

THE ASSEMBLY MESSENGER

Proclaiming the Timeless Truths of the Church to a New Generation of Believers

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Dear Reader

In our continuing study of *reception* we saw in the last issue that one of the requirements found in 1 Corinthians was not having improper associations. We looked at a few examples closely connected with chapters 5 and 10. In this issue we will seek to show that freedom from improper associations has *always* been a requirement for fellowship with the Lord.

We will seek to show from both the Old and New Testaments that association with that which is *unscriptural*, defiles. Much “good” has to be turned away from because it is associated with something evil or unrighteous in God’s sight. We will look at a few Scriptural examples, but first will note how unfortunate it is that the expression “association with *evil* defiles” has been used for all wrong associations. While this expression is true, it makes the principle too restrictive in the minds of most Christians, for they assume that the word *evil* is only connected with sins that strike at the heart of one’s moral character or at the fundamentals of Christianity. However, *evil* as used in Scripture, is a broad term, including *foolishness* (Mk.7:22 — in the sense of not using common sense; senseless; folly). Association with things less than what *we* might call *evil* or *wickedness* also defiles, as seen in some of the up-coming examples.

Examples that Association with Sin Defiles

ACHAN (Josh.7). Achan, an Israelite, sinned in a “little” thing, at least as people would consider it: he took some spoils of war, which God had said not to do. Only one man sinned in actually taking the goods, but God said, “*Israel* has sinned” (v.11). God said “*they* have also transgressed My covenant which I commanded them, for *they* have taken some of the accursed thing” (v.11). All of Israel was seen equally as guilty of Achan’s sin as was Achan, and God severely judged *Israel* (vv.2-5) until Israel *executed* Achan and thus cleared itself. This is a clear indication of *corporate defilement*! Achan’s sin was not a major moral or doctrinal evil as we normally think of evil, but *unrighteousness*, yet severe judgment on Israel, *corporately*, followed. Israel was guilty by *association*. This was written for our learning (Rom.15:4; 1 Cor.10:11). No wonder this example is so often attacked by those who deny the impact of *associations* on assembly defilement! It is one of the clearest examples found in Scripture of the principle that association with sin defiles.

Leviticus 21:16-24. The holy things must not be associated with anything that was blemished — i.e., had on it the marks of sin. Therefore, there were restrictions on who could partake of, or offer the sacrifices because of the principle of association.

PRIESTS (Ezra 2:61-63). Some sons of the priests could not eat of the most holy things because their genealogy was not found, and thus they were excluded from the priesthood *as defiled*. Until they could prove their genealogy, they were defiled on the principle of association.

TRANSMITTED DEFILEMENT (Haggai 2:11-13). In this example, holy flesh (meat) touching what is common doesn’t make that which is common, holy. But, for example, if one who is *unclean* because of a dead body (requiring first-degree separation: one had to stay away from *him*) touched that which is common, it made those things *unclean* (requiring second-degree separation: those things also were to be avoided because they had come in contact with one who was unclean). See Numbers 9:6 and 19:11-13, 22. If a man didn’t purify himself he defiled the temple. A Scofield note says, “The Mosaic law held that moral *cleanness* could not be transmitted, but moral *uncleanness* could.” This shows that religious association with one who is associating with, for example, a false teacher, defiles me to the same degree as if I was actually the one associating with the teacher. Remember, these are *God’s* rules, not rules *we* have made up!

LEAVEN (1 Cor.5:6, Gal.5:9). Since we studied this in the last issue, we will only make a few remarks about these verses. “A little leaven (yeast) leavens the whole lump.” If we associate with moral or doctrinal sin in a *Christian’s* life in any religious way, we are *leavened* or *defiled* by it: it has a corrupting influence on us individually and collectively: the *collective* aspect is here emphasized. The only way not to be leavened by leaven is to physically keep away from it or to destroy the leaven, spiritually speaking, by the “heat” of effective assembly discipline as shown in these chapters. 1 Corinthians 5:7 shows that the sin is to be *purged out*, not associated with in any way. Note that these instructions apply to *Christians*. We probably will have to go to school with, and work with and for unsaved people who practice every kind of moral sin and may even openly deny Christ. Such association with them is not forbidden, for 1 Corinthians 5:9 makes it plain we can’t leave this corrupt world. In fact, we are to be witnesses of Christ to such unsaved people.

1 CORINTHIANS 10:16-21 — Association in the Breaking of Bread. We again looked at this portion in the last issue, so we will keep our remarks here somewhat brief. There is a deep association with those with whom we break bread (v.16). The Word of God then says, “Are not they who eat the sacrifice in communion (partner, partaker) with the altar” (1 Cor.10:18). “I do not wish you to be in communion with demons. You cannot drink the Lord’s cup and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the Lord’s table and the table of demons” (1 Cor. 10:20-21).

In this dramatic illustration coming between the meaning of the Lord’s Supper in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 and its details of practice in 1 Corinthians 11:23-32, we see that we are *one* with those with whom we break bread. We thus are in fellowship with, deeply associated with, the *position* (altar) taken by those breaking bread with us. God has used a worst-case *example* here in 1 Corinthians 10 to illustrate the point. If one associates himself with things sacrificed to idols by simply eating of those sacrifices, he is seen as in communion with the idol’s altar or position, and is associating himself with *demons* who are behind the idols, *even if he strongly repudiates what the idol stands for and would not want to have anything to do with demons!* We are responsible for the position and beliefs of those with whom we break bread!

Some would distinguish between going to some denominational “church” or sect to break bread on *their* ground (altar), and one coming from such a “church” or sect to break bread on the ground or basis for fellowship which we see to be Scriptural. At the most the difference is in outward testimony, not as to association. The physical location doesn’t make the association in God’s eyes, as we will see in the account of the false teacher in 2 John 9-11. If I am warned about the danger of a certain highly contagious disease, am I any less foolish to have one such person with the disease come to my house than to go to that person’s house where the whole family is sick? Likewise, what difference in principle does it make if I link myself with *one* brother or sister in Christ who is walking (*and intends to keep on walking*) on wrong ground and/or is associated with wrong doctrines or practices, by breaking bread with him/her in the local assembly where I express fellowship, or if I go with him to break bread at his group? By using a scripturally-gathered assembly as a *convenience*, the person is not changing the position (altar) he believes to be correct and which he plans to return to as soon as possible.

THE UNEQUAL YOKE (2 Cor.6:14-18). “Be not unequally yoked together with unbelievers, *for what fellowship has righteousness with unrighteousness? ... Wherefore come out from the midst of them and be separated ... touch not what is unclean.*” The *principle* in these verses goes beyond saved and unsaved in “yokes” such as marriage and partnerships, to the overall principle that Christians are to be *separated from unrighteousness*. The unequal yoke with *unbelievers* is just one aspect of that principle. The words “touch not” show how far the separation is to be. Why? *Because association defiles.*

2 TIMOTHY 2:19-22. “Withdraw from iniquity (Gk: *adikia*=unrighteousness)” (v.19). “Purifying oneself from these [vessels to dishonor] *in separating oneself from them*” (v.21, JND). We are not to be ecclesiastically associated with a course of unrighteousness or moral or doctrinal sin because association with that which is wrong, defiles. *Instead of association there is to be separation.*

Note that the expression “in separating oneself from them” in the JND translation of verse 21, above, is not found in other translations, so critics have said that JND simply was imposing some of his personal theology in the verse. But the Greek word properly translated *purge* in the KJV is *ekkathairo* which means “to cleanse *out*, cleanse *thoroughly*” (Vine) — a strong word used only here and in 1 Corinthians 5:7. The less strong and more-used word is *kathairo* which simply means “cleanse.” Hence the JND translation correctly adds the words “in separating oneself from them” to convey the meaning of the strong Greek word in verse 21. There can be no liberty to carry on the service (worship) of God unless we withdraw from what is not right and pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace, with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart (2 Tim.2:22).

THE FALSE TEACHER (2 John 9-11). Often the *principle of associations* seen in these verses of 2 John is lost in the very dramatic and strong *illustration*. So please carefully note the *principle*. If I allow a fundamentally false teacher in my house or even greet him, I become a *partaker of his evil*: I am seen as being *in common* with him and *defiled* by that seemingly slight association! Note that I don’t have to go to *his* house or *accept* his wrong teachings to be a partaker of his evil. Here the thought in the specific example is association with *major evil* brought by an unsaved person, but what is important for our study is the *principle of how* one becomes associated with and defiled by the sinning person. One easily can make the comparison *in principle* to assembly reception. If I break bread — a deep association — with one who holds doctrines or practices contrary to what Scripture teaches, I am associated with those doctrines and practices by being associated with him, *even if I don’t go to his place or believe what he believes*.

Some Comments of Others (Pro and Con) as to Associations and Separation

Foundation Magazine, 4-95, by C. Woodbridge (written about 1970, used by permission). How far does Biblical separation extend? Is it from Christian brethren who are walking in theological disobedience?.... Shall [Christians] believe in mere “first degree” separation, or shall they accept total, genuine Biblical separation?.... In my view men who advocate “first degree” or “primary” separation while denying the validity of “second degree” ... separation do not really understand the meaning of true Biblical separation.... “*I am a companion of all them that fear Thee and of them that keep Thy precepts*” (Ps.119:63). In other words, the Psalmist’s fellowship was with those who were characterized not only by their fear of the Lord but also by their obedience of His precepts.... Do you remember the Levitical laws of cleansing as they are recorded, for example, in Leviticus 15? According to these laws (and their basic principle has never changed), when a man for one reason or another was unclean, everything he touched was unclean. No one was to touch him (“first degree” separation). But by the same token no one was to touch the bed on which he lay or the chair on which he sat (“second degree” separation). Why this stringent command? Because the Lord God wanted His cleansed people to really be separated from contamination. Jude is equally explicit. The believer is not only to avoid contamination with foul flesh (“first degree” separation), but he is also to hate “even the garment spotted by the flesh” (“second degree” separation). Study Jude 23....

The Bible knows nothing whatever about “degrees” of separation from evil.... This new ... non-Biblical distinction between “first” and “second” degree separation is a deadly menace.... When a man repudiates “second degree” separation he has broken down a Biblical wall of defense and the flood-tide of compromise may readily flow into the fortress of the beleaguered remnant of faith!.... The Word of God is crystal clear! If a church or an institution of learning has become theologically unclean, what is our duty? “*Touch not the unclean thing*” (2 Cor.6:17).... On October 7, 1888, Charles H. Spurgeon stated: “*That I might not stultify my testimony, I have cut myself clear of those who err from the faith and even from those who associate with them.*” Amen!

Our Paths and our Associations, F.W.Grant. Who can say then that a man’s own condition may be godly while in open-eyed association with ungodliness around? 2 John is no plainer than 2 Timothy [2:22] is here. Both say we are responsible for, and partakers of, the sins of others with whom we knowingly associate ourselves.

Leslie M. Grant on 1 Corinthians 10 [*1 and 2 Corinthians*, Believers Bookshelf]. “When an animal was sacrificed on the altar, those who ate of the sacrifice were thereby identified with the altar. The serious question

of *association* is that which is pressed here. If we are having fellowship with Christ and His body, as expressed in the breaking of bread, is it consistent at the same time to have fellowship with what is contrary to Him? ... This principle can certainly be applied to a denominational association. Many denominations have been so mixed with idolatry that any Christian should discern this clearly and have no fellowship with such things. The very effort to exalt and justify a certain denomination has in it the element of idolatry, for it puts the denomination in place of Christ. Certainly we are to love those Christians who may be deceived by such things, but the thing itself we should avoid.” (Pg.64-65)

J.N.Darby on 1 Corinthians 10 [*Synopsis*, pg.246 of American Edition]. Those in Israel who ate of the sacrifices were partakers of the altar — were identified with it. So those who ate of idol’s meat as such were identified with the idol it was offered to.

A.N.Groves on Bethesda’s Reception Policy [*History of the Brethren*, N. Noel, pg.222]. “As Christ has received them [all Christians], so would we to the glory of God the Father ... In fact, as we received them for the life, we would not *reject* them for their systems or refuse to recognize *any part* of their systems, because we disallowed much. Trusting, that if this *inter-communion* could be established, to effect all we desire ... But I would INFINITELY RATHER BEAR *with all their evils*, than to SEPARATE from THEIR GOOD ... On my principles I receive them *all*.” (Caps and italics are ANG’s). This view led to the so-called “open/exclusive” division between so-called “brethren” in 1848. ANG does not believe in either first or second degree separation.

Gunter Vogel (from *Keeping the Unity of the Spirit*, Gunter Vogel, Germany, pg.36,38). God’s Word holds the assembly as well as the individual believer responsible for the associations they maintain, for the question of with whom they exercise fellowship.... We just want to emphasize that this portion [1 Cor.10; 2 Cor.8] shows that God holds us responsible for those and for that with which we have fellowship. And particularly when we participate in a religious action *symbolically expressive of fellowship* [the breaking of bread], we are responsible too, to check out the principles that underlie it, *because we are morally identifying ourselves with them*.... We can also recognize here too the duty of separation from all principles that attack the Lord’s honor and curtail His rights — if, for example, the liberty of the Holy Spirit is in principle denied through the clerical [clergy-laity] system.

The Letter of the Ten (Defined the basics of so-called Open Brethren, 1840’s). The following is a crucial passage to our subject, for it clearly shows how otherwise-godly Christians can deny second-degree association. “For supposing the author of the tracts [B.W.Newton] were fundamentally heretical, this would *not* warrant us in rejecting those who came from under his teaching, until we were satisfied that they had *understood and imbibed* views essentially subversive of foundation truth.” But 2 John 9-11 shows that this *imbibing* (personally believing the false teaching to be true) is not necessary to be defiled by association with it.

Summary

Scripture teaches both first and second degree separation based on the principle of association. Without this doctrine, I could break bread with any believer who presented himself to the local assembly even though he was associated (and intended to remain associated) with any false doctrine or practice as long as he *claimed* not to (or as some wrongly say, was not *known* to) hold or teach the false thing. This denial of second-degree association is *exactly* one of the major points that created the so-called “open-exclusive” division among so-called “brethren” in 1848 — one of the most notable examples of the disregard for the principle of associations defiling.

Thus, to not be associated with unrighteousness or evil, we need to clearly know on what ground those who wish to break bread with us stand. What is their ground of gathering together and what is their personal stand as to righteousness, faith, love, peace, etc. (2 Tim.2:22)? What is their stand — and the stand of any group where they break bread — on the Persons of the Godhead? Do they believe that Christ could have sinned? What is their view as to the resurrection and other major doctrines of the Christian faith? Are they involved in counterfeiting the work of the Holy Spirit in the charismatic movement? Are they associated with groups who teach or allow to be taught such false doctrines? Unless we *know*, we may be found in fellowship (associated) with all kinds of false

doctrines and practices, and to be in fellowship with the very ones (in principle) who turned away from Paul's and God's pathway which upholds the truth and holiness of His Assembly (2 Tim.1:15).

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