

“EXCOMMUNICATION”

What Does the Bible Teach?

by Vance A. Stinson

There should have been tears of joy. But *fear* left no room for gladness. There should have been hugging, and laughter, and open, abundant rejoicing. But there were none.

Hours earlier, a man who had never seen the light of day opened his eyes for the first time—a *miracle from God*. The man’s parents, fearing the “minister” before whom they had been called to testify, lacked the bravery to let their true feelings show.

“Is this your son, who ye say was born blind?” the “minister” asked. “How is it that he now sees?”

“Yes, this is our son,” answered the man’s father, timorously. “He was born blind, but...we don’t know by what means he now sees...or who...who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is old enough to answer for himself.”

The man’s parents—their hearts aching, their minds bewildered with mixed emotions—stood quietly, fearfully, as all eyes turned to their son, whose eyes had looked upon no man before that day.

And what did this blind man see? He saw two people whose voices he recognized, whose faces he had lovingly touched, exploring their features with trembling fingers as he tried to print in his mind their appearances. He saw, for the first time ever, his own parents, who had no other recourse but to permit him to become a beggar to help supplement their meager income. He had never seen them before—never seen a tree, a flower, a sunset. How badly he wanted to cross over to them, take them in his arms; how badly he wanted to shout for joy—to exclaim to all he was *seeing!* But he hesitated. He couldn’t recognize from their facial expressions what they were experiencing—but there was no mistaking the anguish, the pain, the fear, in their voices.

What was it the man’s parents were so afraid of? What could have been so dreadful as to cause them to hide their feelings, to speak timorously?

“These words spake his parents, because they *feared* the Jews [Pharisees]: for the Jews had agreed already, that if any man did confess that He [Jesus] was Christ, *he should be PUT OUT of the synagogue*” (John 9:22).

The man’s parents had agreed, in hurried secrecy, that they would not openly confess to believe in Christ. They knew this could get them in trouble with their church—the local synagogue. Better not risk their social contacts, their friends and relatives, their standing in the community. Besides, it

would be financial suicide. Their livelihood was at stake. Better to give in to the religious leadership. Better to “hang in there,” as they had been told so often—to stay with the synagogue—“*no matter what!*”

The healed man, however, did not share his parents’ fearfulness, but openly declared that anyone capable of the miracle Jesus had performed had to be of God. How did the Pharisees respond?

“They answered and said unto him, Thou wast altogether born in sins, and dost thou teach us? And they *cast him out*” (verse 34).

For being honest, for telling the story the best way he knew how, the man was *excommunicated!* It didn’t matter that a wonderful miracle had occurred! It didn’t matter that a person born blind had opened his eyes, *and could see!* What did matter to the religious leaders was that this “dirty sinner” with a “bad attitude” be cast out of the presence of the “righteous” elite who “sat in Moses’ seat.”

Of course, we all know that those self-righteous, glory-loving Pharisees would stoop to just about anything to maintain their ecclesiastical ostentatiousness. But no religious leader, especially in the world of Christianity, would behave like Pharisees; not in our society—*would they?* Well...read on.

The truth is, Pharisaism is alive and well in the world of professing Christianity. There are religious leaders who, as the Pharisees, delight in “holy” showmanship, and there are those who, not unlike the vain, egocentric Pharisees of Jesus’ day, would much rather inflict fellow human beings with *suffering* than chance the *loss of power* over people’s lives.

Many religious organizations practice one form or another of excommunication—some resorting to *shunning*, or *complete withdrawal* of fellowship. For example, in 1972 the Reformed Mennonite Church excommunicated Robert Bear, a Pennsylvania farmer, for publicly criticizing church leaders. Since his disfellowshipment, Bear’s wife and six children have joined with fellow churchmen in *shunning* him, severing all contacts.

After several years of legal battles with the church, Bear stated in a newspaper ad that he was giving up the fight, hoping the ad would persuade the church to permit his wife and children to return home. His plan failed.

The April 13, 1981 edition of *Newsweek* quoted Bear as

saying, "She [Bear's wife] simply isn't capable of loving me as long as the church owns her, body and soul" ("Shunning Mennonite Resumes Battle," page 22).

Excommunication, or "the ban" as it was once called, was one of the distinguishing features of the early Mennonites. Menno Simons, for whom the Mennonites were named, believed in the strict use of "the ban." From *The Encyclopedia of American Religions*, pages 328, we read: "Menno advocated the strict use [of the ban] as the only means to keep the church free of corrupt sects. He also advocated 'avoidance' or shunning all who were banned. Shunning was centered upon the idea of not eating with the person under the ban; this practice created a significant ingroup problem when one member of a family was under the ban. The practice of avoidance was liberalized over the years by the main body of Mennonites, but it was their distinguishing feature."

Jacob Amman, leader of a party which arose among the more liberal Swiss Mennonites in the late seventeenth century, "stressed the practice of avoidance. A member whose spouse was under the ban was neither to eat or sleep with him or her until the ban was lifted" (*ibid.* page 335). Amman, from whom the Amish derive their name, "placed under the ban all who disagreed with him" (*ibid.* page 336).

From *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, article "Excommunication," we read: "The term excommunication...first appeared in Church documents in the 4th century. As the term suggests, excommunication involves a varying degree of 'exclusion from the communion of the faithful'... From the beginnings of Christianity the central realization and embodiment of 'the communion of the faithful' has always been the Eucharistic Communion; hence it is from the Eucharist as the center of the common sociomystical life of the faithful in Christ's Body, the Church, that the excommunicate is primarily excluded. This is the prime factor characterizing excommunication in all the stages of its historical development."

According to the Catholics, there are two categories of excommunicates. The first, the *tolerati*, do not lose their membership in the church, but, as punishment, are not allowed to receive the sacraments and are not permitted to hold office in the church, among other things. They are, however, permitted to attend church services. The second category, the *vitandi*, are described as "those to be shunned" (*The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, article "Excommunication, Canonical"), and "are to be expelled from [church] services, or, if they do not leave, the services are to be discontinued if possible" (*ibid.*).

The *vitandi* "may not attend any form of public divine worship, he loses any and every ecclesiastical office, rank, stipend, or dignity which he may possess, and the faithful are warned to have as little social intercourse with him as it is possible or convenient. No one is 'excommunicatus vitandus' unless he has offered physical violence to the Pope, or been explicitly and by name pronounced 'vitandus' by the Holy See" (*The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, article "Excommunication").

The practice of shunning is not new. Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Episcopa-

lians, and Seventh Day Adventists are among the many denominations, sects, and cults which have practiced, or do practice, one form or another of excommunication. Some rarely employ disfellowshippment, viewing it as an absolute last resort, while others constantly hold the threat of excommunication over the heads of their disciples.

What does the Bible teach about this subject? Did Jesus Christ authorize "marking" and shunning? Should smokers and makeup-wearers be categorized alongside murderers, adulterers, and liars—each stamped with the label "SINNER"—and cast out of God's Church? Let's seek Bible answers!

"Mark Them..."

Churches that discipline by shunning base their practice on Romans 16:17: "Now I beseech you, brethren, *mark them* which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and *avoid them.*"

To "mark," according to some religious leaders, is to publicly *brand* or *label* persons as sinners to be avoided. Of course, those who do the "marking"—ministers, usually—are not to be questioned by the laity. And lay members, if they wish to retain their membership, are forbidden to continue fellowship with the "marked."

According to one church organization, "mark them...and avoid them" means to "AVOID THEM entirely" (Herbert W. Armstrong, *The Worldwide News*, May 4, 1981, "Can We Fellowship the Disfellowshipped?" page 5); and to show kindness and love to disfellowshipped ministers who have continued their ministries is likened to showing "kindness and love toward Satan" (HWA, *WN*, Feb. 25, 1980, "God Commands That We Avoid Certain Ones!" page 1). In fact, such ministers are regarded as ministers of the devil: "These people, even if sincere and deceived, are in SATAN'S service, doing what SATAN WANTS DONE—helping SATAN try to DESTROY God's one and only TRUE CHURCH!" (*ibid.*).

Church members, in some cases, have even been told to withdraw from disfellowshipped relatives and family members (HWA, *The Good News*, April, 1980, "Which Family Comes First?"). "...we are to withdraw ourselves from every BROTHER—or sister—son or daughter, etc. If it is a father or mother, we must still HONOR them, even in withdrawn fellowship" (*WN*, "Can We Fellowship The Disfellowshipped?" page 5).

In spite of this edict handed down to church members, Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong continued to fellowship with both of his daughters and their husbands, even though he had put them out of his church many years previously. They stayed in his home; many times he visited them in their own homes, and took them on trips overseas. Still, such contact with disfellowshipped family members among the laity was absolutely forbidden. Few were aware of this double standard, apparently.

Families have been divided, friendships destroyed, marriages shattered—all in the name of *religion!* Some, out of *fear* and *trembling* instilled by power-wielding, authoritarian "leaders," have broken off otherwise healthy friendships

and family relationships, having been *warned* of the “danger” and “sinfulness” of continued association with the excommunicated.

Church members who continue fellowshiping with the disfellowshipped, and who insist upon showing them kindness and love, are sometimes accused of trying to be “more righteous than God,” and are, themselves, *threatened* with disfellowshippment.

Of course, those who practice excommunication and shunning claim they are just humbly obeying God’s command to “mark” and “avoid” certain ones, and assure their subjects that such actions are done in “love” and are part of God’s way of “justice.”

But what does it mean to “mark” those who are contentious?

When Paul wrote, “...mark them which cause division... and avoid them,” did he mean to *completely avoid* them? Were their names to be announced before the church? Was anyone who chose to associate with them also to be “marked” and “avoided”? Was any “marked” minister who continued his ministry automatically “Satan’s servant”? Was anyone who listened to an excommunicated minister to be publicly *labeled* (“marked”)? Just what did he mean?

Let’s note several points about Paul’s statement.

First, the word “mark” in Romans 16:17 is translated from the Greek, *skopeo*, which means “to look at, behold, watch, contemplate...used metaphorically of looking to” (W.E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, page 715).

The word *skopeo* is again translated “mark” in Philipians 3:17: “Brethren, be followers together of me, and *mark them* which walk so as ye have us for an ensample.” The “marked” in this sense were those who followed the apostle as he followed Christ. Of course, they were not labeled or branded; there was no formal “marking” of these individuals. Paul merely meant that such Christians should be *noted* for their good deeds—that their examples should be followed.

In II Corinthians 4:18, the word *skopeo* is translated “to look...at”; “look...on” in Philipians 2:4; and “take heed (that)” in Luke 11:35.

Obviously, to “mark them which cause divisions” does not mean to place a special identifying label on them—as God placed a “mark” on Cain—but means simply, as the *Revised Standard Version* says, “to *take note* of those who create dissensions and difficulties” (Romans 16:17). “Take note of” merely means to “be aware of,” as anyone in any situation—church, business, social, etc.—would want to be aware of potential problems so that he could avoid them.

Another often overlooked point is the fact that Paul’s letter to the Romans was *not* a pastoral epistle, but was addressed to “all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints” (Romans 1:7)—the local, *lay brethren*. Paul said, “Now I beseech you *brethren*”—not, “I beseech you ministers”—“take note of those who create dissensions...”

There is no “command” to the ministers to tell the lay membership *who* is to be “marked” and avoided. Each individual member must *judge for himself* in such matters. Furthermore, the passage does *not* say that those “noted”

should be “excommunicated” or “shunned” (a Roman Catholic description, adopted by other churches). It doesn’t even say that they should be forbidden to attend church services! It simply says that members should *take note* of the division makers, and be careful to avoid getting involved with, or in any way demonstrating support of, their division-causing activities.

Some are quick to point out that “mark...and avoid them” are “COMMANDS of GOD,” and back up their position with additional “commands” such as II Thessalonians 3:14: “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.” However, those who are so quick to point out these “commandments” seem to feel that numerous other passages are not as much “commands of God” as the “marking” and “avoiding” scriptures.

For example, in one article on “avoiding certain ones,” the author quotes II Thessalonians 3:14 (quoted above), but neglects to follow with verse 15: “Yet count him not as an enemy, but *admonish him as a brother*.” Is “have no company with him” more of a “commandment of God” than “admonish him as a brother”?

It is utterly impossible to “avoid competely” and “admonish as a brother” at the same time. Obviously, Paul’s instruction to “have no company with him” does *not* mean that all communication is to cease.

Notice Galatian 6:1: “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, *restore such an one* in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.” Is this passage not just as much a commandment of God—inspired of the Holy Spirit—as any other instructions in the New Testament? Or is it more important to “mark” and “avoid” than to “restore” an erring brother?

How is it that a church leader can greatly emphasize the passage which says “avoid them,” while neglecting to so much as mention the admonitions to “restore such an one” and “count him *not as an enemy*, but *admonish him as a brother*”?

Jude wrote, “And of some have compassion, making a difference:

“And others *save with fear, pulling them out of the fire*; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh” (Jude 22-24). Does the God who “so loved the world, that He gave his only begotten Son” (John 3:16)—the God who “is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (II Peter 3:9)—place greater importance on “marking” than on *rescuing* the wayward brother?

Religious leaders (particularly those obsessed with their own power) would do well to carefully study Ezekiel 34:2-4: “Son of man, prophesy against the *shepherds* of Israel, prophesy, and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God unto the shepherds; Woe be to the shepherds of Israel that do *feed themselves!* should not the shepherds *feed the flocks?* . . .

“Ye eat the fat, and ye clothe you with wool, ye kill them that are fed: but ye feed not the flock.

“The diseased [the erring brother, the spiritually infirm-ed] have ye not strengthened, neither have ye healed that which was sick, neither have ye bound up that which was broken, neither have ye *brought again* that which was *driven*

away, neither have ye *sought* that which was *lost*; but with FORCE and with CRUELTY have ye RULED them."

The above fits the description of too many modern-day "shepherds." How many persons have been thrown out of the church for such "heinous crimes" as wearing makeup, showing up in church in improper clothing, daring to ask sincere doctrinal questions, or to question the authority of the ministry?

Some "shepherds" excommunicate persons for sins and "spiritual problems," but *never* make any efforts whatsoever to *restore* such persons to a state of good spiritual health and well-being.

The Good Shepherd

If the power-wielding "shepherds" described by Ezekiel would carefully pay attention to what God says about them, perhaps they would experience some of the *fear* they seem to enjoy instilling in others. Notice what God says: "Thus saith the Lord God; Behold, *I am against the shepherds*; and I will require my flock at their hand, and cause them to cease from feeding the flock; neither shall the shepherds feed themselves any more; for I will deliver my flock from their mouth, that they may not be meat for them" (Ezekiel 34:10).

The shepherds who please God are much different from the "shepherds" of Ezekiel's prophecy. Notice Peter's instructions to the true shepherds. "The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed:

"Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind;

"Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.

"And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away" (I Peter 5:1-4).

How incredible that some "shepherds" can read such passages as those quoted above, and somehow still find a means of justifying their actions.

Jesus Christ says, "I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.

"But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep.

"The hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep.

"I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine" (John 10:11-14).

A good "hireling" will not hide from the "wolf," but will defend and protect the "flock." He recognizes that the deadliest "wolves" do not always come wearing "sheep's clothing"; sometimes they are seen carrying shepherd's staffs.

Some point to Matthew 18:17 as biblical authority for excommunication and shunning. "...but if he [a sinning brother] shall neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee

as an heathen man and a publican." The Jews of Christ's time did not socialize with publicans, and did not have spiritual (religious) fellowship with the heathen. To treat someone as "an heathen man and a publican," then, it is claimed, is to have no fellowship with him at all.

But remember, Jesus Christ is our example. So to understand what He meant when He said "...let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican," we must look to Him, to see how He treated publicans and heathen.

Notice Matthew 9:10-12: "And it came to pass, as Jesus sat at meat in the house, behold, many *publicans* and *sinners* came and sat down with Him and His disciples.

"And when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto His disciples, Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners?"

"But when Jesus heard that, He said unto them, They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick."

Jesus Himself associated with publicans and sinners. He befriended harlots, thieves, and corrupt businessmen, but *did not* support or approve their activities. Rather, He admonished them to repent, to "sin no more."

So, does "...let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican" mean to "completely avoid," or does it mean to avoid getting so involved that trouble emerges? Should the ministry (and remember, Matthew 18:17 was directed to the ministry) *completely avoid* "marked" individuals, or be a "physician" to the spiritually sick?

Read the entire 18th chapter of Matthew, and note that the main message of the chapter is *forgiveness of sins*, the importance of the "little one" in God's Church, and the care one should take in avoiding offences. "Woe unto the world because of offences," Jesus declared; "for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!"

In many situations, the best way to thoroughly offend someone is to shun him. When a person is spiritually "down," one of the surest ways a minister can offend him is to excommunicate him. Anyone should be able to see plainly that all spiritual "diseases" do not respond equally to the same "medication"—that *disfellowshipment is not the ultimate solution to the problem of sin in the church!*

Jesus Christ is the Chief Shepherd to whom all other shepherds are to look for an example. Notice the words of God's Shepherd: "For the Son of man is come to *save* that which was lost.

"How think ye? if a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray?"

"And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that sheep, than of the ninety and nine which went not astray.

"Even so it is *not* the will of your Father which is in heaven, that *one* of these little ones should perish" (Matthew 18:11-14).

The forgiveness of sins, avoidance of offending the "little one," and *restoration* of the sinning brother, form the context in which verses 15 through 17 should be understood.

"Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go

and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother" (verse 15). Notice, the primary reason for telling a sinning brother his fault is to "gain," or *restore* him.

"But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established" (verse 16). In other words, if "plan one" fails, then take the next step in helping the sinning brother to see his error and repent—take witnesses. Sometimes, however, even that does not work.

"And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church" (verse 17). The main point Christ is making is this: Don't give up on your brother after only one or two attempts to restore him; go the "extra mile"! If one-on-one doesn't work, try bringing two or three. If that doesn't work, "tell it unto the church."

When it becomes abundantly clear that the sinning brother just *will not* acknowledge his error—will not repent—then, *and only then*, is he to "be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican."

Clearly, the main emphasis is on *restoring* the sinner, not excommunicating him.

But is there ever a time for disfellowshipment? Are there Bible examples of disfellowshipment in the New Testament Church?

"Deliver...Unto Satan"

The Bible does not authorize shunning (in the sense of *total* avoidance) as a means of discipline in the church, but we do find examples of disfellowshipment. However, these disfellowshipments occurred only in *extreme* cases. For example, Paul instructed the Corinthians to "put away from among yourselves that wicked person" (I Corinthians 5:13). The "wicked person," in this instance, was an incestuous person who was having an illicit relationship with his father's wife (verse 1).

The Corinthian brethren knew what was taking place, but continued to fellowship with the fornicator, nevertheless. Probably, they even broke bread and enjoyed fellowship in the sinner's home, *where the sin was taking place*, and acted as though nothing were wrong. Such behavior, of course, could only encourage the spread of sin within the church, and give sinners license to go on sinning.

Paul wrote, "...deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (verse 5). In other words: "Give such a person over to Satan (since he insists upon yielding to Satan anyway) by discontinuing fellowship with him. Perhaps such action will help him to see just how shameful his sin is, and lead him to conquer his 'fleshly' nature."

The fornicator *was* disfellowshipped. But before adopting a position based on this example, at least five factors must be considered.

First, we must not assume that to "deliver such an one unto Satan" means to completely discontinue communication with the individual. As we have already seen, "restore such an one" and "admonish him as a brother" are just as much a part of the inspired Word of God as any other

passages. Obviously, one cannot "restore" or "admonish" unless some amount of communication is maintained.

Second, the fornicator's name was not mentioned. So public name-calling (public character assassination) cannot be supported by the account. (That's not to say that there is never a cause for publicly naming certain individuals.)

Third, the *local, lay brethren* were to "deliver such an one unto Satan." The epistles to the Corinthians were written to "the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints" (I Corinthians 1:2). Although it was Paul who gave the instructions to "put away...that wicked person," the responsibility of disfellowshipment rested upon the shoulders of the individual lay members.

Fourth, the particular sin in the account was not just any sin; it was "fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife" (I Corinthians 5:1). Such a sin can hardly be compared with snuff-dipping or cigarette-smoking.

Fifth, the fornicator's sin was not secret, but was known by all. Hence, his sin, especially because it was acknowledged and accepted, was far more than a personal matter. It affected the whole Corinthian church, and would have ultimately led to the means by which sinning could be justified ("If he can do it and get away with it, so can I!").

Paul says, "...if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolator, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat" (I Corinthians 5:11). These are not occasional sins of weakness, but are on-going, unrepented sins which are detrimental to the church.

It should be noted that disfellowshipment is not the solution to every problem in the church. Though it worked in the case of the Corinthian fornicator (see II Corinthians 2:6-8), disfellowshipment, in many cases, will only compound the problem, driving the sinner further from repentance.

In I Timothy 1:19-20, we find another example of disfellowshipment. "Holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck:

"Of whom is Hymenaeus and Alexander; whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme."

Here, again, we have an *extreme* sin—a faith-destroying sin—which was potentially destructive to the church. Little more than this can be derived from the passage. The circumstances are not revealed, and the sin, though called "blasphemy," is not specifically identified. Moreover, we do not know how many people were involved, nor do we know how much time Paul spent trying to show Hymenaeus and Alexander the error of their ways.

To the minister Titus, Paul wrote, "A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject" (Titus 3:10). The word "heretick," in this passage, is the same word translated "sect" in Acts 5:17 and Acts 15:5—"the sect of the Sadducees" and "the sect of the Pharisees"—and means "sectarian."

Can a Christian who fellowships with other Christians, regardless of organizational affiliation, rightly be called a

“sectarian”? Of course not! Sectarrians are those who *separate* themselves (see Jude 19), as did the esoteric Jewish mystic cults of Paul’s day, claiming to be the “one and only” true body of believers—who, as Diotrephes, “forbid-deth them that would” extend the right hand of fellowship to those not of their own secret society. After two admonitions, Paul says, the secterian should be rejected (*The Twentieth Century New Testament* says, “have nothing more to say to him”).

It is clear that all sins do not warrant disfellowshipment. John said, “If we say that we [Christians] have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (I John 1:8). Paul wrote, “For I delight in the law of God after the inward man:

“But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.

“O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?

“I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin” (Romans 7:22-25).

Christians sin! Even Paul and John, apostles of Jesus Christ, occasionally slipped and *committed sin!* Obviously, all sins do not warrant disfellowshipment. Sins which are extreme, which adversely affect the church, which are committed habitually without evidence of repentance—only those sins sometimes necessitate disfellowshipment.

Disfellowshipment, however, does *not* imply complete avoidance and *shunning!* Nor does it necessarily suggest putting persons out of the church—at least, not in every case.

In II Thessalonians 3:6, 14 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...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.”

What did Paul mean by “walking disorderly”? What was the “tradition” to which he referred? Note verses 7 through 11: “For yourselves know how ye ought to follow us: for we behaved not ourselves *disorderly* among you;

“Neither did we eat any man’s bread for nought; but wrought with labour and travail night and day, that we might not be chargeable to any of you:

“Not because we have not power, but to make ourselves an *ensample* unto you to follow us.”

“For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat.

“For we hear that there are some which *walk* among you *disorderly*, *working not at all*, but are busybodies.”

Paul taught, by example, that working for a living was a virtue—that each should work with his own hands, and not permit occasion to the temptations offered by idleness. This was the “tradition” to which he referred. Those who “walked disorderly” were those who did not work, but spent their time minding other people’s business.

Paul was simply saying, “Don’t let these people mind your business. Stay clear of them and their gossip, and don’t let

them ‘leech’ off you.” Actually, nothing is said here of someone being “put out of the church.” And total *shunning* is out of the question, for Paul wrote, “Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother” (verse 15). Further, we again find the burden of responsibility upon the shoulders of the lay membership—“Now we command you, *brethren...*”

An example of how brethren should “withdraw” from those who “walk disorderly” occurred several years ago in a church of approximately 250 members. One of the families attending that church would “leech” off church members if members allowed it. The family would take advantage of people’s generosity and hospitality. Church members who were aware of this simply avoided social involvement with the family. There was no need for excommunication, no need for shunning, and no need for being unfriendly with the family. Furthermore, there was no need for any official ministerial “decree” in the matter.

Strangely, some quote Paul’s instructions to “withdraw” and “have no company,” but *never* explain the context in which those statements are made, and *always* suggest that *complete avoidance* is commanded.

Dealing With Diotrephes

The apostle Paul wrote of “delivering unto Satan” and of avoiding and having no company with certain individuals, but he never spoke of “casting,” “throwing,” “kicking,” or “putting” persons “out of the church.” But there is an example of one minister who did throw persons out of the church. “I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not.

“Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words; and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and *casteth them out of the church*” (III John 9, 10).

Occasionally, a “Diotrephes” will arise in the church. What should lay members do when they find themselves in the shadow of the iron fist of such a “minister”? Should they follow him anyway, relying on God to “work it out”? Notice John’s next comment: “Beloved, *follow not that which is evil*, but that which is good. He that doeth good is of God; but he that doeth evil hath not seen God” (verse 11). This concurs with Jesus’ statement, “Ye shall know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:16).

Apparently, III John was written to a man, Gaius, who had been *excommunicated* by Diotrephes. But note how John addresses Gaius: “The elder unto the well-beloved Gaius, whom I love in the truth” (verse 1). Obviously, John did not acknowledge Diotrephes’ disfellowshipment of Gaius as valid. Rather, he advised Gaius *not* to follow Diotrephes (“that which is evil”).

In John’s second epistle, the apostle advises “the elect lady and her children” (verse 1) to turn away any would-be “minister” who comes along preaching false doctrine. “If there come any unto you and bring not this doctrine [the doctrine of Christ; see verse 9], receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed” (II John 10).

Does this apply to our day? What if the church organization with which you are affiliated begins preaching a false doctrine such as, say, "the primacy of Peter"; should you continue to be supportive of the church? Note John's next statement: "For he that biddeth him God speed [or, he that is in any way supportive of those who "bring not this doctrine"] is *partaker of his evil deeds*" (verse 11).

Some, aware of false doctrines and unbiblical methods of administration in their churches, excuse themselves from responsibility by saying that "God will work it out." Such persons should study the above passages, and realize that God has not excused them from responsibility.

But, someone will argue, the "primacy of Peter" doctrine is not that bad. Oh? Think about it! The doctrine states that God has always worked through only one man at a time. In the Old Testament period, God worked through Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, the judges, the kings, and the prophets—one at a time, according to the doctrine. In the New Testament, John the Baptist was the "one man," until Christ's ministry began. After Christ, Peter became the "one man through whom God worked."

Wait! Peter replaced Christ as "number one" on earth? This is precisely what the Roman Catholic Church teaches. And a few other churches have adopted similar teachings.

According to the "Petrine" concept, God leads His Church through only one man—His "chosen apostle." It is through this agency, according to the concept, that God puts truth into His church. Of course, God would never allow His "chosen" to go wrong, at least not so wrong that the whole church would be adversely affected. This concept—really a doctrine of *infallibility*—is seen clearly in some modern publications.

From *The Kingdom of Jesus* (published by Confraternity Home Study Service), an introductory study of the Catholic faith, we read: "The Church founded by Jesus must have the apostolic group of bishops who are the successors of the apostles themselves. This same Church must also have a leader of this apostolic body in the person of the successor of St. Peter, bed-rock on which Jesus has built His Church. This Church is infallible in teaching the truths of salvation given to us by our Lord. Could we think that Jesus, the way, the truth, and the life, could have been lost by the Church which He Himself founded to last until the end of time? Absurd! And the office of Peter, bed-rock of that Church—could it have disappeared or have been corrupted to teach error instead of truth, sin instead of holiness? That would be equally absurd and insulting to the wisdom and power of Jesus" (page 52).

Now, notice the words of Herbert W. Armstrong in the following excerpts:

"But, if you have proved that this is, indeed, God's true Church for this present time, then you *MUST BELIEVE* that if and when I make a mistake, the LIVING CHRIST will correct me! Indeed HE HAS DONE SO!" (*Good News*, April, 1979, "Personal," page 23).

"If I make a mistake, it is *CHRIST'S* responsibility to set me straight! But DO YOU *BELIEVE* CHRIST IS STILL ALIVE AND *WILL DO IT?*" (ibid. page 24).

"Now suppose a member thinks he or she has found error

in our doctrines. How must you proceed? ...Take it to your local minister or write to headquarters. What must a local pastor do? Send it to headquarters. If it is felt to be a valid truth, it will be brought to me personally, and the LIVING CHRIST will make it clear to my mind!" (ibid.).

"I have said through the years, over the air and in print and before audiences, 'Don't believe me because I say it—look in your own Bible and believe what you find there!'

"But I DO NOT—or, at least, SHOULD NOT HAVE ever said that to our own brethren!" (ibid.).

But to *whom* did Paul write when he said, "*Prove all things!*"? He wrote to the lay membership, the *brethren* of the church! (1 Thes. 5:21). Further, Paul said, "But though *we* (including *himself*, and other church leaders) or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed!" (Gal. 1:8). He did *not* command them to follow him "NO MATTER WHAT!"

Mr. Hebert W. Armstrong continued, "In all this world's history God has never started an important Work or special activity through a chosen human, and then, after that special accomplishment is well advanced, ALLOWED His chosen human leader to the overthrown by Satan—or in any way to turn false!" (*GN*, August, 1979, "Personal: What God Never Did—Never Will—Allow To Happen," page 1).

"Jesus Christ appointed Peter chief apostle to Israel, and Paul chief apostle to the gentiles. They were falsely accused, opposed, criticized—but neither was allowed by CHRIST to turn wrong—though some under them did turn wrong" (ibid.).

"God never yet has let one through whom He STARTED a great project turn wrong—and He has never yet let such an appointed leader of His die *until his job was FINISHED!*" (ibid. page 27).

This is clearly untrue in two major ways. First, Moses was turned away from entering into the promised land—was only permitted to *see* the fabulous country the nations of Israel had waited forty long years to possess. The account is found in Deuteronomy, the 24th chapter. Because Moses had become arrogant on one particular occasion, God refused to allow him to *finish* the great mission upon which he had embarked!

Moses was angry with the people; tired of their murmurings. When God commanded him to "...take the rod...and *speak ye unto the rock* (which is a symbol of Christ) before their eyes," promising to give water to the Israelites and their animals, Moses, instead, "...said unto *them* (the *people*), 'Hear now, ye rebels; *must WE fetch you water out of this rock?*' "

God then said, "Because ye believed me not, to sanctify me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore ye shall not bring this congregation unto the land which I have given them" (Numbers 20:7-11).

Solomon was a great and righteous king when he began to reign over Judah and Israel. Yet, when he became older, God said, "For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not perfect with the Eternal his God, as was the heart of David his father. For Solomon...did build an high place

for Chemosh, the abomination of Moab...and likewise did he (built altars to pagan gods) for all his strange wives...wherefore the Eternal said unto Solomon, 'Forasmuch as this is done of thee, I will surely rend the kingdom from thee...' (I Kings 11:1-11).

Following Solomon's death, the kingdom over which he had been king was torn asunder; the northern kingdom of Israel, with capital city in Samaria, emerged, and the Kingdom of Judah, with capital in Jerusalem, continued under the lineage of kings as God had promised through Abraham.

Also, since it is clear the great commission to the church is to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom of God *in the name of Jesus Christ* to all the world as a witness, and that this great commission is *yet to be completed*—has not even *scratched the surface* in most of the world—it is equally clear that Mr. Hebert W. Armstrong was allowed to die, at age 93½, *long before* the completion of the task he began so many years ago.

There was *no such thing* as one "chief" apostle *over all other apostles*, as the Bible amply proves! (If you have not yet read it, write immediately for our free brochure, *Did Peter Have The Primacy?*) Yet, Mr. Hebert W. Armstrong felt it necessary to adopt this *Catholic* doctrine in order to support his claim to have sole leadership over the church. But how strange, when one considers that the ministry of the Worldwide Church of God teaches, and has taught for many years, that the Roman Catholic Church is the great *false church*—the "great whore" of Revelation 17. The Worldwide Church, of course, claims to be "the one true church." Incredibly, the "primacy of Peter" doctrine—central to the theology of the "great whore"—*has become central* to "the true church"!

In the early centuries, the "primacy" doctrine ran its natural course, resulting in the concept of "papal infallibility." The Worldwide Church's "primacy" teaching has basically run the same course, as the above excerpts indicate. Just as the Roman Catholic Church developed an ultra-authoritarian system of church government, so has the Worldwide Church.

What's frightening about all this is the fact that the huge organized entity which became the Catholic Church was once the *true Church of God!* Do we see the same age-old apostate system again developing within one branch of the true church today?

In all probability, those who continued with Diotrephes, submitting to his authoritarian rulership, *apostatized*, while those who were ousted most likely remained loyal. Both biblical and secular history reveals that the apostate church grew into a large, organized entity, but the true church remained comparatively small, was scattered, and lacked organization.

If you had been a member of the first century church, and had Diotrephes been your pastor, would you have remained "loyal" to Diotrephes, or would you have been one of those to chance provoking your pastor's wrath by daring to fellowship the disfellowshipped? Would you have put on your "blinders" and said, "God will work it out," or would you have *looked responsibility square in the face?*

Your Responsibility

Just what is your responsibility? Should you follow a minister "no matter what"? Should you adopt the position that God would never allow a human leader He appoints to go wrong? Let's see what the Bible says about the responsibility of the lay membership.

First, note I Thessalonians 5:21: "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good." Did Paul direct this statement to nonmembers? Should one *stop* proving once he finds the true church?

As we have seen, the admonition to "prove all things" is directed to the *lay membership* of the church. The epistles to the Thessalonians were not written to the *unconverted*, but were directed "unto the church of the Thessalonians which is in God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ." Clearly, it was the *converted*, local *lay members* who were admonished to "prove all things," and to *keep on proving*, *after* they were in the church!

But can "prove all things" ever include calling an apostle or minister into question? Yes! Paul answers: "But though we ["we" includes apostles and elders], or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be *accursed* [cut-off]" (Galatians 1:8). Here, Paul suggests that if he or anyone else perverts the gospel [see verses 6, 7], the *local lay members* should accept responsibility by putting some distance between themselves and the corruptor. The admonition to "avoid them" would definitely apply here.

Jesus Christ commended the church at Ephesus for putting self-acclaimed "apostles" to the test: "I know thy works, and thy labor, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast *tried them which say they are apostles*, and are not, and hast found them liars" (Revelation 2:2).

And, as shown earlier, John told Gaius to "follow not that which is evil [Diotrephes]," and admonished the elect lady and her children not to receive anyone [preacher] who does not bring the "doctrine of Christ."

In the event of a sin which, if allowed to continue, would adversely affect the church, it is the responsibility of the *lay members* to make a collective effort in dealing with the problem. The Corinthian brethren's dealing with the fornicator is an example of this.

Furthermore, it is the responsibility of the lay membership to *mark* those ministers who pervert the gospel, who conduct themselves in an unseemly manner, and who exalt themselves as did Diotrephes. Paul's admonition to "mark them which cause divisions..." has been totally misinterpreted. The truth is, hundreds of lay members have "marked" (taken note of) those ministers who insist upon preaching such heresies as "the primacy of Peter," and have chosen to "avoid them" by simply removing themselves from under their authority and refusing to hear and support such heresy.

Though it is sometimes necessary to limit or discontinue fellowship, those who truly practice the teachings of Jesus Christ will always seek a means of reconciliation, and will

strive to extend love, mercy and forgiveness toward everyone, even their enemies. Jesus said, "Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy.

"But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;

"That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.

"For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same?

"And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so?" (Matthew 5:43-47).

The Kingdom of God belongs to "the merciful" (verse 7), and to "the peacemakers" (verse 9). *Mercy* is one of the most basic elements of Christianity, and means "1. Kind or compassionate treatment of an adversary, prisoner, etc., in one's power. 2. A disposition to be kind, forgiving, or

helpful" (*Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary*). And a "peacemaker" is one who makes every effort to be reconciled with his adversary.

Jesus Christ taught much about love, kindness, mercy, forgiveness, and patience, but had little to say about disfellowshipment. He stressed the importance of forgiveness, and outlined the steps one should take in restoring an erring brother.

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, James wrote, "Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him;

"Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins" (James 5:19-20).

Clearly, the Christian's responsibility is to extend love, mercy, and forgiveness to all, whether church members in good standing or erring brothers. The most effective means of dealing with sin is not by excommunication and shunning, but is through *love*. For "love covers a multitude of sins" (I Peter 4:8).

If you would like . . .

Personal Counselling:

Many write asking if we have representatives in their *local* areas to counsel with them personally, to answer their questions, and even to baptize in certain cases.

The answer is yes, we do.

The Church of God, International sends personal representatives into communities throughout the United States and British Commonwealth and many other parts of the world.

These representatives can visit you directly in your own home. Of course, none of them will ever call on you unless invited.

But, if you do have questions or require personal counsel for any reason, feel free to write us and request a private appointment. Or, if you'd prefer faster service, please dial 214-561-2525. Our mailing address is Box 2525, Tyler, Texas 75710.