

QUESTION: What does the Bible teach about excommunicating members from the church? I've heard it spoken of in different ways like withdrawing fellowship or putting someone out. I remember hearing one call it, throwing someone out of the church. What does it all mean?

ANSWER: Thanks for your question. The only one of the terms mentioned that is found in the Bible is to withdraw fellowship. In 2 Thessalonians 3:6 NIV says: "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers and sisters, to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive and does not live according to the teaching received from us." Older translations, such as the King James Version translated it to "withdraw fellowship" from those who walk disorderly and not according to the doctrine received from us." As Paul continued the discussion down in verse 14-15, he said, "Take special note of anyone who does not obey our instruction in this letter. Do not associate with them, in order that they may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard them as an enemy but warn them as you would a fellow believer."

There were two primary purposes for withdrawing fellowship from a church member who wasn't living right. First, the goal was to lead them to repent. As the church pulled back their fellowship with the member it should cause them to see that something is wrong with their life and to miss the love and joy shared in the church. Such missing of the partnership should cause them to repent and stop the wrong living and come back to the right way. In 1 Corinthians 5:4-5, Paul was teaching the church how to deal with an active member who was living an immoral life, having sex with his stepmother, how to conduct themselves. "So, when you are assembled and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord." So, the primary purpose of withdrawal is to win the person back to Christ.

Second, it was to protect the church from their sinful influence. In 1 Corinthians 5:6 he said, "Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough?" If we know a member of the church is involved in some kind of sin and do nothing to cause them to stop, not only will that brother or sister continue their sinful behavior, but it will spread like yeast over the whole church.

This sort of church discipline doesn't throw them out of the church or excommunicate them from the church. It is the Lord that adds a person to the church when they have the faith to turn to God in repentance and are baptized into Christ (Acts 2:47). The Bible never mentions a person joining the church or being put out of one. When we realize that the church belongs to Christ, not us, we also realize we can't put a person in nor take them out. The church is the body of Christ (Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18).

But as fellow Christians we ought to feel such a close bond with other members of the church that the thought of them being lost breaks our heart. We ought to be ready to go to the one in sin personally, longingly, and with humility to try to bring them back to the Lord (Matthew 18:15-18; Galatians 6:1-3). When withdrawal takes place with love

and with broken hearts, tears in our eyes, then it is far more likely to result in the person coming back to make everything right. When it is done with a holier than thou attitude it results in all kinds of harm to the cause of Christ.