

Relationship and Fellowship: Distinct Aspects of the New Life in Jesus Christ

Relationship describes the believer's new birth into God's family (John 3:3; 1 John 5:1). *Fellowship* describes the quality of the believer's growth, attitudes and actions in this grace-based relationship with God (1 John 5:2-4).

The example of the early church, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, demonstrated in wonderful harmony both *relationship* (true salvation) and *fellowship* with God and one another:

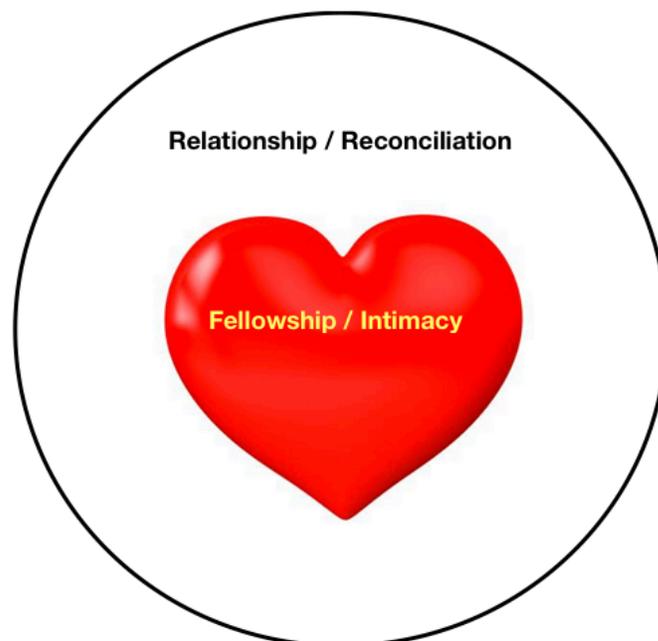
Relationship: "Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them."

Fellowship: "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers... Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people."

Both: "And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:41,42,44-47).

A person can be a child of God (relationship), yet with minimal personal communion with Him (fellowship), but fellowship with God is not possible apart from a saving relationship with Him. These aspects overlap (1 John 5:1,5).

Consider the similarities and contrasts.



| RELATIONSHIP | FELLOWSHIP |
|--|--|
| Salvation | Service |
| New birth (1 Pet. 1:3) | Spiritual growth (2 Pet. 3:18) |
| Apart from righteous works (Rom. 4:5) | Includes righteous works (Phil 2:12) |
| Primary meaning of Water Baptism | Primary meaning of The Lord's Supper |
| Received the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30) | Be filled with the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18) |
| Spiritual gifts received (1 Cor. 12) | Spiritual gifts used properly (1 Cor. 13,14) |
| Determines eternal destiny (John 5:24) | Determines degree of rewards (2 Cor. 5:10) |
| Being a child of God (John 1:12) | Chastened as a child of God (Heb. 12:5-11) |
| Access to the throne of grace (Heb. 4:16) | Prayers effective or hindered (1 Pet. 3:7) |
| Sealed by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13) | Do not grieve Him (Eph. 4:30) |
| Spirit-prompted desires (Acts 8:29; 11:12) | Do not quench Him (1 Thess. 5:19) |
| Initial sanctification (1 Cor. 6:11) | Practical sanctification (2 Cor. 7:1) |
| Positional sanctification (Heb. 10:10) | Progressive sanctification (Heb. 10:14;12:14) |
| Righteous standing (Rom. 5:1) | Righteous attitudes/words/conduct (1 Cor. 15:34) |
| Focus of Romans chs. 1-5 | Focus of Romans chs. 6-8; 12-16 |
| Focus of Ephesians chs. 1-3 | Focus of Ephesians chs. 4-6 |
| Focus of Colossians 1:1-3:4 | Focus of Colossians 3:5-4:18 |
| A vessel of God's life (2 Cor. 4:7) | Be a cleansed and available one (2 Tim. 2:21) |
| "The Lord knows those who are His" (2 Tim 2:19a) | "Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity." (2 Tim. 2:19b) |
| Initial repentance and faith (Acts 17:30;20:21) | Believers should repent of sins (Rev. 2:5,16) |
| The Gospel message believed (Rom. 1:16) | God's Word to be learned & applied (2 Tim. 2:15) |
| Caught up when Christ returns (1 These 4:17) | Ready and hastening His return? (Mark 13:35,37) |
| Children of light (Eph. 5:8) | Let your light shine (Matt. 4:16) |
| Entrusted with the Gospel (1 Thess. 2:4) | A faithful or unfaithful witness? |
| Member of God's (universal) church (Eph 2:19-22) | Don't forsake fellowship with it (Heb. 10:24,25) |
| Stewards of time, talents & treasures | The use or misuse of these opportunities |
| True believers are "saints" (Phil 1:1;4:22) | Exhorted to "Be holy..." (1 Pet. 1:15,16) |

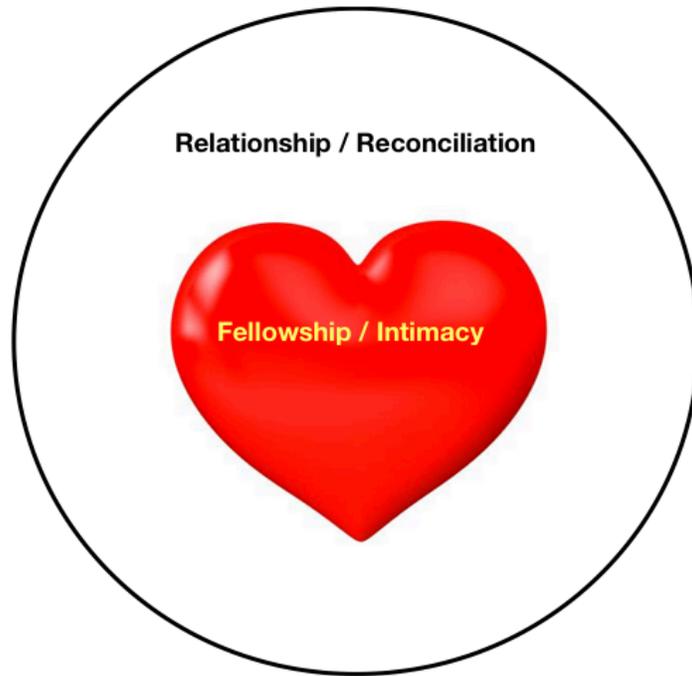
| RELATIONSHIP | FELLOWSHIP |
|--|--|
| Joined to Jesus—the True Vine (John 15:5) | As branches, abide and bear fruit (John 15:4) |
| No legal/objective condemnation (Rom. 5:1,16,18) | Avoid subjective condemnation (1 John 3:20,21) |
| Received Jesus as Savior and Lord (Rom. 10:9,10) | Fully submit to Him (Rom. 12:1; Luke 6:46) |
| Obedience expected (1 Pet. 1:2) | Obedience as a daily decision (Rom. 6:11-14) |
| Based on once-for-all pardon (Col. 2:13,14) | Based on ongoing cleansing (1 John 1:3-2:2) |
| Identity: believer-priests (1 Pet. 2:9) | Ministry: offering spiritual sacrifices (1 Pet. 2:5) |
| Describes one's position | Describes one's practice |
| Describes one's standing | Describes one's state |
| Being (Eph. 2:10a) | Doing (Eph. 2:10b) |
| God's love poured into hearts (Rom. 5:5) | Expressing love to God & others (Matt. 22:37-39) |

Additional aspects and examples could be given concerning the distinction between relationship and fellowship. However, this not to imply that these two categories are separate or disconnected. Relationship with God is the *root*; fellowship is the *fruit*.

Overlap

The “overlap” between relationship and fellowship means that, even when a child of God is temporarily in a carnal condition (1 Cor. 3: 1,3), he /she still has the invitation to intimacy with God (2 Cor. 6:17,18). “God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Cor. 1:9). Fellowship may be hindered, but the call back to communion is continual (Rev. 3:20). Since true salvation is secure (John 6:37,39), the believer’s *relationship* with God as a son or daughter is unchanging. This should motivate unhindered *fellowship* with God. It’s because He has promised “I will never leave you nor forsake you” that His child should turn from covetousness (Heb. 13:5).

For those of us who accept the spirit, soul, and body model of man (trichotomy, 1 Thess 5:23), *relationship* with God begins with regeneration of the believer’s *human spirit*; fellowship involves the believer’s spirit, soul and body cooperating with the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:6,11,16).



Importance of these distinctions

In considering this parallel list, many have been attempting to establish a *relationship* with God through *fellowship* activities. But apart from the Gospel of grace, religious duties are dead works (Heb. 6:1). This was the case of many self-righteous Jewish leaders in the first century A.D. Paul (who had been one himself) testified, “For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (Rom. 10:2-4).

On the other hand, some advocates of grace discipleship implicitly or explicitly blur the distinction between relationship and fellowship. In this case, the blessings of one’s *identity in Christ* and standing in grace are celebrated, but *responsibilities* for protecting and cultivating fellowship with our Holy God are ignored. Such inaccurate and imbalanced discipleship is what the apostle Paul characterized as “wood, hay, and straw” (1 Cor. 3:12).

Andrew Murray (one of the most respected advocates of new covenant living) wrote “The Christian who thinks that his salvation consists merely in safety and not in holiness will find himself deceived. Young Christian, listen to the Word of God, ‘You shall be holy’ [1 Pet. 1:16]. And why must I be holy? Because He who called you is holy and summons you to fellowship [*intimacy*] and conformity with Himself” (*The New Life*, ch. 14).

Here is a concluding example of how relationship is the root of spiritual fellowship with God and others:

Relationship: “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.”
Fellowship: “Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), finding out what is acceptable to the Lord. And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them” (Eph. 5:8-11).

By John Woodward
jbwoodward@icloud.com
GraceNotebook.com
2020

2nd edition (heart graphic in the circle instead of overlapping circles)

McRay, J.R. “Fellowship.” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Ed. Walter Elwell. Baker Book House, 2001.

Miller, Russell Benjamin. “Communion; Fellowship.” *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Editor: James Orr. Eerdmans, 1939.

Toon, Peter. “Fellowship.” *Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Ed. Walter Elwell. Baker, 1997.

Word study “Kiononia” [Fellowship]. See www.Blueletterbible.org / 1 John 1:3/ tools/ interlinear Greek Testament, Lexicon definition and 20 occurrences in the N.T.

Biblical quotations are from *The Holy Bible, New King James Version* (copyright by Thomas Nelson).