

Fellowship vs “Social-ship”

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We have all heard the encouragement to find fellowship with other believers, in our churches, our neighborhoods and sometimes even at work. What exactly does that word, fellowship, really mean? Whenever we spend time with someone aren't we in fellowship with them?

For years now in Set Apart Ministries we have been very vigilant to be certain that our main focus each time we gather is squarely on Messiah, whether it be a worship time, a study or a community meeting. It has been our conviction that any other central focus would endanger our community. Well, perhaps it is more accurate to say that most of us have this conviction. Through the past seven years we have come up against those who disagree.

What is the difference between the two? We understand that one may enjoy the company of other people who share a mutual interest in a particular subject or activity. We consider this to be a social event and certainly not wrong or bad in and of itself. To be social is a mark of health and well-being, generally speaking. Socializing can then be done in the company of many different people, so long as they find a common interest of some kind. We have coined the phrase, “**social-ship**” to refer to this sort of group interaction.

Fellowship on the other hand, is more clearly defined as spending time together with people who share a faith conviction and a unity in Messiah. Those who have fellowship with one another intentionally and purposefully encourage and exhort one another as we all strive toward being more like our Shepherd, Yeshua. When He is our Standard, and we spend time in His Word together, we can all see more clearly what is needed in our own life and in the lives of others. In fellowship, we give one another permission to speak boldly and in love into one another's lives when we see something in need of attention. Maybe an attitude needs to be adjusted, or an anger problem becomes evident and can be addressed. As we move through such concerns and make them open for comment within a fellowship community, we grow stronger and more unified. Our community motto has become: “Pray, stay and don't run away.” As we work through the inevitable relational difficulties we are sharpening one another in our mutual goal to grow into maturity in Messiah Who is our Head.

This unity we think, is related to the unity our Messiah has with YHWH, our Father. In Hebrew, the word “echad” is what we understand to be the fulfillment of the prayer our Messiah spoke as recorded in John 17; that we may all be one and abide in Him as He is in the Father and the Father is in Him.

When we gather together with those who are also in “echad” with our God, we have an element that is missing from simply social gatherings. His Presence is among us and He is desired to be present!

So what happens if the group of Believers who make up an assembly or a church begin to drift away in their focus on Him? When our eyes fall to one another, or the urgency of events around us, we are much weaker in our ability to stand together, and can easily fall into divisions over such things as style and type of worship, prayer or maybe even the color of the carpet in the sanctuary.

We see this ability to remain in “echad” with Messiah and with one another as one element of our maturity. Though all of us must grow older, not everyone actually matures. It is painful to see an apparently mature person behave as a sulky two year old or rebellious teen yet this happens all too often among our gatherings of called-out ones. That’s what we are, you know. “Called out” ones: a peculiar people who are called and equipped to become set apart for our God. "To be holy as He is holy."

The best example I can point to of the combination of issues of maturity and **fellowship vs. social-ship** involve the use of food during gatherings of Believers. It is good to spend time with one another, and snacks or full meals are a time honored way to develop intimacy between people. As long as it remains one element of the gathering and does not become the focus, food seems appropriate to share. If the food-- quantity, type, special recipes, or the need to tend to it during worship or study—becomes so much a focus of those who come together that they are distracted from Messiah worship or study, it has become a snare to the community.

It may seem funny to address such an issue yet in our discussions with other fellowship leaders we have found many similar stories. If people aren’t allowed the type or quantity or attention to food that they desire, they have left the group over it. In such a situation, we would conclude that the heart motivation for being a part of a group was not their faith in Messiah but perhaps more of the desire to belong or draw attention to themselves through their food preparation skills.

When such an issue comes up, we would encourage leaders to quietly speak with the people involved and ascertain what their motivation or distraction with food is all about. Hopefully, they will be open to this interest and will be willing to pray about their behavior and its ramifications. It is not just personally that this matters but in community as well. Have you ever experienced a situation where there was a strong sense of prayerful connection with our God only to have someone who is worried about it being time to do something else dampen the experience? Or perhaps you have found as several communities have expressed; they find that their worship is more deep, intimate and sweet when the larger group goes home early? Too often, it seems that we only want to worship when it is convenient for us, rather than offering that sacrifice of praise, which is one hallmark of a mature believer.

Yeshua has encouraged us, as has Sha’ul/Paul, to walk by faith and not by sight. We are to develop our spirit and our ability to walk according to His guidance rather than remain focused on our bodily needs.

If a primary focus on food is coming from some special need or situation, it can be brought out into the open and an appropriate response determined. If it is due to an immaturity of some kind, the person will be the better for having had it brought to their attention so it can be addressed.

The particular distraction that **social-ship** brings can have a variety of expressions beyond just food. It may have to do with a failure to enter into serious yet joyful discovery of Truths in the Word in the interest of discussing family events, prayerlessness in favor of just talking, or maybe even venting complaints of the day rather than turn to Him in worship together. It may have to do with difficulty understanding the different roles necessary to grow and nurture a community and a desire to just be friends together without acknowledging authority. Sometimes it is just wanting to catch up on the week with someone or sharing some humorous but bawdy story rather than preparing oneself to enter into worship. Any number of things happen when we give a priority to our flesh rather than walking in His Spirit.

The community will be better for having helped to exhort members to grow beyond flesh needs as a primary focus. With loving encouragement of the community, even immaturity issues can be resolved and people do not need to leave.

Social-ship vs. fellowship. We can have both throughout our lives, but which focus do you want within your faith community? We choose purposeful fellowship in Messiah's grace and truth; Messiah centered fellowship!