

Church Discipline Withdrawing from the Disorderly

Scripture Reading: **Acts 20:20-21, 27**

For the past several generations the cry of the true churches of Christ has been to “speak where the Bible speaks and to be silent where the Bible is silent.” Others prefer to “do Bible things in Bible ways”; or to say that they “follow the ‘OLD PATHS’ as the prophet Jeremiah urges Judea in **Jeremiah 6:16**. For many years we managed to accomplish this purpose with various levels of success and there are still a number of congregations of the Lord’s body that work toward that goal. Our creed is Jesus Christ, He is ours and we are His.

However, even among the most stalwart of congregations there is a common failing that frequently exists that will weaken and will ultimately destroy a congregation spiritually if not cause it to dwindle physically as well. That is the failure to exercise the proper discipline that God has commanded within the congregation. Many churches today are hindered in their work for Christ because disorderly members go un-rebuked, because wayward members are not restored and because careless members are not exhorted and reprovved. The results of this failure are many; souls are lost, members’ abilities are not exercised, work fails, the purity of the church is defiled and the church loses its good name with God just as those to whom Jesus spoke in Revelation chapters two and three.

Corrective discipline done properly is neither joyous nor pleasant and can be a time consuming task because of what it requires. It is a subject that is taught as rarely as it is practiced. And this in spite of the fact that when you look at Naves Topical Bible there is more material there on the subject of discipline than there is on baptism. In fact when Darwin and I were discussing this lesson I said that I needed about two hours to cover this subject properly but never fear we will restrict our remarks this morning to the time allotted.

It Is Necessary

II Thessalonians 3:6 “NOW WE COMMAND YOU, BRETHREN, IN THE NAME OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, THAT YE WITHDRAW YOURSELVES FROM EVERY BROTHER THAT WALKETH DISORDERLY, AND NOT AFTER THE TRADITION WHICH HE RECEIVED OF US.”

What is tradition in this verse? Even when we go to a modern dictionary we find that two of the various meanings of this English word are “a body of laws or doctrines” or a “body of teachings, or any one of them, held to be delivered by Christ and His apostles”. “WALKING DISORDERLY” is defined by the Holy Spirit in this verse as not walking “AFTER THE TRADITIONS” that the Apostle was directed to teach. So even by modern definitions those who walk disorderly are those who do not obey the commandments of God.

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When Paul wrote to the church at Corinth; one of the problems that they had was a man, a member of the congregation, living in fornication and they were doing nothing about it. Paul commands them:

I Corinthians 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, ⁵TO 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."

Paul's words bore the weight of being "IN THE NAME OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST". He wanted his brethren at Corinth to understand that this was indeed a direct command, it was not optional or just something that they should think about and never actually do. It was something that they must do.

We add the words of the Apostle John to the "ELECT LADY" who was a pillar of the congregation known for her hospitality and generosity.

II John v.9-10 "WHOSOEVER TRANSGRESSETH, AND ABIDETH NOT IN THE DOCTRINE OF CHRIST, HATH NOT GOD. HE THAT ABIDETH IN THE DOCTRINE OF CHRIST, HE HATH BOTH THE FATHER AND THE SON. ¹⁰IF THERE COME ANY UNTO YOU, AND BRING NOT THIS DOCTRINE, RECEIVE HIM NOT INTO YOUR HOUSE, NEITHER BID HIM GOD SPEED:"

And finally the words of Jesus concerning one who has trespassed and refused to acknowledge or repent of his wrong, even against a brother.

Matthew 18:17 "AND IF HE SHALL NEGLECT TO HEAR THEM, TELL IT UNTO THE CHURCH: BUT IF HE NEGLECT TO HEAR THE CHURCH, LET HIM BE UNTO THEE AS AN HEATHEN MAN AND A PUBLICAN."

From Whom Are We To Withdraw?

Does God direct us to correct those who break any of His laws or only those who break certain laws? If only certain laws, then which are they? We find our answer in the words of Paul to the church at Corinth:

I Corinthians 2:13 "WHICH THINGS ALSO WE SPEAK, NOT IN THE WORDS WHICH MAN'S WISDOM TEACHETH, BUT WHICH THE HOLY GHOST TEACHETH; COMPARING SPIRITUAL THINGS WITH SPIRITUAL."

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The following are some of the examples we're given:

- A. Those who cause discord and dissention among brethren because of a private trespass they refuse to correct – **Matthew 18:15-17**
- B. Those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to sound doctrine:

Romans 16:17 “NOW I BESEECH YOU, BRETHREN, MARK THEM WHICH CAUSE DIVISIONS AND OFFENCES CONTRARY TO THE DOCTRINE WHICH YE HAVE LEARNED; AND AVOID THEM.”

- C. Those who cause envy and strife

I Timothy 6:3-5 “IF ANY MAN TEACH OTHERWISE, AND CONSENT NOT TO WHOLESOME WORDS, *even* THE WORDS OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, AND TO THE DOCTRINE WHICH IS ACCORDING TO GODLINESS; ⁴HE IS PROUD, KNOWING NOTHING, BUT DOTING ABOUT QUESTIONS AND STRIFES OF WORDS, WHEREOF COMETH ENVY, STRIFE, RAILINGS, EVIL SURMISINGS, ⁵PERVERSE DISPUTINGS OF MEN OF CORRUPT MINDS, AND DESTITUTE OF THE TRUTH, SUPPOSING THAT GAIN IS GODLINESS: FROM SUCH WITHDRAW THYSELF.”

- D. Those who walk disorderly – **I Thessalonians 3:6-15**

When we examine the meaning of the word that is translated “disorderly” from the original Greek (Ataktos) we find that it is essentially a military term with the following applications:

- A. Those who did not keep in rank, insubordinate, unruly, with an insubordinate spirit: (**I Thessalonians 5:14**)
- B. Those that live in slackness, like soldiers just ambling along not keeping rank or position. (**II Thessalonians 3:6**)
- C. Those in the church who refused to work, refused to make their own living, who were idle and busybodies; **II Thessalonians 3:6, I Timothy 5:13**)
- D. Those who are undisciplined; behave disorderly or refuse to behave as Christians should. (**II Thessalonians 3:7**)

In short those who refuse to obey God.

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Administering Discipline

How is this matter of church discipline to be conducted? Should we jump up and withdraw from a brother or sister because of a single offense; or because they have just recently been caught up in some sin? Absolutely not; the congregation, especially the elders, have more responsibilities to each member of the flock than just to administer discipline them when they fail. First of all we must make sure that we are carrying out another, equally important commandment of Christ:

Matthew 28:20 “TEACHING THEM TO OBSERVE ALL THINGS WHATSOEVER I HAVE COMMANDED YOU: AND, LO, I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS, *even* UNTO THE END OF THE WORLD. AMEN.”

Our first responsibility is to teach, to make sure that the person who is trespassing against God or against a brother or sister is not sinning because of their ignorance or even our own neglect to teach “ALL THE COUNSEL OF GOD” (**Acts 20:27**) If they refuse to be taught, if they refuse to accept the Word of God then it becomes a more serious matter and efforts should be elevated to the next level.

Our second responsibility is to exhort and encourage. When we have established that the wayward member fully understands the result of their actions, that they are in sin and need to repent; then we are to encourage, we exhort them to repent and correct that which is wrong. Again we turn to the scripture for our instruction and direction. Paul exhorted the brethren at Thessalonica with the same loving kindness as we would our own children:

I Thessalonians 2:11-12 “AS YE KNOW HOW WE EXHORTED AND COMFORTED AND CHARGED EVERY ONE OF YOU, AS A FATHER *doth* HIS CHILDREN, ¹²THAT YE WOULD WALK WORTHY OF GOD, WHO HATH CALLED YOU UNTO HIS KINGDOM AND GLORY.”

We are to do so with all long-suffering and patience:

I Thessalonians 5:14-15 “NOW WE EXHORT YOU, BRETHREN, WARN THEM THAT ARE UNRULY, COMFORT THE FEEBLEMINDED, SUPPORT THE WEAK, BE PATIENT TOWARD ALL MEN. ¹⁵SEE THAT NONE RENDER EVIL FOR EVIL UNTO ANY MAN; BUT EVER FOLLOW THAT WHICH IS GOOD, BOTH AMONG YOURSELVES, AND TO ALL MEN.”

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All attempts to correct, restore or turn someone back to the strait way of God should begin as soon as their sin or offense becomes known. It should continue patiently and persistently until they prove beyond our doubt that they do not intend to change. Then the elders of a congregation, or the leading men of a congregation, that does not have elders have this responsibility:

Titus 3:10-11 "A MAN THAT IS AN HERETICK AFTER THE FIRST AND SECOND ADMONITION REJECT; ¹¹KNOWING THAT HE THAT IS SUCH IS SUBVERTED, AND SINNETH, BEING CONDEMNED OF HIMSELF."

What does "withdrawal" mean? How is the church to treat the withdrawn from brother? Again we turn to the scripture:

Matthew 18:17 "...LET HIM BE UNTO THEE AS AN HEATHEN MAN AND A PUBLICAN."

Romans 16:17 "...MARK THEM...AND AVOID THEM"

I Corinthians 5:11 "...BUT NOW I HAVE WRITTEN UNTO YOU NOT TO KEEP COMPANY..." "...NOT TO EAT."

II Thessalonians 3:14 "...NOTE THAT MAN, AND HAVE NO COMPANY WITH HIM..."

When contact is made and opportunity is presented we are to:

II Thessalonians 3:15 "...COUNT HIM NOT AS AN ENEMY BUT ADMONISH HIS AS A BROTHER."

What does this word admonish mean? From a current dictionary it means "1. to caution, advise or counsel something; 2. to reprove or scold, esp. in a mild and goodwilled manner; 3. to urge to a duty or remind of an obligation."

The whole congregation has this responsibility, not just the elders. An announcement or letter of discipline provides the opportunity to do just exactly that. It makes the congregation aware of a decision made by the elders. The Apostle Paul exhorted the church at Philippi:

Philippians 2:1-2 "IF *there be* THEREFORE ANY CONSOLATION IN CHRIST, IF ANY COMFORT OF LOVE, IF ANY FELLOWSHIP OF THE SPIRIT, IF ANY BOWELS AND MERCIES, ²FULFIL YE MY JOY, THAT YE BE LIKEMINDED, HAVING THE SAME LOVE, *being* OF ONE ACCORD, OF ONE MIND."

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Philippians 3:16 “NEVERTHELESS, WHERE TO WE HAVE ALREADY ATTAINED, LET US WALK BY THE SAME RULE, LET US MIND THE SAME THING.”

Anything less will create a situation where the withdrawn from member will become of the mind that they are the victims of an errant leadership. Anything less will not work and the lost brother or sister will not repent and their souls will be lost. If that happens then hear the wisdom of God from the words of the prophet Ezekiel:

Ezekiel 3:18-19 “WHEN I SAY UNTO THE WICKED, THOU SHALT SURELY DIE; AND THOU GIVEST HIM NOT WARNING, NOR SPEAKEST TO WARN THE WICKED FROM HIS WICKED WAY, TO SAVE HIS LIFE; THE SAME WICKED *man* SHALL DIE IN HIS INIQUITY; BUT HIS BLOOD WILL I REQUIRE AT THINE HAND. ¹⁹YET IF THOU WARN THE WICKED, AND HE TURN NOT FROM HIS WICKEDNESS, NOR FROM HIS WICKED WAY, HE SHALL DIE IN HIS INIQUITY; BUT THOU HAST DELIVERED THY SOUL.”

The Purpose of Withdrawal

That their soul might be saved in the “DAY OF THE LORD JESUS”

I Corinthians 5:5 “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.”

That they might be restored to their right relationship with God:

Galatians 6:1 “BRETHREN, IF A MAN BE OVERTAKEN IN A FAULT, YE WHICH ARE SPIRITUAL, RESTORE SUCH AN ONE IN THE SPIRIT OF MEEKNESS; CONSIDERING THYSELF, LEST THOU ALSO BE TEMPTED.”

That they might be converted back to the truth of God’s word:

James 5:19-20 “BRETHREN, IF ANY OF YOU DO ERR FROM THE TRUTH, AND ONE CONVERT HIM; ²⁰LET HIM KNOW, THAT HE WHICH CONVERTETH THE SINNER FROM THE ERROR OF HIS WAY SHALL SAVE A SOUL FROM DEATH, AND SHALL HIDE A MULTITUDE OF SINS.”

If we do not discipline the individual that is contrary to God; then we leave them lost and out of fellowship with God whether they are in fellowship with us or not.

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We also have to consider the spiritual wellbeing of the congregation as well. Jesus Christ gave himself for the church:

“THAT HE MIGHT SANCTIFY AND CLEANSE IT WITH THE WASHING OF WATER BY THE WORD,” **Ephesians 5:26**

The church must be kept pure for error, whether in doctrine, teaching or manner of living. The church must be kept clean of ungodliness:

Titus 2:11-12 “FOR THE GRACE OF GOD THAT BRINGETH SALVATION HATH APPEARED TO ALL MEN, ¹²TEACHING US THAT, DENYING UNGODLINESS AND WORLDLY LUSTS, WE SHOULD LIVE SOBERLY, RIGHTEOUSLY, AND GODLY, IN THIS PRESENT WORLD;”

The church suffers when we fail to mark the unfaithful. In the wisdom of God sin acts like leaven is a pan of bread dough. The church at Corinth were neglecting their discipline so Paul warns them:

I Corinthians 5:6 “YOUR GLORYING IS NOT GOOD. KNOW YE NOT THAT A LITTLE LEAVEN LEAVENETH THE WHOLE LUMP?”

Sin is like a cancer, something that several of us are familiar with on a personal basis. If not caught and corrected in its very early stages it can become spiritually deadly. Sin works the same way in our spiritual lives.

Withdrawal is an Act of Love

Someone says that withdrawal can't be an act of love because it is harsh punishment; unloving and cruel, but is it? Some of us are so stubborn and hard-headed that we have to hit bottom before we will acknowledge that we're have fallen. One example from scripture is the prodigal son:

Luke 15:15-16 “AND HE WENT AND JOINED HIMSELF TO A CITIZEN OF THAT COUNTRY; AND HE SENT HIM INTO HIS FIELDS TO FEED SWINE. ¹⁶AND HE WOULD FAIN HAVE FILLED HIS BELLY WITH THE HUSKS THAT THE SWINE DID EAT: AND NO MAN GAVE UNTO HIM.”

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In today's world we miss the power of Jesus' example. A Jewish man was raised up in a culture that forbade completely any association with hogs or swine. They couldn't raise them, they couldn't eat them, to avoid spiritual contamination they were to avoid them like we would a poisonous snake. But the prodigal son has hit bottom. He has fallen so far that he is not only tending the hogs which should be an abomination to him but is ready to share their meal. Then "HE CAME TO HIMSELF". This is the purpose of withdrawing fellowship from an erring brother or sister, to help them come to themselves and understand their condition.

The wisdom that God gave Solomon tells us:

Proverbs 13:24 "HE THAT SPARETH HIS ROD HATETH HIS SON: BUT HE THAT LOVETH HIM CHASTENETH HIM BETIMES."

The man that fails to discipline his children invites trouble and is judged by God as unloving. So is the church leadership that does not discipline its members.

Hebrews 12:5-6 "AND YE HAVE FORGOTTEN THE EXHORTATION WHICH SPEAKETH UNTO YOU AS UNTO CHILDREN, MY SON, DESPISE NOT THOU THE CHASTENING OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN THOU ART REBUKED OF HIM: ⁶FOR WHOM THE LORD LOVETH HE CHASTENETH, AND SCOURGETH EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVETH."

Jesus said:

Revelation 3:19 "AS MANY AS I LOVE, I REBUKE AND CHASTEN: BE ZEALOUS THEREFORE, AND REPENT."

Objections of Withdrawing

First someone will say that we are commanded not to judge and they will go to:

Matthew 7:1 "JUDGE NOT, THAT YE BE NOT JUDGED."

But did Jesus forbid us from all judging? Did Jesus condemn judging entirely or is there something else in the context of these verses that reflects the purpose of these words.

Matthew 7:3 "AND WHY BEHOLDEST THOU THE MOTE THAT IS IN THY BROTHER'S EYE, BUT CONSIDEREST NOT THE BEAM THAT IS IN THINE OWN EYE?"

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Why are you trying to pick the speck out of your brother's eye when you are blinded by a log in yours? Why are you judging a brother in Christ when you are deeper in sin than he? Jesus doesn't relieve us of the responsibility of determining the spiritual condition of others:

John 7:24 "JUDGE NOT ACCORDING TO THE APPEARANCE, BUT JUDGE RIGHTEOUS JUDGMENT."

But how are we to do so? How do we do righteous judgment? Jesus tells us that as well. Speaking of false prophets:

Matthew 7:15-17 "BEWARE OF FALSE PROPHETS, WHICH COME TO YOU IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING, BUT INWARDLY THEY ARE RAVENING WOLVES. YE SHALL KNOW THEM BY THEIR FRUITS. DO MEN GATHER GRAPES OF THORNS, OR FIGS OF THISTLES? ¹⁷EVEN SO EVERY GOOD TREE BRINGETH FORTH GOOD FRUIT; BUT A CORRUPT TREE BRINGETH FORTH EVIL FRUIT."

Fruit inspection is not limited to false prophets but to anyone whose conduct warrants that kind of review.

Briefly some of the other objections given are:

- A. "It shows we do not love them", just the opposite, God chastens those he loves
- B. "We are to be forgiving", absolutely, when the erring brother has brought forth "FRUITS WORTHY OF REPENTANCE" but not before.
Luke 3:8
- C. "None of us are without sin; therefore we have no right to point out the sins of others". We all sin (**Romans 3:23**) but to refuse to carry out God's commandments for any purpose or reason is also sin.
- D. "It will harden them so that they never return". Yes, it may. That doesn't relieve us of our responsibility under the law of Christ.
- E. "The elders are taking too much authority". Godly elders are to carry out their duties as shepherds and overseers (**Hebrews 13:7, 17**)

And we could add "It isn't pleasant", of course not, discipline never is. "I'm against it"; our responsibility is to carry out the commandments of God without deference to someone's personal pleasure or displeasure. "We've never done it"; if that be so then we have neglected the commandments of God and we need to repent of that sin.

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When the Brother Repents

Paul had written to the church at Corinth to correct their faults and withdraw from their brother who was a fornicator (**I Corinthians 5:1-5**). He wrote in love "NOT THAT YE SHOULD BE GRIEVED, BUT THAT YE MIGHT KNOW THE LOVE WHICH I HAVE MORE ABUNDANTLY UNTO YOU." **II Corinthians 2:4**. Now that man has repented and what is the Corinthian church to do?

II Corinthians 2:6-8 "SUFFICIENT TO SUCH A MAN IS THIS PUNISHMENT, WHICH *was inflicted* OF MANY. ⁷SO THAT CONTRARIWISE YE *ought* RATHER TO FORGIVE *him*, AND COMFORT *him*, LEST PERHAPS SUCH A ONE SHOULD BE SWALLOWED UP WITH OVERMUCH SORROW. ⁸WHEREFORE I BESEECH YOU THAT YE WOULD CONFIRM *your* LOVE TOWARD HIM."

He or she is to be welcomed back into the fold of God, much like the prodigal son was welcomed back into his father's household. (**Luke 15:21-32**)

Invitation