

EXCOMMUNICATION OR TERMINATION OF FELLOWSHIP?

David P. Kuske

Love for souls requires that we admonish any fellow Christian who has fallen into sin, whether it is a moral or doctrinal error. By earnest and, if necessary, repeated admonition from the Word of God we will try to show him the error of his way. The goals of this admonition will be to bring that person to repentance and also to prevent his sin from acting as a leaven in the hearts and lives of other Christians.

If our loving admonition fails to have the desired effect, what do we do then? What is the difference between excommunication and termination of fellowship? What are we saying to a person when we excommunicate him? When we terminate fellowship? When is the former to be the final admonition we give a person, and when is the other the final step? Or are both applied in every case?

As Christians we need to have the answers to these questions clear in our minds, and the answers need to be scriptural ones. Otherwise, we may be practicing a tyranny of souls by applying excommunication when a termination of fellowship is called for, or we may be tempted to use termination of fellowship as an easy way out when excommunication is called for. Two passages are particularly important in giving us the proper course of action: Matthew 18:15-17 and Romans 16:17-18. A brief study of two points in regard to each of these passages will be helpful: Concerning what kind of person does each passage speak? What action does each passage call for?

Matthew 18:15-17

In this familiar passage Jesus speaks of a brother who sins and of the efforts which Christians will put forth to bring their erring brother to repentance. First, a fellow Christian will admonish him alone. The verb Christ uses is ἐλέγχω. The meaning of this word runs the whole gamut from "bring to light, expose," to "reprove, correct," to "convict, convince," to "punish, discipline" (Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich).

In Matthew's context the meaning includes all but the last of these four shadings. It includes pointing out to the erring brother that what he is doing or saying is contrary to God's Word, telling him that if he continues in his present path he cannot be saved, and saying all this in a way which the Holy Spirit can use to convict him of his sin and lead him to repentance.

"If he listens to you," Jesus says, "you have won your brother over." The verb Jesus uses is κερδαίνω, which means to make a gain or a profit, or to avoid a loss and in that sense make a gain. Here the latter is meant. The loss avoided in this context is a spiritual one, namely, the erring brother's loss of forgiveness, life, and salvation. That this is what Christ is emphasizing becomes more evident as he continues.

If a Christian fails to get his erring brother to listen, Jesus tells him to enlist the help of one or two other Christians. If this still does not bring about repentance, Jesus urges that the help of the congregation be enlisted.

If, after all these sincere and loving admonitions, the person has not repented, it is apparent that this person is no longer a Christian brother but an impenitent sinner. If he refuses to listen to the clear testimony of Scripture which exposes his sin, and if he refuses this clear testimony given not only by a fellow Christian, but also by a small group of his fellow Christians and finally by all those Christians with whom he is joined in the family of the congregation—he shows himself to be one who has hardened his heart against God's Word and so has lost his faith. When Scripture clearly reveals that he has left the right path, and he recognizes that he has done so but refuses to change, his refusal to listen is a rejection of a portion of God's Word. Such a rejection is a clear indication of unbelief. On occasion, a person may pretend not to understand, or he may not listen carefully because he does not want to hear what Scripture has to say about his words or action. Such pretension or such an attitude in listening must be exposed by the earnest and repeated admonition Christ tells us to give, so that the person's willful rejection of God's Word reveals his unbelief.

Matthew 18:17, then, is speaking of one who is no longer a child of God, who has fallen away from God's kingdom of grace. The final admonition Jesus urges us to give him to try to get him to listen is to tell him that he is exactly the same (ὡσπερ) as a Gentile (ὁ ἔθνικός) and a tax collector (ὁ τελώνης). The articles used with these two nouns indicate that the person under admonition is in the same spiritual condition as the people in these two classes. At the time Christ spoke these words, Gentiles were by birth pagans or heathen, "separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world" (Eph 2:12). Every Jew who became a tax collector was ceremonially unclean, excluded from the synagogue, and declared to be the spiritual equal of public sinners such as prostitutes (Mt 9:11; 21:31).

The action called for by Matthew 18:17 we today commonly call excommunication. This ecclesiastical term refers to the action whereby we declare a manifestly impenitent sinner to be outside the *una sancta*. We cannot permit this person to receive Holy Communion, which offers and gives forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation; because of his manifest impenitence he would instead receive only God's judgment.

The action called for in Matthew 18:17 is applied only to individuals, not groups. Jesus uses the singular throughout verses 15-17 in referring to the person being admonished and finally excommunicated. By the very nature of the case, in applying excommunication in a congregation we deal only with an individual. On the basis of outward evidence a declaration is being made about the presence or absence of saving faith, about the eternal welfare of a person's soul. Therefore, we deal with each individual separately as Jesus urged, so that the full weight of the congregation's declaration is brought to bear upon that individual whom we are trying to rescue from Satan's clutches.

Romans 16:17-18

The situation Paul addresses in this passage is not exactly the same as that in Matthew 18. In Matthew the situation is that of a person who ultimately must be dealt with as an impenitent sinner. In Romans 16 the situation is that of person or group of people guilty of departing from Scripture in doctrine or practice and of trying to lead other Christians astray also.

Paul uses a plural attributive participle (τοὺς ποιοῦντας) to describe the persons or people he is talking about. The plural attributive participle often generalizes a description in the same way that τις added to the singular attributive participle does. The words apply to an individual or a group of people who are alike—anyone and everyone who is guilty of the action described. The οἱ τοιοῦτοι ("those of this sort" or "such as these") of verse 18 confirms that the description given in verse 17 is a generalized description.

Furthermore, the participle is a present participle. This adds the idea of continuing action to the description. So the verse does not refer to people who because of weakness in their understanding of Scripture fall into a doctrinal error but who readily disavow that error when they are corrected by the Word of God. Rather, they are people who in spite of correction continue in their error, uphold it, defend it, and seek to win converts to their persuasion. For this reason we use the ecclesiastical term "persistent errorist" to refer to such people. Paul describes them to the Romans as clinging to and teaching what is contrary to (παρά, meaning, "going aside from the straight path" and so also adversative in the sense of "against") the clear body of doctrine (the article with διδαχή makes it definite) which the Romans had learned from God's apostles (μανθάνω, meaning "learn as a disciple from a master teacher").

We note that Paul says that these persistent errorists are doing two things: they "cause divisions and upset people's faith" (TEV), "cause disagreements and make people fall [from faith]" (NET), "stir up quarrels and lead others astray" (NEB). The two Greek words, διχοστασία and σκάνδαλα, both have the article, indicating that there are two separate actions and that both of these actions can be clearly identified.

The divisions which were taking place were no minor, temporary misunderstandings. The Greek word διχοστασία describes a "standing apart" of one person or group from the other. Clear-cut, deep divisions were being caused by the persistent errorists.

These errorists caused people to stumble in faith and perhaps also to fall from faith. The word σκάνδαλον refers to the arm or stick to which bait was attached in a death trap for animals. The NT uses the term in a spiritual sense to mean either a fall from faith (compare Mt 13:21 and Lk 8:13) or a stumbling in faith (compare Mt 26:31 with Lk 22:32). Thus the word carries the connotation in either case of dire spiritual consequences for believers. Paul makes it clear that such consequences are meant when in verse 18 he adds, "Such people...by smooth talk and flattery...deceive the minds of naive people."

Paul's focus, then, is not only on the faith of the persistent errorist, that is, whether he has fallen from faith or not, but also on the effects his actions are having on the unity of the congregation and on the faith and lives of the members. Error in doctrine does result in a complete loss of faith if the error is a false doctrine which of itself makes Christian faith impossible, as for example, a denial of the Holy Trinity, a denial of Christ's deity, a denial of Christ's redemptive work, or a denial of justification by faith alone. On the other hand, there are errors in doctrine which do not of themselves make Christian faith impossible, as, for example, a denial of infant baptism, a denial that the Roman papacy is the Antichrist, or a denial of the six-day creation of the world. Still, this latter type of error is not to be ignored because, although not every error makes the presence of saving faith impossible, every error is harmful to faith.

Therefore, every persistent errorist must be dealt with not only for his own soul's sake, but also because of the harm which his action causes. If, after earnest and, if necessary, repeated admonition, a person persists in his error, defends it and seeks to win converts to his persuasion - thus causing divisions in the church and leading others astray with him - action is called for beyond verbal admonition.

The double action called for by Romans 16:17 is, first of all, to "watch out for" and then "keep away from them" (NIV), "take note of and "turn completely away from them" (NET), "mark . . . and avoid them" (KJV).

The first verb (σκοπέω) urges that a close watch be kept for persistent errorists so that they do not go unnoticed. The meaning of the word in this context probably includes the two different shadings of the word given in the NIV and the KJV: watch out for and mark or identify. The tense of the infinitive is present so Paul is urging that this action be done continually so that there never is a time when the errorist can lead members of the congregation astray without the other members realizing what is going on.

The second action called for is expressed by the verb ἐκκλίνω. This verb like many other verbs with the ἐκ prefix has a perfective sense. A *Grammar of NT Greek—Volume II* (Moulton) says that the ἐκ prefix "shows the action of the verb carried as far as it will go" (p 309). Moulton also demonstrates from usage that when an ἐκ compound has the local sense (away from), it also conveys the perfective sense (action to the nth degree) at the same time.

In Romans 16:17 the perfective sense of ἐκκλίνω, which is already inherent in the verb by virtue of the ἐκ prefix, is underscored by the added prepositional phrase introduced by ἀπό. The basic meaning of ἀπό is separation from someone or something. Thus a literal translation which brings out the full meaning of the words might be: "turn (κλίνω) completely away (ἐκ) apart from (ἀπό)."

The perfective sense of ἐκκλίνω is evident in the other two NT uses of this verb. The context of Romans 3:11 indicates that because of their sins everyone has turned completely away from God. In 1 Peter 3:11 a complete turning away from evil is urged. In the latter passage the use of ἀπό with ἐκκλίνω (as in Ro 16:17) stresses the idea that total separation is what is called for by this verb.

The tense of the verb ἐκκλίνω also adds a sense of urgency to the command that the Romans are to separate themselves completely from all who are persistent errorists. Although the UBS and Nestle Greek texts have the present imperative, the better reading is the aorist imperative. The present imperative is found in only three witnesses (, B, C) which indicate how the verse was read in Egypt. The aorist imperative is found in more witnesses which are just as early and far more widespread: p⁴⁶,)² and A from Egypt; D from Gaul and Italy; and the Byzantine minuscules from Asia Minor and southeastern Europe. The aorist imperative urges the Romans to act and break off all spiritual fellowship with the persistent errorists and not to do anything less than this.

The action called for by Romans 16:17, then, is a complete spiritual break from any and every persistent errorist. We use the ecclesiastical terms "suspension of fellowship" or "termination of fellowship" to refer to this action.

The relationship of the two verses

Is the action called for in Romans 16 always applied whenever the action called for in Matthew 18 is applied, and vice versa? No, not always. Remember that in applying Matthew 18:17 we declare a person to be an unbeliever. In applying Romans 16:7 we end the practice of fellowship with a person or group of people without always making a declaration about the presence or absence of saving faith. Both verses are not necessarily applied, therefore, in every situation.

When do we apply Matthew 18:17? It is to be applied as the final admonition in any case involving God's moral law when a person rejects God's law which shows him the error of his way. By this rejection a person shows himself to be a manifestly impenitent sinner. In a doctrinal matter, when the error to which someone persistently clings of itself makes Christian faith impossible (cf. examples above), we must in obedience to Matthew 18:17 tell this persistent errorist that by his error he has placed himself outside the Christian church and outside salvation. Or, in what is a much rarer case, if a person knowingly clings to an error in doctrine which of itself does not make Christian faith impossible, that is, readily acknowledges that what he believes is not what Scripture says (cf. examples above), we would also have to excommunicate him. If he knows that what he believes is contrary to God's Word, he is rejecting what he knows is God's Word. A conscious denial of God's Word, either as a whole or in part, is unbelief. A person who is guilty of such a denial needs to be told nothing less than that he is an unbeliever.

When do we apply Romans 16:17? It is self-evident that breaking off all fellowship with a person who is excommunicated is part of the admonition we give the manifestly impenitent sinner. Paul says exactly this to the Corinthians in the case of excommunication he admonished them to carry out (1 Cor 5:11). But there are also situations in which we will have to make a distinction between a termination of fellowship which accompanies excommunication and a termination which is carried out without excommunication.

One such situation is when we are admonishing a group of people regarding a doctrinal error. The size of the group or its geographical dispersion may make it impossible for us to establish that every member of the group is a manifestly impenitent sinner. For us to apply Matthew 18:17 in this case to the whole group, telling every member of that group that he is spiritually lost, would be an abuse of the passage. On the other hand, we may be able to establish that the group by its actions, especially the actions of its leaders, is a group which is causing divisions in the church and leading people astray. In obedience to God's Word in Romans 16:17, we must terminate fellowship with that group even though we cannot also apply Matthew 18:17. God's Word nowhere indicates that we are to apply Romans 16:17 only when we also can apply Matthew 18:17. By our separating from the group we would be speaking an earnest warning to every member of the group that by his membership he, too, is involved in the persistent error of which his group is guilty.

Another example—which happens only on rare occasions, but it does happen—is the situation in which these four conditions exist: 1) The error to which the person adheres does not of itself make Christian faith impossible (cf. examples above); 2) the person still professes faith in Christ as the Son of God and the Redeemer who paid the full price for all his sins; 3) the person's words and actions indicate that in principle he holds to all of God's Word; and 4) we are unable to establish this person's continuing in a doctrinal error as manifest impenitence because

- either he is honestly not convinced that what we teach is taught in Scripture (e.g., he is not convinced that the characteristics mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 2 identify the institution of the papacy as the Antichrist);
- or he honestly but mistakenly thinks that what he teaches is taught in Scripture (e.g., he believes that accepting government aid for our church schools is a sin).

In such a case we cannot apply Matthew 18:17, but we will have to leave the judgment concerning his Christian faith to God, who alone can read hearts. Yet, if in following his honest but mistaken convictions he causes divisions in the church and leads others astray, in obedience to God we will have to apply Romans 16:17 and break off all spiritual fellowship with him.

To repeat a point made earlier: God in his Word does not tell us we are to withhold the application of Romans 16:17 until we can also apply Matthew 18:17. In the two situations just cited, even though the personal faith of the individual or the group is not being judged, the termination of fellowship commanded by God is an earnest and continuing testimony to the group or the individual of the serious nature of any false doctrine and everyone's accountability to God for it. We are telling that individual or group that we will not share the responsibility for their error because:

- 1) we would be sinning against God by failing to show our love for his pure Word and failing to separate ourselves from anything false (1 Jn 1:5-6; Ps 119:103-105; Ro 16:17);
- 2) we would be sinning against our fellow Christians and our own souls by failing to separate completely from error, thus implying that one doctrine is as good as another and exposing them and ourselves to the spiritually destructive nature of error which never is static but always spreads like gangrene and yeast (2 Jn 11; 2 Cor 7:1; 2 Tim 2:17; Ga 5:9; Ro 16:17,18);
- 3) we would be sinning against the errorists, confirming them in their error by continued fellowship with them instead of separating from them when they begin to cause divisions in the church and lead others astray (Tit 1:13f; Ja 5:19f; Re 22:18f; Ro 16:17,18).

Some final thoughts

What about a person in our congregation who is in error in regard to a doctrine which of itself does not make saving faith impossible, but who does not cause divisions or lead others astray? He, for example, is not convinced that what we teach is taught in Scripture e.g., that the papacy is the Antichrist, but he tells only the pastor about his doubts. Or he honestly but mistakenly thinks that what he believes is taught in Scripture (accepting government aid for our schools is wrong), but he never tries to lay this belief on the consciences of others. Must we apply Romans 16:17 to him and terminate our fellowship with him? No, not as long as he is willing to receive instruction and is not guilty of causing divisions in the congregation and leading others astray. Instead, we need to deal with him as a fellow Christian whose weakness of understanding requires our continued spiritual care and concern.

But what about the person to whom we apply Romans 16:17 without also applying Matthew 18:17? Does not our action say that we still acknowledge him to be a Christian? Therefore, does not he also need our continued care and concern because he is a brother gone astray? Does not Christ picture the shepherd leaving the ninety-nine to find the one who is lost? By a termination of fellowship are we not abandoning him to the wiles of other false teachers who may lead him even further astray? Is this not a terrible thing to do just so we can have peace in the congregation?

It is true that in the case when we apply Romans 16:17 and not Matthew 18:17, we are recognizing that this person may still be a Christian. But in applying Romans 16:17 we are not identifying him as a lost sheep gone astray for whose sake we will leave the ninety-nine to find him and restore him to the fold. Rather, by his actions of causing divisions and by leading others astray he has identified himself as one to whom the warning of Romans 16:17 applies. For our own sake as well as his and because of the spiritual havoc he wreaks on the flock (Ro 16:18b), we are to separate ourselves from him.

In terminating fellowship with him we are not taking an easy way out for the sake of peace, but we are doing what God commands us to do. To do otherwise would be to disobey God's Word ourselves. Nor is our termination of fellowship a callous act of spiritual abandonment, but it is an act of continual testimony to him. We are not saying to him, "Good riddance!" Rather, the continuing refusal to practice fellowship with him is our constant testimony to him of his error and the great danger it poses for his soul.

Any time that he subsequently seeks further instruction from us about his error, we will be glad to witness further to him. Otherwise, our continued separation from him is the way we must deal with him—not because we think that is the best thing to do, but because that is what God has commanded us to do. We act as God commands not just so we can have peace but in order to preserve God's pure Word in our midst, in order to preserve the faith of those not yet infected by his error, and in order to try to bring him to repentance.

But if this continued separation is to be such a continual testimony of warning to him, the separation itself must have been preceded by earnest and loving admonition. Unscriptural practices such as just dropping people from the congregational membership because they have not been active for a given period of time (i.e., not attended church or communion, not given any offerings) or sending people a letter or two of warning and then dropping them from membership—such unscriptural practices are inexcusable. They are legalistic, not evangelical, practices. We are not speaking here of people who just disappear and whom we are unable to locate, but of people whom we should have admonished as God commands instead of taking some such easy way out. Another easy way out that we may be tempted to use, but which is just as wrong as the aforementioned, is applying only Romans 16:17 (termination of fellowship) when we should also be applying Matthew 18:17 (excommunication). In this instance we are not giving the full warning which God wants us to give this person.

In short, anytime we seek an easy way out in practicing admonition, we are failing to follow God's Word. God wants us by earnest and loving admonition to seek to bring a lost or straying soul to repentance. Applying Matthew 18:17 or Romans 16:17 is to be only the final step in what may often be a long and difficult process of admonition, but a process which we follow in obedience to God himself out of love for the precious souls committed to our care.

Whether the final admonition is excommunication, which by its very nature ends fellowship relations, or termination of fellowship apart from excommunication, is determined by the individual case we are dealing with and by the scriptural directive which applies to that particular case. As was noted earlier, in the case of manifest impenitence for a sin against God's moral law the final admonition given will be Matthew 18:17, which self-evidently brings an end to fellowship. In the case of persistence in a doctrinal error which of itself makes saving faith impossible, the final admonition given will also be Matthew 18:17. If in this case the errorist is also guilty of causing divisions in the church and leading others astray, Romans 16:17 will also be used to admonish. In the case of a group persisting in an error and thereby causing divisions and leading people astray, the action called for by Romans 16:17 will be the final admonition given. In the case of an individual whose persistence in an error which of itself does not make saving faith impossible is apparently a weakness of understanding rather than manifest impenitence but whose words or actions begin to cause divisions or to lead others to follow his error, termination of fellowship according to Romans 16:17 will be the final admonition.

But—let it be said again because it is so important to remember—in each of these cases the final admonition, whether it is on the basis of Matthew 18:17 or Romans 16:17 or both, must be preceded by earnest and repeated admonition. Only in this way will we be scriptural and evangelical in our practice because

- only in this way will we avoid taking a legalistic "easy way out";
- only in this way will we avoid giving a person the lasting impression that we are glad to get rid of him;
- only in this way will we be showing the full measure of love which God wants us to show in trying to lead a manifestly impenitent sinner or a persistent errorist to repentance;
- only in this way will the final admonition to the manifestly impenitent sinner or the persistent errorist truly alert faithful Christians to the danger of the spiritual leaven at work in their midst;
- only in this way will the final action of excommunication or termination of fellowship be a continuing testimony to the person of his lost or straying spiritual condition.