

# Do Two Christians Have to Agree on Everything to be in Fellowship with One Another?

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It is a fact that good, honest Christians sometimes disagree about various issues - whether elders should have more than one child, whether women should cover their heads in worship, whether Christians should be pacifists, and so on. To pretend honest, truth-seeking brethren *always* share identical beliefs is unhelpful.

This is the question we need to be able to answer: **Can you worship and serve Christ alongside another Christian - in full, brotherly camaraderie - when you disagree with him/her on a point of doctrine?** If so, at what point should you sever ties of fellowship?

I won't attempt to address every doctrine (that would be both impossible and presumptuous of me), nor will I address what fellowship (or lack there of) should look like. But there are some principles found in Scripture that can give us greater clarity about this fellowship question. But first, let's look at some false extremes so we can better see the truth.

# Wrong Answers To The Fellowship Question

## ***Extreme A: The “Core Gospel” Theory***

Many teach that there is a “core” set of essential doctrines on which believers must agree – matters such as the resurrection of Christ, the necessity of baptism, etc. Some are quick to point to the popular sentiment: “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.” (It should be noted this phrase is not found in the Bible.)

We need to be careful about turning a man-made quip into a religious creed. **What human gets to decide which matters are “essential” or “non-essential?”** What about instrumental music in worship, or taking of the Lord’s Supper on Saturday, or how to properly handle church funds? The problem with this theory is that *no one can seem to agree on what should be included in this “core” list.*

**Ironically, the idea that Christians must merely share a belief in a “core gospel” of fundamentals, while minimizing the importance of everything else, has caused a tremendous amount of division in the church.** If this is the answer to unity, it is a poor answer.

One particularly novel idea (one which has seen a small resurgence recently) is that this “core gospel” should be comprised *only* of God’s explicit commands, and that Scriptural inferences from deductive reasoning shouldn’t be a reason to break fellowship. However, Jesus Himself didn’t believe this; during His earthly ministry, He expected the Jews to be able to make doctrinal inferences from Scripture (Matt. 22:29-32). Furthermore, the command to abstain from “things like these” is a command to make inferences (Gal. 5:21). **There can be no Christianity without some degree of human inference.** (Is not this false “core gospel” theory an inference in and of itself?) Christians must make Biblical inferences about things like full immersion in water for baptism, denominationalism, instrumental music, etc. – matters on which there can be no room for disagreement among those who share the mind of Christ.

## ***Extreme B: The “Perfect Agreement” Theory***

Some demand that their fellow believers agree with them on every single doctrinal issue before extending a right hand of fellowship. **This approach forgets that Christianity is, in large part, a growth process – that we will never reach moral and intellectual perfection in this lifetime.** Romans 14 clearly explains how Christians can sometimes still be in fellowship despite their doctrinal disagreements. It is unrealistic to expect someone to

know everything about the Bible – and agree with 100% of your doctrinal conclusions – before administering baptism.

### **Extreme C: The Naysayer's Theory**

Some are quick to point to the doctrinal disagreements among Christians today as proof that restoring New Testament Christianity is impossible. The argument goes like this: “If two intelligent Christians who believe in the all-sufficiency of Scripture can't agree on everything, then this is a failed experiment. Let's turn the church of Christ into a denomination.”

**The problem with this theory, however, is that it confuses *unity of mind* with an *exhaustive unity of belief & opinions*.** Again, Romans 14 commands Christians to be in fellowship, despite having a few contrary opinions. While the Bible only teaches one position on any point of doctrine, the unity of mind among Christians is the simple acknowledgment that truth can be understood (at least eventually). Together we are dedicated to better understanding that single truth, no matter how imperfect we might be in the process.

So what are some Biblical principles that can help guide this matter of fellowship among two Christians who disagree?

## **Principle 1: Jesus Is Our Basis of Christian Fellowship**

If we walk in the light, as [Jesus] is in the light, **we have fellowship with one another**, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7).

My confidence that you are in fellowship with Jesus is how I determine whether I can be in fellowship with you. **I do not have a right to extend spiritual fellowship to someone not first in fellowship with Christ** – even if they *claim* to be a follower of Christ (Matt. 7:21-23).

I judge the faithfulness of self-proclaimed believers in Christ by (a) what they say, and (b) what they do. Jesus said, “You will recognize them by their fruits” (Matt. 7:16). Shame on me if I ever convey approval of someone's error (Rom. 1:32; 2 John 10-11).

## ***Fellowship Begins by Being “in Christ”***

One must repent (Acts 2:38; 3:19) and be baptized for the express purpose of entering into Christ for the remission of sins (Gal. 3:26-27; Rom. 6:3-4; 1 Pet. 3:21). **Who am I to call someone my “brother” or “sister” in Christ if they have not satisfied God’s initial requirements to be saved?**

## ***Fellowship Continues by Sharing the “Mind of Christ”***

**Unity can only be found in a shared agreement of what it means to submit to Jesus.** “Can two walk together unless they have agreed to meet?” (Amos 3:3). Paul commanded:

I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the **same mind** and the same judgment. (1 Cor. 1:10).

Peter commanded, similarly:

Finally, all of you, have **unity of mind**, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. (1 Pet. 3:8)

This “unity of mind” is how we approach God and interpret His Word. **Or, to use a more theological word, “unity of mind” is about sharing the same *hermeneutic*.** Jesus is the example of the kind of “mind” we are to have as we submit to the Father (Phil. 2:5-11). There is a right way and a wrong way to approach His Word (2 Tim. 2:15), and to properly interpret it, we must:

- Rid our lives of pride and selfish motives.
- Understand the teachings of Scripture as timeless and relevant to all matters of life.
- Recognize Scripture as the verbal, plenary, inerrant Word of God.
- Understand that the 66 books of the Bible are the sole source of authority, and no man-made document or tradition carries equal weight.
- Be willing to submit to the commands, apostolic examples, and all subsequent inferences as we realize them along the way – even at great personal cost.

**Being “united in the same mind” does not mean we must always agree on every doctrine immediately, but it does mean we must be in agreement in our approach**

**to God's Law (i.e. the mind of Christ).** Someone who has a high view of Scripture cannot, by definition, share the "same mind" as someone who has a low view of Scripture.

## ***Fellowship Is Severed When One Begins "Walking In Darkness"***

**"Walking in darkness" inhibits fellowship with God and consequently severs fellowship with His children** (1 John 1:6). A wrong hermeneutic will cause one to walk in darkness, and will manifest itself as neglecting His commandments (1 John 2:3; 3:22-24; 5:2-3), disregarding His Word (1 John 2:5), and living unrighteously (1 John 2:29), etc.

## **Principle 2: There Are No Unimportant Doctrines**

Say it with me in your heart: **There is no such thing as two equally valid, yet contrary, positions about a Bible doctrine.** God has not spoken out of both sides of His mouth on any issue (though some Bible topics are more clear than others). The Bible only teaches one position on any given topic. **If there is a doctrinal disagreement between two Christians, it is because someone has misinterpreted what the Bible teaches.**

The often-abused example is given of the late Gus Nichols and Guy N. Woods who, a generation ago, publicly disagreed about the nature of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, yet still maintained fellowship with one another (with Woods holding the position that the Spirit dwells within the heart representatively, and Nichols holding the position that the Spirit dwells within the heart literally and personally). **Let us not make the grave mistake of thinking that both positions were equally valid and thus of no consequence.**

Though Nichols and Woods honestly disagreed on this topic, we believe both men are presently in glory. And we hold both of these great men of God were saved - not because this issue didn't matter - but because the blood of Jesus cleansed them of the issues about which they were honestly mistaken (1 John 1:7). Which brings us to the third principle.

## **Principle 3: Jesus May Extend Grace To Our Wrong Positions (To an Extent)**

There is no question that there is no salvation outside of Jesus (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). And baptism is the only way into Jesus (Gal. 3:26-27). **But what if a Christian is honestly trying to serve God, but gets a few more difficult doctrines wrong along the way?**

Thankfully, the blood of Jesus cleanses the Christian's sins when he or she does not understand, or has no intention of breaking, God's Law (1 John 1:7). **There is a degree to which Christ is patient with honest Christians despite their imperfections.** I will not presume the extent to which His grace covers error, but the fact still remains in Scripture.

For example, Jesus told the church in Ephesus to repent of their wrongdoings; otherwise He would "remove their lampstand" (Rev. 2:5). This implies that - at least for the time being - the Ephesian Christians in error were still saved, but they were on probation (so to speak). **Christ had extended them grace in their wrongs, but they were expected to repent upon recognizing the truth.**

In a similar fashion, perhaps it could be said that Christians today sometimes get things wrong. There is a degree to which the blood of Christ continues to cleanse them, yet when they come to a better knowledge of the truth, Christ expects them to repent and do better.

I am confident that there are some Biblical matters about which I am wrong. Yet, so long as I seek to humbly submit to Jesus, I can enjoy the security of having my name written in the book of Life (Rev. 3:5). As I mature spiritually, I hope to better align my beliefs with Scripture along the way.

## **Principle 4: Fellowship Should Never Endorse What Is Wrong**

Christian Fellowship is largely based upon decisions that are the fruit of basic honesty. My beliefs are defined by how I treat other people. If I fail to clearly state my opposition or support of another's life or teaching, I become a hypocrite. **Christians are commanded to judge one another to determine whether fellowship can continue** (1 Cor. 5:12-13).

I must honestly judge those with whom I am considering fellowship, otherwise I risk "taking part in his wicked works" (2 John 11). When I extend my "right hand of fellowship" (Gal. 2:9), I endorse the life and teaching of brethren I deem to be honest and share my mind in Christ. **I must never engage in any form of fellowship which validates a wrong belief.**

Elders are to protect the church on a congregational level from false teaching (Heb. 13:17). Yet I protect the church on a personal level by means of my fellowship. Paul told the Roman Christians to "watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them" (Rom. 16:17). On the other hand, Paul told the Philippian Christians to "keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example

you have in us” (Phil. 3:17). Paul’s letters are filled with names of people to be avoided (e.g. 2 Tim. 4:14) and people worthy of commendation (e.g. Col. 4:7-17).

Of course, my judgments are human and thus sometimes wrong. I am open to honest discussion about my judgments. When Peter and Barnabas wrongfully excluded their fellowship from Christians, Paul rebuked them (Gal. 2:11-14).

## **Principle 5: Fellowship Sometimes Requires Judgment**

**The Bible repeatedly commands Christians to be patient with one another** (Rom. 14:1; 15:1; 1 Cor. 13:7; Gal. 6:2; Eph. 4:2) – and it isn’t just referring to personality conflicts. **We must be patient with fellow Christians as we hope to lead them to a “more accurate” understanding of Scripture** (cf. Acts 18:26).

**We need wise judgment as to how long we should patiently bear with people who are mistaken about a particular doctrine.** However, Scripture must carefully restrict the degree to which we tolerate opposing views.

There are three dimensions to consider when making this judgment call:

### ***The First Dimension of Fellowship: Discerning Right from Wrong***

Sin is sin, error is error, and wrong is wrong. The Bible only teaches one thing on any given issue, and I either get things right or I don’t. **But if this is the *only* dimension of fellowship, then few Christians – if any – could ever be in fellowship!** Perhaps we could say that all Christians are theoretically wrong about *something*. Surely no two Christians agree about every matter of Scripture (if we consider even the most intricate of doctrines). I openly admit that I may hold some beliefs that are wrong. Yet by God’s grace I hope to come to a better understanding of God’s Word as I grow in my understanding of Scripture.

### ***The Second Dimension of Fellowship: Being of the Same Mind***

If I disagree with another Christian, I must ask whether we are operating with the same “mind of Christ.” Remember, the “mind of Christ” is how I approach God and interpret His Word. Sometimes it may take longer to determine whether someone shares the same mind as you, but over time a pattern will begin to develop.

For example, a self-proclaimed “Christian” who does not believe in the essentiality of baptism for salvation is woefully mistaken and thus I cannot be in spiritual fellowship with him. He has not obeyed the gospel. We disagree, not merely about baptism, but fundamentally how we approach God and interpret His Word. The Bible plainly declares that baptism is the occasion at which my sins are washed away (Acts 22:16; 1 Pet. 3:21). To disagree about baptism reflects nothing short of a heart problem.

**Yet, if two Christians share the same “mind” while disagreeing about a more peripheral doctrine, we can expect the truth to prevail over time.** It is when someone exchanges the truth for a lie that two people must break fellowship.

### ***The Third Dimension of Fellowship: Admitting the Relative Complexity of the Doctrine in Question***

Some doctrines are simply more complicated than others. The Bible itself acknowledges this fact (2 Pet. 3:16). Thus, it logically follows that it will sometimes take longer for some Christians to come to the right conclusion about more difficult doctrines. **We need to give Christians, who are operating with the same “mind of Christ,” time to study the issue and work out the matter on their own.** We need to sympathize with brethren who have not yet found the truth on a particular subject, but who may still be searching for it. If I am honest, I know there are some issues I am still working through myself. This is simply part of “walking in the light” (1 John 1:7). The command to grow was written to Christians, not non-Christians (1 Pet. 2:2).

**Thus, as it relates to my fellowship with Christians with whom I disagree, I need to use judgment in identifying the doctrines that are more difficult to understand.** It is unfair for me to quickly sever fellowship with a Christian who is still honestly searching for the truth. At the same time, I need to take great care not to validate someone’s belief I know to be wrong (Acts 18:24-26).

It should be observed that New Testament Christians did work and worship in congregations where perfect doctrinal agreement did not exist – congregations where only a few Christians had not, metaphorically speaking, “soiled their garments” (Rev. 3:4). They worshipped and fellowshiped in imperfect churches, working to “strengthen what remains” (Rev. 3:2). Christians can for a season, in good conscience, remain in fellowship with other Christians who are mistaken about some issues if their aim is to bring them toward perfection. How long that season should be, however, is sometimes based upon wise judgment.

## Conclusion

Do two Christians have to agree on everything to be in fellowship? Not necessarily.

### ***The Limits of Fellowship***

Yet we cannot have Christian fellowship with those who are not first in fellowship with God. This means people who are not in Christ and people who have left Christ cannot enjoy spiritual fellowship with other Christians.

Christians find fellowship by sharing the “mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 1:10; 1 Pet. 3:8). This means we share the same healthy fear of God, submission to Christ, and respect for His Word. This allows for the occasional honest disagreement over some specific doctrines, yet over time - if all parties are operating with the “mind of Christ” - more and more differences will be resolved.

### ***All of God’s Word Is Important***

There is no “core gospel.” No command is too small. God never speaks out of both sides of His mouth. All of God’s instructions are equally important (though all may not be equally clear). We must continually strive to get everything right.

The reason the “core gospel” theory is so popular is because it is so similar to the actual truth (all false doctrine has a little bit of truth in it). The Bible teaches that some doctrines are simply more clear than others, as Peter says (2 Pet. 3:16). Yet, all Biblical doctrines are essential because all are from God.

### ***Protect Your Conscience***

Christians must take great care not to violate the conscience (Jas. 4:17). Even though there are some matters about which Christians can disagree, it is important not to participate in anything that will communicate that you support that which is wrong.

### ***Remember The Three Dimensions of the Fellowship Question***

Fellowship is not always limited to a binary of right and wrong. If this were the case, virtually no Christian could be in fellowship with another, since none of us have reached Christian perfection. To what extent should Christians be patient with those who believe differently than you?

The second dimension takes into account whether two Christians are operating with the same mind, or the same hermeneutic. The third dimension takes into account the relative difficulty of the doctrine in question. I want you to treat me with the same degree of longsuffering as I am commanded to extend to you in Christ.

### ***Be Thankful for Elders & Congregational Autonomy***

We are thankful that God has established autonomous elderships to rule over individual congregations to help Christians work through these difficulties. Elderships are to exercise wise judgment in settling doctrinal disputes, and Christians have an obligation to submit to their decisions (Heb. 13:17). Yet what if a Christian still disagrees with their decision? It is important for him to consider the three dimensions to this question of fellowship.