

Proposition: Public Sin Demands a Public Response!

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The congregations of our Church body are organized to bring honor and glory to the Lord as we share his word with others. "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven." We join Joseph in his eagerness to avoid sinning against the God who was so kind to him. We join the angel choirs praising the Lord each week for his great goodness to us. We gather together to honor the Lord. And few things publicly interfere more with the honoring of the Lord than the problem of public sin. When members within the church of God deliberately violate the Word of God for all to see with no regard for his honor, the dedication of the entire congregation is called into question. And the question is answered by how the congregation responds to the situation. While all of our congregations face the problem of public sin, we do not all react to it in the same way. In some cases our churches may not react at all. The problems of understaffing of the office of the ministry, the fear of the people's reactions, and other earthly concerns prevent congregations from reacting to the problem. When this happens, we bring shame to the God we gather to honor. This presentation is meant to give all of us an opportunity to discuss how our congregations respond to public sin. It is our prayer that God will lead us to a consensus on this issue and help us to lead our congregations to God pleasing reactions when they are confronted with such situations.

Public Sin - A Definition

Before we go any further, we need to establish a working definition of the term Public Sin. For our purposes today, we define Public Sin in the following way: *Public Sin is defined as any sin which is publicly known by all the people of the congregation. Any sin which everyone knows about is Public Sin.*

There are a number of situations which can serve as examples of public sin. These are examples we see in our congregations with alarming regularity. For example, sometimes Christians commit sins which are then noted in the local newspapers for all to read. When Christians are arrested for shoplifting or for public drunkenness, the newspapers print the details. When people seek unscriptural divorces, the divorce is publicly noted in the newspaper. These are sins which everyone knows about. These are Public Sins. Public sin can be the woman who conceives a child out of wedlock. The birth is announced in the newspapers. At the Baptism we print the names of mother and child in the Bulletin. And as she worships with her new child each week and remains unmarried, the members of the congregation cannot help but notice what has taken place. This is public sin. When members publicly renounce the Word of God through sinful actions in group congregational meetings or gatherings such as Voters Meetings or Church Picnics, we have sin which everyone knows about. These are public sins.

Please understand that it is not our contention that sins like this are more evil than sins committed in private. The man who steals and gets away with it is just as guilty before the Lord as the man who is arrested as he leaves the store. But when sins become publicly known, they carry the potential for greater harm to the congregation, the community, the individual who sinned, and the honor of God. Therefore in the case of public sin the need to react publicly is greater on the part of the congregation. The issue before us is how should our congregations respond to public sin. What is proper before the Lord?

In discipline cases in general and in the area of public sin in particular, God tells us that there are three general principles by which we can measure the propriety of our response. The first one is **concern for the Honor of God**. God has brought us into his family as individuals to give honor to him in our lives. God has brought us together as congregations to jointly praise his name and bring him glory. We are congregations dedicated to glorifying God. If we are going to maintain this purpose, we must be sure that any reaction we show to public sin honors the Lord for all to see. If we do not bring honor to the Lord and show others how the

Lord and his Word matter to us in our reaction, we are not responding properly to public sin.

A second principle which requires our attention is **concern for the brother or sister trapped in the public sin**. These people face great danger. They have publicly left the path of God and violated his honor. All the people around them are witnesses of this lapse. Their guilt, their fear of God's wrath, their own misery can easily form a trap which will imprison them in their sin and prevent them from laying hold of the forgiveness of Christ. Judas fell into such a trap and it led him down the road of despair. When our congregations react to public sin, we must take care to make sure the action we take is one which has the best interests of the brother or sister at heart.

And the final principle which deserves our consideration is **concern for the other members of the congregation**. It is a difficult thing to follow the Lord in this world. The devil is constantly urging us to see that there is no point in trying to do what is right. When brothers or sisters listen to the devil's lies and give in to his temptations publicly, it makes it that much harder for the rest of the members to stand their ground for God's honor. The adage that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link applies well to the Church of God. In churches when one couple is unscripturally divorced, other such divorces become more likely. In churches where one or two become pregnant before marriage, other such situations become more likely. All are endangered by the action of the one. So any reaction we show toward public sin must be an action which displays our concern for the welfare and protection of the rest of the believers who are struggling to maintain the honor of the Lord.

Now you may have already concluded that there is a natural tension between these principles. When we strive to honor God, we may not always be taking a path which is easiest for the one who has sinned. When we strive to minimize discomfort or pain to the one who sinned, it is not always so clear to all that we are valuing the Lord's honor. As we deal with public sin, we will have to set priorities on the principles which guide us. And those priorities will not always be the same. What is best for one situation may not be best for another. So before we proceed to apply the principles of Scripture to public sin, we must study the Word of God in situations where these principles were applied. In this way we can become more knowledgeable in their application.

Baal of Peor

The incident at Baal of Peor in Numbers 25 is one such incident. Many within the nation of Israel engaged in the sin of sexual immorality and worship of the false gods of Moab. The Moabite women led the Israelite men into these sins. Clearly, the people were dishonoring their God by their actions. God commanded Moses to "take all the leaders of these people, kill them and expose them in broad daylight before the Lord, so that the Lord's fierce anger may turn away from Israel." Note that even though not everyone in Israel was committing these sins, God's anger was with the whole nation. He held as responsible both those who committed the sin and those who stood silently by while the sins were committed. As a result the people were facing a plague on the entire nation. Moses passed this command on to the Judges of Israel. While they were holding this meeting and planning this action, a man named Zimri brought a woman named Cozbi to his tent. "An Israelite man brought to his family a Midianite woman right before the eyes of Moses and the whole assembly of Israel while they were weeping at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting." This brought the matter to a head. Phinehas, the priest, was so outraged for God's honor here that he took a spear and drove it through both the man and the woman and killed them. At once the plague which God had sent on Israel ceased. And we read in v.10, "The Lord said to Moses, 'Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the Priest has turned my anger away from the Israelites, for he was as zealous as I am for my honor among them...'"

The priorities of this incident are very clear. God's honor is first. It was for the sake of his honor that God commanded Moses to act and it was zeal for God's honor which propelled Phinehas to act. God praised him for this. The welfare of the Israelite nation was second. As long as God was not being honored, the entire nation of Israel was at risk, in this case by a plague. It was imperative that Phinehas act now to save the people. The welfare of those sinning was last. It can be argued that acting with force against the leaders of the sinners

was best for those committing this sin. In the action of Phinehas they could clearly see that their behavior was so evil it could not be tolerated. The lesson then clearly sets God's honor forward as the major issue to be satisfied.

Achan's Sin

Joshua 7 tells the story of Achan. His sin at Jericho was private. He hid what he stole and no one knew that he did it. Yet God tells us in v.1 that "...the Israelites acted unfaithfully... so the Lord's anger burned against Israel." Several reasons come to mind as to why all Israel was responsible before God. It may be that the sin Achan committed was made possible because of a prevalent attitude among the people toward the plunder of Jericho. Even though the people knew that all of it belonged to the Lord, they may well have walked through the city and openly talked of taking the things that they saw for themselves. Even though they did not take any, they could have helped create an atmosphere in which Achan could have been led to think that his action of actually taking something was in line with what everyone else was thinking. Or it may be that God so connects believers through faith as brothers and sisters in Christ, that we become responsible for the actions of each other and God expects us to exercise vigilance in looking out for one another. There are a number of passages in the Bible which would support such a theory. Detailed explanations are lacking in this case to know which theory applies.

Yet it is clear that violation of the Lord's honor is again the issue. And again all Israel suffers for this violation, this time in the battle at Ai. God commanded the action to be taken in v.15. "He who is caught with the devoted things shall be destroyed by fire, along with all that belongs to him." The Israelites stoned Achan and his family, burned their bodies, and buried them under a pile of rocks for all to see. The priorities in this matter are the same as those at Baal Peor. God's honor must be defended. Only by doing this can the welfare of the entire nation be safe-guarded both from the Lord's vengeance and from desecrating God's honor themselves. The pile of stones stood for years after this incident as a warning to the Israelites, calling upon them to honor the Lord. Achan's benefit was found in the opportunity he had to repent before they stoned him.

The Altar Called Witness

This brings us to Joshua 22 and the Altar Called Witness. This was a case of misunderstanding. When the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and 1/2 of Manasseh returned to their land across the Jordan after the wars to conquer the promised land, these tribes built an altar on the eastern shores of the Jordan. When the rest of the tribes heard of this, they were outraged. God had commanded the Israelites to worship only at God's altar in God's holy place and already these eastern tribes seemed to be violating that command. The rest of Israel gathered at Shiloh to go to war over this matter. They sent Phinehas ahead with a delegation to try and reason with the offending tribes first. Phinehas went to Gilead with this message in v.16ff, "The whole assembly of the Lord says, `How could you break faith with the God of Israel like this? How could you turn away from the Lord and build yourselves an altar in rebellion against him now?'" (Note here that Phinehas speaks for the Lord and sets the honor of God before the eyes of the offending tribes as the issue.) "Was not the sin of Peor enough for us? Up to this very day we have not cleansed ourselves from that sin, even though a plague fell on the community of the Lord!" (Note here that Phinehas was expressing concern for the welfare of the rest of Israel. The offending tribes seemed to be endangering them all once again. They were forgetting the lesson learned at Baal Peor.)

The 2 and 1/2 tribes explained that this was not an altar on which to worship. This was an altar of witness. Its purpose was to tell succeeding generations of Israel on the western side of the Jordan that those descendants on the eastern side were truly part of Israel and had proven it by their vital service in the taking of the land. They told Phinehas that it was their fervent intention to maintain the honor of the Lord. Note how Phinehas and Israel responded to this news in v.31 & 33. "Today we know that the Lord is with us, because you have not acted unfaithfully toward the Lord in this matter. Now you have rescued the Israelites from the Lord's hand... (the Israelites) were glad to hear the report and praised God..." It is obvious from the response of

Phinehas to this matter that the priorities were the honor of God and the welfare of the nation of Israel. By maintaining faithfulness to God's honor, the eastern tribes had "rescued the Israelites from the Lord's hand" according to Phinehas. In this approach, any concern for the discomfort of the 2 and 1/2 tribes was secondary when compared with the two more important priorities.

Gibeah, the Levite, and his Concubine

Public sin is more clearly detailed in the painful experience recorded in Judges 19-21. There we learn of the way Israel dealt with the town of Gibeah and the tribe of Benjamin over the matter of the Levite and his concubine. When the nation of Israel was alerted to the atrocity by the Levite, they decided with one voice that those who did this must be punished. It is clear from Judges 20:10 that the issue in the minds of Israel here was the "vileness" of the deed. Israel was a nation whose people honored God. An act of evil such as the rape and murder of an innocent woman had no place in their nation. When the tribe of Benjamin stood opposed to the Israelite intention, a war ensued and Benjamin was nearly destroyed. Note the tremendous price in manpower which Israel had to pay to act in this situation. Israel lost over 40,000 men and the tribe of Benjamin lost over 25,000. Yet the honor of the Lord mattered enough to Israel that they accepted the price.

Note too in this matter the town of Jabesh-Gilead did not answer the call of Israel to take action. They stayed home. When the rest of Israel learned of this matter in Judges 21, they sent an army of 12,000 to Jabesh-Gilead and destroyed all the people except the unmarried women. These women became wives for the remaining people of Benjamin. Again, note the priorities. The honor of God was the first issue to be addressed. Next came the welfare of the nation. If Israel allowed such evil to live unchallenged in its midst, it would not be long before the entire nation would be a place where evil ran rampant. Any concern for the welfare of the people of Gibeah and the tribe of Benjamin was secondary to the first two concerns.

The Woman Taken In Adultery

In the New Testament we can find a number of situations where these principles were applied. One is listed in John 8 where we find a woman taken in adultery. Here the priorities seem to shift. The woman was caught by the leaders of the Jewish people in the act of adultery. There was no doubt as to her guilt. The Pharisees brought her to Jesus as a public example with this question in v.4, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" It was their intention to use this situation to find fault with Jesus' answer. The Lord used it instead to teach us how to respond to sin. In this case the honor of God was satisfied by the public condemnation of the woman and what she had done. She was standing before the moral leaders of her society and all of them were in agreement that she had done a terrible and unacceptable evil. There was no debate about that. In the eyes of everyone, including herself, this woman was the face of evil. Just by looking at her, everyone in their society could tell that dishonoring God through the act of adultery was unacceptable behavior. But the religious leaders wanted more. They wanted her stoned. Their zeal was not like that of Phinehas who was moved by his love for God's honor. These Pharisees were moved more by their own self-righteousness. In stoning this woman, they could somehow validate how upright they were. Jesus would not allow such hypocrisy. He told them that any one there who had no sin could be the first to cast a stone. One by one they left. And the Lord turned to the woman and told her "neither do I condemn you, go now and leave your life of sin." The welfare of God's honor and of the Jewish society was protected by the public condemnation of the act. The welfare of the woman was served in the public forgiveness of God which gave her the strength to leave her sinful living pattern.

Sexual Immorality in Corinth

The congregation at Corinth provides us with another example of the principles in action. They dealt with a man who committed an act of public sexual immorality. It was an ongoing act which even the unbelieving society around the congregation found reprehensible. The members of the church ignored the sin

and told themselves that their tolerance was a sign of how forgiving they were. When Paul learned of this matter he wrote to them and told them they must act at once. The Lord's honor was being shamed and they were allowing it. That is not something they should boast about. And the presence of this sin in their midst was threatening all the members of the church. As Paul put it, "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough." Therefore God inspired Paul to command that the congregation of Corinth "hand the man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord."

Note the priorities here. Clearly Paul like Phinehas is moved by zeal for the Lord's honor. The entire congregation is shamed when one of its members dishonors God so visibly. Paul was also concerned for the protection of the rest of the members. It would be much harder for them to work hard at living on the path of righteousness out of love for God when one in their midst was visibly not working at it at all and it was tolerated. And most clearly, Paul was concerned for the welfare of the sinful man. Paul explains that the act of discipline in putting this man out of the church, "handing him over to Satan," was an act of love done for the man's own good. Only through such an action could this man's blindness be dispelled. Only then could he see clearly that he had done wrong. In II Cor. 2 we learn that the Lord blessed this action and brought the man to true repentance.

Tolerance in Pergamum and Thyatira

The final example for our consideration in this presentation is found in Rev.2. God writes a letter here through John to the churches in Pergamum and Thyatira. In both cases the Lord began by commending the Christians for the progress they had made in their faith. In Pergamum the people held on to their faith in Jesus even in the face of persecution. In Thyatira the Christians had grown in their faith and shown that growth in their visible deeds of love.

But both churches committed the same sin. They tolerated evil in their midst instead of dealing with it. The church at Pergamum tolerated people who followed the sin of Balaam and others who were Nicolaitans. God commanded the Christians to repent and he threatened to come and deal with the offenders himself if the Christians were unwilling to do their job. In Thyatira the Christians were tolerating the "woman called Jezebel." Here God told the Christians he will not tolerate this woman. He will deal with her in such a way that all the world will know that he is God. His action contrasts greatly with the actions of the congregation. They chose to tolerate. God chooses to deal with her. In both these cases we seem to have congregations which were unwilling to apply the principles of discipline to the situations which they faced. They did not defend the honor of God which was entrusted to their care. They did not defend one another by standing strongly against the evil. And they did not help those trapped in the sin by speaking against what they were doing. God sent a message to both saying that he would do what they were afraid to do and he reproached them for their fear.

Conclusion

There is much we can learn from the examples of Scripture noted above. It is very clear that each of our congregations is entrusted with the honor of God. Our churches are the keepers of God's honor in a world where God is not honored at all. When the devil succeeds in leading our members to publicly dishonor God, we must respond at once. There is too much at stake to turn our heads. If we do not honor God, who will in this world? If we do not defend the rest of our members from the leaven of wickedness, who will in this world? If we do not stand by the side of those trapped in sin and show them that such conduct is not fitting for people who honor the Lord, who will help them? From all that we have read, it seems that the worst thing we can do in the face of public sin is turn our heads and look the other way or stand silently by and not do anything. The conclusion which we draw from the points of Scripture studied in this paper is simply this: Public Sin Calls For Public Response!