

Should Sinners Shun Sinners? (Part 1) - Church Rejection

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Church Rejection

Shunning is a religious practice in which a religious body chooses to socially and emotionally avoid a person or group of people. Shunning can take the form of censure (a person is not permitted to speak openly or hold church office) or it can be as serious as expulsion from membership. If a church shuns a person or group, it almost always causes or is the result of agitation within the church. One party in the church will find the practice hurtful and offensive; the opposing party will say it is a necessity. Religious shunning or rejection invariably results in divisiveness and bitterness which can last for decades.

In some circumstances, it is biblically sound for Christians to practice shunning after a period of grace has been extended to the person or persons who are at fault. The Bible teaches the practice of shunning is proper and necessary. Shunning is the only tool a church has for dealing with defiance.

God knows that every person on Earth is a sinner. The Bible declares: **“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”** (Romans 3:23, italics mine) Many Christians (and especially non-Christians) do not know that God divides sinners into three categories. These categories are (a) defiant sinners, (b) sinners who are serious about overcoming sin and pleasing God, and (c) spiritually dead sinners, who are totally ignorant of their offensive ways in God’s sight.

God is willing to forgive any repentant sinner, but He will only forgive when the sinner is willing to admit the sin and turn away from it. **“If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice [no atonement] for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.”** (Hebrews 10:26, insertion mine) The Bible also assures us that, **“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”** (1 John 1:9)

God Leads By Example

The first case of shunning actually began in Heaven. When God’s patience with Lucifer and his followers reached the limit of divine forbearance, God cast the devil and his angels out of heaven. He “cut off” the devil and his angels from the blessings and benefits of Heaven because of their defiance. Centuries later, in Noah’s day, the entire world “shunned” Noah and God’s offer of safety in the ark. This demonstrates the point that shunning works both ways; defiant sinners will shun God’s messengers. After the Exodus, God told Moses to announce that anyone who **sinned defiantly** must be “cut off” from Israel. In those days, the phrase, “cut off” meant death because shunned people were not permitted to receive food, water or any form of support. In Israel, defiance came with a stiff price. To put shunning in context, please

consider God's declarations:

“Do not make any incense with this formula for yourselves; consider it [the incense used in the temple] holy to the Lord. Whoever makes any like it to enjoy its fragrance must be cut off from his people.” (Exodus 30:37,38, insertion mine)

“And wherever you live, you must not eat the blood of any bird or animal. If anyone eats blood, that person must be cut off from his people.” (Leviticus 7:26,27)

“Any Israelite who sacrifices an ox, a lamb or a goat in the camp or outside of it instead of bringing it to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting to present it as an offering to the Lord in front of the tabernacle of the Lord – that man shall be considered guilty of bloodshed; he has shed blood and must be cut off from his people.” (Leviticus 17:3,4)

“Observe the Sabbath, because it is holy to you. Anyone who desecrates it must be put to death; whoever does any work on that day must be cut off from his people.” (Exodus 31:14)

“Do not approach a woman to have sexual relations during the uncleanness of her monthly period. Do not have sexual relations with your neighbor's wife and defile yourself with her. . . Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable. Do not have sexual relations with an animal and defile yourself with it. . . . Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. . . . And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you. Everyone who does any of these detestable things – such persons must be cut off from their people.” (See all of Leviticus 18:6-29.)

After reviewing these few verses, we can see that a God of love will not tolerate defiance indefinitely. Of course, He extends a period of grace to all sinners, but when He concludes that extended mercy has no redeeming effect, He deals with the guilty. In fact, the Bible teaches that if a person commits the unpardonable sin God will shun him until he is destroyed! God requires shunning because defiance is contagious and once it infects a group of people, rebellion can quickly spread. For example, if a captain allows one or two soldiers to display defiance in the ranks day after day, it will not take long until the entire company is out of control. In Numbers 16, Korah, Dathan, and Abiram began a rebellion against Moses which grew to 250 men. These men were angry with Moses because Moses was doing everything the Lord had commanded. The Lord Himself opened up the earth and swallowed the families of the rebels because they too were contaminated with the virus of defiance. Then, He burned the 250 men to death. **“And fire came out from the Lord and consumed the 250 men who were offering the incense.”** (Numbers 16:35)

Sexual Sins in the Corinth Church

About A.D. 50, the apostle Paul went to Corinth, a city of about 100,000 inhabitants, where he

stayed for 18 months. During this time, he taught the gospel of Jesus to both Jews and Gentiles. Paul's efforts to establish a Christian church in Corinth were somewhat successful, but the church in Corinth was not stable. The Jewish and Gentile converts were constantly struggling over the practice and direction of Christianity. About five years after Paul left Corinth, he learned the church was in serious trouble. Many of the Gentile converts in the church had embraced a theological virus, which historians believe Nicolas of Alexandria, Egypt crafted. He taught that the "holiness of the mind" was insulated from the "deeds of the flesh." The Gentile converts liked the concept of a gulf between the holiness of the mind and the deeds of the flesh because it meant that the "legal perfection" favored by the Jewish converts was unnecessary. The Nicolaitans believed that as long as people properly believed that Jesus died for their sins, their salvation was guaranteed. Therefore, let the flesh have its way!

When Paul heard about this, he sent a strongly worded letter to the church saying: **"Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived [with the false doctrine of the Nicolaitans]: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed [of your guilt], you were sanctified [through repentance], you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God [and I can't believe you have returned to your sins]."** (1 Corinthians 6:9-11, insertions mine)

Paul made a declaration because members of the church at Corinth were engaging in sexual immorality: **"I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people – not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother [a Christian] but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat."** (1 Corinthians 5:9-11, insertion mine)

Paul cites the Biblical basis for shunning in his second letter to the church at Corinth: **"What harmony is there between Christ and [the god] Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.' 'Therefore come out from them and be separate,' says the Lord. 'Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you.' "** (2 Corinthians 6:15-17) God required believers to shun defiant sinners and has plainly said in Leviticus 18 that sexual misconduct is defiant sin. Therefore, sexually immoral Christians must be cut off from the church if they insist on living in defiance! Notice these two verses: **"Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge [Greek: condemn] the adulterer and all the sexually immoral."** (Hebrews 13:4) The last words Jesus uttered in the book of Revelation are perfectly clear. **"Blessed are those who [repent and choose to] wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the [holy] city [New Jerusalem]. Outside [the city] are the dogs [those who rejected my love and defied my commands], those who practice magic arts [spiritists who practice voodoo and the occult], the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood."** (Revelation 22:14,15,

insertions mine)

Sexual Sins in Revelation

About A.D. 95, Jesus appeared to John on the island of Patmos. He asked John to write down seven messages and send them to seven of the churches in Asia Minor. Notice this message to the church at Thyatira. Jesus Himself condemned the church because they had not shunned a woman in the church named Jezebel, not the notorious wife of king Ahab:

“Nevertheless, I have this against you: You *tolerate* [in your church] that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. *I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling* [she is defiant]. So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.” (Revelation 2:20-23, insertion and italics mine)

Notice a similar rebuke the Lord sent to the church at Pergamum: “. . . **I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent therefore!** [Expel these people from the church!] **Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.**” (Revelation 2:14-16, insertion mine)

In Leviticus 18, God plainly told Moses that anyone who engaged in sexual misconduct must be cut off from Israel. Five years after leaving Corinth, Paul rebuked the church at Corinth for tolerating members who engaged in sexual immorality. Sixty years after His ascension, Jesus Himself rebuked the churches at Thyatira and Pergamum because they failed to shun sexually immoral people. Finally, Jesus says in the last chapter of Revelation that no sexually immoral person will enter the Holy City! God does not want His people embracing and supporting people who willingly and knowingly participate in sexual misconduct. God instructs His people to shun the individual after a period of grace. Of course, shunning is only to be directed at people who claim to be believers and who claim to belong to God. When Christians learn God’s will and still refuse to change after a period of grace, they should be shunned if there is no reformation.

Conversely, the world is full of people who do not know anything about God’s will. These people should not be shunned; they need to know how to live a life which will result in happiness and eternal joy. They need to learn that sin has its pleasure for a short season, but sin always produces sorrow, pain, suffering, and eventual death. Our duty as Christians is to guide and encourage these people to follow God’s will. Defiance is a deadly virus and sadly, it often influences the youngest and most impressionable members of the body of Christ.

The Bible offers wonderful assurance to every sinner who will confess his sins and forsake

them. **“All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death. We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him.”** (1 John 5:17,18)

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