

THE ASSEMBLY MESSENGER

Proclaiming the Timeless Truths of the Church to a New Generation of Believers
Volume 98-18

Dear Reader

Our topic for this Newsletter is assembly discipline. To many, it is a very unpleasant topic which they would like to ignore. But it really is a very important and necessary topic. Imagine what it would be like if there were no police and courts to enforce the rules of the road ... *or no rules of the road at all*. Or imagine what it would be like driving if most people simply ignored those rules. Think of your home. You would be very displeased if some person, knowing your standards of conduct, came into your house and conducted himself or herself in ways that did not meet those standards. The person would likely be spoken to, and if the conduct persisted, asked to leave. Without *discipline*, the roads would be impossible to drive safely on, and one's home would become the place for every kind of wrong conduct. Likewise, without discipline, the local assembly would become the incubator for every sin that Satan could place in its midst.

Paul said, "I write so that you may know how *you ought to conduct yourself* in the house of God, which is the Church of the Living God" (1 Tim.3:15). Proper conduct or behavior in His house is very important to God, and He has very definite rules of conduct that fit His holiness. Paul was particularly commissioned (Eph.3) to put down in writing what that conduct should be and how it should be enforced, and such proper conduct is found particularly in Paul's writings from Romans through Titus (as well as in a few other locations).

Some of the dictionary meanings of *discipline* are to train, develop by instruction, and if necessary penalize so as to have persons under control; to maintain or impose order. We'll see how these meanings compare with the Scriptural use of discipline in the assembly. Let's look at such discipline first by order of time and then look at the divine course of action to be taken for essentially every circumstance that becomes disorder in God's house — in the local assembly.

Discipline in the Early Church

The early Church grew rapidly, with thousands being saved and added together in a matter of weeks. There was great love for the Lord and for the fellow-believers (Acts 2-4). But a greedy Christian husband and wife had a little scheme. They would pretend to give all the money from the sale of some property to the Lord's work, but in reality keep back some for themselves (Acts 5:1-4). By today's standards we would not think it a very serious sin, but as we go on in future Newsletters we will see that God still demands *righteousness* (simply what is right before God) from His people, not just freedom from what we think are *major* evils — a fact that should speak strongly to all of us.

But God judged by a different standard than we might have judge by, and caused Ananias and Sapphira, although Christians in the Jerusalem assembly, to die on the spot (5:5-10). That was perfect, divine discipline, not an over-reaction! God never over-reacts! What was the result? "So *great fear* came upon all the Church and upon all who heard these things" (v.11). Evidently many sins were prevented. The effect was also long lasting, until Paul had transmitted God's instructions for assembly discipline by means of his epistles (letters), beginning about 25 years later. Have we lost our fear of a holy God?

God Can Still Act in Discipline Apart from the Local Assembly

We will see that God now has put discipline into the hands of the local assembly, and we have seen in previous Newsletters that God has given the local assembly His authority to act for Him, according to His Word. But there may be cases not discerned by the assembly, either by carelessness or because the sin is

kept hidden to all but God. We have two examples. In Corinth there was disorder at the breaking of bread — some of it apparently outward and knowable, and some perhaps hidden in the heart (1 Cor.11:17-29). God had *already* acted in discipline against this disorder, and it would appear that the Corinthian brethren didn't even realize it! Because of the disorders, Paul said by inspiration, "many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves we would not be judged. But when we are judged we are *chastened* by the Lord" (1 Cor.11:30-32). See Hebrews 12:5-12 for more on *chastening* or *child-training*. Evidently some of the local brethren were unduly physically and spiritually weak; others were unduly sick; and others had died prematurely! Each of us should *seriously* consider this matter in relation to our own conduct. Is the Lord trying to show *me* something? *But do not judge anyone else!* The illness or death of a Christian is in no wise *necessarily* the judgment of God due to unusual sin.

1 John 5:16-17 tells us that "there is a sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that. All unrighteousness is sin and there is sin *not* leading to death." God is the judge here. My father knew a middle-aged Christian man who was sick. He said the Lord had showed him he had sinned a sin unto death, and he asked that no one pray for him. And he died shortly thereafter.

Personal Problems Between Believers

We will include "personal problems" in this Newsletter because of their often-devastating effect on assembly life, but most of the Scriptural process is not *assembly* discipline because most of the assembly never knows about it. Yet it is very important because the Scriptural process given below covers the vast majority of problems that, unless resolved, bring discord and thus disorder into the assembly.

When looking at assembly decisions we pointed out that Matthew 18:15-18 uses a problem between two believers to illustrate the *general divine principle* for problem-solving, whether between two or more individuals, two or more families, or two or more assemblies. Here, we will use both the *example* and the *principle* as given in Matthew 18. It says, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother" (v.15). No assembly involvement here! The offended party doesn't stew about the offense, doesn't tell everyone else, doesn't seek supporters, doesn't write a letter. He (or she) meets face to face with the one who has caused the offense, and with a proper Christian attitude, tells the person of his (or her) sin. Usually that solves the problem.

But if not, verse 16 says, "But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established." Now a few others are involved, but the problem is still contained to those few people. The *assembly* is not involved. The extra witnesses act as counsel, they add moral weight that the problem is serious and must get resolved in God's way, and they are witnesses if the third step is necessary. If the sin is stopped and confessed, all further action stops. All forms of discipline are aimed at *restoration*, never punishment.

But if not, then the *assembly* is involved. "And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses to hear even the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector" (v.17). The local church (assembly) seeks a godly resolution, but if the sin is continued in, it is an indication that all discipline has failed and *excommunication* would follow, as we will see below. *Excommunication* is the putting away of a sinning person as a wicked person, from all the affairs of the local assembly — "from among yourselves" (1 Cor.5:13). The person is treated and shunned as unclean, as a leprous person, until such time he stops sinning, repents, and confesses his sin. Compare 1 Corinthians 5:13 with 2 Corinthians 2:5-11.

A Believer Falls Into Moral Sin, Known to the Assembly

The word *moral*, although often associated with sexual misconduct, simply has the thought of being right or wrong in conduct. It is a broad term, as we shall see, including but going far beyond sexual sin. The assembly's course of action depends on how far the sin has progressed.

The first or earliest form of discipline is the *admonition or rebuke of the assembly*, with pastoral care and ministry. "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness" (Gal.6:1). "We exhort you, brethren, warn (admonish) those who are unruly" (1 Thes.5:14). Once the assembly is involved, this is the first course of action, and it is carried out by brothers gifted and with the spiritual maturity to do so in a godly manner. Every reasonable attempt is made to bring restoration. The sinning person is warned of serious consequences to follow.

If the above fails the next step is the withdrawal from, the *avoidance* of the disorderly one. The brethren show their strong disapproval by having nothing to do with the sinning one on a social basis or in *outward* fellowship in the assembly. "We command you ... that you *withdraw* from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition (instructions) which he received from us" (2 Thes.3:6). The Greek word for *withdraw* is *stello* and means to shrink from a person, to avoid him. It is not *excommunication* — a non-Scriptural word which expresses a Scriptural thought, derived from two Latin words — *ex* (from) and *communio* (i.e. the breaking of bread, the communion service: put away from the communion service). The person is still breaking bread. A few verses later the same thought is expressed, "If anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and *do not keep company with him*, that he may be ashamed. Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother" (vv.14-15). The goal is still restoration, and by cutting off all social fellowship in love, the person is made to feel his sin more strongly. Violation of this principle by "friends" of the sinning person probably has encouraged many Christians to *continue in* their unscriptural course and conduct, and is, in itself, a serious sin!

If a suitable time of labor — perhaps up to a year: note the length of time in Luke 13:8-9, speaking of the time the Lord still gave Israel to repent — has not produced repentance, then the sin has definitely become a *course*. See 2 Corinthians 12:21 and 13:1-2. The sinning brother is leprous (Lev.13). Or the sin may be so serious and so well established that an assembly action in excommunication should take place more quickly, as with the case of the sexually immoral man in 1 Corinthians 5:3-5, 13. In this same sad chapter God gave us the basic principle as to why such assembly action is necessary for a dear fellow-believer. "A little leaven leavens the whole lump" (5:6). Just as leaven (yeast) will spread through bread dough until the whole loaf is leavened, sin allowed to go on unjudged in the assembly will spread till the whole assembly is leavened with a similar sin. The action of leaven is only stopped by heat; the action of sin is only stopped by the heat of assembly action in discipline. It is not a matter of our love, respect or compassion for the sinning person, but of maintaining the holiness of the Lord's Assembly, the order of His house.

As mentioned earlier the action of excommunication is the refusal of all fellowship with the sinning Christian, a putting away *from among yourselves* of the evil person (1 Cor.5:9, 13). *Excommunication* is not exactly an act of discipline, but the recognition that all discipline of the assembly has failed to bring repentance. The sinning person is put *outside* (5:12-13). Outside of what? Not of the body of Christ. The person is still a Christian. But he is put outside of the place of blessing found in the practical fellowship of the believers walking according to the apostles' doctrine, including God's plans for His Church! He is put into Satan's territory for the destruction of the flesh (5:5). He needs to learn that in him, that is, his flesh, his old nature, "nothing good dwells" (Rom.7:18). Paul *personally* had authority to deliver to Satan (1 Tim.1:20), but in 1 Corinthians 5, such authority to so deliver was in the *assembly's* act of excommunication. Solemn matter!

1 Corinthians 5:11 gives a list of sins that constitute moral evil, including drunkenness and covetousness. All these sins have to *characterize* the person before assembly action in excommunication can take place. These only apply to Christians. Such conduct is *expected* of the unsaved, and the assembly has no

jurisdiction over the unsaved: they are *already* outside (5:10, 12-13). Another list of moral sins that may characterize professed believers is found in 2 Timothy 3:1-5. Every believer is told to “turn away” from such people.

Only by this action of excommunication was the Corinthian local assembly purified (2 Cor.7:11-12) — “cleared in this matter.” There *must* be proper behavior maintained in God’s house! And the sinning man also was restored, praise God! The discipline and excommunication had its desired effect (2 Cor.2:6-9). In fact, Paul *commanded* the assembly to forgive him and comfort him, and show their love to him. The prodigal had returned and it was time for rejoicing.

A Believer Teaches Doctrinal Error

Some have concluded that since there is not a chapter like 1 Corinthians 5 that deals with doctrinal sins, the assembly should be tolerant and allow these different “opinions” (as they might call them) in their midst. But their argument does not stand the light of Scripture. We saw that the guiding principle for assembly action against moral sin was that “a little leaven (sin) leavens the whole lump” — the whole assembly. *The exact same words are used in Galatians 5:9 for doctrinal sin.* Did the sin seen in Galatians deny the deity of Christ or the existence of the Holy Spirit, or similar sins we might call *fundamental* error? No, the people were simply teaching that one had to keep the Law. So what, it might be argued, if some Christian wants to, or believes he must do something like trying to keep the Law to be saved or to continue in favor with God? If he has trusted Christ as Savior, he’s going to heaven anyway. But Paul by inspiration said such doctrine was *leaven* of the kind that would corrupt the whole assembly! It was *not* the “apostles’ doctrine” (Acts 2:42)! The truth as to such doctrines is not optional: they are deemed by God to be important to Christianity! From the course of action given in 1 Corinthians 5 we learn that serious doctrinal sin *must* be stopped by the disciplinary action of the assembly, including, if necessary, excommunication.

Some in Corinth were saying (*teaching*: usually a systematic and set discourse — Strongs #3004) “that there is no resurrection of the dead” (1 Cor.15:12). According to 2 Timothy 2:17-18 this type of doctrine, taught with a variation by Hymenaeus and Philetus, will spread like a cancer: it is leaven and must be stopped. The doctrines of Scripture stand or fall together! Attacking one has a serious effect on all! For example, denial of the order of God’s house, as is almost universally denied today (*the leaven has spread!*), is *not* conducting oneself properly as to that house. It is a serious attack on the very foundations of the Church, the Lord’s special interest today, as we studied in earlier Newsletters. The course of action for a godly local assembly would be similar to that which we studied under moral sin.

A *heretic* is not one who simply teaches a false doctrine, but one who is making an *unscriptural* (Rom.16:17) party for himself, and that usually involves some doctrinal matters. The party-making is wrong, and often or usually, so is the doctrinal error or over-emphasis on one particular doctrine. Such heretics are called “deceivers” (Tit.1:10), which could be both in a doctrinal and/or moral sense. Their “mouths must be stopped” (v.11) — akin to avoiding or withdrawing from them. They are not to be allowed to teach anyone their false and/or divisive ways. No one is to listen to them. They are to be *rejected* (Gk: *paraiteomai* — to beg off, ask to be excused, refused — Vine). They are to be “rebuked sharply” (v.13). If that doesn’t stop their sin, then we have already seen the assembly’s responsibility to act in excommunication against a course of sin after every reasonable attempt has been made to stop it.

It has become popular to so *humanize* the Lord Jesus that many false doctrines concerning His Person and work are almost “standard equipment” in Christian groups today. We looked at some of these back in issue 97-10. Such false teaching is virtually put in a special category in 2 John 9-11. The *example* is not for an assembly: it refers to unsaved imposters who come to your home, bringing their false doctrine. They are not to be allowed into one’s house or even greeted! But does that mean it’s OK for a *Christian* to bring such false doctrine to the meetings of the local assembly? Of course not! The *principle* is that God has a special interest in maintaining the Scriptural doctrine of Christ! The assembly cannot have or

maintain fellowship with false teachings about Christ or the Father or the Holy Spirit, or with the false teachers!

RPD

Suggested Reading: *The Church of the Living God* by R.K. Campbell; *The Church: Its Origin, Doctrine and Order* by R.P.Daniel; and *The Church and its Order According to Scripture*, by S.Ridout, all previously mentioned, have good sections on discipline.