

Disfellowship

Written by K B Napier
Thursday, 16 July 2009 15:20

What is 'disfellowship'? It means that a person has been removed from fellowship with the brethren. The reasons can be many, so it should not be seen in the same light as 'excommunication', which is a 'kicking-out' of a person from a local church or even out of a whole denomination.

So-called 'excommunication' is the execution of 'discipline' and it is a judgement made by an 'official' (eg a priest or a pastor) against a church member. 'Disfellowship', however, can include this ultimate punishment (some would say it is an action made with the hope that the one being cast-out will repent. In reality, it is more likely that the action is one resulting from anger and so, really, it is a punishment), but it can encompass far more. For example, people can be legitimately cast-out of fellowship for something they continue to do after receiving several warnings; they can be kicked out by the whim of church leaders; they can be forced out by the unfriendliness or animosity of others within the local church; they may be forced to leave because of bad teaching or of spiritual deadness; they may leave for personal but unwarranted reasons, and so on. Thus, disfellowship can be applied either by oneself or by others. It can be legitimate or it can be unbiblical. It can be based on truth or on falsehood and sin.

All denominations are founded on a certain sense of disfellowship. Nowadays, they may be the instruments or causes of disfellowship. Very few local churches will actually disfellowship a person, even if they ought to do so Biblically. It seems that the most stringent denomination (albeit a false church) is Roman Catholicism, which will excommunicate its members when necessary. Strangely, the Roman Catholic institution leads in matters of morality and the proper judgement of immorality (even if its own clergy happen to be the worst offenders!), whilst those calling themselves 'Protestant' (especially the Church of England) are extremely lax in this respect.

Apart from matters of morality and other issues of a glaring nature, it seems that the vast majority of Christians are ignoring, or, are blind-to, a rampant form of disfellowship. Literally thousands of sincere Christians are forced to move from their local churches to attend other local churches. It is true that some move for non-essential, unbiblical reasons, such as services not suiting their personality, etc. But, this is not the kind of mass movement being referred to here.

Often, this movement of people in and out of churches is legitimate, but unrecognised for what it really is. People are accused of being 'spiritual gypsies' or, they are scorned because it is assumed they are "looking for the perfect church". The truth is much closer to home! Many folk

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leave - usually quietly and without fuss, but often under a cloud of suspicion - because they feel forced to do so. They may have had enough of the falsity of the people within the local church, whose actions or words are so marred by sin, that it is impossible to stay amongst them. Or, the pastor is a tyrant, who must have everything all his own way, or he lashes out verbally. Or, his teachings are so bad or unbiblical, that a real Christian cannot stay and listen to his diatribes. If such was the experience of just one person, then an onlooker could be justified in being wary... but this is the active experience of thousands every year in the UK alone. This writer knows of several entire congregations who have left local churches to attend others, but it was all done in silence.

Sadly, many good folk never attend another church in their lives. This writer has heard of one old lady, living alone in a remote house, who has not been visited by those she left and she is still treated with vile bitterness, over 30 years after she was forced out of her local church! It is a fact that when someone leaves a local church, he or she will be shunned in the street by many of the members who remain in that church. It is highly likely that the pastor and the deacons will cross the street to avoid the leaver, maybe spilling over into bitter confrontations (even if *they* were the cause of the disfellowship!).

I left a certain local church (for legitimate Biblical reasons) about seven years ago. Yet, this year (1993) I was walking with my wife in a park and was totally shunned by the pastor and one of his deacons! It was an incredible scene - two Christians with such bitterness, that they openly show hatred for other Christians! This is common today. The Bible allows a local church to discipline Believers and, if the case is bad enough, to cast them from fellowship, but even when this is so, it must be done with a sense of love and for the repentance of the one being cast out. THIS IS NOT IN EVIDENCE TODAY. Rather, what is in evidence is the callous disregard for proper Biblical principles, the disregard for legitimate discipline (of both 'members' and pastors/officers), and the widespread bitterness people show toward others, simply because they have left their local church. Love for the Brethren is absent.

Basically, many Christians are not interested in what God says in His word about this. They simply want to express their own anger, bitterness or personal opinions! In the process they hurt so many folk and bring Christianity into disrepute. Rather than love the brethren (even if they can sometimes be difficult), they just hate them, oppose them with bitterness and generally treat them badly. Not all of us are resilient and able to spring back after being treated shabbily. (This writer thanks God he is able to do so, but he knows many who suffer terribly).

If the reader is one of those who has suffered badly at the hands of other Believers, let them remember that God sees it all. He judges the living and the dead, the Believer as well as the

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unbeliever. He knows when a Believer has been maltreated! Bear in mind that where "two or three" are gathered together, there is the Church of Jesus Christ. If you can only meet in your living room, that is fine. And if you cannot find others of like mind, just pray and study alone - God understands and He will be with you. If there are less than "two or three", it does not matter, for you are still a member of the Body of Christ, the Church! Nothing can alter that fact. If you left your local church for a legitimate reason, then the Lord will see you through. And even if you did make mistakes, or committed deliberate error, that is no reason at all for other Believers (pastors or others) to treat you shabbily and with hatred.

It is the hope of this writer that these few words will encourage those who have been forced to leave their local churches for Biblical reasons, but whose later treatment by fellow Believers has been abominable. God does not sleep. He will repay the wrongdoers just as He will be loving with those who were wronged.

Pastors are respectfully requested to search their hearts carefully and with honesty. If some leave the local church for which he has a pastoral duty he ought to remember several things:

1.

The local church is not his. He is not a manager or owner. It belongs to Jesus Christ.

2.

A pastor is not a ruler. He is a spokesman for the Lord, not for himself. Thus he should not feel personally insulted!

3.

If he is true to His Lord, lives his life in sincerity (we all make mistakes and we all sin), has a love for those in his care, and he teaches only what God gives him to say, then if some decide to leave, he must be totally frank about the issue. **Firstly**, he must find out why the person left. If he left because of some fault in him, then the pastor must change (whether or not the one who left will return). If the person left for an unwarranted (non-Biblical) reason, then the pastor must point this out in love and must leave it to the other person's conscience.

Secondly

, the one who has left must not be victimised or abused. If he has done wrong, he must be prayed for, not treated with hatred and bitterness.

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**God help us
all
in this matter**

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FOR A FULL STUDY SEE THE BOOK 'THE LEFT BOOT OF FELLOWSHIP' BY K. B. NAPIER

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