

**Friendship or
Fellowship;
What's the
difference?**

by

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Friendship and fellowship; are they the same or is there a difference? Let us look initially at defining our terms. Friendship is a relationship with another person which involves caring, sharing and loyalty. Fellowship is a sharing of an interest or activity with one or more people. These are the working definitions that I am going to use in this study. Let us seek to develop them some more.

For true friendship there must be some interest in the other person that manifests in a caring attitude. Then there is a sharing of your life, time and possessions with that person. And finally there is loyalty; the relationship is not just a casual thing. But, rather abides through the turbulences of life; there is a commitment to that person. Whether you call someone you know, a friend or an acquaintance depends upon the degree to which you care, share and are loyal to that person.

Fellowship, as has been stated above, is a sharing of an interest or activity. It involves a drawing together because of a mutual interest. The range of interests and activities is limitless. Talking about football, exchanging recipes, or discussing a mutual interest such as Masterchef or Bake-off; these all involve fellowship.

We then have established the difference between friendship and fellowship. Quite simply they have different emphases. Both involve relationships. However, the first focuses on the person, the latter on the commonality of interest.

I can be friends with someone but not really enjoy fellowship with them. I could have a dear friend who has an interest in collecting stamps from the nineteenth century. We may be friends, but we have no fellowship in stamp-collecting of any sort because I do not share that interest. Alternatively, I can share an interest in sport with someone and thereby have fellowship with them in this matter, but not have a friendship with them.

Perfection

Having established these definitions, let us look at a realm where fellowship and friendship are perfectly established and displayed. We go to heaven and we go to God.

In many ways friendship is the best way to describe the trinitarian relationship between Father Son and Holy Spirit. Other relationship arrangements such as employee/employer, husband/wife and monarch/subjects all have limitations. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit care, share and experience loyalty to one another perfectly; that is friendship.

Furthermore, their fellowship is found in working all things for the glory of their Name and bringing blessing to Their creation. They have fellowship in the most beautiful enterprise in the whole of the heavens and earth.

So we conclude that there is perfect friendship and fellowship in heaven. Our God relates and operates in a glorious yet real fullness of harmony.

Humanity

But what of ourselves in respect of friendship and fellowship? We are made in the image of God. In Genesis 1:26- 27 we read

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

**So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.**

We are made for friendship and fellowship. This is so because our God is such a God; He exists in friendship and fellowship, and we are made in His image.

Mankind, male and female, perfectly reflected that image up to the end of Genesis 2. Happily it returns at the beginning of Revelation 21. In the original creation and in the final new creation friendship and fellowship are shared totally, beautifully and harmoniously. As human beings we are fully what we are called to be in Genesis 1-2 and Revelation 21-22 and that is reflected in how we conduct ourselves towards one another.

Alas, we have the portion in the middle where everything is not as it should be. In that chunk of time, which is where we are now, we are still in the image of God and we are still made for friendship and fellowship. However, our friendship and fellowship so very often go in the wrong direction. Sin corrupts it all. We find friendships polluted by self-interest and pride. Also we are found having fellowship in sinful and corrupt activities. So that, for example, gangsters and criminals can have very strong friendships and fellowship. Things are so very confusing!

All went wrong very quickly. In Genesis 4:8 we read: **Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.** And then we read

Lamech said to his wives:

**“Adah and Zillah, hear my voice;
you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say:
I have killed a man for wounding me,
a young man for striking me.
If Cain's revenge is sevenfold,
then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold.”**

(Gen. 4:23-24)

The rampage of sin is apparent in the reckless acts of Cain which rapidly escalated through Lamech and sadly “the rest is history”! It is very sad history! Friendship and fellowship have been assaulted by sin and the ensuing chaos has been painful to behold and experience.

Humanity Restored

So where does this leave us then?

We need to remind ourselves that friendship and fellowship are essentially good things. They are God originated things. And God is in the restoration business. Since the disaster that started to play out from Genesis 3, God has set Himself to restore us into friendship and fellowship.

Firstly, we need is to have our fellowship with God restored. We need reconciliation. We are away from our God and so we need to be brought back into fellowship with him.

In 1 John 1:3 John declares the purpose of his writing. It is: **that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.** He is saying that his readers have entrance into fellowship with God only through Jesus Christ. This is all worked out as follows, as recorded in the words of Paul:

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin, who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor. 5:18-21)

Secondly, when we have fellowship with God, sharing the same interests and activities as Him, then we can come to friendship with God. The fullness of the relationship is caring, sharing and loyalty. Accordingly, we care for God and share in His life. Moreover there is that commitment to be bound in with Him in all His ways; this is loyalty. All of these aspects are experienced by us, but these emanate from the heart of our God. He cares for us, He shares with us and is loyal to us. This is the essence of covenant; God giving Himself and committing to us. A covenant is a binding agreement whereby two or more parties make a commitment to one another.

In the Old Testament God had promised in the Abrahamic Covenant to establish a people for Himself in His ordained place (see Genesis 12:1-7). He then promised in the Davidic Covenant (see 2 Samuel 7:1-17) that He would establish a people with a ruler over them. The bringing together of all of these covenant promises is in the New Covenant. An essential element of this is to establish friendship. And so we read. **But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people (Jer. 31:33).** This is friendship.

We enter into the fullness of this relationship when the fear of the Lord is in our hearts. **The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom** (Prov. 9:10a) as the Word says. The fear of the Lord is that profound desire to honour and respect God. When we read Psalm 25:14 we see the beautiful embrace of this: **The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him, and he makes known to them his**

covenant. How good is that! Respect for the Lord leads into friendship with Him and the blessings of us being bound into His covenant.

Abraham is the great exemplar of all this. In James 2:23-24 the Word says: **and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.** True life is lived in friendship and fellowship with God. Abraham was a man who entered fully into the reality of these. And as he knew friendship and fellowship with God he knew fullness of life. And we are called into these things in and through our Lord Jesus. And so we read in John 15:12-17:

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another.

As we know this friendship relationship with God we need to be very careful of how we express ourselves. This is because we can start to treat God in a casual kind of way. Acceptance does not lead to over familiarity among those who know the wonder of being brought back into relationship with the magnificent Lord God.

Human Relationships

But what of ourselves? What of our relationships with one another? As we become believers in our Lord Jesus we are called into fellowship with one another. We share the same interests and activities. These focus upon God and are known through His Son and His Christ-revealing Word by His Spirit. Christians therefore are a people who are in fellowship together. Every true believer who holds to the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ shares fellowship together. However, the width and the depth of that fellowship varies.

The width of our fellowship is dependent upon the width of our sharing of the same interests and activities. So with someone who is of charismatic convictions my fellowship will be limited because I am not charismatic in my doctrine and practice. Another issue that could divide us is the difference regarding our ecclesiological persuasions. I am an independent by conviction; those who embrace a Presbyterian model of church government would not share with me in this. The width of our fellowship is thereby limited.

The depth of fellowship can also vary. If you are in a church with someone of like-mind on all relevant issues as yourself then you have a broad width of fellowship. However, if you don't have a living appreciation of those things then the depth of fellowship is affected. On the other hand you can meet someone of a different view

on the charismata, ecclesiology and eschatology to yourself, but that person is well thought out and biblically perceptive. As a result, you have deep fellowship if you yourself are well thought out and biblically perceptive.

In all this we need to remember that real fellowship is sharing in the interests and activities of God and His Son by His Spirit. If we are discussing football after the church services, that is not fellowship in the way of the Lord's grace.

But what of friendship? We are called to friendship as Christians. We are called to care and share and be loyal to one another. It is a part of being a church member to exhibit this to fellow church members. The Lord Jesus said: **A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.**" (John 13:34-35)

When our Lord Jesus came to earth, He entered into friendship with the twelve and particularly with the inner circle of three, Peter, James and John. There was a bond of caring, sharing and loyalty. In a sense that is the model of the friendship which we are called to experience together with our fellow church members. It reminds us that there will be differing degrees of friendship across the church fellowship, after all the Lord had a closer relationship with the three as compared to the other nine.

But what does true friendship involve? It involves talking together. **Then those who feared the Lord spoke with one another. The Lord paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the Lord and esteemed his name** (Mal. 3:16). Friendship means a commitment to draw together with others and as we draw together we care, share and experience loyalty together. This means at the heart of a healthy church life is a helping of each other other and a sharing of time and resources

Is there a connection between friendship and fellowship among Christians, though? I suggest that friendship can either enhance fellowship or hinder fellowship. A strong friendship can encourage the sharing in the ways of God and weak friendships can hinder our fellowship.

Broken Relationships

In this context we need to remember that we are whole beings. To fail to ask about each other's health because it is not spiritual is a super-spirituality gone wild. So we need to share with each other. If we share an interest in cookery or cricket we can talk about it; it is a part of drawing close together. Developing our friendships should help our fellowship.

King David was a man who experienced the realities of friendship. He knew how the loss of a friendship with Ahithophel killed fellowship and the building of a friendship with Jonathan prospered fellowship.

Having considered the development of good wholesome friendships it is good, but

sad, to think of the breaking of a friendship. David had this experience with Ahithophel. Ahithophel had been a friend and close advisor to King David. In the rebellion led by Absalom, David's son, Ahithophel played a key role. David was overwhelmed with sadness that Ahithophel could do this. Loyalty had been cast aside and expediency embraced, as Ahithophel threw his lot in with the rebellious Absalom. So David laments and reveals his heart in Psalm 55:12::

**For it is not an enemy who taunts me—
then I could bear it;
it is not an adversary who deals insolently with me—
then I could hide from him.
But it is you, a man, my equal,
my companion, my familiar friend.
O the pain that David felt!**

This all reminds us that being in a friendship makes you vulnerable to rejection by the other party. This is a rejection that even the greatest of men, like David, can feel. For friendship to work there has to be an investment of your whole being in that relationship. A rejection of the friendship by one person leads to the pain of loss for the other. This is exacerbated when the friendship is destroyed through betrayal.

Beautiful Relationships

Happily, David also knew the happier side of friendship; he knew what it was to be bonded to Jonathan. Here there was a relationship with mutual investment and an abiding loyalty. We read of David and Jonathan in 1 Samuel 18:1-4:

As soon as he had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. And Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father's house. Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. And Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was on him and gave it to David, and his armour, and even his sword and his bow and his belt.

This is true friendship of the fullest sort. To consign David and Jonathan's relationship to the sexual category, as many have done, is to utterly fail to grasp the beauty of the friendship bond. This is about hearts being knit together not bodies. Wholesome friendship like this is a beautiful thing; it is a God-like thing.

The interweaving of friendship and fellowship are displayed in the beautiful affectionate bonding of Christians seen in John's letters. In 2 John 13-14 we read: **I had much to write to you, but I would rather not write with pen and ink. I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face.** He longed to be with the friends he was writing to. And we read in 3 John 15: **Peace be to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends, every one of them.** Diotrophes was a leader of the church where Gaius was (see 3 Jn. 10) and he was a belligerent menace. He was no friend to godly people. Nevertheless there were friends around. There were those with whom you could care and share and display loyalty. Such friendships feed into strong fellowship in the Lord.

As we draw to the end of our study I want to leave you with two proverbs:

Faithful are the wounds of a friend (Prov 27:6)

Oil and perfume make the heart glad and the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel. (Prov. 27:9)

Here is caring, sharing and loyalty worked out. The faithful wounds and earnest counsel being experienced in the strong bond of friendship. And when Christian friendship is prospering it gives the ballast for strong fellowship as we share the same interest in the knowing of our Lord Jesus Christ and the serving of our Lord.

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