a soul. *But if one wanted to be one day among the brethren, the next among the sects, I should not allow it and would not receive such a person*, for instead of using the liberty which belongs to him to enjoy the spiritual communion of the children of God, he puts forward the pretension to *change the order of the house of God and to perpetuate the separation of Christians.*"

As Mr. Darby well says, the meeting for the breaking of bread is *in principle* the meeting together of all Christians in the unity of the body of Christ. Further, as he says, this meeting is, *so far as such a thing is possible now*, the meeting of all the members of the body of Christ. These expressions add up to the “yes” at the beginning of this article. But Mr. Darby rightly puts on qualifiers. There is the *holiness* of the Lord’s table. People must be Christians, free from serious moral and doctrinal sins, free from wrong associations. We have covered these things in detail in past Newsletters. Lack of Scriptural knowledge is not a deterrent to reception, but “occasional fellowship,” the way many want to practice it today, is! Darby says, “I would not receive such a person!”

We would say that “the present state of Christianity” is *far worse* today than when JND wrote this nearly 120 years ago (1881), and thus calls for even greater care, although *never* beyond Scripture, *never* imposing one’s personal views! Over time, JND became far more intolerant of people coming to break bread out of convenience, with every intention to go back to their sects the next week.

Other Comments

A brother wrote, “We must never imply that reception is other than ‘full fellowship’ and ‘permanent fellowship.’ When one is received he is *permanently* received. *We have no ‘guests’* This means that every person received comes under the discipline of the local assembly.... In irregular reception [what we are calling *occasional fellowship*] ... it should be such that if the person were to be received in the normal way, there would be no question of his/her reception.”

We agree: we know of *nothing* in Scripture that indicates that reception to the breaking of bread is other than to full assembly fellowship, the apostles’ fellowship of Acts 2:42, and of one who intends to *remain* in the fellowship! We would ask those who advocate so-called occasional fellowship, “Can you say you would *permanently* receive people who don’t believe in the principles the fellowship believes are God’s principles, or of one who has previously left those principles, and has no intention of walking according to those principles? Don’t you believe there would be serious and warranted questions by other assemblies as to the permanent reception of such ones”? Then how can you receive such an one *occasionally*?

A respected brother well wrote, “Note the divine order of Acts 2:42: Doctrine — the teaching of the apostles communicated to them by the Lord and the Holy Spirit — and fellowship therein, *preceded* the breaking of bread in the Lord’s supper. How fitting is this divine order.... *Following* perseverance in the teaching of the apostles and fellowship therein with each other, these believers all broke bread together ... (These) principles ... remain as guiding principles to help us in the matter of assembly reception in our day.”

We strongly agree with the writer and again ask those who advocate “occasional fellowship,” “Can you say that those who you want to receive in so called *occasional fellowship* are in agreement with you in the apostles’ doctrine, including the doctrine of Church fellowship? If not, since this is the divine order from the beginning, how can you Scripturally justify receiving people who don’t believe the apostles’ doctrine as “we” understand it, and don’t desire “our” permanent fellowship, but are using “us” as a temporary convenience until they get back to what they *do* believe in”? “Can two walk together unless they are agreed?” (Amos 3:3).

One of these writers says, “Scripture always treats the breaking of bread as an integral part of the privileges and responsibilities of a local assembly, and not as an independent, unrelated occurrence. The house of God requires order and discipline (1 Tim.3:15), and all involved in it should be instructed in this.”

Once more we agree, and again ask, “In light of the above principles, how can you let “in” those who don’t believe in the principles we believe to be of God? Would you be free to allow most of those you want to receive on occasion to minister to the assembly, to pass the emblems, pray, attend and take part in the brothers meetings, etc.?”

Continuing, the same writer says, “When a person has disowned (for whatever reason) an assembly with which we are identified and then desires to break bread in ‘our’ local assembly, we should let him know that in turning away

from his local assembly, he has broken fellowship with all other assemblies identified with it. We do not acknowledge *independence* of assemblies. Godly order dictates that he/she first put things right with his local assembly.”

Again, we believe the writer’s comments are Scriptural. Some advocate receiving people on occasion who have left local assemblies we believe are walking according to Scripture. Some put on time limitations of not receiving such until a certain amount of time has elapsed. But based on the Scriptural comment above, we ask, “How then can you receive people who have left assemblies with which “we” are identified? Where do you find *God’s* statute of limitations in regard to time”?

We agree with the writer who says, “The Lord holds every assembly responsible for that which is knowingly allowed in its midst,” and thus ask the advocates of occasional fellowship, “How then can you receive individuals who come from groups/denominations that are known to often teach or promote material that teaches that Christ could sin or that He had a struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane as to whether He would obey the Father’s will, and other such false doctrines, and deny in practice and belief the unity of assemblies, and many other wrong doctrines, including charismatic errors”?

A well known and respected brother wrote, “The principle enunciated by the apostle [in 1 Cor.10:18-21] is that eating at any table is an expression of fellowship and identification with it and all it stands for. Today ... it is more the tables of parties that surround us, groups not meeting on the scriptural ground of the one body of Christ, which characterizes the Lord’s table.... This doctrine of association expressed in the breaking of bread together, needs to be taught and realized in God’s assembly.”

We again ask those advocates of occasional fellowship, “When we break bread with those who believe in and practice other altars or tables, don’t agree with our position (altar), and intend to go right back to the positions they believe are correct, using ‘us’ only as a convenience, *aren’t we associating ourselves with them in what we don’t believe is correct?* Isn’t that a serious sin in God’s sight”?

A brother writes, “... it is clearly taught that *association* with evil defiles as much as the practice of evil Believers who are found in such [denominational] groups are co-responsible for the evil in it, even though they personally reject the evil itself. They may even be a part of a godly and concerned segment within the group who stand against the evil, but this does not lessen their responsibility and defilement as long as their protest is only verbal and there is no separation from the group. On the contrary, their very concern shows that they are aware of the evil. *Unless they separate from it, we cannot receive them.*” Another says, “This instruction [in 2 Jn.7-12] is further confirmation of the principle that any association with those holding fundamentally evil teachings as to Christ, defiles.”

We ask the advocates of occasional fellowship, “In the light of the widespread adoption and tolerance of false doctrines against Christ, charismatic errors, ecumenical associations, and wrong grounds for fellowship almost everywhere in so-called evangelical Christianity, how can you receive people who may be entangled in such errors? Do you seek to find out what the individual *and* his religious affiliation believes as to the many fundamental errors as to both the Person/work of Christ, and of the Holy Spirit (surely as important), that have permeated evangelical Christianity? Isn’t the denominational affiliation sin in itself since it is a denial of the truths of the one body and of gathering only to Christ’s all-sufficient name”?

A respected writer writes, “In 2 Timothy we have the *final instructions from the apostle Paul as to the pathway of fellowship in the days of confusion and departure from divine principles.*” We ask, “Where in these final instructions do you find *occasional fellowship*, as some want to practice today?”

This respected writer says, “Personal purity in association requires separation from iniquity [2 Timothy 2], from what is unrighteous and dishonors the Lord. *Iniquity is anything not subject to the entire will of God.*” How then can one be received, even on occasion, who is plainly not subject to the Word of God by his or her “church” position, which he *intends* to maintain? Where in 2 Timothy does Paul say it’s alright to receive those occasionally who had departed from Paul? He said we weren’t to *quarrel* with them and were to seek to help them (2:24-26), but nothing about

receiving them! Timothy was to go on in fellowship only with those supporting the Pauline doctrines.

Again, “Love and peace are to be followed, but not at the expense of righteousness.” We ask, “Isn’t there a tendency to put emotional love first, at the expense of other Scriptural requirements, when practicing so-called *occasional fellowship*?” But true love to God and other believers is only shown by obedience (2 Jn.5:2).

A brother commented, gave his opinion, that “We cannot expect or require that new converts or others who desire to express fellowship in the assembly, know and understand all these principles of truth. [These truths] are learned in the assembly. This makes us responsible to instruct those received.”

As to instructing those who wish to be received, we ask, “Why not expect a *general* understanding? Is it so difficult to explain the basic Scriptural requirements for breaking bread? Even pre-teens are required to know things no less complicated before taking up further responsibility in school. In reception we are to ‘pursue righteousness, *faith* with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart’ (2 Tim.2:22). Whatsoever is not of *faith* is sin (Rom.14:23).

Breaking bread is a serious matter (1 Cor.11:27-31). One is to act *in faith* — because he is *convinced* he should break bread with certain ones— and not out of unexercised convenience. We suspect many seeking occasional fellowship, once they learned they were associating *themselves* with positions they did not believe were correct, would not *want* to break bread in assemblies where we express fellowship. They would thank us for the explanation, for they generally are taught that breaking bread is an act *separate* from ‘church’ fellowship or what they often would call ‘church membership.’ Further, we ask those advocating occasional fellowship, how can we ‘instruct’ those received on occasion as to the truths of the Assembly when they generally have no interest or intention of being around to be instructed? What utter confusion the concept of so-called *occasional fellowship* brings!”

Romans 14:1-15:7, 1 Corinthians 11:28 and Galatians 6:1 speak to those *already inside*, not of reception. There is quite a difference in having differing views as to *days* and *foods*, and denial in teaching and practice of the truths of the Assembly and other great truths of Christianity. Those already breaking bread are to “approve” themselves week by week to avoid the chastening hand of a holy Lord.

It has been said that an assembly should accept one to break bread on the word of a brother in fellowship. Barnabas (Acts 9:26-30) is often used as the proof. But at *his* time, all believers were breaking bread in fellowship together: once saved, they broke bread. Moral or doctrinal sin was not directly in question at that time. Further, *Barnabas* was known by all to be one walking as God intended all to walk: many today who want to announce people seem not to have much understanding of *God’s* requirements for reception in 2 Timothy (not early-Church) conditions. One of the above writers uses the word *competent!* The assembly doesn’t accept the recommendation of just anyone, but of ones *known* to know and *practice* the truth of the assembly, including reception. But *letters of commendation* provide the *preferred* biblical means of introduction, not simply one of many. The more general principle of Scripture is that every person or situation is established by *two or three witnesses* (2 Cor.13:1).

While we gather on the ground or principle of the One Body, we are never told to keep the unity of the *body* (which God Himself keeps), but to keep “the unity of *the Spirit* in the uniting bond of peace” (Eph.4:3). The Holy Spirit would *never* maintain a unity that was not in accord with the Word. In the house of God, the Church, *proper behavior* is stressed (1 Tim.3:15). In *occasional fellowship*, often the body-aspect (unity) is stressed, while the house-aspect (order) is ignored. *Both* must be maintained in practice with all who will likewise do so.

Conclusions

- Being “of us” is not a Scriptural requirement to break bread, but using “us” for a convenience while rejecting the Scriptural doctrines and practices of God’s Church, is not *righteousness* and thus cannot be tolerated.
- Nowhere in Scripture is there any thought of the breaking of bread being other than association with, and the outward expression of, our continuing Assembly fellowship together (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor.10:16-17).
- Even in *the present state of Christianity*, there may be a few believers who come on an occasion who would only want to break bread with us *because they agree with the position*, although not formally among us, and are not

defiled by wrong associations or doctrines. They would be happy to be considered as under the discipline of, and in agreement with the assembly's position. We believe such are few and far between today, but we must never be careless as to the *possibility*. Thus, we must always be prepared to consider each case on its own merit and receive those few, even on an occasion, who meet *all* the Scriptural qualifications.

RPD