

### **3. Congregational Discipline: When and How?**

The issue of church discipline raises the question of when and how. The elders are to initiate church discipline. In Acts 20, the apostle Paul called the elders at Ephesus to meet him at Miletus. In Acts 20:28-31, he told the elders:

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert . . .

Peter also admonished the elders of the congregations in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia in 1 Peter 5:1-2: “Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder . . . shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God.” To tend and protect the flock, the elders must be on guard—like shepherds—initiating action when savage wolves threaten individual members or the congregation.

#### ***Members to Support Elders***

The members are responsible to support and follow the lead of the elders in this most serious matter. In Heb 13:17, we are told, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.” The apostle Paul adds to this: “The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.” 1 Tim 5:17. Paul also wrote in 1 Thess 5:12-13: “But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work.” For discipline to be effective in restoring the erring, the elders must lead and the members must follow, united in one, solid as a rock, and firm in the truth.

Threats to the members and to the congregation usually come from four directions: division, false doctrine, immorality, and unruly and undisciplined lives. Consider these.

#### ***The Threat of Division***

Of division Paul instructed us in Rom. 1:17 “Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them.” The NIV version says “watch those” and the KJ version says “mark those.” Paul describes the dissentious and divisive person in unflattering words in verse 18: “For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting.” In Galatians 5, when discussing the works of the flesh, Paul identifies eight sins of division in verses 20 and 21 as deeds of the flesh: enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying. These sins, if are not dealt with, will destroy the church and the members. Swift and firm action is called for.

#### ***The Threat of False Doctrine***

False doctrine and teaching are the instruments of the Destroyer—the devil. He comes in with his ministers, who are disguised. “For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as

an angel of light. Therefore, it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness, whose end will be according to their deeds." 2 Cor 11:13-15. These false teachers are wolves (Acts 20 above). They are described in the worst of terms in 2 Peter 2:1-3:

There will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; and in their greed they will exploit you with false words . . .their destruction is not asleep."

Elders are charged to take the lead in confronting false teachers. Paul included this ability when he gave the qualifications of elders in Titus 1:9-22:

Holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict. 10 For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers . . .11 who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach for the sake of sordid gain . . . For this reason reprove them severely so that they may be sound in the faith.

### ***The Threat of Immorality***

Unlike divisive acts and false teaching, immorality targets an individual member or a small group of members. The most notable case is the man in 1 Cor 5 who had sexually immoral relations with his father's wife. Paul chastised the congregation for being arrogant by ignoring what was going on and by not removing such a one from their midst. Paul makes it very clear that it is the responsibility of the church to act in 1 Cor 5:5-7: "5 I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. 6 Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough?"

What was first the sin of one person will run like leaven throughout the congregation in arrogance, boasting, and indifference until the members of the congregation become abettors or accessories to the sin. Paul's rebuke culminates in 1 Cor 5:11-13 by telling them what action to take and against whom to take it, defining abuses that we must still consider today:

11 But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler -- not even to eat with such a one. 12 For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? 13 But those who are outside, God judges. REMOVE THE WICKED MAN FROM AMONG YOURSELVES.

Paul includes so-called brothers who are immoral and covetous people, idolaters, revilers, drunkards, and swindlers. The actions that we are to take include not associating with them, not even eating with them, and removing the wicked from among ourselves.

### ***The Threat of Undisciplined Lives***

Finally, there are those who walk unruly and disorderly lives. Paul writes in 2 Thess 3:6: "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly [disorderly KJV] life and not according to the tradition which you received from us." The meaning of leading an unruly life is defined in 3:11: "For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at

all, but acting like busybodies.” By extension, undisciplined lives must include those who have fallen away from the faith (Heb 6:6), who go on sinning willfully (Heb 10:26), and who are again entangled in the defilements of the world and are overcome (2 Pet 2:20).

### ***The Threat of Forsaking the Assembly***

Forsaking the assembly—a primary problem area today—is a willful sin in Heb 10:25-26: “Not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near. 26 For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins.” The nature of these sins is clear, and Paul’s call for action is equally clear in 2 Thess 3:14: “If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame.” Therefore, we are to keep away from every brother, 2 Thess 3:6 above; take special note of that person; do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame.

### ***Conclusion***

Finally, when we find division, false doctrine, immorality, and unruly and undisciplined lives within the congregation, we must act or we too will be sinning and in danger of the judgment. The love of God, the Father, and Jesus Christ, our Lord, demands it; the love of the erring members requires it; and the love of our souls’ salvation depends on it.