

Purge the Old Leaven: Aspects of Church Discipline in the Bible, Theology, and Culture

He that is without Sin: Qualifications in Judging Others

David L. Williams

KEY WORDS

| Matthew 7:1 | John 8:7 | Qualifications to Judge |
| Church Discipline | Biblical Literacy | Personal Holiness |

ABSTRACT

It is beyond question that God disciplines his children such that their lives produce evidence of increasing moral purity. He achieves this correction through diverse means, one of which is the corrective fellowship of other believers. Yet contemporary emphasis on personal autonomy, postmodern attitudes to truth claims and simplistic, mantra type quotations of decontextualized scripture militates against the serious consideration and practice of moral correction amongst twenty-first century Christians. This paper will be divided into two separate sections; the first will address two of the most commonly misquoted scripture verses employed to make the case that Christians should not judge sin in the lives of fellow believers. It is my hope that these verses when commented upon within their context will enable a slightly different picture of the concept of judgement to emerge. The second section will then briefly address the qualities required of all Christians who seek to be obedient to God in making moral judgments upon and assist to correct the sin of fellow believers in Christ.

Nothing can be more cruel than the tenderness that consigns another to his sin.

Nothing can be more compassionate than the severe rebuke that calls a brother back from the path of his sin.

– Dietrich Bonhoeffer¹

INTRODUCTION

The writer to the Hebrews informs his readers that God disciplines those He loves and reproves those He accepts as sons (Hebrews 12:6; Prov. 3:12). The writer continues instructing his readers, with something approaching a statement of the blindingly obvious, that all discipline seems unpleasant at the time (Hebrews 12:11). As a young child I learned, through what seemed like painfully regular

occurrences, that the right hand of fellowship applied to the seat of correction is no pleasant experience and I suspect that I am far from alone in this observation. Loving parents hope that those formative personal experiences contribute to the formation of godly characteristics in the lives of their children, which after all is also the goal of biblical discipline – that is, it would later yield the peaceful fruit of righteousness (Hebrews 12:11).

A prerequisite of implementing any form of discipline, be it parental, ecclesiastical or

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1954), 107.

otherwise is that of judging or discerning the misdemeanour or pattern of misdemeanours of the one to be corrected, thus enabling an appropriate course of discipline to be implemented. And here is the rub, as many Christians today eschewing the notion of reproof and discipline also reject the concept of believers judging one another. It is quite common to encounter such individuals engaging in a pantomime of naivety as they appeal ostensibly to words of scripture, citing common verses such as “Judge not, lest you be judged”, “He that is without sin cast the first stone”, or alternatively even “All you need is love”, a Beatles-esque approach to how Christians should conduct their inter-personal relationships.

This casual approach to life before the divine is nothing new of course and not even an issue unique to Christendom; for example, Plato addresses a similar concern addressing in effect the issue of easy-believism in his time, in which although a person assents to the notion “that the gods exist”, they are yet “easy to win over by bribes and offerings”². Compounding the matter today are the vast considerations encountered in contemporary postmodern culture; for example, the rejection of metanarrative and notions of absolute truth in favour of concepts of subjective truth and the pre-eminence of experience as a locus for determining meaning. As popular culture would have it “This is my truth, show me yours”³ and “Let your soul be your pilot, it will guide you well”⁴. On the macro scale, as Western society has become

increasingly subsumed into a sentimental, feelings based “love is all you need” type mantra, the church has generally followed along like a troop of transfixed Hamelinesque children, lured and lulled by the apparent sweet tunes of Zeitgeist, played mellifluously upon the pied-pipes of the postmodern piper. Consequently the theology and practise of church discipline has largely fallen out of favour.

Yet if God does discipline those He loves, often doing so through human agencies, and if all discipline though unpleasant at the time leads to the peaceful fruit of righteousness, then it is imperative that Christians embrace this difficult activity of God within their lives, both individually and corporately as a body of believers. It is important also that counter arguments are constructed to challenge the existing tendency to rely upon dubious employment of scripture as a basis of negating the need for ecclesiastical judgement of sin and consequent discipline. A mandate for all Christians to judge sin and to win back the errant brother is clearly present within scripture and the aim of this chapter will be to briefly address several points within this mandate. This chapter will be divided into two separate sections; the first will address two of the most commonly misquoted scripture verses employed to make the case that Christians should not judge sin in the lives of fellow believers. It is my hope that these verses when commented upon within their context will enable a slightly different picture of the concept of judgement to emerge. The second section will then briefly address the qualities required of all Christians who seek to be obedient to God in making moral judgments upon and assist to correct the sin of fellow believers in Christ.

2 Laws 10:885b. This is available online at: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0166%3Abook%3D10%3Apage%3D885#note3>. Last accessed 22nd October 2014.

3 This was the title of a 1998 CD. Manic Street Preachers, *This is My Truth Tell Me Yours*, (Epic Records, 1998).

4 These are lyrics from a popular track. Sting, “Let Your Soul Be Your Pilot”, from *Mercury Falling* (A&M, 1996).

“JUDGE NOT,
THAT YOU BE NOT JUDGED.”
(MATTHEW 7:1)

When discussions of moral matters arise today or when critique of another believer's behaviour and lifestyle arises then many will instinctively allude to or quote Matthew 7:1. Eric Bargerhuff suggests that these words of Jesus are “recited by many but profoundly misunderstood”⁵, that is, they constitute “the most frequently misapplied verse in the entire Bible, used and abused by both Christians and non-Christians alike”⁶. Likewise Mark Dever questions whether this verse is perhaps employed as a proverbial “shield for sin”⁷, deflecting and protecting modern day believers from the type of disciplined lives formerly required of congregations in earlier generations. If Dever is correct, this “shield for sin” represents a potent weapon in the quest for the deconstruction of moral boundaries of permissible contemporary Christian behaviour, the consequence of which is unrestrained freedom, unlimited autonomy and unqualified independence. How pious it can sound to quote “Judge not that you be not judged” as a means of legitimising acceptance of virtually any behaviour. The employment of this sanctimonious sounding, decontextualised phrase, ostensibly invokes the modern god of tolerance yet ultimately defies the biblical standards required of believers. Thomas Oden points out:

Autonomous individualism has divorced sin from a caring community. Absolute relativism has regarded moral values as so

5 Eric Bargerhuff, *The Most Misused Verses In The Bible*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2012), 25.

6 Ibid, 25.

7 Marc Dever, “Biblical Church Discipline” in *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* (Winter 2000), 40 .

ambiguous that there is no measuring rod against which to assess anything as sin.⁸

Thus the instruction to “Go and sin no more” is replaced with “Judge not, that you be not judged” and so what is consequently forfeited in the ensuing moral melee is an emphasis on God's holiness, the absolute yardstick by which we may evaluate our own and one another's lives.

By contrast the “Judge not” pericope appears within the Sermon on the Mount, where throughout Jesus implores his disciples to pursue ever-higher standards of behaviour befitting the holiness of their calling. It will be useful initially to place this pericope within its contextual setting. In a section (Matt 5:17-7:12) that may be themed “Jesus, the disciple and righteousness”, Jesus cautions his followers to base their understanding of God's requirement for discipleship on scripture (5:17-48). He continues, clarifying the nature of true worship (6:1-18), following which he articulates the cost of discipleship in this world (6:19-7:12). Specifically in this latter section Jesus deals with the issues of relationship to wealth (6:19-34), other believers (7:1-5), hostile others (7:6) and finally to God (7:7-12). Essentially, Jesus here and throughout the Sermon on the Mount is placing emphasis upon what it means to live a life committed to him, living faithfully and righteously, in holiness and reverence for God. Jesus repeatedly takes Old Testament commands and intensifies the ethical standards required of his disciples (Matthew 5:21-22, 5:27-30), his words being uncomplicated in meaning as they frame an ethic of holiness and responsibility for his followers. Such simple understanding should be the case here in Matthew 7:1, one chapter later, where Jesus' comments are to

8 Thomas Oden, *Corrective Love*, (St Louis: Concordia, 1995), 56.

be understood within this same context as he addresses the issue of judgementalism or hypocritical judgement. What then is the specific meaning of Matthew 7:1?

The passage comprises two simple components; a prohibitory command (7:1) immediately followed by a qualifying remark (7:2). Douglas Hare suggests that there are two issues to be initially dismissed⁹. Firstly, Hare discounts the notion that this passage refers to “prudential advice”, or, how one treats another is likely the manner in which one is treated in return. Both Hare and R T France¹⁰ read a divine passive into the second verb (judged), thus referring to an action of God rather than of men. Secondly, Hare rejects the concept that one may avoid the final eschatological judgment on the basis that one has demonstrated forbearance to the sins of others.

William Mounce defines the basic Greek verb κρίνω/κριτής(to judge) as:

to separate, to make a distinction between, to exercise judgement upon, to estimate, to judge, to assume censorial power over, to call to account.¹¹

W E Vine provides some further important definitions on this verb¹², comparing κρίνω/κριτής to its prefixed state. Vine defines ἀνακρίνω as “to examine, investigate, question, discern or to judge”¹³. This verb is employed on 16 occasions within the New Testament, regularly commending the notion that one should make discernments or judgments (eg.

Acts 17:11, 1 Cor 2:15). Likewise Vine defines the verb διακρίνω “to separate thoroughly” or “to discriminate, discern”, hence again “to judge”¹⁴. This verb is employed on three occasions in the New Testament with a positive mandate on two of these occasions (1 Corinthians 12:10 and Hebrews 5:14). By contrast Vine identifies ὑπόκριτής, a third version of the basic verb κρίνω/κριτής, as “a play-actor, a dissembler, a hypocrite”¹⁵ further stating that this word’s appearances in scripture are restricted to the Synoptic Gospels, usually Matthew, and exclusively used by Jesus.

Building upon this definition, France suggests¹⁶ that whilst the verb has technical, legal application it may also be employed more customarily to denote the formation of judgements or conclusions. He further points out that the verb is not intrinsically negative but that meaning is contextually derived. Matthew 7:1 is clearly such a case since the unfolding emphasis within the pericope is that of the sins of others. The point is that there are occasions when it is not just permissible for Christians to make judgments but in fact it is a mandate of God that they do so. In others words, context is a major signifier in determining the legitimacy or otherwise of employing judgement in any given situation.

Reading the “Judge not” pericope within context, it is clear that Jesus is attempting to address two essential elements. Initially he places a prohibition on hypocritical judgement warning his hearers that the standards they employ in critiquing others is the standards of critique that they will receive in return. Secondly via the employment of a deliberately exaggerated plank-speck metaphor and perhaps

9 Douglas Hare, *Matthew*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), 76.

10 R T France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 274.

11 William Mounce, *The Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 292.

12 W E Vine, *Complete Expository Dictionary*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996), 336.

13 Ibid, 336, 702.

14 Ibid, 336, 711.

15 Ibid, 316, 725.

16 France, *Matthew*, (2007), 274.

a word play on κριτής/ὑπόκριτής, he is first calling for the removal of sin from the lives of his disciples. R. Tasker points out¹⁷ that by prohibiting judgement here, Jesus does not have in mind the “critical facility” by which one discerns right from wrong. Instead, Jesus is addressing the “habit of censorious and carping criticism” habitually employed in such a manner that it weakens and debilitates the one judged rather than critiques and encourages him. Such a censorious person is a hypocrite and his actions carry him away. Jesus states that such judgement reciprocates, as condemning the behaviour of others whilst engaging in the very same behaviour or worse inevitably brings judgement; the hypocrisy being a compounding factor. Nevertheless the continual habit of carping criticism reveals a broader problem within the critic’s life, namely a censorious spirit, and as throughout the Sermon on the Mount it is this sinful attitude of the heart that serves as a primary concern for Jesus’ comments to his disciples. Jesus’ command to such a censorious individual is straightforward; “Remove the plank from your eye and you will be able to remove the speck from your brother’s eye also”. The implication being that the hypocrite must place primary emphasis upon his own hypocrisy, addressing it by grieving and renouncing his own sin out of reverence for God. It is in this context of perpetually addressing one’s own failings that one is then permitted to assist a co-believer in removing the speck of sin from his eye.

Clearly the sin of judgementalism is indicative of what Douglas Hare describes as a “disease of the spirit”, dwelling within the life of the believer who “arrogantly assumes a superiority that entitles him or her to assess the

failings of others”¹⁸. Initially the “judge not” imperative may appear to address this “disease of the spirit” by providing an all-pervasive prohibition against passing judgement upon a fellow believer’s behaviour. A closer examination of the pericope along with consideration of several other passages suggests a more nuanced position that Christians should pass judgement on one another in certain situations and under certain considerations. As an obvious example, later in the passage Jesus warns his disciples to be wary of false prophets, men whose identity may be discerned or judged from their behaviour (Matt. 7:15-20). Likewise, Paul leaves the Corinthian Church under no illusions that they are not to tolerate the sin of the man caught in a relationship with his father’s wife, stating that he has already judged the man (1 Cor. 5). Christ’s imperative that one should “Judge not, that you be not judged” is thus the prohibition of a hypocritical censoriousness towards others, an attitude that judges others from a position of sham moral superiority. Matthew 7:1 thus does not include a prohibition on a type of discernment that leads to value judgements on the sin of other Christians.

LET HIM WHO IS WITHOUT SIN
AMONG YOU
BE THE FIRST TO THROW
A STONE AT HER.
(JOHN 8:7)

If Eric Bargerhuff is correct in awarding Matthew 7:1 first prize in the race for the title of the most misused verse in the Bible, then undoubtedly John 8:7 provides stiff competition for that dubious honour. Again, simplistic understanding and sloppy, unwarranted employment of the text is common, seemingly

¹⁷ R V G Tasker, *Matthew*, (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1961) 79.

¹⁸ Hare, *Matthew*, (1993), 76.

providing a convenient “shield for sin”. The most common reading somehow gleans from the text that Jesus abrogates the law and abolishes capital punishment, because he “refuses to be part of the hangman’s plot”¹⁹ preferring a law of love for the guilty. The preference for a “law of love for the guilty” is common parlance, often employed as a subsequent pretext for the suggestion that unless a Christian is perfect then he or she has no business vocalising moral pronouncements on other believers.

Whilst many of the earliest manuscripts do not contain the *pericope adultera*, this is no place to peruse and engage the various complex arguments for the authenticity of this text, and I shall assume it for the purposes of this chapter, as authentic or not, this text is both commonly alluded to and frequently misquoted. The *pericope adultera* describes an early morning scene where a large crowd had gathered in the temple to listen as Jesus sat teaching. He is interrupted by the arrival of some scribes and Pharisees who brought with them a woman caught in adultery. The intention of the scribes and Pharisees was not to dispute about interpretations of the law, as the text makes clear that they were testing him. Bearing great animosity against Jesus, these religious leaders sought and found an occasion of public confrontation and testing, the issue seemingly providing Jesus little possibility of supplying a genuinely acceptable response²⁰. They were aware of Jesus’ love and mercy towards sinners but were curious to see how he would manage a case that according to Mosaic Law was crystal clear; that is, they were intent on demonstrating that his teaching on mercy and love contradicted

19 Lewis B Smedes, “Is the Death Penalty Really Necessary?” *United Evangelical Action*, (December 1964), 19.

20 In many respects the attempt to test Jesus here is similar to the “tribute to Caesar” question posed to Jesus in Matthew 22:15-22.

the Law, which punished adultery with death²¹.

If Jesus absolved the woman then they may conclude, with some justification, that he has transgressed the precepts of Moses. Alternatively, if he condemns her then he will not only be deemed inconsistent in his teaching, but will be seen to be engaging in something of a political point as whilst the penalty for adultery under the Mosaic Law was death by stoning, the right of capital punishment no longer resided with the Jewish community at this time since Israel was under Roman occupation²². Should Jesus insist on the Mosaic death penalty in this instance then it would be very easy to concoct a charge of illegality against him, an accusation of which the Roman authorities may take note. So, Jesus finds himself in something of an untenable position, placed there by a cabal of hypocritical conspirators undoubtedly proud of their Machiavellian manoeuvres against him. How does he respond? Jesus’ response is well known, he stoops down and begins to write in the ground, and as his interlocutors persist in pressing him he writes further in the dust (John 8:6b-8). Speculation abounds concerning the words that Jesus wrote, yet the text is silent as presumably the point is to emphasise the fact of writing rather than the content. Nevertheless the scribes and Pharisees were undoubtedly startled and puzzled by Jesus’ eventual verbal response that ‘he who is without sin should cast the first stone’ (John 8:7b). What could he possibly be alluding to by making such a statement?

Was Jesus suggesting, as is commonly heard in contemporary times, that one must

21 Deuteronomy 22:22-24. Note that the man involved in the adultery was also to be brought and stoned to death. Interestingly, Deuteronomy 17:7 indicates that the witnesses were to cast the first stone, on which basis it may be deemed that Jesus was in fact being quite stringent about application of the Law in this pericope.

22 See for instance, the Sanhedrin’s response to Pilate over the question of implementing a death penalty for Jesus (John 18:32).

be absolutely sinless prior to making any comment on the moral behaviour of others? If so, how could God's laws and the resulting moral standards ever be implemented? It would seem absurd to think that Moses expected such perfectly sinless standards of those who would stone an adulteress, as clearly none such exists. More likely is the probability that Jesus is stating not that one must be utterly sinless in all respects but that one must be sinless in certain respects prior to passing moral judgement. Whilst it would have been incongruous to require total sinlessness on the part of those who would stone the adulteress, it is likewise equally inappropriate to think that they could be partakers of the very same specific sin and still deem themselves suitable to hurl stones at her. Clearly an adulterer is in no position to implement the death penalty against an adulteress. According to their own testimony they had caught this woman in the very act, so what then had become of the man? Perhaps he was an associate of theirs, a member of the religious elite even, and thus exposed they depart, one by one, leaving the woman alone with Jesus.

Only now does Jesus address the woman, confidently pronouncing personal absolution upon her. Pressing his point, Jesus commands the woman to leave her life of sin, implying that her moral response to the mercy that she has received must be to henceforth live a life of purity. In contrast to popular analysis of this narrative, Jesus' refusal to condemn the woman does not constitute a denial that her actions were morally reprehensible, and neither is he coining a prototypical "who are we to judge" type cliché. In contemporary understanding the refusal to cast the first stone is reckoned as purely metaphorical; that is, it refers to critique, moral estimation or ethical opinion on

another's behaviour. Yet such an understanding and employment of this phrase is entirely deficient and misrepresents the essential thrust of the phrase within its contextual setting. Clearly, when read within the original context, the act of "casting the first stone" refers to the death penalty. This involves a moral evaluation, a pronounced sentence of condemnation and some authentic rocks launched repeatedly at a living, breathing person until said individual is dead. The textual evidence for this point could not be clearer, but a tendency to spiritualise and sloganise biblical verses obfuscates the straightforward meaning. Yet, given that the woman was caught in adultery why does Jesus prohibit the Mosaic punishment for adultery? Robert Gagnon provides an answer, suggesting that the "problem with capital punishment is that it is terminal: it does not provide the offender with a second chance to demonstrate repentance"²³. Certainly dead bodies cannot repent of sin, thus Jesus' primary concern is not with winning a dispute about interpretations of Law, but is the salvation of the woman, revealing to her that it is God who is the source of salvation. His actions were consistent with the manner in which God treats all sinful individuals, demonstrating a preference for "mercy over judgment" (James 2:13). Gagnon continues²⁴, pointing out that this pericope demonstrates two essential points, firstly that Jesus and the Pharisees are in agreement in their estimation of sin and secondly that Jesus' expectations of the woman subsequent to his act of mercy towards her is that she should disassociate herself from her sinful adulterous lifestyle and instead embrace a life of moral purity.

23 Robert A J Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, (Nashville, Abingdon Press: 2001), 216 .

24 Ibid .

THE QUALIFICATIONS OF THOSE WHO WOULD CORRECT SIN

It is perhaps true that the only “sin” the modern church fails to tolerate is that of intolerance, and whilst such is essentially a contradiction in terms, the reality is that the church is inclined to absorb the prevailing cultural values of the *Zeitgeist*, never more so than in the area of evaluating and judging the misbehaviour of others within the ecclesiastical community. I have already addressed the two most pious sounding biblical citations regularly employed to defend against those who would point out sin. We have seen for example, that Jesus instructed his disciples exactly how they should bring an erring believer to account, first taking the log from their own eye thus freeing them to have the clear vision to assist the erring brother or sister with the task of speck removal. The final section of this chapter aims to ask “what qualities are required of Christians as they help bring correction to their fellow believers?”

Writing in 1860 on the topic of evaluating Christian behaviour and Church discipline, Patrick Mell delineates two essential categories in this discussion²⁵. Firstly he discusses the use of teaching, preaching and general methods of ecclesiastical discipleship as a means of correction, and secondly Mell discusses personal corrective discipline on the basis of Jesus’ words in Matthew 18:15. Mell’s two categories, subsequently echoed by Roger Peterson²⁶, are useful here and bring to light some important considerations that form a basis for the moral requirements of Christians who are involved in addressing sin in the lives of fellow believers. Mell’s first category of instructional training in

righteousness is foundational to all that follows, forming the preliminary and primary means of evaluating and correcting aberrant behaviour. It is certain that any church or Christian grouping seeking to engage in corrective discipleship would be well served to pay heed to the requirement to place great emphasis on producing biblically literate Christians. Indeed Paul’s reminder to Timothy that all scripture is profitable for teaching, reproof and correction (2 Tim 3:16) is prudent here also, for in truth the laws and precepts of God must firstly be taught in order that they may then be implemented, that is before Christians will act correctly they must be taught correctly.

Following this observation there are certain qualifications required of those involved in instructional discipline. Specifically, in 1 Timothy 3: 1:7 and Titus 1:5-9, Paul itemises the qualifications required of congregational leaders. A quick perusal of these two scriptures demonstrates that the list of requirements in First Timothy and Titus are similar yet not identical, with the primary, overarching and summarising characteristic being that a leader should be “above reproach”. The items on the two lists identify the specifics of what it means to be above reproach. A leader must be devoted to his wife and able to manage his children and household affairs (Titus 1:6; 1 Tim 3:4-5). He must be a faithful steward of the resources that God has entrusted to him (Titus 1:7), being humble (Titus 1:7), gentle (Titus 1:7; 1 Tim 3:3) and sober (Titus 1:7; 1 Tim 3:3). He must be peaceful (Titus 1:7; 1 Tim 3:3) and not prone to inflicting violence, perhaps verbally as well as physically. He must be hospitable (Titus 1:8; 1 Tim 3:2) and not greedy for gain (Titus 1:7; 1 Tim 3:3). He will be a lover of good (Titus 1:8), upright and self-controlled (Titus 1:8; 1 Tim 3:2) whilst above all he is to be holy (Titus 1:8),

25 Patrick Mell, *Corrective Church Discipline*, (Arkansas Baptist Standard Bearer), 8-9.

26 Roger Peterson, “Discipline In The Local Church”, (*Central Bible Quarterly*, 02:3), 2.

his life thus wholeheartedly devoted to Jesus and the furtherance of the gospel. Finally, he is to be spiritually mature (1 Tim 3:6), respectable (1 Tim 3:7) and, according to Peter's first epistle, an elder should also be an example to the flock (1 Peter 5:3).

A leader is also required to be able to teach the Word (Titus 1:9; 1 Tim 3:2), yet the capacity to teach the word stands out as the only ability-based requirement amongst the approximately twenty personal characteristics itemised in these two lists that a leader must exhibit. The remainder of these qualifications represent the personal moral qualifications required of the leader who is involved in instructional correction and discipline of those he leads within the church. In truth however, these are the moral qualifications that all believers should aspire to establish in their lives to one degree or another, whether they serve in leadership or not. This list thus serves as a useful checklist for all believers as they engage in the challenge of correcting one another in the area of aberrant and unbiblical behaviour. In truth if those with logs in their eyes were able to remove their wooden optical impediments and eliminate their personal hypocrisy to the degree set out in this list, then perhaps the subsequent removal of specks from the eyes of one another may indeed prove to be a far less painful task for all concerned. Clearly the type of hypocritical judges that Jesus had in mind in Matthew 7:1 and whom he encountered in the *pericope adultera* would certainly not have been displaying the moral characteristics set out by Paul in his letters to Timothy and Titus.

Having attended to the instructional element of discipline, both Mell and Peterson suggest a second, personal aspect of evaluating and correcting aberrant Christian behaviour, relating all correction directly to the fellowship

of believers, that is the local church; the point being that correction of moral wrongdoing is not simply a matter for ecclesiastical leaders, but is one that all believers must engage in, believer to believer, as they work out their salvation in the context of Christian fellowship. Matthew 18:15-17 is the classic biblical passage in which Jesus sets out the step-by-step manner in which an aberrant brother should be approached. The overarching context of these verses is that of the sin of the 'ἀδελφός', the brother; that is, Jesus describes the person at risk here as 'your brother'. This is family business, brother to brother, and those who confront sinful behaviour are required to act toward the errant brother in such a manner as is compatible with kingdom values of love and mercy. Consequently the moral qualifications and attitudes required in such instances are very much those gleaned from 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 as described above. Correction of sin then is not contrary to the requirements to love but is very much an expression of love. There is no room for the censorious judgement of others prohibited by Paul (Romans 2:1), since those who are ensnared in sin are to be restored in a spirit of gentleness by those who walk in the Spirit (Galatians 6:1). Paul denounces harsh judgement but commends an assessment of sin that is firm yet kind, tough yet gentle and demanding yet humble.

Likewise Jesus tells us that if a brother sins then Christians are to approach privately, seeking to win him over. This suggests that the errant brother was in grave danger of being lost, thus it is not just a matter for church leaders to address, but is a matter deeply integral to genuine, growing Christian fellowship amongst the laity. Interestingly these verses in Matthew 18 are bookended by the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the unforgiving servant,

both of which emphasise God's desire that the errant sinner be forgiven and saved rather than condemned and rejected. The motive for approaching a fellow brother in sin must therefore be that of loving, personal concern for that individual, a concern that is wedded to a firm unyielding commitment to the truth and holiness of God. Of course the brother in sin is free to reject such an approach, following which a further visit to him may be required with two or three other witnesses failing which only then may the matter be brought before the church and its formal leadership. The goal in this pattern is to hopefully restore the brother who is in sin rather than to create a public spectacle of condemnation or to make an example of him. Yet the final step here, of presenting the issue before the leadership of the church and if necessary treating that brother as one would regard a Gentile, reminds us that one of the gravest dangers the modern church faces is the temptation to compromise with sin. It is, consequently, imperative that all believers deal with sin within their midst, and do so with moral credibility and according to the biblical pattern.

CONCLUSION

It is beyond question that God disciplines his children such that their lives produce evidence of increasing moral purity. He achieves this correction through diverse means, one of which is the corrective fellowship of other believers. Yet contemporary emphasis on personal autonomy, postmodern attitudes to truth claims and simplistic, mantra type quotations of decontextualized scripture militates against the serious consideration and practice of moral correction amongst twenty-first century Christians.

The simplistic suggestion derived from Matthew 7:1 has been shown to be wide of the mark, namely that if a Christian engages in any moral evaluation or pronouncement, then such a verdict is forthcoming under absolute threat of reciprocal judgement. The passage in question, when studied in context, clearly indicates a prohibition of hypocritical judgement yet does require disciples to engage in a form of judgement, in the form or removal of the brother's speck, following the prior removal of the log from their own eye. Simply stated, Jesus commands his disciples to clean up their own act, following which they are to assist their brothers to evaluate and remove moral impediments from their lives also. Likewise the customary misuse of John 8:7, has been shown to be deficient; as the claim that only the absolutely sinless, by implication nobody, should evaluate the behaviour of fellow Christians is clearly decontextualized proof-texting. Following the departure of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus unmistakably evaluates the behaviour of the woman caught in adultery and commands her to revise her behaviour such that she thoroughly shuns her former life of sin.

The church, then, is to be involved in the moral evaluation and discipline of its believers. Initially, this is achieved via corporate biblical literacy, for the commands and requirements of God must be taught prior to their implementation. Indeed, if Christians are unaware of God's commands then how are they able to obey? Yet, to simply state that Christians are to evaluate and correct one another's behaviour is perhaps only half of the story. Christ's overarching love for sinners is to be reflected in the manner in which Christians assist one another out of sinful behaviour. Consequently, Christians must evidence certain characteristics within their lives as they

mutually encourage and correct one another.

The lists of personal characteristics displayed in 1 Timothy 3: 1:7 and Titus 1:5-9 are those required of ecclesiastical leaders who are tasked with overseeing the lives of those in the church. Yet with the sole exception of the ability to teach, each of these characteristics should be evident within the lives of all believers. I have contended here, that these characteristics are thus exactly the sort that are required of all Christians who engage in the process of correcting errant believers. One of the key points of Matthew 18 is that Christians should approach as brothers those within the church who fail morally, seeking to win them back to the ways of God. This injunction is for all believers and not just for leaders who, on the basis of Matthew 18, are to only be formally involved as a final stage in the disciplinary process. Certainly if Christians endeavour to remove the plank from their own eye such that they display the personal characteristics displayed in 1 Timothy 3: 1:7 and Titus 1:5-9, and consequently approached one another over moral issues with the understanding that the errant believer is a brother in Christ, then many of the controversies over church discipline and issues related to the rejection of correction could be resolved very quickly. In short, the moral evaluation of behaviour amongst Christians is not just for ecclesiastical leaders, it is a matter that all believers should be engaged in as they walk in fellowship with one another.

David Williams

David Williams holds a BTh [Hons] from the University of Wales [Lampeter] and an MA [Theology] with Distinction from the University of Chester. He is an Approved Tutor of the University of Chester and is a member of KEDS' Academic Committee. He tutors several modules on KEDS'

*BTh and MA programmes. He is the Director of Studies for KEDS' "Knowing Your Bible" course. In 2015 he published his first book, **It's All In Your Head**, following this in 2016, with **Knowing Your Bible: An introductory Survey for the Everyday Christian**, which he contributed to and co-edited with Dr Calvin Smith.*

