



Minutes With Messiah

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Unto the Hills

“I lift up mine eyes unto the hills, whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord which made heaven and earth.” (Ps 121:1-2, KJV)

“I lift up my eyes to the hills. From whence comes my help? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.” (Based on several modern translations)

The two versions of the verses above seem to carry two different ideas about where the psalmist looked for help. The translation of 1611 seems to say that the writer considered God to be a god of the hills. This was the thought of the servants of the Syrian King, ben-Hadad (I Kings 20:23), and was the attitude that caused God to destroy him. So can it also have been the attitude of a psalmist inspired by God? The twentieth century versions do not carry this idea. They do, on the other hand, seem to include an unnecessary phrase. The whole reference to the hills seems to be meaningless in relation to the rest of the psalm.

Living in Albuquerque, New Mexico, dominated by Sandia Peak on the east, one is constantly lifting “my eyes up to the hills.” Every day is affected by the “moods” of that magnificent escarpment. It is easy for me to consider one traveling to or living near Jerusalem starting a praise of God by referring to the hills. A believer is constantly reminded of God's creative power just by looking upward. Perhaps this was what the psalmist had in mind. I look to the hills and see the hand of God. It is this same God who is my helper, my shade, my protector. Thus, the introductory statement as translated by most today is the motive force behind the poet's following rhapsody on God.

The King James Version of this passage is not totally lacking in merit, however. Even if the writer did not believe God was just “a god of the

hills; but he is not a god of the valleys,” (I Kings 20:28) that does not mean he did not look to God in the hills for his help and strength. Zion—the mountain of God, the place where God chose to put his dwelling place among men, the holy city. Surely every Jew, at least after the construction of the First Temple, looked unto the hills for their help. Even Daniel, so far away that he could no longer see the hills, prayed to God “toward Jerusalem.” (Dan 6:10) Did he, perhaps, have this psalm in mind often as he prayed. It would certainly have been appropriate to his circumstances.

Whether we look to Zion, literally or figuratively, as the dwelling of God; or whether we look to the nearest mountains to remind us of God's might, we should also remember the conclusion the psalmist drew. We should keep in mind the rest of the psalm.

He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

Contents

Unto the Hills	1
Withdrawing Fellowship, by David Padfield	2

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Withdrawing Fellowship

The following article by my good friend, David Padfield was published in the March 2000 issue of "Reflections on Truth", the bulletin of the Zion (IL) church of Christ where he preaches. On his website, www.padfield.com, he acknowledges that this "is sure to upset a few brethren who are more tied to tradition than the scriptures." Although it is a longer article than I usually include in this bulletin, I reprint it here, with permission, because I think it presents valuable material from the scriptures on a much misunderstood topic.

Tim O'Hearn

The subject of "Church Discipline" has caused no end of discussion among faithful brethren. Anyone remotely familiar with the New Testament recognizes the Bible does speak on this subject. The problem comes in our application of what the Scriptures teach about it.

The phrase most of my brethren like to use is "withdrawing fellowship." Unfortunately, this phrase is not found anywhere on the pages of sacred writ. Beyond this, the way most brethren practice "withdrawing fellowship" is not even remotely connected with New Testament commands or approved examples.

While growing up in central Indiana I saw

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numerous attempts by brethren to "withdraw fellowship" from erring Christians. Most of these "rituals" seemed more like a combination of Catholicism and McCarthyism than an attempt to follow New Testament precepts. I remember brethren reading lengthy letters before the congregation, droning on and on about some poor soul who was about to be "withdrawn from" by the entire congregation—even though the vast majority of the congregation had never even spoken to the one they were about to "deliver to Satan." The

passage most often quoted was 1 Corinthians 5—a passage where the word "fellowship" is not even found!

In recent years I have seen jack-booted preachers try to keep members in line by threatening to "withdraw fellowship" from those who disagree with them.

What Is Fellowship?

The English word "fellowship" is found 14 times in the New Testament (nkjv). James, Cephas, and John extended "the right hand of fellowship" to Paul and Barnabas (Gal. 2:9). Paul admonished the Ephesians to "have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness" (Eph. 5:11). The saints at Philippi were commended by Paul for their "fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now" (Phil. 1:5). The apostle John reminds us that "if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

The basic idea of the word fellowship is "sharing" or "joint participation." The Greek word for fellowship, *koinonia*, is defined by Thayer as "fellowship, association, community, communion, joint participation . the share which one has in anything (p. 352). Friedrich Hauck says the word "expresses a two-sided relation" (TDNT, 3:798).

It is impossible to be "in fellowship" with someone against their will. One person may desire fellowship with another, but cannot have it without mutual consent. John spoke of our relationship with God and said, "If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth" (1 John 1:6).

I know of several occasions where an individual would leave a congregation and say that they no longer wanted to be in fellowship with the group they were leaving. Then the brethren at the congregation would send them a letter saying they were going to "withdraw fellowship" from that person in 30 days if they did not repent! Such ignorance ought not to be tolerated. If a man says he no longer wants to be in fellowship with you,

there is no way you can be in fellowship with him. You cannot remove (or withdraw) that which does not exist. Remember, fellowship “expresses a two-sided relation.”

When a Christian “walks in darkness” he is no longer in fellowship with God (1 John 1:6-7). When a man commits adultery his fellowship with God is severed, and God does not send him a letter threatening to “withdraw fellowship” in 30 days if he does not repent. Some of my brethren apparently think they are more gracious than the Almighty!

Withdraw Yourself

The way some brethren use the phrase “withdraw fellowship” you might be left with the impression it is a Bible phrase. However, such is not the case. The saints at Thessalonica were commanded to “withdraw from every brother” who walked disorderly (2 Thes. 3:6). What is it they were to withdraw or remove? The niv translates this verse as, “keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us.” We are told to “not keep company” with an ungodly brother (nkjv) and “do not associate with him” (niv) (2 Thes. 3:14). We are to withdraw ourselves from ungodly brethren.

A brother “who is a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner” is one that we may not even have a common meal with (1 Cor. 5:11).

Among You

Paul told the Corinthians that there was “sexual immorality among you” (1 Cor. 5:1), and that this fornicator must be “taken away from among you” (1 Cor. 5:2). Paul wrote to the saints in Thessalonica and told them that he was “not disorderly among you,” but had heard “that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner” (2 Thes. 3:7, 11).

Peter told elders to “shepherd the flock of God which is among you” (1 Pet. 5:2). It amazes me that some brethren can understand how elders can only have oversight of those who are “among” them, yet the same brethren try to “withdraw fellowship” from those who are not “among” them. Congregations are commanded to withdraw from disorderly brethren who are “among” them, i.e., in

their midst. I know of no passage which speaks of a congregation “withdrawing” from one who was not in their midst.

I am familiar with a case in Indiana where a congregation claimed they were going to “withdraw fellowship” from an individual who had moved out of state three years before and was worshipping with a faithful group of brethren. Such nonsense ought not be tolerated among those who claim to “speak where the Bible speaks.”

We also need to notice that there is no record in the New Testament of any congregation sending out letters to other congregations about their internal affairs. However, it is very common

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today for brethren to “withdraw fellowship” from an individual and then send letters across the country to warn other congregations about the erring brother they “withdrew” from. When I get letters like this, I promptly throw them in the garbage where they belong.

Diotrephes, a man who loved to have the preeminence among brethren, put some faithful Christians “out of the church” (3 John 1:10). No other congregation on earth was bound to honor his evil actions. Every congregation is independent and autonomous-or at least that is the way God designed it. One congregation is not bound in any way by the actions of another. In fact, I hold some people in higher esteem when I find out they have been “withdrawn from” by a group of knuckleheads or by some egotistical preacher!

What Is To Be Done?

What is to be done when a brother in Christ is guilty of sin and refuses to repent, but is still assembling with the saints? By apostolic command we are to withdraw ourselves from that person, i.e., no longer associate with them or even sit down to a common meal with them. In addition, you do not

have to wait 30 days and send a certified letter before you take such action. When such a one who is “among you” is “delivered to Satan,” his soul might be saved by your actions (1 Cor. 5:5). When you refuse to “keep company with” such a person you “do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother” (1 Thes. 3:14-15).

The fornicator at Corinth came to repentance when faithful brethren at Corinth ceased associating with him. Of their actions Paul said, “This punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man, so that, on the contrary, you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow” (2 Cor. 2:6-7).

Erring Christians who leave a local congregation need to be reprovved and exhorted. When they indicate they no longer want to be in fellowship with the congregation there is nothing else the brethren can Scripturally do to that man. You can announce to the congregation that this individual has broken the ties of fellowship with you, but you cannot threaten to “withdraw fellowship” from one with whom fellowship no longer exists.

The Hebrew writer spoke of those “who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come” (Heb. 6:4-5).

He went on to say that when these people fall away it is impossible for you to “renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame” (Heb. 6:6). He did not say that it was impossible for these people to ever come back to God—it was going to be impossible for you to bring them to repentance. This apostate was going to have to come to his senses on his own. Sometimes men have to reach the very depths of despair before they can see how far they have fallen. It does not mean that we give up hope or cease to be concerned about them. We can continue to pray that they will live long enough to come to repentance.

In the gospel of Luke we read of a wayward son who left his father’s house, “journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living” (Luke 15:13). I am sure this father was deeply grieved and concerned about his son, and mourned over his departure. However, the father did not send out letters of disinheritance to area families, nor even a certified letter to the pigpen where his son was working. One day this wayward son came to his senses and in humble repentance he returned to his father (Luke 15:15-24). The father rejoiced that his son who was once dead was alive again—he who was lost was now found!

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