

FAMILY MEMBERS AND FELLOWSHIP

Perhaps no Christian family has escaped seeing a family member depart from the faith, either in doctrine or in behavior (or in both). When a husband, wife, son, daughter, brother, or sister falls away or becomes involved in doctrinal error or support of a false teacher, what are the faithful family members to do? Can one at the same time be true to the Christ and also true to family commitments and relationships? Must one cease all association with one's kindred?

Relative to the husband-wife relationship in which one has been disfellowshipped, the following question was asked of the late Guy N. Woods, and his answer follows (*Questions and Answers*, Vol. 2, pp. 33-34):

QUESTION: "Paul forbids fraternal association with a withdrawn person, 'with such a one no not to eat' (1 Cor. 5:11). What is a faithful Christian wife to do when her husband is withdrawn from?"

ANSWER: It seems clear that Paul was not alluding to a relationship involving husband and wife in the passage cited. The laws of God are never in conflict; all truth is harmonious with itself, and the principles under which God ordains we are to live are never contradictory. Wives have duties to their husbands—whether they are Christians or not—and these duties harmonize with the obligations as Christians, as well. Marriage relationships were designed of God to take precedence over all other relationships; any situation later arising must be understood in the light of this fact. The Christian wife should therefore continue to live with her husband and use her influence to bring him to repentance. 1 Peter 3:1, though not directly applicable to this matter, nonetheless indicates the principle involved.

I agree with the above, with the following exception: It goes too far to say without qualification that "Marriage relationships were designed of God to take precedence over all other relationships." Paul made it clear (1 Cor. 7:13-16) that if one's ungodly partner refuses to tolerate his/her faithful Christian mate and abandons the marriage, the faithful mate is not obligated to prevent his/her departure. (Note: Such a departure does not give the faithful mate the right to remarry, unless the departing mate has committed fornication/adultery [Mat. 19:9].) It has long been my view that, from the context in 1 Corinthians 7, the departing one is one who finds the godly life of his/her mate so repugnant (and perhaps limiting to his ungodliness) that he/she abandons the "restraints" of the relationship. I have also long believed that the option Paul gives in verses 15-16 is one designed to allow the faithful mate to escape a relationship that might cause the loss of his/her soul through the temptation to keep the relationship intact by yielding to ungodly demands. I realize that this passage deals with a Christian married to a non-Christian, but I see no reason why it would not apply as well to a Christian married to a disfellowshipped Christian. He is no more in fellowship with God and faithful saints than is an unbeliever.

Just as the Scriptural fellowship withdrawal of a husband by the church does not sever the marriage bond or nullify the responsibilities of his faithful Christian wife, assuming this couple have children and the husband also has fleshly siblings, neither does the withdrawal nullify the parent-child relationship or the fleshly brother-sister relationship.

It must, however, alter the attitude toward him of all family members who are faithful to God, so that he well understands that they do not approve of his behavior and/or doctrine and that there will be no spiritual fellowship with him until he repents. Those who quote 2 Thessalonians 3:14 (i.e., "have no company with" the apostate) as an absolute with no exceptions, including family members, have simply quit reading too soon. The next verse qualifies *have no company* by saying we should not treat such a one as an enemy, but should admonish him as a brother—which requires some sort of personal association/contact. If this procedure applies regarding our behavior toward a marked Christian who is not a fleshly relative, should it apply any less to one's fleshly family members? I do not see why it should.

So what are parents and grandparents to do if their children and/or grandchildren abandon the faith when they get away from home? What is one to do when a brother or sister in one's immediate family is involved in error? What is an adult child to do if his father or mother apostatizes? This quandary challenges one's best wisdom at times. Do we summarily, without exception, denounce them and tell them they cannot cross our threshold again until they repent? Do we slam the door in their faces to any further family gatherings and meals? Should we allow them to come, but make them eat in another room? Would doing such help or hinder the possibility of our ever reaching them?

Should we not make some allowance for dealing with such matters on a case-by-case basis, depending at least to some degree on the kind of sins involved (e.g., should one who has embraced agnosticism be treated in the same way as a child molester)? Certainly, **we must unmistakably register our disapproval of their misdeeds** and do what we can to admonish, teach, and persuade them to return, whatever their sin. However, if we summarily cut them off (as some seem to advocate) with an absolute "keep-no-company" approach, what hope then have we of persuading and restoring them? I suggest that there is some room for judgment in dealing with this painful problem.

Having experienced this grief in our own family, our approach has been (and continues to be) somewhat of a middle ground. We have let the offender know (in the strongest terms possible) our disapproval of and disagreement with their behavioral and/or doctrinal errors. These conversations have included pointing out the fallacies of their behavior and/or doctrine, along with strong appeals for their repentance and return to faithfulness. We have left no doubt in the minds of such ones in our family, as beloved as they are to us in the flesh, that we are not in spiritual fellowship with them in any sense or degree and that we will not be, until they repent. We do not, however, bar them from family gatherings that surround them with those whom they know are diametrically opposed to their ungodly behavior and/or damnable doctrines. We believe it would be counterproductive to our aim of restoring them if we cut them off from the only avenue of continued contact we have with them (i.e., love of family ties) and that they have with godly people.

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