

The Harvester



Preparing Souls

To Serve The Lord



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The Abuse of “Disfellowshipping”

By Brian R. Kenyon

What if Diotrephes (3 Jn. 9) wrote a letter notifying area churches of Christ that the congregation over whom he “loves to have the preeminence” has withdrawn fellowship from Gaius (3 Jn. 1-8)? Should local churches automatically honor such a letter? What if a congregation today wrote a letter withdrawing fellowship from a brother known to be faithful? Should that letter be honored without further investigation? While it is true that Scripture is full of examples of those who were once faithful, then turned away (cf. Demas, Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:10), should members of the church automatically withdraw fellowship from a once-thought-to-be-faithful brother alleged to be unrepentant of continuous sin without confirming whether or not such allegations are true?

There are two areas of potential abuse when it come to withdrawing fellowship. First, there are some congregations who withdraw fellowship because their leaders have a strong difference of opinion about matters of expediency than the person or group of people from whom they are withdrawing fellowship. Second, there are congregations who withdraw fellowship from individuals as a matter of revenge. That is, because another Christian or group of Christians went against the advice of another congregation’s elders or “leadership” in a local matter of judgement, perhaps even doing the very opposite. Perhaps that other party went about something in a way (not inherently sinful) that they would not. The congregation then “gets back at them” by withdrawing fellowship. Both of these abuses are unscriptural and worthy of examination.

Opinion Over Expediency Is Not Grounds

For Withdrawing Fellowship

There is a tremendous need among Christians, especially elders, to understand the concept of expediency. Much fellowship has been unnecessarily broken over matters of expediency. Recently, one brother in Christ began his post on social media, “Full Disclosure: I am non-institutional in my beliefs.” The history in our brotherhood of “non-institutional” versus “institutional” stands as testimony that misunderstandings of expediency have unnecessarily divided brothers and sisters in Christ! That same misunderstanding must not be allowed to further divide local churches by unnecessarily withdrawing fellowship from faithful brethren.

What is meant by the term “expediency”? *Webster’s Dictionary* defines the English term as that which is “useful for effecting a desired result; suited to the circumstances or the occasion; advantageous; convenient.” The English word “expedient” is found seven times in the King James Version (Jn. 11:50; 16:7; 18:14; 1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23; 2 Cor. 8:10; 12:1). Of particular interest are those in First Corinthians:

All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any” (6:12)

All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not” (10:23)

The Greek word behind the English translation is *sumphero* (συνφέρω), which is also translated by the King James Version as “profit” (1 Cor. 7:35; 10:33; 12:7; Heb. 12:10), “profitable” (Mt. 5:29-30; Acts 20:20), “better” (Mt. 18:6), and “is [not] good” (Mt. 19:10). This word means “to help, confer a benefit, be advantageous or profitable ... something that is useful or helpful” (Bauer 780). No unlawful action can be done expediently (cf. Rom. 3:8). Also, merely because an action is lawful does not mean that it is always expedient. All lawful actions do not necessarily edify (1 Cor. 10:23 cf. 1 Cor. 8:1-13).

For example, eating meat is a matter of indifference to God. Christians are authorized to eat meat (Rom. 14:1-3), even if it was used in sacrifice to a pagan idol (1 Cor. 8:1-6). However, a meat-eating Christian does sin if his insistence to eat meat influences another brother or sister to sin, either by violating his or her “weak” (i.e., spiritually immature) conscience, thinking he or she has to eat meat to be accepted, or by thinking the eating of meat is still participating in idolatry and that such participation is acceptable in Christianity (1 Cor. 8:7-13). Therefore, something like eating meat is not inherently sinful, but can be instrumentally so if such eating causes another to sin!

Should an eldership that thinks eating meat is inherently sinful, withdraw fellowship from a brother who thinks eating meat is right as long as such eating does not cause others to sin? Of course not! The most obvious problem with this scenario is that an eldership who thinks eat-

ing meat is inherently sinful does not know what the Bible teaches relative to that subject!

Eating meat is not a very controversial subject of expediency among brethren in America, but what about supporting “human institutions” (a general [derogatory?] term used for any work not under the direct oversight of a local church’s eldership) or whether a woman can write the checks from a local church’s bank account? Any eldership or “church leader” who thinks these things are inherently sinful does not know what the Bible teaches relative to these issues. The all “human institutions” are inherently sinful view would mean that two brethren from different congregations meeting each other on an airplane for the first time would be in sin if they “teamed up” to evangelize the hotel where they were staying. The “no woman can ever be involved in any way with the local church’s bank account” view just simply does not understand the expedient nature of banking and the local church. Where in the Bible does one read that any New Testament church had a bank checking account?

Matters of expediency should not normally be considered matters of fellowship. Only when someone persists in a matter of expediency that endangers others’ souls (such as eating meat in the presence of others knowing that it causes them to sin, 1 Cor. 8:9-12) should it be considered a matter of fellowship. In such cases, however, brethren need to come together and first objectively study the issue before sending

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letters of withdrawal of fellowship. The damage done by such carelessness can be irreversible!

Revenge Is Not Grounds For Withdrawing Fellowship

Paul wrote to the Corinthians,

And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. ²I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; ³for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? ⁴For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not carnal? (1 Cor. 3:1-4)

Unfortunately, some brethren today, even in elderships and among "church leaders," are too carnally minded. Their goal seems to be "leadership," but not in a Biblical way. They seem to view church leadership as the misguided apostles viewed prominence in Christ's kingdom (Mt. 20:20-28).

It seems that in some congregations, the "leading brothers" are always in a power struggle, vying for positions of greater "leadership." This attitude manifests itself in many ways. One of those ways is to seek revenge on those who disagree with them in matters of expediency. One way to "take vengeance" on these dissenters is to build a straw man argument as to why their view is sinful and then, because of that, withdraw fellowship. Such behavior, of course, is unbiblical, for it is founded upon the destructive attitude of pride (Pr. 13:10; 16:18; 28:25). What Jesus told His misguided apostles back then is still applicable today,

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. ²⁶Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. ²⁷And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—²⁸just as the Son of Man did

not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many. (Mt. 20:25-28)

Conclusion

While it is true that there are many more local churches that fail to practice the withdrawal of fellowship when it is necessary than those who practice it in an unscriptural way, the abuse of withdrawing fellowship needs to be addressed as part of the "whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27).

Fellowship is much too precious and the number of faithful congregations are too few to be wrecking God-ordained fellowship by using the withdrawal of fellowship for any other purpose than for what God intended: to save the apostate soul, to keep the local church free from destructive influence from within, and to maintain the distinction between the church and the world (1 Cor. 5:1-13; 2 Thes. 3:6-15). 

Works Cited

Bauer, Walter. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 2nd rev. ed. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1979.

Special Prayer Request

Jackie M. Stearsman, director of FSOP from 1992-2003, was recently diagnosed with an aggressive form of leukemia. He is undergoing treatments. Doctors will not know the success of these treatments until after three rounds. Please pray for Jackie, Joyce, and the family.

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Transgender Bathrooms? **“Give Me A [Potty] Break!”**

Even a guy like me, who only listens to the news when he is driving in the car and it happens to be on the radio or when he is visiting a place that has it on television, has been blown away by all this transgender bathroom discussion. The thrust of this article is not about identifying an alleged chemical imbalance in the brain that causes a person of one gender to dress and act like a person of another gender. It is not about God’s teaching against men dressing like women (cf. Deut. 22:5; 1 Cor. 11:2-16, where at least part of the lesson in verse 14 is that men are not to appear as women in any given culture). It is not to “demonize” nor make “monsters” out of people of one gender who dress and act like people of another gender. It is not about policy that gives sexual predators and pedophiles the “green light” to prowl the bathroom of their choice. Rather, this article is about another glaring example of this world’s attempt to rid life of any objective standard by retraining society to think that there is no difference nor consequences in rejecting what the Bible teaches! How ridiculous can policy-makers be to think it is perfectly fine for guys to intermingle with girls in the bathroom or, even as some propose, in school locker rooms? Truly, this is a modern illustration of what Paul said about the Gentiles: “although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools” (Rom. 1:21-22)!

What can faithful Christians do in a cultural environment such as this? First, know what the Bible teaches concerning God, human nature, and sin. Our faith is built on our knowledge of God’s word (Rom. 10:17). Second, continue to live as God instructs, not as the world does (Rom. 12:1-2). Flush ungodly political correctness down the toilet ... of any appropriate bathroom! Third, not only be ready to answer those who ask why you are different from this world (1 Pet. 3:15), but also take every opportunity to verbally teach others what the Bible says because it contains all the answers we need to please God (2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:3). Fourth, realize that “evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived” (2 Tim. 3:13). There is “no new thing under the sun” (Eccl. 1:9). God’s people have had to live among the foolish from shortly after the beginning of time. Let us be courageous and stand up for God, “knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58)! —*Brian Kenyon*