

“Withdrawing Fellowship”



“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” (2 Thess 3:6)

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Fellowship

Introduction

- I. The subject of *church discipline* has caused no end of discussion among faithful brethren.
 - A. Anyone even remotely familiar with the New Testament recognizes the Bible does speak on this subject.
 - B. The problem comes in our application of what the Scriptures teach about it.
- II. The phrase most of my brethren like to use is *withdrawing fellowship*.
 - A. Unfortunately, this phrase is not found anywhere on the pages of Sacred Writ.
 - B. Beyond this, the way most congregations practice “withdrawing fellowship” is not even remotely connected with New Testament commands or approved examples.
- III. While growing up in central Indiana I saw numerous attempts by brethren to “withdraw fellowship” from erring Christians.
 - A. Most of these *rituals* seemed more like a combination of Catholicism and McCarthyism than an attempt to follow New Testament precepts.
 - B. I remember brethren reading lengthy letters before the congregation, droning on and on about some poor soul who was about to be “withdrawn from” by the entire congregation—even though the vast majority of the congregation had never even spoken to the one they were about to “deliver to Satan.”
 - C. The passage most often quoted in their letters was 1 Corinthians 5—a passage where the word *fellowship* is not even found!
 - D. In recent years I have seen jack-booted preachers try to keep members in line by threatening to “withdraw fellowship” from those who disagree with them.
- IV. In this lesson we want to examine what the Bible says about the fellowship of believers.

Discussion

I. What Is Fellowship?

- A. The basic idea of *fellowship* (Gr. κοινωνία) is *partnership* or *joint participation*.
 1. Liddell and Scott define with word as “communion, association, partnership, fellowship” (*An Intermediate Greek–English Lexicon*).
 2. It is also defined as “close association involving mutual interests and sharing, association, communion, fellowship, close relationship” (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich, eds. *A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*).
 3. It is defined by J. H. Thayer as “*fellowship, association, community, communion, joint participation, contact*; in the N.T. as in classical Greek” (*Thayer’s Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament*).

- B. Our English word *fellowship* is found 14 times in the New Testament (NKJV).
1. James, Cephas, and John extended “the right hand of fellowship” to Paul and Barnabas (Gal 2:9).
 - a) “In the Near East, to clasp the right hand of a person was to make a solemn vow of friendship and was a mark of fellowship, or partnership” (John MacArthur, *Galatians*. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary).
 - b) “*They shook hands with Barnabas and me, as a sign that we were all partners* is literally ‘they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship.’ The whole action means entering into a covenant, a binding agreement between two parties, a pledge that they will abide by what is agreed upon. ‘Fellowship’ introduces the idea of partnership. While many translations retain the original expression, others restructure it to express its meaning more clearly (NEB ‘accepted Barnabas and myself as partners, and shook hands upon it’; JB ‘shook hands with Barnabas and me as a sign of partnership’). In a number of languages, however, the fact of shaking hands does not necessarily indicate agreement. In fact, it may suggest merely that Paul and Barnabas were at the point of leaving. A more appropriate equivalent in some languages may be ‘they showed that they were in agreement with Barnabas and me,’ ‘they showed that they agreed with us by shaking hands with us,’ or ‘they made us partners by shaking hands with us.’” (Archea and Nida, *A Translator’s Handbook on Paul’s Letter to the Galatians*. UBS Translator’s Handbooks)
 2. Paul admonished the Ephesians to “have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness” (Eph 5:11).
 3. The saints at Philippi were commended by Paul for their “fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now” (Phil. 1:5).
 4. The apostle John reminds us that, “if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7).
- C. It is impossible to be in fellowship (partnership) with someone against their will.
1. One person may desire fellowship with another, but they cannot have it without mutual consent.
 2. John spoke of our relationship with God and said, “If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth” (1 John 1:6).
- D. Is a local congregation of God’s people obligated to accept into their fellowship every Christian who seeks to be identified with them?
1. If the answer is *yes*, then they are at the mercy of every hothead and trouble maker in the brotherhood.
 2. Not everyone who claims to be a faithful child of God is worthy of having fellowship with.

3. Shortly after his conversion, the apostle Paul “tried to join the disciples” at Jerusalem (Acts 9:26).
 - a) The brethren at Jerusalem refused to accept this former blasphemer into their fellowship until Barnabas testified of Paul’s character (Acts 9:27).
 - b) After receiving the report from Barnabas, Paul “was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out” (Acts 9:28).
 - c) If a congregation could refuse to extend fellowship to Paul, who among us should be exempt from having brethren check on our character before receiving us into their fellowship?
4. Note what John told Gaius about a brother named Diotrephes (3 John 9–10).
 - a) Diotrephes was a malicious gossip who not only wanted to run the church, but ran off faithful brethren as well.
 - b) Suppose Diotrephes moved to this town and wanted to be a member of this congregation.
 - c) I am sure he would tell you a convincing story of his dedication to the Lord and stand for the truth.
 - d) However, any congregation who would accept him would be begging for trouble (Prov 6:27).
 - e) Diotrephes has been dead for nearly two thousand years—but he has many descendants.
 - (1) If modern day kinsmen of Diotrephes are refused fellowship by a local congregation they can still worship “in their house” (Rom 16:5).
 - (2) Local congregations have enough trouble the way it is.
 - (3) They certainly don’t need to accept factious brethren (Titus 3:10–11).
- E. I know of several occasions where an individual would leave a congregation and say that they no longer wanted to be in fellowship with the group they were leaving.
 1. Then the brethren at the congregation would send them a certified letter saying they were going to “withdraw fellowship” from that person in 30 days if they did not repent!
 2. Such ignorance ought not to be tolerated.
 3. If a man says he no longer wants to be in fellowship with you, there is no way you can be in fellowship with him.
 4. You cannot remove (withdraw) that which does not exist.
 5. Remember, fellowship expresses a two-sided relationship or partnership.
- F. When a Christian chooses to “walk in darkness” they are no longer in fellowship with God (1 John 1:6–7).
 1. When a man commits adultery his fellowship with God is severed, and God does not send him a certified letter threatening to “withdraw fellowship” in 30 days if he does not repent.
 2. Some brethren apparently think they are more gracious than the Almighty!

II. Withdraw Yourself

- A. The way some brethren use the phrase “withdraw fellowship” you might be left with the impression it is a Biblical phrase—but it is not.
- B. The saints at Thessalonica were commanded to “withdraw from every brother” who walked disorderly (2 Thess 3:6–14).
 1. *What* is it they were to withdraw or remove?
 2. Most modern translations of the Bible render “you withdraw from” as “keep away from” (NIV, HCSB, ESV, NAS, NRSV).
 3. We are told to “not keep company” with an ungodly brother (NKJV) and “do not associate with him” (NIV) (2 Thess 3:14).
 4. We are to *withdraw ourselves* from ungodly brethren.
- C. Consider the fornicator at Corinth (1 Cor 5:1–13).
 1. He was living in flagrant sin by cohabiting with his stepmother and the congregation was ignoring the situation (1 Cor 5:1–2).
 - a) Such sin was forbidden by the Law (Lev 18:8; 20:11; Deut 22:22, 30; 27:20).
 - b) The brethren at Corinth were more tolerant of open sin than were the pagans among whom they lived, as this activity was even forbidden by Roman law (Cicero, *Cluentes* 6.15; Gaius, *Institutis* 1.63).
 2. Paul told them to “deliver such a one to Satan” (1 Cor 5:3–5).
 - a) Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350–428) wrote, “This is not to be taken literally. What Paul means is that the person concerned should be put out of the church and forced to live in the world, which is ruled by Satan. That way he will learn to fear God and escape the greater punishment that is to come.” (*Pauline Commentary From The Greek Church*)
 - b) Severian of Gabala (c. 400) wrote, “When Paul says that this man must be delivered to Satan, he does not mean that he should be handed over to the power of the evil one. Rather, all the evils of this life, for example, diseases, sorrows, sufferings, and other circumstances, were attributed to Satan, and it is in this sense that Paul uses the term here. What he means is that this man should be exposed to the hardships of life.” (*Pauline Commentary From The Greek Church*)
 3. The reason they were to withdraw themselves from such a man was that “a little leaven leavens the whole lump” (1 Cor 5:6–9).
 4. It is impossible to avoid contact with all immoral people (1 Cor 5:9–10).
 5. However, we are not even to have a common meal with a brother “who is a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner” (1 Cor 5:11).
 - a) One purpose for this is to avoid giving the appearance of approving of their sinful conduct and bringing reproach on the church.
 - b) We also remember Paul’s admonition that, “Evil company corrupts good habits” (1 Cor 15:33).

III. Among You

- A. Consider how the phrase “among you” is used in the New Testament.
 - 1. Paul told the Corinthians that there was “sexual immorality *among you*” (1 Cor 5:1), and that the fornicator must be “taken away from *among you*” (1 Cor 5:2).
 - 2. Paul wrote to the saints in Thessalonica and told them that he was “not disorderly *among you*,” but had heard “that there are some who walk *among you* in a disorderly manner” (2 Thess 3:7, 11).
 - 3. Peter told elders to “shepherd the flock of God which is *among you*” (1 Pet 5:2).
- B. It amazes me that some brethren can understand how elders can only have oversight of those who are *among them*, yet the same brethren try to “withdraw fellowship” from those who are not *among them*.
 - 1. Brethren are commanded to *withdraw themselves* from disorderly brethren who are among them, i.e., in their midst.
 - 2. I know of no passage which speaks of a congregation *withdrawing* from one who was not in their midst.
 - 3. Such nonsense ought not be tolerated among those who claim to “speak where the Bible speaks.”
- C. We also need to notice that there is no record in the New Testament of any congregation sending out letters to other congregations about their internal affairs.
 - 1. However, it is very common today for brethren to “withdraw fellowship” from an individual and then send letters across the country to warn other congregations about the erring brother they “withdrew” from.
 - 2. When I get letters like this, I throw them in the garbage where they belong.
- D. Diotrephes, a man who loved to have the preeminence among brethren, put some faithful Christians “out of the church” (3 John 10).
 - 1. No other congregation on earth was bound to honor his evil actions.
 - 2. Every congregation is independent and autonomous—that is the way God designed it.
 - 3. One congregation is not bound in any way by the actions of another.
 - 4. I hold some people in higher esteem when I find out they have been “withdrawn from” by a group of knuckleheads or by some egotistical preacher!

IV. When Christians Sin

- A. What is to be done when a brother in Christ is guilty of sin and refuses to repent, but is still assembling with the saints?
 - 1. By apostolic command we are to *withdraw ourselves* from that person, i.e., no longer associate with them or even sit down to a common meal with them.
 - 2. You do not have to wait 30 days and send them a certified letter before you take such action.
 - 3. When such a one who is “among you” is “delivered to Satan,” his soul might be saved by your actions (1 Cor 5:5).

- B. When you refuse to “keep company with” such a person you “do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother” (2 Thess 3:14–15).
 - 1. Your goal is to get them to come back to the Lord!
 - 2. What about family members who live in sin and refuse to repent?
 - 3. The family relationship is not severed just because one sins.
 - 4. Parents still have moral and legal obligations to their offspring, even to those who might be living in sin.
 - 5. A spouse still has marital obligations to a sinning spouse.
- C. The fornicator at Corinth came to repentance when faithful brethren ceased associating with him (2 Cor 2:6–7).
- D. Erring Christians who leave a local congregation need to be reprovved and exhorted.
 - 1. However, when they indicate they no longer want to be in fellowship with the congregation there is nothing else the brethren can Scripturally do to.
 - 2. You can announce to the congregation that this individual has broken the ties of fellowship with you, but you cannot threaten to “withdraw fellowship” from one with whom fellowship no longer exists.
- E. The Hebrew writer spoke of those “who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come” (Heb 6:4–5).
 - 1. He went on to say that when these people fall away it is impossible for you to “renew them again to repentance” (Heb 6:6).
 - 2. He did not say that it was impossible for these people to ever come back to God—it was going to be impossible for you to bring them to repentance.
 - 3. This apostate was going to have to come to his senses on his own.
 - 4. Sometimes men have to reach the very depths of despair before they can see how far they have fallen.
 - 5. It does not mean that we give up hope or cease to be concerned about them.
 - 6. We can continue to pray that they will live long enough to come to repentance.

Invitation

- I. In the gospel of Luke we read of a wayward son who left his father’s house, “journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living” (Luke 15:13).
- II. I am sure this father was deeply grieved and concerned about his son, and mourned over his departure.
- III. However, the father did not send out letters of disinheritance to area families, nor even a certified letter to the pigpen where his son was working.
- IV. One day this wayward son came to his senses and in humble repentance he returned to his father (Luke 15:15–24).
- V. The father rejoiced that his son who was once dead was now alive—he who was lost was now found!



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