

Disfellowshippers should take a break

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BIG SANDY, Texas—In 2002 *THE JOURNAL* (published by my wife, Linda, and me) reported on the situation of an elder who is a 1969 graduate of Ambassador College and was a member for many years of the Worldwide Church of God, who left the WCG with the general exodus in 1995 and became a member of an offshoot of the WCG.

On June 11, 2002, the church organization defrocked and disfellowshipped him, alleging the "sowing of discord" and "doctrinal differences."

What had the elder done?

People who are familiar with the Churches of God will recognize in the tired old saw of "sowing discord" a ready-made, all-purpose, off-the-shelf allegation, hauled out whenever a church group either doesn't want to say the real reason for telling its members to shun someone or doesn't have a defensible reason.

What really happened?

Chain reaction

The elder made the mistake of confiding in a colleague—a deacon in his church—that he had questions about the Jewish calendar, the one followed by most Churches of God to determine the timing of the feast days of Leviticus 23.

The elder, in speaking in Sabbath services and in conversations with the general membership, had not mentioned his private beliefs on the calendar. He showed up and served the brethren on the days his church believed were proper to observe the feast days.

He supported his church and his church's doctrines and days.

But the elder's confiding in a colleague started a chain reaction of letters, E-mails, accusations and recriminations that culminated in not only his defrocking but his disfellowship.

Since the elder happens to be a good friend of mine, I am in a position to suspect that another factor is also in play here. He has a fairly wry and even offbeat sense of humor.

He has a kind heart. But he does like to play the role of cynic philosopher and take discussions to their logical and sometimes uncomfortable (depending on your point of view) conclusions.

Thus I suspect that in some of the conversations with some of the church-headquarters personnel, especially with some of the men who are not on the governing board, he got the better of them in his friendly but pointed explanations of his calendar views.

But that's just my suspicion.

Behind closed doors

The church organization, of course, will not openly reveal the bedrock reasons for any personnel decisions, beyond vagaries such as "sowing discord" and "doctrinal differences."

I have no problem with firing church employees or even with removing an elder's credentials. Whether your business is religion or some other enterprise, you should have the right to discharge an employee or other representative, even if it's only because of philosophical or religious differences or even personality clashes.

But the church the elder was a member of—and other Churches of God—do not have the moral and ethical right to frivolously and carelessly and, in a de-facto sense, hatefully disfellowship and mark the brethren of the Churches of God.

Anyone who has been a Church of God member knows that disfellowshipping is not in the same league with a simple layoff, firing or revoking of credentials.

The elder did not sow discord. He did not even have a serious doctrinal difference. He believes in God; He believes in Jesus as Savior; he believes in the law as well as grace; he believes in the Sabbath and feast days; he believes in visiting the sick and the fatherless; he believes in the weightier matters.

So he doesn't believe in the Hillel calendar? So what?

Hateful weapon

I don't think the church used the term "mark" in the elder's case, but it might as well have. Disfellowshipping and marking (the latter, for all practical purposes, is the public announcement of a disfellowshipping) are a prime means used by COGs and their leaders to inflict retribution, pain and suffering on other people.

This may not be their stated or even self-realized reasons for their actions, but this is what disfellowshipping amounts to.

It's one thing to disassociate from someone because he's a murderer, pedophile or thief or in some other way acts violently.

It's quite another to mark, shun and brand someone because of doctrinal disagreements, especially doctrinal differences the accused keeps to himself.

The institution of disfellowship in the COGs over the years has been a coercion-loaded weapon for church leaders to keep lower-echelon church members in line through one of the cruelest forms of intimidation: hanging over people's heads the threat of the loss of their very salvation.

The brethren, over the years, have bought into the concept that the various Church of God organizations, beginning with the Radio Church of God, had control over their eternal destinies, rather than realizing that everyone's salvation is a matter strictly between that person and God.

Further, the way the COGs have evolved, doctrine has become more important than Christianity.

It has become more important to be able to say we've got the right doctrines, even the right peripheral official tenets, than to act Christlike toward people.

For a church or for any church employee or employees to disfellowship any of the brethren for anything other than a blatant, serious sin—such as murder, rape or thievery—is uncalled for and at least in some cases results from a mob mentality taking over and replacing sympathy, empathy, common sense and the Golden Rule.

Short reading list

I recommend to every reader of this article, and every member of the Churches of God, a book called *Crisis of Conscience* by Raymond Franz.

For many years Mr. Franz was a member of the council of elders of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Reading his book, for a Church of God organization, is like gazing into a mirror.

Here's the powerful message of *Crisis of Conscience*: People who are kind, compassionate, loving, friendly and level-headed when they're acting as individuals, one on one, neighbor to neighbor, church member to church member, can become monsters when acting officially as members of a governing body of a church.

Mr. Franz vividly recounts instances of his friends on the JW council ruining people's lives by their careless, arrogant and indeed hateful actions against their fellow human beings.

The book aptly demonstrates that the problem is not just with the Churches of God. It's with other churches and religions as well. But it's particularly sad that the phenomenon is alive and well in groups claiming to be a part of God's one true church.

Ironic but not too surprising is that the churches that claim to be God's one true church are the ones that most abuse the weapon of disfellowship, excommunication and shunning.

The opaque Churches of God

Part of the immediate problem is secrecy, exacerbated by paranoid groups' leaders' natural tendencies to cloister themselves while governing: "executive sessions" and other closed meetings, a lack of accountability, an abject absence of transparency.

Part of the problem is fear of lawsuits. *THE JOURNAL*, at various times, has heard from church leaders in certain situations involving disfellowshipping that there are good reasons to disfellowship, "but we can't say what they are" because this is a personnel matter and "we might be sued."

Fine. But if you will not give details, and you will not say what the real reasons are, then you can't legitimately complain when people draw inferences that you might not be happy with.

Calendar matters

The elder I've been talking about here is a nice guy living in a little town in the U.S. Southwest. He's overly concerned (as far as I'm concerned) with the Jewish calendar's shortcomings, just as many of the churches are overawed by the same calendar.

I observe the same calendar the elder's church group does, but not for the same reasons. I don't agree with that church's calendar approach, and I don't agree with the elder's approach.

I observe the Jewish calendar because the congregations I usually attend observe it, and most of my Church of God friends observe it. If I lived near the elder in question and attended his congregation, I would observe his preferred method of determining the timing of the feast days.

That said, the elder is dead right when he contends that his views about the calendar do not amount to a disfellowshippable offense. That is, they are not a grave sin. In fact, they're no sin at all.

So why did the church disfellowship, brand and implicitly recommend everyone shun him, and why did the church organization deny the appeal of his disfellowshipping?

And, more recently, why has that church not given the elder the courtesy of a reply or even an acknowledgment of the receipt of his "open letter"?

I think it's because of the same mob mentality that for years afflicted the Jehovah's Witnesses' council of elders, causing those otherwise friendly husbands and fathers and brothers to take actions that were as cruel and hateful as human beings can be to each other short of literally stabbing someone in the back.

I want to make one thing perfectly clear. In no way am I questioning anybody's conversion. I know several of the men on the board personally. They're fine people; they have God's Spirit; they're sincere Christians; they're friends of mine; some of them I consider to be close friends.

The behavior I'm talking about seems to kick in, whether we're talking about this matter or many other situations in the COGs and other churches, only when good men act in concert as some kind of a governing body.

Helpful suggestions

I shouldn't end this commentary without a constructive suggestion, so here are two of them.

■ Anyone who is accused of an allegedly disfellowshippable offense should automatically and swiftly enjoy the benefit of a formal hearing, with his accusers as well as his defenders present and allowed to testify.

The session should follow standard courtroom rules of evidence and be open to the general membership and indeed the general public.

Any appeal of the church's decision (the elder's former church has proudly pointed to its appeals process) should be provided a similar open session with the same opportunity for testimony on both sides.

The church provided nothing remotely like this for its elder.

■ My second suggestion: I urge any of the other COG groups that have abused the disfellowship doctrine to declare a moratorium on disfellowshipping anyone.

Is that because I don't believe the Bible allows for disfellowship?

No, that's not the reason. It's that we've demonstrated over and over, time and time again, that we can't handle that doctrine.

We are not able to get it right. We would be better off letting someone with an odd calendar belief, unorthodox doctrine or even offbeat sense of humor attend and fellowship with the brethren.

It would be far better to err in that direction, if indeed doing such would be to err, than to commit the crime of ruining one more person's life, thus sowing massive and genuine discord in the Churches of God.

Good should triumph

I know most of the men who have served on the church's governing board over the years.

I have reason to believe that some of them do not agree with the board's decision on the elder.

But they want to present a united front. They believe it is their duty to support the board even if they disagree with a decision.

Is there anything wrong with that?

Yes. If that is the way you reason, then at times you could be part of an organization within an organization that does something monstrous, like the abuse of the elder.

The decisions of a board or council of elders are not all equal in their effects on their fellow human beings.

What should the level-headed, clear-thinking men on a church organization's board do in this kind of situation?

One thing's for sure. They should not do what they've been doing in this case: just sitting there.