

Withdrawing Membership

By Paul R. Blake

I was recently asked a question by a fellow evangelist who serves as an elder in a distant congregation. The elders found themselves in a position where they had to withdraw fellowship from an erring sister who chose to abandon the faith. Her kinfolk were insisting that there is no need to withdraw fellowship from her because she has already withdrawn her membership from that local church. The question is: Can one preempt local church discipline by withdrawing his or her membership in the local church. The short answer: No. Here's why.

To dismiss the elders admonition to repent or be withdrawn from by insisting that they consider the erring Christian's membership withdrawn constitutes a rejection of the New Testament instructions regarding subjection to the elders. Elders are not asking for anything outside of their duty, responsibility, and authority as elders of a local church when they ask to meet with the fallen Christian for the purposes of restoration, nor are they asking for anything grievous, onerous, or unfair. Their interest in meeting with the impenitent disciple is intended for his good; they have no other motives beyond that apart from the fact that they must give an accounting to the Lord as His servants in the local church. The word of God outlines the response an erring Christian must have to the overtures of dedicated elders. "Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct... Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you" (Heb. 13:7, 17). When elders are vigilant for the souls of drifting Christians, it serves as a safety net designed to protect them from falling completely to their spiritual demise. To reject the appeal of concerned elders gives cause for immediate and lasting fear for the wellbeing of the unrepentant erring Christian.

Members of local congregations are at liberty to depart and work with other churches as they wish and as such choices are in their best interests before the Lord. Elders are not authorized to force members to make specified choices; they can offer counsel and strong admonition, but they cannot order anyone to stay or leave. However, it is misguided to believe that withdrawing one's membership voids the elders' duty to the local congregation in the wake of a departure that involves un-Christ-like conduct. In short, withdrawing membership does not preempt local church discipline. Local church discipline is not merely limited to the purpose of restoring the erring to the faith; it serves to maintain the health of the congregation in the event that the erring one refuses to be restored. Paul's address to the church at Corinth makes it clear that the integrity of the church there was the first concern (1Cor. 5).

First, one cannot expect that withdrawing his membership will prevent the local church from withdrawing fellowship from him. It is understandable that he would ask, but he can have no reasonable expectation of an affirmative answer. Faithful and erring Christians alike may feel pain over the fallout from sin that elders must address, but they must support the efforts and leadership of the men who must make these hard decisions.

Second, withdrawing from the impenitent, erring Christian is not primarily for nor limited to his benefit. It is misguided to think that discipline is strictly for the purpose of restoring the fallen; it is also for the benefit of the congregation. Look at the context of 1Cor. 5; Paul's emphasis is clearly on exercising discipline for the health of the church at Corinth and less for the interests of the fornicator. Five of the thirteen verses in that chapter specifically address the effects of his sin on the local church. Discipline must be practiced for the church regardless of whether or not it produces repentance in the sinner. In addition, when has the Lord ever told elders that if they think a command will not produce the desired result, they are excused from keeping it?

Third, withdrawing one's membership cannot void the elders' responsibilities to the local church. It is a logical fallacy to reason that if one Christian refuses to fulfill his duty, it exempts others from doing theirs. Elders leading a local church to withdraw fellowship is a separate matter from the person who is the object of discipline choosing whether to remain a member or to leave.

This issue appears to be less about what the correct procedure is and more about wanting to avoid embarrassment for erring Christian. In truth, embarrassment is one of the Divinely ordained purposes of local church discipline. "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 (2Thes. 3:14). Elders must move forward with discipline regardless of occasional threats from unrepentant erring Christians or their families. It is difficult for the men in the arena who know that there may be negative fallout, but in spite of that they know they must move forward with the New Testament instructions for local churches.

A Collection of Legends

The Russian Government has issued a dictionary of foreign words in which the word "Bible" is defined as follows: "A collection of different legends, mutually contradictory and written at different times, and full of historic errors, issued by churches as a 'holy book.'" (Sunshine Magazine, June 1951)

My thought: Which country is still standing (the USSR is gone) and what book is still here (the Bible)? Like the blacksmith's anvil the word of God endures. Forever, O LORD, Your word is settled in heaven (Psalm 119:89). (Kent Heaton; found in a church bulletin dated July 31, 1952)

Moving the Barn

"For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything" (1Thes. 1:8).

Herman Ostry's barn floor was under 29 inches of water because of a rising creek. The Bruno, Nebraska, farmer invited all his friends and neighbors to a barn raising. He needed to move his entire 17,000-pound barn to a new foundation more than 143 feet away. His son Mike devised a lattice work of steel tubing, and nailed, bolted, and welded it on the inside and the outside of the barn. Hundreds of handles were attached. After one practice lift, 344 volunteers slowly walked the barn up a slight incline, each supporting less than fifty pounds. In just three minutes, the barn was on its new foundation. Likewise, local congregations, when all the members work together, can accomplish great good in leading many souls to Christ.