

Church Discipline When Fellowship Principles Are Involved

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The Need For Discipline In Doctrinal Matters

Every now and then we learn that one of our members is doing one or more of the following: 1) worshiping and even communing in churches outside our fellowship; 2) listening regularly to heterodox religious broadcasts on TV or radio; 3) attending Bible classes or other religious gatherings led by non-Wisconsin Synod people, such as the Full Gospel Businessmen's Association; 4) sending money to media preachers of other fellowships, such as Oral "give-or-I-will-die" Roberts; or even reading *Awake!* and *The Plain Truth* regularly. What should our attitude be toward such activities? How does the Lord want us to deal with situations like that when they come to our attention?

Certainly, we would never claim that only Wisconsin Synod Lutherans are going to be saved or that only we preach Christ. In Paul's day there were those who preached Christ out of envy, strife and contention, and yet he rejoiced that Christ was preached by them (Phil. 1:15-18). So we rejoice when others in other fellowships preach Christ.

However, it is a fact that the various Christian groups and denominations of today do not teach the same things. Some deny infant baptism. Some teach that Christ's body and blood are not present in the Sacrament. Some turn people's hopes to this earth by teaching that Christ will return and rule as an earthly king for a thousand years. Even Lutheran denominations have been infested with liberals who teach that perhaps Christ did not rise from the dead or perform any miracles. And as we know, the Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and Armstrong's Church of God do not even have the Gospel, and thus are not even Christian.

Yet in almost every denomination there is a growing feeling that it does not matter that error is taught. As long as someone is willing to say, "Jesus died on the cross," he is accepted. It does not matter what else he believes or doesn't believe. Methodists and Episcopalians exchange pulpits; the priest and the ELCA minister officiate at the same wedding.

Certainly, this spirit of tolerance toward error is not the spirit of the Bible. Note the "all things" of Mt. 28:20, the warning against adding or subtracting from the Word in Rev. 22:18-19, or note Paul's urgency as he corrects errors regarding the Lord's Supper among the Corinthians (I Cor. 11), or as he condemns work-righteousness among the Galatians. Or note the treatment of false doctrine in II John. The Bible is full of warnings against false doctrine, echoing the warning of our Savior Himself to "watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves" (Mt. 7:15).

There will always be those who speak out against the disciplining of errorists, and at first glance their arguments may seem very logical and very loving:

- We must not discipline these poor, misguided brethren, but rather show love to them.
- We must stay in fellowship with those who teach and uphold false doctrine that we might convert them from their errors.
- Discipline must be avoided lest we give outsiders a harsh image of the church.
- Jesus wants all Christians to get together so they can bear a united witness to this godless world. Therefore discipline must be avoided lest a more serious and more public split develop.

It is not necessary to refute the arguments given above. All of you recognize the fallacies in them. They may seem to be logical and loving, but after investigation one finds that they are not logical and loving at all, and what is more important, neither are they Scriptural.

Our point here is that church discipline is not the norm in Christianity today, but rather the exception.

Very few main-line Christian churches exercise doctrinal discipline today. In fact, most church leaders feel that doctrinal uniformity is impossible and even undesirable. From our study of Lutheranism in the USA we recall that liberal Lutherans have always maintained that fellowship could be had merely on the basis of agreement on the Augsburg Confession. They were content with “open Questions” regarding matters not treated by the Augsburg Confession. It is sad but true, that the spirit of religious pluralism is not confined to other denominations but is very popular among many Lutherans also.

One of the reasons church discipline is sometimes resented among Christians may be the fact that at various times church discipline has been misused. Recall how the whole country of France was put under the ban by the Pope because the King of France would not send his soldiers to be wasted in the meatgrinder of the Crusades. Today the Roman Catholic Church still seems to have the habit of reserving its harshest discipline for those who violate the man-made laws of the church.

To us, however, it is obvious that church discipline should have a respected place in church life, because it is something established and commanded by God. When done properly, it is an action which is designed to win people back to Christ and to the church, not to drive them away. It is an attempt to show a person how serious his sin is and to lead him to repentance. It is the last emphatic act of love of a congregation determined to win a former brother back from unrepentance and unbelief. An unrepentant sinner is an unbeliever (Luke 13:3-5; Acts 2:38). People who love their fellowmen will not allow them to be lost without expending every effort to regain them. Hence church discipline.

Some years back, Ewald Otto, a Missouri Synod pastor, wrote in a theological magazine called *Affirm*:

“Where, really, does this thing called discipline come from? Despite liberal opinion, it is not the invention of hardheaded legalists or dour malcontents. Discipline is of God! The Bible is full of it. Discipline is to start early in life. “Train up a child...” “Ye fathers, bring up your children...” The Lord of the church also made discipline basic to the function and to the very existence and life of the church. The risen Christ's first words to the apostolic group Easter evening was, “Whosoever sins ye remit they are remitted unto them, and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained.” In Matthew 18 the Lord clearly spells out for the church the procedure to be followed when “thy brother shall trespass.” One would expect, for this reason, that the place of discipline, among those claiming allegiance to God's Word, would be unquestioned in the life of the church established by the God of all authority. Yet it is not so obvious to many, and more than a few want no discipline in the church.¹

When you think of it, there is discipline everywhere we go in life; at home, at school, at our jobs, on the streets of our town. Why wouldn't we want it also in the church where immortal souls are at stake? Certainly, a case could be made to show that church discipline is especially important when it comes to matters of doctrine, simply because these are matters which pertain to the soul.

Consider the fact that false doctrine undermines and destroys the life of the soul. That the Lord by His grace often prevents it from becoming fatal, even in the false prophets themselves, is beside the point. It is the Word of God and the Word alone that nourishes and preserves faith. Adulterate the Word by omitting something, changing something, or adding something, and faith is endangered. Hence the Savior bids us to beware of false prophets, bids us to detect them, to recognize them for what they are, to be on guard against them, to have no fellowship with them, lest we suffer spiritual harm through their destructive activity.²

The Apostle John counsels us to take an uncompromising stand toward false doctrine. He commands us not to give an appearance of sympathy toward it or to aid in the spread of it in any way. He says: “Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work.” (II John 9-11) God forbids us to share in the wicked work of the false prophet by granting him any aid or comfort in his work. To do so is to commit a sin just as serious before God as the sin of the false prophet himself.

¹ *Affirm*, October, 1973, p 2.

² *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 51, October, 1954, p. 287.

C. A. Hardt describes the guilt of the man who aids and comforts the false prophet as follows:

“In more than one way will he who fellowships with an adherent of false doctrine be sharing in his evil deeds. He sins against the Lord, being indifferent to his Word. He sins against the church, for he gives offense to its members by leading them to believe that one doctrine is as good as another, thus making them indifferent. He sins against the false teachers by strengthening them in their convictions that they possess the truth, instead of helping them by testifying against their error in all meekness. He sins against his soul, because he exposes himself to the corrupting influence of error, which is never static but spreads.” (“Christian Fellowship,” C. A. Hardt, *Concordia Theological Monthly*, Vol. XVI, p 520)³ 3

It is not difficult to find Biblical support for what we have just read. Passages such as the following certainly apply: John 8:31-32; II Tim. 2:17-19; Tit. 3:10; Gal. 6:1.

You'll recall that the topic of our assigned paper is “Church Discipline When Fellowship Principles Are Involved.” Thus far we have talked about the need for discipline, especially in regard to matters of doctrine. We've been reminded of the danger of false doctrine. And we have heard God's warning lest we share in the wickedness of others by offering aid and comfort to the false prophet. Before we take up the matter of how to discipline our members who are caught up in doctrinal error, it might be well to also spend some time discussing a very important Biblical fellowship principle:

The Need For Doctrinal Unity In Fellowship

There is, of course, a blessed and glorious invisible fellowship of believers. Every Sunday we confess our faith in its existence when we say, “I believe in the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints.” That fellowship is and (on this earth) always will be invisible. Knowing it exists and knowing we are a part of it, we Christians very naturally seek to enjoy also an outward and visible fellowship with our fellow believers. The Lord has told us not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together (Heb. 10:25). Willingly and according to His command, we gather into congregations to worship Him and to confess the glory of His name.

But what is the basis for our outward, visible Christian fellowship? With whom are we to join in worship? Or in other words, whom may we recognize and acknowledge as Christian brethren? Since faith is a matter of the heart and recognizable only by God, it would be presumptuous on our part to try to recognize Christians on the basis of the personal faith in their hearts.⁴ Therefore the basis for our Christian fellowship must be our fellow Christians' confession of faith. The Bible says: “Test the spirits to see whether they are from God.... This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God...” (I John 4:1-2) This passage tells us that the confession of our fellow men is the basis for our recognition of our fellowship with them. But not just any confession will do! Not a flawed or incorrect confession of faith!

Here all those passages come into consideration which limit and restrict our practice of fellowship to those who confess only the truth of God's Word: “I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.” (Rom. 16:17-18) “In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us.... If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.” (II Thess. 3:6, 14-15) A list of other passages might include the following: John 8:31; Matt. 7:15; Matt. 18:15-17; Tit. 3:10; Gal. 1:8-9; II John 9-11; Jer. 23:25-28, 31; Deut. 4:2; Rev. 22:18-19; Rev. 2:14,15,20; II Tim. 2:17; Gal. 2:9; I Cor. 1:10-11. Again, we acknowledge as Christian brethren those who profess faith in Christ as their Savior and with this profession embrace and accept His entire Word. If a person denies the truth of God's Word,

³ *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 82, Spring, 1985, p. 94.

⁴ *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 51, October, 1954, p 275.

our basis of fellowship with him has vanished. If he refuses to retract his error, fellowship is impossible and unscriptural.

Disciplining Those In Error

Now to the heart of our paper. If discipline is necessary in doctrinal matters, and if doctrinal unity is necessary for fellowship, how then shall we deal with people in our midst who in one way or another identify themselves as errorists? What do we do when we find out that one of our members is a member of the lodge or the boy scouts, or sending money to Billy Graham, or singing regularly in the worship services at the Jewish synagogue? What do we do if one of our members in commenting on the sermon text says, "I really wonder sometimes if some of those things in the Bible really happened. I wish I had more proof?" Should we immediately rail on such people with dire threats and curses and take immediate steps to proceed with their excommunication?

Here we will follow the same principles that guide our actions in disciplining those who are caught in other kinds of sins. Lovingly and patiently we will show the one in error what God says about the matter in His Word. We will do it in the manner Paul describes in Gal. 6:1: "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently;" and as he states in II Tim. 2:25: "Those who oppose him he (the Lord's servant) must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth."

We will remember that here too, as in all cases of discipline, our goal is to gain our brother. In Matthew 18 we find the pattern our Lord Himself has prescribed in matters of discipline. First we will go alone and plead with our brother, not just once, perhaps, but several times. Then we will take one or two others along so that we may have witnesses and some help in bringing our brother back to the truth. This step too may be repeated more than once. Finally, if the brother does not listen though admonished by the whole congregation, we must acknowledge that he is not one of us. Our Lord's concern as it is revealed in Matthew 18 is that a sinner receive every possible opportunity to be instructed and won by God's Word. His impenitence becomes evident when he refuses to bow to this Word of God.⁵

Just as we do not differentiate between sins in other kinds of discipline, so in doctrinal discipline it does not matter what doctrine is denied. Sin is sin. False doctrine is false doctrine. Most important in discipline is the attitude of the person toward his sin or doctrinal aberration. Therefore we will want to distinguish between the weak brother and the persistent errorist.

The Weak Brother

It is important to note that the Bible distinguishes between the weak brother and the persistent errorist. Prof. Carl Lawrence draws from Jesus' dealings with His disciples, showing how Jesus dealt particularly with those who were weak in faith:

"In the Gospels we frequently hear Jesus warning, rebuking, chiding His disciples for being of 'little faith.' They gave way to anxious worries and cares about their earthly needs. In the midst of a storm at sea they were on the verge of giving way to despair.... It was not, however, that in principle they denied God's fatherly care.... Their weakness rather consisted in this that they were not yet quite able to live up to these truths. The hand of faith with which they embraced and held them was still feeble.... Such weakness of faith does not prevent expressions of Christian fellowship. It rather calls for them. Consider how Jesus dealt with His disciples when symptoms of little faith showed themselves. He rebuked them sharply, blamed them for having a Gentile mind. But He also instructed them with all patience and tenderness. In their worries and cares He lifted up their hearts by calling their attention to God's providence in nature and then reminding them that they were more than the birds of the air and the lilies of the field in God's eyes.... Then He granted them a new manifestation of His grace and power in rebuking wind and sea

⁵ Schuetze and Habeck, *The Shepherd Under Christ*, pp 173-174.

before their eyes. The Lord is not pleased to see our faith weak. For a weak faith is in constant danger of dying out altogether and thus of losing the rich blessing which it still enjoys. Yet the Lord recognized also those of weak faith as His believers; and we will want to do likewise. With Him we are not to break the bruised reed or quench the smoking flax but lovingly to make every effort to restore them to healthy vigor. Weak brethren distinguish themselves from scoffers and unbelievers in their willingness to receive spiritual help and instruction.”⁶

Another example of how the weak brother should be treated can be found in Romans 14. There the weak brother could not bring himself to eat meat that was sacrificed to an idol. This was an adiaphoron, something neither commanded nor forbidden by God, but the person's conscience unnecessarily condemned the action as sin. The Apostle Paul was patient and sympathetic as he instructed the conscience of the weak and erring brother. Other examples of patient, loving instruction of the weak can be found in Paul's dealings with the Galatians, who were being misled by the Judaizers; with the Corinthians, who were having second thoughts about the resurrection; and with the Thessalonians, who were confused about the doctrine concerning Christ's return for judgment. Even when Paul met some brethren at Ephesus who had not heard that there was a Holy Ghost (Acts 19:2), he did not immediately make fellowship an issue, but rather by instruction remedied their lack of knowledge.

But always there are two principles that direct us in matters of church discipline when fellowship principles are involved. First of all, there is the debt of love the Lord would have us pay the weak brother, but secondly, there is also His clear command to avoid those who cling to false doctrine and practice. For that reason we will deal with the persistent errorist differently from the way we deal with the weak brother.

The Persistent Errorist

Eventually, in our dealing with someone caught up in an error we may have to recognize that we are getting nowhere. The person clearly and consistently tells us that he rejects our testimony concerning the truth. He demands recognition of his error and the right to make propaganda for it. He makes it clear that he does not care what the Bible says. He intends to continue teaching and spreading the opposite. Obviously, we are dealing with an unrepentant sinner. In Matthew 18 Jesus tells us that we cannot continue to cling to a sin in spite of earnest and brotherly admonition. When it becomes clear that this is the case, a severance of fellowship is necessary.

Though no timetable is given us and much is left up to our good Christian judgment, one important factor in deciding how quickly we deal with an errorist in the congregation would seem to be how vocal he is in spreading his error. The way the Apostle Paul dealt with the Judaizers serves as an example. With the Galatians, who were being misled, Paul was patient in his instruction and consistent in treating them as Christian brethren. But he treated the Judaizers who were misleading them much differently. He used very strong language against them. He said, “If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!” (Gal. 1:8-9) Fellowship with these vocal, persistent errorists was out of the question. Bible passages which would apply in the case of persistent errorists are the following: Gal. 5:9; Matt. 7:15-19; Matt. 16:6; II Tim. 2:17-19; II John 9-11; Rom. 16:17-18; Rev. 2:14-15, 20; and others.

Excommunication Vs. Suspension

When discussing excommunication vs. suspension it is important to keep in mind that it is possible for a persistent errorist to believe in Jesus. His divergence from the truth may involve a doctrinal error which does not immediately destroy the foundation of his faith in Christ. He may believe his error out of ignorance and defend it even when admonished from Scripture. But when such a person still looks to Jesus as his Savior and seeks forgiveness from Him for all of his sins, both the known and the unknown, he is not to be declared “a

⁶ *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 51, October, 1954, pp 278-279.

heathen man and a publican,” but rather a persistent errorist.⁷ In such a case the person is removed from the fellowship not because he is an unbeliever, but because as a promoter of error he is dangerous and is disrupting “the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” (Eph. 4:3) We call this removal from fellowship suspension, separation, or termination of fellowship.

The fact that a false teacher or persistent errorist can believe is shown, for example, in I Corinthians Chapter 3. There Paul speaks of one who builds on the foundation of Jesus Christ “using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw,” a reference to false doctrine. Speaking of Judgment Day, Paul says, “His work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man’s work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.” (vv 13-15) Note: “He himself will be saved!” Obviously, such a person has not denied a fundamental doctrine, one which is necessary for the foundation of faith. Otherwise he could not be saved. He believed in Christ, even though his understanding concerning some points of doctrine was faulty.

In the case of a person who denies a fundamental doctrine necessary to salvation, such as the deity of Christ, the vicarious atonement or the resurrection from the dead, excommunication is in order. Now we are dealing with someone who is an unbeliever. We owe it to the person in love to tell him where he stands before God. The same is true also in the case of one whose heterodoxy involves a non-fundamental doctrine, but who defiantly shows that while he knows what God says, he will cling to his error nevertheless. He admits that he knows better, knows what the Lord has to say, but defiantly insists upon maintaining his heterodox position.⁸ Here the issue is a defiant attitude toward God and a sinning against better knowledge. This constitutes impenitence, and impenitence calls for excommunication.

Simply stated, in suspension we are not passing judgment on someone’s faith, but in excommunication we are. In suspending someone we are saying that the person may well believe in Jesus as his Savior, but his false doctrine keeps him outside our fellowship. In excommunication we are saying that through rejection of fundamental doctrines or through impenitence, the person is not even a Christian. Whether we suspend or excommunicate (neither term is in the Bible), we are following our Lord's directives in Rom. 16:17-18; Matt. 7:15; II Thess. 3:6,14-15; Tit. 3:10; I Cor. 1:10; Matt. 18; II John 9-11; and other passages as well.

Conclusion

The exercise of church discipline is important, also when fellowship principles are involved. Souls are at stake. Precious souls may be misled by error that is allowed to stand alongside the truth. The Lord’s will is that we exercise church discipline with errorists with love and with patience when possible, but also with firmness and dispatch when there is obstinacy and propaganda being spread for the error.

Church discipline is never easy. But we have our Lord’s precious encouragement. He says: “My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner away from his error will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.” (Jas. 5:19-20) Who of us wouldn’t want to have a part in such a blessed work? The Lord goes with us as we do His work. We are not alone. May this encourage us to be faithful in this and in all the blessed tasks and privileges he has given us.

⁷ *A Statement On Excommunication And Suspension From Membership In A Congregation*, 1973, p 1.

⁸ *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 73, April 1976, p 123.

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