

MATTHEW 18:15-20

THE UNWORKABLE SOLUTION

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”¹

Discipline is virtually unknown among the congregations of the Lord in this day. When discipline is administered, there is a surprisingly strong reaction from untaught or disobedient church members. Throughout the years of my service among the congregations of the Master, I have frequently heard church leaders bemoan attitudes of rebellion witnessed among the members. Yet, when discipline is called for I have frequently heard those same church leaders lament, “That won’t work.” In the eyes of many church members, discipline is the unworkable solution to conflict in the church.

While evangelical churches are united in acknowledging Jesus’ teaching concerning discipline as it is recorded in our text, it is virtually neglected across the spectrum of churches identified as holding to the Faith of Christ the Lord. Realistically, church discipline had as well be absent from our Bibles. I suspect that a major reason for this neglect is that we have become so culturally sensitive that we are effectively biblically illiterate. Knowing what is written is a long way from doing what is written.

I am under no illusion; I know that even though we may know what is written, should the need for discipline arise, cultural sensitivity, personal loyalties or fear of consequences will impel some to cry out that we have no business judging anyone. Tragically, every casual Christian knows the words of Jesus that cautions Christians, “Judge not, that you be not judged” [MATTHEW 7:1]. However, few know that we are responsible to judge ourselves [see 1 CORINTHIANS 11:31]. Moreover, we seem ignorant of Jesus’ teaching that we are to “Judge with right judgement” [JOHN 7:24]. Likewise, dissenters from common sense and the Word seem unaware of Paul’s rhetorical question, “Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge” [1 CORINTHIANS 5:12]? The church is responsible to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God” [1 JOHN 4:1].

It should be obvious that judgement falls within the purview of the congregation. This is clearly evident from the summary statement Jesus provides which is recorded in John’s Gospel: “If you [plural] forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you [plural] withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld” [JOHN 20:23]. It should be obvious, both from this statement and from the text we will consider today, that the church is responsible to judge both what is taught and the actions of its own members.

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There is a significant consideration I must note before moving beyond this point. It is a plea for those who love the congregation, yet hold themselves apart from uniting with the congregation, to consider the implications of their choice. Those who are not members of the church have neither warrant nor right to judge those within the congregation. Whenever the church holds its own accountable, those who are not members of the congregation must be excluded from the deliberations, save for evidence they may be asked to present. In other words, those outside the congregation may present evidence, if such is required, but they are debarred from all discussions.

There is a final consideration. The message deals with the theme of conflict in the church. I suppose that when we hear of conflict, our minds turn almost automatically to personal confrontations. Perhaps we have witnessed confrontation between individuals, or between a cabal and church leadership, and we are hard-pressed to move beyond that. However, the conflict may be an ethical violation that is known only to a few individuals—perhaps even to only one person other than the violator. It is possible that the conflict consists of moral transgressions which, though known to only a few individuals, has the possibility of insinuating itself into the very fabric of the church. Certainly, it must be known that the conflict may arise from doctrinal deviation which, if not addressed, promises ruin for the assembly. Move your mind beyond the thought of mere disagreement to actions or attitudes that threaten the health of the congregation, and you will begin to understand the serious nature of the message. Now, turn your attention to the words of the Master as He instructed us through instructing those first disciples.

THE PROPENSITY TOWARD DISOBEDIENCE — “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him.” There is a textual matter which is important. While my translation includes the words “against you” in the fifteenth verse, it is possible that the words are an early interpolation into the original text.² The earliest copies of the Matthew’s Gospel that are available for study omit these words. In fairness, it must be acknowledged that it is equally possible that the words were omitted by a copyist. What is evident, however, is that the words “against you” reflect the sense of what is recorded. For the sake of our understanding, we will accept that the words are genuine, imposing on each Christian the responsibility to take ownership for his or her own response to that which offends, and to accept that each of us is, after all, our brother’s keeper.

Jesus uses what is known as a third class conditional sentence. The concept of conditional sentences is difficult for many of us to grasp when working in the Greek language used in the New Testament. The construction of His words sets up a situation where He envisions a potential, but not necessary, condition. In other words, it is possible that someone will offend us; but we cannot say that people “will” offend us.

Let’s think about this at greater length. Believers are accountable to the congregation for what they teach and for how they act. The sin that could cause offence would be either doctrinal deviation, violation of biblical ethics or moral deviation. Each of us is susceptible to offending in any of these areas of life, and the Community of Faith to which we belong is responsible to hold us accountable, just as we are responsible to hold our fellow believers accountable for their words and conduct.

² See Bruce Manning Metzger and United Bible Societies, **A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament, Second Edition a Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament (4th Rev. Ed.)** (London, New York, United Bible Societies, 1994)

Ever since the Fall, man has been warned that “sin is crouching at the door” [GENESIS 4:6]. The Word of God is very pointed in exposing our sinful nature. Dedication to the Temple, Solomon exposed mankind’s propensity to sin in his prayer before the LORD. “If they sin against You—for there is no one who does not sin—and You are angry with them and give them to an enemy, so that they are carried away captive to a land far or near, yet if they turn their heart in the land to which they have been carried captive, and repent and plead with You in the land of their captivity, saying, ‘We have sinned and have acted perversely and wickedly,’ if they repent with all their mind and with all their heart in the land of their captivity to which they were carried captive, and pray toward their land, which You gave to their fathers, the city that You have chosen and the house that I have built for Your Name, then hear from heaven Your dwelling place their prayer and their pleas, and maintain their cause and forgive Your people who have sinned against You” [2 CHRONICLES 6:36-39]. Though the prayer seeks God’s mercy, it is this acknowledgement that startles us: “There is no one who does not sin!”

Among the wise sayings Solomon delivered to us is found this sobering question:

“Who can say, ‘I have made my heart pure;
I am clean from my sin’?

[PROVERBS 20:9]

His rhetorical question confronts our proclivity toward, our predisposition to, our predilection for, our penchant for sin. The tragic answer to the question is that there does not exist even one person who is able to say that they have made their heart pure—there is not one who is clean from his sin. In his search through the dark recesses of the soul of fallen people, that same wise king wrote these sorrowful, sobering words, “Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins” [ECCLESIASTES 7:20].

The Apostle considers the whole of humanity and sadly concludes, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” [ROMANS 3:23]. You will remember John’s assessment even of us who have been redeemed by the grace and mercy of the Master. “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us... If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us” [1 JOHN 1:8, 10].

Were it not enough that we sin in our choices and through our actions, James reminds us that it is our mouth that often—perhaps always—leads us into sin. He writes, “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body” [JAMES 3:1, 2].

Long years ago, Solomon cautioned, “In ... many words there is ... vanity” [ECCLESIASTES 5:7].³ Speak enough, and you will eventually say something that is foolish—perhaps even errant. Words can wound; words can lead the unwary astray. The potential for introducing error increases the more one speaks. Were we not fallen people, we could speak the truth and never sin with our mouths. For this reason, we are warned, “Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God” [ECCLESIASTES 5:2]. This sage advice is delivered together with other cautionary warnings, “Let your words be few,” and “Let not your mouth lead you into sin” [ECCLESIASTES 5:6].

³ New King James Version (Thomas Nelson, Inc., Nashville, TN 1979, 1980, 1982)

In recent messages I have noted the human condition. We dare not imagine that because we are saved that sin is no longer a problem for us. You need but recall the Apostle's gloomy assessment of his own condition. "I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members" [ROMANS 7:21-23].

Again, recall the compilation of verses he provided to give us insight into the human condition, taking especial note of the universal, inclusive language used.

"None is righteous, no, *not one*;
no one understands;
no one seeks for God.
All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
no one does good,
not even one."

[ROMANS 3:10-12]

It is a tragic truth that though we may want to do what is right, we nevertheless struggle against sin. The Apostle exposes the ongoing conflict in each life when he writes, "The desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do" [GALATIANS 5:17]. What a dark secret is revealed when James writes of the conflicts we experience! "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you" [JAMES 4:1]? Your passions are at war within you! Were this an occasional situation, it would be serious enough; however, this is the normal condition for each of us. What is worse, we *do* surrender to these passions, and we surrender more than occasionally.

It is one thing if we recognise when we have sinned and quickly deal with the sin that has momentarily gained an advantage over us. At such times, we resort to the assurance of God that pledges, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" [1 JOHN 1:9]. But what shall be done when one among us sins and fails to quickly address the sin?

There are times that the congregation must become the means of discipline for a member. If self-discipline is lacking, then congregational discipline must be applied. We read the words that are written, "We, though many, are one Body in Christ, and individually members one of another" [ROMANS 12:5].

Let those words sink in: We are "individually members one of another." If this were the only time such a declaration were made, it would be nevertheless true, but God has given us the identical statement as though to emphasise the point when Paul writes, "We are members one of another" [EPHESIANS 4:25]. Then, should we wonder if this applies to us, we read in the same book, "We are members of His Body" [EPHESIANS 5:30].

I am responsible for myself, to be certain. However, I am responsible for you; and you are responsible for me. Together, we comprise the Body of Christ. Should I sin and fail to exercise self-discipline, then my congregation is responsible before God to hold me accountable. Should my congregation fail to hold me accountable for my actions, you may be assured that God will hold me accountable. If He does not, it means that I never was related to Him [see HEBREWS 12:3-11; note especially verse 8].

Despite our modern tendency to seek peace at any price, the Word of God insists that within the church we are responsible for one another. We are a body and not a federation. We are united to one another as brothers and sisters; we are not a mere political organisation. Because this is true, we must accept responsibility for one another.

THE PROCESS FOR DISCIPLINE — “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

The Master provides a process for discipline that is seldom considered when discipline is called for. Contemporary churches swing from one extreme to the other. Either we ignore discipline all together, or we seek to exercise control and injure both the party that has angered us and the congregation. We lose sight of the purpose of discipline, about which I will have more to say momentarily. For the moment, it is vital to keep in focus that we seek reconciliation whenever we discipline any member of the assembly. Moreover, it is not the elders, nor the deacons, nor a disciplinary committee that disciplines errant members; it is the congregation and only the congregation that is ultimately charged with exercising discipline.

Note the Master’s language when He says, “If your brother sins.” As I noted earlier, the words “against you” quite possibly were not spoken. What is in view is not individual pique or individual umbrage, but knowledge that a fellow saint has “missed the mark.” Knowing what we know from the Word of God, it is probable that each of our fellow members will sin in a manner that offends. Jesus’ instructions are not warrant to act as “transgression police” waiting to pounce as soon as we see someone sin; rather, what seems to be in view is sin that begins to be established in a fellow believer’s life.

Jesus appears to be speaking of sin that begins to tarnish the life of another saint. This is sin for which there is no repentance—sin that continues, sin that has taken root in an individual’s life. It is possible that they are unaware of the egregious nature of their actions or their attitudes; but it is more likely that this is an action or an attitude they are prepared to ignore or even justify. They don’t admit the dreadful nature of what they are doing, and so they are determined to disregard the offensive nature of what is occurring.

What is important for us to note is the response of the one who first notes the sin. Jesus says when you see sin in a brother or a sister, you must “Go and tell him his fault.” Then, because it is critical that there be no misunderstanding, He adds these vital words: “between you and him alone.” In short, there must be no discussion of what you have observed with anyone other than the person for whom you are concerned. To discuss the sinful behaviour or the sinful attitude with anyone other than the one committing the sin is gossip; and all such gossip is slanderous.

Need I remind you that gossip is thoroughly condemned in the Word? The Apostle associates gossips with those who are “filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil covetousness, malice.” Such people “are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness” [see **ROMANS 1:29**]. Such actions characterise the actions and attitudes of a terminal society that has abandoned all pretence of righteousness. A church that rejects obedience to Christ’s instruction in order to embrace gossip is in rebellion against grace.

In a previous congregation, a woman approached me on one occasion. She seemed almost triumphant as she announced, “We have a church member living in sin,”

“Yes, we certainly do have a member who is sinning” I replied, “but I certainly do not appreciate your telling anyone about me.”

“I’m serious,” she stated. “We need to do something about this.”

“Have you spoken with the individual you are about to name?” I asked.

My question apparently threw her off her game. She hesitated and stammered, “No, I came to you so you could do something about her.”

“Well,” I said, as I picked up a pad of paper and a pen, “I’ll take down the details as evidence of your sinful nature.”

The woman sitting in my office was shocked. “I’m not the sinner,” she sputtered.

“Oh, but you are,” I replied. “You are using innuendo as you slander a fellow church member, and you have deliberately ignored the teaching of the Master.”

I read her the passage that is now before us, pointing out that she was responsible to go to the one who sinned. The woman became quite defensive, arguing that the church paid me to do this nasty work. However, she refused to assume any responsibility for her sister, other than to tattle. She rejected the charge that she was acting as an arrant gossip; and she was deeply offended that I would dare hold her accountable for her attempt to gossip while ignoring what she saw as persistent, flagrant sin within the membership.

Worldly people are marked by “quarrelling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, ***gossip***, conceit and disorder” [2 CORINTHIANS 12:20]. It is a characteristic of the last days that people “will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, ***malicious gossips***, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness, although they [will] have denied its power” [2 TIMOTHY 3:2-5].⁴

What are we to do when we observe a fellow believer in the grip of sin? Jesus says, “Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him” [LUKE 17:3]. Inform your fellow believer privately. Don’t discuss your concerns with anyone other than the one who is sinning; rather, take action because you love your fellow believer. Have we forgotten that “love covers a multitude of sins” [1 PETER 4:8]? James taught us that “Whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins” [JAMES 5:20]. We Christians dare not lose sight of the truth that love “does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth” [1 CORINTHIANS 13:6].

If the sinning saint refuses to heed your concern, you are instructed to “take two or three witnesses.” Those who accompany you are identified as witnesses, though it becomes obvious that they are enjoined to urge the straying saint to return to the path of righteousness. Indeed, the witnesses are there to verify what is said, but even more importantly, they are pleading for the sinner to turn to what is right.

The role of the witnesses, in part, acknowledges that the sin may lead to more serious consequences. They have an important role of verifying the exchange between yourself and the one with whom you are pleading. Jesus reminds His disciples of what Moses wrote, that “every charge [must] be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses” [see DEUTERONOMY 19:15]. However, they are active participants and not mere observers, because it is possible that the sinner may refuse to “listen to them.”

⁴ **New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update** (The Lockman Foundation, LaHabra, CA 1995)

If after pleading in the presence of witnesses the wayward believer rebuffs the pleas to again honour the Master, you are constrained to take the matter before the congregation. This is not a time for outsiders to listen in, nor to participate in discussions concerning what must be done. Those who are not members of the Body are to be excused from these proceedings; this is a time for the Body to unite to plead with the sinner, lovingly asking for repentance and seeking restoration of fellowship.

Whilst we are not told how long the Body must entreat the sinner, it should be apparent that when it becomes obvious that the erstwhile believer has become adamant that he or she will not forsake the sin, the congregation has no choice except to accept the sorrowful fact that a member of the Body has separated himself or herself. The church does not exclude those who sin so much as they sorrowfully recognise that the sinner has already excluded himself or herself from the fellowship of believers.

They are to be removed from membership with all the privileges accorded. This means that they must be treated as a pagan. The sinner has refused discipline, living as though he or she were part of the world; thus, the church has no choice but to accept their own lifestyle as evidence that they want nothing to do with the Body of Christ. To the people of God, the unrepentant sinner must be viewed as any other pagan. This does not mean that they are to be hated, or treated discourteously; it does mean that we must not imagine that they are fellow saints, because their actions deny what their lips may say. It is not so much that we are judging them as it is that we are applying the standard they have chosen to live by as evidence that they do not wish to be counted among the faithful. It is permitting them to have what they seek, which is to live as the world lives.

When a member of the Corinthian congregation became notorious throughout the city as result of brazen wickedness, Paul instructed the church, “I wrote you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people. In no way did I mean the immoral people of this world, or the greedy and swindlers and idolaters, since you would then have to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who calls himself a Christian who is sexually immoral, or greedy, or an idolater, or verbally abusive, or a drunkard, or a swindler. Do not even eat with such a person. For what do I have to do with judging those outside? Are you not to judge those inside? But God will judge those outside. Remove the evil person from among you” [1 CORINTHIANS 5:9-13].⁵

It is admittedly difficult to confront an individual whom we believe is sinning. Should we approach in a spirit of humility, asking for clarification, it is conceivable that we will discover that we have misinterpreted the action or the attitude we saw. Perhaps we are unaware of all that is taking place, and with clarification the matter will be set right. If we approach in love and the one we approach heeds our concern, we will have gained a brother. We truly need to be convinced that “love covers a multitude of sins” [JAMES 5:20; 1 PETER 4:8].

Our Canadian character that identifies us as “nice” people can frequently lead us to avoid doing the hard task of confronting the errant sinner. Rather than approaching a sinful saint to seek restoration, we make “prayer requests” within the assembly, which must often be seen as nothing short of glorified gossip. Rather than performing the hard task of seeking restoration of the errant, we find it easier to discuss their situation with others. We are not loving when we speak of the sinful proclivity or the apparent weakness of a fellow believer; such talk is too often vicious and cowardly.

⁵ The NET Bible First Edition (Biblical Studies Press, 1996-2006)

When the matter is brought before the church, the purpose of the congregation is not to conduct a judicial proceeding replete with judge and jury. Rather, this must be a time when the entire assembly seeks restoration of fellowship between the errant believer and the Body. There is already a breach in the fellowship, and the congregation now seeks to heal the fracture that rends the Body. When Jesus holds out the possibility that the recalcitrant sinner will “refuse[] to listen even to the church,” He is tacitly stating the purpose of the meeting, which is to plead with the sinner and to restore fellowship.

THE PURPOSE FOR DISCIPLINE — “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

From the moment that we first become aware that a fellow believer is caught in sin, our purpose must always be his or her restoration. The purpose of discipline is to restore the sinner. Remember the admonition that the Apostle delivered to the churches of Galatia. “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ” [GALATIANS 6:1, 2].

Does loving discipline work? Even momentary consideration of this question will provide the answer. You, who are parents, consider whether loving discipline of your children was beneficial. Did not your stern warnings, and the punishment that was sometimes necessary, bless your children? If you ignored their wicked deeds, would they have grown to adulthood without breaking your heart? Because you love your children, you could not permit them to raise themselves; but rather you held them accountable; and you still hold them to account for their choices.

This is likewise the testimony of the Word of God. Recall the words of the Letter to Hebrew Christians. “Have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?

‘My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor be weary when reproved by him.
For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives.’

It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” [HEBREWS 12:5-10].

I do not deny that there is need for the congregation to purge sin from our midst. I do not deny that as a church we must be diligent to keep ourselves pure in the eyes of the watching world. Far too many of the professed churches of our Lord are ridiculed by the pagans because we tolerate wickedness and ignore sin among our members. Thus, the pagans reject our message as false; the charge that there are too many hypocrites in the church stings because there *are* too many hypocrites in the church. Above all else there remains the need to reflect the mercy and grace of the Master through seeking to restore the sinner. Each of us was a sinner, and Christ received us. He washed us and accepted us; and in the same way, we are responsible to restore broken brothers.

After the Apostle's first letter to the Christians of Corinth, they did exclude the one who was sinning so blatantly before the entire city. The discipline had its desired effect on the sinful saint, but the congregation lost sight of why they exercised the discipline in the first place. So, the Apostle found it necessary to take up the matter, reminding them of what they were seeking in the first place. Listen to him as he pleads with them to accept the repentant sinner again within the membership of the Body.

"If anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. 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. For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ" [2 CORINTHIANS 2:5-10],

The sinner was excluded from the fellowship; he was no longer permitted to come to the Lord's Table. The evil was purged from among the saints; he had been delivered over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh [see 1 CORINTHIANS 5:5]. The discipline had the desired effect and the sinner now sought admission to the Body; but the people were unwilling to receive him again. So the Apostle pleaded with them to accept him again.

As a young Christian, Lynda and I witnessed the felicitous effect of congregational discipline on a member of the church. A member of the congregation had deserted his wife and two little children to begin living openly with another woman. Members of the congregation had pleaded with the man, but he had rejected their pleas, growing increasingly adamant in stating his intention to live his life as he wished, ignoring the righteousness of Christ and rejecting the entreaties of the people who loved him. And so he left his wife, and began to live openly with another woman.

When he would not accept the prayerful pleas of the congregation, the members acted decisively to remove him from membership. We had been Christians only a short time when at a congregational meeting the action was taken with many tears and many prayers for God to guide His people and to be honoured. They commended the man to God's mercy, delivering his flesh over to Satan, just as is written in the Word of God.

It seemed that nothing happened. Superficially, it was as if the church had attended to a mere formality. He was removed from membership, his name was no longer listed on the church roll, and we no longer saw him at the services of the church. The congregation cared for the needs of his wife and children, assisting her with repairs around the house, watching to ensure that she and her children had food and clothing. Godly women went by to pray with the woman, to weep with her and to support her as she tried to put her world back together.

It was after about six months that, on a Wednesday evening that man came into the assembly as we were beginning a prayer service. Before the service began, he stood and humbly sought permission to address the congregation. When permission was given, he came to the front of the auditorium and confessed his sin. He had pursued his own desires and violated the sacred vow he had once made before the Lord God to love his wife and to be committed to her alone. With many tears and evident penitence, he asked forgiveness of the church and requested restoration to the Body.

Before anyone could respond, however, he made a statement that has remained in my memory since. Appearing haggard and worn, he faced the congregation and said, "It's cold out there." He had faced the world alone, and had learned what it means to be delivered to Satan for the destruction of the flesh. You see, there is protection within the Body. Those foolish Christians who remain outside the fold will receive a name they neither sought nor wanted—"victim." We must remember that our "adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" [1 PETER 5:8]. Attempting to resist the wicked one in your own strength will only lead to disaster and ruin. We need one another; we need the strength that each one can lend. Discipline seeks to restore the disobedient Christians so that they can again enjoy the fellowship of the Body and draw the strength required to stand firm.

You are responsible for yourself, to be certain; but you are also responsible for your brother. Together, we bear responsibility for one another. We are responsible to build one another, to encourage one another, to comfort one another. We are responsible to hold one another accountable for our attitudes and for our actions.

Jesus speaks a marvellous truth when He says, "Where two or three are gathered in My Name, there am I among them." This is not a promise to be present when we pray, though He hears our prayers as they are breathed. This is not a promise that each time we meet for worship He is with us, though He does attend our worship. This is a promise that the congregation can know that He is present and guiding as each disciplinary decision is pondered and rendered by His people. The Master Himself is with us when we act in His Name to hold one another accountable for what we teach and how we act.

Candidly, you will never stand if you are disobedient in first things. Christ calls you to faith. Believing that He died because of your sin and believing that He rose to declare you right with the Living God, you receive the forgiveness of sin and the gift of eternal life. Then, having believed, you are called to openly identify with Him in baptism as taught in His Word. Having openly declared your faith through submitting to baptism, you are called to serve where He has appointed you, lending your gift to that of others within the assembly.

Are you saved? What stops you from trusting Christ today? Have you identified with Him in baptism since you believed? Why would you delay obeying what He commands? Have you openly united with that church where the Spirit of God appoints you to serve? What hinders you from united with God's people as taught in His Word? This is the day to openly declare your faith and to obey the Word of God. Amen.