

## Truth's Fellowworkers

5 Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the brethren and for strangers, 6 who have borne witness of your love before the church. *If* you send them forward on their journey in a manner worthy of God, you will do well, 7 because they went forth for His name's sake, taking nothing from the Gentiles. 8 We therefore ought to receive such, that we may become fellow workers for the truth. (3 Jn. 1:5-8)

When I was a teen, I often asked one of my pastors why our church did not join in with the youth camps of certain other churches. Unfortunately, my motive at the time had a lot more to do with fun and friendship than anything to do with truth and doctrine. I got some rather vague answers at the time. And as I got older, I tried hard to understand the whole concept of why churches and Christians fellowship together or don't.

Maybe you've puzzled over similar questions. Why don't we work with a certain group or promote a certain ministry?

There are many, many different kinds of Christian fellowship and partnership. Some of them involve fairly little agreement, while others mean large amounts of agreement. There's informal coffee-cup kind of fellowship. There's doing evangelism together. There's discipleship relationships of teaching, or counselling or mentoring. There's partnering in a parachurch ministry like radio, or publishing, or crisis counselling. There is partnering with missionaries and church planters. There is partnering in presenting conferences for teaching. There is sharing pulpits. There is doing education together: Christian schools, universities or seminaries. There is the partnering of becoming members in the same church, for all that the local church is called to do. There is the partnership of being leaders in the same church.

And the moment you are discussing love and truth, you are also discussing fellowship and separation. Whom should we fellowship with and work with and collaborate with? Whom should we not, and perhaps even avoid?

The sheer range and spectrum of Christianity out there is bewildering, so most Christians just start assuming that there really isn't any biblical way to do it; it's just who you know and who you like.

But in truth, 3 John is a wonderful example of how love and truth function regarding fellowship and partnership between Christians. Third John is dealing with the problem of loveless truth, when doctrine is held for its own sake, without love guiding and balancing it. And the two contrasts in the book are Gaius, who got it right, and Diotrephes who got it wrong.

As we look at how Gaius fellowshiped, we'll see a truth-based approach to fellowship. Then, if we look at Diotrephes, we'll see a tribal-based approach to fellowship. From there we can apply the doctrinal triage we studied last week and use it for a truth-based approach to fellowship.

### I. The Truthful Fellowship of Gaius

5 Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the brethren and for strangers, 6 who have borne witness of your love before the church. *If* you send them forward on their journey in a manner worthy of God, you will do well, 7 because they went forth for His name's sake, taking nothing from the Gentiles. 8 We therefore ought to receive such, that we may become fellow workers for the truth.

John begins by commending Gaius for what he is doing for the brethren and for strangers. By this he means other Christians. In particular, John is referring to Christians who were doing ministry, some kind of itinerant preaching, or possibly church planting and missions.

In the New Testament era, travel was perilous, especially at night. Christians travelling from one place to another and particularly evangelists and itinerant preachers needed hospitality when going

from one place to another. The inns were notoriously dirty and immoral, and Christians wanted to avoid them at all costs. Their only alternative was to lodge in the homes of believers. This explains the repeated emphasis on hospitality in the New Testament.

distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality. (Rom. 12:13)

Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so *doing* some have unwittingly entertained angels. (Heb. 13:2)

For Christians to perform this service was of course a cost to them, many of whom were already poor. Gaius was apparently doing this, and John encouraged him to continue. John called what he was doing faithful, loyal. He did it so well, and so much, that verse 6 tells us that some of those Christian workers told other local churches how faithful Gaius had been to them.

Now why did Gaius partner with these Christian workers? The answer is in verse 7. John emphasises that these emissaries deliberately refused financial aid from unbelievers.

because they went forth for His name's sake, taking nothing from the Gentiles. (3 Jn. 1:7)

Why did these believers not accept or solicit help from unbelievers? Because God's work should be supported by God's people. You might remember that Elisha refused payment from Naaman (contrasted by Gehazi's acceptance of it), because he did not want Naaman to think that Yahweh's grace could be purchased. Abram's refused the patronage of the wicked king of Sodom (Gen 14:23), lest that king begin to think that Abram had been helped or saved by anyone except God.

There are some good reasons here why Christian ministry should be financed by Christians. First, no unbeliever should be encouraged to think that giving to a Christian or a Christian ministry is earning him or her some kind of favour with God. Second, unbelievers have their own causes that they give to, and Christians should seek first the kingdom of God. Third, Christians should not be absolved from their responsibilities to give, by the donations of the unsaved. Fourth, integrity in financial dealings should prevent any blame entering a ministry, and money sourced and spent by the church itself is best. Fifth, money solicited from the unsaved (sales, raffles, billboards, rented space) can begin to look like the commercialisation of ministry, turning a 'house of prayer' into a 'den of thieves'. Finally, there should be "no strings attached" to all donations, and seldom do unbelievers treat their giving and contributions in this way.

From this, we also gather the faith principle of supporting Christian ministry. When Christians give up their livelihood to preach the Word, the church has a responsibility to support those it believes are truly called and qualified (1 Tim 5:17, 1 Cor 9:14). Nothing stops a believer from giving up this right and supporting himself through his own work, but the faith principle is that a man may choose to give up other work to focus entirely on ministry. Whether they are pastors or church-planters, 3 John then encourages believers to support such people so that they may give themselves entirely to ministry. Conversely, when a man does so, he should not waver, but demonstrate to the church that he is not depending on the unsaved, but is looking to God's people for his support. He should only do so when he has the recommendation of God's people, as these emissaries clearly did, from John.

Now John says to Gaius in verse 6 *if you send them forward on their journey in a manner worthy of God, you will do well*, and again in verse 8 *We therefore ought to receive such, that we may become fellow workers for the truth*

To partner with Christians in this way is to do well. To receive them, that means fellowship and show hospitality and partner with them financially, we become fellow-workers for the truth. We are colabourers with the truth itself.

Now it is very unlikely that Gaius agreed with these missionaries and preachers on every point of doctrine. So how did he fellowship with them? Why did he work with them and help them? We'll consider that in a moment. Before that, let's consider how not to do it.

## II. The Tribal Fellowship of Diotrephes

9 I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us. 10 Therefore, if I come, I will call to mind his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words. And not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, putting them out of the church. (3 Jn. 1:9-10)

Diotrephes, as we've seen, was not motivated by love: love for God, love for His Word, love for people. Diotrephes was governed by a greed for greatness. He wanted to be preeminent. He wanted control, attention, followers, loyalty. He wanted the respect and honour, and most of all to be the litmus test for right and wrong. If you did not agree with Diotrephes then, unlike Gaius who received those Christians from outside his church, Diotrephes did not receive you. Diotrephes separated from the apostle John and would not read his letters in church. On top of that, he began using malicious words, manipulative, bully-pulpit techniques of speaking evil of those he disagreed with, slandering them and speaking nonsense about them. Moreover, when people in his own church wanted to extend fellowship to other Christians, verse 10 tells us he forbade them from doing so, and even church disciplined them.

Diotrephes' approach to fellowship was what we call the tribal approach to fellowship.

A tribal approach is when we define our fellowship not by doctrine but by familiarity and personality and loyalty. It is no longer what we believe and practice; it becomes a personality and political approach: who we know, who is in and who is out, who is with us, who is part of our group. Truth is sidelined for a tribe we create of us four and no more. And very often, you'll find that once the tribal approach takes hold, there really is no consistency as to who is in and who is out. People with very weird doctrines and practices are approved and thumbs up, and people who are very sound and helpful are thumbs down and shunned. This is exactly what Diotrephes had ended up doing. To be speaking against the apostle John, telling his people not to read or receive letters from John, casting out good believers, this showed that the man had become completely immersed in his own tribalism.

The tribal approach also tends to become absolutist in its fellowship. Diotrephes was likely treating truth in an all-or-nothing fashion – either you agree with me or I shun you and cast you out. We can decide that if some teacher or church or group gets it wrong in one secondary area, then they are teacher of error and we have nothing to do with them. It's either best of friends or total enemies, full fellowship or none at all.

You often find this in groups that are serious about truth and doctrine. . Whenever a concern for truth takes hold, believers can find themselves slipping into an all-or-nothing approach to fellowship. You are either like us in every point, and therefore part of the tribe, or you are not and must be shunned completely.

But there are two results of this. The first is that the circle of fellowship begins to shrink smaller and smaller. If fellowship is a matter of one strike and you're out, then other churches, Christians, or groups will keep disqualifying themselves because of some difference somewhere in the system of faith. The amount of people who hold the faith precisely as you do will soon shrink to very, very few, and yours will be a fairly lonely, if not solitary Christian experience. The second is that real truth and love is substituted with pride, as it was in Diotrephes. James puts it For where envy and self-seeking *exist*, confusion and every evil thing *are* there. (Jas. 3:16). All manner of abuse of authority, bullying, manipulation and cruelty in the name of Christ will occur. And usually, it also starts to happen within, and soon the suspicion and purges are taking place within the tribe, dividing the tribe up.

Perhaps worst of all, those who suffer under this very often abandon the truth. They decide that if allegiance to sound doctrine produces this kind of tyrannical, abusive Christianity, then it's something to avoid. They either abandon Christianity, or abandon doctrinally sound churches for flakey ones.

Probably most of us have had some experience of something like this taking place in a group or church we know of. And all of this comes from failing to balance love and truth. Gaius' truth-based fellowship was commended by John and urged to continued. So how do we do this?

### **III. The Truth Triage Technique**

Notice that John calls what Gaius was doing an act of love. Love is at the heart of truthful fellowship. All things being equal, we want to find ways to love our fellow Christians, not to shun them or harm them. We saw last time how truth triage helps us classify doctrine. We saw then that we must sort truth into one of three categories: essential doctrines, important but secondary doctrines, and tertiary doctrines with very little effect on Christian fellowship.

When we do a truth triage, we see firstly whether someone else is in the faith, if they hold to the gospel. Once we establish that, we can evaluate how much Christian truth we share. The amount we share dictates how much and how closely we will fellowship.

Let's put this very practically. Beginning with the fundamentals of the faith, if someone denies one of the essentials of the gospel, then we have no Christian fellowship. There is nothing we can share as fellow-Christians, because we are not fellow Christians. We can be neighbours, we can be civil, and kind, but we cannot pretend to share the faith.

Once someone agrees with the fundamentals, then at the very least, we can have the minimal fellowship of recognising each other as being in the family of God. Now it is easy to get this backwards. We can assume that because the fundamentals are essential, that if someone agrees with us on the fundamentals, then we now have 80 or 90 % fellowship as Christians. No, that would be wrong. The fundamentals are essential to any fellowship, but they are only the boundary of the Christian faith. They are the door, but not the house, the perimeter of the circle, but not the space inside. Once inside that boundary, there is still a massive body of doctrine to agree or disagree on. So someone believing the gospel along with us just gets them in the door, it's just the beginning of Christian fellowship, not the end.

Once we agree that we are both Christians, we then have to move to evaluate what we share on those secondary important doctrines. And this is where most of the work has to be done. Questions of church order, such as baptism, the Lord's Supper, women preaching, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the nature of worship, our understanding of election and freedom, Sabbath keeping and the Laws of Moses, views on psychology, even serious practical issues regarding philosophy of ministry and philosophy of worship.

We might find that we have very little agreement. What fellowship do we then have?

Similar to coffee-cup fellowship might be Christians who get together for a bible study at work or at a home, for counselling or mentoring. You might not share a lot of the faith, but as long as there is a shared submission to God's Word, there could be edification and mutual strengthening.

Probably the next level up would be those we have in our pulpit. This might surprise you, but we don't always need exceptionally high levels of agreement here, because for visiting preachers, they are in and out one Sunday at a time. Also, a man might have some differences with you, but if he has enough honour and courtesy, he will respect those differences and not try to change your church's doctrine when he is a guest speaker.

On a higher level of fellowship would be ways that Christians collaborate in ministry. Depending on what we want to do together, we need more or less agreement on the truth. If we want to do a conference, then we could collaborate with those churches or Christians that share what that conference is about, say biblical counselling, or worship. Some of our Reformed or conservative friends might collaborate with us there. If we did a conference in prophecy, we obviously couldn't collaborate with those same people who don't share our view on the millennium.

If we were going to do a youth camp, we should at least share a vision of what a healthy church is, and what sanctification looks like.

If we do evangelism together in a neighbourhood, we need to agree on the kind of churches we want new Christians to attend. If we do publishing together, we should agree on the kinds of truths we want promoted. We might collaborate with different Christians in different ways, depending on what we are wanting to do.

Membership in the same local church requires more agreement on the truth than some other areas, because we are agreeing to worship together in a certain way, believe certain things, practice certain things. If you don't share those things, then membership in the church will be miserable or even divisive. This is why we ask prospective members to understand our doctrinal statement, understand our distinctives, and ministry philosophies, and to only join if they do agree.

If we send or support a missionary, we need a fairly high degree of agreement with that person, because we are trusting him to plant a church somewhat similar to ours in doctrine and practice. We can't really get behind those with whom we have significant disagreements on church practice.

Even higher than that would be church leadership and the training of church leadership. Not everyone who is qualified to be a member is necessarily qualified to be a leader. This level of fellowship entails the highest level of obligation and accountability. Similarly, if we train men in a seminary, we need a very high degree of agreement on doctrine and practice to collaborate together.

From this, you can see why fellowship is not all or nothing. It is a matter of less or more. When we don't have a lot of agreement, then by definition, we have less fellowship, we share less of the truth. That means the ways and circumstances in which we can fellowship is less. The more of the faith we share, both doctrinally and practically, the more fellowship we have, and therefore the more we can fellowship and collaborate. It is not a matter of who is with us, who is in our group, who is just like us. That's the tribal attitude. It's a matter of what do we believe, what are the important doctrines, and how much of the faith do we share with another individual Christian, public teacher, missionary, local church, group of churches or even para-church ministry?

This has oversimplified things, because there are other issues too. Sometimes someone is very close to us doctrinally, but their practices or philosophies are so different that collaboration would be very difficult or impossible. Sometimes, we might want to collaborate with another ministry, but they are mixed up with some very odd people that makes our partnership with them confusing to others. And then there are sometimes some very subjective things, like the trajectory someone seems to be on, how vehemently they hold to a certain doctrine or identify with it, how flexible is someone on this matter.

Fellowship is a lot like doctrine. It is fairly complex, and it takes some experience and learning to understand it and apply it properly.

But what we know we should avoid is the tribal, all-or-nothing approach of Diotrephes. We should be like Gaius and desire fellowship and seek it out, but at the same time be realistic about where it exists and where it doesn't. If we do this, we will be faithful and be fellow-workers for the truth.