

WITHDRAWAL OF FELLOWSHIP

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"Wherefore to him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12). This and other similar warnings in the Bible plainly show it is possible for a child of God to fall from grace. Just what action should the church take when one of its members becomes unfaithful? As noted in the December issue: 1) The church must first be certain that a person is truly living in sin before taking steps to try to restore him/her. 2) The church must maintain a proper attitude toward those who have fallen, and through it all, it must determine to give its greatest efforts to bring them back to Christ.

The third step is that someone needs to go to this brother, express concern and love for his soul, and show him from the Scriptures in what way his life is not in accordance with the will of the Lord. While showing him his error, it may be necessary to teach him more perfectly the way of the Lord (Acts 18:26). Sometimes Christians make mistakes out of ignorance, but if they have a good and honest heart (Luke 8:15) they will receive the truth about their sin if we show it to them from the word of God.

If a member of the church who is living in sin does not seem prepared to receive the truth, then it is appropriate to point out to them the consequences of continuing to live in sin without repentance. "For the wages of sin is death..." (Rom. 6:23). Along with this, we should exhort them to repent, as Jesus did the church in Ephesus: "Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent" (Rev. 2:5). This verse has a warning in it. Jesus plainly pointed out what would happen if they did not repent. Sometimes strong warnings can be very helpful: "Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly..." (1 Thess. 5:14).

Depending on the circumstances, if our brother in sin has still not shown he is ready to repent, we need to rebuke him. Jesus said, "If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him, and if he repent, forgive him" (Luke 17:3). We realize Jesus is talking about a

specific case in which there is a personal problem or conflict between two of His disciples, but the principle would apply when any brother is living in sin. What did Jesus say? "Rebuke him." Paul charged Timothy, "Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear" (1 Tim. 5:20).

Let us add this word of caution. If it is necessary to rebuke a brother or sister in Christ, we must make sure we do so with the right motive. We should not rebuke others with the idea that we are better than they are. The proper motivation for rebuking those in sin is found in Titus 1:12,13: "...rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith" -- that they might repent and live pleasing to God.

It is sad for a child of God to leave the safety of Christ's flock. However, it is equally tragic when the other sheep (Christians) see that one has fallen away, but they do not do anything to restore him! We thank God there are many Christians who work diligently in an effort to help restore those who have left the truth. But even when we do all we can, there are times our fallen brothers and sisters refuse to repent. If we have visited such brethren, have expressed our love and concern for them, have taught them what their mistake is, have exhorted them, warned them, rebuked them, and plainly shown them the eternal consequences if they do not repent and return to their first love, then is there anything else we can or must do?

We would surely want to pray for them, not that God would forgive them before they truly repent, but that they might have a change of heart and return to their loving Savior. After warning and rebuking them, just how long should we wait before taking further action? The Bible does not give a specific answer, so it is a matter of wisdom as to what the elders (leaders) of the church might think best in a specific case. However, from the Lord's example we see that there should be a period of time in which those in sin have an opportunity to repent. Speaking of Jezebel, Christ said, "And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not" (Rev. 2:21).

When all of the church's efforts to restore an erring member have not succeeded in bringing about repentance, then the church must withdraw its fellowship from him. The Lord commands us to do this (1 Cor. 5). When Paul wrote about a brother in

the church at Corinth who was a fornicator, he charged the other members to deliver this brother unto Satan (5:4). He told them to have no company with this brother (5:9), not to eat with him (5:11), and to put him away from among them (5:13). This fornicator was still a member of the church and still a brother in Christ, however since he had become an unfaithful brother, the church could not support him in his sin by continuing to fellowship him.

In 2 Thessalonians 3:6 we read, "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us." The Lord commands us to withdraw from those members of the church who walk disorderly, that is, who do not live according to the teaching of Jesus Christ. In verses 14-15 it is written: "And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother." Some do not agree with what the Holy Spirit commanded in these verses or think that withdrawing fellowship is either out-of-date or too drastic. However, Scripture still says, "withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly." Love demands obedience. "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments; and his commandments are not grievous" (1 John 5:3). Brethren, if we love God and the souls of fallen saints, then we will obey what God commands us to do and withdraw from them if they refuse to repent. We admit that it is not pleasant to cease having fellowship with those whom we love with all of our heart, but if that is what the Lord tells us to do, then we must do it, and we must do it willingly.

From whom should a congregation withdraw its fellowship? From all who do not walk in harmony with the teachings of Christ and refuse to repent (2 Thess. 3:6,14). This includes those who are lazy and do not work but is not limited to them (3:10-12). The church is to have no fellowship with its members who are fornicators, covetous, extortioners, idolaters, railers, or drunkards (1 Cor. 5:10,11). The church is to have no fellowship with those brethren who do not abide in the doctrine of Christ. "Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine

of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed. For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds" (2 John 9-11). The church is to have no fellowship with those who are heretics or who cause division in the body of Christ (Titus 3:10,11). If a child of God does not obey the inspired teaching of the New Testament, then the church is obligated to "note that man and have no company with him" (2 Thess. 3:14). This is not some man's personal opinion, it is simply what the Bible commands.

Why should the church withdraw from those members who have fallen away?

1) To please the Lord. He commanded us to do it (2 Thess. 3:6,14). So, if we want to please Him, then we must obey Him in this matter.

2) To try to save their souls. That is our motivation: "... that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (1 Cor. 5:5). Paul also said we are to withdraw from erring members so that they may be ashamed (2 Thess. 3:14). Hopefully, their shame will lead them to repentance unto the salvation of their souls (2 Cor. 7:10).

3) To keep the church pure. When a person has a terrible disease in his foot which could spread to the rest of the body and eventually cause death, it is sometimes necessary to remove the foot with the desire of saving the person's life. So it is in the church. It is necessary to remove an evil influence that is dangerous to the spiritual health of the church. In the case of the brother in Corinth who was a fornicator, Paul wrote, "Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened..." (1 Cor. 5:6,7).

4) To show the world the church will not tolerate sin in its midst. The church must have and maintain a good moral reputation in the

community. It will lose this if the world sees that the church allows sin to continue in the lives of its members without the church taking action to discipline those who are walking disorderly.

5) To serve as a warning to other Christians. Members are warned that unfaithful living is not acceptable! When the Lord killed Ananias and Sapphira for lying we read, "And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things" (Acts 5:11). Withdrawing from unfaithful saints causes other Christians to seriously examine themselves (2 Cor. 13:5).

If the elders (or brothers in the absence of elders) of the congregation of which I am a member decide the church must withdraw from certain members who have left the faith, then it is the responsibility of *me and every other brother and sister* to support that decision! We support that decision by not defending or encouraging them in their sin and by keeping no company with them that would cause them to think that we in any way condone their lifestyle (1 Cor. 5:9-11). Those brothers and sisters who continue to have fellowship with those from whom the church has withdrawn are themselves sinning and need to repent or otherwise, they are subjects of withdrawal also.

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