

# Termination of Membership

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This paper was assigned to clarify terminology used in the elimination of a person from the membership list in a particular congregation. Hence this outline:

## How Individual Membership in a Congregation Ceases

- I. By Excommunication
- II. By Termination of Fellowship
- III. By Transfer

The Scripture speaks of two kinds of action that a Christian congregation can exercise in Christian love toward a member in its midst who no longer shares the same belief.

The first is that of excommunication. Excommunication, as the term implies, is an exclusion of an individual not only from a visible congregation but from the family or communion of the Christian Church. It is an action by which the Christian congregation declares the sinner as “a heathen man and a publican.” In other words, the congregation declares him to be an unbeliever. Such action is taken with an individual sinner who after repeated admonition and every loving and patient effort to lead him to repentance chooses to continue in his sinful ways. Thus he rejects the forgiveness which Christ offers him. Because of his impenitence he is excommunicated. Impenitence is the only sin that results in excommunication. By refusing to acknowledge sin, the sinner refuses the forgiveness which God freely offers and so is not forgiven. When the sinner thus persists in his sin and rejects God’s forgiveness, he is longer in a state of grace, he is an impenitent sinner whom the Christian congregation must publicly declare as such by excommunicating him.

Impenitence instantly kills faith. By his impenitence a person automatically excludes himself from the invisible Church, even though he may continue to hold membership in the visible church, because his impenitence may not be manifest. . . . Thus the man at Corinth (1 Cor. 5) was, because of his impenitence, no longer a member the invisible Church, although the congregation still carried him as one of its members. However, when the impenitence of a person becomes manifest, then, after due admonition, it is the duty of the congregation to regard such a one as “a heathen man and a publican” (Matt. 18:17), and to “put away from among yourselves that wicked person” (I Cor. 5:13). (“A Summary of Christian Doctrine” E. Koehler, 1952, p. 263)

Any sin, including doctrinal error, may lead to impenitence and result in ex-communication. It is not the particular sin such as adultery, drunkenness, etc., but impenitence that leads to excommunication. “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (I John 1: 8, 9). The Scripture urges excommunication when someone ceases to be a believer, i.e., when he rejects God’s forgiveness and persists in his sin. “Hand this man over to Satan, so that his sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord. . . . But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. . . . expel the wicked man from your number” (I Cor. 5:5,11,13). “Don’t you know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God” (I Cor. 6:9,10). These lists do not mention the same sins. Anyone is excluded from the kingdom who rejects God’s Grace, who is impenitent and thus an unbeliever. “Whoever does

not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:16). The Scripture speaks of excommunicating the unbeliever and so do the Confessions. “The openly wicked and the despisers of the sacrament are excommunicated (Apology XI, 4). “However, the lesser (that is the truly Christian) excommunication excludes those who are manifest and impenitent sinners from the sacrament and other fellowship of the church until they end their ways and avoid sin” (Smalcald Articles IX). “I believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us according to His divine command (especially when they exclude manifestly impenitent sinners from the Christian congregation, and again, when they absolve those who repent of their sins and are willing to amend), this is as valid and certain in heaven also, as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us Himself” (Small Catechism). In love we are obligated to tell a persistent sinner that as long as he persists in his sinful conduct, he is not going to share in the blessings of heaven. By excommunicating, the Christian congregation is being very kind and loving to the impenitent sinner. It gives the sinner an opportunity to repent while he still lives and before he stands before God’s throne of judgement.

When the Christian congregation excommunicates, it is exercising an authority entrusted to it by God himself. In Matthew 18:17-18, Jesus said: “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on, earth will be loosed in heaven.” In John 20:23, Jesus said: “If you forgive anyone his sins they are forgiven, if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” When the congregation excommunicates, it communicates to the individual, the message of judgment which God had already determined before the congregation took the action. The congregation thus functions as God’s spokesman. Since the purpose of excommunication, like that of any previous disciplinary actions, is to regain the erring brother, the Christian congregation should not hesitate to excommunicate the manifestly impenitent sinner. They should do this with the prayer that the impenitent sinner will see the error of his ways and repent.

The second scriptural method to eliminate a member from the membership list, in a particular congregation is known by various terms including suspension.

Suspension or whatever other term may be used, involves a person who persistently clings to a doctrinal error which does not destroy the foundation of faith in Christ. (Rom. 16:17, 18; Matt. 7:15; II Thess. 3:6, 14, 15 or who is factious with the congregation. (Titus 3:10, See also: I Cor. 1:10,11; I Cor. 3:3) (Quoted from a “Statement on Excommunication and Suspension from Membership in a Congregation” 3/11/75 WELS Review Committee)

In dealing with an individual who does not recognize his error and action as sin and when asking forgiveness also asks forgiveness for his unknown sins, sincerely believing that God for Jesus’ sake will forgive his sin, we cannot excommunicate. However, in Christian love his sin must be exposed.

Such aberration on his part is indeed sin, even though he himself is not convinced He may, in fact, out of ignorance truly believe that he is not in error even when admonished from Scripture. When such a person still looks to Christ as his Savior and seeks forgiveness from Him for all of his sins, both the known and the unknown, he is not to be declared a “heathen man and a publican” but rather a persistent errorist. And if he should teach and propagandize his error, he is to be avoided and removed from the fellowship because as a promoter of error he is dangerous and is disrupting “the unity of the Spirit, in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). (quoted from a “Statement on Excommunication and Suspension from Membership in a Congregation” 3/11/75 WELS Review Committee)

Recognizing his sin as a real danger to himself and others if he continues in it, necessary steps should be taken to lead him to see his sin. We will seek to expose his sin as Paul did for Peter, saying, "I opposed him to his face because he was in the wrong" (Gal. 2:11). In such cases of doctrinal error or disruptive action, you deal

with the individuals as if he doesn't understand his error. So St. Paul urged: "Brothers, if a man is trapped (overtaken) in some sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently" (Gal. 6:1). As an example, we may remember how patiently Jesus dealt with his disciples especially in regard to their error of expecting an earthly kingdom. On the other hand Jesus never accepted their false ideas but rather by patient instruction sought to correct the error. When individuals persisted in their error he spoke words of judgment. For example, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?" (Matt. 23:23,33). When an individual is a member of the Christian congregation and guilty of a doctrinal error we shall make every effort to lead him to see that he is wrong. However, if he is unable to recognize the error, i.e. is so confused, that he agrees to the "cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming" (Eph. 4:14) that he cannot be set straight, the Christian congregation is urged to separate him from themselves. "I urge you, brothers to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them" (Rom. 16: 17). The Lord warns: "Watch out for false prophets" (Matt. 7:15), i.e. for those who share false teachings.

If a member proves incorrigible and even insists on making propaganda for his error, the congregation will ultimately find it necessary to declare the fellowship with such a one no longer possible. To be sure, a congregation will not act hastily, it will practice patience as long as possible before taking the final step of excommunication or of severance of fellowship, as the case may be. It may happen that not all members reach the same conclusion at the same time. They all agree in condemning the error, but are divided on the judgement of persistence, and accordingly on the proper mode of procedure. In that case there is no cause for disrupting the congregation, but to continue patiently till unanimity is attained. (J. Meyer, "Synod and Congregation" WLQ, Vol. 61. No. 4, pg. 264)

In the congregation at Thessalonica, there was a group of people who are described as "idle and not living according to the teaching" (II Thess. 3:6). Their incorrect living gave evidence of a belief contrary to God's Word and so Paul urged: "Keep away from them. If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother" (II Thess. 3:6,14,15). The Apostle urges action that will effect a separation but which does not declare the individual an unbeliever. In commenting on this passage, the WELS Commission on Doctrinal Matters, "Church. Fellowship" 1960, pg. 26 said:

Even now Paul does not recommend a complete break fellowship relations. He is still ready to believe that the offenders are not hardened in their course, for or he entertains the hope that they may blush in penitent shame when they are given to realize how serious their brethren consider their disorderly conduct. Yet their fellowship is to be restricted now; final brotherly admonition is to be administered through the act of withdrawing from these offenders, through the act of no longer being utterly identified with them in the sight of others. Such withdrawal is to call his brotherly standing into question, so that he may realize that if he persists the congregation will be compelled to separate itself completely and conclusively from him, no longer considering him a Christian brother. It should be borne in mind that in these Thessalonian passages we do not have a general exhortation but counsel, practical counsel for handling a very specific disciplinary case. Naturally, it gives guidance for the handling of similar cases, yet not all cases can be handled in quite the same way.

When it is clear that a person is guilty of doctrinal error or is factious, the congregation must declare that difference by taking action, previously designated as "suspension". There are many other terms which might be used to identify this break in fellowship relations. For example: expulsion, termination, release, removal, dismissal, self-exclusion, etc. all convey the idea of a break in fellowship. Such action makes it clear that we are not in doctrinal agreement and that we do not have the unity as Paul urges: "I appeal to you,

brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thoughts. (I Cor.1:10).

‘That also our Synodical fathers saw clearly what God asks of us with respect to persistent errorists is evident from Walther’s theses 9 and 10. THESIS IX - Such members willfully persist in deviating from the Word of God, no matter what question it may concern, must be excluded. THESIS X – From the fact that the Church militant cannot attain a higher degree of unity than a fundamental one it does not follow that any error against the Word of God may be granted equal rights in the Church with the truth, nor that it may be tolerated. (WELS Commission on Doctrinal Matters, “Church Fellowship” 1960, pg. 31)

Where differences in teaching exist in doctrine and practice, a separation must be made. To avoid taking action under such circumstances is to endanger the faith of others, as Paul says: Don’t you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough?” (I Cor. 5:6). Therefore, the Christian congregation takes action which terminates the individual fellowship. Such action separates the individual from the fellowship of a particular congregation and the Synod of which he was a member but does not put him out of the Christian Church.

Denial of, or exclusion from, church fellowship is not equivalent to excommunication. While we may not tolerate the teaching and spreading of false doctrine, it is possible that a person errs in sincerity of heart, without losing his faith in Christ (II Thess. 3:14,15; I Cor. 3:11-15. We are to have no fellowship with false teachers (Rom. 16:17), yet we do not regard them as "heathen men and publicans." (E. Koehler, "A Summary of Christian Doctrine" CPH, 1952, p. 264)

It is no secret that there are many heterodox Christians who believe false teachings but by the Grace of God remain believers. We dare not declare them unbelievers unless their sin causes them to reject His forgiveness because the Lord says: "He who believes in Him will not be put to shame" (Rom. 10:13). "Whoever is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:40) By suspending fellowship we make it clear that we do not condone their false teaching and are not encouraging them in their sinful ways. If the persistent errorist is led to admit that his belief is contrary to the Word of God and still persists in his sin, then he is guilty of impenitence and must be excommunicated.

To complete the study of the terminology used in the elimination of a person from the membership list in a particular congregation, I mention the term most generally used to identify the way one WELS or WELS affiliated member gets from one such congregation to another. This term is: Transfer. By granting a transfer of membership, the congregation makes it convenient for a person to enter the fellowship of another WELS congregation. The transfer is usually granted without any questions, involves very little time of the Church Council/Voter's Assembly and requires a minimum of correspondence. The ease with which one can transfer membership within the WELS or WELS affiliated congregations should encourage our membership to request a transfer as soon as they have settled in their new home.

Termination of membership through excommunication or suspension may cause much personal sorrow for the members of the Christian congregation. And yet in love, such action is necessary. May the Lord give us the strength to exercise the proper disciplinary action in our congregations and the ability to maintain the spirit of love and understanding even after the action is taken so that the disciplined individual might turn from his sin and enjoy the fellowship of our Christian congregation.