

## REASONS FOR DISFELLOWSHIPING

Neither the word *disfellowship* nor any of its derivatives appear in the Scriptures. Nevertheless, the phrase “**hand over to Satan**” means that one is transferred out of “the kingdom of the Son” (*Col. 1:13*) and back into Satan’s kingdom i.e. the world and therefore *means to be disfellowshipped*. The following study of the Scriptures reveals that disfellowshipping is necessary under certain circumstances. However, this study also shows that the basis and the reasons given by Jehovah’s Witnesses for disfellowshipping are often completely at odds with the basis and reasons expounded in the Scriptures.

### THE TWO RECORDED CASES OF DISFELLOWSHIPING WERE TO ACT AS A **REBUKE** LEADING TO **RECOVERY**

#### **A. FOR FORNICATION**

❖ *The apostle Paul said to the Corinthians: “...fornication is reported among you...a wife a certain [man] has of his father ... the man that committed this deed should be taken away from your midst? ... hand such a man **over to Satan** for the destruction of the flesh (*sinful character*) in order that the spirit (*his total redeemed, regenerated being*) may be saved in the Day of the Lord ... **Remove** the wicked [man] from among yourselves” (*1 Cor. 5:1, 2, 5, 13*).*

When the man repented he was *immediately accepted back* into fellowship as shown in the later letter to the Corinthians:

❖ “**This rebuke** given by *the majority* is sufficient for such a man, so that on the contrary now, you should **kindly forgive** and comfort him, that somehow such a man may not be swallowed up by being overly sad” (*2 Cor. 2:6, 7*).

Such immediate forgiveness is reminiscent of Jesus’ illustration of the prodigal son where the father immediately, and with open arms, forgives and accepts his son back. But notice in 2 Corinthians 2 that it was **the majority of the congregation** that was to hear the case and to act in this rebuke/disfellowshipping. This is as in Matthew 18:17 where Jesus counsels: “*Speak to the congregation*” and so it was not a secret meeting of elders as representatives of the congregation. This is why Paul could say to Timothy:

❖ “Reprove **before all onlookers** those who practice sin that the rest may have fear” (*1Tim. 5:20*).

The lesson for the congregation would be considerably diminished if the disfellowshipping decision were made behind closed doors and the actual sin and circumstances that led to it remained unknown to the congregation as is the case with Jehovah’s Witnesses.

#### **B. FOR REJECTION OF THE PROVEN TEACHINGS OF AND ABOUT JESUS**

❖ *Paul spoke of: “...holding **faith** and a good conscience, which **some have thrust aside** ... Hymenaeus and Alexander belong to these, and I have handed them **over to Satan** that *they may be taught by discipline not to blaspheme*” (*1Tim. 1:19, 20*).*

❖ “Hymenaeus and Philetus...have **deviated from the truth** saying that the resurrection has already occurred and they are **subverting the faith** of some” (*2 Tim. 2:17, 18*).

These three individuals are examples of **apostasy** because of their rejection of the Christian faith and in teaching what was contrary to the teaching of the apostles.

NOTE: It appears that in the many verses where the Hebrew words for “godless” and “godlessness” appear in the Hebrew Scriptures the NWT committee has mistranslated these respectively as *apostate* and *apostasy* e.g.

NWT - Job 13:16b: "For before him no *apostate* may come in."  
All other translations - "For a **godless (or impious) man** may not..."  
Please see STUDY 23 EXAMINATION OF THE NWT

## THE TWO REASONS FOR A DISFELLOWSHIPING

### A. FOR FOLLOWING A COURSE OF UNCHRISTIAN CONDUCT

- ❖ *Paul counselled the Corinthians to: "...quit mixing in company with anyone who is called a brother that is a fornicator, greedy person, idolater, reviler, drunkard or an extortioner, not even eating with such a man...Remove the wicked [man] from among yourselves" (1 Cor. 5:11).*

This list of sins, the practice of which warrants disfellowshipping, is only representative and not exhaustive. Some of the additional bad practices which are on a par with those above and that will exclude those who practice these things from entering the kingdom include:

- ❖ "...adulterers, men kept for unnatural purposes, men who lie with men, and thieves"  
*(1 Cor. 6:9-10).*
- ❖ "...fornication, uncleanness, loose conduct, idolatry, practice of spiritism, **enmities**, strife, **jealousy, fits of anger**, contentions, divisions, sects, **envies**, drunken bouts, revelries, and things like these" (**Gal. 5:19-21**). *This list is partially repeated in Ephesians 5:5.*

### THE WBTS OFTEN FAILS TO DISFELLOWSHIP FOR MANY OF THESE SCRIPTURAL REASONS

Enmities, jealousy, fits of anger, envies are all excluded from the WTS list of reasons for disfellowshipping. Furthermore, the congregation elders generally do not disfellowship members who are greedy, idolatrous (*including materialism*), revilers, drunkards or extortioners.

### B. FOR REJECTION OF THE PROVEN TEACHINGS OF AND ABOUT JESUS

- ❖ "For many deceivers ... persons **not confessing Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh**. This is the deceiver and the antichrist. Everyone that pushes ahead and does *not remain in the teaching of the Christ* does not have God...If **anyone** comes to you and does not bring this teaching, **never receive him into your homes** (*house*) or **say a greeting** (Gk *khairo*) **to him**. For he that says a greeting to him is a sharer in his wicked works" (*2 John 7, 9-11*).

According to *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* Volume 12, p. 365 such antichrist/deceivers are: "those who deny the Son and hate the brethren...and was applied only to anti-Christians who were committed to destroying the faith of the community." So in John's day "**persons not confessing Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh**" were primarily those with the Gnostic docetic belief about Jesus (belief that Jesus only seemed to be human). The apostolic belief was that Jesus came "as a human person" (Gk *en sarki*), and not 'into a human body.' Any teaching of an incarnation of a previously existing being falls into this category of false teaching. (Please see Volume One, STUDIES 5-17). Theologian Raymond E. Brown comments that:

True belief in Jesus is essential to any real worship of the Father, so that the ultimate criterion for Christians is to remain in the traditional teaching of Christ (by him or about him?). The false teachers are to be rejected (a concept of heresy—a teaching so false it broke the *koinonia* or fellowship—was now developing). *The Gospel and Epistles of John*, p.123

Also those who **teach others to ignore**, or who purposely **change the meaning** of what Jesus taught personally or through his appointed apostles (in its 1<sup>st</sup> century context) fall into the category of those who do "**not remain in the teaching of the Christ**." In such cases the traditional Christian greeting of "Rejoice" or *Peace be with you*, would then be withdrawn from such ones.

NOT ACCEPTED AS A CHRISTIAN TEACHER

Professor F.F Bruce explains that:

The injunction not to receive anyone who does not bring 'the teaching of Christ' means that no such person must be *accepted as a Christian teacher* or one entitled to the fellowship of the church. *The Gospel and Epistles of John* on p. 143.

Clearly it would have to be proved from the Scriptures that a Christian was not remaining "*in the teaching of the Christ.*" This would mean that he was going against the clear teaching of the apostles as recorded in the Christian Scriptures. Such teaching would include false beliefs that emanated from Judaism and from the pagan Greek world e.g. the departing immortal soul going to heaven. It is these teachings that could be categorized as Babylonish and therefore make a person a part of Babylon the Great.

## UNDERSTANDING DISFELLOWSHIPPING IN RELATION TO ITS FIRST CENTURY BACKGROUND

A significant cause of the misapplication of the biblical statements on both disfellowshipping and shunning is a failure to recognize the circumstances and practices of the 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians.

### 1. CHRISTIAN MEETINGS WERE HELD IN PRIVATE HOUSES

Christians lived according to the Jewish customs of the day which included two kinds of **association** (Gk *koinonia* meaning fellowship or communion) **for religious worship:**

- Temple and synagogue for public worship and
- Private meetings of the various sects. Christians met for the "love feast" and *the Lord's evening meal in private houses*. In Acts some 3,000 met in various houses.

Prisca and Aquila, Nympha, and Philemon all had congregations that met in their personal houses. (Rom. 16:3-5, 1 Cor. 16:19, Col. 4:15, and Philemon 2).

### 2. THE MEETING WAS FELLOWSHIP AT TABLE

Acts 2:42 (based on KIT) says: "And they continued devoting themselves to:

- The teaching of the apostles.
- The common participation (sharing), '*koinonia.*'
- The breaking of the bread (*in memory of Jesus*) and to
- Prayer."

Note: According to Acts 2:46 the table fellowship involved the "*breaking bread from house to house, and they were partaking of food in exultation*"- a proper meal, namely, the love feast, called in Greek *the agape* in Jude 12. This included the Lord's Supper where bread and wine were offered. This fellowship also included the common sharing of goods (Acts 4:32).

*The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* Volume 1, p. 66 states of *the agape* that it was the brotherly common meal (table fellowship) connected in some way to the ceremonial act of the breaking of bread in memory of Jesus (the Lord's supper) and occurred on the first day of the week. On p. 743 this same volume says of fellowship:

Luke apparently means us to identify, as the activities involved in 'the koinonia', the breaking of bread and the prayers, as well as the community of goods which occurred when the need arose.

### 3. DISFELLOWSHIPING IN CONTEXT

To deny fellowship meant to deny someone access to the *love feast* and its celebration of the Lord's evening meal. This clarifies the various biblical exclusion statements regarding *eating*. Someone who was denied fellowship was excluded from the eating of the love feast and the Lord's Supper and may even have been denied entry to the house where such meeting was being held. This says nothing about a person being denied a meal in a non-religious situation outside of the meeting in the private house.

#### WHEN A BROTHER SINS AGAINST A BROTHER

##### STAGE 1

❖ *Jesus said:* “Moreover, if your *brother commits a sin*, go lay bare his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother” (Matt. 18:15).

The ESV, NIV and the NLT render this verse as: “*if your brother sins against you...*” Furthermore, the context gives this thought. Many translations either have the words “against you” or bracket them or footnote them. The *Word Biblical Commentary* says of these words that: “they may have been omitted for theological reasons.” Even so, the context shows that it is **not concerning sin in general**, as if to make one brother check up on another, but of one brother sinning in a very substantial way against another brother. Indicating that this is what is in Jesus' mind in verse 15 Peter asks Jesus in verse 21 “*Lord how many times is my brother to sin against me and I am to forgive him?*” Jesus answers with the parable of the unmerciful slave (Matt. 18:23-35). The seriousness of the sin would be indicated by noting the sins warranting expulsion from the congregation that are stated in the rest of the Christian Scriptures. Of course, the sin must be one that can be committed against another person. These would be: adultery (involving one's partner), fornication, extortion (fraud), theft, enmities, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, contentions, divisions, envies, and things like these. Clearly these would include any other abuse, physical or otherwise, of the person, his property or his reputation; for example slander. If the guilty partner repents there is no need to take the matter any further because the unchristian conduct has ceased being practiced. Of course, those sins which break the criminal law of the land must be reported to the secular authorities (Rom.13), although a brother would not take a sinning brother to court in a civil case.

##### STAGE 2

❖ “But if he does not listen, take along with you one or two more, in order that at the mouth of two or three witnesses **every matter** may be established” (Matt. 18:16).

*NOTE:* For “**every matter**” the NWT footnote has **or “everything said.”** The NRSV, Barclay's and the NLT render it in the same way.

The *Word Biblical Commentary* notes that:

This procedure is explicitly on the pattern of the OT stipulation in Deut.19:15... **The parallel is not exact**, however, since in the OT the witnesses are witnesses to the deed itself, whereas here they are to serve as **witnesses of the reproof** and appeal for repentance, or, if the person refuses to respond, of his or her recalcitrance.

Evidently Jesus' words here were not meant to require, for instance, that there must be two or three witnesses who must actually witness a case of rape before it is taken seriously.

##### STAGE 3

❖ “If he doesn't listen to them (*the 2 or 3 witnesses*), speak to the **congregation**” (Matt. 18:17a).

*This is the same as with a matter for Israelites being dealt with at the city gate and therefore out in the open i.e. not a secret meeting.*

## STAGE 4

- ❖ “If he does not listen even to the congregation, let him be to **you** just as a man of the nations (*a gentile*) and as a *tax collector*” (Matt. 18:17b).

It has been noted that the “**you**” is singular and therefore applies only to the person who has been sinned against, not the entire congregation; leading to the conclusion that denial of fellowship in the congregation is not in view here. However, because the subject is about any and all individuals at the beginning of Jesus’ discourse it must concern any and all individuals at the end of the discourse. So the congregation would all individually treat the unrepentant person “*as a man of the nations and as a tax collector.*”

THE UNREPENTANT WRONGDOER IS TO BE TREATED  
AS ANY OTHER NON-CHRISTIAN

So what does it mean to treat someone “*as a man of the nations and as a tax collector*”? This simply involves one’s treatment of the individual sinner in just the same way as a Christian would treat any member of the public. Unlike the Pharisees way and the general Jewish way, **Jesus did not shun gentiles or tax collectors but showed them love.** He ate with and **associated with** them and taught them with the goal of effecting change in their lives e.g. Matthew, Zacchaeus, and the Syro-phoenician woman. On one occasion Jesus’ disciples were asked by the Pharisees:

- ❖ “Why is it that your teacher eats with tax-collectors and sinners?” *Jesus replies that:* “Persons in health do not need a physician but the ailing do” (Matt. 9:11).

So it was **the religious leaders** who shunned these people. Yet in imitation of their master, Jesus’ disciples were to treat Gentiles and even the generally hated tax collectors with love. So this was to be the case with how a Christian would treat a brother who was now denied fellowship in the congregation until his repentance.

NOTE: Matthew 18:18 may not be applicable to modern-day bodies of elders:

“Whatever you [*the apostles*] may bind (*forbid*) on earth will be the thing bound in the heavens, and whatever you may loose (*permit*) on earth will be the thing loosed in the heavens.”

*The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* states: “As with Matthew 16:19, this seems to refer to the general enunciations of principles and policies rather than to specific..ecclesiastical action.” Therefore, this does not appear to refer to decisions of local bodies of elders but to those of the apostles in the 1<sup>st</sup> century.

THE POLICY OF THE GOVERNING BODY OF JEHOVAH’S WITNESSES OF  
“REPORTING ON ONE’S BROTHERS”

*INCORRECT TRANSLATION*

- \* “Now in case a soul sins in that he has heard public **cursing** and he is a witness or he has seen it or has come to know of it, if he does **not report it**, then he must answer for his error” (Lev. 5:1 NWT).

The NWT translation of “cursing” is similar to KJV “swearing” which was corrected in RV and all translations since as “**a public adjuration to testify.**” (Adjure means *to charge on oath*). All modern translations show that this deals with *an Israelite’s failure to respond to a summons to testify*, not with an Israelite’s initiating some report, so that:

- ❖ “If a person *sins* because he does not speak up when he hears **a public charge to testify** regarding something he has seen or learned about, he will be held responsible” (Lev. 5:1 NIV).

*Example:* Joseph felt no obligation to report Mary’s apparent fornication to any one, but rather he did

not want to “*expose her to public disgrace.*” However, one cannot say ‘while Christians are not strictly under the Law,’ and then propose that they obey its decrees. Christians are not under the Law as Romans 6:14 says: “*seeing that you are not under Law, but under undeserved kindness.*”

## ANY DIFFERENCE IN ONE’S GENUINE UNDERSTANDING OF SCRIPTURE IS NOT A REASON FOR DISFELLOWSHIPING

### *A PHARISAICAL PRACTICE*

- ❖ *The apostle John reports that: “...many even of the rulers put faith in him, but because of the Pharisees they would not confess him, in order not to be **expelled from the synagogue**; and they loved the glory of men more than the glory of God” (John 12:42).*
- ❖ *“...in fear of the Jews...that if anyone confessed him as Christ, he should get **expelled from the synagogue**” (John 9:22).*

*Such expulsions from the Synagogue often involved loss of ones livelihood because synagogue members would not trade with the expelled person. In fact, Jesus stated that this would reach the extreme of murder because:*

- ❖ *“...the hour is coming when everyone who **kills you** will imagine he has rendered a sacred service to God” (John 16:2).*

*This pharisaical attitude is one of self-interest and hatred with a desire to punish.*

### *CONCERNING DIOTREPHESES*

- ❖ *“Diotrophes...does not receive anything from us [*John and party*] with respect...chattering about us with wicked words. Also, not being content with these things, neither does he himself receive the brothers with respect, and those who are wanting to receive them he tries to hinder and to throw out of the congregation” (3 John 9-11).*

The NIV notes on 3 John says: “Diotrephes—a church leader who was exercising dictatorial power in the church. He must have had considerable influence since he was able to exclude people from the church fellowship.” And the NIV introduction to 3 John notes that: “Itinerant teachers sent out by John were rejected in one of the churches...by a dictatorial leader, Diotrephes.”

## THE SCRIPTURALLY INVALID REASONS FOR DISFELLOWSHIPING

1. The governing body of Jehovah’s Witnesses has introduced a policy of disfellowshipping for many practices and situations **not mentioned at all in the Scriptures as reasons for disfellowshipping**. These supposedly are based on the principles of the Scriptures yet are often a misapplication, e.g.

- Unapproved employment.
- Independent study and discussion of the Bible.
- Speaking to a disfellowshipped person.
- The doubting or questioning of any teaching of the Jehovah’s Witnesses.
- Any criticism of them or their policies.
- One’s wishing no longer to be called a Jehovah’s Witnesses i.e. “no longer called a brother.”
- Possession of literature written by former members.
- Attending a service of any other religious organization.
- Conduct unbecoming a Christian. This covers anything for which the local body of elders may choose to disfellowship.

2. The breaking of many rules that are based partly on **the abolished Mosaic Law covenant**, e.g.
  - Agreeing to have a blood transfusion (misapplied from the law on not drinking blood - see STUDY 20).
  - Authorizing a blood transfusion, even to save the life of a child.
  - Failing to report a brother for wrongdoing.

To use the Mosaic Law covenant in this way devalues the ransom sacrifice as the basis for the New Covenant and begins to be in imitation of the hundreds of laws created by the Pharisees which, of course, Jesus condemned. Also the whimsical attitude of many local bodies of elders means that the standards vary considerably from congregation to congregation thereby making the entire policy inconsistent. Yet there are a total of about 70 rules that result in disfellowshipping, of which only some 20 are scripturally stated reasons for disfellowshipping. Certainly some of these 70 practices, e.g. smoking, are harmful and should be discouraged; yet they are not practices which warrant a disfellowshipping action. In fact, the loving action that should be taken by spiritual Christians is to give a great amount of attention to helping such struggling Christians to overcome their problems without unduly restricting the amount of time for this to be accomplished.

#### *THE REASON FOR THE EXTREME POLICY*

The current toughened disfellowshipping policy of the Jehovah's Witnesses did not come into effect until 1952 and the extreme shunning policy not until the mid 1980's. This shows that such policies **are in response to circumstances rather than to the Scriptures**. Those who add rules not clearly stated in the Scriptures and the breaking of which is treated as a reason for disfellowshipping step away from Christ Jesus by hampering true Christian freedom, even stifling and grieving the spirit of God. (Eph. 4:30). The biblical position on disfellowshipping does not apply to a Christian who **does not agree with** the teachings of the Jehovah's Witnesses. This is because the Jehovah's Witnesses claim to speak for God cannot be substantiated. In fact, about half of their teachings can be proven to be incorrect or misguided when good Bible scholarship (exegesis) is applied to them. They also have a record of considerable changeableness with their teachings, but never changing to actual biblical truth because of their typical pre-suppositions through teachings of the past.

#### *THE CURRENT SITUATION*

Jerry Bergman, Ph. D., is the leading American expert on the psychology of Jehovah's Witnesses. In interviews with the most prominent four dozen contemporary activists against the governing body of Jehovah's Witnesses, Bergman found that not one of them severed their relationship with the Jehovah's Witnesses because of disagreements over the moral teachings of the JWs. The reasons given always concerned specific doctrines that did not match with the Scriptures. Bergman also found that those leaving had finely tuned scripturally trained consciences so that they made a choice for the Scriptures and against the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses.

#### CONCLUSIONS DRAWN

- The disfellowshipping policy of the governing body of Jehovah's Witnesses is unsupportable once the known 1<sup>st</sup> century background of Christianity is taken into account and that any application of the Mosaic law is seen to be relevant only to ancient Israel and has no place in the Christian arrangement of things.
- Christian fellowship (Gk *koinonia*) in the 1<sup>st</sup> century was table fellowship for **their meeting** in their private houses. It involved: the teaching of the apostles, the love feast, the breaking of bread in memory of Jesus, and prayer (Acts 2: 42, 46).

- Only two occasions of denying fellowship are recorded in the Christian Greek Scriptures. On both occasions the judgments were made under the control of Paul who, as an apostle, had “*spirit given knowledge*”—a factor that does not exist today. This shows how much care must be taken when arriving at decisions.
- The two reasons for denial of fellowship were: a) For unchristian conduct and b) For rejecting the teachings of or about Jesus. Denial of fellowship applied to those who were persistently unrepentant.
- Unchristian conduct includes the following: loose conduct, uncleanness, adultery, fornication, homosexuality, idolatry, greed, extortion, theft, an unwillingness to work, practice of spiritism, enmities, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, contentions, divisions, envies, drunkenness, revelries and things like these.
- Rejecting the teachings of or about Jesus included: refusal to remain in the teaching of Christ i.e. blasphemy and promoting an *unchristian teaching*, such as the prevalent Gnosticism of the first century, which promoted beliefs far beyond what can reasonably be seen in the Scriptures. The promoting of a sect did not refer to simple differences in understanding the Scriptures.
- 1<sup>st</sup> century denial of fellowship was to act as a rebuke.
- Disfellowshipped ones were excluded from the Christian meetings in private houses.
- Because no single group understands all of the Scriptures and the fact that such groups use different methods of interpretation, some of which are highly questionable, rightfully no individual *truth seeker/finder* who is not involved in sin should be denied fellowship for his different understanding of the Scriptures. It is unreasonable to think that everyone who disagrees with any particular religious group is an enemy of God. To engage in independent study and discussion of the Scriptures is what God expects of those who serve Him – especially when there are so many variations of teachings proposed by the many denominations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- Jehovah’s Witnesses often disfellowship individuals for scripturally invalid reasons and often fails to disfellowship for scripturally valid reasons (*sexual immorality is an exception*). This gives the lie to the claim made by the governing body of Jehovah’s Witnesses that disfellowshipping is for the purpose of keeping the congregation clean!
- Evidently the prime reason for the distorted disfellowshipping policy of the governing body Jehovah’s Witnesses is ***to remove those who disagree with the organization*** whether rightly or wrongly according to the Scriptures.

*By Raymond C. Faircloth*  
www.biblicaltruthseekers.co.uk

