

# **Questions and Answers About Church Discipline**

**by  
Flavil R. Yeakley, Jr.**

**Biblical and practical answers to the 25 questions  
most frequently asked concerning church discipline  
in general and specifically concerning the case of  
Guinn vs. the Collinsville Church of Christ**

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## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT CHURCH DISCIPLINE

### 1. Why should a congregation ever withdraw fellowship from a member?

The Bible tells us how Christians should relate to members of the church who sin and refuse to repent. In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus said, "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." The Jews in the days of Jesus had no association with Gentiles (the heathen) or tax collectors (publicans). They understood, therefore, that Jesus was telling them to have no association at all with a member of the church who sins and refuses to repent.

The Bible tells us what Christians should do about church members who cause division. In Romans 16:17, the apostle Paul wrote, "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them." Other translations say to "take note of" such people and then "turn away from them."

The Bible tells us how Christians should deal with church members who become immoral. In I Corinthians 5:1, Paul wrote concerning a church member who was guilty of fornication. The original Greek text uses the word *porneia*, which means "sexual immorality" and includes any and all sexual intercourse between people who are not lawfully married to each other. In this case, the man was having sexual intercourse with his father's wife. In verse 2, Paul told the Christians in Corinth that the man who had done this deed should be taken away from among them. In verse 3, Paul said that he had

already judged concerning this man. In verse 6, Paul warned "Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?" Paul was concerned about the evil influence of this man corrupting the whole church. In verse 7, Paul commanded "Purge out therefore the old leaven." And finally in verse 13, Paul concluded "Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person." Other translations say "Drive out the wicked person from among you."

The Bible teaches that there is a difference between the way Christians are to relate to immoral people in the world and immoral people in the church. In I Corinthians 5:9-12, Paul said, "I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolators; for then must ye needs go out of the world. But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat. For what have I to do to judge them that are without? Do not ye judge them that are within?"

The Bible tells us how Christians are to relate to members who are disorderly. In II Thessalonians 3:6, Paul wrote, "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." The specific reference here, according to verses 7-11, is to church members who stop working, become idle, live off the welfare of the church, and become busybodies.

The Bible tells us how Christians are to treat church members who are disobedient. In II Thessalonians 3:14-15, Paul wrote, "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."

The Bible tells us what Christians are to do about false teachers in the church. II John 7-9 warns about deceivers, those who deny that Jesus Christ came in the flesh, and those who transgress and do not abide in the doctrine of Christ.

Concerning such false teachers, verses 10-11 says, "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 biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds." Other translations say not to give any greeting to such a person. Christians must not do anything that would provide support and encouragement for those who teach false doctrines.

## **2. What are the motives for a withdrawal of fellowship?**

II Thessalonians 3:14 indicates that one motive is to bring the person to repentance. That, however, is not the only motive. In II Corinthians 7:12, Paul said concerning his instructions about the fornicator in the Corinthian congregation, "Wherefore, though I wrote unto you, I did it not for his cause that had done the wrong, nor for his cause that suffered wrong, but that our care for you in the sight of God might appear unto you." In I Corinthians 5:6, the motive for the withdrawal of fellowship was to protect the church from the evil influence of the rebellious member. Another motive, suggested in I Corinthians 5:7-8, is to protect the influence of the church in the community.

## **3. What are the grounds for a withdrawal of fellowship?**

The passages considered earlier do not give a list of "little sins" that can be ignored and "big sins" that constitute grounds for a withdrawal of fellowship. Matthew 18:15-17 makes it clear that the real basis for a withdrawal of fellowship is the person's refusal to repent in spite of repeated admonitions — regardless of the specific sin involved.

## **4. Should the church disfellowship all Christians who sin?**

Of course not. No Christian is perfect. If we had to withdraw fellowship from all Christians who sin in any way, we would not have fellowship with anyone — not even with ourselves. There is, however, a difference between willful sins (Hebrews 10:26) and sins that reflect spiritual weakness and immaturity. Furthermore, there is a difference between sins

that are disruptive to the church and those that affect only the person involved. Those willful sins that are most likely to divide, corrupt, or destroy the church or hurt its influence in the community are the ones that cannot be tolerated.

**5. What is the "fellowship" that is to be withdrawn?**

In the original Greek text of the New Testament, the word is *koinonia*. This word means sharing, association, companionship, participation, partnership, and communication. It does not mean approval. Having fellowship with someone would imply that you both approve of the activity in which you are participating, but it would not imply that you approve of one another. We are not supposed to be in the approving or disapproving business. We should leave that up to God.

**6. How should Christians treat someone who has been disfellowshipped?**

We are not to look on such a person as an enemy; we are to admonish such a person to repent; but we are to have no other association with such a person (II Thessalonians 3:14-15). We must treat such people the way the Jews in the days of Jesus treated the heathen and the publican: have nothing at all to do with them (Matthew 18:17). We are to remove such a person from among ourselves, have no companionship with them at all, and not even eat with them (I Corinthians 5:1-13). We are to mark or take note of them and keep away from or avoid them (Romans 16:17). We are not to receive such a person into our house or give them any greeting (II John :10-11).

**7. Can a person who has been disfellowshipped attend worship services and partake of the Lord's Supper?**

Of course. Worship services are open to the public. Anyone can attend. However, a person who has been disfellowshipped would not be used in any public way — such as leading a prayer, leading singing, preaching, etc. Denominations that practice some kind of "closed communion" do not allow a person who has been disfellowshipped to partake of the com-

munion. That is why the Catholic Church, for example, uses the term "excommunication" to describe this process. However, I Corinthians 11:28 says, "But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup." This passage suggests an "open communion" approach. If a person who has been disfellowshipped wants to attend worship services and partake of the Lord's Supper, he would be allowed to do so. The fellowship that is withdrawn is association with other Christians and most of that takes place outside the assembly.

**8. How should a Christian relate to a family member — particularly a spouse — who has been disfellowshipped?**

The Bible gives no specific guidance on this matter. Such a situation, however, would involve conflicting duties. As a family member — especially as a spouse — a person has some very important family duties that would then be in conflict with his or her duties as a member of the congregation. My own personal judgment is that God puts our family duties ahead of our congregational duties. I would not ask a Christian wife to stop having anything to do with her husband, even if the rest of the congregation had to stop associating with him. In such a situation, I would suggest that a Christian wife treat her disfellowshipped husband the way I Corinthians 7:12-13 and I Peter 3:1-6 teach Christian wives to treat non-Christian husbands. She should make it clear that she does not approve of his sin and that she wants him to repent. She should continue to have as much association with other Christians as she can — but only when she can do so without her disfellowshipped husband.

**9. Can a person be disfellowshipped for not attending worship services?**

According to Hebrews 10:25-26, forsaking the assembling of the saints is a sin and it can be a willful sin. In most cases, however, there is no fellowship to withdraw when a member stops attending church services. The three reasons for a withdrawal of fellowship do not usually apply in the case of a

non-attending member. Since there is no association or companionship to withdraw, such action would not likely bring them to repentance. Since there is no association or companionship to withdraw, such action would not likely bring them to repentance. Since there is no association with other Christians, there is no great danger of the non-attender corrupting the rest of the members. Since the non-attender is not usually thought of by the people of the community as being a member, there is little danger that the person's non-attendance will hurt the reputation or influence of the church in the community. There are, however, a few times when non-attending members still claim to be members, are still thought of by people in the community as being members, and still have association with other Christians away from the assembly. In these cases, there are legitimate motives to be served by a formal withdrawal of fellowship and there is something to be withdrawn. In these cases, therefore, it is proper for a person to be disfellowshipped for refusing to attend church services. Such cases, however, are quite rare.

#### **10. Can a person withdraw his or her membership from a congregation?**

Of course. It happens all the time. When a person places membership with another congregation, that automatically withdraws his or her membership from the congregation where that person was previously a member. Furthermore, if a person simply says that he or she no longer wants to be regarded as being a member of a congregation — even without placing membership with another congregation — that person is removed from the congregation's membership list. No one that I know of denies the right of a person to withdraw membership from a local congregation.

Related to this question is a broader issue concerning the right of a person to renounce membership in the church. At a universal level, the church is the spiritual family of God. Rebellious children of God do not cease to be a part of God's family — even if they renounce their membership in the church. A person becomes a member of the church by bap-



tism. If a person renounces membership in the church and later repents, that person would not be required to be baptized again. That person would be regarded as a former member, not a non-member.

We all recognize that there are former members of our congregations who are now affiliated with other religious groups or who now have no religious affiliation at all — just as there are many members of our congregations who were formerly members of various denominations or who previously had no religious affiliation at all. No one denies the right of a person to withdraw membership from a local congregation or even to renounce membership in the church.

**11. If someone withdraws from a congregation or even renounces membership in the church, is there still a need to disfellowship that person?**

Not unless one of the reasons for a withdrawal of fellowship would still apply. Usually in such cases there is nothing to withdraw. In a few cases, however, people who withdraw membership from a congregation or even renounce membership in the church still have association with members of the church and may still be thought of by people in the community as being a member. If there was a reason for withdrawing fellowship before the person withdrew membership, it would still be necessary for the members to be instructed to have no further association with that person. Such action should make it clear to the people of the community that the conduct of the former member does not represent the standard accepted and advocated by the congregation.

**12. Should letters be sent to other congregations explaining to them why a member has been disfellowshipped?**

Yes. Just as Paul warned about Hymenaeus and Alexander in I Timothy 1:20 and just as Paul warned about Demas in II Timothy 4:10. Good judgment should obviously be used in deciding which congregations need to be notified. But if there are other congregations in the area where such a person might

seek membership, those congregations should be warned. Sometimes people withdraw membership from a congregation at the last minute to avoid being disfellowshipped and then they place membership at another congregation in the area. When that happens, the elders of the congregation the person formerly attended should notify the elders of the other congregation about the facts in the case. Those elders should then require that person to repent and make things right before being accepted into their fellowship.

**13. Is it necessary to make a public announcement to the congregation at some time prior to the actual withdrawal of fellowship?**

Matthew 18:15-17 says that the order of events when a member has sinned against you is as follows. First, you go to that person privately and urge repentance. If that does not work, you go on to the second step — which is to go back with two or three witnesses and again urge repentance. If that does not work, you go on to the third step — which is to tell it to the church. The fourth step is for that person to have an opportunity to hear the church. And if the person will not repent even then, you go on to the last step — which is the actual withdrawal of fellowship. For this reason, the usual practice is for elders to announce the action that will be taken and the reasons for that action, but then allow a week or two for the members to urge that person to repent. Then, if the person does not repent within that period of time, the elders make the final announcement formally withdrawing the fellowship of the church from that person.

That arrangement, however, is not always possible. There are times when the elders must act with great speed in order to protect the church and its influence in the community. When the elders go to such a person and urge repentance, they go in the name of the church. If that person refuses to hear them, he has refused to hear the church. Therefore, it is not always essential or even possible to have a week or two between the initial announcement and the actual withdrawal of fellowship.

**14. Can fellowship be withdrawn without revealing the specific sin of the individual?**

There are times when everyone already knows the specific sin of the person being disfellowshipped. The elders of the church would not want to dwell on such matters any more than necessary. Many elders, however, believe that they do not have the right to ask the members to stop associating with a person without explaining the reasons for such action. In Matthew 18:17, Jesus said, "Tell it to the church." In I Corinthians 5:1, Paul was very specific in regard to the sin of the man who was living with his father's wife. Of course, in this case we are talking about a congregation that did not have elders and everyone already knew what this man was doing. Some Bible scholars believe that the command of Matthew 18:17, "Tell it to the church," could be fulfilled in a congregation that has elders simply by telling it to the elders so that they could admonish the person to repent. Many Bible scholars believe that in especially delicate situations, elders could ask members to withdraw their fellowship from a person without revealing the specific sins of that person. They could simply report that in their judgment this action is needed because the person has sinned and has refused to repent. They could ask the congregation to trust their judgment in this matter. And they could ask those members who do not know the reason for the action and who feel that they need to know the reason to talk to one of the elders privately. This question, however, must be resolved on a case-by-case basis. The elders of a congregation certainly have the right, according to the Bible, to reveal the specific sins of the individual when they ask the members to withdraw their fellowship from that person.

**15. Since Jesus said "Judge not that you be not judged," how can a withdrawal of fellowship ever be justified?**

If you will go through the Bible and make a list of all the passages that talk about judging, you will find that some judging is condemned while other judging is commanded. We are

not to judge the hearts, motives, or eternal destinies of others. Such judging must be left up to God. However, we are commanded to judge between truth and error, right and wrong, good and evil. Furthermore, I Corinthians 5:1-13 makes it clear that we must judge the conduct of Christians who sin and who must be disfellowshipped for their actions.

Some people like to stress what Jesus said about the woman taken in the act of adultery: "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone." When her accusers all left, Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn thee." But Jesus did not stop there, as many people assume. He went on to say, "Go thy way and sin no more." He defined what she was doing as sin and He told her to stop it.

When a congregation withdraws its fellowship from a member, that does not mean that they are judging the heart, motives, or eternal destiny of that person. Nor does it mean that they are self-righteous or that they pretend to be perfect. It just means that they are doing what the Bible requires in judging the conduct of that person and refusing to associate with that person until he or she repents.

#### **16. What are the facts in the recent lawsuit against the Church of Christ in Collinsville, Oklahoma?**

Marian Guinn, a divorced mother with four children, had been a member of the Collinsville Church of Christ for several years. The three elders of the congregation started hearing rumors that were spreading around their town — a small rural/suburban community on the northeast side of Tulsa, Oklahoma. According to these rumors, Mrs. Guinn was having an affair with the former mayor of Collinsville. When the elders went to her, Mrs. Guinn admitted that she was having sexual relations with this man. His wife claimed that her husband's affair with Mrs. Guinn broke up their marriage. Mrs. Guinn admitted that her association with the ex-mayor began before his divorce, although she claimed that she did not start having sexual intercourse with him until after his divorce. The elders explained to her that whether the sexual relationship started before or after his divorce, the relationship was still

immoral — what the Bible calls “fornication.” They urged her to repent. She refused. They told her that if she did not repent, they would have to ask the congregation to withdraw fellowship from her on the grounds of fornication.

Contrary to reports in the press, the elders did not harass Mrs. Guinn. They did not follow her around town. They were not harsh or unkind in their dealings with her. They were gentle and loving. They were very patient. But they were also quite firm in the three or four times they talked to her. They insisted that she would have to repent or else be disfellowshipped by the church.

At this point, Mrs. Guinn went to an attorney. On his advice, she wrote a letter to the elders withdrawing her membership from the congregation and telling the elders that she did not want them to say anything to the congregation about her — except to report that she had withdrawn her membership. She renounced her membership in the Church of Christ. She said that she had never believed things that the Church of Christ teaches. She said that she had always really been a Baptist.

The elders said that simply announcing Mrs. Guinn's withdrawal from the congregation would not be enough and that they had to tell the members to have no further association with her because of her refusal to repent of her fornication. When the elders made this statement to the 110 members of the congregation, Mrs. Guinn's attorney filed suit for \$1,300,000 in actual and punitive damages. The suit charged invasion of privacy through intrusion of seclusion, intentional infliction of emotional distress, and invasion of privacy through publication of private facts. The first charge related to the action of the elders when they went to her asking her to repent of her fornication. Her attorney claimed that in America today, sexual relations between two single people are not regarded as being immoral. He also claimed that those elders had no right to talk to her about her private sex life. The second charge related to the threat by the elders to instruct the congregation to withdraw fellowship from her on the grounds of fornication. Her attorney called that “emo-

tional blackmail." The final charge related to the statement the elders read to the congregation.

The first defense against this suit was the objection to having a matter of church discipline reviewed by a civil court. The local judge denied this objection. He said that after Mrs. Guinn withdrew her membership, those elders had no more right to say anything about her than they had to say anything about the judge. He said that there is no difference between a former member and a non-member. The Oklahoma Supreme Court refused to overturn his decision and the United States Supreme Court refused to review the matter. So the case went to trial in Tulsa, Oklahoma, early in March of 1984.

In the trial, the judge did not restrict testimony to the narrow legal issue of whether those elders had a right to say anything about Mrs. Guinn after she withdrew her membership. He also allowed testimony on the so-called invasion of privacy that occurred when the elders went to Mrs. Guinn asking her to repent of her fornication. He also allowed testimony on the so-called intentional infliction of emotional distress that occurred when the elders threatened to ask the congregation to withdraw fellowship from her on the grounds of fornication. All of this happened before Mrs. Guinn withdrew her membership from the congregation. The judge's decisions in these matters and his instructions to the jury made it virtually inevitable that the jury would find in favor of Mrs. Guinn and that is what they did — unanimously. The jury wanted to award her a much larger amount, but because they failed to understand the judge's instructions, their award was for "only" \$390,000. Statements made to the press by members of the jury after the trial indicate that they reached their decision because of their objection to the practice of a congregation withdrawing fellowship from any member for any reason, because of their objection to elders talking to any member about his or her private sex life, and because of their objection to the doctrine that defined sexual relations between single people as being immoral. One of the jurors quoted the statement of Mrs. Guinn's attorney, "Those two people were single and this is America.!"

The elders of the Collinsville Church of Christ have an-

nounced that they will appeal. The first appeal is to the Oklahoma Supreme Court. Regardless of which side wins at that level, the other side will appeal to the United States Supreme Court — which may or may not decide to review the case. The appeal process will probably take about four or five years.

In the mean time, the church has been subjected to some very negative publicity. Public opinion thus far has been strongly in favor of Mrs. Guinn. Public reaction toward the church has been extremely hostile. The Collinsville elders have been flooded with hate mail. Churches of Christ throughout the Tulsa area have received numerous obscene telephone calls. Churches of Christ throughout the nation have been subjected to hostile nation-wide publicity in the media. Mrs. Guinn has reportedly received numerous offers from Hollywood producers and has sold the rights to her story so that a major film studio can make a movie about this experience.

The \$390,000 award to Mrs. Guinn has stimulated numerous similar lawsuits. The Community Christian Church in San Jose, California, has been sued for \$5,000,000 by a former member who was disfellowshipped. Similar suits have already been filed in Alabama and Georgia. More are sure to follow.

Much of the media attention has actually been an attack against a straw man while ignoring the real issue. Statements made by the Collinsville elders about the nature of the universal church — the spiritual family of God — have been taken out of context and have misrepresented their position. Press reports have indicated that the Collinsville Church of Christ (and, by implication, all Churches of Christ throughout the nation) deny the right of a person to withdraw membership. Editorials have criticized Churches of Christ for this doctrine — which the Churches of Christ have never taught. Here are the real issues, which the press thus far has largely ignored: Does a congregation have a right to require its members to live a disciplined life? When a member engages in conduct a congregation regards as being sinful, do the elders of that congregation have the right to go to that person privately to ask

for repentance? If that person refuses to repent, does the congregation have the right to withdraw its fellowship? and, Do the elders of a congregation have the right to explain to the congregation why they should have no further association with a former member who withdrew membership at the last minute before being disfellowshipped?

These issues have important implications in regard to such matters as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and the separation of church and state. Leaders of many conservative, evangelical, and fundamentalist denominations have offered to help in this fight. Some editors have begun to recognize that their own freedoms may be at stake in this matter. If those elders could be sued for what they did, mass media organizations could be sued for things they do that could just as easily be defined as invasion of privacy and intentional infliction of emotional distress.

#### **17. What are the implications of the jury's decision in this case?**

First of all, it is obvious that the unanimous decision by this jury — which included several members of various denominations — is a clear indication of how much the moral standards of this nation have declined. The strong public support for Mrs. Guinn in this matter is an even clearer indication of this nation's moral decline. Other implications, however, provide a much more immediate danger to the church.

If this decision is upheld on appeal, the elders of a congregation could be sued any time they talked privately to a member about that member's need to repent — regardless of the sin that might be involved. Furthermore, the way this decision interprets invasion of privacy would mean that Christians could be sued any time they engage in personal evangelism. If Christians go to non-Christians and urge them to "repent or perish" — as Jesus said in Luke 13:3 — those Christian evangelists could be sued for invasion of privacy and intentional infliction of emotional distress. And it is not just pastoral care and personal evangelism that is threatened.



Public preaching that gets sinners upset could be grounds for a suit for intentional infliction of emotional distress.

The greatest danger to the church, however, is not through these threats to shepherding, evangelism, and preaching. The work of the church is not done primarily through what is said. Rather, the work of the church is done primarily through the influence of godly Christian lives. If a congregation can no longer require its members to live a disciplined life, the church can no longer have the influence it must have to accomplish its mission. The people of America today do not recognize the need for a disciplined life, but that is what Christianity requires and that is what is at stake in this matter.

**18. Is there anything good that can come out of this matter?**

There most certainly is! While the initial public reaction has been extremely negative toward the church, there is a growing awareness that "you had better not become a member of the Church of Christ unless you are willing to live a disciplined life." That is not a bad perception. In the long run, such a perception could help the church.

Another blessing to come out of this experience is that congregations are being forced by all this publicity to re-examine the Bible teaching on church discipline. Some congregations have gone for years without withdrawing fellowship from anyone, although there have been plenty of cases that called for such discipline.

The publicity associated with this case has given the church an excellent opportunity to teach the Christian message in regard to sexual morality and the need for a disciplined life. That opportunity should not be wasted.

**19. Does appealing this decision violate the teaching of Matthew 5:38-42?**

No! The appeal process is a part of the trial. The trial is not over until the last appeal has been heard. If the Collinsville elders lose this appeal, they will pay the \$390,000.

**20. Is there any danger in appealing this decision?**

Yes. The decision by this jury is not a legal precedent at this point. If the decision is upheld on appeal, it will become a part of case law. The problem in this situation is that there is an even greater danger if the case is not appealed. A failure to appeal this decision would make it appear to the public that there is no basis for an appeal and that the decision was right. Furthermore, paying Mrs. Guinn that \$390,000 would not be good stewardship. That money would support a lot of mission work and benevolent work.

**21. Does appealing this decision violate the teaching of I Corinthians 6:1-8?**

No. In I Corinthians 6:1-8, Paul teaches that Christians should settle any differences within the congregation. A Christian should not file a lawsuit against another Christian. But if a member of the church violates this rule and files a lawsuit against the church and its elders, those elders have both the right and the obligation to defend themselves and the church. In Acts 25:11, Paul appealed to Caesar. He defended himself through the legal system of his day. Appealing the decision does not mean that the church is initiating legal action against a former member. The Collinsville elders did not file this lawsuit. Mrs. Guinn filed it. But the trial is not over until the last appeal has been heard.

**22. Is there anything elders can do to protect themselves and the congregation while we are waiting to see if this decision will be reversed on appeal?**

Not much. The only way to eliminate the risk is to have this decision overturned on appeal. In the mean time, congregations that withdraw fellowship from anyone for any reason will be running the risk of being sued — regardless of what they do. Furthermore, elders need to realize that having the congregation legally incorporated does not protect them from being personally liable in such lawsuits. Elders should also be aware that this case involves a charge of an intentional tort

and most insurance policies do not protect the church or its elders in such cases.

**23. Are there any practical suggestions for minimizing the risk in such cases?**

Here are a few things you might consider. When approaching a situation that might lead to a withdrawal of fellowship, elders need to have everything confirmed by two or three witnesses — just as Jesus said in Matthew 18:15-17. Have everything thoroughly documented. Keep a written record or a tape recording of everything that is said and done. Remember that the testimony of an elder might not be accepted to corroborate the testimony of other elders.

When dealing with a case that might lead to a lawsuit, elders should move as quickly as possible. Try to withdraw fellowship from the rebellious member before that person withdraws membership from the congregation. And if a person who is about to be disfellowshipped withdraws membership from the congregation, be extremely careful about the wording of the statement made to the congregation. If it is not absolutely necessary to specify the reason for the action, follow the suggestion given earlier in the discussion of Question #16.

If it becomes necessary to withdraw fellowship from a member, call a special meeting of the congregation for that purpose. I Corinthians 5:4-5 seems to indicate that a special meeting was called for that purpose when the church in Corinth withdrew fellowship from the man who was living with his father's wife. Do not deal with these matters in a public worship service. Deal with such matters in a meeting where children too young to be members are excluded and where visitors are also excluded.

The plaintiff in a lawsuit against the church and its elders would have a much stronger case if it could be shown that the congregation had failed to withdraw fellowship from other members in similar situations. Many congregations have gone for years without withdrawing fellowship from anyone. Such

congregations should restore that New Testament practice. However, it might be wise to start with some good solid Bible teaching on the subject, announce that in the future the congregation will be practicing church discipline as required by the Bible, and then give any members who are unwilling to live a disciplined life an opportunity to withdraw membership from the congregation before this New Testament practice is restored.

If you think that you might be sued in a matter like this, get a good Christian lawyer and follow your attorney's advice throughout the process. And if it appears that you will be facing media publicity, as in the Collinsville case, get a good public relations specialist to help you say just exactly what needs to be said.

**24. If the decision in the Collinsville trial is not overturned on appeal, will the church have to give up the practice of church discipline?**

No. Romans 13:1-7 teaches that Christians must obey the law of the land. However, if there is a conflict between the law of the land and the law of God, Christians must obey the law of God and be willing to suffer the consequences — just as Peter and John did in Acts 4:19.

**25. Is there anything Christians can do now to help in this matter?**

Yes there is. Christians should pray that the ungodly decision in this case will be overturned. Then, Christians should raise the money it will take to fight this battle. To appeal this case, the church must first post a bond for the \$390,000 judgment and for all the interest that might be built up while the case is on appeal. An early estimate is that legal expenses will run around \$80,000 to take this fight all the way to the United States Supreme Court. Christians may need to raise almost one million dollars to wage this battle — but this is a small price for our religious liberty. Furthermore, when this battle is won, most of that money — the portion for the bond — will be

returned. The elders of the Garnett Church of Christ in Tulsa, Oklahoma, have offered to assume the responsibility for raising this money. You may contact them at 12000 East 31st Street, Tulsa, OK 74145, or call them at (918) 663-3000.



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Flavil R. Yeakley, Jr. is Chairman of the Interpersonal Communication Program in the Faculty of Communication at the University of Tulsa. He began his college education at Abilene Christian College. In 1970 he graduated with his B.A. degree in Psychology from the University of Houston. He received his M.A. degree in Speech from the University of Houston in 1972. His Ph.D. degree in Speech Communication from the University of Illinois was conferred in 1975. Much of the material in this book is based on his doctoral dissertation, "Persuasion in Religious Conversion."

Dr. Yeakley has served as an elder for two years and spent over 20 years in full-time local work as a gospel preacher. Since 1974, when he began his work at the University of Tulsa, he has continued to preach in meetings, lectureships, and workshops. He has continued his church growth research and now spends much of his time conducting weekend workshops on church growth and leadership for local congregations. He served as the first Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Green Country Christian Academy in Tulsa. He also does work as a professional consultant in organizational communication.

Since moving to Tulsa, Dr. Yeakley has done counseling work at Turley Children's Home, conducted research projects for the Christian Child Care Conference, and has been actively involved in marriage and family counseling. He writes a counseling column each month for the Christian Worker. Each year he conducts several weekend workshops on family communication for local congregations.

Dr. Yeakley and his wife, Maydell, have been married since 1954 and they have three children -- Mark, Steven, and Rebecca.