FELLOWSHIP

George Booker's *Biblical Fellowship*, examined

The fullest Central case against "guilt by association", read against Scripture and against the pioneers it quotes.

> "These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so."
>
> ACTS 17:11 ·

Why this book

George Booker's *Biblical Fellowship* is the fullest case made in the Central fellowship against what it calls "block disfellowship" and "guilt by association". Booker "grew up in a Berean Christadelphian ecclesia" (*That They May Be One*, p. 1) and once held the strict position himself, "with the uninhibited zeal of youth" (*Biblical Fellowship*, p. 3). He later joined Central.

This page examines its reasoning, together with his companion study *What Are the First Principles?* It asks two questions of every argument: does the passage say what Booker says it says, and do the pioneers he quotes mean what he takes them to mean?

References to *Biblical Fellowship* give the chapter, linked to its page at ChristadelphianBooks, and the page of the PDF edition. *FP* marks *What Are the First Principles?*, cited by PDF page. Scripture is the King James Version. Quotations from Dr. Thomas and Robert Roberts are checked against the originals in our library.

Common ground, and where it leads

Some of Booker's points are true. Each one, followed through, leads somewhere he does not go.

- **The weak are received.** "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye" (Romans 14:1); "of some have compassion, making a difference" (Jude 1:22). But Paul finishes the sentence, "but not to doubtful disputations", and Jude goes on: "And others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh" (Jude 1:23). Roberts called those

verses “the line to pursue” in the passage on toleration in *The Law of Moses* (p. 285), quoted below. Booker’s own authority sets the condition: the weak brother “must be prepared to cease all forms of propagation of the ideas he has espoused” (H. A. Whittaker, ‘Block Disfellowship’, *The Testimony*, September 1973, quoted on p. 34). How to treat those taught error does not settle what happens to an ecclesia that keeps the teacher.

- **Not every detail is a first principle.** Booker’s example is the order of Melchizedek, and Hebrews itself calls that exposition “strong meat”, beyond “the first principles of the oracles of God” (Hebrews 5:12). The question is where he draws the line. He files “clean flesh” among “technical trivia” (ch. 38, p. 92), yet his own gospel test makes “Jesus the man, of our mortal nature” part of the gospel (*FP* p. 19).
- **The innocent must not be punished with the guilty.** Moses prayed, “Shall one man sin, and wilt thou be wroth with all the congregation?” (Numbers 16:22). God’s answer was a command to separate: “Get you up from about the tabernacle of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram” (Numbers 16:24). The innocent were spared by leaving, not by staying.
- **No ecclesia in the New Testament is told to withdraw from another.** Nor is any told to keep receiving those who stand with a false teacher. The commands are not limited by place: “withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly” (2 Thessalonians 3:6); “If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not” (2 John 1:10). And one ecclesia did write to others to disown the teaching of men who had gone out from it: “certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls… to whom we gave no such commandment” (Acts 15:24). As shown below, Booker’s own rules, and his own fellowship, act between ecclesias.

Proof must come before any action, and hearsay is no ground for judgment. The position this page defends already requires that: error known, admonished and persisted in.

His sources, read to the end

Four of the pioneer passages Booker leans on most, read to the end, teach what he denies.

Dr. Thomas’s letter. Booker introduces it as “at least one statement of Brother Thomas that is never quoted by the ‘pure fellowship’ advocates” (ch. 13, p. 37), gives no source, and ends at “eat condemnation to themselves”. His own excerpt already says that “all in the apostolic ecclesias who believed it not… had not fellowship with the apostles”. The letter goes on:

> "If I believe the truth as it is in the Jesus Paul preached, and fellowship the doctrine of an immaculate Jesus Paul did not preach, in celebrating the death of the latter with those who repudiate the maculate body set forth by God for a propitiation, is affirming one thing and practising another. Those who hold Paul's doctrine, ought not to worship with a body that does not… No; if I agree with you in doctrine, I will forsake the assembling of myself with a body that opposes your doctrine, although it might require me to separate from the nearest and dearest."

The source is *The Christadelphian*, January 1870, pp. 16–17. Roberts reprinted it in July 1873, in the middle of the controversy over Christ's nature.

Roberts on 2 John. Booker quotes Sunday Morning No. 49 to limit John's command "to such only" as deny the doctrine of Christ (ch. 32, p. 77). The next paragraph of the same exhortation says the command "applies to all without distinction, and erects a barrier to fellowship with even some who hold the truth; for though they may hold the doctrine of Christ themselves, yet if they keep up a 'God-speed' connection with those who don't, by John's rule, they make themselves partakers with them". Roberts wrote that in 1873, of brethren who denied that Christ came in our nature: the same question of Christ's nature that, in its 'clean flesh' form, Booker files among "technical trivia".

Roberts's "True Principles and Uncertain Details" (1898). This is Booker's most quoted authority (pp. 6, 10, 46, 49, 78–79). On p. 79 he quotes the opening of a paragraph whose close he leaves out: "They are responsible only for what they wittingly espouse. They would be responsible for the admission of a Mahometan, or a Papal idolator, or an orthodox denier of the Gospel, as such." Roberts does not hold a community answerable for its members' private oddities. He does hold it answerable for whom it knowingly admits. The next section defends his stand on inspiration in 1885: he had to insist "not only on the right doctrine, but on the refusal of toleration to the wrong" (the article online). Set that beside Booker's rule that an ecclesia is not to be abandoned "if the formal basis of fellowship is sound" (ch. 24, p. 63). For Roberts a sound basis was not enough.

Roberts on "God speed". Booker cites *The Law of Moses* p. 285 only for a definition of the phrase (ch. 32, p. 78). The paragraph's point is that toleration shares guilt: "the guilt of an offender against God may cleave to us. Eli, though disapproving of the wrong ways of his sons, sinned in 'restraining them not'… There is such a thing as being 'partakers of other men's sins' (1 Tim. v. 22)."

The pioneers drew a clear line. Uncertain details and the private weaknesses of brethren are to be borne with. Knowingly receiving those who deny first principles shares in their error. Booker quotes the first half of that line and leaves out the second.

The minimum for baptism is not the whole of fellowship

What Are the First Principles? builds on one premise. A statement of faith should define "only what should be believed as a prerequisite for baptism and admission to fellowship (again, no more and no less)", so that the doctrines essential to salvation, those believed before baptism, and the statement of faith should "ideally… be perfectly equivalent" (*FP* p. 3). His "gospel test" then admits as essential only teaching tied directly to "the gospel" (*FP* pp. 18–21).

Scripture does not equate what is needed to enter with all that binds afterwards:

- The commission puts teaching after baptism: "baptizing them… Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19–20).
- Salvation depends on continuing: "If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled" (Colossians 1:23).
- The New Testament disciplines for things no "gospel test" would admit: conduct ("with such an one no not to eat", 1 Corinthians 5:11), disobedience to an epistle ("if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man", 2 Thessalonians 3:14), and moral teaching ("the doctrine of Balaam", Jezebel, Revelation 2:14, Revelation 2:20).

Booker breaks the equation himself. He writes that "obedience to these commandments is surely a part of the 'first principles' of the One Faith" (*FP* p. 54). Either the basis of fellowship includes Christ's commandments, as the Statement of Faith and (Matthew 28:20) say, or it does not. It cannot be both.

The method rests on the Acts speeches: Luke "would not have failed to record at least once any essential element of saving Truth" (*FP* p. 7). Yet Booker grants that the speeches pass lightly over what the hearers already held as "second nature" (*FP* p. 11). Then the record is not a full syllabus, and its silence proves nothing. Paul's founding teaching included commandments and prophecy the short summaries never record: "ye know what commandments we gave you by the Lord Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 4:2); "when I was yet with you, I told you these things" (2 Thessalonians 2:5).

Applied, the test cuts out part of the hope. Booker questions whether the thousand years are literal, suggesting they may be "symbolic of a very, very long time" (*FP* p. 47). He says the general resurrection and judgment at their close "cannot be considered fundamental doctrine" (*FP* p. 48), and that the Statement of Faith's clauses on them "might well have been omitted" (*FP* p. 53). Yet his own statement keeps the substance: Jesus "assisted by his immortal brothers and sisters in ruling over the mortal peoples… Finally all sin and death will be removed" (*FP* p. 47). That is the mediatorial reign in all but its length, and Revelation gives the length six times (Revelation 20:2–7). The reign does not rest on one passage: Christ "must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death" (1 Corinthians 15:25–26); in that age "the sinner being an hundred years old shall be accursed" (Isaiah 65:20); the nations go up "from year

to year" (Zechariah 14:16). And the synopsis by Dr. Thomas that Booker says he consulted "as to any possible omissions" states: "The kingdom, in its mediatorial phase, will last one thousand years" (*FP* p. 24).

The table is not a private rite

Booker writes of baptism and the breaking of bread: "each rite is essentially an individual one" (ch. 20, p. 50). On that premise rests his claim that members who keep breaking bread with a teacher of error, while speaking against him, are not "bidding him God speed" (ch. 32, p. 79).

Yet in the same passage he grants that "the personal aspect of the memorial is intertwined with the corporate" (ch. 20, p. 50), and that the bread "represented the spiritual 'body' also" (ch. 20, p. 49). In *What Are the First Principles?* he goes further: the one body "is equivalent to the 'one bread' of communion", and "defines the ecclesia in terms of fellowship, both inclusively (all true believers being members) and exclusively (no others being members)" (*FP* p. 4). A table that marks who is in and who is out is not a private rite.

Booker cites 1 Corinthians 10:16–17 for unity, but never deals with the verses that follow:

> "For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread. Behold Israel after the flesh: are not they which eat of the sacrifices partakers of the altar?… ye cannot be partakers of the Lord's table, and of the table of devils." (1 Corinthians 10:17–21)

Eating together makes the eaters partakers of what the table stands for. Nor does he deal with the same letter's "with such an one no not to eat… do not ye judge them that are within?" (1 Corinthians 5:11–12).

Toleration admitted, consequence denied

Booker makes a series of admissions about ecclesias that keep teachers of error:

- 2 John "appears to be the only passage in the Bible which puts 'tolerators' on the same ground of condemnation as the 'false teachers' themselves". His advice is that "we leave 2 John alone" (ch. 32, p. 80).
- Such ecclesias "may be disobedient to the apostolic injunction" (ch. 33, p. 80), an injunction he himself calls "the clear duty of rejecting or excommunicating a 'heretic'" (ch. 33, p. 80).
- Passive toleration "may be wrong too, depending on circumstances" (ch. 32, p. 79).
- "After appropriate warnings, false teachers must be summarily dealt with, even to the point of being rejected or disfellowshipped", citing 2 John 7–11 and Revelation 2:20 (*FP* p. 51).

- “Even should we talk of doctrinal divergence as ‘leaven’”, an ecclesia supporting it and “taking no steps to correct or isolate the problem, it is in fact they who are introducing the leaven” (ch. 40, p. 95).

Scripture does talk of it so. Paul uses the proverb of false teaching: “A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump” (Galatians 5:9). Christ defines leaven as “the doctrine of the Pharisees” (Matthew 16:12). By Booker’s own condition, the tolerating ecclesia brings in the leaven, and the leaven spreads to the whole lump (1 Corinthians 5:6).

His answer is an argument from silence: “There is no hint that failure to do so would result in the Corinthian ecclesia being expelled” (ch. 40, p. 96). Corinth repented, so the question never arose (2 Corinthians 7:11).

His reading of the seven letters rests on the same move: “each ecclesia is treated as being responsible for its own affairs only” (ch. 6, p. 21). But Christ charges whole ecclesias with the toleration itself: “thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam” (Revelation 2:14); “thou sufferest that woman Jezebel” (Revelation 2:20). He praises Ephesus for testing teachers from outside (Revelation 2:2), and sends every verdict to all the ecclesias, “and all the churches shall know” (Revelation 2:23). Roberts, in the lecture Booker himself cites on Sardis, says of Thyatira: “Notwithstanding, he condemns their toleration of Jezebel.”

The letters are the admonition. What follows refusal is judgment on those who share, not continued fellowship: “I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds” (Revelation 2:22); “I will… remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent” (Revelation 2:5). What Smyrna and Philadelphia did afterwards is not recorded. To build on that is the same argument from silence as Corinth.

His own rules, and his own fellowship

Booker’s book ends by endorsing the principle it denies.

His own rules. Booker closes his chapter on Matthew 18 with rules for disputes between ecclesias (*The Christadelphian*, 1924), which he commends. They say “the same rule applies to ecclesias”, allow an ecclesia to be asked “to join him in refusal of cooperation” with another ecclesia, and provide that “those who are associated with one who teaches error” be given opportunity “to repudiate the same before exclusion from fellowship” (ch. 9, pp. 28–29). That is the principle the book calls guilt by association, set out as its own conclusion.

The Ecclesial Guide as he quotes it. Booker gives Roberts’s Guide a chapter (ch. 46, pp. 105–107). In his own quotations: “Nothing but denial of the truth in the assembly, or overt disobedience of the Lord’s commandments among them, can justify a brother or sister in absenting himself” (§39). The rule of a hearing is “to be applied as scrupulously to an erring ecclesia as to an individual

delinquent" (§40). And "the withdrawal of one ecclesia is practically the withdrawal of all, since all will respect it till set aside" (§42). The Guide's "agree to differ" covers ecclesias "agreed in the basis of fellowship" who differ "on a question of fact", not on the faith. Of §41, which directs that other ecclesias should not receive someone withdrawn from elsewhere, Booker says only that it is "all very good and very relevant", and draws from it a right of appeal (ch. 46, p. 106).

His own fellowship. In the Addendum Booker writes that "unity implies exclusivity" (p. 115), and that "every ecclesia has responsibilities and obligations to all ecclesias" (p. 118). That is not "responsible for its own affairs only" (ch. 6, p. 21). He grants that Central "will not accept" a definition of fellowship that includes all true believers, because it "has the potential to 'open the doors' to various false teachings and wrong practices". An ecclesia acting on that definition in the breaking of bread "would probably result in its being disfellowshiped by Central" (p. 117).

So the fellowship whose case this book makes will withdraw from a whole ecclesia over whom it receives. The question is not whether ecclesias may act on what other ecclesias knowingly receive. Booker's own fellowship does. The question is whether they act for the doctrine of Christ.

Other passages misread

Romans 16:17. "Mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them." The verse defines the dividers by the doctrine. Booker aims it at those who separate *for* the doctrine (ch. 17, pp. 45–46), and says it means avoiding the causers, "not those who would follow them". He never says how one can avoid those who cause divisions while breaking bread with an ecclesia that keeps them at its table.

Romans 14. The chapter concerns meats and days, of which Paul says "there is nothing unclean of itself" (Romans 14:14). Booker applies it to a dispute over "the nature and sacrifice of Christ" (ch. 12, p. 34).

The wheat and the tares. "The field is the world" (Matthew 13:38). Read Booker's way, "let both grow together" would forbid all discipline, including "put away from among yourselves that wicked person" (1 Corinthians 5:13), and he concedes that ecclesias must still act (ch. 4, p. 15). He says "This basic interpretation is followed also by Robert Roberts" (ch. 4, p. 18). The only Roberts text he offers is a passing figure on a magazine cover. Roberts's own exposition of the parable takes the field as "the (Jewish) world". Booker's own quotation of Dr. Thomas says the tares "choked the good seed, so that a separation had to ensue"; two sentences after it stops, Thomas adds: "It would from the very nature of things be utterly impossible for these two classes to remain together forever" (*Eureka* I, pp. 421–422).

Korah and the seal of God. Booker quotes the first half of the seal, "The Lord knoweth them that are his" (ch. 22, pp. 58–59), and leaves out the second: "Let every one that nameth the name of

Christ depart from iniquity" (2 Timothy 2:19). He tells the story of Korah without the command it echoes: "Depart, I pray you, from the tents of these wicked men" (Numbers 16:26).

Matthew 18. Booker grants that it is "primarily a matter of personal offence, not of doctrinal divergence" (ch. 9, p. 26). He then says that once the ecclesia is told, it "has sole authority to pursue the matter", and that "broadcasting them to the ends of the world" is "wrong… malicious" (ch. 9, p. 27). The apostles named false teachers in letters to other ecclesias: "of whom is Hymeneus and Philetus" (2 Timothy 2:17), men Booker himself names (ch. 22, p. 58); "Alexander the coppersmith… of whom be thou ware also" (2 Timothy 4:14–15). And his own 1924 rules apply Matthew 18 between ecclesias.

First pure. Booker calls "peaceable" "really the first and foremost characteristic" of heavenly wisdom (ch. 36, p. 86). James says it "is first pure, then peaceable" (James 3:17), and Booker's own quotation on the same page agrees: "It is above all else pure".

The commandments of Christ. Booker says the list of commandments "has since the beginning been appended to every Christadelphian statement of faith" (*FP* p. 54). His own list follows Roberts's *Epitome* but leaves out the breaking of bread, of which he then says the Statement of Faith has "NOTHING" (*FP* p. 51). It also leaves out the commandments on fellowship, among them "If any man obey not the apostolic commands, the brethren to have no company with him" (no. 91) and "To reject or receive not into fellowship those who consent not to the doctrine or the commandments of the Lord Jesus" (no. 95).

What follows

By Booker's own rules an ecclesia may refuse co-operation with another, and exclude those "associated with one who teaches error" who will not repudiate it (ch. 9, pp. 28–29). By his own Addendum, Central withdraws from an ecclesia over its fellowship practice (p. 117). By his own admissions, tolerating ecclesias "may be disobedient to the apostolic injunction" (ch. 33, p. 80) and are "introducing the leaven" (ch. 40, p. 95). And by the pioneers he quotes, read to the end, Dr. Thomas would "forsake the assembling of myself with a body that opposes your doctrine", and Roberts held a community "responsible for the admission of… an orthodox denier of the Gospel".

What *Biblical Fellowship* does not show is that knowingly keeping fellowship with fundamental error, after admonition, is innocent. The question every ecclesia must answer is not whether its statement of faith is sound, but whom it knowingly receives. "He that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds" (2 John 1:11).

For the wider case, see Fellowship, autonomy and responsibility and the conversation, reply by reply.