

A Sinner's Prayer

By Roelf L. Ruffner

“Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many. So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow. Wherefore I beseech you that ye would confirm your love toward him” (2 Cor. 2:6-8).

The New Testament commands the church to withdraw fellowship from “every brother that walketh disorderly” (2 The.3:6). In the 21st Century church of Christ not many congregations practice “church discipline.” Yet many claim long and loud that they follow the “pattern” of the New Testament in all they do. They usually drop members from their rolls who fall away and they are forgotten. Friendships, family ties, business associations and just plain negligence get in the way of obeying the Lord. They are concentrated on keeping every contributor to the church, not losing part of their income flow.

But true disfellowshipping is not a “shunning” or even “excommunication” (Loss of salvation.) as some religious groups teach. It is a congregational effort of Christian love to save another’s soul (cf. 1 Cor.5:4,5).

Recently the congregation I serve along with brother Danny Douglas, the Central church of Christ, after much thought and prayer decided to begin a process of withdrawing fellowship from two of our brethren. We sent letters to two of them pleading with them to repent or we would withdraw our fellowship from them in two weeks. We sent a third member a letter of withdrawal of fellowship effective immediately.

The next Sunday we heard that one brother we had warned was seriously ill in the hospital. He suddenly quit attending worship months ago. Numerous attempts had been made to reach him in person, by phone and by letter.

Brother Danny determined he would go that very night and attempt to visit him in the hospital. I accompanied him. This fallen brother was in the Critical Care

Unit. We both donned surgical gowns and gloves to enter his room, not knowing what to expect. I was surprised that we were greeted warmly by him. After a brief conversation brother Danny asked him if he wanted to repent of his sin and be restored to the church. With tears in his eyes this sinner said, "Yes!" Brother Danny and I prayed with this brother to the Father that he might be forgiven – a true "sinner's prayer."

At this writing our brother is no longer a fallen brother but a restored saint. God be thanked! He is also slowly recovering from his illness. "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (James 5:16).

Brethren, does the congregation you attend practice church discipline? If not, demand they do so. If they refuse depart and cleave to one which does. The Lord will bless you. Withdrawal of fellowship, carried out the scriptural way, is a perfect example of *agape* or Christian love. Do we truly love our brethren? Do we love and cherish their soul? Do we want them to spend an eternity in Hell or in Heaven? "Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins" (James 5:20 –).