

# Restoration and the Exercise of Church Discipline

We as a people are called to be holy because our God is holy. (1 Peter 1:14-16) As a church we are to be clothed in righteousness preparing ourselves for the return of our Lord. (Revelation 19:6-8; Ephesians 5:25-27) We have been saved from our sins not only in position but in practice. And over and over again the Scriptures call us to walk in the newness of life.

Being fallible men and women, we are not always holy in our conduct but our inability to achieve sinless perfection is no excuse for giving up the attempt. We are commanded, when we become aware of sin in our lives, to confess those sins and to forsake them and strive to lead holy lives. The believer is, for the most part, to judge himself, and through repentance and confession, experience the cleansing power of the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ and the filling of the Holy Spirit (1 John 1:9).

But there will be some sins we either cannot or will not handle on our own. And so the Lord has committed unto all of us who are part of His body a responsibility to gently and lovingly reprove any of our brothers and sisters we see straying from the truth.

## **Our Objective: Restoration**

The object of our exhorting one another is restoration. (Galatians 6:1) We are to approach one another in a spirit of humility, honestly looking at ourselves and recognizing that we are all prone to fall into sin. (Galatians 6:2) But using the Scriptures as our authority we are to confront sin in each other whenever we see it. This is a commitment we share as fellow members of the body of Christ: to not allow a brother or sister in Christ to continue to sin. For their sake, as well as the sake of the body of Christ, we go to them. (1 Corinthians 12:26) In order to restore our brother or sister, to preserve the purity of the church and her worship (1 Corinthians 5:6-8), to deter others from sin (1 Timothy 5:20), to glorify God by obedience to His Word, we are to lovingly rebuke, reprove and exhort any believer we see committing sin. But our main object is always to express to our brother the heart of God, to forgive him and to see him restored to righteous living.

## **A Pattern to Follow**

Jesus gave us a pattern to follow in Matthew 18:15-20. He tells us first to reprove our brother in private. The Greek text puts it strongly: "between you and him alone." Show him his fault but do it in private, not seeking the counsel of others first, not enlisting prayer support from friends or family, but privately, between you and him alone, bring his sin to light and ask him to repent. If he listens to you, it is over. You have won your brother.

If he refuses to bear the truth, Jesus says, the next step is to take one or two others with you and try again. Sit down with him and show him what the Scriptures have to say on that issue and do so with a loving and gentle spirit. The object is still restoration, and

enlisting two or three witnesses is not an attempt to try to force a response. Rather it is meant to show a sinning brother that this is not a personal attack on the part of one individual, but an issue that affects the entire body. If he still won't repent and forsake his sin, Jesus says to tell it to the entire church. The purpose of this is again constructive and redemptive. The hope is that other members of the body who know that individual will go to him and appeal to him and pray for him. Then, Jesus says, if he will not respond even to the church, we are to treat him as a tax gatherer and a sinner. This does not mean to make him an outcast, but rather to treat him as an unbeliever, as one who is outside the family of God.

Our entire relationship to such a one should then be aimed at bringing him to repentance and faith in Christ. Jesus' point is that any person who can resist the kind of loving treatment outlined here must not be a Christian.

### **The Discipline of the Body**

The apostle Paul takes this teaching a step further. In 1 Corinthians 5:11 he exhorts the Corinthian church not to associate with any so called brother who persists in sin, not even to eat with them. Let him see clearly that his actions dishonor God and the name of Christ and that you can no longer treat him as a member of God's family.

The same teaching is repeated in II Thessalonians 3:6,14,15 with a necessary connective. Here Paul says, "And yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother." The verb tense literally tendered is "keep on admonishing." As an act of love (after all he is not the enemy but the victim of the enemy) we are to limit all our contacts to a call for repentance. It does your brother no good if you allow him to continue in sin without confrontation. The purpose of this entire process from start to finish is repentance and restoration. The confrontations become progressively more extreme only as the sin shows itself to be more deeply imbedded. At any point in the process if the wayward one repents, he is to be fully forgiven and accepted once again into the fellowship of the church. (Matt 18:21-35; 11 Cor 2:5-11).

### **Our Commitment**

Our commitment to church discipline at Westbrooke grows out of our love for one another. Our concern is not to make any person conform to some arbitrary standard we set forth.