

## A THEOLOGY OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

The matter of Church discipline is more than an issue of New Testament example. It is rooted in principle and direct command. The fact that a great percentage of modern Churches do not practice ostracism is excused for various reasons of structure and theology which are beyond the scope of this paper. The central concern here will be with the practical implementation of Church discipline in Churches which already agree it is mandatory.

One of the more difficult lines to draw in the matter of Church discipline is the one which determines who will be ex-communicated. Some sin habits obviously warrant ex-communication, such as the one in I Corinthians 5. Others are not so clear. Consider Paul's "list" in I Cor. 5 of the types of "brothers" we should not associate with. Some of the lifestyles he names should cause concern to any honest believer. There are probably Christians in every community who, at one time or another, become "greedy" or even "idolatrous" (I Cor. 5:10f.). At what point do they merit the formal discipline of the entire Church?

These issues of implementation cause me to speculate that there may have been more than one level of Church discipline. I shall delineate at least three types/levels of discipline which stand out in the scriptures:

- 1) The goal of all discipline is the healing or "winning back" of a wayward brother. The first "level" of Church discipline should involve various types of persuasion with that goal in mind (Mt. 18:15, Gal. 6:1,2).
- 2) If this first type of discipline is ineffective, then the brother will no doubt continue in his sin. It may be that some habits are not

hazardous enough, to either the person himself or the Church, to warrant an official ex-communication. However, his sin may be of such severity that he is of no use to the community. Perhaps, in this case, the best route for others to take would be to leave him/her be. There may be certain situations that a diet of Bible teaching and the work of the Spirit will heal, apart from the active involvement of vital Christians in his/her life. In effect, this would amount to a level of ostracism short of ex-communication.

- 3) The final form of Church discipline would obviously be ex-communication. This type of action would require a decision of the whole community to the effect that the sin was serious enough, and the brother unrepentant enough to warrant "delivering over to Satan" (Mt.18:18, II Cor.2:6).

Many would agree that 1) and 3) are clearly mandated in scripture. The differences would lie in the their implementation. It is the second "level" which seems questionable. How can such neglect be harmonized with Biblical, hard working love? But first, we need to see if there is even a precedent for such treatment in Scripture.

The primary texts on the topic of Church discipline are: Acts 20:29-31, Rom.16:17-20, I Cor.3:17, I Cor.5, I Cor.11:19, II Cor.2, II Cor.7, I Tim.1:20, I Tim.5:8, II Tim.2:14-21,23(cf.25), and Tit.3:10. Added to these Pauline passages are the words of Christ in Matt.18. Since this later pericope is the first, and in some ways the most straightforward, we

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shall take it as a point of departure.

We can sum up Matthew's view of ex-communication as follows:

- 1) The goal of the whole process is clearly "winning over" the sinning brother (see vs.15 "he is a profit to you again", and the immediate context of the lost sheep).
- 2) There is a need for initial dignity and respect in the proceedings by keeping things on a private, one on one basis (vs.15)
- 3) The "witnesses" are for the purpose of "confirming" the facts of the case before the ecclesia later (see Carson pg.403 for an excellent discussion of this principle).
- 4) The identity of the sin is left unclear by Matthew. But we would want to assume it is serious for three reasons: a) the public nature of the sin (vs.16,17), b) the contemporary Jewish practice of ostracism demanded a fairly weighty offense, and c) the context of verses six and following are addressing the issue of false teaching and leading believers astray.
- 5) There is an authority given to the disciples, and we would assume to the Church later on (I Cor.5), to carry through with this exclusion from the community. This "authority" is signified in the "bind" and "loose" phraseology of vs 18. To see anything beyond ex-communication from the earthly Church in this passage would be hermeneutically unsound. The "treating him as a taxgather and gentile" of verse 17 is descriptive of the individual's relationship "to you" in the Church (eis se vs.18), not God. Perhaps the best way to describe the authority granted by Christ in this situation would be "the power from heaven to make the ostracism effective". It is one thing to if men discipline with physical removal. But the effect is multiplied infinitely if God applies pressure from within or even "delivers the sinner over to Satan" (I Cor.5:5, I Tim.1:20).

4 It is this last point which is most pertinent to the topic at hand. Since the practice of ex-communication is so severe, bringing with it Godly discipline, it must be reserved for the most intolerable and harmful sins. While we cannot say that Matthew allows for more than one level of ostracism, he does not exclude the possibility either. It is most likely, for the reasons mentioned in 4) above, that Matthew is addressing public sins of one kind or another. The kinds of offenses warranting a lesser treatment were only spoken to briefly in verses 19f. In this same vein, it should be clear that Matthew does not intend a slavish adherence to the "three steps" of verses 15-18. This is clear from his inclusion of Peter's question, "how many times should I forgive my brother?" immediately following. The "three step procedure" was intended as a general outline of action rather than a rigid formula (note also that this three step procedure was also practiced in contemporary Judaism with quite a bit of flexibility [Qumran, Manual of Discipline]).

The other more or less clear teaching on ex-communication in I Cor. 5 at first glance also seems to describe only one level of ostracism. It is difficult to see "delivering over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh" (vs.5) as anything less or more than "treating him as a taxgatherer or a gentile"(Mt.18). However, there may be a dual structure within I Cor.5. On the one hand Paul addresses the particular issue of the "man who has his father's wife. But in the same chapter he reiterates and expands general principles of ostracism he had written about earlier. Both the specific instruction and the teaching of general

principle are occurring in the same chapter. The structure of the chapter may be briefly outlined as follows:

- I. A sharp rebuke and command to deliver over the fornicating brother (1-9)
- II. A clarification of the general principles which underlie community practice of ostracism (9-11).
- III. Summing up the principle and concluding the specific case (12-13).

The break in chapter five between specific instance and general instruction can be seen in the two types of formulas or words Paul uses to describe ostracism. On the one hand Paul can use more active words such as "give over" (to Satan, I Cor.5:5, Gr. paradidomi), or "be removed" (from among you I Cor.5:2, Gr. airo in the passive). These words are strong, denoting physical removal from the community. Furthermore, these stronger prescriptions seem to require the resolution of the whole church (Mt.18:18). An act such as "delivering over to Satan" or "removal from your midst" requires a judgement to be passed on an individual. In this first case, a decision is made concerning him/her and a sentence is carried out by the entire Church.

But consider some of the other words used in that very same instruction such as "don't associate" (vs.9,11, Gr.sunanamignumi) or "neither eat with such a one" (vs.11). These latter instructions do not require the judgement or consensus of the entire group. An individual Christian seeking spiritual growth can choose to withhold himself from someone he considers to be useless or even bad company. A believer could make this choice purely out of a personal desire to be effective and associate with good company (cf. I Cor.15:33. Mt.7:6. Jude

The two different types of exclusion may be seen better if we look closely at verse 9 and following. Starting in verse 9 Paul brings up a previous letter he had written. Apparently this correspondence contained certain instructions "not to associate with immoral people" of some kind. In this second letter Paul felt the need to qualify these instructions by adding "don't refrain in any way from the immoral people of this world..."(vs.10)."Then you would have to go out of the world...but if any so called brother is immoral..." The most logical and simple reason for Paul's qualification would be that the Corinthians had begun to abstain from certain "immoral" non-believers. Upon hearing this, Paul qualified the earlier letter. But the important point is that the Corinthians somehow directed Paul's earlier prescription toward non-believers! The least we could deduce is that the previous command to "not associate" did not require a meeting of the Church to enforce. In other words, within Paul's teaching on this topic, there was a provision for non-association short of ex-communication.

Paul sums up the topic by asking, "What do I have to do with judging those outside the Church? But you should judge those within"(vs.13). I see this as summing up all that he has been saying and he concludes with a charge to remove the evil man from among them.

All we are saying is that there was a practice in the N.T. Church of

allowing certain individuals to remain in the community even though their sin life rendered them undesirable company. As we attempt to emulate this practice, we are faced with the dilemma of drawing lines mentioned earlier. My research however, has led me to believe that this lesser level of ostracism may have been sanctioned for a great number of sinful lifestyles.

Consider first the schismatic, or divisive man. Paul addresses this situation in Titus 3:10-11. The context of these two verses is very important. It sets the tone for his instruction. For the entire previous chapter Paul was concerned with general maxims for shepherding the flock. In chapter 3 he turns his attention to attitudes and behavior that need to be cultivated in the believers such as obedience to rulers, gentleness, etc. As a basis for these attitudes and good deeds, Paul reminds Titus how far God has brought all of us. Then, in verse 8 Paul begins his concluding remarks.

Throughout these final verses Paul seems very concerned with time, urgency, and those things which are useless. Five times in six verses he uses adjectives akin to "useless" or "worthless". In verse 9 we find *moras*; "foolish" controversies, which are to be shunned. We also find "anophelies"; "unprofitable", and "mataioi", useless. In vs.11 Paul uses the word "exestraptai", a word which communicated being wayward or futile. Finally, he wanted Titus to teach their people not to be "unfruitful" (*akarpoi* vs.14).

In contrast to the many useless and futile sidetracks, Paul adjures Titus and others to engage in "those things which are profitable", and the "pressing needs" four times in the same section. It is impossible to miss his sense of urgency and his distaste for squandering time. Of course this

8 is only typical of Paul's attitude (See I Cor.9:25-27, Phil.3:12-16, and II Tim.4:7 for a sense of Paul's urgency). But surely age was sharpening his diligence and giving him more insight into those things which are tangential.

It is in this context that Paul addresses the "hairesitikos", or "factious man". The only thing we know for sure about this person is that he/she tries to obtain a following, illegitimately we would suppose. It is very likely that the schismatic types were gaining a following by using the "foolish controversies and disputes" mentioned earlier. Regardless of thier method or "bone of contention", we must make a distinction between these factious types and "false teachers". The latter would be those who teach false doctrine in a critical area. Note that Paul's language is much different when he refers to those who tamper with the message of grace (Gal.1:6-8,5:4-6, Phil.3:3-5,17f), or the person of Christ (Col.2:8,18).

The problematic issue is what to do if the factious one continues in his/her sin. Most translators would have Paul advising ex-communication by thier rendering of the Greek word "paraiteomai". The KJV, RSV, and NASB all translate "reject the factious man". If they are accurate this would be a highly unusual use of "paraiteomai". In fact, it would be completely unique. The ten other occurrences of this word in the N.T. range in meaning from "excusing one's self" to "refusing" to participate in something.<sup>1</sup> Consistently it has the sense of refraining from some one or some thing. This fact, combined with its occurrence in the middle

voice indicate that Paul is simply telling Titus to personally remain aloof from such a one.

This is not a short cut through hard working, loving discipline. Paul is not suggesting the outright abandonment of anyone who collects an illegitimate following in the Church. The schismatic needs to be confronted at least twice. This confrontation ought to be strong and persuasive, as the Greek word "noutheteo" suggests (vs.10). And, of course, every serious servant of the Lord must have this ability to "correct those who contradict" (II Tim.2:23). Finally, in this case we have an assurance. The confrontation and subsequent isolation will have a powerful effect within the divisive one. In verse 11 Paul says that we "know" that the unrepentant schismatic is "self condemned" (Gr. autokatakritos). The best way to understand this phrase is the man's conscience is unquenchable. The confrontation with truth and hands off policy will sentence him/her to inward agony till repentance.

We cannot say that the above is the only way to handle a factious person in the Church. But in some ways, wisdom commends it. On the one hand, the people in the Church need to know why the schismatic is useless and foolish. Given time he/she will be exposed. Their folly will be accentuated in contrast to the healthy community. Secondly, there is a tendency for leaders to get caught up with those who make the most trouble instead of those who are most willing. But Paul has learned some things about where to spend one's time. The leaders should not be concerned for their positions, if indeed they are of the Lord. If the legitimate leaders are doing the "profitable" things, the divisive one will not get very far.

Hopefully we are beginning to see that there is no hard and fast way to handle sinful lifestyles in the Church. It would be a mistake to

10 squeeze all the above passages into systematic handbook on ex-communication. Each situation must be handled uniquely, yet with certain principles in mind.

This need for flexibility is very clear in the case of the "one who will not work". Paul relates some guidelines for handling such a one in II Thessalonians 3. A few people in the Church were apparently leading an "unruly" and "undisciplined" life (II Thess.3:6,7). At the least they were not working (vs.11). Beyond that, they were spending their time "meddling" in the affairs of other people (vs.11). They may have gone as far as passing along false doctrine to support their lifestyle. There had been some loose talk at Thessolonica about the Lord's return. Some were saying it had already come! (II Thess.2:2) This kind of chatter may have been facilitated or even created by the busybodies who would not work.

Paul took this problem very seriously in this second letter. Apparently it had been going on for a while (see I Thess.2:9,12, 4:11,12), and the offenders were even able to survive by leaching off the others. Paul's first instruction is for the Thessalonians to "keep aloof from every brother who leads an unruly life" (vs.6). He then goes on to clarify why the unruly life is contrary to everything they have learned (vs.7-10). Finally, he re-formulates and clarifies what he said in verse 6:

And if anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, mark that man and do not associate with him, so that he

may be put to shame. And yet, do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother. vs.14,15

The "instruction" (logos) Paul refers to is evidently the immediately preceding material. There is no other instruction in this letter deserving such a warning (see also I. H. Marshall pg.227 and Hendricksen pg.204). The first disciplinary measure is to "not associate" with the idler. The word used here is "sunanamignumi". This is the same word Paul used in I Cor.5:11 when referring to the various "so-called brothers" we should not associate with. The case was made earlier that Paul was not using this word to denote ex-communication, per se. Likewise, this text does not refer to ex-communication. This conclusion is supported by two lines of evidence.

First, this instruction of Paul's is to the obedient ones in the community. On an individual and personal level he tells them to "note" the ones leading an unruly life. The group action of I Cor.5:5 or Mt.18:17 is not present in this text. Rather, each one is to "stay away" from the unrepentant busybody (vs.6). There is no talk of a group decision or solidarity (such as "the majority" in II Cor.2:6) seemingly because Paul does not consider the offense weighty enough to warrant such attention. "His approach to the subject is not that the person in question should be barred or banished, but that the obedient members should withdraw themselves from him. It is exegetically unjustifiable to superimpose I Cor.5:13 ("Put away that wicked man")... upon II Thess.3:14,15." (Hendricksen pg.206)

Secondly, a careful reading reveals that the members are to "keep on admonishing him as a brother" (vs.15). How were they to keep admonishing him if he was no longer attending? Perhaps Paul is referring to

12 casual contact. Yet it seems that he is prescribing a form of discipline which involves continued contact with the sinner. Marshall suggests that the break in fellowship meant "not eating with him", similar to I Cor.5:11. "This would of course prevent the idlers from sponging on the other members of the Church." (pg.228). Whatever the case, it seems clear enough that the ones under discipline were still regarded as brothers and were in a position to be "confronted" by the others (Gr.noutheteo).

This level of ostracism, short of ex-communication, would only be possible in a community where spiritual values were deeply cultivated in the members. The nature of this type of discipline demands that healthy believers have an almost "instinctive reaction" to certain lifestyles. The unrepentant sinner must be "put to shame" by the majority (II Thess.3:14). Yet at the same time, the measure of effective love in a community will always be their readiness to reach out and change one who has a sinful lifestyle. Only when all other avenues have been exhausted would we want to begin "ignoring" or "withholding" ourselves from someone. It is my hope that this paper would actually increase people's tolerance and patience, and not lead to the "writing off" of good brothers and sisters.

1) Occurences of paraiteomai:

avoid= 1 in II Tim.2:23; NASB has "refuse" foolish and ignorant speculation...followed by "the Lord's bondservant must not be quarellsome..."

entreat= 1 in Heb.12:19; NASB has "begged" that the word not be spoken...

make excuse= 1 in Luke 14:18; dinner guests excusing themselves from coming NASB is the same.

be excused= 2; 1 in Lk.14:18, 1 in 14:19

refuse= 5; Acts 25:11 "I do not refuse to die", 1 Tim.4:7 "have nothing to do with worldly fables, fit only for old women...", 1 Tim.5:11 "but refuse to put younger widows on the list...", Heb.12:25 "see to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking." Heb.12:25 "for those did not escape when they refused Him..."