

Dealing with Sin in the Church

by Robert Griffith

In the Church, as with any collection of people - Christian or otherwise, there can arise from time to time, relational barriers which prevent us from the kind of intimacy and interaction that God intended. These barriers - if not identified and removed early can cause larger, more permanent canyons between brothers and sisters. Often after a period of tension or alienation it takes time, patience and determination to re-build those relational bridges so as to facilitate fellowship and unity once again.

I have had the pleasure of serving God in four different Christian denominations over more than 30 years and regardless of the Church or the people, inevitably issues will arise from time to time in the hearts and minds of believers which will cause them great concern and these issues can in turn place a significant strain on the unity of the Church family.

When these times arise in a local Church, they are usually accompanied by a lot of time spent behind the scenes - analysing and discussing and debating. More often than not it's the preaching or the music or worship style or some other part of the way that Church is run which has offended or upset some people.

I want to suggest to you today, that the issues themselves are irrelevant to the harmony and unity of the body of Christ. There is a deeper and far more critical need among God's people during times of tension and until that is resolved - all other debates are only likely to produce greater barriers.

The need I speak of is that of relationships. By that I mean we need to suspend all discussion and debate on the surface issues - no matter how important or serious they appear - and spend some time digging down through the soil of opinion and counter-opinion and deal with our relationships with each other as brothers and sisters in Christ - our love and commitment as family members. We need to be able to embrace one another as a family again - before we can effectively and positively deal with our differences or hear God's voice as body of believers.

With the scene set above, this sermon is about Church Discipline. Now I can feel the hairs standing up on the back of a few necks even at the mention of the word *discipline*. That is understandable - but sad. It's sad that what the Bible puts forward in the most productive, positive, liberating light . . . is more often portrayed in a negative, judgmental light. If that's your view of Church Discipline - then I hope you will have that view changed today.

Jesus commanded us to love one another, to serve one another, to bear one another's burdens, to forgive one another, to comfort one another, to confess our sins to one another and to discipline and disciple one another. Now all of these "one anothers" convince us that we can't be a part of the Church that Jesus built unless we are related to somebody. Unless we are intimately involved in other people's lives - we can't fulfil any of these one anothers.

The Apostle Paul called us the body the Christ and wrapped up in that picture is the fact that we need each other - we are open to each other - we depend upon each other - we take care of each other - we are related to each other as brothers and sisters under the one Father.

You can't bear somebody's burdens unless you know what they are. You can't correct somebody unless you know them personally. You can't hear each other's confession of sin unless you're close to somebody. No sane person is going to walk up to someone they don't know very well and pour out their heart in confession.

In order to be the Church that Jesus built - we have to be open to each other. This is the reason why there is such a strong emphasis on our home group ministry. The home groups provide the best opportunity for us to relate to each other at this deeper level.

All of this loving, healing, forgiving . . . "one anothering" that Jesus is talking about is gathered together concisely and powerfully in Matthew 18:15-20. This passage is a profound condensation of the love and the care we are supposed to be giving to one another. To function effectively as the body of Christ, we need a firm understanding of the truths that lie beneath Matthew 18.

Let me first mention the larger context. Back in verse 10 of chapter 18 we have the parable of the lost sheep. It's very important to set up this passage on Church Discipline by talking about the good shepherd going after the lost sheep. And it is followed in verse 21 by a parable of forgiveness. How we forgive and how we are supposed to go on forgiving.

So if the term Church Discipline sounds negative to you - I trust that the Lord will remedy that this morning - because Church discipline is very positive - it is all about going after a lost or a rebellious sheep and bringing them back into the family of forgiveness - into the family where we can confess and be open about who we are and get help.

"If your brother sins against you, (and the words against you are not in the earliest manuscripts - they were added) if your brother sins . . . go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony 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, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

"I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." (Matt. 18:15-20)

This passage gives us a very clear model for normal Church life and we see how binding our love is and how seriously we must take each others' lives. You see, the quality of my life really does affect you . . . and the quality of your life really does affect me. Not only do I love you as my brother or sister in Christ and want you to experience the abundant Christian life but I love the Church . . . Christ's Church . . . and if you're in the Church - if you are part of the body of Christ - and if you are living in hypocrisy - then it damages the Church and it's ministry in the community and in turn the quality of all our lives. So let's see what the Church was really supposed to be and to do.

What is the purpose for going to our brother or sister? Verse 15 says *"If your brother sins, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over."*

So the purpose for going is not to punish - not to judge - not to lord it over or inflict pain - the purpose is not to play policeman. The purpose of going is to win your brother - to win your sister . . . THAT IS THE POINT AND TOTAL MOTIVATION IN GOING TO THEM. To reconcile the relationship.

If you are in error, if there is some activity in your life that is clearly contrary to the light and life revealed in Jesus Christ - then you have effectively broken fellowship with the body of Christ who is following Jesus. Regardless of whether you turn up on Sunday or not. Our fellowship is in the light. Let me read from 1 John 1 verse 5 and following.

"This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives."

So by our actions - by our sin - we define ourselves outside the Church. In the spiritual realm we have broken fellowship with the body of Christ. We have put ourselves out on a limb. So if you love somebody as a brother or sister and you see that they have broken fellowship in that sense and you go to them privately and say - hey look - this is not right - you're off the track here ... and if they recognise their fault and realise that they were blinded and deceived and they then allow God to deal with that sin ... then what have you achieved - or facilitated? You have won your brother or sister!

The whole point of Church discipline from beginning to end is to win our brothers and sisters - to be reconciled to them and them to the whole body - even the final stage mentioned here of taking an issue to the Church - must be motivated by the desire to win that person - to be reconciled to that person as family.

If that redemptive motive is there at every step of the way - it will profoundly alter the way we go about doing it. If your only concern is to clean up the Church or be a moral or spiritual policeman, then you can really treat people badly - trying to do a job which isn't yours to do. But if your ultimate desire is to have a relationship with these people after the process - if you want to be friends with them after it's over - then you're going to handle it a lot more graciously and lovingly.

OK, so who goes? Who confronts sin in the Church? Well the leadership of course. Right? If someone is out of line - send in the heavies! Right? That's how they do it in the world. But that isn't how we do it in the body of Christ. Church discipline is a grass roots responsibility - it is the task of every believer.

Who goes? The person who sees. Who goes? The person who's in relationship. Who goes? A friend who wants to save a friend. That's who goes. It's not a legislated, inquisitorial, administrative, top-down kind of function. It's a friend meeting with a friend in order to help a friend. That's the heart of Church discipline. The one who goes is the one who sees ... and the one loves.

The Church is the people - the members of the body of Christ - fellow heirs of the kingdom - brothers and sisters - pilgrims on the same journey to the promised land. It's everybody's job to keep everybody else happy and on the same path. But that does not mean that the leadership is exempt. Your home group leaders, your Deacons, your Elders and your Pastors - they all should be the subject of your loving intervention in this regard as much as anyone else.

Throughout my many years in pastoral leadership, I longed for more people to be bold enough and who loved me enough to give me that discipline. For, as I've said before, we are all on level ground before the cross of Jesus and leaders carry no exemption certificate when it comes to loving correction from brothers and sisters.

Matthew 18 tells us that when you see something that concerns you - go. You don't phone, you don't write a letter - you GO. And you keep it just between the two of you - privately, personally, with no one else involved. Why? Well first of all, that's what friends do for friends, isn't it? Friends go to friends privately - because you don't want anyone else involved in this. You care for them and you don't want their sin or struggle publicised so you go to them discreetly and privately - you want to cover them and protect them because you love them.

You go to your friend - your brother or your sister in Christ - early enough to nip the problem in the bud. You don't want this thing getting out in the public arena because that would embarrass your friend. You go to them to also get the story straight - you may have misinterpreted what you heard or saw them do. So you don't want to be harbouring a half truth or an untruth about your friend - so you go.

But the big reason is you go to avoid gossip. If you want to pump a whole heap of healing into any Church - just follow Matthew 18 for the sake of avoiding gossip. All of the big time sins (big time in our minds at least) like stealing, adultery, murder, sexual sin etc. and all the other stuff that causes pain and heartache in the Church, pales by comparison to the damage caused by gossip every single day.

Gossip destroys the fabric of trust, it destroys reputations and fellowship and relationships. However it is completely accepted and tolerated in the most Churches. In fact it is often the way the Church communicates - by and large. If it weren't for gossip, most people wouldn't have the slightest idea what was going on!

Now this is something that Churches need to come to terms with urgently. Sadly, it has become part of our culture to talk about people behind their backs. The Church has not been spared in this regard - in fact we have refined and re-defined gossip and given it spiritual credibility under the guise of prayer requests and other spiritual masks.

If you have a problem with something someone has said or done - you bring it before the Lord first and then you go to that person - just between the two of you. You don't speak to another brother or sister to get their advice - you don't share the problem at a home group - you go one-on-one.

And friends if that is all we did - if that is all that came out of this sermon, we would see untold healing and health and renewed vision and vitality flow into the church. I really believe that. This would do the Church more good than anything else.

I know of one Pastor in another denomination who had a couple of Elders who were experiencing a little tension. Each one came to him at separate times to tell their story and seek his support or help. He said he would help. He contacted them both a couple of days later and asked them to come to his office at 2:00 pm the following day. They gladly obliged - but little did they know - he'd asked them both to come at the same time.

After the obvious tension had subsided when they arrived - the Pastor just said: 'OK . . . *He said this about you and he said this about you now, you've got one hour I'll be in the next office work it out guys.*' And he left.

Now can you imagine how great it would be if everybody in the Church held each other accountable like that? Can you imagine? Pretty soon, everybody would be doing it right. If we didn't listen to gossip - if we didn't just sit there or stand there and let others run off about someone - if we stopped them and said we didn't want to hear anymore because they were talking to the wrong person - if we really started doing that - the results would be absolutely amazing.

The sad thing is the enemy has redefined gossip for us in the Christian Church so it doesn't look like gossip or sound like gossip. We can gossip by prayer chain - through prayer meetings and home groups. We share a concern for prayer and in so doing, we more often than not mention someone's name and gossip behind their back. When all this happens behind the respectable mask of prayer, it doesn't seem to be the evil sin it is.

If you've got a problem - you go to the person. There is no second option. This is not only biblical - it is putting yourself in the shoes of the person being gossiped about. Would you like the person to come to you direct? Or would you be happy to have their version of your problem disseminated through the Church or community first? The answer is obvious.

So if someone comes to you and starts telling you something about somebody else, your responsibility at that point is very clear. You are to lovingly, graciously, but quickly and firmly stop them. Say: *'I'm sorry, I would really love to help you out on this one . . . but I am not the right person. You need to talk to the one you have the problem with and it's just not appropriate for me to hear any more.'*

Can you imagine what would happen if we all did that? At the beginning of the conversation - not at the end after all the juicy bits are out? Satan would never be able to use that foothold in the Church. If we would just say to each other: *'Go and see the right person . . . and I'll check with you next week to see if you did . . . and if you haven't gone to the person concerned by then - I'll go and tell them what you just told me.'*

If everyone in your church did that, it would not take long for people to realise that you have to talk to the person concerned or you have to find somewhere else to go to Church, because your Church will not feed, entertain or give comfort to the sin of gossip. Wouldn't that be great?

Now one of the wonderful things about being in that kind of Church is: I can live my life with a certain amount of freedom and do what I think is right, knowing that if I get off the track, one of my friends will come to me in love and tell me I am off the track. And I'll say thanks very much and if they are right then I'm brought back on track. If they are wrong - we talk about it and pray about it - and they end up saying thanks very much because a perception they had was wrong and now it's cleared up.

Imagine if you could have the comfort of knowing this: that if people are not talking to you . . . they are not talking about you! We should absolutely insist on that. It should be not negotiable. That's the Bible and that's the way the Church should operate.

It's like having a co-pilot. When a pilot is up in the air all alone, when he's all by himself, he has to depend on himself entirely - there's no one there to keep him in the air. So he has to keep his eyes on all the instruments, knowing that if he misses something - he could be the subject of a news bulletin the next day. That kind of flying is not very relaxing - the pressure is enormous. But when he has a co-pilot, he has the confidence that someone else is looking out for him - somebody else is watching all the instruments. Then he can relax and enjoy the flight. That's the way we're supposed to live in the body of Christ. We're supposed to have a lot of people who will lovingly and graciously co-pilot our lives. He is there to alert the pilot to anything of a serious nature and that's what we are all here for too.

When something potentially damaging or hurtful arises in a brother's life or a sister's life, we tell them - because we love them. And because we love them we don't tell anyone else. That's why we are different to others in the world. That's why the people outside the Church know we are Christians - by our love and love is not an emotion, it's an action - it's something we do. Wouldn't it be terrific if we loved each other enough to never talk behind each other's back?

Can you imagine the impact that would have on those non-Christians in the workplace - those with whom we mix each day? Is that what they're hearing - is that what they observe about you? Or do they hear you criticising your Pastor - your Church leaders - your brothers and sisters in Christ? Is your Church family's dirty laundry hanging out for all to see in the community?

And what about in your homes? What is the topic of conversation around the dinner table? What role models are you providing for your children? Do you freely talk about others in the privacy of your home - thinking that's OK? Do your children sit there during their most impressionable years listening to you criticising the Church and people in the Church?

And do you then in later years cry out to the very same Church to do something for your teenagers who don't want to have anything to do with God? Why would they want to get involved in something that attracted so much criticism from their parents? Friends, the price that some of us pay for not following Matthew 18 can be catastrophic.

Now when you do this, when you take the time to go the person direct and not to anyone else, one of three things will happen. One response might be: *'Well thank you. I really appreciate you for pointing this out. You're right. I was wondering about that. Pray for me. I've got a weakness in this area - I want to be right. Thanks.'* That's one good thing that might happen . . . and it does happen . . . there are people in the Church with the maturity to receive correction graciously and gratefully.

Another good thing that might happen when you go to the person one-on-one is they'll say: *'Well I can see how you perceived it that way - let me tell you the context and what really happened. There's another explanation.'* So then the person who came feels a little bad that they got it wrong - but they shouldn't, because they are talking to the only one who can clear that up for them and the person they went to ends up being eternally grateful that they were the only one that was approached and now the story is dead.

But the third scenario is unfortunately the down side to this, and that is when you leave the person with the problem unresolved. You have a disagreement. You still think there's a problem and that the person may be sinning - but they don't see it that way. So what do you do? Usually it doesn't go that far if we have played our part properly, graciously and lovingly. But if that occurs, verse 16 tells us what to do.

"But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that `every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses."

Now it's wisdom, it's protection, it's perspective to take a second and third person along. But your concern is still the same. TO WIN THAT PERSON. You don't go with a soldier on each arm ready to dump on this person. You go, ready and willing to be talked out of it. You go hoping that you're wrong. You go with love and compassion in your heart for a brother or sister who you want to see freed from this problem.

Taking two others along gives some objective perception. Often a single person can become narrow in their thinking and determined to see this thing through and they lose their objectivity. If a couple of others come and sit and relax they may very well say: *'Well, I can see how you perceived this - but it really doesn't seem like a sin to me.'* Or they could agree and encourage the person to stop.

Now if that doesn't work - verse 17 tells us what to do.

"If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector."

You then pull out the heavy guns and in an attempt to get this person free from the sin that has gripped them. The motivation is still the same - you want to win your brother or sister - you don't want to boot them out of the Church - you want to see healing and restoration.

Now it's interesting to note that even if this third phase fails - it's not the end of the line. It's not like you kicked this sinner out and that's it. We don't wrap our Pharisaical robes around us and get rid of the person who is defiling the Church. That isn't what this is all about at all. What we are doing as a Church at this point is simply, but sadly, ratifying the decision that the person has already made. This is very, very, very important.

When a person is in sin and heading away from Jesus, they are in the darkness, they are not in the light . . . and you've pointed that out to them not once, not twice, but three times now and at that point they have decided by their actions that they are out of fellowship with the Church.

And this final stage of Church discipline simply ratifies - agrees with - their decision - the decision they have made on their own - a decision that we have been trying to talk them out of. Doesn't that put a whole different slant on things? It is not our job to purify the Church by kicking out all the ones who are not holy like us. That has nothing to do with it. The Church is made up of people who are following Jesus - not sinless - but following Jesus. Now when one of those people stops following Jesus and we do all in our power to correct them and it doesn't work - we simply give formal recognition to what they have already decided.

And then what do we do? We treat them like 'tax collectors and pagans'. How do we treat tax collectors and pagans? How should we treat them? How did Jesus treat them? He had lunch with them - He reached out to them - He said 'Follow me'. And that's the message we have for those inside and outside the Church - follow Jesus. We evangelise them.

And Church discipline, rightly understood, is the loving, caring, deliberate, powerful, binding way of ensuring that happens. God doesn't want us to kick people out of Churches. He wants to bring them in - but in the right way.

The Church of Jesus Christ is built on the idea that we need each other as co-pilots. We need to love each other. We need each other to hold up mirrors so that our blind spots can be seen. We need each other to come after us when we go into the ditch, to dig us out, turn us around and head us towards Jesus, if at any time we are moving away from Him.

That's the Church that Jesus built and that's the Church that you and I want to be part of.

Am I right?

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