



# The Good News

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## What does it mean to “withdraw fellowship”?

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There are times in a local church when withdrawing from a brother or sister is necessary and, indeed, commanded. Paul rebuked the brethren in Corinth for being slow to put away from among themselves the wicked brother living in sin, and then exhorted the brethren in Thessalonica to withdraw from anyone who was walking disorderly or out of step with God’s revealed truth (*1 Corinthians 5:13, 2 Thessalonians 3:6*).

It is common, when the formal announcement of withdrawal is made, we hear that we are “withdrawing our fellowship” from a brother or sister. How do you interpret such a statement? Scripturally speaking, are we literally “withdrawing fellowship”?

The Greek word translated “fellowship” denotes a *sharing in common*. With thanksgiving we “share in common” the body and blood of Christ as we partake of the bread and the cup in the Lord’s Supper (*1 Cor. 10:16*). Philemon was praised for the “fellowship of thy faith” or the sharing of his working faith which manifested itself in refreshing the hearts of the saints (*Philemon 1:6-7*). Paul “shared in” and had fellowship with the Philippians by receiving the help they gave (*Philippians 4:15*).

No fellowship or “sharing in common” exists between righteousness and iniquity (*2 Corinthians 6:14*). Continuing to walk in the Light as God is in the light is essential to having fellowship with God and, as a result, necessary if we are to be in fellowship with one another (*1 John 1:6-7*). When people walk disorderly or continue in sin, they have severed fellowship with God, and by extension they have severed their fellowship with the faithful. So, what is it that we are withdrawing? It is not spiritual fellowship, for that has already ceased to exist by their choice to sin and not repent.

Could it mean we are “withdrawing our approval” from a brother or sister who is now walking disorderly, when we say we are withdrawing fellowship? Approval and fellowship, though distinctive in meaning, accompany one another. For example, James, Cephas (Peter) and John gave “the right hands of fellowship” to Paul and Barnabas (*Galatians 2:9-10*). What they “shared in common” was preaching the truth of the Gospel, and not forgetting the poor as Peter focused upon the Jews and Paul upon the Gentiles. Extended was the right hand, indicating approval as they “shared in common” the truth and commands of the gospel of Christ.

Imagine for a moment what would have happened if Paul ceased to preach the truth of the Gospel or refused to remember the poor. Peter might withdraw his right hand which once indicated recognition and approval of Paul’s works, but fellowship would have already ceased. A formal statement might be made recognizing fellowship with God has already ceased with one in such sin, but that is different from saying we are now “withdrawing fellowship from Paul.” What we really mean is we are withdrawing our approval as fellowship has already ceased.

Speaking as the oracles of God, Christians are commanded to “withdraw yourselves” from the brother walking disorderly. This

includes the concept that one is to “have no company” with the brother or sister who is walking out of step with the Lord (*2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14*). We are “not to keep company” with a brother or sister who is persistent in their sin, “with such a one, no, not to eat” (*1 Corinthians 5:11*). By making an announcement to the congregation that we are “withdrawing fellowship” from an individual, here is what we mean: This brother or sister has been found to be in sin and will not repent. We recognize that their fellowship with the Father has ceased. Therefore, we acknowledge that we can no longer approve of this individual’s state before God (because of sin), and this therefore affects our relationship with them. We can no longer be found in company with the individual (*except for the effort to save the soul through study, Jas. 5:19-20, Gal. 6:1*).

There are those in the world who condemn such “judgmental actions”. Discouragingly, what hurts even more is that there are those in the Church that also condemn it. It has been suggested to me in the past that such actions, while effective in New Testament times, no longer carry the same effect and should therefore be abandoned. What is more, this individual went so far as to suggest that we could actually be harming the soul by taking such action, and that such action conflicts with our duty as Christians to seek and save the lost.

Let us be clear here: the duty of the Christian, EVERY Christian, is to the Truth of God’s Word and to be obedient to it. Paul does not mince words in *1 Cor. 5:11-13*, “But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner” (this is by no means a comprehensive list) – “not even to eat with such a person. For what have I to do with judging those who are outside” (outside the church) “Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore put away from yourselves the evil person.” The term Paul uses here for “judging” is the idea of “carrying out a sentence”. While I can point out to people in the world what sin is and how it applies to them, I cannot take any action against them. God will do that at Judgment Day. However, those within the church submit themselves to the oversight of the church. Those individuals who are found to be walking in sin and do not repent, the church is COMMANDED to “put away...the evil person”, thus carrying out an action which clearly shows that the individual is not in a saved state before God.

While people outside and inside the church may condemn the action of withdrawing from sinning brethren, they cannot argue that God has commanded His people to exercise such action. For by such action, we teach the lost soul that there are consequences, physical and spiritual, to their sinful conduct (with the hope it will bring them back), and we keep the body of Christ pure from sin. To do anything less would truly be a dereliction of the Christian duty.