

# One Congregation May Withdraw From Another Congregation

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## Introduction

A certain city of 15,000 people has two congregations which have the name "Church of Christ" on their buildings. Congregation "A" has eight hundred members; congregation "B" two hundred. For the past fifteen years congregation "A" has become progressively "softer" in its teaching and has emphasized social issues more and more. It has consistently used guest preachers who are on the cutting-edge of liberal thought on such subjects as verbal inspiration of the Bible, the distinctiveness of the church, scriptural worship, the necessity of baptism, the work of the holy spirit, fellowship, divorce and remarriage, and such like. Its preacher joined the local ministerial alliance a few years ago and has no problem joining with the denominations in their "Easter" and "Christmas" celebrations. He willingly sits on the platform with the denominational "pastors" and sings hymns to the moaning of their organs at such affairs. He has already swapped pulpits with some of these "pastors." Congregation "A" has begun to accept members from denominational groups which either practice sprinkling or which practice immersion while denying the necessity of the act for salvation.

Congregation "B" has elders who are determined that the church they oversee will submit to the authority of the Scriptures in all that it does and teaches. This congregation has become increasingly uncomfortable with the behavior of its sister congregation across town. The elders of "B" have expressed their concerns to the elders of "A" more than once, only to receive denials that they have changed or to be told (in a polite way, of course) to mind their own business. Finally, congregation "B" cannot tolerate being identified with congregation "A" any longer. Everyone in town can see that "A" is much different from "B" (even though they do not realize why). The townspeople applaud the obvious "new" attitude of change, syncretism, and tolerance they can see in "A" which has made it largely indistinguishable from their own denominations, except for the name, "Church of Christ," which is still on the building. The elders of "B" want to maintain their scriptural identity and distinguish themselves from "A" for the sake of the members of "B," for the sake of members of "A" who might be salvaged, and for the sake of their fellow-citizens.

The elders of "B" fully recognize that the practices and doctrines of "A" are heretical and unauthorized and that they have forfeited their scriptural identity. They would like to lead "B"

in withdrawing fellowship from “A,” announcing this action alike to the congregation, to the elders of “A,” and to the city by means of a newspaper announcement. However, an influential preacher—editor of an influential brotherhood journal—has convinced the preacher and elders at congregation “B” that there is no scriptural authority for one church to “mark and avoid” another. They therefore have resigned themselves to the idea that they are helpless to do anything more about their predicament. Since “B” cannot publicly withdraw from “A,” the whole town assumes that “B” is in agreement with “A” and that “A” represents what the Church of Christ actually is everywhere. The cause of truth and righteousness suffer mightily, error has a field day, and the devil gains a distinct advantage.

If it is wrong now for one church to withdraw from another, it has always been wrong to do so. Please read on. Do we owe the people in the independent Christian and the Disciples of Christ denominations a long-overdue apology? From approximately 1875 through 1906 hundreds of congregations that were once true to the old paths of authorized worship and work adopted the mechanical instrument in their worship and the missionary society in their work. As they did so one by one, they apostatized and lost their identity as Churches of Christ. Congregations which refused these innovations marked, dissociated themselves from, and ceased their fellowship with those churches that adopted them. By 1906 the apostasy was so apparent that the federal census recognized the Churches of Christ and the Christian church (which since 1926 has been composed of the Disciples and the Independents) as separate entities. Many (perhaps most) of those “progressive” congregations wore (and some still wear) the name “Church of Christ.” Not only should we apologize to these apostate sects, but while we are at it, we should also censure, even at this late date, our spiritual forebears in the congregations who dared do the withdrawing. They had no scriptural right to do so **because one church cannot withdraw from another church.**

The previous paragraph is written with admitted (and we trust obvious) sarcasm and irony in an effort to emphasize what this writer believes to be an unfounded and absurd position. The notable preacher/editor and the preacher and elders of congregation “B” above represent the teaching of some otherwise faithful brethren among us, namely that one congregation cannot withdraw from another congregation.

**If** this contention is correct, the elders of congregation “B” above cannot even tell those under their oversight to have no fellowship with congregation “A.”

**If** this contention is correct, we should indeed censure our faithful brethren of yore.

If this contention is correct, we would most certainly owe those in the two-fold Christian church denomination a genuine apology for the mistreatment they received.

If this contention is correct, furthermore, consistency would demand that we actually restore fellowship and work hand in hand with them with no change on their part.

Do the scriptures authorize, explicitly or implicitly, one congregation to withdraw from another? This is a relevant question for every age because of the possibility of apostasy on the part of entire congregations in every age, including the first century (Rev. 2-3).<sup>1</sup> We have for some years been in the midst of a vast apostasy among the Lord's people, fostered by a veritable conspiracy of liberals among us who are bent on "dumbing down" the scriptural identity of the body of Christ to make it fit the mold of human religious orders. With hundreds of congregations already swept away in the current digression, the question before us is particularly appropriate for our time. Let us study the subject of withdrawing fellowship, especially as it pertains to this question.

### **Some Basic Concepts Concerning Fellowship in The New Testament**

#### ***Obtaining and maintaining fellowship***

Since detailed discussion of such concepts as the definition of New Testament fellowship, how spiritual fellowship with others is obtained, and how it is maintained may be found elsewhere, only brief mention will be made of them here. Our English word *fellowship* translates the Greek word *koinonia*, found in both noun and verb forms in the New Testament. It has to do with sharing things in common, joint participation, partnership, and like ideas. The basis of fellowship among men is their common fellowship with Deity: "yea, and our fellowship is with the father, and with his son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3). only when two or more people have established fellowship with God and his Son can they thereby be in fellowship with each other.

Men are sinners (rom. 6:23), and sin separates men from God and his perfect holiness (Isa. 59:1-2). Through his sacrifice on the cross, Christ has made it possible for men to be reconciled to God ("that he might bring us to God," 1 Pet. 3:18). This establishment of fellowship is possible only when men are freed from the guilt of their sins, which is accomplished when the penitent believer repents and is baptized in order to receive forgiveness (Acts 2:37-38). This statement is true because the lord has chosen the act of immersion in water (based upon the appropriate precedents) as the act in which he washes the sinner of his sins in the cleansing blood of Christ (Acts 22:16; Rev. 1:5; Rom. 6:3). Some three thousand people

responded to the Pentecost preaching in this very way (Acts 2:41), and they are immediately described as being and continuing in fellowship with each other (v. 42). By this means men enter into fellowship with God and thereby with one another.

However, continuing in fellowship with God and with other men is not a given — men can forfeit their fellowship with God. Note the conditionality of John's statement of this fact: "if we say that we have fellowship with Him [God, dm] and walk in the darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another..." (1 John 1:6-7). Note the following:

1. Remaining in fellowship with God is dependent upon one's "walking in the light," a metaphor meaning faithful obedience to the word of God.
2. Only as two or more people continue to live lives that are obedient to God, thereby enjoying His fellowship, do these persons continue to "have fellowship one with another."
3. It is possible to lose one's fellowship with God (and thus one's fellowship with all others who are in fellowship with God), or John's statement is meaningless.

When persons in the same geographical location are obedient to the truth, cleansed of their sins, and come into fellowship with God and with one another, they constitute the Lord's people, the Church, in that location. The three thousand who came into fellowship with God and each other on Jerusalem" (8:1; 11:22; cf. 15:4) until and unless they moved elsewhere (8:4). The same was true in Antioch of Syria (11:26; 13:1), Antioch of Pisidia, Lystra, and Derbe (14:23), and likewise in every place on the New Testament map where the seed of the kingdom bore its fruit (cf. Acts 20:17; 1 Cor. 1:2; Col. 4:15-16; 1 The. 1:1; et al.). It has ever since remained so as the Lord continues to add saved ones to his church.

Obviously, the individuals within these respective congregations had fellowship with the other members thereof, even as we do presently. In addition, these **congregations**, though separated by hundreds or thousands of miles, also had fellowship with each other, **as congregations**. When the Jerusalem church heard of the church in Antioch of Syria, she extended her fellowship by sending the good man Barnabas to assist them (Acts 11:22-24). Sometime later, the church in Antioch expressed its fellowship with the Jerusalem church and other Judean congregations by sending a financial contribution to its needs (vv. 27-30). Various congregations had fellowship with the Corinthian church by supplying Paul's support while he worked there (1 Cor. 11:8). This fellowship between congregations is also seen in the bounty Paul gathered from many congregations in the Gentile provinces to meet the needs of the Jerusalem church (Rom. 15:25-27; 1 Cor. 16:1-2; 2 Cor. 8-9). The churches in the provinces had

fellowship with each other, and they all had fellowship with the Jerusalem church. Surely none would question the existence of fellowship among the New Testament congregations. Such fellowship between faithful congregations of the Lord's people continues to the present.

*Fellowship can be forfeited and withdrawn*

In light of the foregoing, particularly the statement from 1 John 1:6-7, one should not be surprised that the New Testament has much to say about the forfeiture of fellowship. The warnings of apostasy are many and frequent. Likewise, the instructions that relate to dealing with impenitent, sinful brethren are plain and profuse. These passages have to do with what may appropriately be called "corrective church discipline," and they relate directly to the withdrawal of fellowship from such brethren.

In one sense almost the entire New Testament has to do with spiritual discipline—bringing and keeping the flesh and spirit under control of the word of God so that the soul may be saved at last. However, there are at least sixty-eight verses that relate directly to the corrective side of spiritual discipline, in which are specified a wide range of sins (if unrepented of) that cannot be ignored. The requirement of us to withdraw fellowship from such erring brethren is principally based upon the fact that such ones have already forfeited their fellowship with God. We must make a choice: if we would remain in fellowship with God, we cannot remain in fellowship with such brethren. The reader's attention is called to a few of these at this juncture, while several others will be referred to later.

The Lord spoke as follows:

And if thy brother sin against thee, go, show him his fault between thee and him alone: if he hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he hear thee not, take with thee one or two more, that at the mouth of two witnesses or three every word may be established. And if he refuse to hear them, tell it unto the church: and if he refuse to hear the church also, let him be unto thee as the Gentile and the publican (Mat. 18:15-17).

Paul penned a very plain statement to the Romans on this subject:

Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them that are causing the divisions and occasions of stumbling, contrary to the doctrine which ye learned: and turn away from them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Christ, but their own belly; and by their smooth and fair speech they beguile the hearts of the innocent (Rom. 16:17-18).

Paul's imperative statement to the Thessalonian church is also explicit:

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. 3:6-15).

Although John is popularly called the “apostle of love,” he did not shrink from writing clearly on this subject:

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 (1 John 1:9-11).

We call attention to some bold, crucial terms in the foregoing passages: “let him be unto thee as the Gentile and the publican,” “mark..., turn away from,” “we command...that ye withdraw yourselves,” “note that man,...have no company with him,” “receive him not into your house, and give him no greeting.” Many other passages forcefully and clearly set forth the responsibility for exercising corrective discipline (e.g., 1 Tim. 1:3-4, 19-20; 6:20-21; 2 Tim. 3:8-9; Tit. 1:9-11; 3:10-11; et al.). The entirety of 1 Corinthians 5 is devoted to this sobering subject.

Undeniably, the Lord’s people are taught to keep the church pure, not only by sound doctrine (Gal. 1:6-9; 2 Tim. 4:2-4; et al.), but by the withdrawal of fellowship from those who stubbornly refuse to be bound by it. The teaching is so clear that no reasonably intelligent person can fail to grasp it. No excuse warrants our neglect of this responsibility when circumstances demand it. If human laws are enacted against it, we must serve the higher law of God. If judges rule against it, we must still submit to the Judge of Judges. With the courageous apostles we must take our stand: “we must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

### **Sins That Demand Withdrawal of Fellowship**

#### ***Doctrinal errors***

Numerous passages not only warn of doctrinal errors, but they specify the exercise of discipline upon those who teach them. Timothy was to “...charge certain men not to teach a different doctrine” (1 Tim. 1:3). Hymenaeus and Alexander, who had made “shipwreck of the faith,” were to be “delivered unto Satan” (a reference to their being expelled from the fellowship of the saints in Ephesus) (vv. 19-20). The Ephesians had to turn away from certain others because they “erred concerning the faith” (6:20-21). Hymenaeus and Philetus had to be shunned because they were destroying the faith of others by teaching that the resurrection had already occurred (2 Tim. 2:16-18). Elders are charged with the task of stopping the mouths of and sharply reproofing gainsayers, vain talkers, deceivers, teachers of fables and commandments of men, and those who turn away from the truth (Tit. 1:9-14). As earlier noted,

those who promote teaching contrary to that of the apostles and who beguile the hearts of the innocent are to be marked and turned away from (Rom. 16:17-18). Also, as previously mentioned, those who do not abide in the things which Christ taught are not to be given our hospitality or even greeted in such a way as to be encouraged in their false teaching (2 John 9-11). Clearly, false teachers who cannot be reclaimed for the truth are to be withdrawn from.

### *Ungodly division*

We specify “**ungodly** division” because God approves of, yea demands, some division. In fact, when a brother or sister must be withdrawn from, a division between that person and the church occurs, but it is one that God demands. Ungodly, unauthorized division includes:

1. One who commits a personal offense against a brother and will not repent (Mat. 18:15-17)
2. One who causes “divisions and occasions of stumbling” by his false doctrine (Rom. 16:17-18)
3. Those who seek to “overthrow...households” by vain speech and deception (Tit. 1:9-11; cf. Acts. 20:29-31)
4. One who is “factious” (a “heretic,” KJV) (Tit.3:10)

### *Miscellaneous causes*

The New Testament’s lengthiest treatment of corrective discipline is aimed primarily at the sin of fornication (1 Cor. 5:1-9). However, the same passage also enjoins disciplinary treatment of those who are covetous, idolaters, revilers (those who verbally abuse others), drunkards, and extortioners (v. 11). A text earlier noticed commands the church to withdraw from the “disorderly,” from a Greek term used especially in a military context to denote those who break rank or who are insubordinate (2 The. 3:6). Paul uses the term here to describe those “that work not at all, but are busybodies” (v. 11), but it is a broad term capable of referring to any conduct that expresses rebellion against the word of God. Likewise, those who would not obey Paul’s word by means of this letter were to be marked by and refused the company of the faithful (v. 14). The elders in Crete were to discipline the “unruly,” a term referring to those who were undisciplined, disobedient, rebellious. (a brother who will not discipline himself must be disciplined by his brethren.) Again, we have a term broad enough to include any sort of impenitent departure from truth and righteousness.

So far as we know, faithful brethren down through the years have all but universally given at least lip-service to the fact that the New Testament explicitly enjoins the practice of withdrawal of fellowship **from** somebody **by** somebody! (unfortunately, there have been relatively few congregations that have found the spiritual fortitude to execute it.) But to whom

do these instructions apply? Who is to execute them? Are these instructions limited to congregational action toward its members alone and/or to individual saints and their behavior toward other individuals? Those who deny that one congregation can either mark or identify and withdraw fellowship from another congregation are forced to limit every passage that orders withdrawal of the disorderly only to one or both of the aforementioned applications. But do these passages have any application to broader relations of fellowship, particularly to relationships between congregations of the Lord's people? Do faithful congregations (and/or individuals, for that matter) have the **right** (not to say, for the moment, the **duty**) to publicly identify and withdraw fellowship from unfaithful, apostate congregations? Here we come to the real burden of this treatise.

### **Some Scriptures and Their Implications Concerning Inter-Congregational Relations**

#### ***Acts 9:26:***

"And when he was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: and they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple." This passage describes the attempt by Saul of Tarsus to "place membership" with the Jerusalem church when he returned to the city for the first time since his conversion. He was converted in Damascus and was a member of the congregation there (vv. 10-25). The congregation in Jerusalem refused to extend fellowship to him until Barnabas, whom they knew well and trusted, vouched for him (vv. 27-29). Admittedly, the brethren in Jerusalem erred in their assessment of this individual case involving Saul, but will anyone argue that they erred in principle? Does a congregation not have the right to question the faithfulness of one who seeks to join himself to it? Must elders of a congregation accept anyone without question who seeks membership? Barnabas did not question the right of the Jerusalem brethren to reject Saul or anyone else who sought membership in the congregation. He only testified to the genuineness of Saul's conversion and dedication, proving that **he** was worthy of their fellowship. Remember, Saul was not a member of the Jerusalem church but of that in Damascus. This case demonstrates therefore that a **congregation** can take action involving the refusal of fellowship against one who is a member of another **congregation**.

#### ***Acts 15:22-23:***

Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men out of their company, and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; namely, Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren: and they wrote thus by them, the

apostles and the elders, brethren, unto the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greeting.

Admittedly the letter which follows in verses 24–29 had the authority of apostolic wisdom behind it. However, this does not alter the following facts:

1. “The elders, with the whole church” (v.22; cf.v.23) in Jerusalem were plainly identified as participants in sending it
2. The letter from the church in Jerusalem was sent not only to the church in Antioch, but to the several congregations in Syria and Cilicia (v. 23)
3. It is not intrinsically wrong for one **congregation** to be concerned about the doctrine and practice of another **congregation** or **congregations** — such was the burden of the letter
4. It is not intrinsically wrong for one **congregation** to write a letter of warning and admonition to another **congregation** or **congregations** that may be in danger of succumbing to error

***Romans 16:17–18:***

Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them that are causing the divisions and occasions of stumbling, contrary to the doctrine which ye learned: and turn away from them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Christ, but their own belly; and by their smooth and fair speech they beguile the hearts of the innocent.

Will anyone argue that this injunction to mark and turn away from false teachers who caused division applied **only if the heretics were members** of the Roman church? If so, then it must follow that it would be permissible for them to embrace Judaizing teachers who might come from Jerusalem or resurrection-deniers from Corinth. If a congregation may refuse to extend fellowship to and may warn others about the apostasy of **one person** who is part of another congregation (as demonstrated by the implications of the passage above), may a congregation do the same concerning **two or three apostate members** from elsewhere? If so, may the congregation do so concerning **two or three dozen**? Why does it then become wrong if it is done to a **congregation of two or three hundred**? If congregations may not withdraw and/or withhold their fellowship from any but their own local members, then congregations are left without defense against identity with and/or attack from one or one hundred apostates from without. As in the case of Saul and the Jerusalem church (acts 9:26), so also this passage implies that a **congregation** can take action involving the refusal of fellowship against one who is a member of another **congregation**.

***1 Corinthians 10:20–21:***

But I say, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons, and not to God: and I would not that ye should have communion with demons. Ye cannot drink the

cup of the Lord, and the cup of demons: ye cannot partake of the table of the Lord, and of the table of demons.

This passage demonstrates that it is wrong for one person in the Corinthian church (thus for the whole church) to have fellowship with one demon (thus with a church composed of or devoted to demons). It is thus mandatory that a **church** have no fellowship with a **church** not in fellowship with God. This being so, how can it be wrong for a church to identify or mark a church of demons and announce that it has no fellowship with it? “but the ‘church of demons’ in Corinth never was in fellowship with God,” someone demurs. True, but suppose its members had once been in fellowship with God and drifted into demonism, thus forming the “church of demons”? Would this mean that the faithful congregation could not then mark it and disfellowship it? If so, the logic behind this conclusion is mysterious in the extreme.

### ***2 Corinthians 6:14–18:***

Be not unequally yoked with unbelievers: for what fellowship have righteousness and iniquity? Or what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? Or what portion hath a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement hath a temple of God with idols? For we are a temple of the living God; even as God said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come ye out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be to you a Father, and ye shall be to me sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.

This statement indicates that it is possible (though displeasing to God) for saints to be in an unequal and unholy fellowship with unbelievers. This letter was written to the “church of God which is at Corinth” (1:1), so it applies to **congregational** as well as to individual relationships. Does not this passage therefore forbid both **congregations** and **individual saints** from forming or maintaining an alliance/fellowship with any person or group (congregation) of persons that would adversely affect one’s loyalty to Christ and his word? If this be the case, it must follow that just as an individual saint can (yea, must) withdraw from any such fellowship, so must a group or congregation of saints do in order to follow Paul’s edict.

### ***2 Corinthians 11:28:***

“Besides those things that are without, there is that which presseth upon me daily, anxiety for all the churches.” The New Testament knows nothing of “dislocated” members—all were members of a local congregation of the Lord’s people. Even Paul, who traveled the empire, had a “home” congregation—Antioch of Syria—to which he returned again and again with the reports of his labors (Acts 11:25–30; 13:1–3; 14:26–28; 18:22). We are to have great loyalty for the

congregation of which we are members, supporting it and working as part of it, in every way possible as long as it abides in the truth. However, local church loyalty in no way precludes concern for “all the churches,” as seen in Paul’s statement. **Exclusive** loyalty to and concern for a local congregation is an expression of spiritual myopia, provincialism, and isolationism and is selfish to the maximum. If individual saints may/should have concern for sister congregations, how can it possibly be wrong for an entire congregation to have concern for other congregations? Would not this concern include not only an interest in their progress and growth, but also an interest in their soundness in doctrine or practice?

***Ephesians 5:11:***

“And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather even reprove them.” Of course, this command applies to individual saints in the Ephesian church and their relationship to other individuals in their immediate circumstances. However, as with Romans 16:17–18, it is utterly arbitrary to limit the application and implication of this imperative to individuals, as if **congregations** are somehow exempt from them. Are there those who are willing to affirm that God forbids his individual children to have fellowship with other individuals engrossed in darkness and commands them to reprove such, but that He allows **congregations** of his people to have fellowship with and forbids them to reprove other **congregations** who are in the realm of darkness? We are willing to affirm that this passage applies to a single saint or to **a congregation of two hundred saints**. It is **never** right for God’s people—in whatever numbers—to have fellowship with evil. Contrariwise, it is **ever** right for God’s people—in whatever numbers—to reprove evil. The number of people involved has nothing whatsoever to do with the implementation of the command.

***1 John 4:1:***

“Beloved, believe not every spirit, but prove the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world.” John wrote this epistle to Christians “in general” rather than to a specific individual or church. The passage above has to do with preachers and what they preached. The message of the preachers was (and is) to be put on trial so as to determine if it was (is) from God. Obviously, it was not merely the preacher in a local congregation who was to be thus proved by its members. Rather, John warns of many false prophets who have “gone out into the world,” referring to men who might come to them from afar. Hence John has in mind **any and every** preacher, from whatever congregation, who might come to them or whom they might go to hear. The entire purpose of the proving would be to

believe or disbelieve him, to accept or reject him, to extend fellowship to or withhold/withdraw fellowship from him. This passage proves that a **congregation** may sit in holy judgment of, and identify and reject as a heretic, one who was not a member of that **congregation**.

## *2 John 7, 9-11:*

For many deceivers are gone forth into the world, even they that confess not that Jesus Christ cometh in the flesh.... 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.

Although John addressed his second letter to “an elect lady and her children” (v. 1), it is still universally classified as a “general epistle.” Notice that John warned about the many deceivers who were circulating and strictly charged that such were not to be given hospitality or greeting (equivalents of fellowship). To do so would be tantamount to partaking in their evil deeds. Again, this reaches far beyond merely a false teacher who might be a member of a local congregation, as indicated by the universal expressions, “gone forth into the world” (v. 7), “whosoever” (v. 9), and “any one” (v. 10) in reference to him. It is very likely that John refers to traveling preachers from distant congregations, rather than to members of the congregation where this dear Christian lady lived. “but this was written to an individual, rather than a congregation,” someone avers. What is the point of such a statement except to imply that while **individuals** should not entertain and greet (so as to endorse) false teachers (who are not members of the local congregation), the **congregation** as a whole may do so?

## *Revelation 2:5:*

“Remember therefore whence thou art fallen, and repent and do the first works; or else I come to thee, and will move thy candlestick out of its place, except thou repent.” The reader is reminded that the son of God is the author of these words in his letter to the church in Ephesus. If she did not repent, the Lord warned that he would withdraw fellowship from her, as implied by the threat to “move her candlestick.” “but the fact that the **Lord** could take this action does not mean that a **congregation** can,” someone may object. All right, let us test this objection. Suppose Ephesus did not repent, and the Lord identified her as an apostate church which he could not fellowship. What should the faithful churches of Asia do? Would they please the Lord by continuing to fellowship her or by refusing to withdraw fellowship from her? Would they displease the Lord by following his example and withdrawing fellowship from her? To insist that one congregation cannot identify another congregation as apostate (and thereupon

withdraw fellowship from it) is to insist that it is **scriptural to dishonor the Lord's withdrawal and that it is unscriptural to follow the example of the Lord himself.**

### **Miscellaneous considerations**

Besides the principles drawn from the foregoing passages, there are some additional ones that bear on the question of congregation-to-congregation withdrawal of fellowship. While some of these principles may somewhat overlap some of those already mentioned, we now give more specific attention to them.

#### ***Congregations can recognize and extend fellowship to each other***

This premise has already been established on the basis of (1) the fellowship extended by Jerusalem to Antioch (acts 11:20-23), (2) the fellowship reciprocated by Antioch toward Jerusalem and the Judean churches (vv. 27-30), and (3) the fellowship between the churches in the provinces with one another and with the congregation in Jerusalem (Rom. 15:25-27; 1 Cor. 16:1-2; 2 Cor. 8-9). Besides these obvious examples, we may further observe without fear of successful contradiction that fellowship between the congregations described in the New Testament is implicit in the very nature of the case.

It is axiomatic that if churches can scripturally **express the fellowship** that exists between them (because of their common loyalty to God's word), in gestures of both edification and benevolence (as demonstrated above), they likewise can scripturally **express the cessation of fellowship** when a congregation apostatizes. If this conclusion does not follow, we are unable to understand why. This one principle should be sufficient to settle the issue and answer the question.

#### ***Congregational membership is a moot issue***

As individual Christians we must certainly obey in our daily lives the commands to identify and withdraw from those who rebel against the Lord. Likewise, congregations must execute these commands against their own unruly and disorderly members. Do these mandates end at the "congregational borders"? We say they do not. Consider the following hypothesis: fifty members of a congregation desire the use of an organ in worship so strongly that they are willing to divide the church if necessary, to have it. The elders have withstood them and are preparing to lead the church in withdrawing fellowship from them. However, before this is done, the group leaves and starts a new congregation six blocks away. What now? According to some, the "organ" group are now protected since the faithful church they have left is powerless

to do anything but accept them as a sister congregation. But let us take it a step further. What if the fifty liberals had been withdrawn from **before** they started their own church? Does the faithful church now have to reinstate fellowship with them? According to some (if they are consistent in their contention on this subject) they would have to take such action.

The issue of fellowship withdrawal does not turn upon congregational membership, **but upon fidelity to the Lord and His word and upon the meaning of fellowship itself.** When a brother **or a congregation** forfeits its fellowship with God by either religious or moral error, he/it forfeits his/its fellowship with all of those who are still in fellowship with God. Moreover, God has decreed (as shown from numerous inspired statements) that those who have thus fallen from God's fellowship are to be identified as apostate and consequently turned away from by those still in fellowship with Him. It matters not whether the apostasy is in only one brother or sister in a local congregation or an entire congregation across town or in another city, state, or nation — **the principle is precisely the same.**

*The identity and purity of the church must be considered*

The overriding purpose of corrective spiritual discipline is to reclaim the one or ones who have strayed (1 Cor. 5:5; 2 The. 3:14), and this should be the principal aim of marking and withdrawing from an entire congregation. However, there are other scriptural purposes as well. One of these is to purify the church and protect its purity and identity as the people of God. Thus the Corinthians were ordered to “purge out” the fornicator and his sin because “a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump” (1 Cor. 5:6-7). If a false teacher or an immoral saint is allowed to retain respectability, such will have a corrupting influence on the rest of the church. Not only so, but such behavior will be identified with the church by those of the world.

The local church cannot protect and preserve its own purity if it harbors rank sin in its bosom. It must lovingly but firmly make the scriptural options clear to the apostate brother — his repentance or his expulsion from their fellowship. Neither can a faithful congregation protect and preserve its own pure reputation and identity as the Church of Christ in a community if it does not make the same scriptural options clear to the liberal, digressive, apostate congregation that may be on the other side of town and that is still dishonestly displaying the name, “Church of Christ,” on its building. Neglect or refusal of a faithful church to do this constitutes dereliction of duty to its own members, to the heretical group, and to those outside the church.

## Objections considered

Those who aver that there is no scriptural authority for one congregation to withdraw fellowship from another offer certain objections to the practice, principal among which are the following:

### *There is no explicit command for one congregation to withdraw from another*

There are many things we recognize as scripturally authorized on the basis of **implicit**, rather than **explicit**, teaching (e.g., building or buying a place for the church to assemble, the use of song books, the use of a public address system, utilizing radio and television to preach the gospel, et al.). Have these brethren forgotten that what the Bible authorizes implicitly is just as valid as what it authorizes explicitly? The implications are clear that impenitent apostate brethren are to be marked and refused fellowship by the faithful, whether the apostate is an individual or a congregation full of apostates. This “no-explicit-command” objection smacks of the approach to scriptural authority made by our “anti” brethren concerning support of children’s homes from the church treasury. It is hardly worthy of notice. However, men desperate to uphold an untenable position will often grasp at straws.

### *For one church to withdraw from another violates congregational autonomy*

The scriptures indeed teach the principle that each congregation is to be a self-governing entity under the oversight of its own elders (Acts 20:28–31). However, we are interested in knowing just how local congregational autonomy is violated when a faithful congregation urges a sister congregation to repent of its rebellion against heaven and then marks it and withdraws from it when it refuses. Has the one congregation made any law which it seeks to impose on the other? Has the action of the faithful, withdrawing church robbed the heretical group of its ability to choose and act as it pleases? Not at all, in either case. As was true concerning the previous objection, this objection has also been frequently raised by those of the “anti” persuasion for almost half a century as they have opposed congregational cooperation in evangelism. Ironically, some of our “anti-anti” brethren are now using the same baseless objection to oppose the practice of congregational “discooperation” (withdrawal of fellowship).

### *Withdrawal of fellowship commands are addressed to individuals rather than to congregations.*

Where have we heard this argument before? As with the foregoing objections, it has been a trademark of our “non-institutional” brethren in debate to point to certain passages (e.g., Gal. 6:10) and insist that they apply only to “individual action,” and that we must not apply

them to “congregational action.” In response to their argument, we have correctly pointed out that Paul addressed his letter to “the churches of Galatia” (Gal. 1:2), thus indicating that whatever was written therein authorized **congregational** action. How can our brethren miss the same point concerning Paul’s instruction to Thessalonica concerning the duty to withdraw fellowship? Paul addressed 2 Thessalonians to “the church of the Thessalonians” (1:1) and then commanded it/them (among other things) to “withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which they received of us” (3:6; cf. V. 14).

Some might quibble and say that this passage addresses only the manner in which one congregation is to deal with its **own** disorderly members, not those of other congregations. We freely admit that the primary purpose of Paul’s injunction is to deal with a problem peculiar to Thessalonica. However, consider the following:

1. The withdrawal is to be practiced toward “**every** brother that walketh disorderly” (Emph. DM). One who limits this **only** to the members of the church in Thessalonica does so arbitrarily. A similar case is found in what Paul wrote to the Ephesians: “and have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather even reprove them” (Eph. 5:11). Are we ready to say that Paul’s command concerning “no fellowship” applies **only** to those in the Ephesian church, and that congregations have no such responsibility and are exempt from it?
2. We have already established (on the basis of Acts 15:22–23) that one congregation is authorized to send a letter of concern, warning, or admonition to another congregation or congregations concerning its/their teachings and/or practices.
3. John warned the brethren to whom he wrote to “prove the spirits...because many false prophets are gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1). While this warning would surely apply to the “local” preacher, it more especially warned the brethren of those preachers who were **not members** of the local church—those who “are gone out into the world” and who would thus come to them from afar. Now if a church should reject **one** false teacher from elsewhere, by what convoluted “logic” can one conclude that it should not, cannot reject—withdraw from, publicly identify—a church full of them or that supports one or more of them, whether it is across town or in another nation?

*There are some in the worst congregation who are innocent of error*

We are willing to admit that some are innocent in perhaps most of the apostate congregations now extant—it may be so in all of them. However, such has been true in many situations in which God “disfellowshipped” an entire group of people. He knows that punishment of the wicked will often bring suffering to the innocent as well (Exo. 20:5). There were righteous people in the corrupt church at Sardis (Rev. 3:1–6), and those who claim that a whole church cannot be disfellowshipped like to emphasize this fact, as though it helps their

cause. The “argument” then follows that to withdraw from the whole congregation would mean withdrawal from some who were faithful.

Notice first that we dare not isolate the material written to the seven churches of Asia from all of the other relevant New Testament teaching regarding error, repentance, and fellowship. Notice also that the purpose of the letters to the churches of Asia was to assess their spiritual condition and to call upon the majority of them to repent or be disowned by the Lord. There was thus a period of reprieve to see if they were going to repent, during which the faithful might still remain there and work to bring about repentance.

However, from the balance of New Testament teaching we must conclude that if those called “faithful” remained in Sardis after their time of “probation,” they would be disfellowshipped by the Lord along with the rest. The principle is clearly enunciated later in the revelation. When the destruction of “Babylon the great” was imminent because of her iniquities, a Heavenly voice cried, “come forth, my people, out of her, that ye have no fellowship with her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues” (Rev. 18:4). It is all the more reason to mark and withdraw from a congregation that has gone astray, that the innocent may be so alerted and alarmed that they will flee that wicked place. Pointing to a few who may be righteous in a wicked congregation is seen to be no argument at all, but merely another quibble in order to somehow avoid the duty to withdraw from apostate congregations.

### Conclusion

It is not only a scriptural **right**, but a **duty**, to withdraw from erring brethren, regardless of the spiritual relationship involved, including individual-individual, individual-congregation, congregation-individual, and **congregation-congregation** relationships. Anyone who would forbid one congregation to withdraw fellowship from another (when its apostasy justifies it) legislates where God has not done so – the classic definition of anti-ism.

When a church so compromises the truth that it is no longer recognizable as a Church of Christ, how can faithful sister congregations fail to mark it and refuse to withdraw fellowship from it and still be faithful to God?

### Endnotes

1. All scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

[**Note:** This MS was written for the 1999 Memphis School of Preaching Lectures Book and appeared therein. A few statements herein originally appeared in slightly different form in the author’s chapter in *Studies in 1 and 2 Thessalonians and Philemon*, ed. Dub McClish (Denton, Tx: Valid Pub., Inc., 1988), pp. 338–57 and in *Christian Fellowship*, ed. Michael Hatcher (Pensacola, FL: Bellview Church of Christ, 1998), pp. 425–43.

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