

Excommunication

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In her January 18th, 2008 column in the Wall Street Journal, Alexandra Alter takes a rather dim view of excommunication. Perhaps you're unfamiliar with the term. Excommunication is a form of 'church discipline' where a church member is told to repent of some corrupt behavior or leave the church.

Alter gives examples of excommunication clearly designed to incense those who already have a foul taste in their mouth regarding the judgmental dispositions commonly associated with pew and pulpit. Even I (one who believes in excommunication) was penned up to write a nasty letter to some of the pastors in her column.

Who wouldn't feel empathy for 71-year-old Karolyn Caskey, with her artificial knees and double hip replacement, when she was shunned because she had the gall to question the authority of the pastor? And Amy Hitt, 43, a mortgage officer in Amissville, Va., was voted out of her Baptist congregation for gossiping about her pastor's plans to buy a bigger house. 74 members of a Nashville megachurch were also threatened with expulsion for gossiping.

While some more tolerant Christians, according to Alter, find such "practices outdated" it appears we should fear a "movement among some conservative Protestant pastors" to bring back this "ancient practice in which suspected sinners are privately confronted and then publicly castigated and excommunicated if they refuse to repent."

It's time to cast your vote; yea or nay on the outdated practice of excommunication? But before taking yet one more shot at the church, consider a few things:

If you're fed up with hypocrisy in the church you may want to keep excommunication alive. Like any adjudicatory system, it has its horror stories, but for the most part it is a system of justice which ferrets out the liars, cheats and fakes. Most of your high profile church scandals would never have happened if a proper system of church discipline was in place. You can't have it both ways. You can't be anti-hypocrite and anti-excommunication. You might as well be anti-crime and anti-law.

Tough-love advocates may also want to cast their 'yea' votes. One of the perks of being a member of a church which practices excommunication is the guarantee of a response if you happen to fall into some egregious behavior. Love means caring enough to confront. A person joins a church in hopes of living by a certain standard. Since we all tend to lapse in

keeping these standards, a loving confrontation is something we all need from time to time.

But what if the offender refuses to repent? In Alcoholics Anonymous they tell you there are times to let a drunk wake up in the gutter. It's wrong to let people ignore the consequences of their behavior. It is wrong to let a thief or adulterer think they can continue in that behavior and go to church like everything is fine.

Someone might say, "Aren't we all sinners?" The answer is, of course, 'yes'. If excommunication were imposed on all sinners, every church on earth would be empty! Excommunication is for people who desired, and vowed, to attempt to live a godly life and then refuse to even make the effort at doing the right thing. Excommunication is not for people struggling with sin. Jesus said you don't snuff out a flickering candle. For years I have sought to minister to those whose sin and addictions find them in and out of prison. Excommunication has never been on the table for them. There is a difference between weakness and hypocrisy.

In richer theological times, Bible scholars determined that church discipline was one the 'marks' of a true church. In other words, if a church doesn't practice discipline, it's not a church at all. In light of this, Alter's statistic that only 10% to 15% of Protestant churches practice discipline becomes enlightening. It can be easily argued that the church's lack of willingness to heed the counsel of Jesus (He was not unclear on the subject) in this matter accounts for its current woeful condition.

It would appear that the only downside of excommunication (which is not done by a pastor, but by a plurality of elders) is that hypocrites are humiliated. Jesus was in the regular practice of humiliating hypocrites. And even if the church is wrong in its disciplinary judgment (the church is, after all, fallible), it does not thwart God's power to utilize excommunication in a positive way. Millions of Protestants routinely celebrate the excommunication of Martin Luther.