



FELLOW WORKERS

There are fundamental concepts in the Scriptures concerning relationships that are often quite contrary to the accepted behavioral norms of the world in which we live today. One of these Spirit-inspired norms is critical in defining how Christians are to relate with one another as the organic body of Christ. This is a relational norm that is often the most violated mandate of the New Testament, particularly in view of the incarnation of the Son of God. Jesus explained to His disciples, *“You know that those who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them. And their great ones exercise authority over them. **But it will not be so among you**”* (Mk 10:42,43).

A. Fellowship without lordship:

No interpretation need be exercised to understand what Jesus meant in the preceding statement. He simply mandated that there would be no lording authorities among His disciples. Nevertheless, this very clear mandate in reference to relationships is a principle that is often ignored by those who seek to rule over their fellow disciples. When this command is

ignored, the relationship that disciples must maintain with one another becomes very dysfunctional. In fact, if one would seek to relate with his or her fellow Christian in a lording manner, then he or she is not walking according to the gospel.

Our gospel relationship with one another is defined in the following statement from the Holy Spirit through Paul:

*Let this mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God. **But He made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant** and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, **He humbled Himself** and become obedient unto death, even the death of the cross (Ph 2:5-8).*

Christians must behave in their relationships with one another as the Son of God behaved in His incarnational relationship with us.

In order to explain the relational servitude by which His disciples were to function as His body of gospel-obedient believers, Jesus illustrated His teaching on relationships with the practice of slavery that was common in the socio-economic structure of the Roman Empire. Jesus used the relationship of slaves (bondservants) with one another to define the relationship that Christians, as fellow slaves, would function with one another in His kingdom.

Slaves were **fellow** bondservants (or, servants) (Mt 18:28-35; 24:45-51). They were equal among themselves. Jesus explained that the disciples' relationships with one another must be as fellow slaves who were equal with one another. The disciples understood the slavery of the Roman Empire, and thus they understood what Jesus meant when He spoke of them as fellow slaves of one another (Mk 10:44,45; see Jn 11:16).

There is no competition among slaves as to who is the greatest or who is in control.

B. Fellows in Christ:

Being “fellows” in Christ meant that no disciple was given the right to have authority over any other disciple. Before His departure from them, therefore, Jesus reminded His disciples that **all authority among all His fellow bondservants would always remain with Him** (Mt 28:18). Discipleship, therefore, meant serving one another as fellow workers in Christ, not being in positions of authority over one another.

After the ascension of Jesus, the Holy Spirit continued to define the relational function that the disciples were to have with one another. The Spirit first focused on the reason for the disciples’ relationship as fellow members of the body. They were “*fellow heirs with Christ*” (Rm 8:17), and thus “*fellow heirs of the same body*” (Ep 3:6). The Gentiles were “*fellow citizens*” in the household of God (Ep 2:19). Now if the disciples were called to be “fellows” in reference to their salvation and kingdom citizenship, then, as Jesus had previously stated, there were to be no lords or rulers among them. The definition of disciples being “fellows” in their relationships with one another dismisses the possibility that one “fellow” should rise up over his other “fellows” in Christ.

There are no bosses among fellow heirs.

A good example of how the disciples were to behave in reference to their relationships with one another was stated by Paul in reference to Andronicus and Junia. These two were his “*fellow prisoners who are notable among the apostles*” (Rm 16:7). Being “notable” does not mean being exalted with authority over the apostles. They were fellow prisoners “among,” but not over one another in the kingdom. Aristarchus

and Epaphras were likewise fellow prisoners with Paul in Rome (Cl 4:10; Pl 23). There were no lords or rulers among fellow prisoners.

C. Equally sharing:

“Fellow” also means that we equally share in the same thing. Christians equally share together as heirs with Christ. If required, they equally share together as prisoners for Christ. They equally share together as citizens of the kingdom. And thus, they equally share together as “*fellow bondservants*” in their organic function as members of the body (Cl 1:7).

Herein is the definition of the disciples’ relationship with one another as members of the body of Christ. The absence of lords and rulers among the disciples means that there is an equality among fellow citizens. Disciples cannot equally share as fellow workers if some “fellows” are designated with authority over their fellow disciples. As soon as one of the “fellows” assumes authority over his fellows in Christ, then the one who assumes authority has made his fellow bondservants his employees. In his assumption of authority, therefore, he has denied the fellowship of equality among the disciples (See 3 Jn 9,10). He has revealed that he is not following the incarnational journey of the Son of God from heaven into this world in order to be made in the likeness of those He served (See Jn 1:14).

Equality assumes fellowship, and thus fellowship assumes that the disciples are responsible for one another.

An example of the disciples being responsible for one another is what the disciples did when the church was first established in Acts 2:

Now all who believed were together and had all things in com-

mon. And they sold their possessions and goods and divided them to all, **as everyone had need** (At 2:44,45).

D. Fellow workers:

Timothy was a fellow worker with Paul, though Paul was not a boss over Timothy (Rm 16:21). Paul would not rule over the faith of the Corinthians, but reminded them that he was a fellow worker with them (2 Co 1:24). Titus was a partner and fellow worker with Paul (2 Co 8:23). The two sisters, Euodia and Syntyche, were also fellow workers with Paul (Ph 4:3). In their relationships with one another, the disciples in the New Testament were identified to be fellow workers, or servants of one another (See Pl 1,24; 3 Jn 8; Rv 6:11). Being fellow workers meant that no one disciple had any authority over any other disciple.

Being fellow workers assumes that the workers are responsible for one another.

This is the secret to the dynamic function of the body of Christ. If there are no lords or rulers among fellow members, then each fellow member must take ownership of his or her responsibility to be a functioning member in the body. All members must assume their responsibility to function equally, though equality does not mean that they function in the same way. We are all blessed with different gifts (See 1 Co 12:12-31). With the control and authority of only one Head, each fellow member assumes his or her role to function with his or her gift that was granted by the Head in order that the body function.

In order to function to the best of their ability, the disciples should organize their gifts with one another. In this way the whole body functions in harmony as each member uses his or her gift to the fullest potential.

Dysfunctions in the body result when members refuse to function as fellow parts of the body (See Ep 4:7,8,11-16).

There is no competition for power or exaltation of gifts among equal fellow workers. If Paul had authority over Apollos, he, on one occasion, could have commanded him to go to Corinth (1 Co 16:12). Since Apollos did not go when Paul requested, Apollos was not sinning against some “apostolic authority” that was supposedly invested in Paul. This one example in the behavior of Paul illustrates what Jesus meant when He stated that there would be no authorities among His disciples (Mk 10:42,43).

Another example would be the relationship between Paul and Barnabas. When Paul and Barnabas disagreed over taking John Mark on the second mission journey, Barnabas was not rebelling against any so-called apostolic authority of Paul (At 15:36-41). Paul, Apollos and Barnabas were all fellow workers, and thus, neither of them had any authority over the other, and neither had any authority over the function of the church as a whole. And for this reason, each of these men assumed their responsibility to use their gifts to be functioning fellow workers in the body of Christ.

There is no such thing in the New Testament as “apostolic authority” in reference to the relational function of the members of the body of Christ with one another.

E. Living incarnationlly:

We live in a world of lords and rulers. For this reason, our social environment makes it quite difficult for some disciples to leave the business boardroom of the corporate world, and then function in inequality as fellow workers among the disciples. The boss in the boardroom is often tempted to treat his fellow workers in the body as his employees. The CEO of a

company often seeks to be the president of the local church. Those invested with authority in government sometimes seek the same among the disciples. However, leaders among the members of the body do not lead with authority. The notable leaders among us do not “*lord over those entrusted*” to them, but function as “*examples to the flock*” (1 Pt 5:3). When disciples take ownership of their responsibility to function as fellow workers of the body, it is then that the body grows.

Gospel-obedient people behave according to the behavior of the Son of God who became a slave to the spiritual needs of the world.

Group Review Discussion Questions

[After reading the text of this bookito, answer the following questions in a discussion group with others.]

1. What is the difference between the authority structures of the business world and the servanthood leadership of the body of Christ?
2. What is the relationship that slaves have with one another?
3. What does the word “fellow” imply concerning the disciples’ relationship with one another?
4. What is the difference between authority over one another as opposed to being responsible for one another?
5. What does the example of Paul and Apollos prove in reference to the relationship that fellow workers have with one another?

For continued research on this subject,
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ABBREVIATIONS

OLD TESTAMENT

Genesis - **Gn**, Exodus - **Ex**, Leviticus - **Lv**, Numbers - **Nm**, Deuteronomy - **Dt**, Joshua - **Ja**, Judges - **Jg**, Ruth - **Rt**, 1 Samuel - **1 Sm**, 2 Samuel - **2 Sm**, 1 Kings - **1 Kg**, 2 Kings - **2 Kg**, 1 Chronicles - **1 Ch**, 2 Chronicles - **2 Ch**, Ezra - **Er**, Nehemiah - **Ne**, Esther - **Et**, Job - **Jb**, Psalms - **Ps**, Proverbs - **Pv**, Ecclesiastes - **Ec**, Song of Solomon - **Ss**, Isaiah - **Is**, Jeremiah - **Jr**, Lamentations - **Lm**, Ezekiel - **Ez**, Daniel - **Dn**, Hosea - **Hs**, Joel - **Jl**, Amos - **Am**, Obadiah - **Ob**, Jonah - **Jh**, Micah - **Mc**, Nahum - **Nh**, Habakkuk - **Hk**, Zephaniah - **Zp**, Haggai - **Hg**, Zechariah - **Zc**, Malachi - **Ml**

NEW TESTAMENT

Matthew - **Mt**, Mark - **Mk**, Luke - **Lk**, John - **Jn**, Acts - **At**, Romans - **Rm**, 1 Corinthians - **1 Co**, 2 Corinthians - **2 Co**, Galatians - **Gl**, Ephesians - **Ep**, Philippians - **Ph**, Colossians - **Cl**, 1 Thessalonians - **1 Th**, 2 Thessalonians - **2 Th**, 1 Timothy - **1 Tm**, 2 Timothy - **2 Tm**, Titus - **Ti**, Philemon - **Pl**, Hebrews - **Hb**, James - **Js**, 1 Peter - **1 Pt**, 2 Peter - **2 Pt**, 1 John - **1 Jn**, 2 John - **2 Jn**, 3 John - **3 Jn**, Jude - **Jd**, Revelation - **Rv**

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