

Discipline in the Body of Christ

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"These things I write to you, though I hope to come to you shortly; but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth" (I Timothy 3:14,15). These words from the apostle Paul to Timothy give us a beginning place in considering the subject before us. The testimony that is given forth by the church is the testimony of who God is and what He is like. What is seen and heard by men is not just the word spoken by ministers, but the lives of all the members of Christ's body. *"Now you are the body of Christ and members individually"* (I Corinthians 12:13). The testimony given forth by the whole body is made up of the testimony of every member. It is a wonderful privilege to be fully identified with God in what He is doing, and yet at the same time it is an awesome responsibility.

There is no problem if all the members are mature, conducting themselves properly, and giving forth a testimony that is pure and holy. But what should we do if this is not the case? What is our responsibility if one who is identified with the church is giving forth an impure testimony? On what basis do we take action? The body of Christ is also a place where believers grow up into the full stature of Christ. How do we leave room for growth and yet maintain purity in testimony?

Some might say that the safest way is to leave everything in the hands of God and pray. Yet we have many admonitions in scripture to take action together in certain cases. Can we spiritually discern the different conditions and know the mind of God? Can we know the wisdom of God and His timing? We want to consider these and other questions, so that we might move responsibly before God in the matters before us.

The Foundation: One Spirit In Christ

"For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free--and have all been made to drink into one Spirit" (I Corinthians 12:13). We must begin by knowing what is the basis of membership in Christ's body. The Holy Spirit makes us members of Christ. Each member is born into the family of God, is alive unto God, and is able to function under the authority of the Head, who is Christ. There is no middle ground. A person either is a member of Christ or is not a member of Christ. It is failure to be absolute at this foundation that often creates confusion and prevents us from seeing properly.

Strictly speaking, discipline is only for sons. *"If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons"* (Hebrews 12:7,8). This is a very important distinction. A person must belong to the family before we can discuss discipline. If a person does not belong by birth to the family of God, he is not subject to discipline. Attending meetings of the church, he may be only a visitor or an honest seeker, and should be recognized as such and dealt with accordingly.

In this whole subject, we must keep very clear that God is for us, not against us. Consider the natural family. A good father may bring discipline to his son. He has one aim in mind: to see an area of weakness corrected in order to nurture the strength of character that is needed to withstand the tests of life. It may seem painful to the son at that time, but as the scripture says: *"Now no chastening seems to*

be joyful for the present, but grievous; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12:11).

God's definition of love is often so very different from ours. We may just overlook problems because that is the easy way, and we think God will take care of the problems down the road. But love is not passive. Love is active care for souls. Love took Christ to Calvary. Love will move us to discipline when necessary, with a godly care in our hearts. Discipline is always for the sake of correction and restoration. If we do not discipline when the situation warrants it, then it is sure that we really do not love.

There is a significant difference between the natural family and the spiritual family, which is important at this point. A natural son is born into a family apart from any choice of his own. In the family of God, even though God was the one who drew us to Himself, each of us made a choice to submit to His authority. God never takes away that choice. Similarly, each member chooses to be part of a local body of believers. Again, that choice is never taken away. If a member is not willingly and openly submitted to God and willing for others to be properly involved in his or her life, church discipline has no meaning, for that member does not recognize the authority that God has placed in the midst of God's people. Discipline is for those who are committed, who have fallen into a fault or sin, and its purpose is that they may be restored to fellowship with God and with His body.

Discernment

In our consideration of this subject, we must be reminded that we are dealing with spiritual matters. It should be obvious, then, that we need spiritual discernment. *"Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:1,2).* Paul's admonition to the Galatians speaks of the attitude of godly care and concern that we should have at all times. Any of us can be caught in a snare. We need to deal with others as we would like to be dealt with. We are members of one another. We are our brother's keepers, and we are one in Christ.

To be able to properly care for one another, we need spiritual discernment. We cannot depend on our natural minds, reasoning about what we have seen and heard. What we see and hear is likely to be only the outward symptoms of the real problem. We must move by the Spirit, as spiritual men and women. If we do not, our natural efforts will only make things worse. God has made provision in Himself for these matters, and that puts a demand upon each member to hear God and be sensitive to what the Spirit is saying to the church. It is often easy to see an outward expression that is wrong, but it is another thing to hear God and move together by the Spirit to affect the root problem and lift a brother up. Jude wrote *"But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life. And on some have compassion, making a distinction; but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh" (vs. 20-23).* It is demanding to keep ourselves in the love of God when dealing with these things, but it is absolutely imperative if we are to see God's results.

There are a number of specific situations mentioned in scripture with instructions on what to do in those cases. But even though the instructions are quite specific, we still need to know God's wisdom and timing in these matters. We are not being led by a "rule book" but by the Spirit of the living God. Have we borne these ones before the throne of grace in prayer? Have we given time for God to work in their hearts? Have we set an example before them? Have we come alongside with a word of

encouragement? Is there a true godly care in our hearts? Has that godly care under girded our whole expression towards them? Are we discerning the root need? Do we have the mind of the Spirit so we can move in faith? Are we moving in union with others who are spiritual? Have we heard God together? These and other questions need to be answered honestly before God and before one another.

Those Who Care

When we think of church discipline, we are thinking of action taken by the church as a whole, in a matter that has not been able to be affected by other means. Normally, this is a last resort. God has provided oversight to care for our souls. When it is functioning properly, this care should be effective in dealing with the majority of difficulties. Other members will be aware of needs if they have spiritual discernment, but their primary responsibility is to take the matters before the Lord in prayer. There should be communication with those who are functioning as overseers, giving a witness about what they are seeing as the need, and being aware of what steps are being taken to affect the needs. This is not meddling, but active care and concern for other members. Again, we are our brother's keepers. This is a normal outgrowth of our care for one another.

In some situations, there may not be recognized elders to perform this function. This does not mean that care is not being exercised, or that we can move on quickly to other things. Listen to Paul's admonition to the Thessalonians: *"And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. Be at peace among yourselves"* (I Thessalonians 5:12,13). Where God is building a people together, He is always working a care in the hearts of brothers, even if that care has not come to full maturity in expression and formal recognition in eldership. Our responsibility is to recognize that care so that we can benefit from it. It is God's provision for our souls and for the building up of the body of Christ.

It is those who have been exercising this care that will likely bring unresolved needs to the brothers and the church as a whole for further action. Those who exercise this care are not a law unto themselves, but are accountable to the whole body for their functioning. As matters are brought out, they should not take us unaware, for if we have been sensitive to the Spirit, we should know what has been taking place. Every member is functioning under the authority of the Head, Christ, and He has given the Holy Spirit to dwell within each one. Every member may not know all of the facts and really should not need to know. But each member should be able to give a witness of the Holy Spirit to the need and to the action that should be taken. To do this, however, every member must be alive unto God. Without this sensitivity to God, the body will not be able to move in faith under the direction of God and we will not see the spiritual results that God is looking for.

A Matter Against a Brother

"Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear you, take with you one or two more that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector" (Matthew 18:15-17).

This is a familiar teaching of our Lord, and it is important because it points out the progression that should take place in dealing with a wrong relationship. At the same time, we must not use this as a pattern for all matters brought before the church. This deals with a specific case of an unresolved

offense between two members. Unresolved offenses can affect the whole expression of the body. When I come to the Lord's table, by partaking of one loaf and one cup, I am saying that I am one with my brothers and sisters, and all things in my heart toward every member are right before God. If this is not true, I should judge myself and deal with the matter before I partake. *"The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?"* (I Corinthians 10:16)

What is important in our discussion here is that all steps possible have been taken prior to making this a matter to bring before the whole church. If we are submitted to one another in the fear of the Lord, we will have no difficulty in inviting other brothers to judge our spirit, and to gain their help in resolving the problem. Often the problem is "me" and I do not see it. Others can help me in this. I may be "right" in my actions but wrong in spirit; thus, I am wrong. There may be miscommunication. Others can help me understand. I may not understand the needs in another. Others can help me with that as well. In all of this, my humility before God and my submission in the body of Christ is tested. This forms the basis of being able to work through problems to the glory of God, all the while keeping ourselves in the love of God and giving forth a pure testimony.

Members With Impure Testimonies

There are several scriptures that speak directly about a brother who is not giving a proper testimony for one who names the name of Christ. One such instruction is II Thessalonians 3:6: *"But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us."* In obeying this command of Paul to the Thessalonians, there are several things that must be prayerfully considered.

First of all, the command concerns brothers. Is the one under consideration a brother? Do we see evidence of the life of God? A parallel command is found in verses 14-15 and ends with, *"Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother."* If we cannot bear solid witness that this person is a member of Christ and has shown evidence that he is alive unto God, then we do not have a basis in this scripture to discipline in this manner.

A second consideration is whether there has been time for God to deal in the matter. Included in this would be the normal functioning of oversight. Again, we need spiritual discernment. This is not a license to bring any member before the church for discipline that does not meet up to our standard. Rather, this is to restore one who has allowed an area of disobedience to God to go on not dealt with. We must be able to witness that the Word of God has come and not been heeded. Under the direction of the Spirit, church discipline brings pressure that helps to cause a member to deal with God instead of escaping what he knows to do.

A third consideration is the effect that disobedience is having on others and on the testimony as a whole. The specific example given in the above passage indicates that the member was making a nuisance of himself and even a burden on others, not being responsible in work. It was openly seen, and bringing discredit to the testimony of Christ. The specific instruction given surely applies to more than just the specific case of not working, but we must know that we have judged properly before God in the matter and that we have the mind of the Spirit.

What does it mean to "withdraw" or "not keep company"? Verse 15 gives us some help when Paul says, *"Do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother."* The whole body acting together by withdrawing from normal social discourse, yet with a godly care and concern, can be a powerful encouragement to a member to do business with God. We must let the Lord give us all understanding

in these things.

Open Sin

God always views sin with great seriousness. Christ died to deliver from sin. To allow sin in our midst is a complete denial of what Christ came to do. Thus, open sin in any form must be dealt with quickly and carefully so that others are not affected, and that the testimony of God is preserved.

Perhaps the most familiar example in scripture is the man in Corinth who was found in open fornication. Paul's rebuke was strong, and his final admonition was to *"put away from yourselves that wicked person."* Some today do not want to deal with these things, and with the increasing permissiveness of our society, cases such as these are bound to increase. In these matters, God has entrusted us to the maintenance of the testimony. This is a proper place to judge. If we want God, we must judge; otherwise He will withdraw Himself. God will not dwell with sin.

Leaders are responsible to bring these matters before the church, but the church is called to judge. This judgment consists of giving a witness of the Spirit regarding the course of action being taken. It also consists of being consistent in carrying out the judgment. If some member feels that the action taken is too severe and tries to comfort the one judged by maintaining a relationship, he actually works against God and the person involved. It is not love to soften the judgment of God. God is working for repentance and a full restoration of fellowship. In the case at Corinth, the man did repent, and then the command was to restore the member. The body as a whole must be able to move as one man under Christ by the Holy Spirit, if God's purpose is to be fulfilled.

Titus 3:10 speaks of another area of sin: *"Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned."* This could be a man that has been present a length of time or one who has recently come into the company. It makes no difference, because a divisive spirit is extremely dangerous and must be dealt with strongly. A divisive man is like a wolf that will devour the flock. God gives a place for two warnings and then says that we should reject such a one. A divisive person is not being honest with God. The Holy Spirit has already been ahead of us bringing condemnation in the heart, and our place is to stand with God. A similar admonition is found in Romans 16:17: *"Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause division and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned and avoid them."*

Why do we use the expression "open sin?" Open sin is sin that is revealed and can be judged accordingly. All sin may not have come to that place. We are not to go prying into people's lives looking for sin. It is the Holy Spirit that must convict of sin and we must give time for this to happen. But sin that is open has a leavening (contaminating) effect on the whole gathering and must be dealt with for the good of all and for the sake of the testimony. The sinner has hardened their heart against the conviction of the Holy Spirit. Open judgment by the church is part of God's plan and must be done if we are serious about the testimony of God. What God is doing is not separate from man but in and through man.

Those Who Are Not Members

God's heart desire is not that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. As we move in union with God, we will move in this same spirit. If the church is moving in a healthy way before God, there should be visitors and seekers. These are not members. They may be present for a length of time, but because they are not in Christ, there will likely be expressions in their lives that do not bring honor to God. How should we deal with such?

First, let us remember that the church is not primarily a place to preach the gospel to sinners, but the place for believers to be built up. The gospel is proclaimed in the "marketplace" by evangelists and by the witness of every member. It is there that God deals with men to repent and come to Him. There, every believer is called to live a life that proclaims the goodness of God. Our primary emphasis should not be to invite people to come to a church meeting to be saved, but to let God bring them to repentance before they come in. If we will keep a clear vision of this, we will avoid many problems.

Secondly, if the Holy Spirit is moving in our midst, the power of God will be there to convict of sin. It should not take weeks and weeks for a person to make a choice as to which way they are going. A person may visit, but if God is drawing them and the Spirit of God is present in our meetings, they will soon make their choice, either to submit or to rebel. If they submit to God, we will see them born into the family of God. If they rebel, they will not continue to be in our midst. If visitors sit in our midst week after week not moving either way, then we, the members, may be the problem. We may not be moving in the power of the Spirit, and we are the ones that need to repent.

When those who are not in Christ are in our midst, we should be very mindful of what God is doing. We cannot overwhelm them with any natural efforts to force them into Christ, but neither should we just let them drift. Can we be spiritually sensitive? Are we being faithful in prayer? Can we recognize what God is doing and move in union with Him? Remember, it is Christ who is building His church, not us. We are to be under His authority at all times, so that He can use us as He chooses. Sometimes we just let people drift, not being alert to God's direction or seeking His mind in the matter. Again, we are the ones who need to repent and move in union with the Spirit.

If we are alive unto God, there should always be movement in God. If people are allowed to stay in our midst without coming face to face with God and the power of His Spirit, it is likely that the church is at fault. To allow this to continue brings a deadening effect in all of our lives. It is usually easy to see others who are not responding to God. What about ourselves? Perhaps we are looking at the mote in another's eye while the beam is in our own. Are we willing to be honest before God in these things? We may be right in our evaluation of another member but very wrong in what we see as the solution. Jesus said there would be fruit in our lives if we continue to abide in Him. Do we believe that? He also promised that He would bring wells of living water. Are we seeing that?

On the other hand, we may be doing all that we should, and yet still a visitor remains in our midst. He is not a member, and is not subject to discipline. There is no open sin in his life that can be judged accordingly. What should we do? We began our discussion by saying that a free commitment by a person is the basis for being involved in their lives. If there is no such commitment, then it is sure that we cannot really be of help to such a one. He may think he is a member and really he is not. Do we do him a favor by allowing him to continue on in deception? After a period of time, if there is no response to the Lord and to the Word, continuing to visit will only have a deadening effect on him and on the gathering as a whole. It would be better for him to be on the outside where God can deal as He chooses.

How then do we approach a man or woman in this situation? We have clear direction in the scriptures that those who are members should be in submission to one another. Evidence of such submission would be openness to admonition, and taking action when it comes. If a person is not willing to take such direction, then surely in the love of God and the direction of the Spirit we can communicate to them the fact that we do not see them submitting to the direction of the Lord; thus, we cannot help them in their relationship with God. We do not "put them out" as such, but in the love of God, we can bring them to a decision point, even if they had not wanted to make a choice on their own. God never forces a man to choose Him, but He does force a man to choose.

Involvement

All of what we have been saying may be summed up in the one word "involvement." We must be involved with God and we must be involved with one another. There is no other way. What God is doing, He does in and through man. It is costly to be involved. It takes commitment. It takes spiritual vision. It takes time. It takes grace. It is spiritual work. This is not just preaching sermons and reading a few scriptures or mentioning a few principles to live by. This is laying down our lives and living His life. This is living in union with God. It is demanding. Christ did not preach from heaven. He proclaimed love from the cross. He calls us to do the same. We must take up our cross and follow Him.

There is much religion in the world today that has no cross. There is little or no involvement. It does not require a relationship with God or with each other. God is not in it. If we want God we must go His way. We must be willing to pay the price. If we do not pay the price, we will not see God's results. God only has one plan and it is the body of Christ, functioning under the Head. It is every member connected to the Head, under His authority at all times. It is total commitment, not just a Sunday religion or meetings. The real question before us is this: Are we crucified with Christ? Are we living His life? Are we being led by the Spirit?

Again, as we have said above, we may be looking at the problems around us, and the problems are real. But what is the solution? We may be pointing at somebody else and yet the real problem is us. We may not have been willing to be involved. Perhaps we have not yet laid down our life. We may not have known the direction of the Spirit or the wisdom of God. We may not have been consistent in our movement. These and many other things may have contributed to the stagnation that we see. There is only one solution and that is to come before God with diligence until we know we have heard from God and that we have His mind. Then we can move in faith for God's glory.

Brethren, this short word of exhortation is directed to those who care about the testimony of God and are willing to be counted with Christ. The body of Christ is a reality, not just a theory. The body of Christ is here to do the will of God. What Christ began while He was here on this earth in bodily form, He is continuing through His body of believers. Are we part of that body? Do we see our responsibility? Are we willing to believe God and to move as He moves? Time is short and souls are at stake. Let us be renewed in the spirit of our mind, and in faith before God, let us move as one man for the purity of His testimony and for the salvation of souls. God will give the grace as we respond to His word and glorify His name.