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A STATEMENT ON EXCOMMUNICATION AND SUSPENSION FROM MEMBERSHIP IN A CONGREGATION

TWO PROCEDURES

Scripture speaks of two procedures by which membership in a congregation may be terminated. The more common is excommunication. The less common is called suspension, separation, termination of fellowship, or some other similar term.

EXCOMMUNICATION

Excommunication is used in the case of a person who sins and refuses to turn from his sinful way and seek forgiveness in Christ, in spite of repeated admonition. By such action he shows himself to be a manifestly impenitent sinner, and because of his impenitence he is no longer to be considered a believer or follower of Christ, but rather a "heathen man and a publican." The key support passage is Matt. 18: 15-17.<sup>a</sup>

It should be mentioned that any sin, including the sin of persistent adherence to an error in a doctrine which undermines the foundation of faith (e.g., denial of the Trinity or vicarious atonement of Christ), may lead to excommunication if it becomes clear that the person is unrepentant (Gal. 1:8, 9<sup>h</sup>; II John 9-11<sup>2</sup>). Also, only a person, not a group of people, is to be excommunicated because the outlined steps of admonition and the final step in church discipline apply only to individuals.

SUSPENSION

Suspension, or whatever other term may be used, involves a person who persistently clings to a doctrinal error which does not destroy the foundation of faith in Christ (Rom. 16:17, 18<sup>b</sup>; Matt. 7:15<sup>c</sup>; II Thess. 3:6, 14, 15<sup>d</sup>) or who is factious within the congregation (Titus 3:10<sup>e</sup>. See also I Cor. 1:10, 11<sup>f</sup>; I Cor. 3:3, 4<sup>g</sup>). Such aberration on his part is indeed sin, even though he himself is not convinced of it. He may, in fact, out of ignorance truly believe that he is not in error even when admonished from Scripture. When such a person still looks to Christ as his Savior and seeks forgiveness from Him for all of his sins, both the known and the unknown, he is not to be declared a "heathen man and a publican," but rather a persistent errorist. And if he should teach and propagandize his error, he is to be avoided and removed from the fellowship because as a promoter of error he is dangerous and is disrupting "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3).

CRITERION FOR USING ONE OR THE OTHER PROCEDURE

That member who impenitently clings to faith-destroying doctrines or who continues in godless living is to be excommunicated (Matt. 18:15-17<sup>a</sup>). That member who persistently adheres to an error in non-faith-destroying doctrines and makes propaganda for them, or who is divisive and factious is to be suspended from fellowship (Rom. 16:17, 18<sup>b</sup>; Titus 3:10<sup>e</sup>).

GOAL IN BOTH PROCEDURES

In both excommunication and suspension of fellowship the ultimate purpose is to win back an erring brother.

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Suspension from membership in a congregation.

- a) Matthew 18:15-17 - Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: But if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.
- b) Romans 16:17,18 - Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple.
- c) Matthew 7:15 - Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.
- d) II Thess. 3:6,14,15 - Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us...And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.
- e) Titus 3:10 - A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject. NIV - Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that have nothing to do with him. NASB - Reject a factious man after a first and second warning.
- f) I Cor. 1:10,11 - Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you.
- g) I Cor. 3:3,4 - For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal?
- h) Gal. 1:8,9 - But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed.
- i) II John 9-11 - Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: For he that bid-  
deth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds.

QUOTATIONS AND SOURCES OF INFORMATION WHICH PERTAIN TO THIS STATEMENT

1. Schuetze and Habeck, The Shepherd under Christ, NPH, 1974, p. 173

"Where admonition has taken place because of doctrinal deviation, only those are to be excommunicated who persistently adhere to an error which subverts the foundation of faith (denial of the Trinity, the divinity of Jesus, salvation by grace, vicarious atonement, resurrection). In other cases separation is called for (Tt. 3:10), i.e., the declaration that the persistent errorist is no longer a confessional brother, but not that he is to be regarded as a heathen man and a publican."

2. Ibid., p. 316.

"If a member's doctrinal views change and he persists in them in spite of admonition, this may call for suspension of fellowship. This, too, releases a person from membership but with the initiative for it generally taken by the congregation. This action assumes that the erroneous views are not such as make the presence of Christian faith impossible."

3. WELS Commission of Doctrinal Matters, Church Fellowship, p. 26. 1960

In reference to II Thess. 3:6,14,15, "Even now Paul does not recommend a complete break of fellowship relations. He is still ready to believe that the offenders are not hardened in their course, for he entertains the hope that they may still be brought to blush in penitent shame when they are given to realize how serious their brethren consider their disorderly conduct. Yet their fellowship is to be restricted now; final brotherly admonition is to be administered through the act of withdrawing from these offenders, through the act of no longer being utterly identified with them in the sight of others. Such withdrawal is to call his brotherly standing into question, so that he may realize that if he persists the congregation will be compelled to separate itself completely and conclusively from him, no longer considering him a Christian brother."

4. Ibid., p. 27.

"We can no longer recognize and treat as Christian brethren those who in spite of patient admonition persistently adhere to an error in doctrine or practice, demand recognition for their error, and make propaganda for it. Gal. 1:8,9; Matt. 7:15-19; II Tim. 2:17-19; II John 9-11; Rom. 16:17,18. If the error does not overthrow the foundation of saving faith, the termination of fellowship is not to be construed as an excommunication. Moreover an excommunication can only apply to an individual, not to a congregation or larger church group."

5. Koehler, Edward, A Summary of Christian Doctrine, CPH, 1952, p. 264.

"Denial of, or exclusion from, church-fellowship is not equivalent to excommunication. While we may not tolerate the teaching and spreading of false doctrine, it is possible that a person errs in sincerity of heart, without losing his faith in Christ (II Thess. 3:14,15; I Cor. 3:11-15). We are to have no fellowship with false teachers (Rom. 16:17), yet we do not regard them as heathen men and publicans."

6. Koehler, Edward, quoted in a report of a Synodical Committee to study Rom. 16:17-18, dated Nov. 21, 1957.

"Avoiding such errorists is not identical with excommunicating them ... if his error does not overthrow the foundation of saving faith, he may still be a Christian. Yet his sincerity and personal faith do not prove his error right, nor do they justify us in continuing in fellowship with him. The 'avoid' must therefore not be construed as a sentence of excommunication, but it is a protective measure, even as the words of Christ are, "Beware of false prophets."

7. Habeck, Irwin, The Function of the Church, a paper delivered at the Ariz.-Calif. District Convention, 1962, p. 9.

"In the matter of doctrinal discipline, in which the final step may not be excommunication but separation or termination of fellowship, it is interesting to note that the passages which have been used to support the separation between church bodies who do not agree in doctrine and practice, are addressed to individual believers and not to bodies of believers, with the possible exception of what is said in Revelation 2 and 3 in the letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor. Believers as a body have the duty because believers as individuals have the duty. But for that very reason it dare not be contended that individual believers have a wider latitude in the matter of fellowship than congregations and church bodies."

8. Meyer, John, "Synod and Congregation," Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Vol. 61, (Oct. 1964), p. 264.

"If a member proves incorrigible and even insists on making propaganda for his error, the congregation will ultimately find it necessary to declare the fellowship with such a one no longer possible. To be sure, a congregation will not act hastily, it will practice patience as long as possible before taking the final step of excommunication or of severance of fellowship, as the case may be."

9. Habeck, Irwin, "Church Discipline," Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Vol. 58, (Apr., 1961), p. 98.

"What has been said about the subject, the object, the purpose, the urgency, and the spirit of church discipline would apply here, too. The outcome when the brother has been so confused 'by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive' (Eph. 4:14) that he cannot be set straight, if the error is not soul-destroying in its essence, would be separation rather than excommunication."

SEE ALSO OTHER PERTINENT ARTICLES:

10. Meyer, John, "Prayer Fellowship," Quartalschrift, Vol. 47, (Apr., 1950), p. 124-136.
11. Meyer, John, "Second Thessalonians 3:14,15," Quartalschrift, Vol. 54, (Jan., 1957), p. 14-27.
12. Gawrisch, Wilbert, "What is Heresy?," Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Vol. 63, (Jan., 1966), p. 29-35; also (Apr., 1966), p. 98-105.