

THE ASSEMBLY MESSENGER

Proclaiming the Timeless Truth of the Church to a New Generation of Believers
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Dear Reader

A new doctrine has been circulating recently as an excuse to do “nothing” in relation to sin within assemblies or within “fellowships” (so-called). It is the doctrine that *God will take care of it*, so pray but don’t act. Rather, we are told, we are only to look *within* and cleanse or purify *ourselves*. We should seek to *help* others, we are told, but not act against the sin, trusting the *Lord* to take care of the holiness of His Church. But this thought is really an old doctrine! For example, in the 1840’s a prominent brother wrote, speaking of sinning Christians, that he “would infinitely rather bear with *all their evils* than separate from their good.” Surely we *are* to cleanse ourselves (2 Cor.7:1), as many verses dealing with personal conduct show, and are to seek to help others, but there are many verses, such as 1 Corinthians 5:12-13, that show that *assemblies* are responsible for what goes on in their midst and must act regarding sin.

One portion used by these teachers is the account of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. The early Jerusalem assembly didn’t act: *God* did, and in a most decisive way so that “great fear came upon all the Church and upon all who heard these things” (5:11). Certainly God can still act in judgment, and Paul informs us in 1 Corinthians 11:30 that God acts behind the scenes in weakness, illness and even death when there is unjudged sin in His house. But in the case of Ananias and Sapphira, the sin was hidden from the assembly. And it can be rightly said that there was no *written* record of what God expected the assembly to do, although surely the Lord gave His apostles sufficient information about the then-future Church and proper conduct regarding it, when he taught them for 40 days before His ascension (Acts 1:2-3).

OLD TESTAMENT EXAMPLE

We want to use only one Old Testament example since our emphasis is on Church-truth. In Genesis 15:18 we are told that God gave the children of Israel the whole land of *Canaan* (Gen.15:18; 17:8). But Israel had to *go in and possess it*, or they would have gained nothing. “Every place on which the sole of your foot treads shall be yours” (Dt.11:24). Yes, the Lord would help: “the *Lord* will drive out all these nations *from before you*, and *you* will dispossess greater and mightier nations than yourselves” (v.23). “No man shall be able to stand against *you*” (v.25). See also Joshua 1:2-8. Israel had to *fight* hard for every foot of the land, and God gave them great victories, at least when they were obedient. It took about seven years and finally they “took possession of it and dwelt in it” (Josh.21:43-45).

Since this account is an *example* for us (1 Cor.10:11), *for our learning* (Rom.15:4), we see a *principle* here that applies to the New Testament Church. We are in a spiritual warfare (Eph.6) and are to “fight the good fight of faith” (1 Tim.6:12) — an order from Paul the apostle. We are not merely spectators in a fight between God and Satan, but are to put on the whole armor of God to be able, not just individually but as assemblies, to hold our position against the attacks of the enemy. Paul speaks of it as a wrestling match (Eph.6:11-13). Verse 17 gives us an offensive weapon, the “sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God.” With it, we can and are expected to win great victories.

NEW TESTAMENT EXAMPLES

- **Problems Between Brothers and Sisters**

Matthew 18:15-18 shows plainly that problems between brothers and sisters in the local assembly (or, in principle, even problems between assemblies) are to be resolved *by the brethren*. If personal effort doesn’t resolve it, then the *assembly* gets involved. If the assembly’s attempt at restoration (Gal.6:1) doesn’t resolve the problem, then the assembly *acts* in judgment against the sin, *for sin must not be allowed to continue in an assembly*. And the assembly has authority from the Lord to act for Him. The Scriptural judgment against the sinning brother is bound

in heaven; if there is repentance and that judgment is rightly lifted, that also is bound in heaven: it has God's stamp of approval. The point is, God expects the *assembly* to act and not just put up with the continuing sin, praying for *God* to do something.

- **Responsibilities of the Lord's Disciples**

When the Lord was here, He certainly could do all that needed doing, but He often put responsibility into the disciples' hands for what they could do. Note two examples in John. In John 6 we have the Lord miraculously feeding 5000 men plus women and children (Mt.14:21) from 2 fish and 5 barley loaves. Only the *Lord* could do that, but the Lord had the *disciples* make the people sit down (v.10), distribute the food (v.11) and gather up the remnants (v.12). He expects His people to do what they can do, according to His commands! Then in John 11:44 only the Lord's resurrection-power drew the resurrected but bound Lazarus out of the tomb. But the Lord commanded the *people* to "take away the stone" from the cave's entrance (v.38) and when Lazarus had come forth, to "Loose him and let him go" (v.44). And likewise, God has given orders for "action" in His assemblies by the brethren so that proper conduct will be seen in His house.

- **The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15)**

Acts 15 begins with professing Christians (15:24) teaching wrong doctrine and upsetting the brethren at Antioch and elsewhere. The doctrine was a mixture of Judaism and Christianity. Did Paul and others just wring their hands and appeal to God to somehow solve the problem? No, it was met head-on! Paul and Barnabas personally disputed with the false teachers, but to no avail. So the Antioch assembly decided a council or conference was necessary and it was held at Jerusalem between the apostles, others from afar, and the large assembly at Jerusalem. It was a unique conference, for we do not have apostles today. "Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter" (v.6). The following verses show there was no going around the problem, but it was met by fact and Scripture. There was agreement by "the apostles and elders, *with the whole church*" (v.22), and that agreement was sent by brethren giving personal testimony and by letter, and the problem was resolved. Today, although matters certainly can be discussed in conferences and counsel given, it must be remembered that the only authority to act is in the hands of the local assembly.

- **Note and Turn Away From (Rom.16:17-18)**

Paul's letter to the brethren at Rome (and there was an active assembly testimony in Rome — 16:1,5) gave them a broad spectrum of foundation truth, and that included some "assembly truth" in chapters 12 and 16. We will concentrate on two verses in chapter 16 because they indicate the need for action by the brethren. "I beseech you, brethren, to consider those who create divisions and occasions of falling, *contrary to the doctrines which ye have learned*, and *turn away from them*, for such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by good words and fair speeches *deceive* the hearts of the unsuspecting" (JND). This was the action expected of all the brethren, all the assembly at Rome, and thus by all of us, for the things that Paul writes "are the commandments of the Lord" (1 Cor.14:37).

Ekklino, the Greek word for "turn away" (avoid, KJV) is only used two other places (Rom.3:12; 1 Pet.3:11) and indicates a complete turning away, not just avoiding someone for a while. Unsaved mankind has *completely turned away* from the truth (Rom.3:12); we are to *totally turn away* from evil (1 Pet.3:11). Notice that the people who *God* says are causing divisions, are teaching contrary doctrines and thus *causing* those divisions when others won't go along with them. The people who maintain the truth and "turn away from" (break assembly fellowship with) those teaching wrong things, are not the division-makers: they are not sectarian. *Right doctrine is the dividing line* — the "apostles' doctrine" of Acts 2:42. The division-makers do their work cleverly, using but twisting Scripture, as masters at the art of argument and appeal to the emotion ("good words and fair speeches"), but they bring poisoned food, although appealingly wrapped. So it is plain that wrong doctrine, and those who persist in bring it, must be *actively rejected* — turned away from — by each person and each assembly which will be true to the Lord. Darby's note on the word "deceive" in verse 18 is, "The Greek word has the sense of seducing *from* what is right and deceiving *into* what is wrong: see 1 Timothy 2:14."

- **All Forms of Immoral Conduct: Wrong Doctrines Too (1 Cor.5; Gal.5)**

1 Corinthians 5 is the chapter on the necessity for an *assembly* to act strongly when immoral conduct of a *Christian* is active in its midst. We think of immorality as a sexual offense, and it includes that, but it includes covetousness, idolatry, drunkenness, etc. *Moral* means what is right conduct in God's eyes; *immoral*, what is wrong conduct. Such sin, when left unjudged, leavens or corrupts the entire assembly (5:6). Therefore, "*purge out the old leaven*" (v.7)! What does that mean? We are "not to keep company with" such (vv.9,11) — not even to eat with them (v.11). We *are* to judge the conduct of one within the local assembly and "put away from yourselves the evil person" (vv.12-13). *God expects decisive action on the part of His own as to sin!* Only then has the assembly cleared or cleansed itself (2 Cor.7:8-12; cf. Jn.20:23). Then in Galatians 5:9 we see that doctrinal sin also "leavens the whole lump." It is clear that the same process as for moral sin applies. God expects holiness in His house! Certainly He is *able* to cleanse His own house, but He has put that responsibility in man's hands to act for Him according to His Word.

- **Forgiving a Repentant Christian — Administrative Forgiveness (2 Cor.2)**

Just as God requires strong action against the person in moral or doctrinal sin, He equally requires *forgiveness* in a most complete way when the sin is confessed and forsaken. 2 Corinthians 2:7-9 is speaking of the same (formerly) immoral man who was the example in 1 Corinthians 5 for action against all forms of evil. We aren't given the details, but the sin had obviously been forsaken and confession made. But the brethren still had to act, although in a completely different (although no less difficult) way. "You ought rather to forgive and comfort him" (v.7). "Reaffirm your love to him" (v.9). What if the brethren had been too hurt by his sinful actions? If anyone, this man had caused too much distress to ever be fully restored! But their actions in real forgiveness was a "test whether you are obedient in all things" (v.9)! These instructions were not for a few, but for every brother and sister in that assembly, and for every one of us! No one, without himself sinning and becoming an object of the assembly's discipline, could say, "Let *God* forgive him: I won't." On the contrary, there was to be a concerted effort to make the formerly excommunicated man feel forgiven and included!

- **Come Out From Among Them (2 Cor.6:14-18)**

"What fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness ... Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord" (2 Cor.6:14-18). This so-called "unequal yoke commandment" has been generally looked at as only applying to saved-unsaved "yokes" such as marriage and business partnerships. But the last part of verse 14 gives a wider principle. Wherever there is lawlessness — a refusal to acknowledge "the commandments of the Lord (1 Cor.14:37), and all "sin is lawlessness" (1 Jn.3:4) — *the believer is to separate from it*. Further, he is to *expose* the true character of unfruitful works of darkness (Eph.5:11). The promise is closer communion with our Lord: "And I will receive you. I will be a Father to you and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the Lord almighty" (2 Cor.6:17-18).

- **Warn, Comfort and Uphold (1 Thes.5:14)**

1 Thessalonians 5:14 gives continuing action in an assembly. The brethren in general are exhorted to *warn* the unruly in the assembly. Unbecoming conduct is not to be allowed: it is to be *stopped* early on before it becomes a habit. A warning from many brethren usually solves the problem. Equally true, there may be some who are afraid to step out, to make a decision, to speak up, to actively participate, and they need to be *comforted or encouraged*. This is true shepherd work, for the assembly is to function in every part. There are others who are spiritually or even physically weak. They need *support* when the adverse winds come, whether doctrinally or physically. To uphold them takes time and energy, but it is part of our assembly work and it is pleasing to the Lord. It is not work left up to God to do!

- **Withdraw; Do Not Keep Company with Disobedient (2 Thes.3:6,14)**

In 2 Thessalonians 3:6,14 there are two strong action verses dealing with assembly matters. In verse 6 we are told to “*withdraw* from [Gk: *stello*: shrink from] every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition [instruction or directions] which he received from us.” The brethren are to have nothing to do with the sinning person that he may feel the assembly’s displeasure as to his conduct. Verse 14 is stronger. “If anyone does not obey our word in this epistle [and surely, any of the epistles], note that person and *do not keep company with him*, that he may be ashamed.” The Greek word is *sunanamignumi* and means to mix with, keep company with, and is only elsewhere used in 1 Corinthians 5:9,11 where it clearly means to have nothing to do with such a person, not even to eat a common meal with him or her. So one who is wilfully disobedient, turning from what he knows to be right, is in a serious position with God and God expects a serious and decisive response from us. This is not in itself excommunication by the assembly, but not lending one’s fellowship to that which is disorderly.

- **Fight the Good Fight of Faith; Contend Earnestly for the Faith (1 Tim.6:12; Jude 4)**

Darby translates 1 Timothy 6:12 as “*Strive earnestly* in the good conflict of faith.” It’s again that spiritual warfare we’re in, and it takes active and hard effort to be right with God where the world, the flesh and the devil are active. Jude tells us the same thing. Whether the truths of Christianity are given up by saved or unsaved, there is to be the necessary hard work to maintain those truths. That includes the truth of the Assembly.

- **Withdraw from Iniquity; Purge Out; Flee Youthful Lusts; Pursue Righteousness; Turn Away (2 Tim.2-3)**

The action words of 2 Timothy 2:19-22 are commanded of every individual who will remain faithful to the Lord. These inspired words were written at the time of the first widespread departure from the Pauline truth and practice of the Assembly. We are to depart or *withdraw from* [Gk: *aphistemi*: to withdraw or absent oneself from] iniquity [Gk: *adikia*, unrighteousness: whatever is not according to the revealed will of God] (v.19). Then we are to *purify ourselves from* or *purge ourselves from* (as only found elsewhere in 1 Corinthians 5:7 as to leaven) from vessels not to honor. In the context of the book, those who had clearly left the Pauline pathway (2 Tim.1:15) were among the ones Timothy had to purge himself from. He then was to *flee from* those desires of the flesh that would hinder him from obeying God, and then to *pursue with* ones “calling on the Lord out of a pure [undivided] heart,” the Pauline pathway of righteousness, faith, love, peace. Finally, when certain sins *characterize* professing Christians one is to “*turn away*” [Gk: *apotrepo*] from them (2 Tim.3:5). Some argue these verses do not refer to Christians. Yet Paul clearly says in 1 Corinthians 5:10 that a *Christian* does not refuse company with the unsaved because of their conduct, which is normal to their character. Rather, 2 Timothy 3 gives the fleshly activities of the type of professing Christian who would turn from the restrictive Pauline truths and pathway. God’s requirements are not easy, but are expected of each believer who will be true to Him.

- **Preach; Convince, Rebuke, Exhort (Encourage) (2 Tim.4:2-3)**

The last chapter of 2 Timothy begins with more action words (4:2). There is an urgency, for verse 3 explains that the time is coming — it has come! — when people will not endure sound doctrine. So, we all are to preach or proclaim the Word, preach sound doctrine! It is not to be done in a weak or uncertain way, but plain, clear and definite, bringing it to bear on the conscience, convicting or convincing the listeners. When there is error it is to be rebuked, not whitewashed over, as is so common today. If it is not sound doctrine, that should be plainly stated and the person told plainly that he is wrong and what the consequences are. Finally, in discouraging days the brethren need exhortation and encouragement to go on in the truth, no matter how difficult it may be.

- **Stop the Mouths; Rebuke; Reject (Titus)**

Disorderly persons must be refused an audience, refused opportunity to spread their disorderliness (Tit.1:11). The Greek word for “mouths must be stopped” is *epistemizo*, meaning “put to silence.” Such must also be rebuked with all authority — on the basis of God’s Word (2:15). This is the responsibility of every brother as led of the Lord. If that doesn’t solve the problem, such a divisive man is to be *rejected* (3:10-11), knowing that he is “warped and sinning, being self-condemned.” The Greek word for reject is *paraiteomai* and means *to beg off, ask to be excused, have done with*. It is leaving the person alone by every other person. The next step would be excommunication. Sadly, today, many refuse these instructions and give a ready and sympathetic ear to ones who should be refused, so they aren’t “put to silence.” This is sinful and greatly hinders discipline in the house of God and the ultimate betterment of the sinning person.

- **Go Forth to Him Outside the Camp (Heb.13:13)**

We will end with the action instructions of Hebrews 13:13. “Let us *go forth* to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach.” The *camp* is the camp of Israel with its Judaistic principles. It was the proper thing under Judaism, but not in Christianity. We are to leave those former Jewish practices and go to Him as our gathering Center (Mt.18:20), leaving behind wherever those Jewish principles are practiced. Sadly, they are almost universally practiced today in professing Christianity. The priesthood of all believers is given up for the clergy-laity system, in principle a Judaistic practice. God is often far off; law keeping is often insisted upon; assurance of salvation is often thought to be impossible; and many other such things. Leaving that behind will cost something, but how wonderful it is where *He is*, that He asks us to go!

RPD