HOW CAN IT BE RIGHT TO TURN A CHILD OF GOD OVER TO SATAN?

Have you ever heard of the proposal that there comes a point when the Lord's church should somehow deliver its unfaithful members to the devil? Does that idea strike you as being unreasonable or unthinkable? The truth is, beloved, that is exactly what the God of heaven instructs us to do. Really? Yes, really. Here are two New Testament passages in which we read such teaching:

1 Cor. 5:4,5 – "*In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus*."

1 Tim. 1:19,20 – "*Holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck: Of whom is Hymenaeus and Alexander; whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme*."

Obviously, the matters about which Paul wrote in these two instances were extremely serious. In the first scenario, there was a brother in the church at Corinth who was a fornicator, and at the time Paul wrote this inspired letter (1 Corinthians) to them, the saints there had not yet properly dealt with this immoral man. What was the Holy Spirit's instruction to them? To purge out the old leaven (5:7), have no company with this man (5:9), not eat with this man (5:11), and put him away from among them (5:13). By doing those things, what would they actually be doing? They would be delivering or turning over this brother to Satan.

What does it even mean to turn over or deliver a person to the devil? It seems that if we will look at the intention of such action, that will help us to understand what it means. The notion that Christians should turn a brother, one of their own, over to Satan, may sound horrible to some. But let us read 1 Cor. 5:5 again: "*To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus*." Did you notice the motivation behind such action? What is the ultimate desire of turning a fellow saint over to our adversary? "*That the spirit may be saved*" – rather than the mindset being, "Let's cast him off to the wolves and let him burn in hell," the real goal is that his soul will be saved from hell! With that in mind, the Bible says that such a brother is to be delivered to Satan "*for the destruction of the flesh.*" Brethren, the man is already in a lost condition, so delivering him to Satan does not make things worse (God does not prescribe remedies that make things bad or worse). Rather, the hope is that by turning him over to Satan, which is the same as refusing to have company with him, he will open his eyes, see his horrible condition, hate the thought of losing all social association with his beloved Christian family, and resolve to fulfill the lusts of the flesh no longer, including being a fornicator.

Why is it right to turn a child of God over to Satan? It is proper to do so because that is the action which the Lord instructs us to take. If God counts it as a good and necessary step, then that is just what it is. Someone might still wonder, "I do not see why the Lord would tell us to do such a thing. Would it not be better to work patiently with people and try to encourage them to do what is right, rather than just write them off?" First of all, to make the scriptural decision to withhold fellowship and support from a rebellious child of God does not mean that we are not concerned about them. On the contrary, it shows that we love them and ultimately want what is

best for them – for them to be restored to their first love (Rev. 2:4,5). Second, to refuse to have company with a member of God's family does not mean that we never want to see or hear from them again. God forbid! Should a child of God that the church has delivered to Satan for the destruction of the flesh come to his senses (as the lost son did, Luke 15:17), repent of and confess his wrong, we would with great rejoicing receive him with open arms. What a great day that would be! Through the years there have been many fallen saints who have been properly delivered to the devil by a faithful congregation, and in the course of time those fallen saints have repented and come home.

Each sinful situation has to be considered individually. There is a need to try and restore the ones overtaken in a fault (Gal. 6:1,2), to convert or turn back those members of the church that are willfully living in sin (James 5:19,20), and to warn the unruly (1 Thessalonians 5:14). The Lord even said of a woman that had led others into error, "And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not." (Rev. 2:21). Obviously, in her case, this woman needed to be granted time in order to give her an opportunity to get herself straightened out. Yes, there are some situations that do demand ongoing instruction, gentle pleading, and longsuffering. Even in such cases, though, when a person defiantly remains in sin despite our sincere efforts to help them make the necessary correction(s), there comes a time when the leaders of a local church must take the action that the Lord prescribes: lead the church in refusing to have company with the sinning member.

On the other hand, there are times when the sin is of such a nature that the church needs to deal with it quickly and clearly. The matter with the fornicating brother in Corinth was such an example, and so was the one of the two brothers (Hymenaeus and Alexander) about whom Paul wrote to Timothy (1 Timothy 1:20). They needed to learn not to blaspheme, and they needed to learn that quickly, so Paul said that he had delivered them to Satan.

If God commands us to take the step of delivering a brother or sister to the devil for the destruction of the flesh, but we somehow convince ourselves that that is not really the best course of action, so we refuse to do it, what do you suppose the Lord thinks about our failure to obey Him? Here is what the Master said: "*Why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?*" (Luke 6:46). If someone were to suggest that we should stop partaking of the Lord's Supper, what would be your reaction? I am confident that we would all in unison say something like, "We've got to partake of the Lord's Supper – the Lord commands it." Or, what if someone were to propose that we stop baptizing people? What would be your response to that? Again, I am convinced that we would all make it clear: "We can't stop baptizing people – the Lord told us to do it." And, we would be right again.

Why is it, then, brothers and sisters, that in some cases congregations keep on having company with members that willfully remain in sin and have no intention of changing? Among other things, God commands us to (1) partake of the Lord's Supper, (2) baptize people, and (3) deliver ungodly members of the church to Satan for the destruction of the flesh. How can we justify the decision to comply with the first of these two commands, but disregard and reject the third, which is just as much a decree of the Almighty as the other two are?! This is not a trivial matter. Let us love our brothers and sisters in the same fashion that the Lord does. He said, "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten." (Revelation 3:19).

Katoro church of Christ – Geita Tanzania.

Your brother in Christ, Sadat