Does the Bible Teach the Principle of *Guilt by Association*?

Dub McClish

Introduction

Is it valid for voters to question candidates for the office of President of the United States about their close associates? In the 2008 presidential campaign this question came to the fore, especially concerning Barrack Obama. His twenty-year membership in the extreme racist and anti-American Jeremiah Wright's Chicago church and his defense of Wright have raised the *guilt-by-association* issue. Additionally, Obama's continued close and amicable relationship with William Ayers, the impenitent early-1970s radical Weather Underground Organization terrorist, further fueled the *guilt by association* charge. Political conservatives argue that such associations are reliable indicators of one's convictions and direction. Predictably, liberal politicos have jumped to Obama's defense, denying the viability of the *guilt-by-association* principle.

Is there such a thing as "guilt by association"? Some brethren have for years answered with a firm "No," denying any Scriptural basis for it and classifying it as unfair, prejudicial, and unjustified. Others have just as boldly and staunchly replied, "Yes," arguing that the Scriptures teach the principle, both explicitly and implicitly.

Let us define the terms of the disputed principle:

- ***Guilt:*** A noun indicating accountability or responsibility for an offense, blameworthiness for wrongdoing, or error in morals, doctrine, or practice.
- ***By*:** A preposition indicating the means through which an action, state, or situation occurs.
- ***Association*:** A noun indicating a relationship between two or more persons or entities.

Given the foregoing definitions, is one to be held accountable for the sins/errors of his associates? Does one incur *guilt by association*?

Various Usages of *Guilt by Association*

Guilt by association is the name of a logical fallacy by which one attempts to discredit a doctrine or practice by associating it with one who is in disfavor. To argue that fellowship with denominational churches is sinful because Max Lucado engages in such fellowship demonstrates this fallacy. Another illustration of this fallacy would be the assertion that the use of instruments of music in worship is sinful because the apostate North Richland Hills Church of Christ near Fort Worth, Texas, employs them. The practices in both cases are sinful, but not because of who is associated with them. They are wrong because the Bible forbids and/or does

not authorize them, either implicitly or explicitly. Our examination of "guilt-by-association" does not pertain to this logical fallacy.

Another facet of "guilt-by-association" is that wherein one actually may be led to commit a sin or embrace an error through the influence of his associates. Paul referred to this danger concerning the incestuous brother whom the Corinthian church was tolerating among them. He commanded them to purge him from their fellowship, stating the principle, "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump" (1 Cor. 5:6). He stated it again in the same letter: "Be not deceived: Evil companionships corrupt good morals" (15:33). While multitudes over the centuries have been led to engage in evil and/or erroneous behavior through the influence of their companions, this is not the "guilt-by-association" with which we are concerned in this study.

The guilt-by-association, which is the focal point of this essay, is that which may or may not be incurred merely as a result of one's favorable association with one who is in error or sin. Does one, though not personally engaging in the sinful practices or holding the errors of his associates, share in the guilt of said sinners by extending fellowship and encouragement to or by defending or endorsing such persons?

Mere Association Does Not Necessarily Imply Endorsement

It is abundantly clear from our Lord's behavior that association **alone** does not imply agreement with or endorsement of one's associates. He ate with and otherwise associated with sinners (e.g., Mat. 9:10–13; Luke 15:1; John 4:4–42), but such associations never involved Him in their sins or errors (Heb. 4:15). Paul consistently preached in the synagogues (e.g., Acts 13:14; 14:1; 17:1; et al.), not in order to endorse the Jews' doctrine and practice, but to refute, correct, and convert. None can fairly accuse him of associating with the Jews in these cases in such a way as to be guilty of their errors.

Associations with Those Who Are Not Christians

We cannot avoid all "association" with sinners, including those who are guilty of immorality, theft, religious error, or other sins, without literally becoming hermits. We come in contact with such folk as we work, shop, travel, attend school, and eat in public places, with no means of even knowing of their sins. Paul stated the simple and obvious fact that to avoid "keeping company" with all such would require us to "go out of the world" (1 Cor. 5:9–10). Again, we see from the above that merely being in the company of those of the world does not imply complicity with their sins. (However, this fact in no way justifies a Christian to choose

people of worldly thinking and behavior as his or her closest friends and companions, as already noted [1 Cor. 15:33].)

One's Associations with Brethren in One's Local Congregation

Paul forbade God's people to "keep company" with impenitent brethren (including eating with them):

> But as it is, I wrote unto you not to keep company, if any man that is named **a brother** be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such a one no, not to eat (1 Cor. 5:11, emph. DM).

Paul gave this order, at least in part, to prevent any hint of further encouragement or endorsement of the brother's sin, which encouragement had formerly characterized the Corinthian saints (vv. 2–6). The Scriptural proscription of association with the sinful brother is not absolute, however. Concerning those from whom the church must withdraw its fellowship, Paul instructed the Thessalonian church:

> 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 they received of us.... And if any man obeyeth not our word by this epistle, note that man, that ye have no company with him, to the end that he may be ashamed. And yet count him not as an enemy but **admonish** him as a **brother** (2 The. 3:6, 14–15, emph. DM).

The prescribed treatment of the sinful person in verse 15 implies at least some communication, if not association, in order to admonish (i.e., to warn or encourage) the erring brother or sister to repent. From the foregoing material, it is clear that the mere act of association with one in sin, in and of itself, does not cause the innocent party in the association to incur guilt.

Associations with Those Outside of One's Local Congregation

May one attend a religious assembly to hear for oneself a false teacher (whether or not he is a brother), so that he can perhaps learn better the way to expose and refute his errors? In 1961, two other brethren and I attended an Oral Roberts "Crusade" in Wichita Falls, Texas, specifically to observe and hear this reprobate so that we might better oppose his errors. Several years ago, I attended a "Good Friday" service in the building of the First Baptist Church, sponsored by the local Ministerial Alliance in Denton, Texas. I specifically wanted to observe the actions and words of Don Browning (preacher for the liberal Singing Oaks Church of Christ in our city), who was a member of the Ministerial Alliance and was one of the speakers (along

with men from six "other" local denominations) for the occasion. (I later exposed his participation in an article that appeared in the Pearl Street congregation's bulletin, *The Edifier*.)

May a preacher accept an invitation to preach in a Gospel meeting or lectureship **in order to** confront error in the congregation or in one or more of the speakers? Let us remember that, in principle, both the Lord and Paul did this very thing, as earlier noted. (If one denies that one can do so without engaging in fellowship with error, one must oppose the participation of faithful brethren in religious debates.) Does one sin who speaks on a lectureship with one who is a false teacher or who may be a fornicator or a crook without correcting or exposing him, **not knowing he was such**? (In May 2005, I was one of several brethren who spoke on the Gulf Coast Lectures in Portland, Texas, with brother Joseph Meador. It was subsequently revealed that he was **at that time** engaged in an adulterous relationship with another man's wife). Although there was "association" with those in sin or error in each of the aforementioned cases, there certainly was no participation in said errors or sins.

The Scriptural Principle of *Guilt by Association*

While we may engage in associations with those in error and sin without becoming culpable with them (as demonstrated above), the Bible nonetheless emphatically sets forth the principle of *guilt by association* in certain circumstances. By this I mean that one may become guilty of the sin or error of his associates, even without personally teaching or practicing those errors. As we shall see, the determining factor is one's association with and approving behavior toward those in sin or error, **while fully conscious of their errors**. Don Browning, mentioned above, well illustrates this circumstance. He consciously, knowingly participated with denominational heretics in such a way as to endorse and encourage them. He reinforced their contentment in their doctrinal and practical errors. **He thereby became a partaker** in their errors and sins. One becomes culpable in such cases because he is an accessory, accomplice, collaborator, and abettor to the one in error and to his sin or error. Criminal law has long acknowledged this principle because it is both logical and just to do so. On this basis the driver of the get-away car is as guilty of a crime as is his partner who robs the bank and shoots a teller in the process.

Numbers 16:26

Numbers 16 records the insurrection Korah, Dathan, and Abiram led against the authority of Moses, God's authorized spokesman and lawgiver. In response to their challenge,

Moses warned those still associated with them: "Depart, I pray you, from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing of theirs, lest ye be consumed in all their sins" (v. 26). Those who continued their association with these rebels would be subject to the judgments against them because such association implied concurrence in their rebellion. Even if some of the associates of these insurrectionists had not personally cried out against Moses, it is clear that to remain amicably associated with them would have made them partakers in the guilt and consequent punishment of the rebels.

Ephesians 5:6–11

In Ephesians 5:6, Paul wrote of the "sons of disobedience" upon whom God's wrath would be administered. He then warned: "Be not ye therefore partakers with them" (v. 7). He further warned: "And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather even reprove them" (v. 11). To have fellowship with such persons would cause those so doing to partake of their guilt and the judgment against their sins. Such fellowship, with no rebuke of the sins, would result in their guilt by association on two counts: (1) Fellowship with (i.e., partaking in) their errors and (2) failure to rebuke the one in error.

2 John 9–11

John declared the reality of guilt by association explicitly:

> Whosoever goeth onward and abideth not in the teaching of Christ, hath not God: he that abideth in the teaching, the same hath both the Father and the Son. If any one cometh unto you, and bringeth not this teaching, receive him not into your house, and give him no greeting: for he that giveth him greeting partaketh in his evil works (2 John 9–11).

In recent years, liberals, clamoring to embrace advocates of almost every stripe of error in their fellowship, have conveniently redefined *the teaching of Christ* in the foregoing passage to mean the teaching **about** Christ (i.e., His Deity). However, respect for both the immediate and remote contexts of this passage demand its reference to the doctrine Christ both taught and inspired/authorized others to teach—the entire corpus of New Testament doctrine.

Giveth him greeting (*biddeth him God speed*, KJV) is from a word that means to rejoice with or wish one well. Thus one who encourages the teacher of doctrines contrary to "the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3), becomes culpable for his errors. The encourager of the sinner becomes guilty of his or her sins. An association/relationship that encourages or implies endorsement of a heretic renders one complicit in heresy. If no other

passage relative to this subject existed, this one is quite sufficient to make the case. The honest exegete cannot escape the conclusion that one who **willingly, knowingly, consciously** associates with individuals, congregations, or institutions so as, whether implicitly or explicitly, to encourage, endorse, or otherwise bid them Godspeed is guilty of the error himself by said amicable association.

Some Practical Applications of the Principle

Congregational Situations

- A family moves to a new location in a job change. They find a congregation that outwardly seems to be faithful and place membership. After a few months, they discover that it provides financial support for brother Dave Miller, whom they know to be a false teacher. Yet this family says nothing to the elders about their concerns, presents no evidence of his errors to them, and continues to contribute money, time, and efforts to the congregation. This family is guilty by association.
- A congregation Scripturally withdraws from a brother for divisive behavior, but two members refuse to honor the withdrawal, continuing to associate with him so as to defend him and approve of his sin. They are guilty by association with him, and if they will not repent, they likewise should be withdrawn from.
- A brother receives an invitation to preach in a Gospel meeting where the preacher is a known impenitent fornicator/adulterer. The invited preacher does not hesitate to accept the invitation, making no attempt to restore the sinful brother either before he goes or while he is there. **The visiting preacher thereby becomes guilty by such association.**
- An employee of Apologetics Press is invited to deliver a series of lectures on apologetics and evidences in a congregation with which he is not familiar (although one could easily familiarize oneself with any congregation in advance). He learns upon arrival that the church is very liberal in doctrine and practice. He delivers his planned lessons without any discussion with the elders or preacher of their liberalism and without any other attempt to expose or correct the church's errors. **He is guilty by association.**
- A preacher is invited to preach in a Gospel meeting, and faithful brethren in the same city, learning about the meeting, warn him months in advance and provide dozens of pages of evidence of the church's digression. Said preacher ignores the warning and chooses not to read any of the documents faithful brethren sent him. He not only preaches in the meeting, but he publicly praises the elders and the preacher, bids them Godspeed, and accepts their accusations against the faithful brethren who issued the warnings. **He makes himself guilty of the errors of the liberal church by his encouragement of their errors.**

Brotherhood Situations

- Abilene Christian University invites a preacher generally known for his soundness in the faith to speak on its annual lectureship on some non-doctrinal subject. Faithful brethren beg him not to lend his influence to the school's apostasy and point out that the school is exploiting

him as a "token conservative." Faithful brethren also point out that some immature brethren will interpret his participation as endorsement of the school. He insists on accepting the invitation on the premise that he "can preach the Gospel anywhere." He speaks on the subject assigned and does not expose any of the heresies of the faculty and administration. **He becomes guilty by association in his implied endorsement of those involved in grievous error.**

- A brother is invited to speak on the Lake Tahoe Family Encampment. Knowledgeable brethren warn him that the program is stacked with liberals and that its director has long been involved in liberalism. The brother ignores the warnings, accepts the invitation, and speaks the Truth on his assigned topic, but he says not a word about the pervasive liberalism. In fact, he accepts an invitation to return the next year. **He is guilty by such association.**
- A brother is invited to speak on the Spiritual Sword Lectures, the Truth in Love Lectures, and the "Polishing the Pulpit" program, knowing that a well-documented impenitent false teacher and encourager of liberals will also be speaking, and he accepts the invitation in spite of these facts. He preaches the Truth on his topic, shakes hands with and cordially greets the erring brother, sits down and eats with him, and never raises an objection to his errors, publicly or privately. **Said speaker makes himself guilty by this kind of association.**
- The director of a school of preaching receives an invitation to speak on the Annual Schertz Lectures, Schertz, Texas, knowing that the local preacher has publicly taught gross error on marriage, divorce, and remarriage and that the Schertz congregation has been marked by a faithful congregation for continuing to support its preacher. Said director attends, delivers his speech, never raises any question about the preacher's error, but instead publicly praises and bids Godspeed to the errant Schertz preacher. **Based on 2 John 10–11, the director participates in the guilt of the preacher.**
- A brother has in years past publicly opposed the elder reaffirmation/reconfirmation program as advocated and practiced by brother Dave Miller. With brother Miller's appointment as Executive Director of Apologetics Press (AP), this brother, a dedicated supporter of AP, faces a dilemma. Determined to continue said support, he first suggests that he is supporting only AP, not its head or any errors of which he may be guilty. However, he soon realizes the folly of this excuse. He knows if he continues to oppose Miller's errors, he cannot support the institution of which he is the head. Likewise, he understands that if he continues to support AP he must cease his opposition to its director. He resolves his dilemma by continuing to support AP, by beginning to defend and endorse Miller, and by claiming to continue to oppose elder reaffirmation/reconfirmation "as the liberals practice it." **He has become implicitly guilty of brother Miller's errors, not to mention of flagrant hypocrisy, by such behavior.**
- A brother is invited to preach in a Gospel meeting at the Phillips Street congregation in Dyersburg, Tennessee, home of Online Academy of Bible Studies (OABS). He accepts, knowing that OABS abruptly broke its contract with the Spring, Texas, congregation to broadcast all of its 2006 lectureship (including its Open Forum) via the Internet because the director of OABS apparently feared the lectureship would expose the errors of certain

brethren reputed to be "somewhat" (Gal. 2:6). The invited preacher also knew that OABS unhesitatingly fulfilled its contract to broadcast the entire Memphis School of Preaching (MSOP) Lectureship (including its Open Forum) only a few weeks after the Spring Lectureship. He further knew that OABS continued to broadcast the morning worship periods of the Forest Hill congregation, home of MSOP. He preached in the meeting at Dyersburg, thereby giving his endorsement to OABS's squelching of the truth about grave brotherhood fellowship issues and its continued encouragement of those who were/are violating God's law concerning fellowship. **Said preacher was guilty by such association, according to 2 John 10–11.**

- A preacher conducts a TV program, and brethren who operate the Gospel Broadcasting Network (GBN) invite him to air his program on their network. This preacher has rightly been opposed to the elder reaffirmation/reconfirmation program and marriage error relating to "intent" as taught by brother Dave Miller. He knows that GBN fellowships, defends, and uses brother Miller in its programming. He joins with GBN and allows his program to become part of its broadcast schedule. Regardless of his claims to the contrary and in spite of his disavowal of the Miller errors, **he incurs guilt by such association.**

Conclusion

All of the above situations reflect specific real occurrences. Every one of them involves and demonstrates "guilt-by-association" as defined and described in 2 John 10–11. We had an expression in central Texas where, in some of my childhood years, my family raised goats: "You can't run with the goats without smelling like them." This earthy expression is not far from the principle John enunciated.

Tragically, many, if not most, of these men who are blatantly involved in "guilt by association" are seasoned men who know better. They are men who for years preached and practiced the Truth found in such passages as Ephesians 5:6–11 and 2 John 9–11. They would doubtless consistently and correctly apply these fellowship principles had Mac Deaver, Jeff Walling, or Rubel Shelly been appointed Executive Director of AP. However, by some means brother Dave Miller seems to have them almost hypnotically in his thrall. A large number of brethren who know better refuse to call him to account for his errors, continuing to embrace him. In the minds of these brethren he **has done** no wrong, **is doing** no wrong, and perhaps, in their contorted view of matters, **can never** do any wrong. They bow before him almost as an idol and are quick to excoriate any who dare call attention to his errors and their encouragement of him.

So far as I know, these brethren who refuse to **practice** what the Bible teaches concerning fellowship still **orally teach** the Truth on the subject. However, I remind them one and all that

what we are teaching by our practice is far more powerful than the mere words we utter. The adage is old, but true: "Actions speak louder than words." Brethren who continue to teach the Truth orally concerning fellowship, but refuse to honor that teaching with their behavior, are, plainly put, hypocrites.

For years, liberals in the church have defended those who hobnob with them (when we have rightly accused such hobnobbers of liberalism) by vociferously denying the existence of guilt by association. They have spoken of this Biblical principle with the utmost contempt, barely able to spit the words out they so despised them. Will those who have set out on this latest "unity in diversity" gambit now join these liberals in denying the Biblical affirmation of *guilt by association*? Have they not already done so in deed, if not in word? According to 2 John 9–11, those who engage in this practice will be just as lost and Hell will be just as hot for them as if they had actually preached and/or practiced the errors of the purveyors of error they have endorsed and are endorsing.

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