

THE ASSEMBLY MESSENGER

Proclaiming the Timeless Truth of the Church to a New Generation of Believers

04-75

Dear Reader

This last issue of 2004 will contain two documents. First, we will look at what is the responsibility of every believer towards one under scriptural discipline. History indicates that the God-intended effect of scripturally-applied discipline sometimes has been circumvented by usually well-intended brethren who (often and hopefully usually through ignorance) treat the sinning person in ways other than God intended. We'll look at what Scripture has to say. Secondly, we'll use an article by Leslie M. Grant entitled *God's Beloved Son* to look at some precious truths concerning Him which are often overlooked. The truth that Christ could *not* have sinned while here on earth must be considered fundamental to Christianity, yet the false doctrine that Christ could have sinned is widely taught and believed today. Brother Leslie speaks strongly!

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF ALL CHRISTIANS TOWARDS A BROTHER OR SISTER UNDER SCRIPTURAL DISCIPLINE

Scriptural discipline is the scripturally-proper application of biblically-defined sanctions to a sinning believer by the local assembly (not by an individual believer or any group of individuals) with the intended result being to stop the sin and bring restoration. I say "by the local assembly" because only *there* does authority exist to act against those who express fellowship in its midst. What confusion it would be if every individual decided to act in the manner that suited his or her particular attitude!

The Rebuke

The first form of discipline is a rebuke by the assembly (1 Thes.5:14 JND here and elsewhere in this article), "But we exhort you, brethren, admonish (warn) the disorderly." That is generally sufficient to correct a problem that hasn't been corrected as a result of ministry or in private discussions (Gal.6:1-2). If the problem is corrected, then

the brother or sister is treated like all the others with a genuine display of family affections.

Refusal of Outward Fellowship

The next form of discipline, more serious, is the withdrawal or shrinking from – the refusal of outward, social fellowship with the sinning person (2 Thes.3:6, 14-15) by *all* in the assembly and certainly in all like-minded assemblies, for they are to act as "one." It is a serious and comparatively rare matter to place a brother or sister under such discipline, but when necessary, God insists it be done, because He intends the local representation on earth of His Assembly (i.e., the local assembly) to be holy in practice and doctrine. Therefore, the local assembly is responsible to maintain what is right according to God's Word and for His glory, and in some cases this requires the application of moderate to severe discipline.

Once a sinning believer has been put under discipline, every other Christian is responsible to God and to the local assembly to recognize such discipline and to do nothing to weaken or nullify its effect on the sinning person! There is no statute of limitations with God. The discipline is binding until the sin is cleared. In fact, as seen from Matthew 18:15-17, the refusal of milder forms of discipline should bring more severe discipline by the assembly, up to excommunication, which is the declaration that discipline has failed to stop the sin and the sinner must be classed as a "wicked person." The person then is "outside" to be dealt with directly by God (1 Cor.5:12-13). Even then, the desire of every Christian should be for recovery. Compare 1 Corinthians 5 with 2 Corinthians 2:6-8.

Let's look at some verses which define this moderate form of discipline and our individual responsibility towards the disciplined person. "We enjoin you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from (Gk: stello, #4724-Strong's

Concordance: “keep away from, avoid”) every brother walking disorderly and not according to the instruction (teaching) he received from us” (2 Thes.3:6). Every Christian who values God’s Word must totally avoid such a sinning brother or sister. Of course, there are immediate-family obligations that would still continue. I do not see from Scripture the extreme that a few go to, that, for example, the *family* couldn’t eat in the same room together with the sinning person.

“If anyone obey not our word (instructions) by the letter [sent by Paul], mark that man and do not keep company (associate) with him that he may be ashamed of himself, and do not esteem him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother” (2 Thes.3:14-15). The sinning believer is to be left alone. One may feel sorry for the person, one may have been a close friend, but those are no reasons to disobey God! The sinning person is to deeply feel the isolation. That isolation is necessary to rebuke the sinner, to make him or her ashamed of the sin that caused the discipline to be necessary. Those who *willfully* violate God’s ban should be disciplined themselves! They prove themselves to be willfully disobedient to God’s instructions concerning His Assembly!

God still makes provision for continued admonition, but from whom? Local assembly discipline primarily is the responsibility of the local assembly. It’s not for any person who feels like it, or thinks of himself as an arbitrator, to interfere, even to adding his own admonition. Such a person would not be able to rightly judge, not having the background the local assembly has. There certainly may be outside help, but only with the permission of the local assembly which has scripturally applied the discipline.

“There are many and disorderly vain [empty, useless] speakers and deceivers of peoples’ minds ... who must have their mouths stopped” (Tit.1:10-11). Such people must be refused any audience: they are not to be listened to, for they may be masters of persuasion and/or deceit, who can gain followers. Soon, wrong becomes right in the minds of the deceived.

Dealings with a Heretic

“But foolish questions ... and strife and contentions about the law, shun (#4026-Strong’s: stand around, avoid, don’t listen to), for they are unprofitable and vain (empty, useless). A heretical (divisive) man, after the first and second admonition, have done with (#3868-Strong’s: have nothing to do with him, do not listen), knowing that such an one is perverted and sins, being self-condemned” (Tit.3:9-11).

A heretic is one who seeks to force his own particular views on others; one who seeks a following based on those views. He is a divisive person. Although still breaking bread, when two rebukes by the assembly have not changed his or her conduct, such person is self-condemned by his own actions. He then is put under more severe discipline and is to be refused one’s ear, one’s attention, one’s greeting, one’s social fellowship. This is not optional, but mandatory for every assembly and for every Christian. Those who willfully violate this discipline should themselves become subjects of discipline!

Doctrinal Discipline

“Consider those who create divisions and occasions for falling *contrary to the doctrine* which you have learned, and *turn away* from them (Gk: Ekkliño: to turn aside, away from them, Vine), for such serve not our Lord Jesus, but their own belly (appetites) and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting” (Rom.16:17-18). The Greek word above is used in Romans 3:12, “All have gone out of the way” – all have turned aside from the truth. It indicates a complete turning away. If things have gone this far, then *excommunication* is required. Notice how clever such may be. They are masters at good and clever words. They make right seem wrong and wrong seem right, and many are deceived! Have you run into such? I have!

In some instances, contention may arise and divisions result over ones truly standing for the fundamental truths of God’s Word, against those attempting to pervert God’s Word by either misinterpretation or cleverly promoting legalistic, personal, quasi-scriptural views. These views serve the per-

son's appetite for self-importance. Such people may do many good things and be able to give convincing, persuasive semi-scriptural arguments. People who don't know what is going on then may be deceived. God's instructions to the believers of the Roman assembly was to turn *completely* away from such people. See section below. Those who then befriend them are violating God's instructions and are in serious spiritual danger.

All this is quite different from a believer who has never learned the doctrine and is walking in his "group" or "denomination" as best he knows for the Lord, or who simply, quietly, feels he should be elsewhere and goes to where he feels he is best serving the Lord. We may feel sad about such and earnestly pray for them, believing they don't understand God's pathway for them, but they are not actively and even cleverly promoting division over wrong doctrine.

God has spoken. His Word is clear. Each of us is bound to obey, as personally painful as it may be.

Excommunication: Failed Discipline

If the final form of discipline, excommunication, is necessary (and from Romans 16 and the example of Matthew 18, it eventually will be if the moderate discipline fails to stop the evil), God is equally plain. "But now I have written to you, if any one called brother be ... [sins listed] ... not to mix with him; with such a one not even to eat But those without God judges. *Remove the wicked person from among yourselves*" (1 Cor.5:11-13).

An excommunicated person is to be refused even the courtesy of a common meal. He is to be treated in practice not much different than in the moderate discipline seen earlier, except such a person is now outside the fellowship of the local assembly and is to be considered a wicked person. He has shown that all discipline has failed to stop the evil. He is not permitted to break bread or have part in the affairs of the assembly. He is no longer in the hands of the local assembly, but in God's hands. Such a person would not be restored until there was full proof that the sin was forsaken and confessed. 2 Corinthians 2 encourages us that the worst possible sin one can think of (1 Cor.5) can be stopped, con-

fession made and happy assembly fellowship fully restored.

Self-excommunication

A person who refuses discipline and puts himself in an outside place by refusing to break bread in the local assembly except under his or her conditions, really excommunicates himself. It is a frightful position, a no-man's land. It doesn't remove the impending discipline in God's eyes, but rather heaps disobedience onto disobedience. The answer for restoration (as always) is full confession, full proof that the sin is totally forsaken, and then to seek restoration with one's brethren. We already have seen from 2 Corinthians 2 that the local assembly then (and only then) is expected to grant full restoration and if anything, treat the person with special love and care. Until that time, the discipline that would have been applied remains in full force: as we have said, there is no statute of limitations with God.

RPD

GOD'S BELOVED SON

When the Angel Gabriel brought to the virgin Mary the marvelous message that she was to be the mother of the Messiah of Israel, he answered her question as to how this could be by the words, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God" (Lk.1:35). How wonderful beyond human understanding is so great a miracle as this! It is altogether above and outside of the natural course of events. Though Mary was a sinner of Adam's race, yet God chose her to be a vessel by whom this blessed Son of God was to be brought to birth and cared for through all His dependent years. This very contemplation surely draws out the wondering admiration of every believer at the thought of wisdom and grace so amazing.

Mary's sin, however, did not in the least degree affect Him, for Scripture tells us, "In Him there is no sin" (1 Jn.3:5). Of course, Joseph had nothing to do with His birth; and Mary contributed nothing

whatever to Him, either physically or spiritually, except nourishment and warmth. The Lord Jesus speaking to His Father in Hebrews 10:5 says, “A body *You* have prepared for Me.” That body was implanted by the Holy Spirit in the womb of Mary, and just as He is called “that Holy One,” His body was perfectly holy, as was His nature. When Adam was created he was physically perfect, but not holy. He was innocent, which innocence he lost very soon. His innocent nature became sinful, which has been passed on to all mankind. Holiness involves the love of good and the refusal of evil. This is perfectly seen in the Lord Jesus from the very beginning.

Therefore, in contrast to all other human beings, Christ is “holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners” (Heb.7:25). This is His very nature from the time His body was prepared. Is any change possible? No indeed! In fact, Hebrews 13:8 declares He is “the Same yesterday, today, and forever.” Yesterday infers His whole time in coming to earth until His death and resurrection. Today applies to all the present time of His being exalted on His Father’s throne, faithfully caring for every believer. Tomorrow speaks of the future, involving His coming again and His manifest exaltation for eternity. Would any believer dare to say it is possible for the Lord Jesus to sin now or in the future? Of course not! Then how can anyone suggest that it was possible that He might have sinned when He was on earth? For He was the same then as He is now. Blessed Lord indeed: He cannot change.

While on earth He often called Himself “The Son of Man,” yet, though God called Ezekiel “son of man” (Ezek.2:1 and often afterwards), yet He never called the Lord Jesus “The Son of Man,” but He did call Him “My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Mt.3:17). How important to observe also that God said this immediately before the Lord Jesus was tempted by Satan. He certainly did not approve Adam before he was tempted. Note that Satan tried to get the Lord Jesus (tempted Him) to sin, but the Lord was never personally, internally tempted – considered or thought about doing so – to sin: a holy nature can be tested, but never even thinks about succumbing to the outside temptation. When God so approved His beloved Son, was there any possibility He might fail? Absolutely not!

Moreover, all of prophecy bears witness to the perfection of the Man of God’s choice, just as Isaiah 42:4 declares, “He will not fail nor be discouraged, till He has established justice in the earth.” This is the Word of God concerning Him. Was there therefore any possibility that Christ could fail? If so, God would have been proven untrue, but Hebrews 6:18 is clear and decided, “It is impossible for God to lie.” Therefore it is impossible that Christ could have failed in any way.

Many other prophecies concerning Him are just as decisive as this one, and not one of them fails. For instance, In Psalm 2:7-8 it is the Lord Jesus Himself speaking, “I will declare the decree: the Lord has said to Me, You are My Son, Today I have begotten You. Ask of Me, and I will give you the nations for Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for Your possession.” There were no conditions involved in this promise, that is, for instance, a condition that His Son would keep from sinning. Why not? Because His Son is sinless and nothing could keep the prophecy from being fulfilled!

Therefore, if anyone embraces the wicked doctrine that it was possible for the Lord Jesus to have sinned, he is taking the place of an enemy of God and his claim to be a Christian cannot be trusted. This is a question we do not definitely decide, but his doctrine is anti-Christian. We would have to say, “The Lord knows those who are His” (2 Tim.2:19). On the other hand, let those who give Christ His place of sinless perfection and of supreme exaltation, rejoice in prospect of the soon-coming great Day when He will take that place of exaltation publicly and all creation will bow at His holy feet, some not willingly, but by force; but many others to gladly echo the words of Thomas recorded in John 20:28, “My Lord and my God.”

Leslie M. Grant

Note: as part of the next issue, Bob Costen has given us a valuable outline on discipline which will be the second article.