

“Sufficient To Such A One ...”

“... is the punishment which was inflicted by the many so that contrariwise ye should rather forgive him and comfort him lest by any means such a one should be swallowed up with his overmuch sorrow” (2 Cor. 2:6-7).

The withdrawal of fellowship from an erring Christian is a painful matter. The primary purpose for such is to save the erring one — done only after every other option has been exhausted. It goes without saying that many congregations fail to implement this action — for a variety of reasons: perhaps all attributed to one fact — a lack of faith.

Faced with the prospect of withdrawal, many excuse failure to take that step by saying, “It won’t do any good” or “It will do more harm than good.” Either excuse demonstrates a lack of faith because none can deny that such was commanded of the Corinthians, as well as the Thessalonians (1 Cor. 5:5; 2 Thess. 3:6). We must walk by faith that God knows what is best and what will (or won’t) work (2 Cor. 5:7). Aside from the implications in this chapter that the brother of 1 Corinthians 5 had been moved to repentance by the church’s actions him (thus, withdrawal had worked); practical experience also testifies that withdrawal works. And, as to the proposition that withdrawal “does more harm than good,” perhaps those who say this should consider how much harm is done if the church does not obey the Lord’s instructions. Consider three: 1) The offending one may be lost because brethren did not pursue God’s instructions regarding him; 2) the great danger that the leaven which was deliberately neglected to be removed, infected the whole lump (1 Cor. 5:7); and, 3) the dire consequences of deliberately pitting our wisdom against God’s and rebelling against God’s clear instructions.

For discipline to be effective, it must be “inflicted by the many”. Withdrawal is not simply a statement being read of withdrawal. A statement of withdrawal is directions to congregational action against an offending member. That action is “with such a one, no, not to eat” (1 Cor. 5:11). All social fellowship is to be severed — by all. In too many instances the action of the congregation toward the offending member is changed not a whit. Withdrawal from an erring child cannot succeed if the church does not withdraw! And, for all its failures in so many different matters, Paul’s letter to these brethren did bring about action on the part of many. And Paul said it was “sufficient” — enough! It woke the brother up which was exactly what it was intended to do.

There is always a danger that when one accepts an “extreme” position on some point, that once he is persuaded his position is wrong, he swings to an opposite extreme. Carl Ketcherside, once the champion of those who opposed churches having supported ministers while at the same time having elders (as well as a host of other such views), extended fellowship to only a small minority of brethren. He wrote extensively on his views in his periodical and traveled far and wide to promote his views. But, as the years passed, and for whatever reason, he swung to an opposite extreme. In his latter years his circle of fellowship was broadened to embrace even those of the liberal Disciples of Christ.

Apparently the Corinthians were in danger of making a similar mistake. At the first they were “puffed up” when they should have mourned (1 Cor. 5:2). But, when they did “deliver such a one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor. 5:7); it seems they were unwilling to receive the brother back whose withdrawal had wrought repentance in him. And, their failure to extend forgiveness could have had as disastrous effect as the withdrawal had had a beneficial effect: failure to receive the penitent brother again might have caused him to be swallowed up with his overmuch sorrow (2 Cor. 2:7).

Soundness is not to always be equated with “extremism.” We should all take care to see that while our moderation and toleration does not allow us to fellowship sin and error; on the other hand our view of fellowship should not exclude from that circle some who are in fellowship with God. It was this latter that the Corinthians were apparently in danger of doing.

Jim McDonald