

What Happens When a Christian Sins?

*Judicial Committees, the Confessional, and Two Ways of Handling
Wrongdoing*

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I. Two Answers to One Question

Every church must answer a question older than any denomination: what happens when a member sins—gravely, really sins? The answer a religion gives reveals what it believes God is like more clearly than its formal doctrines do, because this is where doctrine touches a guilty human being. This essay sets the Watchtower’s answer and the Catholic Church’s answer side by side. They could hardly be more different. One is a committee; the other is a confessional. The sections that follow describe each system fairly, from its own sources, compare their purposes, and then examine at length the sharpest edge of the Watchtower’s system—the practice of removal and shunning—against the Scriptures cited for it.

II. The Watchtower’s Answer: The Judicial Committee

In the congregations of Jehovah’s Witnesses, serious sin is an organizational matter from the start. A Witness who commits a serious wrong is expected to confess it to the elders, and a Witness who learns of another’s serious sin is expected to see that the elders hear of it; confessing privately to God is not treated as sufficient, and concealment is itself an offense. The elders inquire, and if the wrongdoing is established as serious, a judicial committee—normally three elders—meets with the person behind closed doors. No observers attend, and the committee weighs whether the sinner is repentant. If the elders judge him repentant, he is reproved, sometimes with restrictions on his privileges in the congregation. If they judge him unrepentant, he is removed. As the Society describes it: “If, despite repeated efforts to help him, he makes a practice of breaking the Bible’s moral code and does not repent, he must be removed from the congregation.”

The removal is then made public: “The elders simply announce to the congregation that the person is no longer one of Jehovah’s Witnesses.” From that announcement, the congregation stops associating with him, with the consequences examined later in this essay. The way back runs through the same machinery in reverse: the removed person attends meetings, typically for months, while his conduct is observed, and a committee decides when he may be reinstated. The purposes the Society itself names for the arrangement are the ones to keep in view: the congregation must be kept clean, Jehovah’s name must be protected from reproach, and the discipline may bring the sinner to his senses. Each purpose is sincere. It is also worth noticing what they have in common: their reference point is the congregation and its reputation before observers. The sinner’s restoration is hoped for; the organization’s cleanness is required.

III. The Catholic Answer: The Confessional

Set beside that system the scene the Gospel of John records. A woman is caught in adultery—caught “in the act,” her accusers say—and dragged before Jesus by men holding the Law of Moses in their hands and stones in easy reach. It is, in form, a judicial proceeding: the offense established, the witnesses assembled, the sentence prescribed. Jesus declines the role of committee. When the accusers have gone, one by one, He is alone with the sinner:

Jesus looked up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again.”

John 8:10–11, RSV

Both halves of that sentence matter, and the Catholic sacrament of Reconciliation—Confession—is built to hold them together. “Neither do I condemn you” without “go, and do not sin again” would be indulgence; the command without the mercy would be a tribunal. The authority behind the sacrament is the risen Christ’s own commission: “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you ... Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:21–23). The apostles were sent not merely to announce forgiveness in general but to forgive—a verb that requires hearing the sin; and so the New Testament church already practices confession: “Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed” (Jas. 5:16). Paul calls the apostolic office “the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18).

In practice the sacrament is this: a Catholic who has sinned examines his conscience, comes to a priest—often behind a screen, anonymous even to him—confesses, receives counsel and a penance, prays an act of contrition, and hears the words of absolution. The whole thing normally takes minutes, and it can be repeated as often as sin is repeated, for a lifetime. Three features answer the committee point by point. There is no panel: one priest, bound to mercy, whose absolution does not wait on a committee’s verdict about the quality of your sorrow. There is no announcement: no one in the parish—not the priest’s superiors, not the sinner’s family—will ever learn what was confessed, because the seal of confession is absolute. The Catechism states it in full: “Every priest who hears confessions is bound under very severe penalties to keep absolute secrecy regarding the sins that his penitents have confessed to him. He can make no use of knowledge that confession gives him about penitents’ lives. This secret, which admits of no exceptions, is called the ‘sacramental seal’” (CCC 1467; cf. canon 983). Priests have accepted prison and death rather than break it. And there is no record: none is kept, and none may be.

None of this makes sin casual. The Church obliges the faithful to confess grave sins at least once a year (CCC 1457), requires the intention to amend, and a priest can withhold absolution where there is no repentance at all. What the system assumes, though, is the opposite of a two-class congregation of the clean and the removed: it assumes that everyone in the building is a sinner, because Scripture says so—“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). The line for the confessional has no exceptions and no observers taking note of who stands in it.

IV. Two Purposes: Protecting a Name, Healing a Sinner

The two systems differ because they exist for different reasons. The Watchtower’s stated purpose is protective: the congregation kept clean, Jehovah’s name shielded from reproach before the watching world. The confessional’s purpose is therapeutic: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick ... I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Matt. 9:12–13). A physician does not publish his patients’ diseases to keep the clinic’s reputation clean; the clinic exists for the patients.

The difference in purpose produces a difference in incentives that anyone who has lived under both systems can feel. Where confession triggers a committee, an announcement, and the loss of every friendship at once, the sinner’s strongest incentive is concealment—the system taxes honesty at the highest rate it can set. Where confession is private, sealed, and answered with absolution, honesty costs nothing but humility, and the way back from sin is measured in minutes rather than months. One system makes the sinner’s worst moment public property; the other makes it a secret even from the records of the Church. And here as elsewhere, the proof text is an address read correctly while the household goes unvisited: “remove the wicked person from among yourselves” is really in 1 Corinthians 5:13, but the second letter to the same congregation—commanding that the removed man be forgiven, comforted, and loved—goes unquoted, as Section IX will show.

V. Shunning: The Practice, and What It Costs

A baptized Jehovah’s Witness who commits a serious sin and does not repent, or who formally resigns, is expelled from the congregation. Three elders hear the matter in private. If they decide against him, a brief announcement is made from the platform at the next meeting: the person is no longer one of Jehovah’s Witnesses. Nothing further is said, and nothing needs to be. From that evening the congregation stops associating with him.

For someone raised in the religion this is not the loss of a church. It is the loss of a world. Witnesses are counseled to keep their close friendships inside the congregation, so the people cut off are, in most cases, everyone the person knows: the friends he grew up with,

the men he worked beside, the woman who taught him to read at the Kingdom Hall. And the rule follows him home. Relatives living under the same roof continue their ordinary family life, but a parent, a child or a brother living elsewhere is to reduce contact to what family business genuinely requires.

It is worth being plain about what that means in practice, because the abstractions hide it. It means a mother who is not told her son is in the hospital. It means a grandfather who learns of a birth by rumor. It means a young man of nineteen, disciplined for a sin he committed at seventeen, sitting alone in a flat in a city where he knows nobody, having lost his family, his friends and his religion in the same week.

This essay argues that the practice is not required by Scripture, that the passages cited for it do not say what it needs them to say, that Scripture in fact forbids the severing it performs, and that the Society's own publications show a rule which has been loosened, tightened and renamed by administrative decision four times in seventy years. But none of that is the reason for writing. The reason is the young man in the flat.

One thing should be said at the start, in fairness. The practice is not maintained by cruel people. The elders who administer it are, in the main, sincere men doing something they find painful because they believe God requires it. The mother who does not telephone her son is not indifferent; she is frightened, and she has been told that her obedience may be the very thing that brings him back. The argument here is not against their motives. It is against the claim that Scripture obliges them.

VI. What Changed in 2024, and What Did Not

In March 2024 the Governing Body announced a change, and it was widely reported as the end of shunning. It was not that, but it was not nothing either, and both halves of that sentence matter.

What changed first was vocabulary. The word “disfellowshipped,” in use for seventy years, was retired. The Society now states the position this way: “Previously, we referred to unrepentant wrongdoers as being disfellowshipped. But now we simply use the Bible's wording and refer to them as being *removed* from the congregation.”[1] The new term is taken from the *New World Translation* rendering of 1 Corinthians 5:13, “Remove the wicked person from among yourselves,” and the change was presented as bringing the organization's language closer to Scripture.

Some substance changed with it. A removed person “is welcome to attend our religious services, where he may be greeted by Jehovah's Witnesses.” He “can request visits from the elders, who will provide loving Scriptural counsel and warmly appeal for him to repent and return to God,” and elders were instructed to take the initiative in such visits rather

than wait. The practice of giving a talk “marking” a member whose conduct was disapproved was discontinued.[2]

These are real mitigations and it would be ungenerous to pretend otherwise. A person who may now be greeted at the Kingdom Hall, and whom elders may visit, is in a materially better position than one who could be greeted by nobody.

But the architecture is untouched. The announcement is still made to the congregation. Witnesses are still told, in the same document that describes the softening, that “we do not socialize with someone who has been removed.” Relatives outside the household still reduce contact to necessary family matters. The friendships still end. What was removed was a word and a degree; what remains is the thing that does the damage.

There is also a question the change raises which the announcement did not address, and it is pressed in section XIII below. If saying a greeting to such a person was forbidden by the apostle John—as the Society taught for forty years—then no administrative decision can now permit it. And if it can now be permitted, then the apostle John never forbade it, and forty years of separated families rested on a misreading.

VII. The Case as the Society Makes It

The argument deserves to be stated at its strongest before it is answered, and it is stronger than outsiders usually allow. It rests on four passages and a principle.

First, Paul’s handling of a case of incest at Corinth. He rebukes the congregation for tolerating it, and directs them not to associate “with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber—not even to eat with such a one.” The chapter closes with an imperative: “Drive out the wicked person from among you” (1 Cor. 5:11, 13).

Second, the second letter of John, which instructs that anyone who does not remain in the teaching of the Christ is not to be received into the house, and that one must not even give him a greeting, “for he who greets him shares his wicked work” (2 John 10–11). The Society observes, reasonably, that this is the apostle of love drawing the line, not a harsher writer.

Third, the principle of contamination: “a little leaven leavens the whole lump” (1 Cor. 5:6). Sin tolerated spreads, and a congregation which keeps an unrepentant member in fellowship teaches its own young people that the standard is negotiable.

Fourth, the priority of God over family, from Christ Himself: “He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me” (Matt. 10:37). If obedience to God should ever

require a painful distance from a relative, the Christian is not permitted to prefer the relative.

And the governing principle is that the discipline is *for* the person disciplined. It is meant to let him feel the weight of what he has done, which comfortable words would not accomplish, and so to bring him back. The Society can point to many who did come back and say so.

That is a serious argument, and the sections that follow take the texts one at a time in the order the argument uses them.

VIII. What Paul Ordered at Corinth

Begin with the case itself, because its details are more particular than the use made of it.

The offense was not doubt, or dissent, or lapsed attendance. A man was living with his father's wife, in an arrangement the surrounding pagan city itself would not tolerate, and the congregation was proud of its broad-mindedness about it (1 Cor. 5:1–2). Paul is dealing with public, ongoing, notorious immorality inside the assembly, defended by the assembly.

His instruction is to deliver the man “to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor. 5:5). Whatever the first clause means in detail—and it is disputed—the purpose clause is not disputed at all. The measure is aimed at the man's salvation from the first sentence. It is medicine, and its dosage is therefore limited by what will cure.

Notice next what the prohibition attaches to. “Not even to eat with such a one” is, in that setting, a statement about the common table of the community, and very probably about the Lord's Supper, which the same letter discusses three chapters later as a meal the congregation eats together and which can be eaten unworthily (1 Cor. 11:20–29). The exclusion Paul describes is exclusion from the assembly and its table. It is a congregational act with a congregational scope.

What it is not is an instruction to a mother about her son. Paul is writing to a church about a member of that church; the language of the passage is corporate throughout—“you are arrogant,” “when you are assembled,” “drive out from among you.” To move from that to a rule governing whether a woman may attend her daughter's wedding is not exegesis but extension, and the extension is precisely what the passage would need to state and does not.

IX. The Letter That Answers the Letter

If the first letter to Corinth is the ground of the practice, the second letter to Corinth is its answer, and no treatment of the subject that omits it can be taken seriously.

Paul writes again to the same congregation about a disciplined man—on the most natural reading the same man, and on any reading the same policy:

For such a one this punishment by the majority is enough; so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him... to keep Satan from gaining the advantage over us; for we are not ignorant of his designs.
(2 Cor. 2:6–11)

Every clause tells against the practice. *This punishment is enough*: the discipline has a sufficient quantity, after which continuing it is disobedience rather than faithfulness. *Forgive and comfort him*: the congregation is not to wait passively for a satisfactory application but to move toward him. *Or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow*: the danger Paul foresees is not that the man will take his sin too lightly but that the church will crush him. *Reaffirm your love*: the word suggests a formal, public act, the mirror of the formal, public act that excluded him.

And then the reason, which is the sentence that ought to end the argument. Excessive severity is not described as an excess of zeal, or as an error on the safe side. It is described as Satan gaining the advantage. The apostle who ordered the expulsion warns that the discipline itself, pressed past its purpose, is the adversary's opportunity—and says he is not ignorant of his designs.

This is not an obscure text. It is the sequel to the passage the whole practice is built on, addressed to the same people about the same matter, and it says that the moment of danger comes not when discipline is withheld but when it is prolonged. A rule which treats the first letter as permanent legislation and the second as a special case has not weighed Paul. It has selected him.

X. “Do Not Look on Him as an Enemy”

Paul also tells us, in another letter, what he meant by withdrawing association—and the gloss is his own, immediate, and decisive.

If any one refuses to obey what we say in this letter, note that man, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not look on him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother. (2 Thess. 3:14–15)

The first sentence is the sort of thing the practice quotes. The second is the sort of thing it cannot accommodate, and the two are joined without a pause.

Consider what the second sentence requires. To *warn* a man is to speak to him. Not to look on him as an enemy is to maintain an attitude of goodwill which he can perceive, since a warning delivered in silence is not a warning. And to warn him *as a brother* is to keep addressing him by the relationship the discipline was supposed to have suspended. Paul places all three obligations on the congregation at the same moment as the withdrawal, which shows what kind of withdrawal he had in mind: something more like a marked coolness, deliberately visible, intended to be felt and understood, and accompanied by continued speech about the reason for it.

Shunning as practiced makes each of the three impossible. There is no warning, because there is no conversation. The person cannot fail to experience the treatment as enmity, whatever is intended, because a silence maintained for years is indistinguishable from hatred at the receiving end. And the word “brother” is precisely what is withdrawn.

It is sometimes replied that 2 Thessalonians concerns a lesser fault—idleness and disorder rather than gross sin—so that a severer treatment is warranted in the graver case. But this concedes the point that matters: it grants that the New Testament knows a graded discipline, in which the treatment is fitted to the offense, and that at least one grade of it explicitly requires continued speech. The Watchtower arrangement is not graded. The man expelled for drunkenness, the woman who married outside the faith, the elder who came to doubt the 1914 chronology and said so, and the teenager who smoked are all treated in exactly the same way.

XI. Second John and the Traveling Teachers

The greeting text is the one that does the real work in practice, since it is what converts exclusion from the assembly into exclusion from ordinary human contact. It will not carry that weight, and the letter itself says why.

Two verses earlier John identifies the people he is discussing: “For many deceivers have gone out into the world, men who will not acknowledge the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh” (2 John 7). These are not lapsed members of the congregation. They are itinerant missionaries, on the move, denying the Incarnation—and the specific problem is that they were arriving at Christian households and expecting to be housed.

This is a world we can reconstruct with some confidence, because another document of the same period describes it in detail. The *Didache* devotes two chapters to the reception of traveling teachers, and its rules are entirely practical: an apostle is to be welcomed as the Lord, but if he stays more than two days he is a false prophet; if he asks for money he

is a false prophet; a visitor who wants to settle must work for his living, and one who refuses is trading on Christ and is to be avoided.[3] The early Church had a real and recurring problem with religious travelers living at its expense, and it developed rules for refusing hospitality to them.

That is the genre 2 John belongs to. “Do not receive him into the house” means do not lodge him, do not fund his journey, do not give him your congregation as an audience—and the house in question is very likely the house-church, since that is where the assembly met and where such a teacher would speak. The greeting withheld is correspondingly formal: not the acknowledgment of a human being in the road, but the public welcome that would present him as a teacher in good standing and make his hosts partners in his work. That is exactly what “shares his wicked work” means. It is the language of complicity in a mission.

Read this way the letter is coherent and its severity is intelligible. Read as a rule requiring a father to refuse a word to his daughter, it becomes a strange command indeed: a prohibition aimed at heretical missionaries on tour, applied to the person in the world least likely to be one.

And here the Society’s own history is instructive, because it once read the passage as this essay reads it. Its 1974 treatment of the subject said that when a disfellowshipped relative “uses his or her family ties as a means to carry on activity like that described at 2 John 7-11, his Christian relatives properly deny such a one entrance to their homes.”[4] The condition is the point: the text was understood to bite when the person was propagating false teaching—which is what the letter is about—not simply because he had been expelled.

XII. The Limit Paul Sets on His Own Authority

There is a sentence at the end of the Corinthian passage which is almost never quoted in this connection, and which limits the practice at exactly the point where it now presses hardest.

For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. (1 Cor. 5:12–13)

Paul draws a boundary around his own jurisdiction. The congregation’s disciplinary authority runs to its own members and stops there; those outside are God’s business, and the apostle disclaims any competence over them.

Now apply that. A person who resigns has, by his own deliberate act, placed himself outside. He is not a member under discipline; he is a former member, which is the very definition of an outsider in Paul’s sense. Yet the modern rule falls on him with its full

weight—and, since 1981, with exactly the same weight as on an expelled wrongdoer, the resignation itself being treated as the offense.

So the chapter which supplies the practice with its central command also supplies the limit which the practice most conspicuously ignores. The Society judges outsiders, at length and by announcement, in the name of a passage whose final sentence declines to judge them.

XIII. The Commandment That Is Not Suspended

Everything so far has been about what the disciplinary texts do and do not say. But there is a positive obligation on the other side of the ledger, and it is not a minor one.

“Honor your father and your mother” is among the ten, and the New Testament repeats it without qualification, noting that it is “the first commandment with a promise” (Eph. 6:2). Paul’s language about the duty of family support is as strong as any in his letters: “If any one does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his own family, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Tim. 5:8). Nothing in either passage admits an exception for relatives who are outside the congregation, and the apostles wrote in a setting where most converts’ relatives were pagans.

The reply offered is Matthew 10:37—that one who loves father or mother more than Christ is not worthy of Him. But that verse addresses a competition between loyalties in which the family is trying to prevent a person from following Christ. It tells the disciple to follow anyway. It does not tell him to stop loving them; the whole point of the saying is the pain of loving people who oppose you and going on regardless. It cannot be turned into a warrant for withdrawing affection, because withdrawal is not the thing being commanded—perseverance is.

And there is a passage which addresses the maneuver directly, because Christ encountered it in a developed form and gave a verdict.

You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, in order to keep your tradition! For Moses said, “Honor your father and your mother”... but you say, “If a man tells his father or his mother, What you would have gained from me is Corban” (that is, given to God)—then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God through your tradition. (Mark 7:9–13)

Nor does “whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me” (Matt. 10:37) rescue the arrangement. The saying compares two loves in the disciple’s own heart; it does not authorize anyone else to demand that one of them cease. The man who loves Christ more still loves his father and mother—the commandment requires it—and the

Christ who spoke the sentence is the same Christ who condemned Corban. A text about the ordering of loves cannot be made a warrant for the ending of one.

The structure of the abuse is worth setting out slowly, because it is the structure under examination. There is a religious rule, sincerely held. It is framed in terms of devotion to God—the property is *given to God*, which sounds pious and in a sense is. Its effect is to release a person from an obligation to a parent which the commandment imposes. And the people operating it are not cynics; they are the strictest religious party of their day, doing what they believe holiness requires.

Christ's judgment on it is the sharpest language He uses about religious practice: it makes void the word of God. He does not say the tradition is unwise, or that it should be applied with more compassion. He says that a human rule which cancels the duty owed to a parent has annulled a commandment, and that framing the rule as devotion to God makes it worse rather than better.

A rule which tells a daughter she may not eat at her mother's table, and gives as its reason that God requires the distance, is that rule. The parallel is not decorative. It is the same move, made for the same stated reason, and it falls under the same judgment.

XIV. The Man Who Ate With Sinners

There is an argument from the character of Christ which is sometimes dismissed as sentimental. It should not be, because the Gospels present it as the central controversy of His public life.

The standing charge against Jesus was not blasphemy in the first instance, nor sabbath-breaking. It was table fellowship. "This man receives sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2). The accusation is precisely about the practice under discussion: whether a righteous man may share a meal with a person under religious censure. His accusers held the position the Watchtower holds. He did not.

And His answer to the charge was not a concession or a technical distinction. It was three parables, of which the third is the most famous story He ever told, and it is constructed to overturn exactly this instinct. The younger son takes his inheritance, spends it on prostitutes, and comes home only because he is starving—his stated motive is that his father's hired men have bread enough (Luke 15:17). By any disciplinary standard his repentance at the moment of return is unproven; he has a speech prepared and self-interest sufficient to explain the journey.

The father does not wait for the speech. He does not wait for evidence of the fruits of repentance, or convene three of the household to assess whether the change of heart is genuine. He is watching the road, which means he has been watching it for a long time;

he sees the boy “while he was yet at a distance”; and he runs—an old man running in a culture where that was undignified—and embraces him before a word of the confession is delivered. When the speech finally starts, the father interrupts it to call for a robe.

The elder brother is the other half of the parable and is usually passed over quickly. His objection is not unreasonable and it is never said to be factually wrong: the boy did squander the money, the celebration is disproportionate, standards are being relaxed. He is the character in the story who takes sin seriously. And he is the character who ends up outside the house, refusing to go in, while the party goes on without him—his own choice, made on principle. Jesus leaves him there, unresolved, which is the sharpest thing in the parable. It is addressed to people who were sure that keeping a distance was righteousness.

A practice which requires a father to be told he may not run down the road is answering the parable rather than following it.

XV. A Rule That Keeps Moving

So much for the texts. There is a second line of argument, entirely independent of exegesis, and for many readers it will be the more decisive of the two. It concerns not what the Bible says but how the rule has behaved—and all of the evidence for it is in the Society’s own publications, available in its own online library.

1952. The modern procedure is established in an article of 1 March 1952, “Propriety of Disfellowshipping.” Before this the movement had no such developed machinery.

1974. On 1 August 1974 the Society published “Maintaining a Balanced Viewpoint Toward Disfellowshipped Ones,” and the article is a sustained warning against severity. It identifies the danger of “going too far in the other direction, going from laxity to rigidity and hardness.” It cautions that if a congregation “were to be overly cautious and reluctant about receiving the now truly repentant wrongdoer back, delaying unnecessarily his reinstatement, this would suit the Adversary’s purpose”—which is, remarkably, the argument of 2 Corinthians 2:11 made by the Society itself.[5]

On family it went further than anything published since. “Since blood and marital relationships are not dissolved by a congregational disfellowshipping action, the situation within the family circle requires special consideration.” On relatives outside the home it declined to legislate at all: “As to disfellowshipped family members (not minor sons or daughters) living outside the home, each family must decide to what extent they will have association with such ones.” And it affirmed a right: “Such a one has a natural right to visit his blood relatives and his offspring.”[6]

1981. Seven years later, on 15 September 1981, two articles reversed this. Where 1974 left the extent of family association to each family's judgment, 1981 directed that "Christians related to such a disfellowshipped person living outside the home should strive to avoid needless association, even keeping business dealings to a minimum." The companion article extended the whole treatment to those who had committed no offense but had simply resigned, ruling that when a person "repudiates his being a Christian and disassociates himself," the congregation should announce that he "is no longer one of Jehovah's Witnesses"—the same announcement, and the same consequences, as for an expelled wrongdoer.[7]

2024. The vocabulary is retired, greeting at meetings is permitted, elder visits are encouraged, and marking talks are discontinued.

Set those four dates beside each other and ask what kind of thing is being described. The text of Scripture did not change between August 1974 and September 1981. No manuscript was discovered, no verse was retranslated, no exegetical argument was published that had not been available seven years before. What changed was the policy of an organization, and it changed in a direction—first loosening, then tightening well past its original position, then loosening again under a new name.

Divine commands do not behave like this. Institutional policies do. And the human cost of the oscillation is not hypothetical: a Witness who maintained ordinary contact with a disfellowshipped son in 1979, exactly as the 1974 article permitted, could find himself judged for it in 1982 under a rule that did not exist when he formed the habit.

XVI. What the 2024 Change Concedes

The most recent adjustment deserves a section of its own, because it creates a difficulty which has not been acknowledged.

For four decades the Society taught that 2 John 10–11 forbade saying a greeting to an expelled person, and that one who did so shared in his wicked works. That teaching was the basis of the most painful part of the practice, the refusal of ordinary human acknowledgment. Whole relationships were governed by it.

As of 2024 a removed person attending a meeting "may be greeted by Jehovah's Witnesses."

Both cannot be right, and the dilemma is symmetrical. If the apostle John forbade the greeting, then no Governing Body update can license it, and the 2024 provision is a permission to sin—the very charge the Society levels at churches which relax biblical standards. If the greeting may now be given, then the apostle John did not forbid it; the text was misread for forty years; and families were divided over a misreading.

The second is plainly the truth, and it is what this essay has argued on independent grounds: the letter concerns traveling teachers and the hospitality that funded them, not the acknowledgment of a human being. But notice what follows. Once the concession is made that 2 John does not govern ordinary greeting, the passage no longer supports the rest of the structure either—and the practice is left resting on 1 Corinthians 5, which is answered by 2 Corinthians 2, and on 2 Thessalonians 3, which requires that the person be warned as a brother.

The Society has conceded the exegesis while retaining the practice. That is an unstable position, and it is worth saying to any Witness reading this that the instability is not a debating trick. It is the ordinary consequence of a rule which was always institutional being defended as though it were scriptural.

XVII. What Excommunication Is, and Is Not

It would be dishonest to conduct this argument as though the Catholic Church had no penal discipline. She has, she has always claimed the authority to exercise it, and this essay does not object to exclusion as such. The question is what exclusion consists of, and the difference is the whole point.

Excommunication in Catholic law bars a person from receiving the sacraments and from exercising any ecclesiastical office or ministry. That is its content. It does not instruct any Catholic to stop speaking to him, to refuse him a place at table, to decline his telephone calls, or to withhold affection. No announcement is made from the pulpit inviting the parish to withdraw. His family owes him precisely what it owed him the week before, and if they failed him they would be answerable under 1 Timothy 5:8 like anybody else.

He is not even excluded from the building. An excommunicated Catholic is encouraged to continue attending Mass; what he may not do is receive Communion. The censure touches the one thing his own act has already broken—communion at the altar—and stops precisely there.

It is also medicinal by definition rather than punitive. It is imposed to bring about repentance, and it is remitted as soon as the person repents and asks; the law obliges the authority to lift it in that case, and the Church reserves the loosening of the gravest censures to high authority precisely to ensure they are loosened properly rather than left in force.[8] The Code closes with the sentence that governs all of it: the salvation of souls must always be the supreme law in the Church.[9]

The contrast is therefore not between discipline and no discipline. It is between a penalty aimed at the person's relationship with God, which stops at the altar rail, and a penalty

aimed at his relationships with everyone he loves, which reaches into his mother's kitchen.

XVIII. A Word Against Overreach: The Church's Own Record

Honesty requires a section here, because a Catholic making this argument is open to an obvious retort, and the retort has some force.

The Church has not always confined herself to the altar. Under the older law a distinction was drawn between the *tolerati*, who were merely barred from the sacraments, and the *vitandi*—"those to be avoided"—whom the faithful were to shun socially as well. The category was real, it was enforced, and in the medieval period it could carry civil consequences that made an excommunicate's life very hard indeed. Anyone who has read about the interdict, or about what befell those excommunicated by name in a hostile century, knows that Christians have done worse in this line than the Watchtower has.

Two things must be said about it, and the first is simply that it was wrong. Not merely impolitic, but a failure of the principle the Church herself taught about the purpose of censure. The argument of this essay applies to it with the same force, and a Catholic who deploys 2 Corinthians 2 against the Watchtower and not against his own tradition's excesses is not arguing, he is scoring.

The second is that the Church examined the practice and abolished it. The *vitandi* category was already restricted to persons excommunicated by name by the Holy See, an exceedingly rare act, and the revised Code of Canon Law of 1983 removed the distinction entirely.[10] There is now no category of Catholic whom other Catholics are directed to avoid socially. The correction ran in the direction of the New Testament texts, and it has not been reversed.

That is the relevant difference, and it is offered without triumph. Both bodies have had to decide what to do with the severity in their own past. One examined it and dropped it. The other, in 1981, took a practice its own publications had moderated seven years earlier and extended it—to relatives outside the household, and to people whose only offense was to resign.

XIX. Is a Faith Held on These Terms Held Freely?

There remains a question which is not about exegesis at all, and it is the one that ought to trouble a thoughtful Witness most.

Consider the position of someone raised in the religion who comes, at thirty, to doubt one of its distinctive teachings. Perhaps he cannot make the 1914 chronology work; perhaps

he has read the older publications and found the record of changed dates hard to reconcile with the claim of divine direction. He is not immoral, and he has no wish to lead anyone astray. He simply no longer believes.

His options are these. He may stay and say nothing, which requires him to profess weekly what he does not think true. He may stay and say what he thinks, in which case he will be removed for apostasy and treated more severely than a drunkard. Or he may resign, which since 1981 carries the same announcement and the same consequences as expulsion. Every road but the first ends with the loss of his parents, his children if they are grown and baptized, and every friend he has.

So the cost of an honest change of mind is set, deliberately, at everything he loves. And the effect—whatever the intention—is that his continued profession of faith tells us very little about what he believes. He may believe every word. He may not. The arrangement has made the two indistinguishable from outside, and after a while, one suspects, from inside as well.

This is why the practice should trouble people who are not Catholics and have no stake in the doctrinal quarrels. A religion confident of its truth does not need to make departure this expensive. The apostles were content to let men walk away: when many disciples drew back and no longer went about with Him, Christ turned to the twelve and asked whether they wished to go as well (John 6:66–67). He asked. He did not attach a penalty to the answer, and the freedom of the ones who stayed is intelligible only because the ones who left were free to leave.

A faith worth holding must be one that a person could have declined to hold. Where the price of leaving is your mother, the profession of belief has been made unfalsifiable, and something has been lost which no amount of doctrinal correctness can replace.

XX. The Reply in Brief

The texts do not carry the weight placed on them. The expulsion at Corinth is aimed from the outset at the man's salvation, is addressed to a congregation about its own assembly and table, and is answered in the next letter by an order to forgive and comfort him lest he be overwhelmed—an order which names prolonged severity as Satan gaining the advantage. Paul's own gloss on withdrawing association is "do not look on him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother," which requires the speech that shunning forbids. 2 John concerns itinerant teachers who denied the Incarnation and the households that would have lodged and financed them, as the *Didache* shows and as the Society's own 1974 treatment recognized. And the Corinthian chapter itself declines jurisdiction over outsiders, who are exactly the people the rule now falls on hardest.

Against the practice stands a commandment the New Testament never qualifies, and a verdict of Christ on religious rules which void the duty owed to a parent while presenting themselves as devotion to God. Against it also stands the charge He accepted rather than denied—that He received sinners and ate with them—and the parable He told in reply, in which the father does not wait.

And the rule has a history that no divine command has. Established in 1952, moderated in 1974 in terms its own author would now be disciplined for, tightened in 1981 and extended to those who merely resign, renamed in 2024 with greeting permitted. Scripture was cited at every turn and did not change at any of them. The latest adjustment concedes the exegesis while keeping the practice: if 2 John forbade a greeting, greeting cannot now be allowed; if it can be allowed, 2 John was never the rule, and the families were divided for nothing.

The Catholic answer is not that sin does not matter or that the Church may not exclude. It is that exclusion belongs at the altar rail and stops there, that it is medicine and must be withdrawn when it has done its work, and that no ecclesiastical authority has ever been given the power to stand between a mother and her son. The Church tried something harder once, in the *vitandi*, and abolished it.

To any Witness who has read this far: the argument here is with a policy, not with you, and the strongest evidence against the policy is not Catholic at all—it is in your own library, in an article of August 1974 which warned against going from laxity to rigidity and hardness, and said that excessive delay in restoring a repentant person “would suit the Adversary’s purpose.” That was true when it was written. It did not stop being true in 1981.

Step back finally to the wider question this essay now asks. When a Christian sins, one system convenes a committee, announces the verdict, and defends a name; the other sends the sinner to a physician, seals what he says forever, and restores him the same hour he repents. Both claim the Scriptures. But the Gospel's own picture of the moment is neither a hearing nor an announcement. It is Jesus alone with the woman her judges had condemned, saying both of the things the confessional still says: "Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again."

Endnotes

1. "How Do Jehovah's Witnesses Treat Those Who Used to Belong to Their Religion?" (jw.org). The change was announced in the Governing Body Update of 15 March 2024 and set out in *The Watchtower* (August 2024), accompanied by the elders' document "Adjustments to Handling Serious Wrongdoing in the Congregation" (S-395).
2. All quotations in this paragraph are from "How Do Jehovah's Witnesses Treat Those Who Used to Belong to Their Religion?" (jw.org). The discontinuance of marking talks was announced in *The Watchtower* (August 2024).
3. *Didache* 11–12. The instructions are practical throughout: an apostle staying beyond two days, or asking for money, is to be judged a false prophet; a visitor wishing to settle must work, and one who will not is "trading on Christ." The document is generally dated to the late first or early second century, close in time to the Johannine letters.
4. "Maintaining a Balanced Viewpoint Toward Disfellowshipped Ones," *The Watchtower* (1 August 1974), par. 23.
5. "Maintaining a Balanced Viewpoint Toward Disfellowshipped Ones," *The Watchtower* (1 August 1974). The two quotations are from the article's discussion of the danger of excessive severity.
6. *The Watchtower* (1 August 1974), pars. 17 and 21. The 1974 article is the high-water mark of moderation in the Society's published treatment of the subject.
7. "If a Relative Is Disfellowshipped . . ." and "Disfellowshipping—How to View It," *The Watchtower* (15 September 1981). The second article introduced the treatment of those who disassociate themselves on the same footing as the expelled.
8. On the effects of excommunication and its remission, see the *Code of Canon Law*, cann. 1331 and 1358, and *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §1463.
9. *Code of Canon Law*, can. 1752: "the salvation of souls, which must always be the supreme law in the Church."

10. On the former distinction between *excommunicati tolerati* and *excommunicati vitandi*, see the 1917 *Codex Iuris Canonici*, can. 2258. The distinction was not carried over into the revised Code promulgated in 1983.

For Further Reading

How Do Jehovah's Witnesses Treat Those Who Used to Belong to Their Religion?, jw.org—the current teaching, in their own words. Free online at <https://www.jw.org/en/jehovahs-witnesses/faq/removed-from-the-congregation/>.

Propriety of Disfellowshipping, The Watchtower , 1 March 1952—the modern procedure established. Free online at <https://wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/1952161>.

Maintaining a Balanced Viewpoint Toward Disfellowshipped Ones, The Watchtower , 1 August 1974—the rule relaxed. Free online at <https://wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/1974565>.

If a Relative Is Disfellowshipped . . ., The Watchtower , 15 September 1981—the rule tightened again. Free online at <https://wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/1981689>.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§1422–1470 on the Sacrament of Reconciliation; §1467 on the seal; §1463 on excommunication. Free online at <https://usccb.cld.bz/Catechism-of-the-Catholic-Church2>.

The Seal of Confession, Catechism §1467—absolute secrecy, admitting of no exceptions. Free online at <https://usccb.cld.bz/Catechism-of-the-Catholic-Church2/388/>.

Crisis of Conscience, by Raymond Franz—a former member of the Governing Body, later shunned.

* * *

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.*

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A Note on Authority

What Happens When a Christian Sins?

This essay represents the author's articulation of the Catholic response to the Watchtower practice of removing and shunning former members, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church's teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author's alone.