

TOO HOT TO HANDLE

4 Is There A Way Out?

We have been asking questions like, “What is the church?” and “What is a church?” and we have seen that there are certain characteristics which must always be true of every church. In particular, every local church should reflect the “oneness” of the church in the way it relates to other local churches and in the relationships that exist between its members.

Then we asked, “What is the nature of that oneness?” What is the nature of the bond that unites us and what does it look like when it is in action? We came up with a list of responsibilities and duties that God has given to all of us. The fulfilment of those duties is, in part, the visible expression of the bond that unites all believers.

But how does all this apply when we have to address controversial issues and differences of opinion?

Duties Must Not Be Neglected

God given duties must never be neglected. Whatever difference of opinion I may have with a brother in the Lord, so long as He is a brother, you must still meet with him, be open and prepared to receive him — not remain distant or aloof, be kind to him and be generous to him. You must pray for him, edify him, support him and encourage him. You must submit to him and serve him, confess to him when you have wronged him, warn him when he strays, forgive him when he repents, comfort him when he is sorrowful and share his burdens. You must try to stir him up to good works, honour him and love him. You must not provoke him or judge him.

Can I Ever Walk Away?

Can you ever walk away and refuse fellowship with a brother with whom I disagree? If he is a brother in the Lord, I do not see how you possibly can. It seems to me that you must either resolve your difference of opinion or agree to differ and not let your difference inhibit the fulfilment of your God given duties toward one another in anyway.

Even if your brother sins those duties still apply. Your responsibility is to admonish him, patiently encourage him, work to restore him and, when he repents, forgive him.

If he persists in sin God has told you what to do in Matthew 18. Ultimately the matter will come before the whole church, a judgement will be made and a persistently sinning brother will be excluded from fellowship. But note two things. The decision to discontinue fellowship is made by the church, not by any individual, and the whole context of Matthew 18 emphasises how important it is that not one of the Lord’s little ones should be lost. In other words when the process of Matthew 18 is followed the motivation behind it is primarily to restore the offender, not exclude him.

The breaking of fellowship is always a last resort. In effect it only happens when someone who professes to be a brother in the Lord proves himself not to be by persistent and wilful sin, and that in spite of patient admonition and encouragement.

But, What About...?

But what about ...

“Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition.”

Titus 3:10

It seems to me this is entirely consistent with Matthew 18.

What about ...

“There are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.”

Galatians 1:7 – 9

This passage primarily addresses how we should respond to those who preach a “different gospel — specifically a message of salvation by works. A stranger who comes with such a message should be considered accursed. If a brother within the fellowship should begin to proclaim such a message, presumably Matthew 18 would apply.

“If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds.”

2 John 10 – 11

Again this is the issue of an outsider coming with a different gospel. This time it involves a denial of the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ and that He was also a real man: something which is fundamental to everything we believe.

Can I Ever Leave A Church?

Are there any circumstances where it is possible for a believer to leave the local church with which he is associated?

Yes it is possible to leave a local church provided that you can do so without violating any of the duties and responsibilities listed above. For example, it could be possible to leave a church —

When you move to another area

When you and the church agree that you could serve the Lord best as part of another local church because you have agreed to differ on certain matters and there is no sin involved — merely an allowable difference of opinion or interpretation — or because there is work to be done in another church which your gifts are suited to or because your present church is not best meeting your needs or the needs of your family.

The key thing is that in all these circumstances the transfer is made with the blessing of the church that you are leaving.

What if everyone else is persistently sinning and you are not? If that is truly the case then, whatever you have been a member of, it is not a church but remember the heart is deceitful. Could it really be true that you are the only one who is out of step? I suppose it is possible but you need to be very cautious. A decision to leave should not be taken without a lot of careful thought, prayer and advice from mature and trusted believers who know you well and after all that you must remember that in leaving you must still demonstrate the graciousness of the Lord.

You Cannot Leave The Church

Remember you may be able to leave a local church but you can never leave the church. For that reason membership may be transferred but membership may never be resigned. If you leave a church you must leave with its blessing or you must leave under the cloud of discipline.

You Cannot Refuse Fellowship

You cannot refuse fellowship with anyone who is a genuine believer however weak his faith may be and however prone he may be to stray into sin. Unless he has been judged by the church to be a wilful and persistent sinner, he is your brother in the Lord and is entitled to all the privileges that go with it!

What About Cooperation Between Churches

It seems to me that the logical extension of what we have learned is that wherever a group of believers meets we must recognise that group as a church and part of the church of which we also are a part. We must deal with them as brothers and sisters in the Lord and work in harmony with them. That cooperation may only be discontinued if we as a church rule that that group is persistently and wilfully sinning but we must take care to remember that there may still be within it those who are genuine believers and we cannot withhold fellowship from them on a personal level.

Coming Soon

Next we will move on to consider the issue of authority in the church and how it relates to the resolving of differences.