

# **Fellowship Forum**

**Facebook Discussion between  
Mike Criswell and Steve Ramsey  
January 8, 2012 – February 9, 2012**

## **Post 1: Steve Ramsey, 1/08/2012**

We thought it might be good to post a brief biography so people on the forum who might not be familiar with one or the other of us could know at least something of where we are coming from.

### **Mike's Bio:**

At the outset I want to express my appreciation to Steve for inviting me to be a part of this discussion. I have known Steve for many years and he has proved himself a sincere brother in Christ and one worthy of respect. Over the years Steve has been a great asset to my work especially in his willingness to help edit and publish the Christian's Expositor. Without his help we would have been at a loss. I look forward to our discussion and am confident that we will not only grow closer in the Lord but also learn a great deal from each other. As to my background I would share the following. Like Steve I was "raised in the church" and also attended SMSU in Springfield, Missouri. After graduation I settled in Kansas City where I began working with the congregation at 85th and Euclid. Under their leadership I have been blessed to to preach the gospel both at home and abroad. Although as a young man I never intended to become an evangelist the Lord presented opportunities that compelled me to preach His Word. So often I feel a bit like "Jonah" who went kicking and screaming to the ministry, but through the years the Lord has been gracious and has given me encouragement

through family and faithful brothers in Christ. May our discussion be filled with love and edification and may God bless you as we study together.

### Steve's Bio:

I have been a child of God for twenty years (almost to the day). I was “born and raised” in the church, attending the Leawood Village congregation in Joplin, Missouri, until I went to college. While attending SMSU in Springfield, Missouri, I attended the Mission Hills, Jamesville, and Northside congregations. I currently live in Corsicana, Texas, about an hour south of Dallas. I am a high school English teacher (but please overlook my mistakes on FB) and a debate teacher/coach. I am married to Sarah (Vannoy) Ramsey and have four wonderful little boys. I have known and respected Bro. Mike for years. We have worked together on the Christian’s Expositor and on his Matthew commentary. We have spent many hours together in person and in email.

### **Post #2, Mike Criswell, 01/08/2012**

Fellowship - FIRST POST

A quick overview

The English term “fellowship” is found in the King James New Testament some fourteen times. In the Greek text,

however, the word translated “fellowship” is the word “Koinonia” and in New Testament times carried a rich variety of meanings. It was used of a business partnership, where two or more persons were closely connected. It was of marriage and the shared life of husband and wife. It was sometimes used of a perceived relationship to some god, such as Apollo. And finally, it was used to refer to the spirit of generous sharing in contrast to the spirit of selfishness. It is clear then that the term “fellowship” may have a variety of meanings and only refers to religious matters when context demands such an interpretation.

In the New Testament “fellowship” describes the relationship Christians have with one another and with God through the blood of Jesus Christ and the sanctifying work of the Spirit. Paul says, “God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord 1Cor 1:9). Paul also speaks of God’s eternal plan and calls it the “fellowship of the mystery. He goes on to note that this grand scheme was from the beginning but had been hidden in God (Eph 3:9). John says that our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ (1 Jn 1:3).

From the above verses it seems clear that biblical fellowship is multifaceted and involves more than a simple relationship between individuals or congregations. Fellowship is first and foremost a relationship, rather than an activity. The principle is that any activity that follows should come out of the relationship. Fellowship, as Paul describes it, is the

mystical union that occurs when believers are in agreement with the Godhead. From a practical perspective two Christians find themselves in fellowship only by virtue of the fact that they are first in fellowship with the Godhead. Clearly then it is God who sets the terms and limits of fellowship. In reality fellowship with one another occurs by default when we are in harmony with the Word of God. If an individual chooses to walk outside the light of the God's revelation they are no longer in fellowship – not because humans say so but because God says so (1 Jn 1:3-7).

**Post #3, Steve Ramsey, 01/08/2012**

Mike,

Maybe one of the first things we should discuss is what the requirements are to be in fellowship with God. I would not want to deny fellowship to anyone who is within God's fellowship, nor would I want to be in spiritual fellowship with someone outside of God's fellowship.

So question #1: What does it take to be in fellowship with God?

**Post #4, Mike Criswell, 01/09/2012**

What does it take to be in fellowship with God?

In Corinthians 1:9 Paul says "God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord." Here the apostle confirms that the first step to fellowship is "The Calling." While Calvinism and other

theologies opt for some kind of a miraculous call to salvation Paul makes it abundantly clear that God's call to "fellowship" comes via obedience to the gospel of Jesus Christ. To the Thessalonians Paul writes: "Whereunto he called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Thes 2:14). But Paul also indicates that fellowship must be maintained by "The Continuing." Verse 15 says, "Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle." Thus these verses encapsulate the basic premise of both obtaining AND sustaining fellowship with God. When we are baptized into Christ we put on Christ (Gal 3:27) and have our sins washed away by Jesus' blood (Rev 1:5, Rom 6:3). At that moment we are brought into fellowship with the godhead (1 Jn 1:3) and subsequently with all others who have obeyed that form of doctrine (Rom 6:17). To maintain and sustain fellowship with God, and by extension with other Christians, we must then continue to obey Christ and his doctrines. We must be disciples (learners). Acts notes that after obtaining a relationship with God via baptism (Acts 2:38) the early church "sustained" that relationship by following the apostle's doctrine (Acts 2:42). They obeyed and abode in the teachings the apostles laid down both by word and epistle (2 Thes 2:15). Furthermore they "marked" those who did NOT remain faithful. John says it this way, "If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: 7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of

Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin” (1Jo 1:6). Thus fellowship is a two part process: Obedient faith puts into Christ and obedience to the faith keeps us in Christ.

Below is a short response to Bro. Steve's first question. While the paragraph below does not discuss what "core doctrines" we must agree upon, it does set forth the biblical notion of entrance into Christian fellowship and the necessity to remain in that fellowship. We can discuss particulars in up coming posts. Thanks Steve!

**Post #5, Steve Ramsey, 01/09/2012**

I am amazed that we already have so many members of this group! I think this speaks to the need we have to discover what the Bible instructs in regards to fellowship. We have lots of questions, and hopefully this discussion will bring us some answers and help us formulate a cohesive belief.

At the outset, I think it is important to consider some logical fallacies that often get in the way of us truly understanding and accepting the teachings of the Bible. There are numerous ones out there, but one that I was thinking about the other day is called “Appeal to Consequences of a Belief.” This is when we refuse to accept something as true simply because if we did acknowledge its truth, we would also have to accept some other truths that we are not ready to accept. For example, someone might argue, “You don’t have to be baptized into Christ because if you did, that would mean my grandpa was not in Christ since he was never

baptized...” We are all human and must bear with our emotions, but we need to be mindful that our emotions often lead us the wrong way. We must examine ourselves and be willing to accept the truth regardless of the consequences. I constantly remind myself of this.

Ok, now on to the discussion about what it takes to be in fellowship with God...

I like to look at our relationship with God and each other as a family relationship. This is a common theme in the New Testament—indeed, Jesus emphasized that not only is God His Father, He is ours, too! Therefore, it seems that one must be in the family to have a true relationship with God. Maybe the best summary is John 1:10-13: “10 He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. 11 He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. 12 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” Once we become children of God, adopted into His household, we have a relationship with Him. By definition, therefore, all others who also have been adopted would be our brothers and sisters. All who have been born again are my brothers and sisters and are children of God.

But this is merely the point when our “fellowship” with God and other Christians begins. As you mention, Mike, must we

do anything to maintain it? The easiest answer is to look at the parable of the Prodigal Son. He was always his father's son and his brother's brother, yet he was not always in "fellowship" with them. Once he left home and went off to do his own thing, he was no longer under the safety of his father's blessing. When he came home, the father received him. So it is with us, as long as we strive to live under our Father's roof, we are in fellowship with Him. Once we run off and do our own thing, we lose contact and have to come back home. Did the son do everything exactly like his father asked when he was home? Probably not. But he was trying. And I think that is the key. There is a difference in trying and still making mistakes and simply being rebellious.

Mike, you mention that we must continue in the light (1 John 1). I think this is the same as what I just said. But what are your feelings about mistakes we make and grace? In other words, at what point do we cease "walking in the light" (leave home)? I used to think that the Bible taught if you sinned once you were out, so you had to repent to get right back in. Do you hold to this view or do you feel there is grace to cover our ignorance?

**Post #6, Mike Criswell, 01/10/2012**

Steve, you are so right about being amazed that so many folks are interested in this forum. I believe it shows that in spite of disagreement we have love for each other and want the Lord's cause to be at peace. It humbles me greatly that

you and I are having this discussion before so many wonderful brothers and sisters in Christ. What a great responsibility we have. I can think of no one with whom I would rather discuss this issue.

I apologize for not writing sooner in the day but hospital visitation took precedent. Brother Don Freeman is again in the hospital battling cancer. May I appeal to our readers to keep him in earnest prayer!

First I would like to briefly consider the “argumentum ad consequentiam” concept you introduced in paragraph one. While not specifically our topic of discussion the “Appeal to Consequences” argument is interesting. Without running amuck in a philosophic quagmire I would note that while an argument’s perceived outcome does not in and of itself determine whether that argument is true or false, there are times when “outcomes” must certainly be taken into consideration. Before we adopt any doctrine, it is wise to ask where this particular view will lead us. Sometimes a belief/worldview/ doctrine lead to such conflict with other clear teaching that it is obviously wrong. Thus while it is not enough to condemn or support a doctrine simply on the basis of subjective pragmatism, wisdom does require that we “test all things” and take possible consequences into account.

As noted in my last post, I love the prodigal son illustration of Luke 15. Clearly the immediate context of this parable is a

contrast between “sinners” and “Israel’s religious leaders (see verse 1-2), but there does seem to be a deeper theme that runs through this beautiful story. Without doubt the story shows the love of The Father and the desire God has to have all of us in the warmth of His embrace. As you correctly noted, the problem with the prodigal son was that he was aggressively rebellious. He certainly knew what the Father expected and yet refused to submit himself to the Father’s will. Not until he lost everything did he come to desire the fellowship of home.

Steve, you asked about my feelings regarding the “mistakes we make and the role grace plays in forgiveness?” You also asked at what point we cease “walking in the light” and whether there is “grace” to cover sins of ignorance. With this you’ve hit upon the “million dollar question.” I doubt that I will satisfy our readers but I do have a couple of observations that might be helpful.

First, John’s first epistle is one about “relationship.” And what a beautiful epistle it is. Yet as we read it in English we may miss the beautiful nuances which are evident in the Greek text. The constant watchword in John’s writing is “abide” (1 Jn 2: 28 – Gk: meno). And as noted in other posts, we abide” in Christ when we “walk” in the light (1 Jn 1:7). When John uses terms like this he uses the present tense denoting “continuous action.” Practically speaking then a Christian does indeed “sin” from time to time (we might call this “sin dot”) but he does not continue and persist in sin (we might call this “sin line”). When a Christian realizes he

has sinned, he immediately confesses his sins and is promised cleansing via the blood of Christ (1 John 1:9). The implication then seems to be that known sins which are not repented of lead to condemnation. When we consider other passages such as 2 Peter 3:18 \*(Grow in the grace . . . ) and Philippians 2:12 \*(work out your own salvation . . . ) we see the necessity for a constant examination of one's life, worship, and Christian relationship. It seems that God holds us accountable based on the amount of light we have.

Finally, as to the specific issue of how much we can sin (either willfully or ignorantly) and still be covered by grace, let me say that I've always believed this to be the wrong question. This approach is kind of like the person asking how close he can get to the cliff without falling off. Or like the person who plays chicken with an oncoming train. One may or may not fall or be hit by the train but such an approach is far from wise. I believe the same is true biblically speaking. It is human tendency to want God to tell us just how "far" we can get from Him and still be accepted. Frankly only God can answer that! I simply don't know and don't feel it would be productive for me to even try to figure it out. The question we should be asking is how "close" we can possibly get to God by reading and obeying His will and the pattern contained therein. The premise of New Testament Christianity is to follow as closely as possible the words/traditions of the apostles (Acts 2:42, 2 Thes 2:15, 1 Cor 11:2 etc.). Likewise the premise of the "Restoration Movement" was to "restore" New Testament Christianity. In

both of these cases the goal was not to see how “far” Christians could get before they were condemned, but to see how “close” they could get to God’s revealed Word. In closing I would note that “grace” is never described in scripture as some kind of nebulous fog in whose haze we can sin with impunity. It seems to me that New Testament grace is in reality the plan God has given us both for initial salvation via obedience to the Gospel (HBRCB) and for continued cleansing via confession and prayer. At this juncture in my study I am unaware of a New Testament plan that allows us to knowingly sin and be forgiven without repentance and confession of that sin. As to “sins of ignorance” being covered by some kind of grace? I’m not sure how much I can say. God will judge each of these. And by virtue of the fact that they are “sins” that only God knows about I suppose it would be impossible for me to say much about them one way or the other. However, IF I did come to know of these sins it looks to me like I would need to repent and confess them. But to worry about “sins” that I may have committed seems to me to be unproductive. The best approach is just to continue to study and let our ignorance disappear as we mature in the faith.

One of my fears in the church today is that folks are asking the wrong questions. So often we are tempted to focus on what we CAN’T know rather than what we CAN know. It is this formula that some institutions of higher learning exploit in an attempt to wreck our kids faith. I experienced this back in the “stone age” when I was working on my theology

degree and I doubt that the devil has changed his tactics today. We would be much better off in the church today if we would simply focus on the beam from the Lighthouse rather than on the misty darkness of life's sea of doubt.

Thanks again Steve. May the Lord bless us in our continued study!!

M

**Post #7, Steve Ramsey, 01/10/2012**

Mike,

I think we agree on everything so far. I think this reflects how much all of us have in common.

In regards to the logical fallacy, I agree that sometimes consequences can help determine what is the best course of action. My point was that consequences should not cause us to determine what is objective truth. In other words, in matters such as whether or not to eat that extra bowl of ice cream, we would need to consider the consequences (unfortunately). The same is true in spiritual matters, too. This is the idea Paul presents when he writes, "All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify" (1 Cor 10:23). And in Romans 14:21 "It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles." In regards to eating meat, the truth was that it was acceptable to eat the meat. This objective truth, however, did not mean it was best to eat the meat. My concern is that I know too often

we rule out what is right because we feel it takes us where we aren't willing to go: "That can't be right because that would also mean that ..." I fear we hold to this fallacy sometimes. Truth is truth, consequences be what they may.

I think you are exactly right about grace and rebelliousness. We cannot simply choose to do what we want when it is contrary to God's will. When we learn of our sin, we need to repent.

The reason I wanted to start with the question, "What does it take to be in fellowship with God?" is because I think this is where we start veering off the road. For example, I know of some preachers who have taught things I "know" are not what the Bible teaches. They honestly believe them. Does this cause them to lose fellowship with God? I have been wrong in the past, even when I was sure I was right. I mean, really, how many times have we learned something we were doing or believing or teaching was wrong? How many times have we changed our understanding of what the Bible teaches on a subject? It happens all of the time over the years. As you referenced, this is growing in grace and knowledge, etc. (2 Peter 3:18, etc.). Growth requires a starting point below the destination, and thus it requires that we be wrong and then improve to be right. If we start off perfect, there isn't too much room for growth there.

So here is my dilemma: how can I say someone else is not in fellowship with God when they are living, believing, and

teaching as best as they know how yet when it disagrees with my stance? In other words, I would hope that God's grace covered me in the past when I was wrong about some things. I thought I was right and even preached those things as being right. Over the years, however, I changed my view. Does this mean I was separated from God until I changed my stance? I believe the New Testament teaches that God's grace did cover me in my ignorance. If not, God requires perfect knowledge of His word—a place I don't think any of us claim to be at. But, if God's grace covers me in my honest ignorance, wouldn't it cover someone else? For example, if you think and teach that Jesus is going to establish a kingdom on earth when He returns and reign for 1,000 years, are you lost? Suppose you have studied it over and over, and yet that is your conclusion? Suppose I have gone to you and told you why I think you are wrong? Are you out of fellowship with God? We could use other examples such as our understanding of Revelation, the baptism of John the Baptist, whether an elder could have a wife after his first died, having a kitchen in the building, etc. But the question is the same: do these misunderstandings cause us to be separated from God? I believe there are some beliefs and practices that would separate us, and I think they are explicitly given, but I have written so much already. Maybe we can address those in the next session or two. I look forward to your thoughts.

Everyone, please continue to pray for this forum and the church.

**Post #8, Mike Criswell, 01/11/2012**

Steve,

I had a few minutes so I thought I'd jot a few thoughts. I'm going to try to keep this as short as possible. I got to thinking that perhaps our busy readers might like shorter and more easily digested posts— you know . . . “bits” instead of “bytes” (LOL). So here goes the impossible!!!!

The issue you've raised about folks seeing things differently may not be so much a “fellowship” issue as it is a question of the “perspicuity” of scripture. In other words, has God made His Word clear and can we understand the Bible alike? In our post-modern world it may seem naïve to believe that Christian unity is possible. But I believe that when it comes to salvation, corporate worship, core theological tenants, and godly living unity is not only possible it is mandatory. This is what Jesus prayed for (Jn 17:21).

We have always said that the things “most” necessary to salvation are the easiest to understand. I think this is a fair statement. To take any other view would be to espouse what one of my friends once called, “Agnostic Theology.” By this he was referring to the notion that the Bible is so unclear that no one can really know the truth. Such a view, however, is really an indictment of God's ability to explain Himself and is a “no confidence vote” in verbal plenary

inspiration. Furthermore if we are unable to see the Bible alike then honesty requires that we fellowship ALL religions and ALL theologies. This would be religious relativism in its purest form and even the most progressive among us would probably reject this. We all draw lines of fellowship whether we like to admit it or not.

Naturally when a doctrine is clearly stated (ie: one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one church, one cup, one undivided assembly, morality etc) there is little room for exegetical disagreement.

On issues of less clarity, however, and on issues that do not affect the corporate and collective conscience of the church, I believe we can be more open minded and patient with one another. In fact I believe Romans 14 demand's it. We might want to discuss Romans 14 but to me it seems clear that the "disagreements" discussed in that chapter are personal and private matters which are neither right nor wrong in and of themselves.

Finally, I will close by saying that if a man holds some view (even a false view) and never expresses that view then a congregation has very little choice but to fellowship him. Why wouldn't they since they don't know he holds that view? However, personal views tend to surface over time and if a brother/sister begins to express views that fly in the face of core doctrinal truths and/or bring division to the congregation, then fellowship might well be discontinued if

the problem cannot be solved (Rom 16:17, 1 Cor 5:5, 1 Tim 1:20, etc).

On a practical level it looks to me as if “fellowship” (or lack thereof) is primarily a local issue. If a person begins to cause division or teach error in his home congregation the leaders have the responsibility of rebuking him. If another congregation, however, begins to teach aberrant doctrine about the only thing I can do is to warn the flock of which I am a leader/.member and attempt to maintain doctrinal purity at home. Naturally this would not necessarily preclude my discussing the issue with those I have a relationship with in that other congregation. But at the end of the day congregational autonomy allows other congregations to determine their own eternal destiny.

While it may seem overly simple, it looks to me as if each of us has the responsibility to examine ourselves and others in light of the scriptures. Those we find to be walking in the light are those we then fellowship. However, we must be honest and careful in our assessment and make sure our judgment is influenced only by the Word of God and not emotional ties we have to friends or family. It may seem a bit subjective but if we let God’s voice speak louder than our own I believe we can generally come to the correct conclusion. If we can’t prove it by scripture then we ought to reject it!

**Post #9, Steve Ramsey, 01/11/2012**

Mike,

If that is your short post, I would hate to see a long one! :)

As usual, we agree on most things. Because of the nature of this discussion, I don't want to address those too much. This might make it look overly critical or negative. It shouldn't be seen that way because we agree on much more than we seem to disagree. Such is the nature of this discussion, though.

The first point you make is that this seems to be a matter of perspicuity rather than fellowship. Merriam-Webster.com defines "perspicuous" as "plain to the understanding especially because of clarity and precision of presentation." In other words, God's word is clear and should be understandable to all. Mike, you claim that if we can't understand the Bible alike, then it places the blame on God, but since God is infallible, we must be able to understand it alike. I think we agree on most of this. The Bible is objective truth. We should be able to study it and understand it. The difference is in what we can do and what we actually do. In theory, we should all be able to agree on objective truth, but in reality, we don't agree on everything. In fact, I doubt there are any two people who agree on everything. It isn't because God's word is flawed but because our understanding gets clouded. Jesus often explained, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." Sometimes our ears are not ready to hear for one reason or another. Jesus told His

disciples, “I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now” (John 16:12). Jesus does not say this as an insult, but as a fact—they simply were not ready. Even Peter explains that some of Paul’s writings were “hard to understand” (2 Peter 3:16). We are all on different places of the “understanding highway.” If we look at our own lives, we surely see how much more we understand now than years ago. This is not because something is wrong with God’s clarity; the problem is us.

So this brings out the question of what to do during this growth period. Paul says in Romans 14 (which I figure we’ll get to later): “10 But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. 11 For it is written, “AS I LIVE, SAYS THE LORD, EVERY KNEE SHALL BOW TO ME, AND EVERY TONGUE SHALL GIVE PRAISE TO GOD.” 12 So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God. 13 Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this -- not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way.” In other words, when two people disagree about something, they should agree to disagree and remain at peace with one another. Why? They don’t answer to each other; rather, they answer to God. God’s way is the way of peace. There are some exceptions to this “agreeing to disagree.” Sometimes we cannot have unity with brothers who disagree with us. But what are those matters?

This brings us to the second part: What does the Bible say we must agree on in order to remain united (in fellowship)?

You state

“Naturally when a doctrine is clearly stated (ie: one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one church, one cup, one undivided assembly, morality etc) there is little room for exegetical disagreement.”

and

“... on issues that do not affect the corporate and collective conscience of the church, I believe we can be more open minded and patient with one another”

Just so I understand you correctly, because I could be misinterpreting what you are saying. Are you saying the list of things we must agree on and which are not covered by grace are

One Lord

One faith

One baptism

One church

One cup

One undivided assembly

Morality

Issues involving corporate church conscience

Is this your complete list? Is there anything you would add or take away?

Also, would you please reference or copy/paste the scriptures you use for this list?

I believe there is a list, but I want to see if our lists agree before I present mine. Plus this is already really long :)

You are in my prayers.

**Post #10, Mike Criswell, 01/12/2012**

Steve . . . wow you must be a night owl. I got up about 6 AM and somewhere in the dark of night you posted. And yes, you hit the nail right on the proverbial head: I too would hate to see me write a “long” post. LOL! When I first began preaching I was asked to do a Preacher’s Study topic on “Apologetics.” Being young, green, and naïve I thought I needed to reinvent the wheel. I think my paper turned out to be something like 70 pages long!!!! You talk about “overkill.” I’ve learned that most folks don’t want “Master’s Theses.”

I really appreciate your last post. You’ve given me a lot of food for thought! I love it!!!! As humans we often don’t understand the Bible alike and we both agree that’s not God’s fault. So the real question then is whether or not we can know enough to be saved and “walk in the light.” We both agree that’s possible! But as you correctly observed we

have a tendency to want to make definitive lists of requirements. In my last post I had what might have looked like a list dealing with doctrinal basics, the plan of salvation (HBRCB), corporate worship, and morality . . . but also notice I included a huge “ETC.” at the end of my comments. I did this for a couple of reasons. First I am not omniscient and any list I would make would be far from adequate. Lists don’t leave much room for growth and probably lead to arrogance anyway. The rich young ruler seemed to have wanted a list (Mt 19:21) and Jesus refused to give him one. Jesus wanted the ruler’s obedience to be “open ended.” But secondly even Paul did not attempt to make exhaustive lists but used phrases like “such like” to round out the “listings” he did give (Galatians 5:21). I take from Paul’s comments that he expected men to use their God given intellects to apply God’s Word to their individual situations. As an aside, Paul’s use of “such like” clearly sounds the death knell to the cry that we can’t use human reason in interpreting truth. Lately some have tried to argue that since “hermeneutics/ logic” are a product of the mind this makes them inherently unreliable. Apparently Paul didn’t think so. But anyway, God calls upon each of us to “work out our own salvation” (Php 2:12). As I grow and learn I will no doubt become more sensitive on some issues and less on others. With that said, however, that does not mean that there are no “definitive truths.” Surely we can at least agree on “direct commands” and “apostolic patterns.” And as I noted in my last post, the things most pertinent to salvation are the clearest in scripture. Who can read the command to be

baptized and not understand it? Who can read Paul's directive about the Lord's Supper and not understand the significance he places on correct worship. Who can read Galatians and not understand that we are free from the Law of Moses? I suppose the list could go on and on but the problem with "lists" is that they seem to reflect our desire to put God in a box. Again as an aside, sometimes in order to justify some non-authorized practice I've heard people say, "You CAN'T put God in a box." By this they mean that God just may be more gracious than His written word indicates and thus may overlook sin. Perhaps, but while we can't put God in a box . . . GOD CAN AND DOES PUT US IN A BOX!!! His Word is the gracious box that keeps us safe from Satan. But as far as lists go . . . I'm not going to attempt to make a definitive "list." That would be foolish and furthermore that's what the "Church Councils" tried to do in the early centuries of church history and that led to a mess!

So if there are no exhaustive lists that determine the limits of fellowship, what are we to do? Well it looks to me like the only thing we can do is first examine ourselves to see if we are in the faith (2 Cor 13:5), and then examine those around us to see if there are any glaring errors in their lives/worship/practices that violate God's Word. We must judge righteously but we must judge none the less (Jn 7:24). When I find others walking in the light of God's word (1 Jn 1:7) and in accordance with the Apostles teaching (1 Jn 1:3) then I can be assured that we are in fellowship with each other because we both are first in fellowship with God.

However, if I find a person or congregation violating the Word of God and they refuse to heed the pleas of those who point out their errors, then naturally my conscience will not allow me to consider them in fellowship. I can never be in fellowship with someone I believe to be out of fellowship with God. Naturally that doesn't mean I have to mistreat those with whom I disagree but it does mean I must reject any religious partnership with them (2 Cor 6:14, 2 Thes 3:14).

But here is where many seem to get the cart ahead of the horse. Some, no doubt with the best of intentions, want to examine their relationship with other folks/congregations BEFORE they examine that persons/congregations relationship with God. How do we examine persons or congregations? We do this by comparing their doctrines and practices with the Bible. If they are found wanting then I have the responsibility to "note" that person (2 Thes 3:14). An important axiom is . . . JUST BECAUSE I AM IN AGREEMENT WITH A FELLOW HUMAN OR A SISTER CONGREGATION DOES NOT MEAN THAT EITHER OF US IS IN FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD. Or as a wise preacher once said, "We are in fellowship with brethren IF they are in fellowship with God. We have to deal with THEIR fellowship with God long before we can deal with OURS with them."

Steve, I really think "at the end of the day" Satan has used post-modernism to terrify us into refusing to draw lines in

religion. In no other field or endeavor would we take this approach because it simply doesn't work. But when it comes to God's Word many of us are afraid to take a stand. We've so "sensitized" our conscience against "being judgmental" that we've forgotten how to be "discerning." When you combine this with the dearth of biblical knowledge so prevalent in the church today, we have an A #1 recipe for apostasy. As I sign out I will again reiterate my favorite phrase, "We MUST focus on what we CAN know rather than what we CAN'T know." The doubts we harbor about how God will judge good sincere people must never detract us from continually going back to the Word. It's the only guide we've been given. I may be naïve or too pragmatic but to worry about with whom I'm in fellowship to the exclusion of just concentrating on doing what I know is biblical . . . would be tragedy of epoch proportions. Ironically, when we just go back to the Bible and concentrate on ourselves, fellowship takes care of itself.

Brotherly love to you and your family, Steve. I look forward to your next post.

**Post #11, Steve Ramsey, 01/12/2012**

Mike,

Hey, I never really go to bed with four little boys under 7 years-old. I just take prolonged naps :) I sure appreciate your tone in your messages. I was telling Sarah tonight that I think you sound nicer in your messages than I do, and she agreed!!! :/ I'm going to try to do better!

I apologize for the length of this response. I really want to present it all in one sitting to keep the flow of thought. Ok, here it goes...

Most of what you said was how I believed for a long time. In fact, only recently after much study and prayer have I changed my ideas on what God wants in regards to unity. As we mentioned in our opening post, unity is what the Lord prayed for on the very night He was betrayed. As both of us agree, because we are all growing in knowledge and understanding, we will not be able to see everything the same. And, as you said, this brings up the question of what MUST we agree on?

You mentioned that you do not believe in lists because we are not omniscient and sometimes lists breed arrogance. But, dear brother, you do have a list. Your list is like mine used to be—we need to agree on some of the major doctrines, lifestyle, and worship. But the more I studied the Bible for the lists it contains, I discovered I was wrong. What I am about to say might sound crazy to some, heretical to others, and refreshing to others. But I challenge each of us to study what the Bible says and see if I am mistaken. Like I said, I did not always hold to this position and would have zealously refuted someone who said what I am about to present....

The Bible essentially has one list of what we need to agree on to have unity. That list is found in Eph 4:1-6:

Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, 3 being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling;

5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism,

6 one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

I like to include the first few verses, not because they are really part of the list, but because they emphasize the attitude we must have if unity is going to prevail. Then we have the list of the “seven ones.” That’s it—those are the seven things we must agree on to have unity. If we have those things in common, we are to be one.

Let me now mention a few exceptions that God mentions.

1. Paul provides a list of immorality that disassociates us from someone who is “sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner” (1 Cor 5:11).

2. He also mentions in 2 Thessalonians 3:6, “But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us.” And a little later (a verse you referenced) “And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed” (2 Thess 3:14). While these passages in Thessalonians might appear to be general statements about anyone who refuses to follow the Bible, the context shows that the “disorderly” are those who refuse to work and just mooch off other Christians.

3. Paul also says in Rom 16:17-18, “Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. 18 For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting.” Note that they teach “contrary to the teaching which you learned.” One of the most immediate lessons Paul taught in chapter 14 was for them to be united and not judge or despise each other over differences in understanding. Someone who denies this commandment could be guilty of the sin mentioned here.

4. And finally, John warns in 2 John 7-10, “For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist. 8 Watch yourselves, that you do not lose what we have accomplished, but that you may

receive a full reward. 9 Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son. 10 If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting.” While we might end up studying 2 John 9 more in depth if you want, I think the context is clear—if someone denies that Christ came in the flesh, he is to be rejected.

In summary, we are to be in unity if we agree on one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all with the exceptions of sexually immorality, covetousness, idolatry, reviling, drunkenness, extortion, refusing to work and using Christians, divisive teaching contrary to Paul’s teaching, and denying the incarnation of Jesus

If we are truly going to let the Bible speak, this is our conclusion. This list is not long enough for some, probably, and for others it is too long. Nevertheless, this is the will of the Lord.

Now, let’s be practical about how this would work and what this would mean. Does this mean that I should worship in a way I feel is in error since worship is not mentioned

anywhere in the list? Certainly not. Just as on Romans 14 Paul does not tell the vegetarian to eat meat, it would not be appropriate here to violate your conscience. Does this mean there are no standards for how we should worship? No, those standards still exist, but the way we worship is not to divide us. I think an example would help: J.W. McGarvey believed that worshipping with mechanical instruments was a sin and refused to do it. But occasionally he would speak for a congregation that used these instruments. Yet, when he went to their services, they did not use them. He did not withdraw his association with them, and they honored him by setting aside something they knew would offend him.

What this would look like today is that we can work with congregations who do not agree with us on everything, but who still hold to those “seven ones.” We can use the members in our services, we can go to their meetings, etc. In doing such, we not only fulfill the law of Christ, we keep open the lines of communication to discuss these matters without being judgmental or confrontational.

That is the end of part one :) (and you thought your post was wordy!)

Now, I would like to look at the more traditional view you posted and show you why I left such a position. First, we struggle compiling a list of all we think is essential, as evidence by the “etc.” We each have our own lists of things

we think are essential. Many of our lists have similar items, but mine might have some that yours might not. Even within those lists there is disagreement. For example, we might both agree that morality is essential, but we might disagree about which acts are immoral and even which are immoral enough to be on the list—is cutting the hair immoral? Is watching R-rated movies immoral? Is letting your daughter be a cheerleader immoral? Is celebrating Christmas immoral? You get the point. When we do not look to the Bible for God’s list but instead create our own, we really have created a mess.

Second, sometimes something that might seem so clear to you is not so clear to me and vice versa. You mention, “With that said, however, that does not mean that there are no “definitive truths.” Surely we can at least agree on “direct commands” and “apostolic patterns.” Surely we agree on most things, but what if we disagree on some of the “apostolic patterns.” What if I see a pattern that you don’t or you see a pattern that I don’t. You might think we have to eat the Lord’s Super upstairs always, and I might believe that we have to wash each others’ feet. If we hold to the belief that following the “apostolic patterns” as we see it is essential for unity, we’ll never have unity. Some brethren hold that there is a strict order of worship because of Acts 2, yet most of us don’t. Should they withdraw from us and consider us out of fellowship with God? This would be the logical conclusion if the traditional view is correct.

Thankfully, the Bible does not require that we agree on all of the “apostolic patterns.”

The last problem with the traditional understanding is that it violates the clear teaching of the Bible. You explain that we must “first examine ourselves to see if we are in the faith (2 Cor 13:5), and then examine those around us to see if there are any glaring errors in their lives/worship/practices that violate God’s Word. We must judge righteously but we must judge none the less (Jn 7:24).” It is true that we should examine ourselves to see if we are in the faith, but nowhere does it ever tell us to examine others to see if they are, too. In fact, it says the opposite:

In Romans 14:4, 7-10 Paul says, “4 Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand. ...7 For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. 8 For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. 9 For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living. 10 But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.” Later, Paul writes in 1 Cor 4:3-5, “3 But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. 4 For I am conscious of nothing

against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord. 5 Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God." I especially think the part about motives is important here. Only God knows our motives, and we need to be careful about judging why someone does or does not do something. Finally, notice what James says in James 4:11, "Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge of it." We are told in Galatians 6:1 what to do if we see a brother sin, but this is different than judging one's relationship with God. When we create our own lists, it almost always leads to judging others' righteousness.

I know I have said a lot, but I would like to address a couple of more items. First, you say, "Some, no doubt with the best of intentions, want to examine their relationship with other folks/congregations BEFORE they examine that persons/congregations relationship with God. How do we examine persons or congregations? We do this by comparing their doctrines and practices with the Bible." This is a dangerous view for a couple of reasons. It is possible for there to be faithful Christians in unfaithful congregations. Jesus tells the church at Thyatira in Rev 2:24: "But I say to

you, the rest who are in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not known the deep things of Satan, as they call them -- I place no other burden on you." The church here had some problems, but there were still some who were not accountable for those problems even though they were members of the church there. Possibly a better example is the church at Sardis. Jesus tells them, "But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy" (Rev 3:4). If we follow the traditional view and try to judge a person's rightness with God based on the actions of their congregation, we violate the premises presented in these passages. Indeed, when we pass judgment on any congregation, we usurp the Lord's role as sovereign over His church. We can choose to not attend services at a congregation because of how they worship or what they teach, but we need to be careful about calling them apostate or lost, especially when we mean the entire congregation.

Ok, last point: I agree that post-modernism is wreaking havoc on our nation and maybe even in the church. There are things that are right and wrong. But those things are stated in the Bible, and when we veer away from it, we are not on solid ground. The truths that we must agree on are in the Bible, not in our heads.

I know that as someone who studies and loves the Bible and who holds it in such high regard, you will study these things.

These words are not easy. These words indicate that some of the battles we have fought and lines we have drawn were wrong. It is going to be difficult for all of us to accept them. Accepting them means accepting that we have been wrong and that some of our dearest and most respected forefathers were wrong, too. But let us let the Bible speak and hold all doctrines, practices, and beliefs up to its light to truly know God's will.

I said I was going to try to sound nicer, but I feel like I haven't done a very good job. I think you know me well enough to know the spirit in which I mention these things. I once believed like you, but have changed my mind. If I am wrong, please show me. If not, let us work together to show others.

God bless you, brother and all who seek Him.

**Post #12, Mike Criswell, 01/13/2012**

Dear Steve,

Well I'm finally at my computer with a few quiet moments so I thought I'd jot a few lines. First let me again say that I thoroughly enjoyed reading your last post. It stretched the old gray matter a bit but that's just what I needed. Now my brain, though thinner, actually fits the extra space. LOL!!! But in all seriousness I sincerely thank you for being transparent in your post. It really helps me better understand where you're coming from.

Like you I have struggled through the years with many theological questions including “fellowship.” I’ve challenged my upbringing. I’ve questioned God. And often I’ve been in constant debate with myself. The irony of debating one’s self is that one always ends up losing. And I’m not a very good loser either! I’ve always said that “thinkers” carry an extra burden in learning to trust God. To our chagrin we want things tied up in neat little packages and sometimes it’s just not that way. At times it really is hard to walk by faith instead of by sight? I’ve come to the conclusion, however, that God isn’t upset when we question Him as long as we don’t question rebelliously and as long we are willing to listen to the answers found in His Word.

Fellowship is indeed a hard issue to discuss because in a world of relativism it tends to make us feel judgmental, critical, and even condemning of others. At least that’s what the “world” wants us to feel. And the only thing today that culture can’t tolerate is “intolerance.” So in hopes of portraying a “loving spirit” we find ourselves tempted to put up a big tent and cry to the masses, “Come one come all.” Ironically Jesus made a similar appeal but he did it on his own terms (Mt 11:28). I’m afraid that sometimes the appeal we make is on our terms rather than on God’s.

A few days ago our dear Brother Don McCord had a post that really thrilled me. On day seven of his “New Year’s Resolutions” he spoke eloquently of the congregation at

Covina and his deep love for them. As he lifted them up as a monument to faithfulness he beautifully wrote:

“ You will not find a more faithful church in corporate worship, in work, in spirit; peace-loving. In song acappella; in prayer and teaching, one man at a time, undivided assembly; the Table, one loaf, one cup. Only preachers, brothers who worship the same, are used, called on. We do not practice or promote "open-fellowship" - never have. We attend to our own business, and expect others to attend to theirs. What a blessing it is at the sunset of my life to work with and worship with these dear people.

What poignant words from such a seasoned soldier of the cross. What wisdom set down with ink? Don has been a mentor and friend to many of us for such a long time and his words rise from a wellspring of wisdom. Yet in the glowing warmth of life's western sunset, and knowing true fellowship waits just over the horizon, he chooses this as a beautiful synopsis of his work.

Why would a man whose passion it is to engender peace among us take the time to speak so definitively of worship and fellowship? Would not peace be more easily attained if we would agree to blur the lines just a little bit? Yes, without doubt, but Don knows that once one is willing to blur the marks of distinction he soon has nothing to which he can convert others. Don knows that the Lord painted his church on a very special canvas – a canvas woven with

threads of scarlet and splattered with the blood of his cross. There's no other painting like it. It is the Master's masterpiece. It is priceless. Others have tried to paint their own "body" only to find a disturbing self-portrait. Paint unmingled with the blood of Christ pictures nothing but the horrid scene of man's sin.

Well I've gotten carried away and haven't even addressed what I had in mind.

In my next post I want to look at one of the most beautiful passages in all of Holy Writ. Steve, it's the one you shared as part of your "list" and what an awesome "list" it is. But I want to examine Paul's words and see if they tell us anything about the fellowship God wants us to have with the world.

Thanks for indulging me my dear brother. I have so many unconnected things I'd like to say and present for our study. I apologize up front for not getting to the meat of what I wanted to write. With your permission I hope to have the rest finished by Saturday evening.

Blessings to you, your family and all those in Christ Jesus our Lord.

**Response(P12), Steve Ramsey, 01/14/2012**

Mike,

I look forward to your longer post sometime today (don't feel rushed, though). I wanted to comment on something

you said in your last post, though, and would like for you to maybe explain or comment on it when you write. In speaking about Bro. Don McCord, you said,

"Why would a man whose passion it is to engender peace among us take the time to speak so definitively of worship and fellowship? Would not peace be more easily attained if we would agree to blur the lines just a little bit? Yes, without doubt, but Don knows that once one is willing to blur the marks of distinction he soon has nothing to which he can convert others."

... I just want to note for the record that my long post the other night does give very clear lines of fellowship. I listed the verses for those lines and then listed verses where God has provided exceptions. Please don't read my words as fear to judge or draw lines. I just want to make sure that the lines I draw are God's lines and not my own or those of people I know and respect. The lines need to be from God.

God bless you in your study. Have a great Saturday, everyone!

**Response(P12), Mike Criswell, 01/14/2012**

Thanks brother. I know you do indeed draw lines too. I never want to misrepresent you so I appreciate the clarification for our readers! Hope all is well. Enjoy the boys today!!!! They grow up so fast.

**Post #13, Mike Criswell, 01/14/2012**

Dear Steve,

As noted yesterday I wanted to finish out my comments and thoughts on your last major post. Again I want to say “thanks” for that post. It was well written and very transparent and I deeply appreciate that. It’s kinda funny how different days find us in different moods. Yesterday I was a bit nostalgic about things and today I’m more “exegetical.” So to all my readers out there . . . this one may be one dry read!!! And who knows if I’ll even get to the main points I want to make. But Steve you said it best when we decided for this forum to be spontaneous. And again brother, I have really enjoyed our dialog. What a fantastic way to get to know ourselves and others better. You’re already taught me a lot!!!

I promised I’d write a few words about Ephesians 4:1-4 and I shall at some point. To begin with, however, I want to throw out a few points that came to mind when I was reading your post:

- First, you mentioned J.W. McGarvey as being an advocate of fellowshipping congregations with whom he disagreed on instrumental music. History certainly demonstrates that toward the end of his life McGarvey softened. However, his attempt to make peace with apostasy didn’t work and apparently he knew it wasn’t working? In January of 1902 or 1903 McGarvey was asked by the Central Christian Church

in Dallas to attend and preach for one of their services. Brother Jesse Sewell, then a boy preacher of about 24, sat next to McGarvey. Well let's let Bro Sewell tell the story:

o As we sat there talking, Brother McGarvey said to me: "Brother Sewell I want to say something to you, if you'll accept it in the spirit in which I mean it." I told him I'd appreciate anything he had to say to me. He said about these words, "You are on the right road, and whatever you do, don't ever let anybody persuade you that you can successfully combat error by fellowshipping it and going along with it. I have tried. I believed at the start that was the only way to do it. I've never held membership in a congregation that uses instrumental music. I have, however, accepted invitations to preach without distinction between churches that used it and churches that didn't. I've gone along with their papers and magazines and things of that sort. During all these years I have taught the truth as the New Testament teaches it to every young preacher who has passed through the College of the Bible. Yet, I do not know of more than six of those men who are preaching the truth today." He said, "It won't work." (<http://www.therestorationmovement.com/sewell,jl.htm>)

- In discussing Rom 16:17-18 you noted: "One of the most immediate lessons Paul taught in chapter 14 was for them to be united and not judge or despise each other over differences in understanding." But over WHAT "understanding?" While you are certainly right that Paul

urged acceptance of one another, a quick look at the context of Romans 14 shows that Paul could not have been talking about doctrinal error or corporate worship. Such an assumption would make no sense at all. What Paul deals with in Romans 14 are matters of personal conviction, things that in and of themselves were neither right nor wrong (ex: eating meats, celebrating days, etc) – things that scripture did not legislate on. Obviously we don't eat meat in worship and neither do we corporately celebrate holidays so Paul can't be talking about how to worship God in a corporate assembly. No one disagrees that Paul forbids division over personal matters, but the context just won't allow us to apply this to things the scripture HAS legislated upon. The Lord HAS legislated doctrine and practices in worship. Thus Romans 14 proves nothing in regards to our practices in the assembly of the saints. Equating Paul's leniency in Romans 14 to what he says elsewhere about worship practices such as the Lord's Supper or instrumental music is like comparing apples to oranges. Such comparisons may make for a juicy story but they don't tell us the truth.

- The same apostle who commanded the Romans to “mark” those that caused division (Romans 16: 17) also commanded one cup, one loaf, one assembly, one man speaking at a time, singing as the only authorized form of music in worship, etc. So was Paul saying to "mark" those that advocate more than one cup, or those who taught that instrumental music in worship was okay? Or maybe Paul's

command to "mark" applied only to the church in Rome and it didn't matter about those who would change the pattern he laid down to Corinth. Well Paul answers this when he says he taught such things in ALL the churches (see 1 Cor 14:33 and 36, see also 1 Cor 7:17). You see Paul's doctrine about worship etc. was not unique to a few congregations. Everything Paul demanded of the Corinthians he demanded from ALL the churches. Thus when Paul laid down instruction regarding worship to the Corinthians the same was being laid down for the Romans. Does it make sense that Paul would be so adamant about doing things correctly in Corinth and then tell the Romans in chapter 14 that it didn't matter as long as they tried to get along? Besides, the context of Romans 16:17-18 where Paul says to "mark" people is not in reference to liberties. In 16: 1-16 Paul commends those who were FAITHFUL in the Lord. He closes out by warning about those who were NOT faithful in the Lord. In fact he says in verse 19 that their OBEDIENCE was known abroad. What obedience? Obedience to ALL the doctrine he had delivered (vs. 17) – the same doctrine we find in Corinthians and his other writings.

- In your post you also mention 2 John 7-10 where John warns against going beyond and not abiding in the teaching of Christ. You note: "While we might end up studying 2 John 9 more in depth if you want, I think the context is clear—if someone denies that Christ came in the flesh, he is to be rejected." But is this admonition exclusive to the issue of Christ's incarnation??? I believe not! While the immediate

context deals with Christ's incarnation, in reality John is reiterating a long known axiom of Christianity. DON'T CHANGE GOD'S WORD. Is it okay to go beyond the teaching of Christ in everything else besides the fact that Jesus came in the flesh? Notice verse 4 where John rejoices that they are walking in truth. Was the only truth John had reference to the incarnation of Jesus? Notice verse 6 where he says we are to walk in Jesus' commandments. Is the only command we are to walk in the truth of Jesus' incarnation? In verse 10 does John have reference to ONLY rejecting those who deny the incarnation? The answer to all these questions is "NO!" John's condemnation of "going beyond" applies to ANYTHING the Lord has laid down whether recorded by John or any other inspired apostle. Condemnation of going beyond what is written is a general principle found throughout the scripture (ex: Rev 22:18 etc.).

- Finally in the second part of your post you note, "It is true that we should examine ourselves to see if we are in the faith, but nowhere does it ever tell us to examine others to see if they are, too. In fact, it says the opposite."

While this sounds good in our post-modern world it just isn't true. First, if we are to never judge one another then why did Jesus say, "Judge righteous judgment?" (Jn 7:24). When Paul instructed the church to judge those that were within (1 Cor 5:12) what did he mean? When Paul told the Corinthians to judge one another instead of going before

pagan courts (1 Cor 6) what did he mean? When Paul told Timothy to rebuke, reprove, exhort etc. how was he to do this if he was not to judge? (2 Tim 2). When Paul instructs about how to deal with one overtaken in a fault (Gal 6:1), what did he mean? How can someone know if one is at fault if we never judge? The very nature of preaching is to administer “righteous judgment” so that others may be convicted of sin. Peter certainly judged on the day of Pentecost. And what did Paul mean when he told the Thessalonians to warn the unruly? How could they determine if someone was unruly if they were not to judge?

Well I’ve done it again and still haven’t made it to Ephesians 4. I shall in time but I don’t want to go any longer tonight. I hope that what I’ve said wasn’t too terse. I’ve probably sounded more like a debater than I would like but as you noted, we both need prayer because this is a serious issue and one that we must look only to the Word of God to answer. I fear that so many of us (me included) sell God’s Word short in an attempt to feel good about ourselves. Nothing feels better than having a big heart and open arms to others – especially in things that pertain to the soul. I’d love to say it didn’t matter if we worshiped with Cups brothers or Instrumental brothers – I have friends and family in some of these groups. But Christ demands we have authority for all we do. That’s what it means for him to be Lord! But I’m preaching to the choir – I know you hold to the authority of God’s word else we wouldn’t be having this wonderful and stimulating discussion!!!

Blessings to you and your family. I hope you had a good day with the boys and I hope you have a great Lord's Day tomorrow. Isn't it wonderful to be able to call at least one day of the week "The Lord's Day?" What honor and glory He deserves.

Love you brother.  
mike

**Post #14, Steve Ramsey, 01/15/2012**

Mike,

I have to be honest. When I read your last post, I was upset and my competitive juices kicked in. I began trying to think of a way to win and defeat your argument rather than looking for the truth. I think we all struggle with that—I mean, who wants to be wrong? I think I am over that, though, and I pray that I will not worry about who is right but what is right. Sarah said something this morning that made me realize the problem. She said that it was a discussion not a debate. I think we began that way, but we are starting to get more debate-like. I blame myself for that and will try to make it more discussion-like.

Now, let's discuss each of your points:

Point 1: J.W. McGarvey.

I knew when I mentioned him the other night that there was testimony that he wished he had not preached for

instrumental churches. I used him simply as an example of how it should be done. The fact that it did not work for his intended purpose is really beside the point. Numerous churches did disfellowship instrumental people, and the result was the same. Neither method worked. One man's experience over one hundred years ago does not negate what the Bible says to do. I believe that if we do what God says, God will be glorified and victorious. Besides, with McGarvey there was much more to what was going on than simply him preaching there every once in a while. It was a movement that was really much larger than him. I hope no one uses this as a red herring and gets distracted by the real issue. (see <http://www.don-lindsay-archive.org/skeptic/arguments.html#digression>). The fact that McGarvey says it did not work and suggests that it should not be done is his opinion and must be held up in light of the Scriptures.

I haven't looked into McGarvey's view on this, but it seems he felt like many people feel today, that if you worship "incorrectly," you are lost. This kind of takes us back to where we began days ago about whether God's grace covers us when we sin without knowing any better. THE QUESTION IS NOT "WHAT IS SINFUL?" THE QUESTION IS "WHICH SINS MERIT DISFELLOWSHIP?" (I'm not yelling here, but Facebook won't let me bold it :) We have traditionally focused on worship almost to the exclusion of lifestyle. Worship is important, but in both the Old and New Testaments, God emphasizes how we live over how we

worship. One passage to illustrate is Prov 21:3, “To do righteousness and justice is desired by the LORD more than sacrifice.” It seems you keep saying or implying that I am saying it does not matter how we worship. That is not what I am saying. What I am saying is that if a brother worships in a way I feel is sinful, it is no different than someone who watches rated-R movies. Neither one should be disfellowshipped because neither is guilty of violating the seven ones of Ephesians 4. I don’t know any verses that make a distinction between sins of lifestyle and sins of worship. Why can I have a brother lead a prayer in services even when I know he watches rated-R movies and not use a brother who worships with multiple cups? Or, if your answer is that one is private, how about this: what about a brother whose home congregation has a kitchen (which someone might think is sinful). Why can I use the kitchen-brother and not the cups-brother? None of us is perfect, so why are my sins allowable but not someone else’s? I know you think this is as plain as the nose on your face, but where are the verses where a distinction is made? This is what so many people are asking—something that has been assumed for generations.

Point 2: Romans 16 and 2 John 7-10.

I grouped these together because they are essentially the same argument. In regards to Romans you state, “Obedience to ALL the doctrine he had delivered (vs. 17) – the same doctrine we find in Corinthians and his other writings.” Then in your discussion about 2 John, you

comment, “John’s condemnation of “going beyond” applies to ANYTHING the Lord has laid down whether recorded by John or any other inspired apostle.” I want you to consider what you are really saying. Do you really believe that we must agree on ALL things—all doctrine—or else mark and withdraw from each other? There is no indication in either passage that this has any reference to worship any more than another aspect of Christianity. If you are correct that the “doctrine of Christ” refers to all of the New Testament and that Romans 16 refers to any and all things Paul ever wrote, we must withdraw for any variation in belief or teaching.

The second option you could affirm is that it doesn’t mean EVERYTHING per se, just the important things. To which I would respond, “What are those?” I would hold that they are the ones I mentioned in my earlier post. If this is wrong, please show me from the scriptures that there is another set of doctrines that Paul and John mean.

### Point 3: Judging

I am begging you to please stop referencing post-modernism. Pretty please. I have shown you over and over that this is not about refusing to take a stand (as post-modernists would hold) but rather is about taking the right stand. It is a straw man (for those interested <http://www.don-lindsay-archive.org/skeptical/arguments.html#straw>) argument to insinuate that someone like myself who disagrees with your

view is falling prey to post-modernism's efforts to remove all standards of right and wrong. There is a right and a wrong (I even have a sermon against post-modernism). I am not being wishy-washy by requiring book-chapter-verse for our lines and standards. I have provided my verses to justify the lines I believe God has drawn.

You argued that we are supposed to judge people's relationship with God, and you listed several passages saying we are to judge. I previously mentioned that we are not supposed to judge one's relationship with God and listed several passages. Well, obviously the Bible isn't contradicting itself, so what gives? We have to look at the context.

The first reference is John 7:23-24, where Jesus asks, "If a man receives circumcision on the Sabbath so that the Law of Moses will not be broken, are you angry with Me because I made an entire man well on the Sabbath? 24 'Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment.'" Here the Lord is showing their inconsistency. They allowed for some "good deeds" to be done on the Sabbath, but not others. It is similar today when we make our inconsistent lines of fellowship—we overlook some sins but allow others. Nevertheless, Jesus is saying to judge deeds as being good or evil, not brethren as being saved or lost.

Your reference to 1 Corinthians 5 is the one I used the other night in speaking of exceptions to the rules of fellowship expressed in Ephesians 4. Yes, we are to pass judgment on those actions and remove the people who do them. The issues mentioned in 1 Corinthians 6 seem more materialistic, such as maybe borrowing something and never returning it. This coordinates with another exception to the rule (that I left out by accident the other day), that someone who sins against a brother and refuses to repent, is to be disfellowshipped (Matthew 18:15-17). In reference to reproving, rebuking, etc. as Paul tells Timothy, I agree. I am not saying that we should ignore sinful behavior or even refuse to go to a brother in error and show him his sin. This is, as you said, what we are to do. The difference is that we are not to determine whether that sin has separated the brother from Christ. For example, I go to Brother Jones who watches rate-R movies and explain why that is not right. If he refuses to agree with me (as some reading this post probably do), I don't just declare him disfellowshipped from God and decide not to use him in services or eat with him. The passages I cited (Romans 14:4, 7-10; 1 Cor 4:3-5; and James 4:11) are more applicable to the discussion because they indicate not just judging an action but judging the person. Especially note 1 Cor 4:3-5, "3 But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. 4 For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord. 5 Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time,

but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God." This is speaking about judging one's relationship to God. We are simply not to do that because we cannot know the things hidden in darkness nor motives.

Now, let's talk a little about Romans 16:17-18. Like I said earlier, if what you are saying is true, we would have to disfellowship every brother or sister who disagreed with us on anything. I don't think you really hold to such a view. So what is Paul saying?

You are misinterpreting what I am saying about Romans. You state, "Does it make sense that Paul would be so adamant about doing things correctly in Corinth and then tell the Romans in chapter 14 that it didn't matter as long as they tried to get along?" My point is not that following God's word does not matter as long as we all get along, but rather that we don't have to agree on all things to still get along. We do that now—none of us agrees on everything with each other. The real question is: WHAT ARE THE THINGS WE CAN DISAGREE ABOUT AND REMAIN UNITED? (not yelling again :) I say they are anything outside of the seven ones of Ephesians 4 and the exceptions I cited. Does that mean that we can disagree about worship practice and get along? It could be difficult on a congregational basis. For example, if we go to the same congregation and you believe it is OK to have a piano and I don't, and if you utilize your

“right” to have one, it keeps me from being able to be a part of it. But remember, this is on a congregational level. And, if you simply hold to that view but do not exercise it, there is no division. If someone maintains that there is a set order of worship but does not bind it on the congregation, there is no problem. The problems always arise when these issues are forced on others. I even believe it would be wrong for me to push something divisive in a congregation even if it were allowable/scriptural (such as a set order of worship). But, as you mentioned earlier, this is all handled on a congregational level.

In regards to liberties and Romans 14, you say that it does not apply because it is talking about Christian liberties and that God has legislated about worship practices, so we can't violate those. As you know, God has legislated lifestyle as well as worship. In fact, all of the sins listed for disfellowship in 1 Corinthians 5 and 2 Thessalonians are for private practices and have nothing to do with worship. Second, and this is a difficult point to accept although logically clear, when we discuss “liberties,” only one side of the discussion sees it as a liberty, the other sees it as sinful and doctrinal. That was the case in Romans 14. If both acknowledged these were “liberties,” there would have been no argument. But since one side saw the issues as doctrinal and damnable, they judged the others to be “sinners.” Paul says they are to get along regardless. This does not mean they never discuss it with each other, but such disagreements did not merit or allow for division.

In regards to what Paul meant about people who cause division in Romans 16:17-18, you say, "The same apostle who commanded the Romans to "mark" those that caused division (Romans 16: 17) also commanded one cup, one loaf, one assembly, one man speaking at a time, singing as the only authorized form of music in worship, etc. So was Paul saying to "mark" those that advocate more than one cup, or those who taught that instrumental music in worship was okay?" You focus a lot on worship being a disfellowship-able criterion, but what specific verses do you have to support this? Also note, nowhere in Romans does Paul ever mention anything about worship. I think a more likely contextual example (rather than worship) would be Jewish v. Gentile issues. He discusses the Jew/Gentile issue throughout Romans (Romans 1:16; 2:9-16, 17-29; 7:1-6; etc.). This would coordinate well with happened in Acts 15:1-2, "Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.' 2 And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them..." Paul knew what it was like to have someone come in and try to teach something wrong and split the church. He warns them to mark such people. So yes, if a brother is trying to push a type of worship that is wrong on the congregation or any other doctrine, then that brother is being divisive and should be withdrawn from.

Well, I think this is the record length so far. I wanted to be specific enough with each point, though. I now want to summarize everything in a very rough summary:

Point 1: J.W. McGarvey—his opinion should be considered in light of Scripture, and much more was going on in his day that affected the outcome

Point 2: Romans 16 and 2 John—these cannot mean all of the teachings of the New Testament or else we would have to withdraw for every variation in belief and practice

Point 3: Judging—we are to judge actions as sinful or righteous, but we are not to judge a brother's relationship with God

I want to conclude with some questions I would ask you to please answer in your next post. Please be very specific with them (and use the same numbers for everyone's reference). I think this will go far in our discussion:

1. Do you believe 2 John and Romans 16:17-18 refer to all of the teachings of the New Testament?
2. If your answer to #1 is "yes," why would it have been necessary for Paul to mention specific sins in places such as 1 Corinthians 5?
2. If your answer to #1 is "no," then what verses do you use to justify that we should withdraw from someone who worships different than we do?

3. Can we accurately judge someone's relationship with God?
4. Is every sinful act worthy of disfellowship? If not, which ones are?
5. When a brother visits your congregation, do you have to agree with everything his home congregation does before you will use him in services?
6. Do we have to agree with everything another congregation does before we feel "in fellowship" with them? If not, what must we agree on?

I appreciate your time and study with all of this. It is a complicated knot we are trying to untie, and I pray everyone will be patient and pray that our conclusions are what God would have us conclude.

God bless you and your family!

Steve

p.s. This was supposed to have sounded discussiony not debatey :)

**Response (P14), Steve Ramsey, 01/15/2012**

Mike,

I don't want this to turn into a J.W. McGarvey argument, because really that is not the point. But I am afraid people are misreading what McGarvey supposedly said. On the

same website you cited about how McGarvey seems to warn Sewell, we find the following:

"Brother Sewell baptized 26 preachers. I remember many times, as a boy, I would see him going to the pulpit on Sunday morning or afternoon, to preach, and if there was a Methodist or Baptist or Presbyterian or any other denominational preacher in the audience, Brother Sewell would invite him to the pulpit with him, ask him to read the scripture, or lead the prayer, and then in this kind gentle spirit and complete understanding of God's teaching, he would stand there beside that preacher and teach him the truth from the pages of the New Testament. If I were to go to that community today and invite a denominational preacher into the pulpit with me, the meeting would close then and there. I am wondering, beloved, if there are not some things we could learn from these great old men, who worked and preached with such marvelous results, from the viewpoint of procedure and treatment of people in order that their minds might be open to the truth. I am not advising any of you to do that, but I am telling you that it was common practice among gospel preachers then, and they were able to convert hundreds and thousands of people."

Whatever Sewell took from McGarvey's comments, it does not seem that he reached the same conclusions you are suggesting. Sewell would not only fellowship instrumental

brethren, he "fellowshipped" men from denominations and even asked them to lead prayers, read, etc.

I am not suggesting we fellowship denominations. My point is that the McGarvey article you cite might not say what everyone thinks it does. But let's not get bogged down in McGarvey--he was as human as the rest of us.

**Response (P14), Mike Criswell, 01/15/2012**

Steve,

Thanks for the post. As usual you have given us all a lot to think about. As to the McGarvey incident I agree that its an anecdotal account and does not change the scripture one way or the other. I did a little looking and while we both would like to have a little more context for the quote the line at the bottom of the quote is interesting and may help us interpret it. The last line from the quote is:

"That experience has been an inspiration to me all the days of my life since. It has helped me, when I was ever tempted to turn aside and go along with error, to remember the warning of this great old man."

Unless I misread the quote the writer seems to be saying that "compromising with error" is never successful. Thus I would take from this that this particular writer felt that McGarvey was same thing. But we can leave McGarvey alone till another day.

I do appreciate you noting that Facebook WON'T LET US BOLD THINGS!! That frustrates me because, like you said, it makes it seem like we're screaming. Neither of us intend it that way. So go ahead and bold if you need to. :)

Finally, I'll get back with you on the other points tomorrow. It's been such a busy day. I'm kinda brain dead right now.

BTW: Tell Sarah that she makes a good point!!! We don't have to be "head hunters" in our discussion!!!! LOL!!!! How to make strong points without coming across as mad is the challenge!!!!

Take care brother.

**Post 15, Mike Criswell, 01/16/2012**

Dear Steve and our faithful readers:

For some time now I've been intimating that I would discuss Ephesians 4 and the ramifications it has on fellowship. In this post I promise to finally do this. This doesn't mean that I won't at some point address the other excellent points Steve has raised but it does mean that I'm anxious to study the "non-negotiable" things on which fellowship is based. When Steve gave me his list he gave me Ephesians 4:1-4 as well as several verses that pertain to morality etc. I have no problem with his list per se because what he gave me was biblical. And whether we make formal "lists" or not as long as we stick with scripture we're on the right track. By

dealing with Ephesians 4 it's not that I'm ignoring or disagreeing with Steve on the other verses he cited. I am in full agreement that these issues can also affect fellowship. But I do want to look specifically at what Paul says to the Ephesians. Steve and I both love this book and believe it just may hold the key to the limits of fellowship.

In Eph 4:1-4 Paul lists some seven things which Steve and I both agree are "non-negotiable" in our relationship with God. But before discussing these seven things I want to sincerely applaud Steve for going back to verse 1 in his discussion. Steve, you are right that it all begins with a humility to God and longsuffering and love toward one another. Any sermon on "The Seven Ones" that forgets the context of verse 1-2 is an incomplete sermon. One of the best ways we can demonstrate the unity of God's system is to be unified with one another (Jn 17:20-21).

As we look at these seven "ones" we'll be doing so in the same order as Paul lists them. I think what we'll see is that these verses more narrowly define the limits of "fellowship" that we might first imagine. To keep this as succinct as possible I'm going to make my remarks in more of an outline form.

- One Body:
  - o Christ has only one body – the church (Col 1:18)
  - o Christ is head of the body – the church (Eph 1:22)
  - o Christ's Word directs/guides his body (Acts 2:42)

o Christ's body is composed of faithful local congregations (Mt 16:18, Rom 16:16).

**IMPLICATIONS:** When a congregation is unfaithful and unrepentant it ceases to be in fellowship with God and subsequently with other congregations in the body (Rev 2:5). If Christ has one body then only one of two things is possible. Either Christ's universal body is made up of "congregations" or it is made up of "denominations." Since denominations are foreign to the NT we conclude that the Universal Church is composed of individual congregations all looking to Christ as their head (Eph 4:15). Christ's "one body" is divinely pictured in the Lord's Supper. Of the loaf Jesus said, "This is my body (Mt 26, Mk 14, Lk 22, 1 Cor 11). Christ has but one physical and spiritual body. Therefore any "communion" observance which does not typify the "one body" of Jesus Christ is vain worship (Mt 15:9) and violates the divine pattern laid down by Jesus himself. Any teacher who teaches any other thing than a correct observance of this and other divine patterns must be regarded as a wolf (Acts 20:28-30). He CANNOT be fellowshiped because he is taken himself out of fellowship with the head of the Church: Christ.

**CONCLUSION:** The "one body" is a non-negotiable concept in scripture and any doctrine or practice (including multiple loaves or denominationalism) that implies anything else is to be purged.

- One Spirit

- o There is one Holy Spirit in the Godhead
- o The Holy Spirit's role was always to bring the Word of God (2 Peter 1:21)
- o The HS guided the apostles into ALL truth (Jn 14:26, 15:26, 16:13).
- o The HS inspired the apostles to confirm the Word with signs (Heb 2:4)
- o The HS reveals the mind of God (1 Cor 2:10).

IMPLICATIONS: When someone teaches another doctrine than that which the Holy Spirit has delivered he is accursed (Gal 1:9). The HS set the Ephesian elders (Acts 20) in charge of feeding the flock (via the Word of Truth) and COMMANDED them to watch for wolves (ie: false teachers). The Word of God is the Sword of the Spirit (Eph 6:17). Anytime we accept/use/teach any other doctrine than what scripture teaches we bring the sword to our own necks.

CONCLUSION: The Holy Spirit reveals the very mind of God thus when we choose any view that cannot be proven in scripture we no longer have a respect for the very mind of God. How then could we be in fellowship with someone who teaches or advocates that which God has not revealed? Whether we are talking about multiple wives (polygamy) or multiple cups any deviation from what the HS has revealed

puts us into sin and thereby breaks our fellowship first with God and by extension with others.

- One Hope

- o The hope of eternal life via Jesus Christ and the kingdom (Acts 23:6)

- o This hope comes via the call of the gospel (Col 1:5)

- o This hope is the hope of eternal life promised before time began (Tit 1:2)

- o The hope includes the glorious appearing of Jesus (Tit 2:13)

IMPLICATIONS: The Christian has hope in Christ by being in his church (kingdom) and has hope that he will spend eternity in heaven. The “one hope” doctrine that Paul teaches is vital to an understanding of other key doctrines such as the “kingdom” and the “judgment.” The kingdom, the judgment, and the hope we have at the return of Christ cannot be separated. Thus if someone began teaching that “Christ had already come” (ex: A.D. 70 Theory) or began to teach false doctrine regarding the return of Christ (ex: Pre-millennialism) that person would need to be marked. If, after being taught the truth, he did not change his views, fellowship with that man could not be maintained.

CONCLUSION: Even though on the surface “one hope” may seem like a simple issue it is intimately and inseparably connected to other key non-negotiable doctrines of the Bible.

- One Lord

- o All authority has been given to Christ (Mt 28:18).
- o Christ's Lordship requires obedience else he is not lord.
- o Calling Jesus Lord demands that we do all that he says (Mt 7:21)
- o All that Paul taught was from the Lord (1 Cor 11:23, 14:37, etc)
- o When someone is LORD his commandments are non-negotiable.
- o We show our love for the lord by OBEYING HIS COMMANDS (Jn 14:15)

IMPLICATION: Even though we may have difficulty in being faithful servants, when we come to understand ANY commandment of Christ we then have the obligation to obey it. To claim that Jesus is Lord and then decide that some of his commandments or his apostle's commandments are optional (ex: morality, worship items, etc) makes us unprofitable servants and puts us out of fellowship with Christ. To call Jesus lord and NOT attempt to obey all his commandments makes us liars. The way we show our lord love is by obedience (Jn 14:15).

CONCLUSION: The One Lord concept that Paul teaches sums up the extent of required obedience. Every command must be obeyed. When we or brother learns the truth on any

issue and then rejects that truth . . . then he is no longer in fellowship with God and by extension with other faithful Christians.

- One Faith

- o This is the “faith system” that God set forth from the beginning of time.

- o This is the faith that Jude says we must earnestly contend for (Jude 3)

- o This is the faith once for all time delivered to the saints.

- o This is the faith to which many were converted (Acts 6:7)

- o Paul says we are to stand fast in the faith (1Cor 16:13)

- o This is the faith that Paul once destroyed but now preached (Gal 1:23)

- o This is the faith Paul says revelation of his word unites us in (Eph 4:13)

**IMPLICATION:** Just as there is only one body so there is only one saving system ordained by God. This system consists of God’s plan as revealed in His Word. Therefore there are not many faiths. We cannot choose the faith of our choice. The One Faith is revealed through the Bible and **INCLUDES THE DOCTRINE OF THE APOSTLES.**

**CONCLUSION;** If we reject the doctrines, worship practices of The Faith we are out of fellowship with God.

- One Baptism

- o This is the baptism required by Jesus in Mark 16:16

- o This is the baptism given in the Great Commission (Mt 28)

- o This is the baptism that puts one into Christ (Gal 3:27).
- o This is the baptism that is a type of the DBR of Jesus (Rom

IMPLICATION: This is the only entrance into the body, the church of Christ. We cannot be saved without baptism. We cannot accept sprinkling, pouring, or any other mode other than authorized by scripture. It is impossible to be in fellowship with one who either does not believe baptism is necessary for salvation or who refused to administer it correctly.

CONCLUSION: Even if someone believed that baptism was necessary but administered it the wrong way then that person would not be in fellowship. The same can be said for other practices in the Lord's church. If we change or digress from the pattern we are in sin and are thus out of fellowship with God and by implication other fitful believers.

I shall sum up my post here. As you can see the Seven One's in Eph 4 are not as simple as we might first imagine. When we admit that there is One Lord we are actually admitting to ALL that the Lord commanded. When we admit that there is One Hope we automatically reject any doctrine that compromises the truth of the kingdom and Christ's return. When we admit there is One Body we accept ALL that that implies. The single body of Jesus is the very basis of the "one church" concept as well as the "one loaf" concept in the Lord's Supper. Thus once again to make Eph 4 the "list"

upon which we base fellowship actually narrows fellowship to ONLY the authority of Jesus and his commands.

May the Lord bless our readers and may we prove all things from his word.

PS- the above outline is very preachable and is free for the taking.

**Post #16, Mike Criswell, 01/17/2012**

Dear Readers,

In his last post brother Steve gave me a series of questions he would like me to answer. While I am happy to oblige I also would prefer our discussion to be as much in the affirmative as possible. We will never have all our questions answered on this side of eternity but this should never distract us from obeying what we do understand. As I've emphasized in my posts, "Concentrate on the things you CAN know rather than what you CAN'T know." Even though I am a questioner by nature it was Satan's questions to Eve in the Garden (ie: Has God really said . . .???) that led to the fall. I believe that Satan loves it when we question God's word to the point of doubt. But that is probably another topic for another time.

As I look at Steve's questions I want to summarize what I believe we have learned so far from the Fellowship Forum discussion. This summary is pertinent so please bear with

me. First we have learned that “Fellowship” is the horizontal relationship we automatically sustain with other humans when both they and we are in a correct vertical relationship with God. Fellowship happens by default and is determined in as much as we can look at our brother and determine whether or not he/she is walking in the light (1 Jn 1:8). Secondly, we have learned that the ONLY criteria for determining whether or not someone is in fellowship with God and thus us as well is whether or not they are following the directives of our Lord Jesus Christ. John says, “that which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.” The “us” in this verse are the apostles who had been guided into all truth (Jn 15:26 et. al.) and “that which they had “declared” was that which the Holy Spirit delivered. John’s comment indicates that unless we remain in fellowship with the apostles by obeying their directives we are not in fellowship with God. We have also learned that Ephesians 4 is indeed part of what it takes to be in fellowship with God. And in this passage the natural conclusion to these great truths are actually quite narrow and have far reaching implications. Finally we have learned in our discussions that “everyone” draws lines of fellowship somewhere so “open fellowship” is not only a misnomer it is an unscriptural concept. While we may ask “with whom are we in fellowship?” the real question is “who is in fellowship with God?” Our fellowship with each other will be determined by who is already in fellowship with God. This fact may lead to many questions

but in reality all we can do is align ourselves with those who we believe to be walking in the light (see 2 Tim 3:10 where Paul says the same).

Now to the questions:

Steve asks:

1. Do you believe 2 John and Romans 16:17-18 refer to all of the teachings of the New Testament?

Answer: The overall context of this epistle is “knowing the truth and dwelling in that truth” (see John’s intro in verses 1-2). In verse 4 John gives a general commendation to his reader because they were walking in the truth (ie: the light). John then goes on to say that we show our love by “walking after HIS (Christ’s) commandments.” In verse 7 John gives an immediate example of those who were NOT walking in the light (Gnostics?). He then begins to sum up his letter in the remaining verses by warning that anyone who “goes beyond the doctrine of Christ” is out of fellowship with God and must be rejected outright and sent on his way. So in answer to Steve’s question about 2 John, yes I believe that when John speaks of “knowing the truth, walking in truth, and walking after Christ’s commandments” that he is indeed speaking of ALL that the apostles laid down. This agrees exactly with what we learn in Acts 2:42. The early church continued steadfastly in ALL THE APOSTLES DOCTRINE. When an apostle spoke the church listened. The overall context of 2 John is knowing and walking in truth – all truth.

The underlying truth of John's epistle is that ALL TRUTH MUST BE OBEYED TO BE IN FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD. Anytime we have a specific context that is based on a more general known truth we can be confident that those verses definitely apply to us as well! In this case the general truth is that we must reject error of all kind. Yes the context of 2 John allows for ALL of the apostles doctrine to be seen as authoritative.

Answer: In Romans 16:17-18 Paul tells the church to "mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them." Notice what Paul says. He says that ANYONE teaching that which was contrary to the DOCTRINE (teaching) they had received must be avoided. What doctrine did Paul teach to the Romans? The same thing he taught to the Corinthians, to the Ephesians, to the Colossians, etc. We know this because Paul says so in 1 Cor 7:17, 1 Cor 11:16, 1 Cor 14:33, see also Colossians 4:16 where Paul's letters were circulated among the churches). As stated above, since Paul was an apostle and since the church continued in the apostles' doctrine, and since it was the HS that guided ALL that the apostles wrote, the same rules regarding and marking false teachers would apply to every congregation of every age and would include everything the Holy Spirit has revealed. ALL TRUTH MUST BE OBEYED TO BE IN FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD. We do not get to pick and choose what truths are more important than others.

Steve asks:

2. If your answer to #1 is “yes,” why would it have been necessary for Paul to mention specific sins in places such as 1 Corinthians 5?

Answer: I may not be understanding the question correctly but I see no conflict between what Paul teaches in Romans 16 and what he teaches in 1 Cor 5. In Romans 16 Paul makes a general statement regarding false teachers and in 1 Cor 5 he specifically instructs the church on how to deal with a fornicator. The two passages are a dovetail to each other. One is dealing with keeping the church pure from false doctrine. The other is dealing with keeping the church pure from immorality.

Steve asks:

3. Can we accurately judge someone’s relationship with God?

Answer: The best way to answer this is to let Christ answer it. Jesus said, “Ye shall know them by their fruits” (Mt 7:16).

Steve asks:

4. Is every sinful act worthy of disfellowship? If not, which ones are?

Answer: The best way to answer this is by letting Paul speak. He says, "Some men's sins are open beforehand, going before to judgment; and some men they follow after. Likewise also the good works of some are manifest beforehand; and they that are otherwise cannot be hid. (1 Tim 5:24)." In other words there will always be sins in other's lives that are between them and God. If, however, I know of a brother in sin I am commanded to go to him and restore him (Gal 6:1). Jesus taught that any sin can condemn us if not repented of (Luke 13:3). Even a sin someone commits against me personally may, if not repented of, be grounds for disfellowship. Jesus says, "And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. (Mt 18:7). So in answer to the question, every sin has the potential of being a cause of disfellowship when/if the church knows about it and it is not repented of. Every private sin not only has the potential but WILL condemn us if, when we come to know about it, we refuse to repent.

Steve asks:

5. When a brother visits your congregation, do you have to agree with everything his home congregation does before you will use him in services?

Answer: the best way to answer this question is to let Paul answer it. "Paul says, "And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in

the Lord, and admonish you; (1 Thes 5:12) The immediate context refers to Elders/leaders. But the general admonition is the same as in Acts 20:31. Any congregation that puts men in leadership or invites men to be a part of the edification of the Saints is foolish indeed if they do not know the men's background. Apparently among some churches in the 1st century there were even letters that were sent with folks when they traveled to sister congregations so they would know if they (the traveler) were sound in the faith (see the very interesting statement by Paul in 2 Cor 3:1). We need to be careful who we allow to lead the flock.

Steve asks:

6. Do we have to agree with everything another congregation does before we feel "in fellowship" with them? If not, what must we agree on?

Answer: In as much as we know a congregation to be teaching truth we can have a relationship with them because they are in a relationship with the Father. When, however, we know of unbiblical practices in another congregation we have the obligation to warn and protect the flock at home. It is up to the leaders of every individual congregation to examine and protect their own and to determine with whom God is in agreement.

Well, dear reader, I know the above answers may not satisfy your every question. I have tried to provide book, chapter, and verse for my conclusions. While we may continue to have philosophical questions about who we may fellowship the bottom line is we must compare one another to the righteous standard of God's word. While I may not be able to know all that you do in your private life (and thus leave that judging to God) in corporate worship and in public acts of the collective church we CAN know and make judgments about each other. The danger in this discussion (ie: Fellowship Forum) is to water down what we can know by dwelling on the philosophical ramifications of "what ifs." As stated in one of my last posts. When we focus on ourselves and our home congregation and follow God's word as best we can the "fellowship" issue will take care of itself. Most of our disagreements are NOT over what the bible says, it is over trying to provide justification for ourselves or others who are not following what the bible says. May we all return to the pattern, focus on what God HAS revealed and let Him handle the rest.

Blessings to each of you.

Mike

### **Post #17, Steve Ramsey, 01/17/2012**

When I was a junior in college, I got to where I couldn't make out the words on the board at church. I figured I needed to see an eye doctor. I had never needed glasses before, but something wasn't right. When I went, he put the little glasses machine up to my eyes and did some

adjustments. “How’s that?” he asked. It was amazing! Then he would make some adjustments, and things became even clearer. After doing some tweaking here and there, I walked out with a prescription for some glasses. I got my glasses, and for the first time in quite a while, I was able to see clearly. It wasn’t that the objects suddenly appeared; it was just that now I could see them in a way I couldn’t before.

Mike, I do not say these words boastfully or with joy, but I want to say them to you and others who believe like you do because of my concern for your souls. I believe that you do not realize the eyes through which you see the Bible are not the eyes God would have you use. There is so much more to see, so many more truths, etc. that are being clouded out because of how you approach the Bible and God Himself.

Only you know for sure, and I do not claim to know, but from reading your responses, it seems that you have approached these things as having known them, and then looked for scriptures to use to back up your point, rather than actually looking for what the Bible teaches. I have done, and probably still do at times, the same thing. I used to work on a sermon by knowing what I wanted to say, and then I would hunt down my verses. I could always find what I was looking for. I simply ask you to examine your heart to see if that is indeed what you did. It probably was not a conscious decision. It seems that is how we were trained in the church.

Let me provide one example of what I am talking about. You mention, "So in answer to Steve's question about 2 John, yes I believe that when John speaks of "knowing the truth, walking in truth, and walking after Christ's commandments" that he is indeed speaking of ALL that the apostles laid down. This agrees exactly with what we learn in Acts 2:42. The early church continued steadfastly in ALL THE APOSTLES DOCTRINE. When an apostle spoke the church listened. The overall context of 2 John is knowing and walking in truth – all truth. The underlying truth of John's epistle is that ALL TRUTH MUST BE OBEYED TO BE IN FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD." Your conclusion is that we must obey all truth or be out of fellowship with God, and you use the brand new church of Acts 2:42 as support. But, honestly, do you believe the thousands of new Christians knew and obeyed ALL truth at this point? Most had come to Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost as Jews, were convicted of the truth of the Messiah's death, and now they knew everything about how to dress, wear their hair, pray, worship, how the Spirit dwells in us, etc.? And yet this is the verse you use to support your point.

I could list other examples, but the point is the same: you wrangle verses out of context to make them say what they don't. You admit to immediate context, but then generalize to make it apply to things never intended. This should concern you, but I understand why you do it, and I am not trying to attack you. I am simply hoping that you see the meaning of having to resort to such actions.

Let's consider your responses to Ephesians 4:1-4. I don't want to dwell on each individual point. If you would like me to, I will, but I think it might be best to summarize. Essentially you bring each point back around to obeying all of God's will. You say

"Any teacher who teaches any other thing than a correct observance of this and other divine patterns must be regarded as a wolf (Acts 20:28-30)."

"...any deviation from what the HS has revealed puts us into sin and thereby breaks our fellowship first with God and by extension with others.

"The One Lord concept that Paul teaches sums up the extent of required obedience. Every command must be obeyed."

Etc.

I simply ask you and everyone to really think about these conclusions. Is this really what Paul meant and what he expected the church at Ephesus to hear? Were his "seven ones" really the seven ones plus 30 sub-points? Were they to take what Paul said and conclude that he was warning them if anyone had any differing idea about God's word, that if any person's understanding of doctrine was different, that such a person was cut off from God and should be cut

off from them? Is that the context of that chapter and the entire letter to Ephesus? Surely not. Consider how Paul painstakingly points out that Jews and Gentiles are now one:

Eph 2:13-14, 18 But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, ...18 for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father.

It is inaccurate to say that these “ones” mean that there can be no variation in any doctrine and to separate from one another if there was variation. Paul is telling them that they are one people, Jew and Gentile. There is no Greek gods for one and Yahweh for the other. There is no church of the Jews and church of the Gentiles, there is one. There is one baptism for the Jew and Gentile—baptism into Christ, the one Lord. There is one Father because there is one family of Jews and Gentiles. This is the context of his words.

I feel like we have reached a point in our study where we need to address the root of the issue and focus on where we disagree. I wish I could put this into two columns, but you know how Facebook is...

What you believe (and correct me if I am wrong).

In light of 2 John 7-10, Romans 16:17-18, and Ephesians 4:1-4, we must obey all of God's word in order to be saved. If we are doing something wrong, whether public or private, we must repent of it or else lose fellowship with God. If we do lose that fellowship because we violate one or more of God's commands, we also lose fellowship with those who are walking in the light—meaning, those who follow God's will exactly. Therefore, we should judge one another and disfellowship anyone for any violation of any of God's word because they are no longer in fellowship with Him. To retain relationships with them is to be partaker in their sins.

#### What I believe

We are to obey every command of God. However, since none of us has perfect knowledge and each of us sin without realizing it, God's grace makes up for our deficiencies. We cannot willingly disobey God, for this would be rebellion; yet, we are to grow in the knowledge of God. We are not able to always receive what is taught until later, yet God is patient with us. No matter how hard we try, we will always fall short, but God's grace is greater than our sin. We acknowledge that such is true for us as well as everyone else. For this reason, we do not judge which sins cause someone to lose fellowship with God, aside from those specifically mentioned in Romans, 1 Corinthians, and 2 Thessalonians. These are the only sins ever mentioned to withdraw from.

Mike, I am afraid for you and for hundreds of my brethren. I am afraid because I believe you are on the verge of or have crossed into falling from grace. Paul warns some of the Christians in Galatians 5:4, “You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.” This is not simply trying to be justified by the Old Law, but rather trying to be justified by ANY law. You simply cannot be justified through keeping a law, and when you try to, you deny salvation through God’s grace. Salvation either comes through grace or works. The traditional stance, which you uphold, tries to earn salvation through perfect obedience. I know how you think—I was once like that. We paid lip service to being saved by grace, and we acknowledged God’s grace at baptism, but after that, we lived in fear. We were afraid that if we did not obey everything just right (really, if we did not worship a certain way and at a set time), we might be doomed. Someone could ask us if we were saved, and we would timidly respond with, “I hope so. I’m doing what I can...” We knew we always sin, so we just hoped we had time to pray for forgiveness before we died. I’m not just talking about sins of commission like stealing, but also sins of omission—I might not be patient enough or kind enough. I might not demonstrate the love of God enough. It isn’t just a matter of how we worship, it is a matter of how we live.

But fear is not God’s way. God’s way is a way of joy and peace. Paul says to the Romans, “for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and

joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14:17). We can’t be joyful when we are constantly working to save ourselves or risk losing salvation. This is not to say we should not do everything we can to obey God, but is an acknowledgment that we don’t do everything. Grace covers us. John explains in 1 John 4:17-18

17 By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world. 18 There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love.

So many of us are still infants, still living in fear. Our fear has not been cast out through love. We have not fully realized the love of God, and so we find it difficult to really express love toward man. But God does not want us to live in fear of Him. Fear might be a good motivator to get your life right with God, but it is not the way of the mature child of God.

I am also afraid because your stance means that we must constantly judge one another to see if each person is in the faith. What is frightening is that you argue that we must obey ALL doctrines or else lose fellowship with God. Jesus warns, “Do not judge so that you will not be judged. 2 "For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you” (Matt 7:1-2). The standard you are saying we should apply is that if

someone misses one thing, they are lost. Is that the standard we want applied to us?

Mike, you rely so heavily on worship as being an indicator of God's people. And I agree that worship is important, but that is not how Jesus said the world would identify His people. He said, "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). But this has not been what we used as identification of who we were as a people. We were the one cup, one loaf, non-instrument people of God. To declare that this is the wrong marker scares many brothers. Probably many of you have used my words for sermons or are thinking of sermons you are going to write to combat what I am saying. Why? Not because what I am saying is wrong, but because it threatens your identity. People worry that if we say that someone who uses multiple cups in worship is not condemned to hell for that offense, then what have we got? Where is our line? The answer is that we can still identify sin, but we don't condemn to hell nor withdraw fellowship.

Mike, I think something you said earlier explains well the attitude we have traditionally held. In speaking of Brother Don McCord, you said, "Don knows that once one is willing to blur the marks of distinction he soon has nothing to which he can convert others." This is what is sad to me—we should not convert people to a way of worship, we should convert people to Christ. For too long, however, we have been converting people to the church and our way of

worship. When someone decides to no longer live as a Christian, we say they “left the church.” Really? Wouldn’t it be more accurate to say they left “the Lord.” Maybe, but then again, maybe not, if they were never really converted to Him. Converting to Christ obviously means deciding to follow Him as Lord, but that means so much more than how to worship.

In his book *The Life You’ve Always Wanted*, John Ortberg references James Dunn’s writings about the Jews around the time of Christ. He states (all emphasis is in the book—in other words, the caps are not my doing),

“...in the first century A.D. a vast amount of rabbinic writing focused on circumcision, dietary laws, and Sabbath keeping. This seems odd, because no devout rabbi would have said these matters were at the heart of the Law. They knew its core: ‘Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.’ So why the focus on these three practices? The answer involves what might be called ‘identity’ or ‘boundary markers.’ Groups have a tendency to be exclusive. Insiders want to separate themselves from outsiders. So they adopt boundary markers. These are highly visible, relatively superficial practices...whose purpose is to DISTINGUISH between those inside a group and those who are outside.....What is worse, the insiders become proud and judgmental toward outsiders. They practiced what might be called a ‘boundary-

oriented approach' to spiritual life: Just look at people and you will know who are the sheep and who are the goats..... This is why the religious leaders of Jesus' day so often fought with him about circumcision, dietary laws, and the Sabbath. Jesus was not just disagreeing with them on how to interpret the Law. He was THREATENING THEIR VERY UNDERSTANDING OF THEMSELVES AS THE PEOPLE OF GOD."

This is why you compared asking questions to the devil in the garden. Questions threaten traditions and markers. Yet Christ questioned traditions and beliefs when He questioned the Jews of His day. He threatened their traditions—actions they "knew" were correct and which marked the godly. If He took those away, what would they have? So they killed Him.

I have said much, and maybe too much. All of this is spoken out of love for God, for each person reading this, and our posterity. If anyone disagrees with anything I said or has questions, please message me and I will respond. Please don't talk bad about me, for this would anger our Father (Rom 14:10). Just contact me and tell me where I am wrong. If you love me, do this for me.

May God bless us in our service to Him.

**Post # 18, Mike Criswell, 01/18/2012**

Dear Steve,

Thank you for your late night post. Like I said before, "You must be a night owl! When do you sleep brother????!!!" :) I want to ponder your post before I reply and it may be at this juncture we need to shift directions. Since you asked me some questions I wanted to ask you a couple just so I won't misjudge your post and positions.

1. Do you believe we (ie: Corsicana or any other cong...regation) can fellowship those who use instrumental music?

2. Have you had opportunity to do much study or reading on the Regulative Principle of Worship? Is it something you'd be interested in discussing? Just wondering!

Thanks Steve. I don't want to rush my reply and I'd like to get a simple answer to the above before I post. I also want to prayerfully think about your post and give others time today to read your post too. I do not disagree with everything you've said. However, I do believe you may have misunderstood a few of my positions. I'll explain later. Busy day so I'd better run for now!!! Oh and don't go to sleep at the wheel, get some rest!!! :) Love you brother!!!

ps: John and I had a wonderful breakfast yesterday. We had a great discussion and I think you would have enjoyed being there too. What a nice guy!!!!

**Post #19, Steve Ramsey, 01/18/2012**

Mike,

I wish I had been there with you guys. Where did you eat? I really wanted to get that post out last night and told Sarah I would stay up till midnight if I had to. Well, that is about when I posted it! Ironically, I am a morning person and have been known to usually fall asleep before 10:00. But I only have so many hours at home and without little interruptions needing things :)

Please corr...ect me where I have your position incorrect. That is one of the reasons I posted the summary parts. I want to make sure we understand each other and all.

Here are my answers:

1. Do you believe we (ie: Corsicana or any other congregation) can fellowship those who use instrumental music?

In a nutshell, yes. Now let me qualify this answer--It depends on the situation. If the persons have been baptized into Christ and are not guilty of any of the sins I mentioned in the earlier posts and hold to the doctrines of Ephesians 4, I believe we may work with them in various community projects, etc. If they attend our services, it would not be wrong to ask them to lead a prayer or song, etc.

2. Have you had opportunity to do much study or reading on the Regulative Principle of Worship? Is it something you'd be interested in discussing? Just wondering!

I have studied it some, but I would definitely need to study some more. But I think it would be good to study in the future. Maybe after we get this issue kind of settled we can discuss that. What do you think?

I look forward to your next post and hope there is much common ground. God bless you and your family.

**Post #20, Mike Criswell, 01/19/2012**

Dear readers,

Today was an emotional day. Today we laid to rest our Brother Don Freeman who for about two years now has been battling cancer. It was a bitter-sweet service with congregational singing and time with memories and the Word. It's always sad when a faithful brothers steps across time's threshold into eternity. But what is the purpose of life if not to faithfully walk with God here and then stroll down the street of gold with Jesus. I've preached the funerals of those who were not members of the Lord's church and there was always emptiness and certain coldness to the occasion. But on this day, in spite of the sub-freezing wind chill, there was an effervescent glow that flickered across every face as we confidently placed Don in the hands of our Lord.

In some ways I'm glad a distraction interrupted the posts that Brother Steve and I had been quickly jetting back and forth across cyberspace. The pause let me ponder our brother's last post: its content, its criticism, its tone. It let me reflect on the fundamental differences in the way brother Steve and I approach the fellowship issue. Our brother has raised many good and legitimate points that in time he and I will likely have the pleasure of discussing. Forums such as this only afford limited space and since brother Steve and I both agreed that we wanted to keep this blog as spontaneous as possible it has been possible for us to only deal superficially with each other's concerns. However, in his post Steve raised the all-important question. What really separates our understanding of the fellowship issue? Naturally there are many parts to this important topic. Like a diamond with its many facets, so the beauty of walking with one another in Christ must be viewed from many different angles. But what is the core of the issue? What lies beneath the shimmer of the facets? Is it "grace?" Is it "love?" Is it "friendship?" Is it "forbearance?" Though each of these gleaming traits claim their place, I believe that at the core of the "fellowship diamond" is the authority of God's Word.

It all began with God's Word. Before time began God spoke and the universe leaped into existence. For six days God spoke and for six days His authoritative Word molded and

shaped the world until finally on the potter's wheel of time God took the dust of the earth and formed Adam.

Soon afterwards God spoke again. This time the Word was given in the form of Law. "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat," said God, "but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen 2:17). Until these words were violated there had been fellowship, perfect fellowship. Evenings found Adam and his bride in the garden with their Father. As their Lord walked so they walked, hand in hand, together in the cool of the day.

We need not belabor the details of our story. But fellowship was broken the moment Adam and Eve sinned. They stood naked before God. They stood condemned – no earthly creature would be the same ever again. The garden was no longer theirs.

It was disobedience to the Word that soon brought condemnation to Cain. With supreme authority God had given His directives for worship (Heb 11:4). Cain disobeyed and once again forfeited his fellowship with God.

The story of the Old Testament is about "fellowship" and the authority of God's Word. When God spoke and Israel disobeyed they fell from His protective fellowship.

God was always long-suffering with His people. When they repented and confessed God forgave. He brought them back into sweet fellowship. And so God said, "If they they confess their iniquity ... then I will remember My covenant with Jacob ...(Lev 26:40-42).God was always a Father of "Hesed" (Hebrew word that stands as the approximation of what we might call loving kindness or grace) but for fellowship to be maintained or restored after sin, the people, had to "accept their guilt" and confess.

And God's Word was not only authoritative, it was understandable. To Israel Moses said, ""For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it." (Deuteronomy 30:11-14)

What a blessing Israel found in the clarity of God's revelation. They didn't have to fly to the moon or travel the seas to know and obey. It was there – it was clear. All they had to do was exercise faithful obedience. This same truth is found over and over and over in the New Testament as well. Fellowship begins and ends with the Authority of God's Word. Obedience to the Word puts us into Christ and disobedience removes us from fellowship with him.

Remember John's words that when we walk in the light as he is in the light it is THEN and only then that we have fellowship (1 Jn 1:7-9). Remember Jesus' words as he told the people that His words would judge them at the last day (Jn 12:48). Remember Jesus again when he gives the criteria of knowing God as He says, "If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love" (Joh 15:10). And remember Paul as he instructs the church time and time again to keep the ordinances (1 Cor 11:2) and to keep the traditions (2 Thes 3),

But as we conclude we need say that God is not unfair or unjust. He takes into account our weaknesses. He knows that we do not begin with perfect knowledge. We have to grow in knowledge (2 Pet 3:18). He knows that we are flesh and thus Jesus is the perfect mediator. Our Lord was tempted in all points as we are yet without sin (Heb 4:15). God knows that we are frail and need grace to help in time of need (Heb 4:16). But we dare not continue in sin that grace may abound (Rom 6:1). And just as a baby cannot walk but must learn to walk, so we must desire the sincere milk of the word that we may grow thereby (1 Pet 2:2). When mistakes are made, and we will make mistakes, and when we come to know of them,, we must repent and confess those sins (1 Jn 1:9). Does God have a never ending, unseen cloud of grace that constantly hovers about us to protect us when we sin? If so He alone know but He has not revealed such in His word. All too often times we try to

quantify God's grace. But how foolish to attempt such an impossible task. God's grace is greater than we can imagine – greater than all our sins. But that does not mean that we can presume that God will overlook sin once that sin has been brought to light. Whether we are speaking of worship or of everyday living, fellowship with God depends not only on grace but on obedience as well. Will we likely offer perfect obedience? No, not on this side of eternity, but when we sin, in His glorious grace He provides an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. It is he who knows our hearts better than we know ourselves. It is he to whom we confess our sins so that we might once again stand justified in His presence. Obedience to the "gospel of Grace" (Acts 20:24) put us into Christ and by his grace he provides continual cleansing when we confess our sins\*(1 Jn 1:9).

Someday we shall stand to give an account of the deeds done in our bodies (2 Cor 5:10). Will we be saved by grace? Certainly! We are but unprofitable servants (Lk 17:10). Were it not for the Grace of the gospel and the ongoing grace of god's allowance for repentance we would all be lost. But no sin, once apprehended by the mind, is exempt from God's full judgment. Will God have a reservoir of grace waiting for those who did not, for whatever reason, obey His will? If so I know of no scripture that says such. Does God have a cloud of grace around us today which automatically provides forgiveness without confession? Such a thought brings pleasure to my mind. But again if such is the case I know of

no scripture. But God has revealed that every commandment must be obeyed to the best of our maturity. And so I must focus on what has been revealed, not on what has not been revealed –what I CAN know rather than what I can't know. My fellowship with others must be based on what God has revealed rather than what he has not revealed. Any expectation of a new revelation should never drive us from what has been revealed (Bengel). To offer a cloud of grace that God has not revealed is not my prerogative. God is perfect in judgment, mercy, and grace. He will take care of the sincere sinner as He sees fit. Our job is to obey God to the best of our ability, to call our fellowman to repentance , to search His Word and discover as best we can the pattern,and then obey and teach others to obey that pattern.

The grace of God be with you.

### **Posts #21, Steve Ramsey, 01/20/2012**

Mike,

I appreciate all of the time you have put into this study. I know how many hours are spent behind the scenes, besides the writing of these posts. I pray they are benefiting everyone and that this discussion will work to bring about peace and unity in the body of Christ.

I hope that no one (including yourself) reads anger in my message. I am going to try to point out some things I believe are wrong about the traditional stance that you have

presented, but it is not out of anger. It is an attack on the stance and not you personally. As Paul said in 2 Cor 10:4-5, “for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. 5 We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.” That is what I am working to do—battle a false doctrine, a thought, that I believe is working to divide us. Please consider all of these words as coming from love for your and everyone’s souls.

I believe we actually agree on most of the things you wrote. The Bible is authoritative and serves as our only authority when dealing with issues such as fellowship. I agree that our disagreement might be a matter of the authority of the Scriptures, but the question is, which stance respects that authority more? Obviously we would both argue that our side does, but such cannot be the case. Let me explain why I believe the view of fellowship I propose respects God’s word even more than the stance you have promoted.

First, every required belief for unity that I listed was used contextually in the New Testament in the midst of a discussion about unity. Ephesians, especially chapter 4, is largely about the unity we have in Christ. These are the only verses in the New Testament that deal directly with doctrines required for unity. These alone are the ones I believe we must have because they are that God has given.

The Bible explicitly gives exceptions to this list, as was brought out in my earlier post regarding 1 Corinthians 5, 2 John 9, Romans 16:17-18, and 2 Thessalonians 3 (I added Matt 18:17 in a later post). I hold that we must follow a strict observance and obedience to these laws of fellowship that are given in the Bible. We are not allowed to create our own additional lists of sins we think are worthy of disfellowship. It is showing the utmost respect for the authority of God's word to accept it for what it says and not add to it. We must accept the Word as sufficient. This is in contrast to the traditional stance, which holds that we are allowed and even commanded to add things to this God-given list. You mentioned this idea in an earlier post when you said, "I take from Paul's comments that he expected men to use their God given intellects to apply God's Word to their individual situations." So we have a contrast—use only what the Bible states or add to it with our own reasoning. Again, this is not an attack on you, brother, but is merely demonstration of a huge flaw in the traditional view, and I think it demonstrates which stance has a higher respect for the authority of the Scriptures.

I think the reason you said what you did about the authority of the Scriptures was because you interpreted what I was saying as it was not important to obey God because grace would cover us. I think a close reading will show that is not what I said nor is it what I believe. You are completely correct that when someone sins and is confronted with that sin, he needs to repent and confess. This is a fundamental

truth in the New Testament. Someone who refuses to repent and confess demonstrates a heart of rebellion. We agree on that. What is tricky is the Christian who sins but does not know it. I think we agree on this (and correct me if I am wrong), but we both believe that God's grace covers us when we sin and do not realize it. This would coincide with what you said about growing in knowledge as Christians. We are not expected to know everything from the start. Yet, ironically, we will never know everything on this earth. Therefore, we will always need this grace to cover our weaknesses.

Let me now discuss the limitations of and problems with the traditional stance on fellowship.

1. The traditional stance has additional items on its list for disfellowshipping beyond what is stated in the New Testament. You mention that we must obey ALL of God's word to have fellowship with Him. This would require someone to have perfect knowledge. We do need to obey God as best as we know how, but none of us knows everything, and thus we would all be guilty of losing fellowship with God.

2. The traditional stance goes too far. Since the traditional stance holds that we must obey ALL of God's word or lose fellowship with Him, we would need to disfellowship everyone who believed, lived, or taught differently than

what we each do. Most of us would not even be able to be in fellowship our own spouse.

3. The traditional stance is inconsistent for pragmatic's sake. Knowing that we could not really do what the traditional view states to do (see #2 above), those who hold to the traditional stance must modify their list. The list cannot contain EVERY New Testament teaching as meriting disfellowship, so it uses reason to modify the list. Most commonly, this view is interpreted in real life as meaning that if someone worships in a way we think is sinful, they have lost fellowship with God. The list becomes the list I mentioned + worship errors. The main problem is that the same verses the traditional view uses to support worship sins makes no distinction between worship, belief, or lifestyle. There is, in other words, no support for putting worship on the list to the exclusion of the others. While one might argue that worship is public and affects the church, it would be good to note that such criteria are never part of the reason the sins mentioned in the exceptions are given. For example, if someone is sexually immoral, that does not affect our worship and is not public, yet that is one of the sins which leads to disfellowship. On a practical level, my stance would mean that if a brother worshiped in good conscience with multiple cups and with those who also felt the same, he would not be guilty of dividing the church (one of the sins meriting disfellowship—Romans 16:17-18). If that same man decided to attend services where the congregation used only one cup, and he did not try to get

them to change but simply came to worship, he is no different than someone who sins in any other way that is not on the list. If so, what scriptures justify this?

4. The traditional stance is not followed, even by those who uphold it. We all make mistakes and all need to grow as Christians. For that reason, nearly every congregation will have people who sin yet are not disfellowshipped. There are numerous other “sins” that are fellowshipped such as watching inappropriate movies, women cutting hair, celebration of holidays, etc. Even after the person is spoken to and studied with, and they still believe that what they do is correct, there is usually no line of fellowship drawn.

5. Disfellowshipping for reasons not on the list requires that we have perfect knowledge. Most of us at some point have probably changed our views about some truth of the Bible. If the traditional stance were followed, we would have disfellowshipped brethren who disagreed with us. Then as our view changed, we would have to rejoin in fellowship with them and disfellowship the ones we had been with before.

6. The traditional view negates the teachings of the Bible. If the traditional view is correct, there would have been no need for Paul and the others to write of specific sins which deserved disfellowshipping. But these men were very specific about which sins were worthy of disfellowship.

7. The traditional view causes us to judge each other, which is forbidden in the New Testament. We have discussed this at some length in earlier posts, but the New Testament is clear—we are not to judge one another. Jesus says, “Do not judge so that you will not be judged” (Matt 7:1). Contextually, and in harmony with other scriptures, this verse means that we are not to judge one’s soul condition. We can judge the sinfulness of acts (and we should), but we are not to decide who is in fellowship with God and who is not. This is very clear in the New Testament. Can you imagine what the church in Corinth would have been like if that were not the case?! But the traditional view requires we make this judgment or else be in danger of partaking in the sin ourselves, as evidenced by an incorrect reading of 2 John 7-10.

8. The traditional view violates the principle and teaching of Romans 14. Paul writes in Rom 14:3-8

“3 The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him. 4 Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. 5 One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. 6 He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not,

for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God. 7 For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; 8 for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's."

The brethren who did not eat meat believed and were convinced that eating meat was a sin. For this reason, they judged the meat eating brethren as being sinners. This was dividing the church. This was not viewed as matter of liberty from their non-meat-eating side. This was sin and it needed to stop. What does Paul say? "Get along with each other. You non-meat-eaters, do not judge them even though you think they are sinning. And you meat eaters, don't get mad at them for not wanting to eat meat. Get along because you are not the judge—the Master is." That's it. But the traditional stance would require the non-meat-eaters to withdraw fellowship from the meat eaters for their sin.

Mike, I know that is a lot, and I did not originally intend to make a bulleted list, but I think it makes the point. Let me ask a personal question: do you have members in your congregation who do things you think are sinful? If you have talked with them or preached on these things and they have continued, have you disfellowshipped them? For example, have you studied with the sister who cuts her hair, but she continues to do it? If she continues to cut it, the traditional view demands you disfellowship her. What about a brother who watches Rated-R movies. Have you studied with him the importance of being holy and yet he continues? The

traditional stance requires you disfellowship him. You get the point. You realize that we should not disfellowship every sin, and just because someone is told of a sin does not mean they are convinced of it.

Ultimately, the problem is that the traditional stance adds things on the disfellowship list that God did not, namely worship. One could just as easily add order of worship, wearing of red clothing, etc. These would have the same justification as someone who worships with cups, etc. But we must stick with what the Bible says and speak where it speaks.

So many who hold to the traditional stance fear the digression that could happen if the lines are put where I say the Bible puts them. I understand this fear because so many brethren do go down a slippery path to all sorts of sins. But the fact that some have fallen away who held this view is not reason to deny what the Bible says. We will not slide down a slippery slope as long as we put our feet firmly on the stops that God has put into place.

God bless us all as we work through this and toward unity.

**Post #22, Mike Criswell, 01/21/2012**

Dear Steve,

Thanks for the post. I'm finally getting around to looking at it more closely and considering your arguments. Again, I

think we are having a good conversation even though it is not going to satisfy everyone. What I'd like to do in this post is go back and address Ephesians 4 and then in my next post address your 8 criticisms of our traditional position on fellowship. This has direct bearing on the whole issue at large.

As I begin I'd like to describe a scenario that actually happened to me.

A few years ago I had a weekly ongoing bible study with a man that would have been a great asset to the Lord's church. He was intelligent and it was obvious that he could have been a good public teacher. Over time we studied many basic subjects regarding the nature of God, the church etc. But one day we got to the "plan of salvation." As is typical I began at the beginning and anticipating rejection I began to point out that he needed to believe the gospel of Jesus Christ (Rom 1:16). To this he readily agreed and said he indeed believed it. I then noted that our sins separate us from God therefore we must "repent" of our sins (Lk 13:3). He said he agreed with the bible teaching on this. I went on to point out the need to demonstrate our faith by confessing Jesus (Mt 10:32). This good man said he was more than willing to confess AND profess Jesus Christ. As we continued on I added the final step that scripture says puts us into Christ. I told him that one must be baptized into Christ FOR THE REMISSION SINS by IMMERSION. To my astonishment at this point he began nodding his head in full agreement. But even more to my amazement he told me

that he had already been baptized into the body of Christ and was a member of the church. Well I knew right then there I had made a big mistake in assessing this man's beliefs. There would be NO conversion of this man. He was already converted and had already been baptized by immersion for the remission of sins. What I found out was that he was a "digressive." It was a disappointment. What a loss for the one cup fellowship.

Now Steve, with that event in mind I want you to hold that thought and go with me to Ephesians 4.

In your post before last you said this of Paul's list

,

"Were his "seven ones" really the seven ones plus 30 sub-points? Were they to take what Paul said and conclude that he was warning them if anyone had any differing idea about God's word that if any person understands of doctrine was different, that such a person was cut off from God and should be cut off from them? Is that the context of that chapter and the entire letter to Ephesus? Surely not."

You then go on to affirm:

"It is inaccurate to say that these "ones" mean that there can be no variation in any doctrine and to separate from one another if there was variation."

Now let's apply your reasoning to the passages in Ephesians 4. Let's apply your statement that our exegesis of Ephesians 4:1-4 CANNOT have sub points and must be taken strictly at face value. And let's apply your reasoning that Eph 4 IS THE DEFINITIVE list of things that mark the line of fellowship (I know that you also included moral issues and I fully agree with this so I'm not discussing these passages), But anyway according to your reasoning I see some major problems. Let me also bullet or number them for clarity sake. Here is the problem with your position.

1. It violates EVERY recognized rule of exegesis (biblical interpretation) which begins with the fact that ALL verses on any given subject must be taken into consideration before we come to a conclusion on that subject. So if we can't go to any other passages or have sub points on Eph 4 how do we really know how to apply the points or what the points really even mean?

2. It violates EVERY recognized rule of exegesis that states that scripture must interpret scripture. Your approach to Eph 4 makes its interpretation esoteric and makes you the one who decides what these 7 things actually mean.

3. It violates EVERY biblical statement that ALL scripture must be obeyed and of equal importance. Paul says in 2Ti 3:16 ALL scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness that the man of God might be

perfect (complete). How can we be complete if we refuse to accept the complete canon of scripture? Why do you, instead of me, get to decide what is needed for fellowship? Or to state it another way, why do you rather than God get to draw up the list that sets the limits of fellowship? It goes back to the principle that God has always instilled in his people. Samuel told Saul: And Samuel said, Hath the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to OBEY is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. 23 For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. 1Sa 15:22

4. Okay now let's look at the seven ones and apply your logic. In fact I think you'll see is that by your reasoning you are being quite ungracious in your narrow view fellowship. You may think that I'm being Narrow Minded but I think we'll see that it's really the "partial open fellowship" folks that are being ungracious and judgmental!

a. One Body – Since we can't really tell much from this passage alone but I suppose that you'd have to say that the one body is the church. Okay so what do we know about that one body from this passage alone? Well we don't know if Paul is talking about one universal body consisting of denominations or individual FAITHFUL congregations. So in the tenor of your open fellowship views I'm going to say that Paul is simply saying that there is one universal body with many denominations. Therefore I can fellowship the

Baptists, the Lutherans, the Catholics etc. Steve . . . by your own reasoning you are being closed fellowship by not accepting your denominational brothers and sisters!!! Is this not being pretty judgmental?

b. One Spirit – Ok, one spirit. What does that mean? Well we can't really tell from Eph 4 alone so I'm going to conclude that it is the one spirit that gives miraculous spiritual gifts. Therefore I can now fellowship the Charismatics.. Steve unless you fellowship Charismatics we'd have to admit that you're being pretty closed minded by not letting tongue speakers take part in the service.

c. One Hope –, What does that mean? Well we can't really tell much from Eph 4 so I'm going to concluded that the "one hope" is realized in the Millennial Reign of Jesus when he comes back and sets up a literal 1000 years reign. I'm going to teach that the "church" concept that Jesus offered to the Jews was a huge failure and therefore Jesus will have to come back and do it again. So now I can fellowship Pre Miills, the A.D. 70 folks that teach that Jesus has already come and all kinds of eschatological views.

d. One Lord --- What does that mean? Well again its unclear without going to other passages so I'm going to extend fellowship to those who want to just invite Jesus into their heart for salvation. I'm going to teach the Sinners Prayer. I'm going to worship with folks who are faith only because

obviously you have to have faith to believe in one lord. How about you? Will you fellowship these folks? Why not?

e. One faith – Ok one faith. What does that mean? Well I don't really know so I'm going to fellowship those who are "faith only." I'm going to conclude that "one faith" is talking about my own subjective faith and whatever I believe is between me and God. Doctrine certainly doesn't matter. Steve, will you fellowship these folks? Why not?

f. One Baptism – ok what does that mean? Well I'm not sure because we just can't go to any other passages or have sub points. So I'm going to extend fellowship to those that say that the one baptism is the baptism of the HS given to all Christians when they accept Jesus into their heart. I'm going to logically extend fellowship to those who pour, sprinkle, immerse, or those who don't even believe that water baptism is even being talked about. How about you Steve? Can you fellowship these sincere folks?

g. One God – ok I'm going to skip down to this one. Well what can we know strictly from Eph 4 about the nature of God? Well not much. We can know that there is only ONE so I'm going to fellowship the Oneness folks. I'm also going to fellowship those who believe that God is NOT omniscient, NOT omnipresent. I'm going to accept those who have an Islam type approach to God. So how about you Steve. Can we fellowship these folks???

h. Ok what about some other practical matters??? IF we can't have any sub points that limits or clarifies Ephesians 4 then I'm also going to have to do the following:

i. Fellowship those who worship on Saturday. Where is Lord's Day worship mentioned in Eph 4?

ii. Fellowship those who don't believe we have to take the Lord's Supper every week or at all for that matter. Where in Eph 4 do we have anything about the LS?

iii. Fellowship those who put coke and hamburgers on the Lord's Table. Where does Eph speak to this issue?

iv. I'm going to fellowship those who have instruments AND those who don't even believe in singing at all. Where in Eph 4 is music mentioned or authorized in worship?

v. I'm going to fellowship those with classes, women teachers, or who have no teaching at all. In fact I'm even going to fellowship those who don't even go to worship services. By your own admission you said that we make way too big a deal about public worship anyway. So I'm going to fellowship all those who may or may not worship publicly. Where in Eph 4 is there anything that says we have to assemble for worship to God?

Well by this time I think you get my point. You're probably angry. I don't intend for you to be but by your own admission this is the "brotherhood" you have created for yourself. If not why not? If you say that this is ridiculous YOU'RE RIGHT. It is ridiculous to say that God doesn't expect

us to obey all of HIS Word or that fellowship doesn't include other things mentioned in scripture.

Well as I close I want to finish my story which I began at the beginning. Our good man with whom I studied was indeed a digressive. But he was a very special kind of digressive. Yes he was a member of the Church of Christ. But it was the Church of Christ of Latter Day Saints. He was a Mormon. Obviously we did not extend fellowship with him that next Lord 's Day morning. Would you have? If not why not?

**Post #23, Steve Ramsey, 01/22/2012**

Mike,

I would like to encourage everyone to do something before they read my post. I know this will take a little time, but I believe it will benefit you in your study. Please read Acts 18:23-Acts 20, Ephesians 4:1-4, and then Ephesians chapters 1-4. I believe this will help you see the words of Ephesians 4:1-4 in the proper context.

Mike, I mentioned the straw man fallacy and posted the link to the video because I thought it would help everyone identify better what happened in your last post. I don't claim that you did this on purpose, but I believe it was a straw man attack. Let me explain...

A straw man argument is when someone makes an argument. Then someone else takes that argument, modifies it slightly and then attacks the new, modified

argument, claiming that he is attacking the original argument. In our case, I made some arguments, you took what I said and altered it (not saying you did in consciously), and then attacked the altered version.

Let me show you a couple of ways.

First, your comments about Bible study were not directly addressing what I was saying. My point was that we have to look at how the people who received the letter would have read the letter. We read it as 21st century Americans, whereas they were first century Asians. Whatever the truth was for them, it is also for us. I think you would agree with this concept. This morning Jonas (my 16-month-old) woke up a little after 4:00 AM. He settled right back in and went to sleep, but I couldn't. So I decided to read the whole book of Ephesians to see how it all fit together. I think it is amazing that many of the ideas about the "seven ones" are dealt with in the first three chapters. When we read the seven ones of Ephesians 4, we have to remember that Paul is writing to Christians, many of whom he knew personally and maybe even baptized. What I was trying to say in my last post was that you were reading more into the text than was there by concluding that Paul was telling them that they had to have complete agreement on all doctrines. It is just not there.

One of the things you attack throughout is based on you hearing me say that if it wasn't in chapter 4, it was not

relevant. That is not what I said. As you know, there were no chapter divisions when it was written. It was all one letter. I simply suggest that we consider the letter as a whole, as well as the background information we know about Ephesus, to determine what the words of Ephesians 4:1-4 meant to them, and by extension, mean to us. I think you would agree that this is an important way to approach Bible study.

My biggest issue with what you posted, and the biggest straw man problems arise when you take a distorted view of what I said and then try to apply it to the seven ones, coming up with radical conclusions. The main straw men are when you claim that I said it had to be in chapter 4 to count and the fact that you take each of the “ones” separately. I believe we must have all seven of the “ones” to have unity. If you consider that all seven must be met, the conclusions you draw will be answered. So let’s go through these briefly. For clarity, I am going to post your complete comments in uppercase and then write a response to each below it.

a. ONE BODY – SINCE WE CAN’T REALLY TELL MUCH FROM THIS PASSAGE ALONE BUT I SUPPOSE THAT YOU’D HAVE TO SAY THAT THE ONE BODY IS THE CHURCH. OKAY SO WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THAT ONE BODY FROM THIS PASSAGE ALONE? WELL WE DON’T KNOW IF PAUL IS TALKING ABOUT ONE UNIVERSAL BODY CONSISTING OF DENOMINATIONS OR INDIVIDUAL FAITHFUL CONGREGATIONS. SO IN THE TENOR OF YOUR OPEN

FELLOWSHIP VIEWS I'M GOING TO SAY THAT PAUL IS SIMPLY SAYING THAT THERE IS ONE UNIVERSAL BODY WITH MANY DENOMINATIONS. THEREFORE I CAN FELLOWSHIP THE BAPTISTS, THE LUTHERANS, THE CATHOLICS ETC. STEVE . . . BY YOUR OWN REASONING YOU ARE BEING CLOSED FELLOWSHIP BY NOT ACCEPTING YOUR DENOMINATIONAL BROTHERS AND SISTERS!!! IS THIS NOT BEING PRETTY JUDGMENTAL?

It is clear from Ephesians 1:22-23 that the church is the body: "And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, 23 which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all." What makes up that body? Individual Christians (not churches). This is clear when Paul discusses things such as in Eph 2:21-22 where he says that they are each individually part of the temple: "in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit." In chapter 4, Paul says each person is a member of the body, "from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love" (Eph 4:16). Therefore, since your premise is false (that the church is made up of churches), the conclusion is also false—that we could fellowship any church. In addition, the churches you mentioned do not hold to all of the other "ones," which is a prerequisite to fellowship.

b. ONE SPIRIT – OK, ONE SPIRIT. WHAT DOES THAT MEAN? WELL WE CAN'T REALLY TELL FROM EPH 4 ALONE SO I'M GOING TO CONCLUDE THAT IT IS THE ONE SPIRIT THAT GIVES MIRACULOUS SPIRITUAL GIFTS. THEREFORE I CAN NOW FELLOWSHIP THE CHARISMATICS.. STEVE UNLESS YOU FELLOWSHIP CHARISMATICS WE'D HAVE TO ADMIT THAT YOU'RE BEING PRETTY CLOSED MINDED BY NOT LETTING TONGUE SPEAKERS TAKE PART IN THE SERVICE.

Let me say that I never called anyone "closed minded." I don't believe pejorative language helps the discussion. But the question is, How would the Ephesians have interpreted this expression? Well, here is a list of some of the verses dealing with the Spirit found in the book of Ephesians:

Eph 1:13 "In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation -- having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise,"

Eph 2:17-18 "AND HE CAME AND PREACHED PEACE TO YOU WHO WERE FAR AWAY, AND PEACE TO THOSE WHO WERE NEAR; 18 for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father."

Eph 2:21-22 "in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.

Eph 4:30 “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption”

It is clear from the context that Paul is not even considering spiritual gifts. His focus on the spirit in Ephesians is on how the Spirit of God seals His people and dwells in His people. Nevertheless, if a brother did believe spiritual gifts still exist, I can remain in fellowship with him as long as he does not try to divide the church with his teachings or try to manifest them in our worship services, violating the consciences of others (see 1 Cor 14). Besides, many of us disagree about how the Spirit dwells in us, and yet we remain in fellowship. Paul is not saying we have to know and agree on every aspect of the Spirit. We simply realize that it is the one Spirit of God who dwells in us as a seal and down payment for our impending reward.

C. ONE HOPE —, WHAT DOES THAT MEAN? WELL WE CAN'T REALLY TELL MUCH FROM EPH 4 SO I'M GOING TO CONCLUDED THAT THE “ONE HOPE” IS REALIZED IN THE MILLENNIAL REIGN OF JESUS WHEN HE COMES BACK AND SETS UP A LITERAL 1000 YEARS REIGN. I'M GOING TO TEACH THAT THE “CHURCH” CONCEPT THAT JESUS OFFERED TO THE JEWS WAS A HUGE FAILURE AND THEREFORE JESUS WILL HAVE TO COME BACK AND DO IT AGAIN. SO NOW I CAN FELLOWSHIP PRE MIILLS, THE A.D. 70 FOLKS THAT TEACH THAT JESUS HAS ALREADY COME AND ALL KINDS OF ESCHATOLOGICAL VIEWS.

In Ephesians, the word “hope” is used four times:

Eph 1:12 “to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory.”

Eph 1:18 “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints,”

Eph 2:12 “remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.”

Eph 4:4 “There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling”

It is clear that the one hope Paul speaks of is the hope we have in Christ of “the glory of His inheritance” and “the riches of his glory.” In other words, it is our eternal inheritance as children of God. I doubt any of us completely understands what all that entails. Some of us believe we will live in “heaven” while others believe the earth will be renewed and we will live here. This is not a doctrine that divides us now nor should it. (I would rather not go into the many facets of the AD 70 doctrine you mention because I think that would sidetrack us.) The hope Paul speaks of is the hope of enjoying our blessed inheritance in eternity.

D. ONE LORD --- WHAT DOES THAT MEAN? WELL AGAIN ITS UNCLEAR WITHOUT GOING TO OTHER PASSAGES SO I'M GOING TO EXTEND FELLOWSHIP TO THOSE WHO WANT TO JUST INVITE JESUS INTO THEIR HEART FOR SALVATION. I'M GOING TO TEACH THE SINNERS PRAYER. I'M GOING TO WORSHIP WITH FOLKS WHO ARE FAITH ONLY BECAUSE OBVIOUSLY YOU HAVE TO HAVE FAITH TO BELIEVE IN ONE LORD. HOW ABOUT YOU? WILL YOU FELLOWSHIP THESE FOLKS? WHY NOT?

This is a good example of what I was saying earlier—the fact that there is one baptism would limit fellowship with people who pray the “sinner’s prayer or believe in faith only. People who believe in faith only are not excluded by this verse, but they are by others.

E. ONE FAITH – OK ONE FAITH. WHAT DOES THAT MEAN? WELL I DON'T REALLY KNOW SO I'M GOING TO FELLOWSHIP THOSE WHO ARE “FAITH ONLY.” I'M GOING TO CONCLUDE THAT “ONE FAITH” IS TALKING ABOUT MY OWN SUBJECTIVE FAITH AND WHATEVER I BELIEVE IS BETWEEN ME AND GOD. DOCTRINE CERTAINLY DOESN'T MATTER. STEVE, WILL YOU FELLOWSHIP THESE FOLKS? WHY NOT?

From the context of Ephesians, there are a couple of possibilities. One is that it refers to the saving faith through which we access God's grace as found in Eph 1:15 “For this reason I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus

which exists among you and your love for all the saints” and Eph 2:8 “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.” The second possibility is a set of doctrine as found in Eph 4:13 “until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.” Note, however, that belief in one set of doctrine does not mean the same thing as understanding everything of that doctrine the same way.

F. ONE BAPTISM – OK WHAT DOES THAT MEAN? WELL I’M NOT SURE BECAUSE WE JUST CAN’T GO TO ANY OTHER PASSAGES OR HAVE SUB POINTS. SO I’M GOING TO EXTEND FELLOWSHIP TO THOSE THAT SAY THAT THE ONE BAPTISM IS THE BAPTISM OF THE HS GIVEN TO ALL CHRISTIANS WHEN THEY ACCEPT JESUS INTO THEIR HEART. I’M GOING TO LOGICALLY EXTEND FELLOWSHIP TO THOSE WHO POUR, SPRINKLE, IMMERSE, OR THOSE WHO DON’T EVEN BELIEVE THAT WATER BAPTISM IS EVEN BEING TALKED ABOUT. HOW ABOUT YOU STEVE? CAN YOU FELLOWSHIP THESE SINCERE FOLKS?

By definition, baptism means “immersion.” This is what the Ephesians would have understood. Indeed, they did have a baptism question arise in their congregation as found in Acts 19:1-5, “It happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the upper country and came to Ephesus, and found some disciples. 2 He said to them, "Did

you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they said to him, "No, we have not even heard whether there is a Holy Spirit." 3 And he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" And they said, "Into John's baptism." 4 Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus." 5 When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

This is the baptism Paul speaks of, something they all knew about. His point is not to teach them what baptism means but rather to show that since they have all been baptized into Christ, they are one. Note, also, how well of these go together to speak against the paganism and Judaism that surrounded them. He is showing that they are a new kind of people, separate from their countrymen and ancestors.

G. ONE GOD – OK I’M GOING TO SKIP DOWN TO THIS ONE. WELL WHAT CAN WE KNOW STRICTLY FROM EPH 4 ABOUT THE NATURE OF GOD? WELL NOT MUCH. WE CAN KNOW THAT THERE IS ONLY ONE SO I’M GOING TO FELLOWSHIP THE ONENESS FOLKS. I’M ALSO GOING TO FELLOWSHIP THOSE WHO BELIEVE THAT GOD IS NOT OMNISCIENT, NOT OMNIPRESENT. I’M GOING TO ACCEPT THOSE WHO HAVE AN ISLAM TYPE APPROACH TO GOD. SO HOW ABOUT YOU STEVE. CAN WE FELLOWSHIP THESE FOLKS???

Remember the context: these are Christians. They understand Paul is not writing about Islam (which didn’t

even exist) or other religions. Most likely, this would have referred to Diana (Artemis), who was the patron saint of the city of Ephesus. Notice what had happened earlier in Ephesus: "For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, was bringing no little business to the craftsmen; 25 these he gathered together with the workmen of similar trades, and said, "Men, you know that our prosperity depends upon this business. 26 "You see and hear that not only in Ephesus, but in almost all of Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away a considerable number of people, saying that gods made with hands are no gods at all. 27 "Not only is there danger that this trade of ours fall into disrepute, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis be regarded as worthless and that she whom all of Asia and the world worship will even be dethroned from her magnificence" (Acts 19:24-27).

The most logical context is in reference to the paganism, therefore. This verse alone would not eliminate a great amount of people from unity with us, but, as I keep pointing out, we need all seven.

H. OK WHAT ABOUT SOME OTHER PRACTICAL MATTERS???

IF WE CAN'T HAVE ANY SUB POINTS THAT LIMITS OR CLARIFIES EPHESIANS 4 THEN I'M ALSO GOING TO HAVE TO DO THE FOLLOWING:

I. FELLOWSHIP THOSE WHO WORSHIP ON SATURDAY. WHERE IS LORD'S DAY WORSHIP MENTIONED IN EPH 4?

II. FELLOWSHIP THOSE WHO DON'T BELIEVE WE HAVE TO TAKE THE LORD'S SUPPER EVERY WEEK OR AT ALL FOR THAT MATTER. WHERE IN EPH 4 DO WE HAVE ANYTHING ABOUT THE LS?

III. FELLOWSHIP THOSE WHO PUT COKE AND HAMBURGERS ON THE LORD'S TABLE. WHERE DOES EPH SPEAK TO THIS ISSUE?

IV. I'M GOING TO FELLOWSHIP THOSE WHO HAVE INSTRUMENTS AND THOSE WHO DON'T EVEN BELIEVE IN SINGING AT ALL. WHERE IN EPH 4 IS MUSIC MENTIONED OR AUTHORIZED IN WORSHIP?

V. I'M GOING TO FELLOWSHIP THOSE WITH CLASSES, WOMEN TEACHERS, OR WHO HAVE NO TEACHING AT ALL. IN FACT I'M EVEN GOING TO FELLOWSHIP THOSE WHO DON'T EVEN GO TO WORSHIP SERVICES. BY YOUR OWN ADMISSION YOU SAID THAT WE MAKE WAY TOO BIG A DEAL ABOUT PUBLIC WORSHIP ANYWAY. SO I'M GOING TO FELLOWSHIP ALL THOSE WHO MAY OR MAY NOT WORSHIP PUBLICLY. WHERE IN EPH 4 IS THERE ANYTHING THAT SAYS WE HAVE TO ASSEMBLE FOR WORSHIP TO GOD?

You are right that none of those things are mentioned in Ephesians 4, and this is what upsets you. But try as you might, you will not find them there. We are then left with a couple of choices: 1) Accept it for what it says or 2) Read these others things into these verses. I guess one could argue that we could have a 3) look at all of the scriptures,

which sounds nice on the surface, and which we would want to do to grow as a Christian, but none of which directly relate to unity or even hint at being a prerequisite for unity.

Mike, what concerns me is that you have taken what I said and tried to make it into something I did not say. I am not claiming you are being dishonest, but I am concerned because it shows that you are not really addressing the issues at hand and revert to emotional attacks on straw men. Mike, this should tell you something about your position. Notice how well what I said flows together—let Ephesians and the context interpret Ephesians. When we consider what is being said in the context in which it is being said, it all flows naturally. The flow is not because I am some great writer, it is because that is how truth works.

Before I close, I would ask you to please address one specific question, which is really at the heart of the issue. It is included in my list of 8 things, but please make a special note to address it on its own, if you don't mind.

We both agree that a person cannot willfully sin and continue in fellowship with God. In other words, if you know you are sinning, you have to repent to maintain that relationship. But what about when we do not know we are sinning. It is in reference to those that I pose the question I am pleading with you to answer:

If you are correct that we must obey all of God's laws to have fellowship with Him, why do you not disfellowship everyone who does something you think is sinful?

I am going to sign out, but I want to go ahead and post my list of 8 things wrong with the traditional stance at the bottom of this message for your reference and for others who don't want to have to scroll down to find it.

Praise God for his indescribable Gift!

Steve

1. The traditional stance has additional items on its list for disfellowshipping beyond what is stated in the New Testament. You mention that we must obey ALL of God's word to have fellowship with Him. This would require someone to have perfect knowledge. We do need to obey God as best as we know how, but none of us knows everything, and thus we would all be guilty of losing fellowship with God.

2. The traditional stance goes too far. Since the traditional stance holds that we must obey ALL of God's word or lose fellowship with Him, we would need to disfellowship everyone who believed, lived, or taught differently than what we each do. Most of us would not even be able to be in fellowship our own spouse.

3. The traditional stance is inconsistent for pragmatic's sake. Knowing that we could not really do what the traditional view states to do (see #2 above), those who hold to the traditional stance must modify their list. The list cannot contain EVERY New Testament teaching as meriting disfellowship, so it uses reason to modify the list. Most commonly, this view is interpreted in real life as meaning that if someone worships in a way we think is sinful, they have lost fellowship with God. The list becomes the list I mentioned + worship errors. The main problem is that the same verses the traditional view uses to support worship sins makes no distinction between worship, belief, or lifestyle. There is, in other words, no support for putting worship on the list to the exclusion of the others. While one might argue that worship is public and affects the church, it would be good to note that such criteria are never part of the reason the sins mentioned in the exceptions are given. For example, if someone is sexually immoral, that does not affect our worship and is not public, yet that is one of the sins which leads to disfellowship. On a practical level, my stance would mean that if a brother worshiped in good conscience with multiple cups and with those who also felt the same, he would not be guilty of dividing the church (one of the sins meriting disfellowship—Romans 16:17-18). If that same man decided to attend services where the congregation used only one cup, and he did not try to get them to change but simply came to worship, he is no different than someone who sins in any other way that is not on the list. If so, what scriptures justify it?

4. The traditional stance is not followed, even by those who uphold it. We all make mistakes and all need to grow as Christians. For that reason, nearly every congregation will have people who sin yet are not disfellowshipped. There are numerous other “sins” that are fellowshipped such as watching inappropriate movies, women cutting hair, celebration of holidays, etc. Even after the person is spoken to and studied with, and they still believe that what they do is correct, there is usually no line of fellowship drawn.

5. Disfellowshipping for reasons not on the list requires that we have perfect knowledge. Most of us at some point have probably changed our views about some truth of the Bible. If the traditional stance were followed, we would have disfellowshipped brethren who disagreed with us. Then as our view changed, we would have to rejoin in fellowship with them and disfellowship the ones we had been with before.

6. The traditional view negates the teachings of the Bible. If the traditional view is correct, there would have been no need for Paul and the others to write of specific sins which deserved disfellowshipping. But these men were very specific about which sins were worthy of disfellowship.

7. The traditional view causes us to judge each other, which is forbidden in the New Testament. We have discussed this at some length in earlier posts, but the New Testament is

clear—we are not to judge one another. Jesus says, “Do not judge so that you will not be judged” (Matt 7:1). Contextually, and in harmony with other scriptures, this verse means that we are not to judge one’s soul condition. We can judge the sinfulness of acts (and we should), but we are not to decide who is in fellowship with God and who is not. This is very clear in the New Testament. Can you imagine what the church in Corinth would have been like if that were not the case?! But the traditional view requires we make this judgment or else be in danger of partaking in the sin ourselves, as evidenced by an incorrect reading of 2 John 7-10.

8. The traditional view violates the principle and teaching of Romans 14. Paul writes in Rom 14:3-8

“3 The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him. 4 Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. 5 One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. 6 He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God. 7 For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; 8 for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for

the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's."

**Post #24.1, Mike Criswell, 01/24/2012**

POST ONE OF TWO

I'm breaking my post up because they deal with two different issues. So please, folks, take time to read both. Thanks!!!!

Dear Steve,

Thank you for your last post. I found the videos you posted interesting. There are quite a few good videos on YouTube that deal with logic and philosophy and I've enjoyed watching them over the years. It seems they are invariably better than late night TV – and more educational for sure. However, in all fairness to you and our Forum such postings probably come across as condescending and pejorative. They seem to imply that neither I nor our audience understands enough about conventional logic to follow the discussion and make rational decisions without our help. Furthermore, as we progress in our discussions I think our audience will see that my arguments are not nearly as irrelevant as you have tried to paint them. Even if we were to broaden the fellowship discussion to the entirety of Ephesians, I do not believe you can successfully show that

this book gives the single most exhaustive list of requirements for fellowship.

With that said, however, there is something interesting that the videos pointed out: namely that any and all of us can be thrown off scent by the nasty smell of fish! Over the last couple of weeks I have racked my brain trying to figure out what really is going on in the whole “fellowship” controversy. Why are there two sides (maybe more) to this issue? Well I can’t say for sure (it’s probably a multilayer problem) and I think you and I have made a pretty good, and friendly, attempt at understanding each other. But could it be that we’re both missing something in all of this?

It struck me for the first time the other night that when we discuss whether or not we can fellowship someone the issue is NOT really “fellowship” as much as it is the “authority” for the practices of the one we wish to fellowship. And I noted in a previous post the early church investigated each other to see who was in the faith (2 Cor 3:1, 1 Cor 16:3, Acts 15:23 etc).

When considering whether or not someone is part of God’s fellowship we often focus on how tolerant we should be or how far reaching God’s grace is. Like you, I tend to worry about sins we all commit that are indeed sins of ignorance.

If you will indulge me to speak from the heart I’ll take a small rabbit trail here and try to address the question you

asked me about “sins of ignorance.” I’m going to address it but I doubt I’ll answer it because I’m not sure it has an answer this side of eternity. After what I’ve just said I’ll probably get e-mails from those who have it figured out, but I’m not sure the New Testament answers everything in regards to God’s judgment and pending grace. I do know that we both agree that while grace is no excuse for sin (Romans 6:1), we nevertheless will make mistakes. I’ve never been one that thought it necessary to promote an unrealistic, unbiblical view of “perfection.” In fact I think the NT seems to take an incredibly “fair” approach to our walk with Christ. By virtue of the fact that John uses the present tense when he talks about our sins (ex: 1 Jn 2:1) it would seem to me that he takes into consideration our human frailties. I’m not a Greek scholar but as I understand it the tenor of John’s epistle is that Christians do sin (on occasion) but they do not persist in sin (habitually). And as we’ve also discussed in the past there are passages that speak of “growing and maturing.” All of this seems to indicate that mistakes will be made but that God looks at our overall process of development. I know this may be met with opposition by some and I certainly could be wrong and do not mind being corrected. But it looks to me as if we will be judged in accordance to the light we have and in accordance with our spiritual maturity. This is not to say that we can use “immaturity” as an excuse for not growing. Neither would this be a blank check to disobey God. There does come a time when God expects us to grow up and learn the doctrines of the faith (1 Peter 2:2 and Hebrews 5:12). And if

we refuse to press onward toward maturity I believe we will be judged the more severely. The problem with going down the “how much will God overlook sin” road is that A) scripture does not approach sin this way, B) it focuses on that which God has NOT fully revealed, and finally C) it seems to make ME the arbiter of right and wrong rather than God. I do NOT believe God wants us to live our spiritual lives in constant fear. Respect and watchfulness? Yes! But not in terror!!!! As Barnes says: “It is guilt that makes men fear what is to come; but he whose sins are pardoned, and whose heart is filled with the love of God, has nothing to dread in this world or the world to come” (see comments on 1 Jn 4:18). Our sins are pardoned by the blood of Jesus in baptism and then continually pardoned as we repent and confess that which is brought to our attention by the Word of God or other faithful Christians. Beyond this Steve, I am just not sure if I have the right to say more. I do believe that God takes our frailties into consideration else what is the point of Hebrews 4:15. Apparently Jesus understands our struggles and is more than ready to extend grace and forgiveness. I guess I’ve almost come to the conclusion that these questions maybe “red herrings” in and of themselves. I think you and I are both questioners. And I’m sure you’ll agree with me when I say that such a trait is our cross to bear. There will always be things that we can’t know. Deuteronomy 29:29 says, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which ARE revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may DO all the words of this law.”

As I noted in one of my early posts, I don't believe we will ever be able to fully comprehend the grace of God. Furthermore we've probably been afraid to talk about grace for fear of sounding denominational. The reality is, however, the older I get the more I believe that were it not for grace we would have no hope whatsoever in either being saved or in continuing in a relationship with God. When begging God about his thorn God told Paul, "My grace is sufficient for thee." I love that statement!!!! We shouldn't abuse grace but neither should we be afraid of it. What little we do apprehend about this great subject comes from reading the Bible. And there are things that God has not revealed which certainly would be of interest. Whether or not God has some kind of quantifiable reservoir of Grace out there that automatically compensates for sincerity and ignorance is beyond the scope of revelation. I believe God is more gracious than we can even imagine but to try to quantify that which is unrevealed would be pure presumption on my part. I wish I did have everything spelled out to my mind's satisfaction. But it isn't and thus we walk by faith. God simply asks us to trust and obey to the best of our ability (Php 2:12) and when we sin follow John's words in 1 Jn 1:7-9.

But back to the main point!!! IF "fellowship" is not the main issue in our discussion what is the issue underlying the controversy? Well it looks to me as if the real issue is primarily one of "obedience." If, as we both agree,

fellowship begins with one's relationship with God and God requires obedience (Heb 5:9), then ongoing, unrepentant, disobedience would sever that tie. Even though God is gracious it seems to be getting the cart ahead of the horse to talk about fellowship without first seeing what God says about obedience.

So what about the "digressive" person who comes into our midst? (Actually I don't care for the term myself even though it may be correct. I think we minimize our chances for productive study when we loosely throw around pejorative epithets). But anyway, what about the person who comes into our midst with views we fully believe are unscriptural and yet they want to be a part of the local "fellowship" of which I am a member. What then?

While circumstances may vary, it seems to me that the first responsibly leaders of a congregation have is to find out what the newcomer believes and stands for. This would just be part of protecting the flock. Paul gives the authority to do this in Acts 20:28. So let's say that this newcomer believes in instrumental music and wants to publicly OR privately spread his doctrine among the flock. Is this a "fellowship" issue?

Without splitting too many hairs, it seems that this is a "doctrinal" issue first and foremost which has the potential to BECOME a fellowship issue. So what should we do once we come to know of a man's unscriptural beliefs? Kick him

out? Shoot him? Accept him with open arms into the congregation? I believe the answer is 'NO' to all of these.

The correct approach would be to patiently reason with this person from scripture in an attempt to convert him from the error of his way (Jas 5:20). This may actually take some time as this person gradually comes to understand that we cannot add to God's Word and that we MUST have authority for ALL we do (1 Thes 5:21, Col 3:17). During this time it would be up to the local congregations' leadership to determine how best to protect the flock from any potential false doctrine while this man is being shown the way of God more perfectly (Acts 18:26). But this is not a time for impatience, anger, harshness, etc. This is a time for love, teaching, reasoning, and humility. IF, however, our efforts fail to convince the gainsayer (Titus 1:9) then it is not only appropriate but mandatory to warn the body and NOT extend our right hand of fellowship to this person.

Now the same thing that I've said about instrumental music could be said about cups/classes or any other number of issues. At some point in time the leadership has the duty to mark and avoid (Rom 16:17) those who espouse doctrines contrary to the Word of God.

So where are we in our discussion? Well in reality whatever issues we're dealing with (public or private) they are first and foremost "truth" issues instead of "fellowship" issues.

They only become fellowship issues after the person in question refuses to accept the truth.

But someone objects saying, "We just don't all see the Bible alike." Maybe so but that is not God's fault. God's word is clear enough to determine who is and is not in following the Bible pattern. God never said it would be easy to read His mind (the bible – see 1 Cor 2), but he did say, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth (2Ti 2:15). Apparently the word of God CAN be rightly divided! Teachers and leaders have a tremendous burden on their shoulders. No wonder James said what he did in Jas 3:1.

But someone says, "We just aren't consistent so we'd better not judge at all when it comes to fellowship." But this argument is irrelevant. Just because a congregation doesn't always use consistent judgment in dealing with one issue does not negate the truth of God's Word on another issue. We WILL be judged for our inconsistency but we will ALSO be judged for error we tolerate in the body of Christ. As one old gentleman told me once, "MY inconsistencies don't make YOU right!" I had to admit that he was right!

As I've considered the various arguments on both sides of this issue it is my conclusion that the main reason we want "open fellowship" is not because we want a bigger brotherhood or not even because we're primarily concerned with promoting true biblical love.... (True biblical love is demonstrated by implicit non-meritorious "obedience" Jn 14:15, 15:10 ).... But rather it is because we are often unprepared to call something "sin" and/or are

simply not convinced that the thing in question IS sinful. I know this is just my opinion so you can discount it if you like.

Steve, if all in our brotherhood really believed that cups were wrong, or that God condemned instrumental music, I'm convinced we'd fall all over ourselves defending our position must like we defend baptism. But I fear that many actually don't believe these innovations are wrong. So instead of unity based on scripture we opt for UNION instead. You see Steve, it seems to me that the real problem here is NOT the fellowship issue. That's just the stinky fish that got drug across the path. The REAL issue is whether or not the particular doctrine or practice of someone is in keeping with the Apostle's doctrine and the revealed Word of God and whether or not we're willing to "call someone" on their false doctrine.

**Post #24.2, Mike Criswell, 1/24/2012**

POST 2/2 -- CAN BE READ IN ANY ORDER

PART 2/2

Now I'd like to look at Ephesians and address some of the things that we were kicking around the other day. We've locked horns over this whole Ephesians passage. (actually your horns maybe "longer" than mine . . . but our good OU friends might take offense if I actually use the "L" word (lol). But anyway, all jokes aside, I do think that our approach to Ephesians is pivotal. First your analysis of the overall book of Ephesians was well presented. And I agree that the overall

theme of the book is the unity Jews and Gentiles have in Christ. I also agree that Eph 4 is not to be taken out of context from the book. However, even when you read the entire book of Ephesians we are still left with the questions I posed regarding how we know what each of the term's mean. Where in the book do we read about "how" baptism is to be administered or if it is even water baptism that Paul is talking about. Where in the entire book do we find an explanation of what the nature of the true God is? And what about the problem of knowing about worship etc. My point, albeit a bit over the top I admit, was and is that we must use the entire Word of God to know His will. I don't believe Paul wants us to subjectively interpret Eph 4. While you suggest that I am reading way too much into Eph 4 and thereby "adding to the word of God." I would humbly suggest that you may be "taking away" from scripture the very things necessary to rightly divide Ephesians 4 (ie: other necessary texts in other books).

But someone might say, "Paul had already explained these seven one's to the Ephesian church. In fact if I'm not mistake you cited Acts 19 in your comment about "the one baptism." To this I would reply and say, "I agree!" And that is indeed my point. Paul does NOT deal with EVERYTHING the Ephesians needed to know in that book alone. Just as Paul commanded his letters to be circulated among the churches so we today read the same letters and thereby come to a FULL knowledge of the truth. Everything WE need to determine fellowship is not going to be in Ephesians alone.

But let us look at Ephesians 4 in some depth. You have stated many times that except for other passages on morality this chapter (and book) sets the requirements for fellowship in Christ. Yet one of the major problems I have with this view is found, ironically, in the very context you contend I have abused!

When we look at Ephesians we find the following. In chapter 1 we have the “plan of redemption” shown to be from before eternity. In chapter 2 we have the implementation of that saving plan shown to be the product of Grace. Man was not even around when the plan was thought up so obviously man didn’t earn the plan by any kind of works. In chapter 3 we have Paul showing that this “plan” was a gift to the entire world. It broke down the wall that separated Jew and Gentile and made them one in Christ.

Now we come to chapter 4. Paul begins this chapter by telling the church that they must put aside cultural differences and seek the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (vs. 1-3). He then goes on to give his “list” in verses 4-6!

Now what is Paul’s point in listing these 7 ones? Just this, GOD’S SYSTEM IS UNIFIED and therefore this should be proof enough that they (the church, Jews, Gentiles) should be unified. Paul’s not only after “union,” he is after “unity.” The design of Paul’s list then is not to set forth an “official credo.” Paul is not laying down a comprehensive “list” whereby we might determine orthodoxy or fellowship. This

is an illustration!!! God's system is "One" as shown by the fact that there is one church, one God, one faith, etc. Paul is NOT drawing a circle around "fellowship" so we might have a tidy little check list. That's not even Paul's point. His point is that there is inherent unity in God's system. Eph 4:1-6 is not "The Apostle Paul's Creed." This is not a catechism of orthodox first century beliefs upon which all fellowship was based. This is an example, and illustration, not an exhaustive list.

In reality, Steve, if one really wanted to draw up a definitive list, First Corinthians would be THE book to use. In 1 Corinthians Paul deals with just about every doctrinal subject we need to know about how to walk worthy. He begins his book with a call to unity and then marches his way chapter by chapter through the book showing them how to achieve unity. If someone want's "doctrine" it's certainly found in this book. In 1 Corinthians Paul deals with everything imaginable including the Revelation Process (chp 2;) the requirements for Worship (chp 11-14) ; the Resurrection and the Judgment; etc. Paul not only deals with "fellowship" in this book he also deals with "disfellowship." And by the looks of chapter 4:21 Paul was willing to do a little "disfellowshipping" of his own when he came! To avert such the church at Corinth had to correct their ways ASAP!!!

In conclusion then the beautiful truths of Eph 4 are not some official dogma for fellowship. They are an example of how much God loves unity based on His system, His plan, His son, and dare we say, His Word???

**Post #25, Steve Ramsey, 01/29/2012**

Mike,

I appreciate the time and effort it took to make your last posts. I think you have some good thoughts, and there are many things we agree on. In some ways I think our study is kind of stalling out, though. I feel like we are going around in circles on several things, and that is hindering our progress. I don't know exactly what is causing it, but I think we and everyone reading it will benefit if we can find a way to move on.

Here are some things I would like to clarify/finalize in our discussion so maybe we don't revisit them:

1. No one is claiming there should be no judgment about unity/fellowship. The stance I present limits unity to the verses in Ephesians 4 with the exceptions I mentioned. This is not the same as saying we should not judge at all.

2. Just because we "fellowship" someone does not mean we agree with everything he does, believes, or even teaches. It also does not mean that we are going to engage in the practice we disapprove of. You mention that if we are going to fellowship someone who uses instrumental music, we might as well use it ourselves. That would be like saying that if a congregation is going to fellowship a sister who cuts her hair, all the women might as well cut their hair.

3. There is a difference between something that is sinful and something that is worthy of disfellowship.

4. We all need God's grace to be saved, and such grace is not license to sin. When we realize we have sinned, we need to repent and ask forgiveness.

Secondly, and maybe most importantly, I think one of the best means to this progress is for you to answer the question I posed last time and to comment on the 8 problems with the "traditional" stance. For that reason I don't want to spend too much time on this post. I do want to note a few areas where we disagree:

#### Judging Others

You state, "And I noted in a previous post the early church investigated each other to see who was in the faith (2 Cor 3:1, 1 Cor 16:3, Acts 15:23 etc)." Below are the verses you cite:

2 Cor 3:1-2 Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you? 2 You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men

1 Cor 16:3 When I arrive, whomever you may approve, I will send them with letters to carry your gift to Jerusalem;

Acts 15:22-23 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among

them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas -- Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, 23 and they sent this letter by them, "The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings.

Notice that none of these even hints at the idea of judging a brother's fellowship with God. 2 Corinthians basically says the opposite—that they don't need letters of commendation. 1Corinthians 16 simply says for them to find some people they can send money with. Acts 15 is not a letter about their fellowship with God, but rather it is a letter of introduction and shows who these men were who delivering the letter. It was not so much the men but the message that is under consideration. This message was inspired (Acts 15:28, "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us ..."). None of these deals with examining a brother or sister and their relationship with God. In fact, as I have pointed out, this is the opposite of what is taught and is a dangerous and divisive element of the "traditional" stance on fellowship.

### Spiritual Growth and Grace

Next, we agree that we need to grow in our knowledge and obedience to God. However, we grow at different rates, and we cannot determine when someone should know something already to the point we could say they are willfully disobedient. Hearing something, having someone

study with you, and reading it does not always equate to understanding and obedience. I have heard numerous sermons on topics that I “knew” were incorrect, but it was not until sometime down the road that it all “clicked” and I changed my mind.

You say that grace is essential and how much we all need it, and you say we should not limit or quantify it. But then that is what the traditional stance does—it allows God’s grace up till a point, then it says that God’s grace won’t cover such and such a sin. You admit that “The problem with going down the “how much will God overlook sin” road is that ... C) it seems to make ME the arbiter of right and wrong rather than God.” This is exactly what is wrong with the traditional view. It does make us the arbiter of God’s grace—deciding when God is extending it and when He is not. It forces US to decide at what point someone is being rebellious and not simply ignorant. We have to decide which sins destroy one’s fellowship with God and which don’t. If we simply go with what the Bible says and use the specific list God has given us, we are not the arbiter.

This is also clear as you apply the traditional stance with a brother who believes instruments are acceptable. You ask, “So what should we do once we come to know of a man’s unscriptural beliefs? Kick him out? Shoot him? Accept him with open arms into the congregation? I believe the answer is ‘NO’ to all of these. ...At some point in time the leadership has the duty to mark and avoid (Rom 16:17) those who espouse doctrines contrary to the Word of God.” Doesn’t

this make men the arbiter of God's grace? If the brother is not seeking to divide the church but simply has different beliefs, why should he be disfellowshipped? What verses justify this? If he is trying to divide the church, he does fall under the exception to unity found in Romans 16:17-18. If he simply believes these things and tells people what he thinks, without drawing people after him, he is fine. This is what we practice now with such things as modest apparel, holidays, the indwelling of the Spirit, etc.

#### What Issues Matter

You seem to make a distinction between sins of worship and other sins. For example, you say about the above example of instrumental music, "Now the same thing that I've said about instrumental music could be said about cups/classes or any other number of issues." It seems that consistency with the traditional view encourages and demands that such action be done with all sins. I am curious why you do not say such action must be followed with all sins? What makes instruments or cups or classes different? Suppose there is a family in our congregation that has a husband, wife, and teenage daughter. If the wife and daughter cut their hair, do you go to them and study with the 1 Cor 11? If they do not instantly repent, do you disfellowship them? You seem to suggest that they be given some time. Does that mean a month? A year? Two years? How do we know? Should these Christians ever be removed from the

fellowship of the church for refusing to see and repent? (I am honestly asking what your stance is about this situation and not posing a rhetorical question.)

What is the Real Issue?

Maybe one of the major areas we differ is when you say, "Well in reality whatever issues we're dealing with (public or private) they are first and foremost "truth" issues instead of "fellowship" issues. They only become fellowship issues after the person in question refuses to accept the truth."

Mike, I don't think the key in all of this is "obedience" to what the Bible says about a particular subject. In Romans 14, Paul told them to stay united and not judge the other, even though one side saw it as a sin/truth issue. What was foremost was them remaining one in Christ. This is also true in 1 Corinthians. First and foremost was maintaining UNITY without having to have UNIFORMITY of beliefs.

You claim, "Steve, if all in our brotherhood really believed that cups were wrong, or that God condemned instrumental music, I'm convinced we'd fall all over ourselves defending our position just like we defend baptism." But that is simply not true. Truth should always be defended and taught. And we do need to teach the truth of how God wants us to worship, live, etc. But we also have to acknowledge God's laws on fellowship, too, acknowledging that worship is not one of the reasons to disfellowship. Baptism is one of the "ones." I believe using multiple cups is wrong, but I also acknowledge I am never told to withdraw from someone who uses them. I would not use them, but

that does not mean the brother who does could not join with me in worship or service.

### Afraid to Judge

You also state, "But someone says, "We just aren't consistent so we'd better not judge at all when it comes to fellowship." That is not the stance I am contending for as I mentioned at the beginning. I am simply saying that we must judge about the right (biblical) things and not issues we have done simply from tradition. This is not from fear of calling sinful things "sinful," but rather stems from a desire to follow God's instructions in His Word. I have no problem calling something sinful, and I have no problem implementing God's rules on fellowship. What I don't want to do is cut off a brother or sister unbiblically. This is about doing what is right. That is why I so adamantly oppose the traditional stance on fellowship. It simply is not found in the Bible and attempts to cut off God's faithful children. It has left weakened and sick congregations, broken families, and numerous people who saw through it all and left.

### Ephesians

The point of using Acts 19 in discussion of baptism was to show that Paul had been in Ephesus and had dealt with those things earlier. His audience knew what he was saying and to which baptism he referred. We do not have to know and agree on everything about God, the church, the Holy Spirit, etc. to be in unity. If we did, I think we would all disfellowship each other.

I disagree that Paul speaks of the unified nature of God's plan. He is not saying that God's plan is unified, but rather that they, the Christians, are united because God's plan calls them into unity.

As you said, I think 1 Corinthians provides a fine example of how God wanted his church to maintain unity. Notice verses such as 1 Cor 4:2-4 where Paul says about judging, "In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy. 3 But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. 4 For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord." The only judgment one is to pass is in regards to the immorality mentioned in chapter 5. I think that one of the problems the church at Corinth was facing in regards to division is the same we see today, namely external markers of righteousness. He says sarcastically in 1 Cor 11:19, "No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval." I think this is much of our problem today, and it was something Paul spoke against. But I don't want to go off into a tangent on 1 Corinthians unless we think it will progress us in our discussion.

### Consistency

You comment about someone who once said, "My inconsistency does not make you right." That is true, but someone's inconsistency proves he is wrong about something—either in his understanding or in his obedience.

In matters of truth, where there is inconsistency, there is always fault. We agree that there is inconsistency among those who hold to the traditional view. There is either a problem with the view or there is a problem with the way it is practiced.

### Final Thoughts

I have more to say, such as real-life ramifications of the “traditional” stance and the stance I am promoting (I don’t have a name for it—maybe the “Ephesian Stance”?). But let me mention a couple of things in passing. Even as we speak, there are people calling me “digressive” and who refuse to have fellowship with me because of what I am saying. They believe this is biblical, and it follows the “traditional” stance. In addition, there are three newly baptized Christians (within the last month) who now have been “disfellowshipped” by the “brotherhood” because of where they go to church. Is this the fruit the Lord desires? Something to think about.

Again, please answer that one specific question I asked last time and discuss your views on each of the 8 problems I listed. If you will copy what I said and then post a response under each point, I think it will help. Please don’t feel compelled to defend each point if you think there is no defense. Just speak from the heart and from your study. Also, please add this question (sorry for all of the questions): Would you use me in leading songs, prayers, or teaching at your congregation?

God bless you and your family.

**Post # 26.1, Mike Criswell, 01/28/2012**

Post 1/2 – in two parts for readability and clarity of theme.

Dear Steve,

I want to again thank you for your last post. You mentioned something to the effect that we seem to have hit a snag in moving past the initial phase of our discussion. I gave that some consideration and I think there may be two issues here.

1. At the outset we decided this would be a free flowing discussion instead of a propositional debate. This being the case it is natural that our discussion circles, repeats and may or may not have a particular direction.

2. The other reason I think we may be going in circles is because we have two different premises regarding fellowship and its non-negotiable requirements.

As I begin let me again reiterate what I believe:

Jesus prayed for unity based on love and obedience to his Word (Jn 17:20). Jesus says that he had given this Word in its completeness to the apostles (17:8, 14, 17). The HS guided the apostles into ALL truth (Jn 14:26, 15:26, 16:13)  
---- We demonstrate our love for Jesus by obeying ALL his

commandments (Jn 14:21)--- Those who do NOT abide in his Word are not in fellowship with him (cut from the vine) – Jn 15:7 --- We have fellowship with Christ when we walk (continual action) in the truth (1 Jn 1:6) --- When we walk in the truth we walk in the light and this puts into fellowship with God and others who do the same (1 Jn 1:7) --- All apprehended sins must be confessed in order to be cleansed (1 Jn 1:9). ---We KNOW we are in fellowship WHEN we keep God’s Word (1 Jn 2:5) --- Sin is a transgression of the Law (1 Jn 3:4-5). --- The one “born of God” CANNOT keep on sinning because God’s Word dwells in him (1 Jn 3:9). True love for God and others is keeping Gods’ commandments. (5:2) --- God’s commandments are not grievous. (5:3) --- The sin that takes us out of fellowship with God is any sin we refuse to repent of (5:15-18) --- Fellowship requires that we continually walk in truth (2 Jn 1:6). --- Progressing beyond the doctrine (ANY DOCTRINE) of Christ puts us out of fellowship (2 Jn 1:9). \*\*\*\* see note below.\*\*\* --- Christians are NOT to tolerate ANY false doctrine (2 Jn 1:11-12) --- The early church found UNITY in the Apostles’ doctrine (Acts 2:42). This doctrine was gradually revealed as the first century progressed (1 Cor 13:8-10). As more was revealed more was expected! --- Paul commanded the church to have NO division and to be of the SAME mind and the SAME judgment (1 Cor 1:10). UNITY IS POSSIBLE!!! ---Paul commanded Corinth to be united in judging the sinner and putting him from their midst – remove him from FELLOWSHIP (1 Cor 5). --- Christians are COMMANDED to judge the sinner (1 Cor 5:12-13). Saints will even judge the

world (1 Cor 6:2). Jesus said we would be able “to remove the speck from our brothers eye” (ie: JUDGE) after we look at ourselves first (Mt 7:1-4). ---Paul’s ORDERS for unity and fellowship were from the Lord (1 Cor 14:37, etc) -- Paul taught the SAME doctrine in ALL the churches (1 Cor 7:17, 14:33) and demanded doctrinal purity in ALL the churches. --- ANY sin has the potential of disrupting fellowship in the church because it is like leaven (1 Cor 5:6) and can affect the entire congregation. --- Christians will make mistakes as they grow but they must learn to discern between right and wrong (Heb 5:14). --- We must work out our own salvation with fear and trembling (Php 2:12) --- We determine limits of fellowship by comparing our lives and other’s lives with the teaching of the apostles (2 Jn 1:10). We are commanded to make comparative judgments based on the Word. --- We are commanded to “mark” (JUDGE) those who bring about division and teach false doctrine (Rom 16:17). --- There is a difference between being patient with someone struggling with an issue in our home congregation as opposed on the other hand to “actually inviting” a false teacher in to be part of our worship, teaching, and fellowship (1 Thes 5:14, Acts 20:29) --- Judgments on matters of weak Christians, and tolerance must be settled on a congregational level as its leaders look to the Word of God (Tit 1:9-11).

End of Part 1:

\*\*\*\* Steve in spite of the fact that you said I wrangled the scripture by applying (2 Jn 1:9) to “all doctrine” of Christ, the best commentaries I have agree with my assessment

that by extension this verse applies to ANY doctrine (teaching) of the New Testament. Thus there IS a SPECIFIC context and a GENERAL truth in this verse (see Lenski, Ellicott, Hovey, Wordsworth, et al).

**Post #26.2, Mike Criswell, 01/28/2012**

Part 2/2 -

The Difference between Personal and Corporate Infractions

Steve, in our discussion it seems that three issues form the basis of most of our disagreement: 1) Our right to judge others; 2) Whether Eph 4 is the exclusive criteria for fellowship; 3) and the distinction between personal sins (private) and corporate worship (public). I've really not said much about this so I want to take a moment and deal with the distinction between personal and corporate sins. In response to my position you note:

“You focus a lot on worship being a disfellowship-able criterion, but what specific verses do you have to support this?” and then later, “Mike, you rely so heavily on worship as being an indicator of God’s people. And I agree that worship is important, but that is not how Jesus said the world would identify His people.”

Okay, that’s a fair comment so let’s take a look at what scripture says.

First, any sin, whether public or private has the potential of disrupting a local congregation. This was actually what was happening in Corinth (1 Cor 5). The man who was living with his “father’s wife” was not doing so in front of the “church” per se, but the congregation DID know about it and were boasting in their tolerance of the sin. Thus the private sin BECAME a congregational problem. Likewise in Matthew 18 what begins as a personal issue has the potential of becoming a corporate matter.

The implications of this are important in that even an individual’s false belief or private practice could become an issue requiring dis-fellowship. Furthermore, the converse seems also correct. Congregational beliefs/practices also condemn individuals when those sins are not corrected. Such was the case again at Corinth where their corporate abuse of the Lord’s Supper seem to have been having some kind of affect on individuals (see 1 Cor 11:30). So while personal sins and corporate sins are obviously distinct, they are often connected.

One of the interesting things in both the Old and New Testaments is the fact that God more rigorously regulated “corporate” worship than he did “private daily living.” While it was indeed possible for one to “sin” in his private life and thus face the consequences (Num 15:32) the requirements for corporate worship were much more stringent than those for private matters. For example, when God gave Moses instruction regarding the tabernacle He did so to the very

minute detail. From the fabric to its size to the activities allowed therein, God demanded strict obedience to the Law. On the other hand God did not legislate the size of one's personal tent, the fabric of that tent, or every detail of what went on in that tent. It is for sure that God was strict on His people, but in Worship God was even MORE strict and demanded even MORE perfection. Thus we have the example of Nadab and Abihu who offered strange fire and were condemned (Lev 10). It didn't matter what fire they used at home but it did in worship. Thus we have Uzzah who disobeyed God by touching the Ark and was condemned (1 Chron 13:9). Uzza could touch whatever he liked at home but not in worship. Thus we have David giving Solomon a strict pattern for building the Temple – a pattern he had received from the Lord (1 Chron 28:12). David could build his house anyway he wanted but not so with the Lord's house

.

When we get to the New Testament the lesson is the same. God is Spirit and they that worship him MUST do so in the prescribed manner (Jn 4:24). Paul commands that no deviation be made from the ordinances of worship (1 Cor 11:23). We have strict rules pertaining to the Lord's Table. But we can set our table any way we like at home (1 Cor 11:22). We can play any instrument we want at home but there is no authorization for anything other than the "human instrument" (voice/singing) in the church (Eph 5, Col 3 et al). We can give money away freely to the poor in our private life but as a corporate church we have

authorization for only certain activities. Women may teach in the privacy of the home but not so in the church (1 Tim 2, Tit 2). So while there are rules for both public and private, corporate and non-corporate, God is exceedingly more stringent the closer we get to the corporate assembly of the body. This is the very point of 1 Cor 14 and the regulations Paul places on Worship “in the church” (see vs. 19 etc).

Now on a more practical level what’s the difference between corporate worship and whether a not a woman cuts her hair or watches R rated movies. Well first of all this woman’s actions do not keep me from examining myself during the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 11:28), or saying “amen” to prayer, or making melody in my heart. The personal sin of one individual does not necessarily affect the church’s corporate approach to God. While this woman’s sins need to be addressed and corrected, her personal sin does not taint my worship or violate my conscience. She will stand before the Lord and give account of her own sins! Furthermore IF someone held an aberrant doctrine that NO ONE KNEW ABOUT such would not affect me either. How can I know that which has not been revealed???

But what about corporate worship and those that lead? IF an “instrumental music” advocate came into our midst and I knew it and yet invited him to lead the congregation then a) I have become a partaker in his deeds (2 Jn 1:11) b) I have implicitly sanctioned his actions and c) I have INVITED trouble into the ranks (Gal 1:7, 2 Thes 1:6). Every

congregation has enough trouble teaching their own members about personal piety without opening the door to false doctrine.

There are at least two issues at play here. First God has always had a no tolerance policy when it came to error in corporate worship. And second when we defile the consciences of others by directly or indirectly sanctioning an apostate, we sin against the body of believers and against God. Leaders have the COMMAND to watch and guard the flock. If instrumental music is sinful then we are not in fellowship with those who advocate such. If the church is to be kept pure then to invite an advocate of false doctrine to lead the body is not only unscriptural, it is foolish.

Ephesians 4 and the limits of fellowship.

In conclusion I want to quickly address Ephesians 4 and the limits of fellowship. As noted above this has been another of our hang ups. Besides moral issues, you believe that Ephesians 4:1-6 is the sine qua non, (the key) to determining the limits of fellowship. I believe there are MORE than these things involved in determining fellowship. I also believe that to properly interpret or define the "list" of "ones" in Ephesians 4 we have no choice to not only go outside of the book of Ephesians but go to other books of the New Testament. Thus Ephesians is NOT the only test for orthodoxy

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In my last post I explained that I believe that Eph 4:1-4 is Paul's way of demonstrating the unity Christ demands in the church. God's system is unified (one Lord, one Faith, etc) and thus there should be unity in the "one body." You disagreed and I respect that. However in our discussion you and I have both gone outside the pages of Ephesians to determine the limits of fellowship.

Of Ephesians 4 you note:

"These are the only verses in the New Testament that deal directly with doctrines required for unity. These alone are the ones I believe we must have because they are that God has given."

Later you "added 2 Jn 9 which you said ONLY applied to Jesus' incarnation. (As an aside, Lenski and Wordsworth both agree with my assessment that this verse speaks to MORE than just a single doctrine). But in any event let us assume for a moment that you are correct and that we may ONLY apply 2 John to the heresy that denied Jesus' incarnation! How does this impact our discussion? Well here we have one of the keys to knowing what "one lord" means in Eph 4. Our "one lord" came in the flesh. So once again we have gone outside of Ephesians to learn what Paul means.

In another post you referenced the "one baptism" and said that Acts 19 explained it. This is certainly correct. However, by going outside Ephesians you once again have broadened

the scope of Paul's list. Now we have added sub points to the main point.

In your last post I also found it interesting that besides the passages in Ephesians and the morality passages you added Matt 18:17 as yet another "test of fellowship." In other words our "list" is growing and changing

.

Steve, besides the fact that "lists" minimize God's revelation, it brings up one final question, "Who gets to make up the list?" What authority does either of us have to decide what is most important to God? While there are indeed a number of items mentioned in Eph 4, to arbitrarily decide on our own that THIS is THE LIST, the ONLY criteria for fellowship, is presumptive and dismissive of God's full revelation.

In conclusion, what about issues that are not addressed in your list? Things such as how we worship, the day of the week we meet upon, the elements on the Lord's Table? What books are canonical? You see we now have a real problem. The irony of taking this view is that while it "broadens" fellowship it "narrows" the likelihood of genuine unity. Thanks Steve for considering this. Much love in the Lord.

**Post #27, Steve Ramsey, 01/30/2012**

Mike,

I numbered your list of items from your first post and it came to 31 doctrines. I then went through and marked the ones I agreed with you completely—there were 16, which is more than half! There were nine that I pretty much agreed with you on. That means there were only 6 we pretty much totally disagree about. I am going to deal with those somewhat holistically, but I wanted to note them below:

1. Those who do NOT abide in his Word are not in fellowship with him (cut from the vine) – Jn 15:7 ---

2. Progressing beyond the doctrine (ANY DOCTRINE) of Christ puts us out of fellowship (2 Jn 1:9).

3. Christians are COMMANDED to judge the sinner (1 Cor 5:12-13). Saints will even judge the world (1 Cor 6:2). Jesus said we would be able “to remove the speck from our brothers eye” (ie: JUDGE) after we look at ourselves first (Mt 7:1-4). ---

4. ANY sin has the potential of disrupting fellowship in the church because it is like leaven (1 Cor 5:6) and can affect the entire congregation. ---

5. We determine limits of fellowship by comparing our lives and other’s lives with the teaching of the apostles (2 Jn 1:10). We are commanded to make comparative judgments based on the Word. ---

6. There is a difference between being patient with someone struggling with an issue in our home congregation as opposed on the other hand to “actually inviting” a false teacher in to be part of our worship, teaching, and fellowship (1 Thes 5:14, Acts 20:29) ---

Essentially we disagree about three main ideas:

1. Can someone remain in fellowship with God without obeying perfectly?
  2. Should we judge another Christian’s relationship with God?
  3. Are worship sins more important than other sins?
- So let’s talk about each one in order.

First, can someone remain in fellowship with God without perfectly obeying ALL of God’s word?

I sure hope so, or else we are all lost. Your stance is that we must know and obey all things perfectly or else lose our salvation. This is the only conclusion available with the criteria you state:

1. We demonstrate our love for Jesus by obeying ALL his commandments (Jn 14:21)---
2. Those who do NOT abide in his Word are not in fellowship with him (cut from the vine) – Jn 15:7 ---
3. The sin that takes us out of fellowship with God is any sin we refuse to repent of (5:15-18)

4. Fellowship requires that we continually walk in truth (2 Jn 1:6). ---

5. Progressing beyond the doctrine (ANY DOCTRINE) of Christ puts us out of fellowship (2 Jn 1:9). \*\*\*\* see note below.\*\*\* ---

6. Christians are NOT to tolerate ANY false doctrine (2 Jn 1:11-12) ---

7. Paul taught the SAME doctrine in ALL the churches (1 Cor 7:17, 14:33) and demanded doctrinal purity in ALL the churches. ---

If these stand as our standard for righteousness, we are in trouble. But I don't think you even believe that we have to obey ALL the commandments or be lost. You have mentioned that we must obey the ones we know about, and we must continue to grow. I agree 100%. We would not expect a new Christian to know everything, nor would we really expect any Christian to know everything. We expect people who have been Christians longer to be more knowledgeable and obedient, sure, but even then we acknowledge that grace covers our ignorance. Besides, even when we think we obey, we come woefully short of the true Standard. For example, which of us could not improve in our kindness, our love, our patience, etc.? We will always have something to improve on and to learn.

If you agree that sins of ignorance are covered by the grace of God, and if you agree that God is patient as we grow spiritually, then we agree.

I think the problem is that you have some things you think are so clear and understandable that you do not think people should have time to learn. You believe that worship elements are so clear and specific that everyone can understand them without variation, and so you hold these items to a different standard. You allow for growth in personal areas and beliefs, but you do not allow for growth in regards to worship. But, what verses distinguish between the two? Which of the above verses that you list actually identifies errors in worship as different from errors in personal growth? If ALL means "ALL," why is it that ALL sins are not dealt with equally?

Second, should we judge another Christian's relationship with God? Absolutely not!

This is one of the clearest teachings in the New Testament. Let me cite again some of the verses that warn against it:

Matt 7:1-4

"Do not judge so that you will not be judged. 2 "For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. 3 "Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? 4 "Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' and behold, the log is in your own eye?"

Rom 14:10

But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.

James 4:11-12

11 Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge of it. 12 There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?

You and I agree that we are to look out for each other, and if we see a brother do something we think is wrong, go and teach him (Gal 6:1-2). We are not to turn a blind eye to sin. The question is, however, what if he continues to disagree with us that his action or belief is sin? The above verses teach that it is wrong to judge the condition of someone's soul—their relationship with God. If that is not what these verses mean, then what do they mean? The verses you cite mean judging some ACTION as sinful, not judging a brother as lost or separated from God.

What the two stances look like in real life

Scenario 1:

Brother Joe preaches that the Holy Spirit dwells in us only through God's word. After services some of the brothers are talking to Joe about what he said because they disagree

with him. They agree to study it further, and do so for a few weeks. At the end of that time, Joe still believes the same way. Now what?

Traditional view: Joe must not be used in services any more. He will not be formally disfellowshipped and disallowed from attending. He can eat meals with everyone, but he will not be allowed to lead in the worship services until he changes his mind. (Note: the traditional view, if truly followed, would mean a full disfellowship and not a pseudo-disfellowship of not using him in services)

The Ephesian view: Joe is allowed to believe what he wants to believe, and others decide to preach that the Holy Spirit dwells in us personally. Joe does not try to force his beliefs on the other members and does not try to divide the church, so he continues to be a fully functioning part of the congregation. If he does decide to try to put people on sides of the issue, he will be disfellowshipped per Romans 16:17-18.

Scenario 2:

Brother Bill preaches that the Holy Spirit dwells in us personally and not only through God's word. After services some of the brothers are talking to Bill about what he said because they disagree with him. They agree to study it further, and do so for a few weeks. At the end of that time, Bill still believes the same way. Now what?

Traditional view: Bill must not be used in services any more. He will not be formally disfellowshipped and disallowed from attending. He can eat meals with everyone, but he will not

be allowed to lead in the worship services until he changes his mind. (Note: the traditional view, if truly followed, would mean a full disfellowship and not a pseudo-disfellowship of not using him in services)

The Ephesian view: Bill is allowed to believe what he wants to believe, and others decide to preach that the Holy Spirit dwells in only through the word. Bill does not try to force his beliefs on the other members and does not try to divide the church, so he continues to be a fully functioning part of the congregation. If he does decide to try to put people one sides of the issue, he will be disfellowshipped per Romans 16:17-18.

If you noticed, both scenarios are exactly alike except for the fact that Bill and Joe have different views and are members of congregations with differing views. Probably it would be best if Bill and Joe just exchanged congregations but that is not always possible, and it does not account for differences on other subjects. Notice how the traditional view is not founded on truth but on perception of truth. Both men were going to be disciplined in some way if they refused to comply with the majority even though both would have been accepted at the other's congregation. Ironically, probably both congregations would use members from the other congregation in their worship.

The only consistent stance is the Ephesian stance which treats both the same way, the way the Bible prescribes. Bill and Joe are not "false" teachers if they are simply wrong about their beliefs. I think you will find that false teachers

usually are tied to the idea of drawing followers after themselves. Probably most of us who have stood in the pulpit have taught something wrong, but which we felt was correct at the time. How thankful we should be that people did not label us false teachers and disfellowship us because we did not know any better. “But,” some will argue, “those who use multiple cups in worship continue to persist in their error.” What we need to ask is whether they do such from ignorance or out of rebellion. I have never had someone who uses multiple cups tell me that he felt it was wrong but he was going to do it anyway. The brothers and sisters I know are sincere in their belief, even though I disagree with them and have tried to show them their error. Indeed, Mike, I have spent countless pages even in this forum trying to show you why I think you are wrong, but you have not been persuaded (yet ). Should I write you off as rebellious? Should you write me off as rebellious or a false teacher? You have seen my arguments and how I have based my conclusions on the Bible. But am I now a “false teacher” who has gone beyond the “doctrine of Christ” because we do not agree? The traditional view would say that yes, you should have nothing to do with me, which explains why brethren hundreds of miles away are calling me “digressive.” This is the way of the traditional view.

Now let’s briefly discuss the idea you brought up in the second of your posts—the idea that worship errors are worse than other errors.

I agree with your question, “Who gets to make up the list? What authority does either of us have to decide what is most important to God?” This is the dilemma. I say that if God does not explicitly tell us something is required for unity or is a reason to disfellowship someone, then we must not presume it is. The traditional stance, however, argues that EVERYTHING is on the list, but then never actually practices that or even completely believes it (such as sins of ignorance). In practice, it does make up its own list. This is why someone who teaches that he feels multiple communion cups are acceptable is disfellowshipped, but someone who teaches that the Holy Spirit dwells in us personally/literally is not. This is why someone who tells the brothers in the congregation that he thinks God still speaks to us individually today is disfellowshipped, but the brother who tells them he celebrates Christmas is not. The Ephesian Stance simply argues that sin is still sin, but not all sins are worthy of disfellowship. The traditional stance is actually the stance that tries to decide which of God’s commands merit disfellowship.

Besides, out of all the specific sins that are explicitly mentioned which are worthy of disfellowship, NONE of them is related to worship. They ALL deal with personal or private issues. We cannot argue that someone’s belief about instrumental music effects my worship if that belief is not used to divide the congregation any more than if the person believes differently about the Holy Spirit.

You mentioned the very real concern about what it means when we ask someone to lead a song, prayer, or even preach. Let me ask you, Do you agree with everything that every song leader, prayer leader, etc. believes, teaches, or does in your congregation? Do we ever have complete agreement with anyone in belief, teaching, and practice? If not, this simply shows that you acknowledge that when we ask someone to lead a song, etc. we are not saying that we agree with him on everything. Besides, imagine if that were the case with the church at Rome. The meat-eating Christians would have their service and leaders and the non-meat-eating Christians would have theirs, and no one would ever ask the other to preach, sing, etc.

Essentially, the traditional view is that we can fellowship someone who is more strict (or who holds to perceived “traditional” views) than we are but we may not fellowship someone who is less strict. For example, we might be willing to let someone who does not believe in the divorce exception lead a song, but in a no-exception congregation, someone who allows for the exception would not be allowed to lead a song. We might invite someone who believes the Holy Spirit dwells in us only through the word to preach for us, but a congregation that believes in the Spirit indwelling us only through the word would not invite a speaker who believes the Holy Spirit personally indwells us. And the list could go on—the congregation who allows wearing of red and gold uses someone opposed to their wearing, but not vice versa; the congregation that feels the church can have a kitchen uses someone opposed to

kitchens, but the anti-kitchen congregation will not use the brother from the kitchen congregation...

What the traditional stance would mean:

Everyone who does not agree with the congregation on every doctrine should be disfellowshipped if anyone knows about their “false” belief or practice. This would include celebration of holidays, hair cutting, movies, order of worship, wearing of modest clothing, etc. Note, that this stance not only says it could be done, but that it **MUST** be done. There is no gray area in 2 John 9-10 “Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son. 10 If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting.” If this is the case, why are we not disfellowshipping more people? On the other hand, if we don’t think **EVERYTHING** merits disfellowship, then who is making the list? Who decides?

Mike, I know you have kind of talked about a couple of the 8 things I said were wrong with the traditional stance. I’m begging you here: Please address each issue. Of utmost importance to our discussion is the idea of consistency—why does the traditional stance say **ALL** doctrine of Christ must be followed (2 John 7-10), but then not actually follow through?

Please address those eight points (and I really think the bulleted list would help). And please add #9: Would you use me in your worship services?

Thanks for listening, brother. May God bless all of us as we work through these things.

**Post #28.1, Mike Criswell, 01/31/2012**

Dear Steve,

Over the past day and a half I've spent about 10 hours writing and rewriting a response to your last post only to find after 18 pages that I hadn't even gotten to the questions at the bottom of your last post. My conclusion is that one or both of us will be sorely disappointed if we're looking for exhaustive explanations because Facebook is simply an unacceptable venue for such. In reality I believe I have stated a scriptural case for "limited fellowship" and will have to let some of the passages I've cited and some of my conclusions stand on their own. I assure you this is not a "dodge" because I love to explain myself. Remember I'm a preacher and as brother Irvin Barnes once said, "We preachers have the gift of gab!" Irvin was a mentor while in college and his country logic has served me well. He is a wealth of wisdom.

What I'll do is deal with what I feel is most important and we'll go from there. I hope our readership understands the restrictions inherent in a blog format.

It seems to me that the real crux of the matter regarding fellowship is WHERE we draw the lines and HOW to draw those lines. Since neither of us are Universalists we both have limits to fellowship. Neither of us, for example believe we are in fellowship with those who have NOT been immersed for the remission of their sins. But beyond this I'm still hazy as to the way your position should be applied in real life. For example, what constitutes a "false teacher?" Also if we can allow an avowed cups/instrumental music person time to come to a better knowledge of his sin, then why can we not allow a fornicator to do the same? What if someone sincerely did not think it was wrong to have a concubine? As the world shrinks, and we convert those from other cultures, such a scenario is actually possible.

What I'd like to see developed is how the criteria you've laid out would be used if, for example, a staunch instrumental music advocate decided to worship part time with one of our congregations and part time with the Christian Church. Where would he stand regarding fellowship? Should we allow him to teach? Would it be okay for us to trade out pulpits or share worship back and forth? These are all questions I'm still unclear about as I study your position.

But let me now go back and deal with a couple of the statements I made that you disagree with.

Here is the complete list of things you DO NOT BELIEVE. Having already elaborated on these statements in previous posts I'll only deal with a couple. Our readers can refer to previous posts if desired.

#### STATEMENTS I AFFIRM THAT STEVE DISAGREES WITH:

1. We demonstrate our love for Jesus by obeying ALL his commandments (Jn 14:21)
2. Those who do NOT abide in his Word are not in fellowship with him (cut from the vine) – Jn 15:7 -
3. The sin that takes us out of fellowship with God is any sin we refuse to repent of (5:15-18)
4. Fellowship requires that we continually walk in truth (2 Jn 1:6). ---
5. Progressing beyond the doctrine (ANY DOCTRINE) of Christ puts us out of fellowship (2 Jn 1:9).
6. Christians are NOT to tolerate ANY false doctrine (2 Jn 1:11-12) ---
7. Paul taught the SAME doctrine in ALL the churches (1 Cor 7:17, 14:33) and demanded doctrinal purity in ALL the churches. ---

In reality the above statements are tenants that orthodox believers have believed since the first century. While their application may differ from group to group, even the denominations believe and defend these axiomatic truths.

Let's take number 1 for example. I state that we demonstrate our love for Jesus by obeying ALL his commands. How can any Christian disagree with this? This is exactly what Jesus says! This is exactly what Paul said! Steve if we BEGIN ANY discussion on ANY BIBLICAL subject with the premise that SOME OF CHRIST'S COMMANDS ARE OPITIONAL then where do we go from there? Naturally one may discuss what happens when we stumble and fall but to flatly deny that we MUST OBEY ALL of Jesus commands is perplexing to me. One of the last things Jesus said before going back to heaven was, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: TEACHING THEM TO OBSERVE ALL THINGS whatsoever I have commanded you.

None on either side of the issue believes we are perfect or become mature overnight. I believe Jesus knew we sometimes would fall. But again I have shown from scripture what it takes for a Christian who sins to reestablish his relationship with the Lord via repentance and confession.

In your analysis of the above list you state,

"First, can someone remain in fellowship with God without perfectly obeying ALL of God's word? I sure hope so, or else we are all lost. Your (ie: Mike's) stance is that we must know and obey all things perfectly or else lose our salvation."

Again I think this statement misses the point that I have made from the beginning. I have repeatedly said that God allows for growth and maturation. He even allows for mistakes. I have also affirmed that I believed God's grace is more amazing than we could ever image. But this does not negate the solution to sin as revealed in scripture. Neither does it negate an immediate change of life when we are shown to be in error.

Now on to number 2.

**YOU DISAGREE WITH MY STATEMENT:**

Those who do NOT abide in his Word are not in fellowship with him (cut from the vine) – Jn 15:7

**MY ANSWER:**

The basis for my conclusion in the above statement starts all the way back in chapter 14 where Jesus emphasizes the fact that love for him is shown by keeping his commandments (vs. 15, 21, 23, 24). Jesus says that when His WORD is in us He will make his home in us. At home with Christ indicates fellowship. In chapter 15 Jesus switches to the metaphor of the vine but is teaching the same basic truth. In 15:2 Jesus says that if we do not bear fruit we will be cut off. In 15:3 Jesus says that the apostles were bearing fruit BECAUSE OF THE WORD. Jesus then shows that we ABIDE in him by keeping his WORD. We are to keep Christ's Word just as he KEPT his Father's WORD.

YOU DISAGREE WITH MY STATEMENT:

Progressing beyond the doctrine (ANY DOCTRINE) of Christ puts us out of fellowship (2 Jn 1:9).

MY ANSWER:

First, in all humbleness, I must ask what sacred doctrine Jesus says we can ignore and still be in fellowship? In 2 Jn 1:9 John says that we HAVE both Christ and God WHEN we abide (continuous action) in his DOCTRINE (teaching). John says that we abide in Christ's DOCTRINE when we walk in the truth (vs. 4). God's WORD is truth (Jn 17:17). Walking in truth (ie: the light) is the only place fellowship is found (1 Jn 1:7). Not a single doctrine of Jesus is listed in scripture as optional. No doctrine of Christ is said to be more important than any other. As I've continuously noted, however, growth in Christ is continuous and incremental. But once truth has been taught to us we have the obligation to abide in that truth. Doctrinal truth IS knowable else Jesus' words make no sense.

YOU DISAGREE WITH MY STATEMENT:

Christians are COMMANDED to judge the sinner (1 Cor 5:12-13). Saints will even judge the world (1 Cor 6:2). Jesus said we would be able "to remove the speck from our brothers eye" (ie: JUDGE) after we look at ourselves first (Mt 7:1-4).

MY ANSWER:

To understand judging we need to do a full study of the topic. While we are not to damn those whom Christ has not damned, we are to “inspect the fruit” of others and discern whether or not they are teaching the truth. In the context of our discussion I have repeatedly used the term “judging” to refer to discernment between “right” and “wrong” as based on the standard of the revealed Word of God. A STANDARD by very definition implies some kind of judgment!!! If we cannot judge then how are we to define the meaning of “False Teacher?” Steve according to your position when would we classify someone as a false teacher?” I am genuinely unclear about this.

We certainly have the right (responsibility) to tell someone that he/she is in sin and that if they don't correct their sin they will be lost (Lk 13:3). This is the entire purpose of preaching. But until the final judgment we hold out hope for repentance. Thus it is not ours to damn a sinner's soul to hell. Such is God's department.

However, if we are not allowed to take scripture and use it as a measuring stick to determine definitive right and wrong, then Christianity becomes a tangled mass of subjectivity. If the bible allows NO judging then we have no right to say ANYTHING OR ANYONE is wrong. When God, the righteous Judge, has spoken through His WORD, as servants we are allowed to repeat our Master's JUDICIAL DECISION. In reality WE are not judging, we are simply stating what GOD has already decided. I know that you do not believe we should simply turn a blind eye to sin. But if we are not to judge then how do we identify sin?

In the case of the Corinthian church Paul commands the church to purge the sin from their midst. In 5:5 Paul anticipates the church actually gathering together to make an official judgment about the fornicator. While we are NOT to judge those outside the body we are COMMANDED to judge those within the body. Verse 12 says: “Or what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within?”

As Barnes says,

“Our province is in regard to the church. We are to judge these; and these alone. All others we are to leave entirely in the hands of God.” Barnes further says, “Excommunicate him; expel him from your society. This is the utmost power which the church has; and this the church is bound to exercise on all those who have openly offended against the laws of Jesus Christ.”

When the Corinthians refused to make judgment calls between folks in the congregation Paul said, “I speak to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you? no, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren? (1 Cor 6:5).

**YOU DISAGREE WITH MY STATEMENT:**

There is a difference between being patient with someone struggling with an issue in our home congregation as opposed on the other hand to “actually inviting” a false

teacher in to be part of our worship, teaching, and fellowship (1 Thes 5:14, Acts 20:29) –

MY ANSWER:

Again, I am at a loss. The wisdom and truth of the above statement seems so axiomatic that I don't really know how to respond. I'm just not sure what there is in this statement to disagree with. We have already established that Christians often struggle with sin and even doctrinal questions. But to invite those who firmly espouse false doctrine into the body is to fly in the face of every command to protect the flock. I might use this example. It is one thing for my child to come home from school with lice. But I'm not going to knowingly invite a lice ridden child over to my child's birthday sleepover.

In conclusion you reminded me of the 8 points. This deserves its own post. I don't want you to think I'm avoiding you so I'm going to give exceedingly short answers. To our readers: these were points Steve made on Jan 30th (I think!!!) and they explain what Steve believes to be wrong with our "traditional stance" on fellowship. I'm only going to repeat part of each point to save space.

**Post 28.2, Mike Criswell, 01/31/2012**

PART 2/2 -

Steve's arguments against the current view of fellowship and my SHORT response.

### Contention 1:

The traditional stance has additional items on its list for disfellowshipping beyond what is stated in the New Testament. ... etc.

### Answer:

The question assumes the point yet unproven that there is a "short list" of things required for fellowship. Such a list does not exist! Nowhere did Christ or the apostles minimize the entire corpus of Holy Writ.

### Contention 2:

The traditional stance goes too far. Since the traditional stance holds that we must obey ALL of God's word or lose fellowship with Him, we would need to disfellowship everyone who believed, lived, or taught differently than what we each do. Most of us would not even be able to be in fellowship our own spouse.

### Answer:

The question above is again based on a false premise. I have made it very clear that God allows for our weaknesses and sins of ignorance. Further it is also based on the false premise that disagreement immediately requires disfellowshipping. I have never maintained this. However I have maintained that we cannot destroy the flock or corrupt corporate worship all in the name of tolerance.

### Contention 3: (too long to post all but here is part)

The traditional stance is inconsistent for pragmatic's sake. .... Most commonly, this view is interpreted in real life as meaning that if someone worships in a way we think is sinful, they have lost fellowship with God.

Answer:

First this question again assumes the false premise of "perfectionism." It also assumes another false premise that the traditional position has a "list." I have stated clearly that there is NO list save the entire New Testament and that ANY sin has the potential of breaking fellowship if scripture is not followed. This question also states that "corporate worship" is no different than "private personal struggles." Such is simply not the case and I have amply shown this to be the case.

Contention 4: see post on Jan 30

Answer: Again the same noted above applies. Growth or lack of maturity is not the issue here. I have repeatedly explained my position on perfection. I have also show the distinction between sins one has personally and sins which affect the corporate body.

Contention 5: see post on Jan 30

Answer: The question assumes the false premise that we must agree on everything to fellowship one another. I have never said this. What I have said is that when we have clear

revelation we must obey. Personal matters such as found in Romans 14 need not damage fellowship.

Contention 6: see post on Jan 30

Answer: Scripture addresses not only general truths that apply to all churches of all times but also addresses specific situations in congregations of the first century. Just because we have Paul saying that certain sins demand fellowship has NO logical bearing on whether or not other sins demand disfellowship. Where, did the apostles ever disfellowship people for the sins listed in Revelation 21:8? Yet these sins certainly would have been worthy of disfellowship.

Contention 7: see post – deals with judging.

Answer: see previous posts – I have dealt with this in detail.

Contention 8: see post –deals with Romans 14

Answer: Context shows that Romans 14 cannot be dealing with matters on which scripture has legislated. If it does then God's legislation mean's nothing.

Contention 9: Can I use you (Steve) in services?

Answer: At this point this question, whether answered in the affirmative or in the negative, would be an emotive distraction to the seriousness of our topic. Suffice it to say

that each congregation has the responsibility of placing in leadership those whom they feel will best edify and guide the congregation.

Brother Steve, I now come to the end of my post. As I have contemplated our discussion it seems we have likely discussed in detail all major points that either of us hold. I am certainly open to suggestions either from you or our readership but even in a court of law the case is eventually delivered to the jury for their deliberation. Whether this is the direction we take or not is undecided. However, at some point I would like us to consider giving “closing arguments” for our individual positions and then let our readers think on these things.

Love in Him

Mike

**Post # 29, Steve Ramsey, 02/2/2012**

Mike,

Before we go into our new question/answer format, I would like to address a couple of things from your last post. Then I will begin the new Q&A.

My disagreement about those things I listed was merely the words such as “all,” and “every.” Let me explain each one, and I think you will agree with me on most if not all of them:

1. THOSE WHO DO NOT ABIDE IN HIS WORD ARE NOT IN FELLOWSHIP WITH HIM (CUT FROM THE VINE) – JN 15:7 ---

It actually says we need to abide in Him (like 1 John and abiding in the light). My only disagreement is if we say we have to obey perfectly every teaching to be in fellowship. This would require perfect knowledge and obedience, plus a constant repenting/confessing prayer. Of course, we need to obey everything we know to obey. We can't be rebellious.

## 2. PROGRESSING BEYOND THE DOCTRINE (ANY DOCTRINE) OF CHRIST PUTS US OUT OF FELLOWSHIP (2 JN 1:9).

I think we have discussed this quite a bit. In spite of what the commentators say (who are wrong on many things), to generalize this verse to apply to ANY/ALL doctrines would mean we are REQUIRED to disfellowship everyone who sins about anything—hair, Christmas, the Holy Spirit, etc. I believe the context limits it to the truth regarding Jesus' incarnation. This does not mean we can ignore any teaching, but it does limit which sins we must disfellowship over. Besides, we cannot obey something we don't know.

## 3. CHRISTIANS ARE COMMANDED TO JUDGE THE SINNER (1 COR 5:12-13). SAINTS WILL EVEN JUDGE THE WORLD (1 COR 6:2). JESUS SAID WE WOULD BE ABLE "TO REMOVE THE SPECK FROM OUR BROTHERS EYE" (IE: JUDGE) AFTER WE LOOK AT OURSELVES FIRST (MT 7:1-4). ---

The verse you reference from 1 Corinthians was for the specific sin of sexual immorality. We should not extend it beyond that. The verse in Matthew does not say we should

judge someone's standing with God, but rather we should try to help them with their sin (speck).

4. ANY SIN HAS THE POTENTIAL OF DISRUPTING FELLOWSHIP IN THE CHURCH BECAUSE IT IS LIKE LEAVEN (1 COR 5:6) AND CAN AFFECT THE ENTIRE CONGREGATION.

The only sins we are told to disfellowship are the ones specifically listed by God. In one sense, I agree with you if that sin is against a brother and then the sinning Christian refuses to repent (Matt 18:15-17).

5. WE DETERMINE LIMITS OF FELLOWSHIP BY COMPARING OUR LIVES AND OTHER'S LIVES WITH THE TEACHING OF THE APOSTLES (2 JN 1:10). WE ARE COMMANDED TO MAKE COMPARATIVE JUDGMENTS BASED ON THE WORD.

I think I explained this on #2, above. The passage simply does not mean that, and if it did, we would be REQUIRED to disfellowship everyone for even personal "sins" like hair cutting, holidays, and eating meat.

6. THERE IS A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BEING PATIENT WITH SOMEONE STRUGGLING WITH AN ISSUE IN OUR HOME CONGREGATION AS OPPOSED ON THE OTHER HAND TO "ACTUALLY INVITING" A FALSE TEACHER IN TO BE PART OF OUR WORSHIP, TEACHING, AND FELLOWSHIP (1 THES 5:14, ACTS 20:29)

We really need to define what a “false teacher” is. If we mean someone who disagrees with us on a subject, I think we all have false teachers in our congregations. In fact, Mike, if our definition of “false teacher” is someone we think is wrong about a subject, then I would not be able to have you speak for our congregation. I believe “false teachers” is more limited than simply someone who is “wrong.”

Ok, with that now said (and hopefully clarified) I want to conclude this format of the discussion and move on to the Q&A. I will begin by addressing a couple of questions you brought up in your last post...

**Post #30, Steve Ramsey, 02/2/2012**

MIKE’S Q: BUT BEYOND THIS I’M STILL HAZY AS TO THE WAY YOUR POSITION SHOULD BE APPLIED IN REAL LIFE. FOR EXAMPLE, WHAT CONSTITUTES A “FALSE TEACHER?” ALSO IF WE CAN ALLOW AN AVOWED CUPS/INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC PERSON TIME TO COME TO A BETTER KNOWLEDGE OF HIS SIN, THEN WHY CAN WE NOT ALLOW A FORNICATOR TO DO THE SAME? WHAT IF SOMEONE SINCERELY DID NOT THINK IT WAS WRONG TO HAVE A CONCUBINE? AS THE WORLD SHRINKS, AND WE CONVERT THOSE FROM OTHER CULTURES, SUCH A SCENARIO IS ACTUALLY POSSIBLE.

WHAT I’D LIKE TO SEE DEVELOPED IS HOW THE CRITERIA YOU’VE LAID OUT WOULD BE USED IF, FOR EXAMPLE, A STAUNCH INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC ADVOCATE DECIDED TO

WORSHIP PART TIME WITH ONE OF OUR CONGREGATIONS AND PART TIME WITH THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH. WHERE WOULD HE STAND REGARDING FELLOWSHIP? SHOULD WE ALLOW HIM TO TEACH? WOULD IT BE OKAY FOR US TO TRADE OUT PULPITS OR SHARE WORSHIP BACK AND FORTH? THESE ARE ALL QUESTIONS I'M STILL UNCLEAR ABOUT AS I STUDY YOUR POSITION.

I think the key in all of this is to go back to what the Bible explicitly says. The difference between the instrumental music brother and the fornicating brother is that we are told specifically to withdraw fellowship from the fornicator (1 Cor 5:11) but never for the instrumentalist. Often in the past we have tried to do a pseudo-disfellowship by simply refusing to use the instrumentalist in services. The Bible never indicates an in-between level of discipline (and how would this work for our sisters?). If someone is not disfellowshipped, they have full rights of citizenship. If they have lost those rights, we cannot even eat with them.

In regards to the "staunch instrumental advocate," I guess it would depend on what being a "staunch advocate" entailed. If he came and tried to draw people after him and split the church, he should be disfellowshipped (actually this could only happen if he were a member of the congregation). If he simply chooses to worship with instruments at a Christian church, for example, and then worship with us sometimes, there is no reason not to allow him to teach. Although this is radically different from what I used to believe, this is the

conclusion I came to when I simply took the Bible for what it says rather than what I wanted or had been taught. There is no scriptural reason for limiting him just because he is honestly mistaken. I also think it would be fine to “trade pulpits” depending on what is being taught and with whom we would be trading. It would have to be a congregation who meets the 7 ones of Ephesians 4, and it would not excuse worship violations. For example, I could go and preach in a multiple cups church as long as they do not try to have communion with multiple cups while I am there. A multiple cups brother could speak for us so long as he did not try to split the church. Although we need to guard against false teachers, we also must realize that often we grow and learn when someone teaches something that is different from what we thought or knew. We need to be careful about censoring before the person even speaks. In 1 Cor 14:29 we see that brothers were allowed to speak, and then their words were judged (not vice versa). Realistically, today we do things a little differently than in the NT times. We ask people to speak for us rather than having them ask to speak. With that said, it might not always be wise to ask someone to speak for us. If I thought you were going to teach something I did not agree with, I might ask you to refrain from that particular topic for the time being, but I would still allow you to speak.

I think this kind of goes back to the Regulative Principle concept. I do not see a brother who worships in a way I

think is wrong any different than a brother who teaches a different view on the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

MY Q: DO YOU BELIEVE A BROTHER OR SISTER LOSES THEIR FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD IF THEY CONTINUE IN A SIN THEY ARE IGNORANT OF?

**Post #31, Mike Criswell, 02/04/2012**

Steve's question to me February 3, 2012

Steve asks:

DO YOU BELIEVE A BROTHER OR SISTER LOSES THEIR FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD IF THEY CONTINUE IN A SIN THEY ARE IGNORANT OF?

Answer:

Steve, you've probably heard about the old Zen Buddhist monk who asked his disciples about the sound of "one hand clapping." When I read your question I smiled and thought of that story. Even though the monk's question sounds like something I'd try to figure out everyone knows that one hand can't clap! The question just doesn't compute.

While your question is perplexing and certainly interesting, there are parts of it that just don't compute and make it impossible to answer. I actually believe that your question reflects the major difference between our theologies. I'll explain below but like the "open fellowship" position in

general, your question asks me to go beyond revelation to determine fellowship.

But first, an answer to your question would require judging someone's relationship with God. But one of your major contentions throughout our discussion has been that God forbids judging. Thus from the outset any answer I would give would be by definition unsatisfactory since it would be based on a premise you reject.

Furthermore the question you posed asks me to do something humans are forbidden to do. It asks me to go beyond revelation and speak for God. I can't do that. I can read about what God says a Christian MUST do when he sins (repent and confess – 1 Jn 1) but I can NOT read anything in scripture about how long God has patience with a sinner. Only God knows that. But beyond this;

1. The question assumes WITHOUT scriptural evidence that God has some kind of reservoir of grace (akin to the Catholic idea of merits of the saints) that allows the Christian to find forgiveness OUTSIDE of Jesus Christ. Yes! OUTSIDE of Jesus Christ! When inspiration tells us that CONFESSION OF SINS is the ONLY way for a Christian to restore their broken relationship with God , and then we decide there is ANOTHER way (extra grace that scripture does not mention) we have stepped outside the SAVING, SUSTAINING, WORK OF JESUS. Paul warned the Galatians about “falling from grace” when they tried such a thing.

2. In reality, Steve, the salvation that “open fellowship” teaches is NOT salvation based on Christ’s promise that we shall KNOW the truth and the truth shall set us free (Jn 8:32). The real power of salvation behind “open fellowship” is “IGNORANCE.” When clear doctrinal error (cups/instruments, etc) can simply be dismissed as ignorance, then it isn’t TRUTH anymore that provides justification. The power of God to salvation is his REVEALED Word. It is not the sinners IGNORANCE. Such a system based on ignorance is the product of man’s wisdom and NOT God’s wisdom.

If ignorance PLUS God’s EXTRA grace takes care of sin then we can be united with just about anyone in the denominational world. And ignorance truly IS bliss. Could we not argue that the Baptists are ignorant of the true meaning of baptism and all they need is a little more time? Could we not argue the same for Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists and all who practice “baptism?” These folks could be the very ones you call “brothers/sisters” in your question.

In conclusion, the question you’ve asked is interesting but cannot be answered without going beyond what is written. Scripture NEVER approaches sin by asking, “How much can I sin,” It ALWAYS approaches the subject by encouraging implicit obedience. There are some things God has not revealed. God can save anyone He wants but it is totally

improper to take things we CANNOT know and use them in an attempt to minimize the clear commands of God.

My Question for Steve:

Steve my question has two parts. First what scripture(s) proves that God has for the Christian a meritorious reservoir of grace that offers pardon beyond 1 John 1:9? And since it is the silence of the scripture that prohibits instrumental music, why doesn't silence also prohibit adding such a reservoir?

As always, sincere thanks brother and much love in the Lord.

**Post #32, Steve Ramsey, 02/04/2012**

Mike,

So much for the 500 word idea! :) It pretty well fits into 500 words for each section--my response to your answer and my answer to your question. At least it is about half what we were doing! OK, here it goes...

Response to your answer to my question

I guess you are saying that we should not judge someone's relationship with God because we do not know their relationship? Is that correct? If that is what you believe, I agree.

The problem is that the traditional stance DEMANDS that we judge whether or not God has forgiven them or removed them from His fellowship. In one of your first posts you said that we have fellowship with each other primarily because we all have fellowship with God. The traditional stance must conclude that such fellowship with God has been withdrawn by Him because it requires that we follow suit and withdraw it from the individual.

The idea that grace is found outside of Christ is the furthest thing from what I am saying. Indeed, I am saying that grace is one of the greatest blessings in Christ as you will see.

While your second bullet might be a facet of “open fellowship,” that is not what I am advocating, as you know. We both agree that God expects us to grow and mature in our knowledge. This is the idea expressed in Hebrews 5:12, “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food.” But in spite of their ignorance, the writer of Hebrews does not say they have lost their relationship with God.

You state, “When clear doctrinal error (cups/instruments, etc) can simply be dismissed as ignorance, then it isn’t TRUTH anymore that provides justification.” Again you have a list of sins you think are clear and which do not fall under the growth/grace umbrella.

You told me in an earlier post, “Neither of us, for example believe we are in fellowship with those who have NOT been immersed for the remission of their sins.” That is true, and it answers what you said about Baptists, Catholics, etc.

One final point, while I should not ask how close can I get with sin before God disfellowships me, the question I am asking is totally different—how close can MY BROTHER/SISTER get before THEY lose fellowship. The way you keep phrasing it makes it sound like I am saying we should go out and push the limits with our own lives. What I am saying is not about ME seeing what I can do, but rather me seeing what YOU can do before I have to withdraw. God answers the question specifically in the passages I have mentioned in earlier posts.

Answering your question:

MIKE’S QUESTION:

STEVE MY QUESTION HAS TWO PARTS. FIRST WHAT SCRIPTURE(S) PROVES THAT GOD HAS FOR THE CHRISTIAN A MERITORIOUS RESERVOIR OF GRACE THAT OFFERS PARDON BEYOND 1 JOHN 1:9? AND SINCE IT IS THE SILENCE OF THE SCRIPTURE THAT PROHIBITS INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC, WHY DOESN’T SILENCE ALSO PROHIBIT ADDING SUCH A RESERVOIR?

I am a little unsure what you mean by a “meritorious reservoir of grace,” but let me give it a shot and correct me if I misunderstood.

First, I think the terms “meritorious” and “grace” are mutually exclusive, so I would say that there is no such teaching because of this conflict. Either something is earned or it is given. Those are the only two options.

Second, I do believe that God’s grace is what saves us and not perfect obedience to a set of laws. I am glad you referenced what Paul said in Galatians 5:4, “...you have fallen from grace.” Actually, the whole verse says, “You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.” Throughout Galatians, Paul deals specifically with the idea of Christians having to obey the Old Law to be saved. But in reality, the word “the” is not included in most, if not all, of the expressions. In other words, this passage is correctly translated to teach Paul’s overriding message—law does not save us, whether it be the Old Law or the New Law. Paul’s point is that salvation is a gift. So I guess this serves as my first verse that shows God’s grace covers us in spite of our weaknesses. This is not license to sin, however, as Paul points out in Gal 5:13-16: “For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh....”

A second verse I would use to show we are saved by grace and not works is Eph 2:8-10,

“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.”

Again, we are saved by grace through faith and not through our works. But this does not mean we can do anything we want (hence verse 10). The problem with what you are saying is that we must have perfect obedience to the law to be saved. But since we cannot, you argue, we must confess and ask forgiveness. But, again, this would require us to at least have perfect knowledge—something I doubt any of us has.

The idea that God’s grace covers our sins of ignorance is not something I have developed. Even David acknowledged that he was unaware of all of his sins and asked for forgiveness for those: “Who can discern his errors? Acquit me of hidden faults” (Psalm 19:12). I think most of us probably ask a “general” prayer of forgiveness to cover things we might have forgotten or never knew we did wrong. This is all I am saying. If I expect God to forgive me of sins I am unaware of, why would I not expect Him to forgive another Christian who says the same prayer?

I think your second question will take us on a tangent if we get into the “silence of the Scriptures.” I hope my answer to the first part covers whatever you were asking about, though.

MY NEXT QUESTION:

DO I HAVE TO KNOW ABOUT EVERY SIN I HAVE COMMITTED BEFORE I CAN ASK FOR AND RECEIVE FORGIVENESS? IN OTHER WORDS, DO I HAVE TO KNOW ABOUT THE SIN IN ORDER TO “CONFESS” IT AND STAY IN THE LIGHT OR CAN I ASK FOR FORGIVENESS AND RELY ON GOD’S GRACE TO COVER THINGS I MIGHT NOT BE AWARE OF?

**Post #33, Mike Criswell, 02/05/2012**

Now to your question: You ask:

DO I HAVE TO KNOW ABOUT THE SIN IN ORDER TO “CONFESS” IT AND STAY IN THE LIGHT OR CAN I ASK FOR FORGIVENESS AND RELY ON GOD’S GRACE TO COVER THINGS I MIGHT NOT BE AWARE OF?

Steve, this is essentially the same question as your last one but let me make an attempt to answer it as directly as I can. I want to begin by saying that even under the Old Testament God required... folks DO something to be forgiven of “sins of ignorance.” Leviticus 4 notes two things about sins of ignorance. First that sins of ignorance, when discovered, required sacrifice (Lev 4:3). And second that even sins of ignorance incurred guilt!!! See Lev 5:7 “If a person sins .... though he does not know it, yet he is guilty and shall bear his iniquity.” In other words sin was still sin

and ignorance was no excuse. So how then does this relate to today? Well Luke 12; 47-48 seems to indicate that infractions of ignorance STILL incur punishment albeit perhaps to a lesser degree. Thus sin again brings guilt no matter under what conditions it is committed. Jesus said those who crucified him were ignorant and yet were still guilty. Paul said that before conversion he did many things against Christ in ignorance. And yet he was still guilty. The Jews were ignorant of God's righteousness (Rom 10:1) but were still guilty. Heb 9:7 indicates that sins of ignorance still needed sacrifice. We could go on and on. The point, however, is that ignorance has never been an excuse to God. . Paul said that at one time God winked at ignorance but now commands all men to repent (Acts 17:30). Since I cannot go beyond what is written I would have to conclude that the pattern of both the Old and New Testament is that all sins, ignorant or otherwise, require confession. I would also have to conclude that the sincere truth seeker can and will KNOW the truth and that God will help the seeker come to understand one's sins. Jesus said, "Seek and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened." God does not leave the sincere seeker to grope in ignorance. While it is appropriate for us to pray that God help us to grow and apprehend our sins, I find no record of God forgiving any sin that someone did not repent of. As to how generic we can be in our confession I am not yet sure. I would LOVE to say that God allows us to sin and not worry about it (even sins of ignorance) but unless I'm missing something I just can't find that in the bible. I wish I could! If God wants to forgive the

sincere sinner then that's fantastic. But we must learn to let God's word speak for itself and not develop theologies that God has not revealed. In the end analysis I really believe that for the diligent student of the bible there are a lot fewer sins of ignorance than we might imagine. Surely sin isn't that hard to figure out else God seems unfair! Paul said we are not ignorant of Satan's devices (2 Cor 2:11). When we seek the truth, we will find it!

QUESTION FOR STEVE:

Steve, In Luke 15 we have the parable of the prodigal son. After his rebellion what was required for him to regain fellowship with the father

**Post #34, Steve Ramsey, 02/05/2012**

Mike,

In answer to your question about the prodigal son, it was required that he come home. But, we might note that first he "came to his senses" (Lk 15:17). I am also reminded of the sheep and the coin...

I think that maybe we need to wrap this subject up for now. It is becoming more and more frustrating for me and I am sure for many of the readers. With that said, maybe you could write and post your final thoughts and I will do the same. I think it might benefit us to study another subject and possibly solicit input from people in private messages as to what they think would benefit the body of Christ.

You mention that we must let the jury make a verdict, and indeed, that is all we can do. But what is sad is that right now the church is being split apart by those who want to draw lines. For this reason, before I post my last comments, I would like to bring to light just what the “traditional” stance does to the church.

Let me tell our story (if anyone would like a more detailed account, let me know)...

A couple of years ago, our congregation along with several in the Dallas-Ft. Worth area contributed money to the Let the Bible Speak television program. We were asked to do this. Things went along fine until we sent out meeting announcements that said we were having Jim Crouch for a gospel meeting. Not long after that, we were contacted and told we were being removed from the television program (our money was not returned—we were just having our name taken off the list of congregations at the end of the show). This was because some brethren in Grapevine, Texas, had a problem with Jim (who worships at Irving). No one from Grapevine ever contacted us about their concerns. The first we heard of people’s problem with us was the removal call. We were removed without hearing or discussion because one congregation (Grapevine) had contributed more money than us and was helping with some of the technical aspects of the ministry. They were going to pull their support if we remained on the list. When

we were finally contacted and told we were off the list, we mentioned that we were ignorant of anything Irving did that would warrant us not having Jim speak for us. In fact, we told them, someone from Irving had spoken for us each month for a few years and we had never noticed anything dangerous about them.

After much discussion, it was agreed upon that we would meet with some of the area brethren who had "issues" with Irving. We asked that someone from Irving be present to corroborate or deny the allegations. Our request was denied. They did not want someone from Irving there. We reluctantly agreed to at least hear what they had to say. We (about 15 men from area congregations) met at the Green Oaks building in Arlington, Texas, one Saturday morning in the fall of 2010. The brethren discussed their concerns, and minutes were taken by one of the members from another congregation (I have them on computer if you would like to see them). Basically, there were 25 or so complaints against Irving that were made. We said we would investigate everything and get back with them on our decision. We asked that we be put back on the television program list of churches until our decision. This was agreed upon and we were back on the list that runs at the end of the program. Not long after that, we had three leads in our area from the program.

I compiled the list of questions that were brought up at the meeting, sent them to Joe Norton, who looked over them along with Nathan Battey. They suggested a couple of

wording changes, so I made the changes and sent them to Jim Crouch. Jim responded with a lengthy response to our concerns and explained what really happened, and we realized that what really happened was not the same as what everyone thought or published. After we read his response and studied and prayed about the various items, we determined that we saw nothing wrong with what Irving was doing (a conclusion also arrived at by MANY others). We then sent out a letter to the area congregations about our conclusions (I have that, too, if anyone is interested).

Of course, our conclusions did not agree with what many of the area brethren believed and wanted. They had told us that the more congregations that took a stance against Irving, the greater the pressure on them to change. But if a congregation agreed with Irving, then Irving would feel empowered and validated in their actions. Indeed, we were told that the Irving leaders conspire each week on how to get other congregations into their little fold, and that probably the reason Irving sent preachers to help us once a month (after one of our main speakers died) was because they were trying to woo us into their group. As a side note, the brethren at Irving have never tried to coerce us into anything, but such is not true of those opposed to Irving.

A few months after we sent out the letter in conclusion of our findings, we were invited to another meeting with fewer members to try to work things out. Jim Crouch was allowed to attend this meeting. A handful of brothers came to Corsicana to meet with us. During our discussions, allegations of Irving's sins were brought up which Jim

explained. It was amazing to me to watch as one attack after another was explained. One brother would say, “I understand that y’all ....” And then Jim would explain what really happened and it was nothing sinful. The accusation the brother mentioned was always false or distorted. This happened time and again.

Unfortunately, like you, they never understood what we were saying. Bob Johnson even asked us if we would consider using individual cups in communion! We weren’t quite sure why he even asked that, but it is starting to become clear now. He saw us as not having any lines of right and wrong and for fellowship, when we were actually just disagreeing with THEIR lines they were drawing. Not agreeing with THEIR lines is not the same as having NO lines. We wanted to do what the Bible says and not men—that was our point. And we were not going to simply give in to appease them and make things more peaceful for us if it meant throwing our faithful brethren in Irving “under the bus.”

Not long after all of this, we were taken off the list of congregations on the television program. We have not had any leads from the TV program sent our way since. A little later, we were dropped from the church directory “Where the Saints Assemble.” My wife has had people drop her from their Facebook “friends” list, and it seems no one in Texas (save a couple of places) will ask us to lead songs, etc.

Here is another example of the control and abuse. Bother Julio Rodriguez, who works tirelessly as a servant of God, became a victim of similar politics. Not long ago, Julio went to Central America to spread the gospel to some people in very remote areas. At one point they had to cross a river. Julio and the other men carried dogs with them because there were so many crocodiles in the river. If the crocodiles came after them, they could throw the dogs toward the crocodiles to eat rather than having the crocs eat the men! This is only one example of the type of man Julio is. A few months ago we were contacted because a congregation cut off \$500 support/month for Julio because of his connections with Irving. Julio is not a member at Irving, but he has taken the same stance as us.

You can say we do well by getting people to think, and that's true, but what I have just detailed is what is happening on the frontlines. Our congregations are drifting further apart, and numerous Christians are leaving because they see the judgmentalism and hypocrisy.

To all of you who think we were justly punished, just note that if you do something that the wrong person dislikes, you will be out of favor and out of the directory. Funny, it reminds me a lot of what John said in 3 John 9-10,

"I wrote something to the church; but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say. 10 For this reason, if I come, I will call attention to his deeds

which he does, unjustly accusing us with wicked words; and not satisfied with this, he himself does not receive the brethren, either, and he forbids those who desire to do so and puts them out of the church.”

This is not merely an academic subject worthy of our study. This is the Lord’s church that is being torn apart because some prominent men don’t like things and will mishandle, misinterpret, and twist the Scriptures to argue and to bully their brethren. I am sincerely afraid for them and for all who follow in their ways.

Prov 6:16-19

6 There are six things which the LORD hates, Yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: 17 Haughty eyes, a lying tongue, And hands that shed innocent blood, 18 A heart that devises wicked plans, Feet that run rapidly to evil, 19 A false witness who utters lies, And one who spreads strife among brothers.

I have one final post.

**Post #35, Mike Criswell, 02/06/2012**

Steve,

This is really strange. Last night when I read your post for some reason I did not/could not see behind two paragraphs. Maybe I just overlooked the "continue reading" notice but I've never overlooked it before. So ... this

morning when I got up I saw and finally read the rest of the post. Sorry I didn't see it until today! I won't make many comments for times' sake and because I am so far removed from the situation there in Texas. Most of what I know has come from observation of the Facebook posts, websites, and pictures of my many friends in the Dallas area (on both sides).

But anyway, first let me say that I have enjoyed our discussions and have enjoyed the scriptural challenges you have set before me. You have proved yourself a worthy spokesperson for the "Open Fellowship" view. You have clearly stated the beliefs and the application of those beliefs. Personally I appreciate that. No matter what side one is on in the "fellowship" issue I think our Forum has given both sides the chance to see some of the logic and some of the end goals of each position.

I am genuinely sorry that you feel hurt from the events in the Dallas area. From the beginning I too believed there were too many politics involved on both sides but given that I'm in Kansas City I've tried to keep my nose out of it as much as one can in our brotherhood. As you know that's hard because most of us have some connection, either close or distant to the Irving congregation. We are an interconnected, intermarried group be that for the good or bad! So many things float through the "grapevine" (uh: internet???) which may or may not be true.

While Irving has certainly been the catalyst for the brotherhood's latest batch of woes, it seems that about every 40 years the Lord's people have historically gone through changes and upheavals. This occurred back in Israel's day and has occurred more than once since the restoration movement. It likely will happen in another 40 to 50 years in our children's generation.

I think the thing to keep in mind is the Lord's Work will survive!!! While struggle and even conflict can make us stronger, the key is our attitude toward each other and God's Word. I hope that you and I have both shown that we can disagree in a civil manner. Anger does not befit us as brothers.

The one concern I have above all others is the damage to our kids. Someone told me one time that the "tolerances of the fathers become the excesses of the sons." I think there may be a ring of truth to that. On one hand you and I are both concerned about the one cup fellowship. Through the years we, like other fellowships, have been through many ups and downs. However, my perception (and it could be wrong) is that the current "open fellowship" trends may be a springboard for further digression. I have had several good brothers and sisters tell me that so many of our kids are leaving the "Lord's Church." That's such a concern we both agree. The irony to me, however, is that the very trends that we now struggle with (ie: open fellowship, ecumenicism, community action focus programs, etc) are the very trends

that provide the springboard for greater departure from the brotherhood that we once knew. This because those trends mimic the very denominations we claim NOT to be a part of.

Steve, I try to be fair and I have been accused of over thinking things and have been accused of being too much of a moderate (whatever that means -- I think it means you get shot from BOTH sides.. Ha!) but to me there is another irony in the current controversy. While most of us want the church to survive, many of us want to radically change its beliefs and practices in the process. But is it possible to fix something by knocking out its foundation of beliefs and practices? For example open fellowship would by very definition irrevocably change the Church of Christ. It would change the very foundation of exclusivity that we believe the church must maintain. Open fellowship would, by definition, turn what we are trying to save into something we would not recognize. If we look at previous "fellowship" movements they have historically ended up in one of two places. They either end up fizzling out due to in-fighting and disagreement, or they end up being what they themselves criticize -- just another group who stand for almost nothing and finds unity by adopting denominational trends. In other words, open fellowship movements don't work. They present a utopian view of religion without understanding the very foundation of belief - the conscience.

I guess what I'm saying is that we must be careful. At this point the "open fellowship" folks want it both ways. They

want to be a part of a "conservative fellowship" but at the same time want to be change agents. It is my belief that it is impossible to have it both ways. The open fellowship folks would like to be able to have the prerogative of NOT having individual cups and instruments etc. and yet accept those who DO want such. I don't believe it will work. Water doesn't run uphill and like water people will eventually sink to the lowest common denominator in worship. History proves this over and over.

I am so sorry to say that so many of our kids have left the church. No doubt part of this is due to inconsistencies and judgmental attitudes on our part. But on the other hand, if we signal to our kids that the very doctrines that identify us are negotiable, then we should not be surprised when our kids negotiate their way right into the denominations.

There are some very interesting trends among us and among the cups/classes today. There was a point in time when folks (even preachers) became disgruntled with the brotherhood they simply left! They left and took their doctrines to their logical conclusion. They joined the denominations. Today, however, in the Churches of Christ we are seeing the disgruntled not LEAVING but rather STAYING and creating even more division. We're not the only ones who are struggling with this. Other "brotherhoods" are too.

Well I'll sign off. But I believe we've had a good conversation. I believe so much of this could be solved if we would just get back to scripture and 'prove all things.' I know that's easier said than done but open dialog and love for the brothers would go a long way. So much of this seems to be driven by hurts and wounds that folks won't let heal. There are plenty of scars on both sides. There has been plenty of blood shed. But the only thing that can unite us is the only blood shed that means anything at all -- the blood of Jesus.

Thanks brother and feel free to respond if you want. This isn't my "last" post but was just some musings in regards to your last note. Maybe this is what a conversation should be anyway? Love you brother. You have been a treasure to me and have forced me to study on my own. I speak for no one. I speak for no side. I speak only as I believe the Lord wants me to speak. May we both do that forever.

Because of Calvary

**Post #36, Steve Ramsey, 02/07/2012**

To everyone,

And so we bring this study to a close for now. I can't say I am not disappointed because the opportunity to bring about peace in a splintering church has seemed to pass us

by. But maybe some seeds have been planted, and in time they will grow and bring fruit for His glory.

I commend Mike on his persistence in all of this. Most people would have ended the discussions long ago.

It is difficult to summarize everything in one short post, but let me try. I believe firmly that God knows what He wants in regards to fellowship and the unfortunate disfellowship. For this reason, I hold to a strict (conservative) interpretation of the Scriptures. In doing so, we find that the only list given for unity is found in Ephesians 4:1-4. It is this list that we must affirm. The only time God wants us to disfellowship are for those sins He specifically mentions (1 Cor 5, Matt 18, 2 Thes 3, and Rom 16). It is really pretty simple. We have tried to complicate things like the Pharisees of old—analyzing to the point of violating what is taught. Such is not the way of Christ.

As someone who grew up with the traditional stance I now disagree with, I can understand people's reluctance to accept what I have presented. I merely ask that you study it for yourselves with no preconceived ideas, no lens of tradition. This is how we should approach all of the Bible, and yet we seldom do because we do not even realize our own biases. As we have often discovered in discussing God's word with those who are lost—we can find verses to support anything we want. It is only in approaching the Bible with a pure heart that we will finally see God.

Many of the people who agree with my view of fellowship have given up hope for reconciliation. Maybe I'm naïve and overly hopeful, but I believe that peace will come. It might not be within my generation, and it might not be 100% peace, but I believe that our posterity will enjoy something that we have now lost.

As a last plea, I cry out to you who disagree with me because I feel your very souls are at stake and you don't even know it. You think I am sinking into digression and am in danger of being lost, yet, dear brother and sister, please consider what the traditional view says. It is a stance of division. It requires perfect obedience to be saved. And when that obedience inevitably fails, it requires perfect knowledge to be saved because unless you know about your sin, you can't confess it and be forgiven. It is an attempt to save through works of law rather than the grace of God found through Christ. This was the great tragedy of Galatians that prompted Paul to warn, "You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace" (Gal 5:4). This scares me for your sakes. We are not only talking about worshipping correctly, we are talking about living correctly—do you really believe you are humble enough, kind enough, patient enough, joyous enough? If not, the traditional view says you are lost unless you repent, confess, and pray—daily, hourly....

The traditional view is founded on fear and control. It is the religion of the one talent man. It cannot bring peace because it demands that we all judge one another to see who is really faithful to God and who is not. It causes us to develop our own lists of righteousness and see who measures up. It develops pride as we see ourselves fulfilling our list while others fall short. It drives people away through its condescension and hypocrisy. Indeed, it says we must obey ALL laws or be lost, and yet it only disfellowships for some laws. Truth is never inconsistent and never needs to be.

The fact that Mike has tried to portray what I am saying as being devilish, “open fellowship,” and the first step to complete digression from truth only emphasizes the fear of the traditionalists. We speak to our denominational friends, begging them to go back to the Bible and do what it says in spite of what their pastors, parents, grandparents, and friends may be saying. It is the Bible that matters, we tell them. Most never heed our pleas because they are afraid to change. They are afraid to admit that they are wrong. They are afraid to acknowledge that the people they have respected all this time are wrong, too. It is unfathomable to them, and so they walk away. I’m afraid that is what we have here: so many good people who are holding onto something that never was right, but which feels right because it has been this way for so long.

I need to wrap this up, so let me show how the God of the traditionalists is so different from my God:

#### The God of the Traditionalists

- Tells me I must obey the word of God perfectly or lose fellowship with Him
- Tells me that if I make one mistake, even out of ignorance, I have severed my relationship with Him
- Tells me to judge others to see what doctrinal errors they are committing
- Tells me to withdraw from anyone who commits any sin
- Allows me to remain His faithful son as long as I do everything right

#### The God I serve

- Tells me that I am not perfect and must be saved by grace
- Tells me that others are not perfect either and must also be saved by the same grace
- Tells me not to judge my brothers' relationship with Him, their Master and Father
- Establishes clear reasons when I would be forced to disfellowship my brother or sister
- Allows me to remain His faithful son as long as I am striving to please Him

To modify and paraphrase what someone said, "The traditional view says that God loves me because I change, but the Bible says that God's love changes me."

This discussion has always been about more than just Irving, Texas. It has even been more than about fellowship. It is about how we view God and how we relate to Him as our Father.

Continue to ask questions about what you have always heard. Continue to search out the truth, and when you find it, hold on and rejoice. There is so much joy and peace in truly knowing God. I went for so long without it, as did many of you. But there are some who are reading these words who still don't have it because you have been taught all your life that you had to be perfect, and yet you know that you aren't. You are never loving enough or kind enough or patient enough. Your only hope is one desperate prayer before death. But it doesn't have to be this way. God doesn't want you to live in fear. He says that perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18). Cast your fear and self-dependence away, and finally enjoy the grace of our God.

May God bless all of us on our road home.

Steve

p.s. I invite everyone to message me with questions or comments about the study :)

**Post #37, Mike Criswell, 02/09/2012**

FINAL FAREWELL POST!

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments; As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the LORD commanded the blessing, even life for evermore. (Ps 133).

What thrilling words from the sweet singer of Israel. How beautiful the picture – unity; abundant, flowing full and free. Like Aaron's anointing – the fragrant oil that soaked his head, and then his beard, and then lavishly pooled about his feet. Like the dripping dews of majestic Hermon—refreshing, inviting, dripping from its summit, feeding the gentle Jordan, as it shares itself with the parched land below. Of such is the character of unity! Refreshing, reviving, pure, peaceable, gentle, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.

Oh how our Heavenly Father loves unity. And oh how he wants his children to love it too. When in rebellion man was estranged from God's grace, He sent His Son to die for our sins. On an old rugged cross Jesus stretched out his arms to embrace the world. It is this love that forms the basis of unity and fellowship. These are the threads, stained with sinless blood, that weave the tapestry of redemption.

But what is biblical fellowship? Over the past month we have endeavored to find out. Over time a beautiful picture

has emerged of God's grace, mercy, and peace. The best definition of fellowship is given by the apostle of love himself when John says, "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin" (1 Jn 1:7)

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What beautiful words, but conditional just the same. "If" says the writer. "If" we walk in the light we have fellowship. But I am flawed I exclaim!!!! Does God demand perfection of me? Well yes in the sense that He is the very essence of perfection and his nature can accept nothing less. But "no" in the sense that God has provided forgiveness for our sins. He has paid the price so we would not have to.

So what about our sins? Are we covered by grace? Indeed, not only are we covered, Grace lavishes upon us forgiveness that none deserve. It is by God's grace that He provides for his wandering sheep a path back to the shepherd and bishop of our souls. That path, John says, begins with a penitent heart. And so inspiration boldly declares, "If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from ALL unrighteousness."

That God offers Grace to the fallen is Amazing. And surely it has at its root His Son, Jesus the Christ. The pre-incarnate Logos became flesh and tented among us. The same winds of temptation that batter us ripped at his canvas of flesh and yet he withstood without sin. Jesus is our high priest

who IS touched with the feelings of our infirmities. He understands and has unspeakable compassion on those who struggle with going astray (Heb 5:2). He stands before God as our advocate. He is our mediator! He is our friend in time of need. Through him we come boldly and confidently to the throne of Grace!

So we ask again, does God's grace cover our sins? Yes, Grace not only covers, it drowns our sins in peace and forgiveness." No matter how many times we stumble, God reaches down His hand to gather us up. And as we put our frail, trembling hand into His, and look up through tear stained eyes, and as our lips stammer, "Father I have sinned, I am no longer worthy" God smiles and calls for the robe and the ring. The lamb has been slain! The banquet is ready. Forgiveness is on the table waiting to be served. The angels of heaven rejoice in song.

The subject of fellowship has long been one of controversy in the religious world and there are many ideas as to how to attain it. Some suggest that unity is never attainable and that furthermore it is impossible to even understand the Bible alike. Others say that unity is found by tailoring the bible so as to provide a neat list of required elements.

The fact of the matter is that neither of these approaches is biblical. Paul told Timothy that ALL scripture is God breathed and is profitable for doctrine. Jesus commanded disciples to teach the nations ALL things he had

commanded. No matter the topic we cannot pick and choose as we see fit. The water of life is an all or nothing proposition. It is not our prerogative to tell God what part of His Word to base fellowship on.

Throughout this discussion one of the major issues has been whether or not fellowship is based primarily on Ephesians 4. Such a theory may seem like a handy solution for it does indeed list things that every Christian must believe. But is this all the Christian must believe? Certainly not! Even Ephesians 4 leaves us wondering about its meaning unless we rely on the rest of God's Word to help us. For example, we cannot know the mode or meaning of baptism without going to other scripture. Likewise issues such as Sabbath observance, the nature of the resurrection, and the ordinances of divine service are not fully explained in this passage. It takes ALL of God's Word to determine how to walk and worship God. It takes ALL of God's Word to determine the bounds of fellowship.

In our past discussions we have discussed the various nuances of fellowship and its impact on the Christian's daily inconsistencies and daily sins. The argument has been made that because we might be Inconsistent in one area then that negates the truth in another. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Our inconsistencies never change God's Word. While we often talk theoretically about the subject the issue most directly impacted is corporate worship. It is here that Christ's body assembles for praise and worship. It is here

that consciences are laid bare and it is here that God's Word gives its strictest instruction. While, for example, we may set our table at home anyway we like, the Lord's Table is to be set and observed in but one way.

And so then the question is, "What shall we do about those who do NOT worship as scripture instructs?" Those who broaden the limits of fellowship suggest the solution to be compromise. In the Lord's Supper, for instance, while some of these same folks prefer and may even demand "one cup in practice" they are comfortable in inviting into their pulpits the very men who would advocate and promote just the opposite. Such may be union but it is certainly not unity. Over and over Paul warns of false teachers and John strictly forbids having fellowship with those who go beyond the doctrines of Christ. Does the shepherd invite the wolf, no matter how cuddly, to feed with the sheep? Certainly not and nether should we. Any leader who allows such a practice has abandoned his role as watchman. Any congregation that fellowships such a false teacher is no longer the pillar and ground of the truth.

Holding to an uncompromising view of worship should not embarrass us. In fact those who enter into our fellowship should have no problem with being tested before they attain leadership positions. I so like what Brother McCord once shared. With his permission I now share it with you. Of worship he said . . . . "We just cannot call on those who worship in error. We had a man, good man, who met with

us, but he was in error in worship. I explained to him why we could not use him. He replied gentlemanly, " If you folks called on me, I would not give you a flip for your position". . . . Well said brother Don. Well said! Compromise never makes a strong statement!

The irony of most open fellowship advocates among us is that while they proclaim the benefits of open or semi-open fellowship, fact of the matter is that they have never tried it. If open fellowship is right then it should be embraced and treasured. It should be practiced in every church. But as yet I am unaware of anything beyond talk of these issues in the congregations of those who advocate such.

For many decades our brotherhood has demanded a "thus saith the Lord" in faith and practice. And now the open fellowship position seeks to compromise under the assumption that they have found a new and better way. Historically speaking, however, nothing could be further from the truth. The battles we fight today have already been fought in previous generations. The old guard, now often ridiculed, maligned and caricatured as power hungry tyrants, once faced the same issues. And they learned, as will we, when folks buy into ecumenicalism they ultimately sell out to the denominations. Such is the logical end of open fellowship. Like water compromise always seeks the path of least resistance and when we welcome false shepherds the flock will soon follow. We should respect and learn from those who have gone before.

As I close I beg to address some of the conclusions our dear brother has come to as he has made his spiritual journey in the “traditional brotherhood.” First, Brother Steve I am deeply saddened by any mistreatment you or others have received in your quest for truth. Such is not the spirit of Christ. I suppose that we all act out of line from time to time.

But in reality, brother, the brotherhood you describe is not the one most of us recognize and not the one that thousands in Christ enjoy. Perhaps through the lenses of pain you see more clearly than I do. But as one who has questioned, studied the scriptures and poured over our historical past, the picture you paint seems more “impressionistic” than “realistic.”

When I look at the church I see a collective group of congregations around the world made up of people who are striving to live holy lives and maintain the truth of God’s Word. I see a brotherhood composed of people who want to worship in Spirit and in Truth and look to the Word to do so. I see a brotherhood where its preachers, though at times off the mark and maybe even at times overbearing, yet fought the battle in the heat of the day and handed to us that which many now seem to despise. I see a group of people who give thousands of dollars to preach the gospel to the world. I see a brotherhood that when our brothers in Africa were hungry rushed to give millions of dollars for

their relief. I see a brotherhood where thousands love to lift their united voices in praise to God. I see a brotherhood where most are happy in the Lord and go about their daily lives living for Jesus.

I see hard working people, mostly unconcerned with so called brotherhood problems, who just want to make heaven their home. I see folks who assemble on the Lord's Day and whose consciences are clear as they joyfully approach God as He directs. I see folks who have hope for their children that they too, in spite of the parent's failures, will grow up to be uncompromising lovers of Jesus and extend His Body, the church, into the remotest regions of the earth. In short I see a brotherhood that sees Jesus.

And so as I close dear brother I thank you sincerely for the time you have taken to speak about these things. I thank you for the invitation to be your partner in this endeavor. I thank your family and especially your lovely wife for her input and her patience over the past month. I thank our readers for slogging through what must have seemed an insurmountable bog of minutia . But mostly I thank God that He allows us to be brothers and sisters in Christ and graces us with the honor of being called His children.

I love you brother,  
Because of Calvary  
Mike