

# The Ignored Commandment

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Having come out of denominationalism in my early twenties, I thought I had entered the one body of the faithful—those who would do their best to follow God’s commands, no matter the cost. In a sense I was correct, but was I too naïve with such an idealistic view? The Lord’s church is a perfect body comprised of people who are fallible—people who are made perfect by the blood of Christ upon repentance and obedience (1 John 1:6-10), but could it be that many churches of Christ are refusing to obey a very specific command from God?

Allow me to explain. When I grew in knowledge after conversion, I realized that God has clearly and repeatedly commanded withdrawal of fellowship from brothers or sisters who refuse to repent (Matthew 18:14-20; 1 Corinthians 5; 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14, 15, etc.). I began to wonder, “*Why have I never heard of a congregation doing this? Isn’t this supposed to be the true body of Christ?*”

I decided to do some research, and I began calling many churches of Christ in various areas, asking them if the congregation there had ever withdrawn fellowship from anyone. I found many who had. Although nobody rejoices about the need for withdrawal, it was comforting to know that many congregations were holding fast to God’s commands. I was also happy to hear that many had been restored after withdrawal, like the fornicator at Corinth (2 Corinthians 2:1-10).

It was withdrawal that stimulated the fornicator at Corinth to repent, but before that happened, the congregation had to repent of not administering “*punishment*” (1 Corinthians 5; 2 Corinthians 2:6). After Paul wrote First Corinthians, the church repented, as Paul explained:

*For though I made you sorry with a letter, I do not repent, though I did repent: for I perceive that the same epistle hath made you sorry, though it were but for a season. Now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance: for ye were made sorry after a godly manner, that ye might receive damage by us in nothing. For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death. For behold this selfsame thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge! In all things ye have approved yourselves to be **clear in this matter** [There was one particular matter in mind here—withdrawing from the fornicator; see 2 Corinthians 2:1-10, JPH]. Wherefore, though I wrote unto you, I did it not **for his cause that had done the wrong** [the fornicator, JPH], **nor for his cause that suffered wrong** [the fornicator’s father, whose wife was involved, see 1 Corinthians 5:1, JPH], **but that our care for you** [More than anything else, there was concern about the church needing to repent for not dealing with this!, JPH] *in the sight of God might appear unto you* (2 Corinthians 7:8-12; cf. 2:1-10).*

Many preachers have applied Second Corinthians 7:10 to alien sinners, and understandably so, but the words originally applied to the church at Corinth. Because of the church’s penitence and withdrawal, Paul went on to write these words: “*Titus...remembereth the obedience of you all...I rejoice therefore that I have confidence in you in all things*” (2 Corinthians 7:15-16).

How many congregations of the Lord’s church need to repent of the same sin as Corinth? How many have gloried in their “love and tolerance” like Corinth, instead of removing the leaven of sin? (1 Corinthians 5:2-8). How many have put family before God, having refused to withdraw because of family relationships or other excuses? (Matthew 10:34-39; Luke 14:25-35; cf.

Deuteronomy 13:6-11; 21:18-21).

Years ago Ed Smithson published a book about withdrawing fellowship called *The Forgotten Commandment*. Perhaps it would be better described as the *ignored* commandment, because surely it has not been forgotten. Smithson's book was published in 1965. Has the Lord's church improved regarding the practice of withdrawal since then? Surely this is still "the elephant in the room" of the brotherhood which needs to be addressed in so many places. As one brother said, "The issue is not a lack of need, but a lack of heed!"

It has already been stated that the Lord's church is a perfect body, cleansed by Christ's blood upon repentance and obedience (1 John 1:6-10), but will the blood still cleanse those who refuse to obey? If we say we are faithful when we refuse to obey, John said we are liars (1 John 2:4). How then can we tell those in denominations that they should be converted and become active members of a local church of Christ, if that congregation refuses to obey God? (Romans 16:16).

Preachers and elders should make sure this subject is being taught, so congregations will have a proper mindset about it and be willing to do what must be done. There is nothing hateful about it. It is an act of love to restore the lost to salvation. When a child of God refuses to repent, the purpose of withdrawal is manifold:

1. To keep the congregation faithful by obeying God's command to withdraw (Matthew 18:14-20; 1 Corinthians 5; 2 Corinthians 7:8-12; 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14, 15, etc.)
2. To save the sinner's soul (Matthew 18:14-17; 1 Corinthians 5:5; 2 Corinthians 2:1-10; James 5:19, 20)
3. To keep the leaven of sin from spreading further in the congregation (1 Corinthians 5:6-8; 15:33)
4. To cause other children of God to fear the same punishment and be faithful (Acts 5:1-5; cf. Deuteronomy 13:11; 21:21)
5. To prevent those outside the church from talking negatively about God, the church, or His Word (2 Samuel 1:20; 12:14; Romans 2:21-24; 1 Timothy 5:14; 6:1; Titus 2:5)
6. To set a good example that will hopefully encourage other congregations to do it (1 Corinthians 11:1; Philippians 3:15-17; Hebrews 6:9-12)

Regarding that last point, the last two congregations where this writer has preached have withdrawn fellowship from several people. This is not shared to boast or rejoice, but to show that it can be done and encourage others to do so. For those who have questions, first study what God's Word says about this. You may want to consult sound books or sound brothers who have some experience doing this. Much of the process is in the realm of expediency, but excuses like, "We did not know how to do it" or "We did not know we were supposed to do it" will surely hold no weight on the Day of Judgment.

If we have failed to obey this command in the past, let us be like the Israelites of Nehemiah's day who cried out in sorrow when they realized they had failed to do God's will, but rejoiced when they understood what needed to be done and did it! (Nehemiah 8:9, 12-18; cf. 2 Kings 22:8-20; 2 Corinthians 2, 7).

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