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### ***BLOCK DISFELLOWSHIP: IS IT TAUGHT IN THE BIBLE?(1)***

HARRY WHITTAKER

IT IS PROPOSED to examine the Bible passages which are usually cited in support of the assumption, often made, that the man in fellowship with a believer of false doctrine is himself unworthy of fellowship. That the heretic himself should be the subject of ecclesial discipline is not in question; the teaching of the New Testament is clear enough on this.

But there is the case of the one who, whilst being himself sound in the Faith, fails to take any action against the heretic in his own ecclesia. Here, it must be agreed, a serious weight of responsibility and blame rests on any who show such indecisiveness or indifference. Yet even here it is not Biblically certain that such a man (or ecclesia) deserves the drastic cutting-off which some would rush to apply.

The next stage, with which this study is primarily concerned, is that of the ecclesia remote from some doctrinal trouble-centre and not actually in contact with it, but which belongs to the network of ecclesias constituting that group-fellowship. In such a situation certain vociferous minorities insist that the existence of one heretic in a world-wide group of ecclesias defiles the entire group and makes them all unfit for fellowship.

“A pure fellowship!” is the cry. And on the assumption that a pure fellowship is possible and that it is demanded by the precept of Holy Scripture, a root-and-branch excommunication on a world-wide scale has more than once been brought into operation.

Let it be at once conceded that if the Bible requires such a policy to be followed as a means of keeping the Faith incorrupt, then in loyalty to the Lord who so commands, whether the application of such a method be congenial or not, it must be put into operation—even though it mean the severance of the closest and most cherished ties of affection and regard.

But **does the Bible require such a principle to be put into practice?** It is here suggested that a calm re-examination, one by one, of the Bible passages usually made to do duty as foundation for such a vital conclusion will reveal that they may have been too hastily assumed to mean other than what they actually say. The truth or

otherwise of this statement will become evident as this study proceeds.

The list of “proof texts” usually marshalled for this spiritual polemic is

2 John 10, 11.  
Titus 3:10.  
2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14.  
1 Corinthians 5:6, 7.  
1 Timothy 6:3-5.  
2 Corinthians 6:14.

A reconsideration of these texts may be a worthwhile and enlightening exercise.

## **2 John 10, 11**

The context (v. 7) presents a picture of peripatetic teachers going from ecclesia to ecclesia. Some of these, unsound in the Faith, taught what was not true. “If there come any unto you, and bring not this (true) doctrine, receive him not into your house, and give him no greeting (of farewell)”. Here is a fairly explicit instruction that the teacher of false doctrine is to be dealt with according to his evil work. He is to be sent to Coventry, cold-shouldered—an attitude altogether incompatible with fellowship at the Lord’s Table.

In the present issue, however, the real point is in the words that follow: “For he that giveth him greeting is partaker of his evil works”. From this statement the conclusion (*page 311*) is boldly drawn that anyone in fellowship (however remotely) with one believing false doctrine shares the sin of such an one, is therefore under condemnation because of such contamination, and *ipso facto* is himself unfit for fellowship.

The logic behind such conclusions is not easy to follow. In fact brief reflection quickly brings to light several serious assumptions which have been made:

- (a) This passage is specifically about false teachers: its application has been broadened to cover those who **hold** (as distinct from those who **teach**) what is wrong. The assumption is a big one.
- (b) Clearly these words are written as counsel how best to deal with such a problem when it presents itself on one’s own ecclesial doorstep—not when it crops up at the other end of the world. Where is the warrant for such a generalisation?
- (c) Even if the elders of an ecclesia should decide to tolerate the membership of one holding false doctrine, it cannot be said that members of that ecclesia who continue to use every possible opportunity to expose and denounce his errors are “bidding him God-speed” or “partaking of his evil deeds”. To say that they are is a travesty of language. The situation has been known a hundred times over that something done or said by a brother has been openly disapproved of by the rest without excommunication being applied.

## Titus 3:10

“A man that is a heretic after the first and second admonition reject”. The duty to apply discipline to a “heretic” is not to be evaded here, even if there is little inclination to apply it. But then a strange and unexpected application of this commandment is encountered. It is argued: The man who fails to apply this Scripture is by that very fact himself a heretic who is therefore, after due process of warning, himself to be rejected. Such a view of this Scripture is mistaken.

The word “heretic” has been badly misconstrued. It was only in later times, when the growing apostate church became a battle ground of doctrinal controversy, that the word took on its current meaning. Its Biblical meaning is quite different. The associated Greek noun comes in such phrases as “the sect of the Sadducees” (Acts 5:17), “the sect of the Nazarenes” (Acts 24:5), “after the straitest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee” (Acts 26:5). This shows that the reading in the RV margin—“faction”—is on the right lines. The mention of “heresies” along with “divisions” (schisms) in 1 Corinthians 11:18, 19 in a context where there is no hint of false teaching points strongly in the same direction. Likewise in Galatians 5:20 RV heresies are listed as one of “the works of the flesh” in a company which has little to do with false doctrines: “factions (Gk. splits), divisions, heresies (margin: parties)”. Even in 2 Peter 2:1, 2, where the context is definitely that of false teaching, factions are mentioned (“and many shall follow their pernicious ways”), and may well be the true reason for the use of this word in this place. Titus 3:11 describes the “heretic” as “self-condemned”. This is hardly ever true of the man who holds false doctrine. Such people are almost invariably vociferous in their self-confident self-vindication. But the leader of a faction is self-condemned—by his action in separating himself and his followers from the Body of Christ. Over against this evidence there is no single place in New Testament or Septuagint Version where “heresy” clearly has the meaning of **teaching** to be reprobated. Rather, it is very perceptible that in at least two places the heretic is the one who causes schism or encourages the formation of splinter groups. Thus Titus 3:10 is a two-edged weapon, to be wielded by separatists only with very special care!

## 2 Thessalonians 3: 6, 14

“Withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which ye received of us” (v. 6). Verse 14 continues: “And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed” (v. 14).

The argument based on these words goes thus: It is part of Paul’s word by this epistle that we “withdraw from every brother that walketh disorderly”. If this is not done, then Paul’s word by this epistle is being flouted, and it is necessary to “have no company” with those who so disregard his instruction.

At first sight this seems to be a water-tight argument. But again a careful rereading exposes the misuse of words:

- (a) Verse 6 is not about those with false ideas but concerning those who “walk disorderly”. This “walk” is a familiar (*page 312*) Hebraism for **the kind**

**of life a man lives.** (Gesenius' Hebrew Lexicon has an impressive paragraph on this).

- (b) Verse 14 is not intended to be linked with verse 6 but with the verses immediately preceding—a much more natural way of reading the words. The **immediate** context is this: “There are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies. Now them that are such we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ that with quietness (instead of being busybodies) they work (instead of “working not at all”) and eat their own bread—**and** if any man obey not our word (about this) by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him (to counteract his “busybody” tendencies?), that he may be ashamed”. So the man who obeys not Paul’s word here is, in this context, not the man who fails to withdraw from one walking disorderly, but the one who is himself disorderly, idle, and a busybody. The word “and”, in bold letters in this quote, strongly suggests the link just made.

### **1 Corinthians 5:6, 7**

“Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven...”. These words are quoted as supplying the imperative for rooting out of wrong teaching. The application made of them is this: Just as the influence of leaven, given time, inevitably permeates the whole mass of meal where it is, so also any single perversion of the Truth will, if left untrammelled by discipline, bring about ultimately the ruin of all.

There are four simple objections to the use of this Scripture for this purpose:

- (a) What Paul is talking about here is bad behaviour, not false ideas. The context, so often inconvenient for schismatics, is the Corinthian case of incest and the deplorable ecclesial reaction to it. In the entire chapter there is no hint of doctrinal error. This simple fact alone makes it clear that the words quoted are being made to do duty for a purpose other than their original intention.
- (b) Long experience shows that whereas nothing contributes to the lowering of tone in an ecclesia like persistent bad behaviour, it is possible for the community to immunize itself almost completely from the cranky ideas of one member, be he never so good a propagandist. Paul’s words are absolutely true in the field of morals.
- (c) But suppose the use made of this passage were conceded, it still goes no further than demanding that an ecclesia clean out its own stables. There is no hint that failure to do so should result in the Corinthian ecclesia being outlawed by the rest.
- (d) If the application so often put on this passage be granted, it becomes a terrible ground for censure of those who apply it thus. For, if the leaven of false teaching really leavens so drastically, how is it that the writings of the spiritually decadent (*sic*), e.g. this article, are read, scrutinised, criticised,

discussed so vigorously? If such activities do not “leaven” some who are doctrinally “pure”, why should they be so damaging to others?

### **1 Timothy 6: 3-5**

“If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; he is proud, knowing nothing...: from such withdraw thyself”.

The fact that this passage has the word “withdraw” has made it very popular in certain quarters. This is not to say that any attempt has been made by others, or is being made here, to evade the plain simple meaning of the words.

But what do they actually say? The man who **teaches** error is to be the object of this reprobation. He is the one who “consents not to wholesome words”—that is, when remonstrated with he still seeks to vindicate his own point of view with self-confidence and assertiveness. Such a picture is implicit in the words: “He is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words...”.

It is not certain whether this passage has any relevance to the case of a man who deviates from some principle of the Truth, but in a quiet unpropagandist fashion. The words do not seem to describe a man of such a character.

But it is certain that these words cannot be used to flay the ecclesia which itself is sound in the Faith, but yet tolerates the odd (*page 313*) individual who is astray on a point of doctrine. For those who themselves hold to the basic fundamentals can hardly be described as “doting about questions and strife of words”. Much less should this passage be used as ground for block-disfellowship of such an ecclesia.

These words in 1 Timothy 6 are yet another example of the thoughtless (and quite unwarranted) way in which additional meanings are read into Bible passages so that they may be used to belabour those of more balanced outlook.

### **2 Corinthians 6:14**

“What communion hath light with darkness? ... therefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing”. This passage always popular with the separatists, is even more badly misapplied than the others. True, it teaches separation, but the exhortation in this passage is from “unrighteousness... Belial... an infidel... idols... the unclean thing” (see vv. 14-17). These words are not about attitude to false doctrine. They warn against the life of unrighteousness. Certainly they have no bearing whatever on the problem of separation from those who do not separate from a believer of false teaching. Yet they have been made to do service in such a cause. How near to Biblical bankruptcy are those who would insist on such extremism?

## Old Testament Teaching

It is worthy of remark that the idea of block-disfellowship is often confidently advanced under the shelter of “the overall teaching of the Old Testament” (quoting the precise often-repeated words of one of its protagonists). Such passages as Deuteronomy 20:16 (the extirpation of the Canaanite abominations), 18:9-12 (the elimination of false religions), 17:2-7 (the punishment of the idolater), are cited to support the like treatment for those who espouse wrong ideas today in spiritual Israel. Only the man who is **determined** to find support for his policy would use these passages for such an end. The difficulties are considerable. For instance:

- (a) New Testament fellowship must be established and controlled on the basis of New Testament passages. It would be a very easy matter to produce a number of palpably absurd conclusions by applying the same method to other Old Testament Scriptures, e.g. the penalty for the man who broke the sabbath.
- (b) Even these Scriptures do not go so far as to require the elimination of the worshippers of Jehovah who lived in the same town as the Baal-worshippers. Yet the principle of block-disfellowship would require some such Mosaic antecedent if this argument is to be of any use at all.
- (c) When the prophets of Israel witnessed against the spiritual abuses amongst their contemporaries they did so whilst continuing full fellowship with those denounced. More than this, the examples of Moses, Daniel, Nehemiah, Jeremiah show these men intimately associated with the people whom they denounced; they even confessed the sins of the nation as though they were their own.

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Thus far the present study has reviewed the Bible passages usually cited by those who seek to find Biblical foundation for the idea that one single heretic, however obscure, defiles the entire chain of world-wide ecclesias with which he happens to be associated. It cannot be emphasised too strongly that such a principle is absolutely crucial. Apart from the fact of redemption in Christ itself, no more important principle exists, if it should be true. Clearly, therefore, there is need for Bible teaching regarding it to be almost brutally clearcut—at least as unmistakable and unquestionable as Bible teaching about the nature of Christ, human mortality, the devil, and so on. The foregoing comments may help readers to assess to what a serious extent Scriptures have been misapplied or wrenched from their original signification in order to put on a pseudo-Biblical footing a conclusion for which there is no adequate foundation. One is left with more than a lurking suspicion that the case insisted on suffers from a higher degree of spiritual debility than many another which it is used to attack.

*(To be continued)*

## *BLOCK DISFELLOWSHIP (2)*

HARRY WHITTAKER

BY CONTRAST with the decidedly dubious evidence examined in earlier sections of this study there are certain New Testament passages which seem to show with unmistakable clearness that the apostles reserved their censure and acts of ecclesial discipline for men who were false teachers. The rank and file of heretical movements were remonstrated with and shown the right way, but there is no hint anywhere in the New Testament of groups of the misguided being thrust out of fellowship after the pattern of contemporary excommunication. The Biblical details of this aspect of the problem were worked out by the present writer in an article called "False Teachers" (*The Testimony*, June 1966 [see pages 15 to 20 of this document]). Just now it is desirable to take this a step further and show that New Testament precept and example are positively against the idea of block disfellowship.

### **John 10: 12**

"But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth... the hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep". From these words one would think it transparently obvious that in time of danger to the flock from false teachers ("After my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock"), a man's duty will keep him with the flock in order that he might exert every possible effort in defence of those less able than himself to combat spiritual evil. Yet in sharp contrast to this the attitude of some seems to be: "There is a wolf in the flock. I have told the sheep to chase it away, but they do nothing of the sort. So now it is time for me to get out as quickly as I can".

The incisive word of the Lord for men who act in this way is the opprobrious term: "hireling". Separatists have been known to protest with bitterness that they are in no way hirelings; for, say they, do we not forfeit the advantages of nursing homes, fine halls, homes for the aged, missions, and instead have to be content with a much more modest ecclesial life? But Jesus was not speaking of literal hire any more than he was speaking of literal sheep. Without doubt those who withdrew to an exclusive "pure" fellowship are hirelings in the sense in which Jesus used the term, for their separatism is solely a means of furthering, as they think, their **own** spiritual safety and benefit.

The disciple of Christ who is worth his salt will not beat a hasty retreat, or even a reluctant (*page 341*) retreat, at the signs of danger, but will persistently and courageously set himself to antagonise and expose every symptom of apostasy which may manifest itself in his own ecclesia. There are times when the disciple is bidden to flee. "Flee youthful lusts", says Paul; the words need no clarifying. And the disciple preaching in a hostile persecuting city is bidden to flee to another.

Here the separatists triumphantly quote John 10:5, "And the stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him; for they know not the voice of strangers". It is more

than doubtful whether the word “stranger” here stands for the false teacher, for he is represented in v. 12 as the “wolf”. Far more likely, the modern equivalent of the “stranger” is the contemporary orthodox church which is palpably “strange” and unworthy of the fellowship of those who belong to the Lord.

“And there shall be one fold and one Shepherd” (10:16), Jesus went on to assert. But for a good many years some of those who are “brethren in him” have been very definitely and unashamedly correcting this: “No, Jesus, you mean ‘several folds and one Shepherd’”. The mordant and unpopular point which this passage makes is not blunted at all, but rather sharpened by an insistence that this was a prophecy of Jew and Gentile in the fold of Christ. For the most cursory reading of the New Testament makes it very evident that the divergences of **principle** and **way of life** in the various ecclesias of the first century were **much** more pronounced than any of the official differences today between Christadelphian groups. The details given later under the subheading **The Attitude of the Apostles to Wrong Beliefs** (p. 343) are relevant here.

### **Revelation 3:1-5**

The letter to the church at Sardis is as clear an example of what Christ requires of the faithful in time of ecclesial decay as could be wished. Here was an ecclesia weighed in the balances and found wanting: “Thou has a name that thou livest and **art dead**”. Few ecclesias today are in such a parlous plight as Sardis. Nevertheless, the “few in Sardis which have not defiled their garments” are not commanded to leave the lifeless ecclesia they belong to, nor are they reproached for having fellowship with the unworthy. An attempt is made to get round the simple teaching of this letter with the assertion that there was nothing doctrinally wrong in Sardis; it was merely spiritual apathy. This purely gratuitous assumption, completely contrary to all experience, is vetoed by the exhortation: “Be watchful, and strengthen the things that remain”. Such words are altogether inappropriate to the apathetic or insincere, but are apt enough for an ecclesia losing its grip on “the healthful teaching”.

### **Revelation 2:18-22**

The letter to Thyatira is, if possible, even more pointed. Thyatira had a false prophetess Jezebel who had already been openly admonished regarding her evil teaching (whatever it was): “I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not”. Included in the Lord’s rebuke of this ecclesia is the reproach: “**Thou sufferest that women Jezebel to teach** and to seduce my servants...”. Even so, Thyatira was not deemed unworthy of fellowship with the Lord. And far from there being any requirement placed on the faithful to separate themselves from the contaminating influence of Jezebel and her coterie, the exact opposite is explicitly laid upon them: “But unto you I say, and unto the rest that are in Thyatira, as many as have not this doctrine, and which have not known the depths of Satan, as they speak; I will put upon you **none other burden**. But that which ye have already, **hold fast till I come**”. Such words need no explaining. They tell their own story. How stands block-disfellowship in the light of such commandments?

Other letters to the Churches emphasise the same lesson even more forcefully, if that be possible. Ecclesias like Smyrna and Philadelphia incurred no reproach from the



Lord of any sort. Yet if the “exclusives” are right in their insistence on a “pure fellowship”, both of these ecclesias were sadly at fault in that they had not broken off all fellowship with Sardis, Thyatira, Laodicea. The rejoinder that they were too far away from these other ecclesias to know about the vexed problems existing there is ridiculous nonsense. Asia was one of the most highly developed areas in the Roman Empire, and these cities lay on its main arteries. Inter-communication in remote corners of the empire may have been somewhat uncertain, but here in Asia conditions were more comparable with the twentieth century. Thus Smyrna and Philadelphia continued in uninterrupted fellowship with ecclesias which the Lord himself castigated.

Block disfellowship of precisely the kind (*page 342*) which has been known in more recent times **does** crop up in two places only in the New Testament:

- (a) “Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them receiveth us not... and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and for-biddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church” (3 John 9, 10). Here is the very thing, large as life. Block-disfellowship is the action of Diotrephes!
- (b) “And he was angry, and would not go in”. The prodigal’s older brother disapproved of the sinner even in his repentance, and not only refused to join in fellowship with him, but also with those who were glad to have him back! The self-righteousness of his protestation has a very familiar ring in twentieth century ears!

## 1 Corinthians 12

The elaborate allegory which Paul works out of the close analogy between the human body and the Body of Christ is completely contrary both in spirit and in explicit detail to the doctrine of the separatists. Paul grants that the body has its “uncomely parts”; nevertheless they are necessary (v. 23). There are members which “seem to be more feeble”; but these too are necessary. “God hath tempered the body together... that there should be **no** schism (division) in the body” (v. 24, 25). It is to be noted that Paul wrote “**no** schism”, not “no avoidable schism”! “And whether one member suffer, **all** the members suffer with it” (v. 26). How true this is! So often toothache or indigestion or a cold in the head makes the whole person feel out of sorts. For this reason in the Old Testament men like Moses, Daniel, Nehemiah, Jeremiah, David are found confessing the sins which they personally did not commit. These men of God felt themselves soiled by association with the sins after which their fellow-Israelites ran so greedily; yet none of them showed any sign of censoriously dissociating themselves from Israel, no matter how wayward in life or doctrine. These men had learned the Bible doctrine of the One Body long before Paul.

It may perhaps be argued that when gangrene sets in, amputation becomes an urgent necessity if life is to be saved. Precisely! Gangrene (like cancer) is a condition in which the damaged or faulty member is not willing to receive and use the healing influences which all the rest of the body, via the blood stream, tries to bring to bear. Instead it is an aggressive evil which, left to itself, will certainly bring death. Here is the false **teacher** who refuses the help which the ecclesia can make available to him,

but who instead employs every effort to spread the corruption which has affected himself. For such, excision or amputation is the only course.

On the other hand, to take off a toe because the nail is in-growing, or to gouge out an eye because a squint has developed, is plain folly. In such cases, the body puts up with the defects and takes what action is advisable to restore normality to the defective member.

There is a sad irony in these days about Paul's insistence on "giving diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, forbearing one another in love" (Eph. 4:3). Every phrase, every word here, is a rebuke of the excluding spirit ("stepping aside"). And in the words which follow, the modern Christadelphian is faced with an impasse: "There is one Body and one Spirit"—not One Body existing in several pieces, but one organic coherent Body... "One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism". The inescapable conclusion from these words is that where the One Faith exists in two disjunct communities, one of them for certain is not the One Body because the Unity of the Body has been severed and maintained in this sad state by deliberate choice and decision.

### **The True Vine. John 15**

Through a different allegory the Lord himself taught the same principles. Unhappily he has been badly misunderstood by some. "Every branch in me that beareth not fruit, he taketh away" (v. 2). It is not certain that this translation is what the Lord intended. The word **could** mean: "he lifteth up". However, there is no need for inconclusive argument about it, for the main point is that whatever is done to this faulty branch is done by the "husbandman"—and "my Father is the husbandman". There is no warrant here for reference to drastic ecclesial action.

A big inconsistency is revealed by verse 4: "As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me". The strange doctrine of "stepping aside"\* from a teaching which is (*page 343*) deplored and disallowed results in two or more "True Vines"! They are brethren in Christ (they call each other such, and readily facilitate the grafting of branches from one to the other!), but the Lord's allegory is reduced to nonsense in the process. The logical conclusion would be to assert that, and to act as though, the "separated brethren" or the "mixed fellowship" are cast forth and withered. But only one or two cranks dare be as logical as that. And the rest try to pretend that this horrible inconsistency is not there—or that it is somebody else's fault, and not theirs.

### **The Prayer of Jesus. John 17**

Precisely the same point leaps inexorably at the reader of John 17. With what reluctance does the enthusiast for separation read his Master's five-fold prayer: "that they may be one, as we are". Here the word "one" is not masculine but neuter, and probably presupposes "one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:13) or "one Body", for both of these are neuter nouns. No matter. "That they **all** may be one... that the world believe that Thou

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\* Was the invention of this unBiblical euphemism ever warranted?

has sent me” (v. 21). Instead they are not all one, not by any means as much as they might be. And if the world quizzically comments: “How these Brethren in Christ love one another!” it is certainly not helped to believe in the Christ they all honour.

### **The Attitude of the Apostles to Wrong Beliefs**

“Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead?” (1 Cor. 15:12). By modern standards here was a situation which was utterly monstrous. Today the sharp reaction of many would be: “These individuals never had the Truth”. Yet there is no hint of excommunication. Instead Paul reasons solidly, persuasively, simply — so simply, in fact, that one marvels at his patience. Then, verse 35: “But some man will say, How are the dead raised up? and with what body do they come?”. At this moment (so it is said) there are several thousands who would be utterly of one mind with us but for divergences on this point. Yet Paul did not shrug his shoulders and murmur something about the need to “step aside”. True, he was impatient with such immaturity: “Thou fool!”. But then he resumed his simple ABC style: “precept upon precept, here a little, there a little”. There is a winsome tolerance about his attitude as he set about putting them right.

The Epistle to the Galatians is even more instructive. The issue there was **vitally** important, a First Principle among first principles: Were these new converts to Christ to find their salvation through faith in Him? or, as Judaistic teachers “unawares brought in” persuaded them, by settling down to a full and complete observance of the Law of Moses?

Again Paul is withering, but never censorious or exclusive: “O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you...? Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing... ye are fallen from grace” and much more to the same effect. There is a tolerance of those who have been misled, and a concern for them, that is altogether lovely.

### **False teachers**

Now, by contrast, observe his attitude to these **teachers**, wolves who have come in to ravage the flock: “Though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be **accursed**”, that is, excommunicated (Gal. 1:8, 9). “Whose mouths must be stopped, men who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not” (Titus 1:11): observe the reason why their mouths must be stopped. “Charge certain not to teach a different doctrine” (1 Tim. 1:3). Hymenaeus and Alexander “concerning the Faith were making shipwreck, ... whom I have delivered unto Satan (put out of fellowship), that they may learn not to blaspheme” (1:19, 20).

Here is a simple principle. Any teaching which is not for the upbuilding of the ecclesia must cease. The teacher of such things must be required to cease from all dissemination of what is deleterious. If, being so much in love with his own ideas, he refuses to accept such a ban, then his mouth can be stopped in a very effective way, by excommunication, because he rebels against the authority of the ecclesia.

What a contrast there is here with modern methods! That which is subversive of

fundamental principles is disseminated far and wide, and the false teacher is even encouraged to become a gladiator in public discussion. Even Paul, expert dialectician that he was, never went so far.

There is evident in Paul's attitude to the sticky situation in Galatia a marked reluctance to be more drastic in action than necessary: "I would that they were even cut off which trouble you" (5:12); but he is not peremptory about it. "He that troubleth you (obviously a Jew of consequence) shall bear his judgement, (*page 344*) whosoever he be" (5:10). Clearly the apostle was far from being in a hurry to apply the surgical knife—and this to **one** person. Where the rest are concerned, there is no hint of drastic discipline

In Romans 14:1 Paul has left explicit instruction about the attitude to be adopted towards those who espouse wrong ideas. It is difficult indeed to reconcile these words with the drastic policies so often followed and vigorously justified: "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations". The form of the Greek verb here means "go on receiving". It is easy to see why Paul so advises. As long as the weak brother with off-beat ideas continues in the fellowship of sounder brethren there is some hope that by degrees he will achieve a more balanced point of view. Such things have been known to happen. But the necessary condition must be observed: "not to doubtful disputations". If such a problem individual is to continue to share the blessings of the community, he must be prepared to cease all forms of propagation of the ideas he has espoused. Only on these eminently reasonable terms can his membership of the family of Christ be tolerated.

## Judas

The point has often been made that Jesus was prepared to tolerate the presence of Judas at the Last Supper. Then, similarly, how tolerant should his brethren be of those who show signs of espousing false ideas.

Is the argument valid? No, and yes. What are the facts? The meal was still in progress when Jesus offered the sop to Judas (John 13:26). "He then, having received the sop, went immediately out" (v. 30). But the bread was given to the disciples **during** the meal (Mark 14:22), and the wine when the meal was ended (Luke 22:20). So Judas **may** have shared the Bread; he did **not** share the wine.

But the main point is surely this: Jesus was willing to have at this meal of fellowship one who had lost faith in him.\* For "that thou doest do quickly" can hardly be regarded as an indirect device for getting rid of Judas before the bread and wine were introduced. Is it conceivable that, if Judas had stayed another hour, his fellow apostles would have been defiled in their partaking by his presence? Judas would have been the one defiled!

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On the strength of the foregoing analysis, pro and con, it is submitted that no clear-cut

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\* There is *no* evidence for the fantasy that Judas believed Jesus to-be the Messiah and sought by betrayal to force his hand. There is good Bible evidence against it.

Biblical case has yet been made for the root-and-branch disfellowship practised in the name of purity by certain misguided zealots. Nevertheless, many years ago this “surgical operation” method of coping with the crisis created by false doctrine came in without adequate thought and attention being given to its uncertain Biblical foundations. And ever since it has been the assumption of the zealot for purity that this is the right and proper way, the only way, to cope with the difficult situations discussed in this study. Thus, in effect, in order to safeguard “the healthful teaching”, another erroneous doctrine was brought in— an unBiblical doctrine of fellowship.

It is a fact to be more than ordinarily thankful for that by the Providence of God the Amended Statement of Faith was never further amended to include such an evil principle. Somehow even those who have been most eager to preserve purity by ruthless excision of error (and also excision of those who were **not** in error!) have somehow been saved by their better instincts from committing themselves to an apotheosis of this dreadful attitude. If they had not, then the tragedy of a dozen splits over the past century would have been multiplied without limit, and the ludicrous spectacle would have been presented of hundreds of little self-admiring groups, dotted around the world, all claiming to be the One Body of Christ, whilst blithely consigning all the rest to Babylon. The situation is pathetic enough, as it is. But amoeba-like division and sub-division is the logical, inevitable conclusion of this false doctrine of fellowship.

The situation is all the more tragic because for many years there has been available in the **Constitution** (respected by all, and followed by most) a concise statement of sensible procedure by which to cope with problems of just the kind discussed in this study. The two relevant sections are

34. That no brother or sister withdrawn from by, or out of fellowship with, another ecclesia, shall be received in fellowship until the cause shall have been investigated and found such as to warrant the reception of the said brother or sister; but that this investigation shall not take place without first asking the said other ecclesia to take part in the proposed investigation; that if the said other ecclesia shall refuse their co-operation in the said investigation, the matters in question shall be investigated without them; that, if, on the other hand, they consent to take part in it, they shall, after the reinvestigation conducted in their presence, have equal voting power with the first ecclesia, and that no decision shall be valid without the concurrence of a majority of the assembly so constituted of the two ecclesias fused together in equality of numbers; if one ecclesia exceeds the other in number, the equality to be obtained by arrangement.
35. That in the case of another ecclesia, after either of these processes, receiving into their fellowship any brother or sister from whom we have withdrawn, or who may have separated from us, we shall not consider it a cause of separation from them, regarding the case as one of difference of judgement as to facts merely; we shall be content in that case to maintain our own withdrawal from the brother or sister in question. Should they, on the other hand, receive such, without reinvestigation or without asking our concurrence in any reinvestigation that may take place, we ourselves shall apply to the said ecclesia for reinvestigation in the form defined by the last rule, and only in case of their refusal, shall we consider that their action in the case has furnished a cause of separation.

The brethren who first framed these words showed wisdom. A careful pondering of them makes it very evident that **this** procedure and the principle of “block disfellowship” cannot exist together. The unhappy disfellowshipping of blocks of ecclesias, often thousands of miles apart, because of their “guilt by association”, is here replaced by the eminently sensible and very Christ-like approach whereby representatives of **two ecclesias** get together ultimately to understand and appreciate one another’s point of view, or to agree to disagree. In the latter case, at worst, there is complete severance between these two ecclesias without the rest of the Body of Christ being at all concerned about the problem, unless it chooses to be.

From every point of view this mode of action commends itself. For those who come into the Truth on the basis of individual knowledge, faith, and response, should obviously (if it sadly becomes necessary) go out on the same basis. But the root-and-branch “purists” (what a misnomer this is now seen to be!) write the word inconsistent across all their activities by accepting men into the Faith of Christ as individuals, and yet throwing them out in hundreds and thousands. If only they could be persuaded to take a good look at themselves.

They would then see, also, that in separating as they have done they have acted in bad faith, it may be even, in hypocrisy. For, whilst the “block-disfellowship” principle is nowhere written in *Bible* or *Statement of Faith* or *Constitution* (except for the two bad examples of Diotrephes and the prodigal’s brother), here in *The Constitution*, which these separatists have long since put their hand to, is the very procedure which they have ignored, and have scorned to follow. In the circumstances, **inconsistent** seems to be rather a mild word to use.

There are clear instructions in the words of the Lord himself urging a life of courageous and faithful witness in times of spiritual decline. Only when an ecclesia formally and deliberately sets aside its true *Statement of Faith* is a brother in Christ warranted in separating himself. But as long as the foundation is nominally sound it devolves upon the faithful, even though only a minority, to “hold fast till I come” and to “strengthen the things which remain”; that is, to witness ceaselessly against the corrosive influence of unworthy teaching, aiming to “stop the mouths” of its teachers, and to call the ecclesia back in unequivocal terms to its first love. Amid the perplexities of a difficult era this duty is paramount.

*Concluded*

## The Testimony Magazine

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(Page 209)

### *FALSE TEACHERS*

H. A. WHITTAKER

*One of the major causes of unease in the Christadelphian Body today is the lack of a clear-cut, BIBLICAL teaching concerning Fellowship. Some members show signs of an invertebrate toleration of serious error. Others clamour for extreme exclusiveness of a kind which finds no hint of support in Scripture. Many are vaguely disconcerted through lack of a clear lead from those who should be able and ready to give it. "The Testimony" Committee commends this study as a worthwhile summary of Scriptural principles.*

THE Early Church is often spoken of as though it really was in the main a pure and true church of Christ in the first two or three centuries, until corruption came with a rush, in and after the time of Constantine. Such a picture could hardly be further from the truth. A careful examination of relevant New Testament passages shows only too clearly that *before the Apostles passed off the scene* the apostasy had already arrived and was making big inroads. The truth of this, which should become evident enough as the present study proceeds, and which may be readily inferred from the vigorous pictures of doctrinal corruption painted in such chapters as 2 Peter 2, becomes amply confirmed by a course of reading of the earliest Church "fathers". Certainly by the time of Constantine the apostasy was in full spate, and not just beginning.

It can only be because of evident signs of declension from the very earliest times that the Apostles were led to speak and write their warnings against false teachers, and to state in clear terms what attitude the church should adopt towards the menace such men presented. At a time when many are alarmed —unduly alarmed, as others would think— about the current erosive effects of unsound teaching it may not be amiss to review the Apostles' inspired directives.

The concrete example of Hymenaeus (1 Tim. 1:19, 20) makes a good starting point.

Here was one who was "making shipwreck concerning the faith" and who, along with Alexander, is labelled a blasphemer. This is strong language. The twin passage in 2 Tim. 2:16-18 explains. Hymenaeus and his associates Alexander and Philetus, were teaching that "the resurrection is past already". Presumably, though not certainly, these men had preferred the Greek doctrine of the immortality of the soul and restricted the Lord's teaching about Resurrection to himself, and perhaps, to those who rose when he rose (Matthew 27:53). Or it may be that "resurrection" was spiritualised (with the help of such passages as Romans 6:4) to signify the new life after conversion, and nothing more. Whatever precise form the heresy took, this teaching was subversive of the faith. It set aside one of the very fundamentals of

Christian conviction. Therefore Paul “delivered unto Satan” the men who taught it.

The view usually adopted that this phrase describes excommunication is almost certainly correct. Within the ecclesia was Christ; outside was the world, “Satan”. These men were removed from the ambit of Christ and given afresh the status of “a heathen man and a publican”. The case of incest at Corinth (1 Cor. 5) makes such a view more than likely. There Paul’s judgement, that they “deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh (his fleshly mind)” is (*page 210*) explained by his final word on the matter: “Put away from among yourselves that wicked person.”

Paul’s motive for such drastic action regarding Hymenaeus was twofold. He sought to save others from the pernicious effects of false teaching: “They overthrow the faith of some.” He also hoped to save these men from themselves: “That they may learn not to blaspheme”. This latter aim was, of course the motive for the disciplinary action in Corinth. And, if the linking of 1 Cor. 5 with 2 Cor. 2 is correct, it achieved its objective: “Sufficient unto such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted by the majority (“a majority vote of the ecclesia;” see R.V.M.)... Wherefore I beseech you that ye would confirm<sup>1</sup> love (the *Agape*, Love Feast, Breaking of Bread) toward him” (v. 6-8). There is no sign that Paul’s disciplinary action had a like effect on the heretics in Asia. Perhaps it did. But the repeated allusion to them makes this unlikely.<sup>2</sup> Strangely enough, a man is usually more ready to confess his moral declension than he is to acknowledge the error of his beliefs and teaching.

Logically Paul’s action ought to have been unnecessary. Hymenaeus and the others should have recognised the simple truth that their wrong-headed ideas had taken them away from the Christian foundation of faith and should therefore have taken them, of their own choice, away from the ecclesia of Christ. But where could they go? Doubtless long before Paul had reached the point of no longer tolerating their harmful presence, they had rationalised the situation by persuading themselves that they had not really disavowed the principles of the Faith. “We *do* believe in the resurrection”, they would assert with emphasis, but to them the statement of that earliest creed outside the covers of the New Testament: “I believe in the resurrection of the body”, meant one thing, whilst to all their brethren it meant something else vastly different.

This sorry sordid situation has repeated itself in more recent times. Today the majority of Anglicans repeating the Apostles’ Creed each Sunday mentally turn: “I believe in the resurrection of the body” into “I believe in the immortality of the soul”, or its equivalent.

The teaching of Hymenaeus and those with him is described (2 Tim. 2:16) as “profane vain babbling”. The word translated “profane” means the opposite of “holy or consecrated”, and, from the way it is used can have reference—not to the men as unauthorised teachers—but to the character of their message. It was profane inasmuch as it did not come out of the Holy Scriptures. This was its primary fault.

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<sup>1</sup> This word normally applies to the confirming of a covenant. In this instance, Luke 2:20.

<sup>2</sup> A correspondent suggests that “somehow, although both Hymenaeus and Alexander had been punished by Paul at the time of 1 Tim. 1, Hymenaeus continued to spread the error, perhaps through Philetus who was still a member of the ecclesia” (2 Tim. 2).



Similar language is used in 1 Tim. 1:4 to describe these errors. There Timothy is bidden: “Charge certain men not to teach a different doctrine, neither to give heed to fables (stories of *men’s* devising, which may or may not be true) and endless genealogies. “ This last expression inevitably suggests to the mind the modern theory of evolution, which actually had its beginnings in ancient Greece. How apt also is Paul’s caustic comment (v. 7) that these teachers “understand neither what they say, nor about which they offer ‘proof’”.

It was the more needful that warning be spoken against these men because their ideas “bring in argumentations rather than the administration of the House of God in faith” (v. 4). To Paul, faith was the key virtue. Anything in Christian life which gave emphasis to faith had his special blessing and commendation. The efforts of the misguided men he contended against tended away from so wholesome an outlook.

It is to be specially noted that “delivering such unto Satan” was not Paul’s *first* course of action to counter the effects of the false teachers. Timothy was personally to “charge them that they teach no other doctrine” (1 Tim. 1:3). These men were to be required to keep silence concerning their deleterious doctrine. The same is implicit in the commandment to “shun profane and vain babblings”. It is quite explicit in Paul’s warning to Titus concerning a similar problem: “There are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers... *whose mouths must be stopped*, men who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not”.

The first aim, then, was to end the dissemination of all perversions of truth. All teachers of such were to be required to cease their activities forthwith: “A man that is an (*page 211*) heretic after the first and second admonition reject” (Tit. 3:10). It is likely that in our Christadelphian tradition more has been got out of these words than they actually contain. The heretic is one who gathers about himself a faction which is strongly self-opinionated. The word necessarily implies a leader and teacher. It is inappropriate to the unprominent follower. Paul’s recommendation here, then, concerns the wilful teacher of harmful doctrine. Yet even he is to be dealt with in mercy and with consideration. Only after “the first and second admonition” is he to be excommunicated. It is noteworthy, however, that the faithful ecclesia troubled with such will not shrink from administering the needful admonitions.

There is about this wisdom of Paul’s an altogether admirable combination of mildness and firmness. For the sake of others as well as for his own sake, the false teacher is to be required to cease his baneful activities; and only when such mandate is twice disregarded is he to be treated as unfit for fellowship.

Wherever one turns in the writings of Paul to assess his attitude to divergence from the Truth, the target of his criticism and censure is invariably the *teacher* of error: “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which *cause* divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and *avoid them*. For... by good words and fair speeches they deceive the hearts of the simple” (Rom. 16:17, 18). The point of this apostolic recommendation is so evident as not to need comment. Perhaps it is worth while to underline that there is no hint here of the need for similar decisive action against “the simple” who are deceived.

Similarly, in 1 Tim. 6, the apostolic reproof is aimed at the man who “teaches otherwise and consents not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness... From such withdraw thyself”.<sup>3</sup>

At first sight the conclusion so far reached will appear to some to be altogether too weak-kneed and over-tolerant, but a little reflection will soon show that this is far from being the case. According to Paul, the teacher of error must be required to cease completely from the propagation of his reprobate ideas. This means an end not only to the advocacy of his views from the platform but also to all propounding of them by printed page or private discussion or letter.

And here is the test of the man’s worthiness to continue as a member of the ecclesia. Either he will respect ecclesial authority and do exactly as he is bidden—in which case, his humility is proven, and his error even if still cherished remains locked in his own heart until the day of judgement when he will answer for it personally. Or else he will openly defy the ruling of his ecclesial elders and thus prove himself unworthy of fellowship. Or else he will overtly accept the restriction that is put upon him, and will yet covertly continue his censured activities. In such a case it will not be very long before his insidious “fifth-column” work becomes evident, and then he is branded as a hypocrite quite unfit for welcome to the table of the Lord.

Clearly these principles apply also, in somewhat different degree, to the less prominent disciple of the false teacher. If he takes upon himself the role of auxiliary propagandist, in however humble a fashion, a similar course of action regarding his activities will be both necessary and right.

Other New Testament passages similar to the Pauline passages already cited, show clear signs of the same policy towards those who troubled the early church with their wrong-headed notions. The familiar words of 2 John 10, 11, when read in their context, are seen to have specific reference to false teachers, who were travelling from ecclesia to ecclesia: “Many deceivers are gone forth into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh”. The doctrine of the Deity, as distinct from the divinity, of Jesus was evidently coming in, along with the immortality of the soul. “This is the deceiver and the antichrist... If there come any unto you, and bring not this (true) doctrine (about Jesus), receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: for he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds.”

The full weight of apostolic action appears to have been reserved for the *disseminator* of God-dishonouring beliefs. It is a vehemence which springs from the solemn warning of Jesus himself:

“Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:19).

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<sup>3</sup> The omission of this last phrase by some modern versions is difficult to account for. For it is easy enough to see how the words might come to be omitted from New Testament texts, but it is difficult to account for their insertion.

In the day of reckoning those who have prophesied (taught) falsely in the name of (*page 212*) Jesus are pictured as enduring his most withering condemnation:

“And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.” (Matthew 7:23).

Paul’s blistering anathema was hurled not against Galatians who had allowed themselves to be led astray into Judaism, but against those who had swayed them in this direction: “If So-and-so (you know who!)<sup>4</sup> preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:9). “I would they were even cut off which trouble you” (5:12).

The contrast with Paul’s attitude to those in Galatia who had been led astray is most pointed. For them there was reproach, appeal and Biblical argument in plenty, but not a hint that they were unworthy of fellowship or in danger of drastic church discipline. It was the same at Corinth. In a way which is not clearly understood, some were openly saying: “There is no resurrection of the dead”. Even in such a parlous situation, Paul showed no sign of asserting his apostolic authority in requiring that such misguided individuals be excluded from the ecclesia (contrast 1 Cor. 5:3-5, 11, 13). Instead he argued the undeniable facts about Christ himself; he reasoned from nature and from common sense, he even spoke roughly—“thou fool”.

The reason for this sharp contrast in his attitude and policy is readily discernible. These were sheep being led astray and deserving pity and tender guidance more than excommunication.

“And on some have compassion, making a difference:  
And others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire.”  
(Jude 22, 23).

The letters to the churches in Asia show that this campaign against the false teacher, rather than against the deluded disciple, is the Lord’s own policy as he walks in the midst of the candlesticks. The false prophetess Jezebel (however she be identified) was to be dealt with drastically. Yet even here first of all there was ample opportunity afforded her for a change of heart: “I gave her space to repent of her fornication (i. e. that which she taught: verse 20); and she repented not” (Rev. 2:21). Balaamites (and Nicolaitanes—the same crew, under another name) came in for an equal share of the Lord’s invective. And these—be it noted—were not the poor misguided creatures who thought nothing amiss in eating things sacrificed to idols or in temple fornication, but were those who—like Balaam—*taught* that these evils might be indulged in. It is for such that the heavenly censure is specially reserved. Yet even in such an extreme case there is still the solemn and gracious warning beforehand: “Repent, or else...”.

Of course there is in addition a very very plain accusation from the Lord against those ecclesias which tolerate such corruptions: “I have somewhat against thee... I have a

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<sup>4</sup> This kind of inflection is probably behind the words Paul used here.

few things against thee...” These are solemn words indeed. Yet, reproach though there be, there is no trace of the drastic root-and-branch policy favoured by some hot-headed (or cold-blooded) idealists of this century who would make severance between ecclesia and ecclesia. The Lord himself threatens action against indolent, corrupt, or self-indulgent churches, but there is no sign of him requiring anything like the “block” disfellowship which has been inflicted only too often in more recent times.

Indeed such action—so often called today “withdrawal” or “standing aside”, sorry euphemisms, both!—appears to have been anticipated by Jesus in some of the most scornful words he ever spoke: “But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep. The hireling fleeth because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep” (John 10:12, 13). Let any who are troubled by current contentions and worried by vague apprehensions as to their own responsibility for “condoning” such evils ponder these words of the Good Shepherd again and again. He calls men to be good shepherds after his own pattern, giving themselves in devoted service and care to the harassed flock, and even laying down their lives for the sheep. How strange that it doesn’t seem to dawn on these rigorous separatists that they testify for Truth (*continued on page 195 - page 195*) against error far more efficiently by *staying where the error is* and witnessing ceaselessly against it than by fleeing to a “holier than yours” sanctuary, whence to carry on a campaign of scolding across a great gulf which they themselves have fixed.

It would be enlightening indeed to know where the New Testament teaches such an attitude. One recalls that Jesus said something about letting both wheat and tares grow together until the harvest! And it is, to say the least, remarkable that when the ecclesia at Corinth began to divide itself up into cliques associated with different personalities, Paul did not require them to break up into so many separate fellowships, but with biting scorn he bade them recover their sense of proportion and become once again One Body with eye, ear, nose, hand and foot each functioning for the benefit of the whole.

## Summary

The main results of this study are:

1. False teachers are to be required to cease *all* propagation of their erroneous ideas.
2. Failure to do so after repeated warnings merits excommunication of the leader of a faction, but along with this should go patient toleration of any ill-informed and/or indecisive followers with a view to restoring them to doctrinal soundness.
3. The idea of “block disfellowship” based on “guilt by association” appears to be without support in the New Testament.
4. As long as an ecclesia has, even nominally, the true foundation of Faith, apostolic example and precept require the faithful to continue in fellowship and in persistent witness against current abuses.

*Concluded*