

The Role Of Admonition In Termination Of Church Fellowship Between Church Bodies

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I. The Goal of Admonition

Scripture abounds in passages that enjoin upon every Christian the solemn duty of admonishing, guiding, correcting and restoring the weak and the erring. It does that in plain and literal language when it says, "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently" (Ga 6:1). Or James encourages his readers, "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" (5:19,20).

In addition to plain and direct command and encouragement, Scripture also dignifies the task of admonishing by describing the doer of it in the most engaging and winsome pictures. The admonisher is like a father disciplining a son (He 12:9), like a mother caring for her children (1 Th 2:7), like a guide keeping a blind man from falling into the ditch (Lk 6:39), like a shepherd guiding his sheep on the right path (Ps 23/Jn 10/Ac 20:29).

But perhaps none of these present a more forceful picture or quite so sustained a description of the purpose and role of admonition as does the description of that work as it was given to Ezekiel under the picture of being a "watchman." We take the liberty of quoting in their entirety the opening nine verses of the thirty-third chapter of Ezekiel:

The word of the Lord came to me: "Son of man, speak to your countrymen and say to them: When I bring the sword against a land and the people of the land choose one of their men and make him their watchman, and he sees the sword coming against the land and blows the trumpet to warn the people, then if anyone hears the trumpet but does not take warning and the sword comes and takes his life, his blood will be on his own head. Since he heard the sound of the trumpet but did not take warning, his blood will be on his own head. If he had taken warning, he would have saved himself.

'But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet to warn the people and the sword comes and takes the life of one of them, that man will be taken away because of his sin, but I will hold the watchman accountable for his blood.'

"Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you will surely die,' and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die for his sin; and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man to turn from his ways and he does not do so, he will die for his sin, but you will have saved yourself."

A study of this description of the watchman would seem to disclose four main tasks or roles in the activity of admonishing, although they are perhaps not all developed to the same degree of completeness. They are: to uphold God's honor; to protect the unwary; to warn the wayward; and to fulfill a God-given personal obligation.

To Uphold God's Honor

After first giving a general job description of the watchman's office and impressing on Ezekiel the seriousness of that task, God now makes it all very direct and personal by telling Ezekiel, "I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel."

Admonishing is not a private arrangement or a self-sought task. It is God who lays it on us, and it is his concerns that are to be the burden of our message. To Ezekiel God says, "So hear the word I speak and give them warning from me." The essence of Christian admonition is the warning: "What you are doing is contrary to God's will. God is offended by your activity." The impetus for admonishing is not personal indignation or a sense of outrage over some slight or injury to our person, but it is rather a genuine concern that there be conformity to God's will. In the final analysis, it is a love for God and the upholding of his honor that is one of the key objectives of Christian admonition.

To Protect the Unwary

A large part of a watchman's duty (perhaps the one that we might be inclined to think of first) is the critical matter of sounding an alarm for the unwary and unsuspecting citizenry of a city or principality. In fact, the most basic rationale for having a designated watchman is that he is to do the rank and file of the citizenry the service of watching for the enemy while they are occupied with other tasks. It is not that they abdicate responsibility for their own safety but rather that he renders them the service of providing a first alert. If he "sees the sword coming against the land," he is expected to "blow the trumpet to warn the people" (v. 3). It may be assumed that self-interest will motivate the majority of the townspeople to heed the trumpet call and take refuge in the city to assure their safety.

Christian admonition is much like that. We all daily get caught up in the cares and concerns of this earthly life. It is a special gift of God that he sets us together as members of his family where brothers and sisters do us the priceless service of admonishing us and alerting us to dangers that threaten to overtake us unawares.

Surely, that is another key goal of admonition and a precious blessing! But interestingly enough, that aspect of admonition gets much less treatment in Ezekiel's account than does the next one, namely, the warning of stubborn and wayward people.

To Warn the Wayward

A long section—in fact, the greatest part of this picturesque section from Ezekiel—speaks of help intended for people disinclined to hear or heed the warning call. It seems noteworthy, though perhaps not particularly surprising considering Israel's track record, that all the examples cited in this section turn out negative. The fourth and fifth verses are typical of the rest:

If anyone hears the trumpet but does not take warning and the sword comes and takes his life, his blood will be on his own head. Since he heard the sound of the trumpet but did not take warning, his blood will be on his own head. If he had taken warning, he would have saved himself.

At bottom the problem is that many who are confronted by the watchman really want to be doing what is distracting them from their own welfare and their own best interests. They prefer to continue on their careless way.

And spiritually too is that not the case with perhaps the majority of people who require our admonition? We find ourselves talking to people harboring pet sins and weaknesses, following the course of least resistance, refusing to overcome inertia. In short, they are people oblivious to or unconcerned about the fact that spiritually they are shooting themselves in the foot.

The faithful watchman's heart simply has to be concerned about a major role of admonition, that of warning the wayward in hopes of reclaiming and restoring them.

To Fulfill a God-given Personal Obligation

But in addition to a strong concern for God's honor and the welfare of our neighbor, there is also a highly personal factor inherent in admonishing. That aspect is the personal responsibility and the resultant guilt which attends the neglect of so solemn a responsibility as having saving information and not sharing it with others. Again, after a general description of how things go in a city or in a country, the Lord makes this all very personal and individual by telling Ezekiel explicitly:

When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you will surely die,' and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man to turn from his ways and he does not do so, he will die for his sin, but you will have saved yourself.

It is a chilling verdict to hear God say, "I will hold you accountable for his blood." Obedience to God's will, which clearly calls on us to exercise our duty of admonishing our fellow believers, is a powerful incentive to be zealous in our God-appointed task. To refuse to admonish, to neglect admonition, or to give it less than our best effort puts us at odds with that good and gracious God who, just two verses beyond the point where our section from Ezekiel cuts off, declares:

"As surely as I live," declares the Sovereign Lord, "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?"

We who are children of such a loving father, recipients of his grace, and endowed with his Spirit, will want to do no less than what he wants done in urging people to turn from their evil ways and live. But we need also to know that we dare do no less. To withhold correction where needed, to decline to admonish those for whom we have responsibility is to fall under the wrath of a holy God and to incur the just verdict, "Your brother's blood will be on your head." Well might we all repent of our halfhearted attempts, our missed opportunities, our outright refusals to admonish where our Lord has expected it of us.

II. The Role of Admonition in Terminating Church Fellowship Between Church Bodies

Although not spelled out in Ezekiel's picture of the watchman, implicit in the situation described there is an understanding that it is intolerable for admonition or warning to be given and then to allow that warning to go unheeded. Sounding the warning is a life and death matter, for the watchman who would become guilty of criminal omission and dereliction of duty if he didn't do it, as well as for the warned person whose life and safety depend on his acceptance of it. There is an exchange here between two parties so significant that it absolutely requires a response. The warning cannot be disregarded with impunity. If it is, there can't any longer be business as usual-as though nothing had happened. In some manner there has to come a parting of the ways. And that brings us to the heart of our discussion, the matter of terminating church fellowship.

The very wording used, terminating church fellowship, immediately sets one of the parameters within which our discussion will be held. It indicates that there is or formerly was fellowship. It forces us to ask how brothers who used to see eye to eye deal with one another when there arises a fundamental difference in their respective reactions to a perceived threat or danger. In short, the question is: What role does admonition play in the matter of terminating church fellowship?

There is an additional consideration in that we have agreed to restrict the scope of our discussion to the matter of terminating fellowship between church bodies. In principle, of course, dealing with church bodies bears some significant similarities to dealing with an individual, but the situations are by no means identical.

The subject is worthy of earnest consideration because termination of fellowship is serious business. It makes a statement about the church body which is being dealt with. It expresses the conviction that there are things in the doctrine and/or practice of that church body which are out of step with what Scripture teaches, and it charges that if those things are not rectified or repented of, they constitute a great danger to the spiritual life of the group and jeopardize the salvation of the individual souls within that group. Obviously such dire consequences are to be avoided if at all possible. A loving concern which seeks to protect brothers from such danger is the motivation that underlies Christian admonition. A loving spirit is an essential feature of all effective and God-pleasing admonition, including admonition given in connection with the matter of terminating fellowship between church bodies. Turning that observation into a double negative, we might posit the thesis:

Termination of Fellowship without Admonition Would Be Unscriptural and Loveless.

Loving admonition reflects the heart and mind of a gracious God who, in his unwillingness to cut off recalcitrant Israel, called Ezekiel as a watchman and gave him the urgent command:

Say to them (Israel), 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?' (v. 11).

Israel may still remain unfaithful. She may eventually have to be cut off, but termination of God's relationship with her—termination of fellowship, if you will—is not to come as a bolt out of the blue, as something sudden or unexpected. While a parting of the ways may become necessary, it is to be invoked only after the warmest and most winsome admonition has been attempted by God's appointed watchman. He will be motivated by the same love and concern that moves a faithful shepherd to seek a lost sheep (Mt 18:10-13). Loving admonition precedes termination of fellowship.

But does that square with Romans 16:17,18? It may have been a total misunderstanding; it may have been an impression that was taken rather than given, but there have been those who felt they heard explanations of the Romans passage which did not leave full opportunity for the loving activity of admonition before termination. Or to put that point a bit more concretely: Some have felt that so close an association may have been drawn between "marking" and "avoiding" as to make those two activities almost synonymous and thus in lock-step fashion to require that as soon as any aberration in doctrine or practice is detected, there must be an immediate severance of fellowship.¹

To probe that critical area we need to focus our attention on the two verbals *σκοπεῖν* and *ἐκκλίνετε*. It would seem advisable therefore in our discussion, while granting the close interrelationship between these two verbs, to note also their individuality, both as to lexical meaning and their syntactical construction.

Of itself *σκοπεῖν* is a neutral verb and means "to watch," "to observe," "to keep an eye on." The positive or negative slant of the verb is determined by context. When Paul urges the Philippians, "Take note of (*σκοπεῖν*) those who live according to the pattern we gave you" (3:17), he is obviously urging them to follow a good example. The case is quite different in Romans where the verb has a completely different sort of object. Here the object of observation is "people who keep on causing dissensions and offenses in opposition to the teaching which you learned." Here Paul is plainly advising them not to follow that bad example.

¹ This refers to the impression of WELS observers that the CLC's interpretation of Romans 16 does not allow time for admonition. The CLC representatives denied that this is their view.

The verb can involve positive or negative objects and will thus occasion a different response on the part of the one doing the observing (*σκοπεῖν*). The point to be noted is that *σκοπεῖν* allows or even presupposes either a reaction to what is seen or some accompanying activity.

If it is contended that *σκοπεῖν* does not admit of the possibility of an accompanying action or activity, then we need to look at a passage such as Galatians 6:1, where Paul urges: "Watch yourself, lest you also be tempted" (*σκοπῶν σεαυτόν...μὴ πειρασθῆς*). A mere detached, passive observing of oneself would hardly accomplish the warding off of temptation that, Paul here enjoins on the "strong" Galatians. Paul is expecting them to do something about what they see.

Sometimes it is conceded that *σκοπεῖν* allows or even presupposes additional activity, but that such activity is always for the benefit of the "observer" or "watcher." To be sure, in the half-dozen places where *σκοπεῖν* occurs in the New Testament, that is usually the case. However, insisting on that as the only meaning would seem to confound the sense of Philippians 2:4. There Paul cautions his readers "not to look out only for your own things, but also for the things of others" (*μὴ τὰ ἑαυτῶν ἕκαστος σκοποῦντες, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰ ἐτέρων ἕκαστοι*). The context, with its *καὶ* (also), allows for the supplying of no verb other than the previously used *σκοποῦντες*. Hence *σκοπεῖν* does permit the possibility of the "watching" being for the benefit of others. To make that point relevant to the topic currently under discussion, we would observe that *σκοπεῖν* allows the activity of admonition, so beneficial to the ones being observed.

Not only the lexical meaning but also the difference in form between *σκοπεῖν* and *ἐκκλίνετε* needs to be observed. The former is an infinitive and the latter is an imperative. What that tips us off to is that the overriding relationship in this section is not really between the *σκοπεῖν* and the *ἐκκλίνετε* (infinitive and imperative) but between *ἐκκλίνετε* and the 16 imperatives (*ἀσπάσασθε*) that have preceded in this chapter. Note how neatly that integrates verses 17 and 18 with the rest of the chapter. In the first sixteen verses Paul has repeatedly urged them in the imperatives *ἀσπάσασθε* to greet fellow believers as brothers and sisters in Christ, but (*δὲ* v.17) the case is quite different with the causers of divisions and offenses. Those they are to avoid (imperative).

As a final observation on *σκοπεῖν*, we note its tense. The use of the present tense speaks of an activity that has some duration. With that choice of tense Paul does not specify how long the duration is to be. He speaks merely of the activity of watching or observing, which activity may be accompanied by other actions. The verb itself does not specify by commanding one type of accompanying action or forbidding another.

What we have already intimated above is that the activity accompanying *σκοπεῖν* may indeed legitimately be admonition. But when we say that, we need to be careful that we do not give the impression that it is the *σκοπεῖν* that requires us to do the admonishing.

Admonition is required by the situation that is seen or observed, not by the inherent meaning of the verb *σκοπεῖν*. The duty to admonish is taught in other passages. To make that a bit more specific: a situation that threatens to erupt in division and offenses among brothers has to be a cause of genuine concern. When the danger signals are observed, they require admonition on the part of the one doing the observing—for the four reasons detailed above in connection with Ezekiel as watchman. God's honor requires us to say, "Thus saith the Lord," when something appears to be compromising or crowding out God's message. Love for our neighbor compels us to protect the unwary and to warn the wayward. Finally, we are our brother's keeper and to neglect that solemn duty is to make ourselves culpable before God. The point is: admonition has not only a legitimate but an essential place in our dealing with those who are observed to be departing from the position that brought us together as brothers and bound us together in fellowship.

As such, admonition is generally a process. While it is conceivable that one's whole obligation could be discharged with dispatch, it is likelier—particularly in dealing with a group—that admonition will be a somewhat protracted procedure, something that accompanies and parallels the durative activity implied by the present tense of *σκοπεῖν*.

Contributing to the drawing out of this procedure is the fact that Christian love will always be very careful and circumspect in how it approaches the delicate matter of giving admonition. Undue haste or impetuosity might worsen the situation by driving the adherents of an unscriptural position to harden themselves in that dangerous view. Indeed, the whole matter of practicing admonition requires a great deal of mature Christian discretion. There is, for example, the matter of tact: how one confronts the suspected offenders. There is the aspect of timing: when one talks to them and where. There is the problem of communicating clearly what the scriptural position is and making sure that it is understood.

Although the principles of admonition will be essentially the same, all the difficulties experienced in dealing with an individual are compounded when dealing with a group, particularly the difficulties of communication. It becomes more difficult to know whether we are getting through to the group. As to the content of what is to be communicated, there we have an advantage, for Scripture is clear and plain in telling us what our message and the content of our admonition is to be. But in the area of methodology and procedure, there we need to realize that Scripture does not prescribe a definite pattern or fixed schedule. Even Matthew 18 with its guidelines for dealing with an individual does not offer an inflexible mathematical formula. Just so, there are no New Testament regulations that prescribe the method or the timetable for dealing with groups and church bodies, other than our Savior's standard, "A new commandment I give you, that you love one another" (Jn 13:34) and the apostle's parallel directive, "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another" (Ro 13:8). If we add to that the encouragement of James, "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," then we have a powerful incentive to be zealous and diligent in fulfilling our obligation of love toward our fellowman by warning and admonishing where that is called for.

We have previously cautioned against linking *σκοπεῖν* and *ἐκκλίνετε* ("mark . . . and avoid") too closely. Perhaps the same caution should be sounded to ensure that we do not treat admonition as identical with or interchangeable with *σκοπεῖν*. The apostle, after all, does urge the Romans "to observe," "to watch," "to watch out for." He does not specifically and directly enjoin admonition. Recall how we got to this conclusion. The verbal *σκοπεῖν* was identified as the larger consideration, entailing the whole arena of watching and observing. Admonition is an accompanying action; one, however, that provides invaluable input into the task of observing. The observer's task is aided immeasurably by observing receptivity to admonition, or lack of the same, on the part of the group that is being dealt with.

It is, in fact, receptivity to admonition that makes all the difference in the world. If a group or church body accepts admonition, changes its stance, and acknowledges the correctness of the scriptural position as it has been pointed out to them, then it becomes evident that we are dealing with weak brothers who have again through admonition been restored to a secure position in the fellowship.

If, however, there is a continuation of the aberrations, defense is made for them, activity is conducted that reflects adherence to the error, then it becomes observable (*σκοπεῖν*) that we are dealing with people of the sort whom Paul describes as ones "who keep on causing dissensions and offenses in opposition to the teaching which you learned."

We need to note Paul's use of the present tense in the participle *ποιοῦντας*. That choice of tense indicates that their adherence to error is deliberate, ongoing, and persistent. Their problem is not a lack of information, or an unfortunate choice of wording, or a chance misstep. They remain committed to an unscriptural position. That state of affairs calls for decisive action.

Endless Admonition Without Termination of Fellowship Would Be Unscriptural and Loveless

We have already indicated that the process of admonition, particularly between groups, tends to be painfully, yes even excruciatingly, slow. There is first of all the matter of having the admonishing body make sure that they themselves are speaking with one voice regarding the points at issue. There follows then the matter of communicating their concerns to the offending body and assuring themselves that their concerns have been heard and understood by the party being admonished. The admonished party needs to have time to evaluate the points of concern their brothers have expressed and to respond to them. Finally the admonishing body must evaluate and react to the response they have received from the other group.

The procedure may be long, but it dare not be endless. Brotherly admonition requires a response, and that response must be acted upon. If there is a correction of the situation that caused the concern, then we can be guided by Paul's imperative *ἀσπάσασθε* and greet or welcome the former troublemakers as brothers in the faith. Fellowship continues. If the situation does not change, if the errorists remain unreconstructed and insist on making (*ποιούντας*) dissensions and offenses, then we have no choice but to resort to Paul's other imperative, *ἐκκλίnete*, avoid them!

Most New Testament editors have chosen to print the reading *ἐκκλίnete*, the present imperative, rather than the aorist imperative *ἐκκλίνατε*. In our previous discussions there seemed to be a consensus favoring the aorist. That reading is being assumed here, without repeating the supporting rationale, which is basically that the aorist imperative reading is just as ancient as the present imperative and more widely distributed.

The aorist imperative serves as a most fitting counterpart to the 16 aorist imperatives (*ἀσπάσασθε*) which Paul used in the first half of this chapter. But more important, the aorist tense of the imperative is ideally suited to call for the decisive and vital action of avoiding the ones causing divisions and offenses.

The case, however, does not rest only on having an aorist rather than a present imperative. Also the lexical meaning of *ἐκκλίνω* leads us in precisely that same direction of suggesting a decisive and final action. The verb *ἐκκλίνω* means "to avoid; to separate from; to put distance between." Though etymologically the verb derives from *κλίνω* (to lean), the perfective prefix *ἐκ* and the accompanying preposition *ἀπὸ* leave no room for the idea of "leaning away from" while retaining some form of limited fellowship. Rather, Paul is speaking of a clean break, as Peter also does when he says of the person who "would love life and see good days," that "he must turn from evil" (*ἐκκλινάτω ἀπὸ κακοῦ*—(1 Pe 3:11).

The imperative of *ἐκκλίνω* calls for a clean break with errorists, and that means a clear declaration that there no longer is any religious fellowship with the group that formerly were brothers in the faith. It means a termination of church fellowship, the earnest and loving testimony to errorists that their doctrine and/or practice is at variance with God's Word, thus putting their souls and their eternal salvation into jeopardy. Admonition rejected must perforce end in termination of fellowship.

Does Termination of Fellowship Preclude Further Admonition?

We have indicated that the termination of fellowship is a clean break, a clear declaration that there no longer is any religious fellowship between us and people who formerly were our brothers in the faith. What role does that leave for further admonition? To reiterate: the very point of terminating fellowship is to indicate as clearly and forcefully as possible that we have done all we can to alert the errorists to the danger in which they have placed themselves and to dissuade them from the course of action they are following. Since they refuse to hear, we have no choice but to avoid them in obedience to Scripture.

Such "avoiding" is serious business! We dare not terminate fellowship and then carry on with business as usual, as though nothing had happened. We dare not continue admonition as though we still had more to say

and additional things to discuss. If that were the case, then we should not have broken with them. That is precisely why it is so essential that there be patient, thorough, loving admonition before the termination of fellowship. Properly understood and seriously done, termination of fellowship marks the end of the relationship.

There is a finality about severing fellowship, but we need not on that account end on a negative note. The termination itself is a form of admonition—although this admonishing is no longer being done within the framework of fellowship. Termination of fellowship is a continuing, ongoing protest against what the errorists are doing, but it is also the loving invitation: Turn! Turn from your ways! And where that warning plea has been heard and heeded, there we will be ready and willing, yes eager, to do everything possible to restore the fellowship upon their return to a scriptural position.

Admonition has an important, an absolutely essential, place in the area of terminating fellowship. It dare not be neglected. It has to precede the termination of fellowship to the fullest extent that it can be done. But, on the other hand, it dare not become a device for procrastinating or for evading the scriptural injunction to part ways with those who persist in error.

Difficult and painful as it often is, admonition remains one of God's great blessings to his people. It is a basic reason for God's putting us together into a family and for establishing bonds of fellowship. May he grant us the courage always to apply admonition where it is needed, and may he give us the humility to accept it when we require it ourselves.