

## Newsletter, December 2015

In recent newsletters, we have discussed various biblical errors, worldly practices, and sinful deviations and compromises of the true faith that have all but overwhelmed the purity of today's temporal churches. The temporal church at large is no longer a viable representation of the true Visible Church of Christ (cf. Newsletter May 2012), but has become a counterfeit of that which it purports to represent. Would that it could recognize its reflection in Jesus' message sent to the church of Laodicea through the apostle John and repent (cf. Re.3:14-22; *CRC Book III*, page 86). However, it is far more interested in social issues, in political activism, in swelling its ranks, and in pursuing the pleasures of the world. It no longer considers Scripture to be authoritative, but instead chooses secular literature to prepare flowery speeches from its pulpits that is but sentimental psychobabble. It is hungry because it has no spiritual food to satisfy its great need. It is wretched because it is wallowing in its sins. It is miserable because it lacks genuine hope. It is poor because it has no spiritual treasure stored up in heaven. It is blind because it has no genuine faith with which to see spiritual things. It is naked, because it is not clothed in the righteousness of Christ. In this newsletter we shall discuss the temporal church's grievous lack of proper self-discipline, which over time has led it into this miserable state. In doing so, we shall use the word "brother" or various masculine pronouns when referring to a believer in Christ, but one must understand that women are not thereby excluded as fellow believers through this usage.

As individual members of Christ established in Him through divine grace, we have each become directly accountable to Him for our every thought and action. However, we are not alone in Christ, but have been conjoined with many others who have also been redeemed with us in Him. For that reason, we also are accountable to each other as fellow members of His body, the true Church. The standards of conduct for God's people are very high and are attainable in a fallen world only through an abundance of God's divine grace, which is nourished through godly Christian fellowship. Any temporal church purporting to represent the true Church must provide that necessary nourishment through the wise exercise of benevolent church discipline.

When we think of discipline we most often think of it as a verb signifying correction or punishment for some undesired act. However, discipline is also a noun, which in an ecclesiastical sense defines a regimen or rule of conduct that governs the practice of a church and its congregation to maintain its unity. That discipline is firmly based upon but is commonly exercised apart from its doctrine. To establish and maintain that necessary discipline, a temporal church must be actively involved in the sound expository teaching of Holy Scripture to ensure correct doctrine, which in turn promotes personal practice based upon that exposition. The goal is to produce teachable and knowledgeable disciples of Christ who themselves become active participants in that united discipline of faith. An inexperienced novice must first be carefully lead into an understanding of the way of righteousness living as well as being informed of the necessity and benefit of mutual accountability. Church discipline must be carefully organized so as to aid believers in channeling their thoughts and actions in full accordance with God's Word to their eternal benefit as well as the benefit of their fellow believers. At times corrective action becomes necessary to maintain that high discipline. That action must never be carried out in a mean-spirited way, nor should it ever be designed to destroy a person's reputation through hatred or anger; after all, we all struggle with sin in our lives from time to time (cf. 1Jn.1:8). Rather, the goal of corrective discipline must always be to effect the safe return of a wayward believer back into the unity of church fellowship through his genuine heartfelt repentance and sincere desire to serve and please Christ.

Sin is a matter that can only be dealt with in finality by God Himself in his heavenly courts, but on earth He has delegated authority to his body of believers in Christ – the Visible Church – to execute necessary acts of spiritual discipline for the benefit of the elect here on earth. Unfortunately, tolerance of sin is being promoted in many of today's liberal temporal churches through an improper interpretation of Christian benevolence and love for all other believers. Tolerance and love are not synonymous, nor is discipline and hate. Truly, God is love (cf. 1Jn.4:16b) – exemplified by the death of Jesus Christ on the cross to atone for the sins of mankind (cf. 1Jn.4:10). Accordingly, the same divine love now exists between those who truly share in Christ's atoning work. This is an axiom echoed throughout the pages of New-Testament Scripture (cf. Jn.13:35; Ep.4:2; 1Jn.3:11 etc). Therefore, if a brother in Christ knowingly or unwittingly falls into a sinful practice, we are obligated by that divine love to come to his aid through warnings and admonition as well as prayers for his soul in the hopes of turning him away from such ungodly activities through heartfelt

repentance. If we choose to tolerate sin in a brother's life without warning him of the dangerous path he is on, we neglect to live up to the high standard of benevolent love that Christ intended among all his disciples to come to the aid of each other when they stumble.

Proper implementation of true Christian love is often difficult because it must never be based upon fickle human emotions, but must instead be firmly established upon the direct commandment of Christ for us to love one another even as He loves us (cf. Jn.15:12,17). We must never allow emotional pity for another believer's financial or social situations overrule their obligation as Christians to lead a godly life within their current circumstances, but rather sorrow over the sin that has them in its grip. Tolerance of sin in others (especially in unbelievers) is often falsely rationalized by misinterpreting the words of Jesus when He said, "Judge not, that ye be not judged" (Mt.7:1). Truly, we must not judge another based upon our own notion of what is proper and what is improper conduct. God alone is the judge of his creation, and it is upon his divine authority alone that we must base the assessment of ourselves and the actions of others – and respond accordingly. Many activities of a brother in Christ may annoy us because it is not in harmony with our own carefully considered lifestyle; nevertheless, their activities may not in any way rise to God's definition of sin. "Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way" (Rom 14:13). Here the Apostle Paul is not referring to blind tolerance of sinful practices, but to various matters of personal conscience that vary from one believer to another within the category of Christian liberty that is free from all legalism. In this particular passage, Paul is referring to matters of diet – improperly judging what a Christian should and should not eat, but it could be easily extended to other benign matters such as customs of dress, recreational choices, occupations, and other personal choices and activities that are not in any way immoral or sinful by biblical standards. If we insist that others follow the precise dictates of our conscience regarding such trivial matters, rather than their own, we find that we have placed an alien obstacle of conscience before them that could hinder or even derail their personal faith in Christ. Every man must determine such personal matters of conscience for himself as one who will one day stand alone before Christ where all things will be revealed. "Hast thou faith? have it to thyself before God. Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth" (Rom 14:22).

Admittedly, there are gray areas with regard to questionable activities about which Holy Scripture is silent or is not specific. For instance, the drinking of alcoholic beverages and tobacco smoking in moderation could easily be considered as falling under Christian liberty – inasmuch as there is no direct prohibition of either practice in Scripture. Even so, excessive use of strong alcoholic beverages resulting in drunkenness is clearly warned against (cf. 1Co.6:10; Ep. 5:19). Consuming any quantity of alcohol directly affects one's mental acuity resulting in poor judgment, which can unwittingly lead to that person engaging in all kinds of sinful practices while under its influence (cf. Is. 29:7). Chemical addiction often leads to family neglect, unemployment and poverty, theft to financially support the habit, domestic violence, vehicular homicide, and even murder.

Moreover, alcoholism destroys the human liver, and the carcinogens released from tobacco smoking often result in deadly lung cancers in the user as well as in others about them who breathe in the smoke second hand. Many today have become addicted to drugs that are even more dangerous than alcohol and tobacco and to which they have become trapped by a strong chemical dependency. Over time, all such substances work to damage or destroy the Christian's body, which is the temple of the Lord in which the Holy Spirit dwells (cf. 1Co. 6:19,20). Such abuses seriously grieve the Holy Spirit, thus negatively affecting one's personal walk with Christ, his resistance to sin, and his personal witness before the world. Therefore, any physical or mental addiction that conflicts or competes with our personal faith in Christ automatically rises to the level of sin and must then become a matter of rigorous prayer to be set free from that dependency.

Hence, we find that even some activities about which Scripture is silent can become a valid cause for a Christian brother to lovingly intervene with both warnings and admonition out of genuine concern for his brother's eternal soul. In attempting to come to the aid others, we must carefully guard our own lives at all times lest we likewise fall into any sinful practice through obedience to the dictates of our flesh attained through unwise association with practicing sinners. "And others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh" (Jude 1:23). If we attempt to point out sin in a brother's life in hopes of guarding his soul, yet we ourselves harbor or practice sin of the same or even a dissimilar manner, we

condemn ourselves through our own words. We would find ourselves in the role of a hypocrite who cannot convince a brother of his sin but only sanctions his further sin through our poor example (cf. Mt.7:2-5).

Sin is by definition an offense committed against our holy God, such that we cannot sin against one another (cf. Ps.51:4). Nevertheless a brother's sin may indirectly affect others in some personal way through his iniquitous action. The natural man's response to such an offense is to get even through sinful reactions, or perhaps take the brother before the civil courts for redress of our grievances by unbelievers. This is never a proper approach to a resolution of grievances between brothers in Christ because it permanently establishes animosity between them whatever the outcome, and it does not recognize sin against God as the root cause of the offense. The proper response to a sinful act committed by another that we may have inadvertently discovered, or one that has affected us personally, is to go directly to the offending party privately to see if it is possible to rectify the fault. It may be that the offense was not recognized as being sin and only needs to be brought to light. Bringing our sincere concern before a true brother in Christ may serve to convict him of his sin such that he seeks to repent and is willing to offer restitution wherever possible. In that way fellowship is restored between fellow believers and with Christ through repentance and genuine forgiveness (cf. Mt.18:15).

In other instances, sin is so deeply rooted that it is emphatically denied by the offender such that the issue cannot be resolved on a one-to-one basis. In that case, we must again return to him along with two upstanding Christian men, who are held in high esteem by all, to judge between him and us (cf. Mt. 18:16). Perhaps, we were wrong in accusing him of sin when none actually exists; in that event the matter must come to an end with our sincere apology and offer of restored fellowship. If however the offender persists in harboring sin, which has been duly verified as such by two or more witnesses, we must then present the case before the church, lest sin becomes rampant and spoil its purity (cf. Mt.18:17a). In a fully biblical church government, the sinful offense must be presented before the council of church elders – whose purpose it is to maintain the purity of the church through adherence to sound biblical doctrine and practice. In other churches, the path is less clear; it could be submitted to a board of deacons, some of whom may serve as unofficial elders. Taking a personal accusation of sin by a brother before the church is a very serious undertaking, which must be initiated only after all efforts previously described have failed – especially so when a charge of sin is made against a pastor, elder, or deacon. We must bring with us all relevant evidence as well as corroborating witnesses. Although the sin may have been initially discovered by women, men must present the accusation before the church based upon the biblical mandate that women should not usurp such authority over men (cf. 1Ti. 2:12).

In very rare cases a sin committed by a member or a church leader is so egregious that it violates civil law and must be reported to civil authorities to protect the public at large; such violations would include acts of homicide, extortion, confidence theft, pedophilia etc. In some instances this sin will not have been discovered by any in the church, but it suddenly becomes public knowledge through arrest and conviction by civil authorities. Once such facts are publicly known, church leaders must take immediate action to protect its members and absolve the church of any guilt-by-association through the immediate expulsion of the guilty party. This action is fully justified without the ecclesiastical due-process described above for more private sins.

Properly-executed church discipline carries the same weight as a heavenly court, and its verdict is fully binding in heaven as well on earth (cf. Mt.18:18-20). The primary purpose of church discipline is to maintain all members in close fellowship with each other in obedience to Christ such that genuine Christian love prevails. For that reason, if an offender persists in a grievous sin, refusing to repent of it after repeated church counseling and rebukes, he must be firmly censured. While for lesser offenses a formal reprimand may be sufficient, in more serious cases the offender may, for his own sake, be denied access to the Lord's Table until he repents. For more grave infractions, the offender cannot be allowed to remain within the congregation lest he contaminate the entire church through his sinful activities. At this point, the precise nature of his sin must be openly laid before the entire church congregation such that no one can think that the church leadership is acting rashly (cf. 1Ti. 5:20). The excommunicated offender must then be denied participation in all church assemblies and must henceforth be treated by members as an unbeliever (cf. Mt. 18:17b). This does not mean that the offender must be shunned when we inadvertently encounter him outside the church assembly any more than we would avoid contact with any unbeliever, but that any necessary communication must be conducted as we would with an unbeliever – no longer greeting or treating him as a fellow brother in Christ.

A true believer, so admonished and excluded from fellowship, finds himself wandering about in a fallen world that is governed by the prince of darkness (cf. 1Co.5:5) without any hope of spiritual fellowship and sustenance. Under such terrible pressures, he may at sometime in the future be fully convicted of his sin and repent of it before God – making appropriate restitution wherever appropriate and possible. In doing so, he is immediately restored to full fellowship with Christ – as a wayward sheep that was lost from the flock but is now regained. After a reasonable length of time has passed, during which his repentance can be proven genuine by all, he may humbly petition the church to be restored to their fellowship. If his petition is approved, he must be joyously welcomed back by the full church with forgiveness of all past deeds; church discipline has served its intended purpose (cf. Lu.15:4-7). Nevertheless, the restoration of a man who was previously a church pastor, elder, or deacon can not erase all memory of their past sins such that they can automatically be accepted back into a leadership role. They may have effectively denied the very faith they had previously professed and diligently taught, such that it is now impossible for them to be restored again to that high calling. Their reputation may have been tarnished to the extent that they can never again assume a position of church authority lest by their example they “crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh and put Him to open shame” every time they present themselves before the congregation (cf. He.6:4-6).

Unrepentant believers whose sin continues to rule their lives, or those whose Christian profession was not truly genuine to begin with, often seek membership in another temporal church that will readily tolerate their sinful activities. These churches openly advertise that they will accept everyone into their church without any criticism of their lifestyle – however sinful it may be. Most of today's temporal churches do not practice church discipline at all, or they practice it in such a way that it is the godly who are forced out of their midst. The godly are often viewed by these churches as bigoted intolerant trouble-makers, who are intent on destroying all the fun-loving togetherness within the church by unnecessarily applying biblical standards. Some believers choose to remain in those churches as a witness against their decadent churchianity as long as they believe they can make a difference. However, it eventually becomes necessary for them to seek out another church fellowship that more closely emulates the Visible Church through sound biblical teaching and discipline, lest they become contaminated through their continual association with the ungodly (cf. 2Co. 6:17).

The institutionalized tolerance of sin by today's temporal churches is perpetuated and sustained through what may, for want of a more descriptive term, be referred to as “theistic humanism” – an impossible non-homogenous admixture of worldliness with faulty church doctrine. It is not man's prerogative to determine what is right and wrong, what is good and what is evil, or what is sin and what is not sin. Nor can man negotiate with God over various aspects of his mandates that we may think is unreasonable – as theistic humanism would propose. We must rest fully upon God's definition of sin as it is found in Holy Scripture: “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2Ti 3:16). When men attempt to determine for themselves what is good or evil apart from God's Word, they replicate Adam's original sin in which he partook from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil – leading to the disastrous fall of all mankind away from their loving Creator (cf. Ge. 2:17).

As in the sin-filled church of Thyatira (cf. Re.2:18-23: *CRC Book III*, page 80), many churches today have permitted the ordination of women as well as the promotion of homosexuals to high places of authority in direct defiance of God's Word (cf. Newsletters March 2015 and April 2015). Over time, all manner of sin is readily tolerated by its members who blatantly defy the Truth. Unscriptural divorce, fornication resulting in the repeated bearing of children by unmarried women, unabashed adultery, and the murder of unborn children through abortion on demand all goes unchallenged by its church leaders. All of this ungodliness in the temporal church has come about over many decades as a consequence of the admission of many who are not true believers in Christ at all, but only hypocritically emulate one through outward ritual acts of the flesh. Their corrupt church leadership does not properly examine each prospective candidate for membership with respect to their adherence to biblical authority to determine their authenticity, but instead falls back on ritual baptism, which has become corrupted into a mere initiation requisite – as we have repeatedly warned against in this work. The undisciplined inclusiveness of today's churches has welcomed the fallen world into their church fellowship and sanctuary. This moral and spiritual decline within the temporal church can be expected to accelerate as we approach the end of this age of grace. © Arthur J. Smith December 2015