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Aspects of Church Discipline
in the Bible, Theology, and Culture"*

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The Evangelical Review of Theology and Politics

Volume 5
2017

Essay Series

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

Edited by
Calvin L. Smith
Stephen M. Vantassel

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The *Evangelical Review of Theology and Politics* subscribes to the historic decisions of the early church councils. We hold dearly to the deity of Christ, the virgin conception, salvation through Jesus Christ, and the Trinity. We also believe in the unity of Scripture and consider the Bible as the final authority on all issues of faith and practice. This high view of Scripture requires submissions to be underpinned by a thoughtful biblical and theological analysis. The Editors also welcome non-Evangelical contributors to submit critiques of Evangelical political and social thought, providing they are suitably respectful of our values and beliefs, and that submissions are of interest and relevance to the aims and readership of the journal. Articles appearing in the journal do not necessarily reflect the views of the Editors.

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

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Introduction

Calvin L. Smith

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About...

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

Editorial

Anthony Royle

ABSTRACT

An introduction to the papers, the historical background to Church discipline, post-war developments and studies, this series of essays comprise studies that investigate some of these theological themes in the context of the church discipline process. Each study explores the multiple viewpoints of the biblical authors, wrestling with contesting issues, and noting various possible solutions provided by different scholars. Some of these themes are juxtaposed between values upheld in Scripture i.e. excommunication and hospitality, judgement and salvation, forgiveness and condemnation and are explored to clarify possible conflicting views. Furthermore, these essays challenge some of the pervading presuppositions that people impute on the biblical texts as well as analysing postmodern and pluralistic thoughts that abound in churches today that hinder the task of church discipline

A brief survey of writings on church discipline in the latter part of the twentieth century and early twenty-first century will highlight that there has been little written on the subject of Church discipline. When compared to the volume of writings of the early church fathers, the Reformers, and nineteenth century Pietists, this lack of interest in the last hundred years is astonishing. By contrast pre-twentieth century writers had a higher view of church discipline. Notable figures such as Irenaeus, Clement of

Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen, and Cyprian contributed various works commenting on the subject and process of church discipline. These figures were interested in the penitential aspect of discipline and its administration.

Similarly the Reformer, Balthasar Hubmaier (1485-1528) described church discipline as the “third mark” of Church. The first mark was the gospel and the second was the sacraments. Therefore, church discipline was viewed as an integral part to the churches identity and how a church should function.

In the nineteenth century church records describe annual days of church discipline where church members would congregate for the express purpose of disciplining wayward members. Various denominations published “manuals of discipline” to set guidelines in practicing many aspects in church administration including church discipline. Holiness and piety were of extreme importance and members were disciplined for activities that are acceptable, although perhaps still frowned upon in many churches, such as drinking alcohol and dancing.

There was a decline in these days of discipline and writings concerning the process of church discipline post World War II, which may have been a reaction to the over zealotness of the practice or heavy shepherding that wrought in previous centuries. Despite this decline, there have been notable contributions that have continued to uphold church discipline in the modern church. Continuing the reformers theme of the churches identity, Francis Schaeffer argued nine points of what a church should consist of in order to identify as a true church. Schaeffer’s fifth point was that the church must take discipline among its members seriously. The most notable and perhaps most popular book on church discipline in the twentieth century was *Handbook on Church Discipline: A Right and a Privilege of Every Church Member* by Jay Adams. Adams’ contribution was pastoral in tone and presented a balanced approach to the issues at hand compared to the strict approach of the previous century. The practical approach of Adams provided a wide readership and was aimed at both

leaders and laity providing a comprehensive handbook with a step by step guide to the process of church discipline. Adams also sought to unify corrective discipline with formative discipline (discipleship) in providing a positive and productive approach to discipline.

Building upon Schaeffer's nine points, the pastoral approach of Adams, and rooted in reformed tradition, the Southern Baptist Seminary and a group formed by some of its faculty (9Marks) have published books and articles on church discipline at the turn of the twenty-first century. 9Marks, formed by Mark Dever alongside colleague Jonathan Leeman, are a group that helps to support churches and pastors in being "healthy churches". One of the signs of a healthy church is that both formative and corrective disciplines are practiced by its members. Many of the publications from 9Marks are aimed at church members for lay reading in order to educate them in church membership, discipleship, and even the corrective process of church discipline. The aims of these writing are to encourage Christians and churches to practice church discipline, noting the sanctity the process provides by protecting the church and the Lord's name, but also stresses that church discipline's main obligation is to, with grace and love, admonish someone who has fallen and restore them with the Lord and with fellow believers.

The Southern Baptist Seminary also contributed additional academic writings and published a volume of papers in a special edition of church discipline for their journal in 2004. This covered a wide range of issues to the history of church discipline, to its practices, or lack thereof, in churches today, legal issues regarding the process of church discipline, and some other practical concerns.

Over the last thirteen years, there has been little academic output on the issue of church discipline. There have been some books over the last several years that have started to reflect on the theological aspects of church discipline. The most notable theme these works deal with is the love of God and how this is reflected through church discipline. Various illustrations of God's love as a father (Eric Bargerhuff, *Love*

that Rescues) or as a husband (Robert K. Cheong, *God Redeeming His Bride*) are provided for the reader to reflect upon the relationship between Christ and the church. These theological reflections have been a neglected part of the discussion of church discipline in both academic settings and their practical implications exhorted in more popular writings. However, there are further aspects to consider when engaging on the subject of church discipline. For example, how does church discipline inform us about forgiveness? Is forgiveness unconditional or given on a series of conditions? Another aspect that requires investigation is the issue of judgement. Eric Bargerhuff in his book *The Most Misused Verses in the Bible* highlights that Matthew 7:1 Judge not lest ye be judged is often used by many Christians and non-Christians today (p. 25). However, church discipline requires us to make judgements upon the lives of others. These portions of Scripture, therefore, require us to read these themes with the whole scope of the bible in mind. The example of the use of Matthew 7:1 in our culture today reflects the use of proof texting that is used to support one's own presupposition or opinion of a church discipline situation.

An attitude of "judge not" it reflected in postmodern viewpoints that are expressed by many today. Unfortunately, there has been little written in regards to church discipline in regards to the cultural challenges of postmodernism, pluralism, and radical inclusivism. Although there have been many writings about the influencing factors of postmodernism on the church, both positive and negative, there is little in regards to its impact of the process of church discipline and the disruption it has on personal and corporate holiness. As the conversation of church discipline has navigated to pastoral responses to church discipline, there is a need to engage with a generation immersed with postmodern thought.

This collection of essays comprise studies that investigate some of these theological themes in the context of the church discipline process. Each study explores the multiple viewpoints of the biblical authors, wrestling with contesting issues, and noting various possible solutions provided by different scholars. Some of these themes are juxtaposed

between values upheld in Scripture i.e. excommunication/hospitality, judgement/salvation, forgiveness/condemnation and are explored to clarify possible conflicting views. Furthermore, these essays challenge some of the pervading presuppositions that people impute on the biblical texts as well as analysing postmodern and pluralistic thoughts that abound in churches today that hinder the task of church discipline. Although these essays are not a handbook or guide to the process of church discipline, nor do they seek to offer advice regarding church polity, they do provide some sharp conclusions and principles that should guide the reader when faced with administering discipline in their own church setting. It is our hope that this collection of papers on church discipline will contribute to the discussion of biblical, theological, and cultural issues and move the conversation on to pave the way for future contributions, leading to a positive approach and greater interest in both academia and the church.



*Purge the Old Leaven: Aspects of Church Discipline
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Church Discipline: Rationale, Scope, Process, and Issues

Stephen M. Vantassel

KEYWORDS:

| Closed Communion | Corrective Discipline | Excommunication |
| Judgement | Practical Theology |

ABSTRACT:

This essay discusses why corrective discipline is necessary for healthy church life by showing how the popular understanding of Matthew 7:1 is incorrect and that the church is commanded to judge the behavior of its own members. The author explains what types of behaviors are suitable for church discipline and explains how the discipline process should proceed. The article concludes with insights for how churches lacking a discipline process can begin to implement biblical teaching in a manner worthy of Christian grace and pastoral concern..

INTRODUCTION

“Who are you to judge?” is a common response used by “Christians” to blunt comments perceived to be critical of their beliefs or behavior. The assumption of this defense is that Christians are only responsible to the Lord Jesus Christ. The Church or Body of Christ, therefore, is not a familial institution where members have responsibilities and commitments to each other, let alone any authority over believers¹. Rather, the Church is like college. It’s a place where the attendee gets his/her needs met to live a more successful and productive life. Whether the attendee participates in the life and activities of the college is up to the goals of the attendee. If the attendee finds that the college does not “fit” his/her perceived needs, one need only transfer to a different, and presumably better, institution.

This individualistic behavior amongst Christians in the Western church is so prevalent, it is difficult for many to imagine the Christian life being any different. The individualistic narrative fits so well with the West’s long-standing focus on the individual against the collective or ruling institutions. Evangelicals may even point to Martin Luther’s assertion that his conscience trumped the power and intellectual heft of the Roman Catholic Church.

But is this hyper-individualistic understanding of Christianity Biblical? Does it align with the witness of the first century tradition as presented through the apostolic witness contained in Scripture? As can be surmised from the tone of this introduction, I believe the answer is a resounding, “No!” However, the manner by which the New Testament explains how accountability should “look” needs to be unpacked. This chapter seeks to not only justify the righteousness and necessity of Church discipline but also to provide a vision for how proper Church discipline should be enacted.

Peterson argues that discipline is broader than punishment. Discipline

¹ J. Carl Laney. *A Guide to Church Discipline: God’s Loving Plan for Restoring Believers to Fellowship with Himself and with the Body of Christ*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 72-78.

includes training, drilling, exercising, cultivating and preparing believers for the Christian life. Thus the preaching of the Word is part of the discipline process². Peterson is quite right in this regard. Proper Christian teaching, both in word and deed, prevents a lot of problems and/or eliminates them before they become severe. Traditionally, this kind of discipline is called formative, because it seeks to shape the life of the believer³. However, this chapter will focus on the narrow definition of discipline known as corrective discipline⁴. Corrective discipline involves the direct confrontation of specific issues involving specific individuals⁵. The chapter will discuss four key questions concerning corrective discipline: What is the rationale for Church discipline? What is the scope of Church discipline? What is the process of Church discipline? What is the tone and the extent of Church discipline? I end with some practical considerations on how the contemporary Evangelical church can begin to implement the process of biblical discipline in churches where it has long been absent.

Readers should be advised that I will only be focusing on biblical and spiritual grounds and procedures for the proper implementation of corrective/reformative church discipline. I will not engage the problem of restoration for difficult sins such as domestic violence⁶. Likewise, discussion of how Christians can avoid civil lawsuits and criminal charges will not be addressed. This narrowing of the topic is not due to any assertion that those issues lack relative importance as I believe they

2 Roger L. Peterson. "Discipline in the Local Church." *Central Bible Quarterly* 2:3(Fall 1959), 1-2. See also Don Cox, "The Forgotten Side of Church Discipline," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4:4(Winter 2000):44-45.

3 Mark Dever. "Biblical Church Discipline." *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4:4(Winter 2000), 29.

4 Dever. "Biblical Church Discipline", 29.

5 The New Testament does not directly address the discipline of groups, such as is done when the Catholic Church enacts an interdict (see Peter D. Clark. *The Interdict in the Thirteenth Century: A Question of Collective Guilt*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007). However, the idea of collective punishment is suggested by Paul and John (Rev 2:5).

6 See Susan E. Hylen. "Forgiveness and Life in Community." *Interpretation* 54:2(2000), 146-157.

are or soon will become increasingly important as the culture and its laws shift from apathy towards Christian values to open hostility. Rather, the decision stems from my lack of counseling/legal training (I am not a lawyer) and from the belief that we must first have a clear understanding of Biblical teaching on church discipline before we consider how to restore those with profoundly hurtful sins or how avoid lawsuits when the church implements it. In addition, I contend there is a point at which Christians will have to bear the burden of persecution for following Christ's commands. We must, after all, obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29).

WHAT IS THE RATIONALE FOR CHURCH DISCIPLINE?

There are essentially two reasons why the church must enact discipline. The first relates to the church itself. Paul argues that failure to evict an unrepentant sinner can negatively impact the church, just like a little leaven, leavens the whole batch of dough (1 Cor 5). Robert E. Moses argues that the reason why Paul was so adamant that the incestuous man be excommunicated was that if he was allowed to remain Satan would be able to breach the church's protective hedge⁷.

The second reason the church must exercise discipline is for the benefit of the person being excommunicated. In the case of 1 Corinthians 5, Paul wants the immoral (i.e. sensual) man to be excommunicated so that he can suffer physical decline at the hand of Satan, and perhaps see the transitory value of physical pleasure and ultimately return to Christ⁸.

7 Robert E. Moses. "Physical and/or Spiritual Exclusion? Ecclesial Discipline in 1 Corinthians 5." *New Testament Studies* 59(2013), 185-189. The grounds for Moses' opinion is based on the notion that a Christian's protection against Satan is only partial. Since Satan and his minions are not destroyed until the end of the age (1 Cor 15:24-25; Rom 8:22-23), they retain power. Christians are protected (Gal 1:4) as long as they maintain purity in the church. I suspect that the need for purity is also why elders are subject to public punishment (1 Tim 5:19-20; cf. Jms 3:1).

8 Robert E. Moses. "Physical and/or Spiritual Exclusion? Ecclesial Discipline in 1 Corinthians 5." *New Testament Studies* 59(2013), 172-191. See also Simon J. Kistemaker.

Restoration was also the goal behind Paul's condemnation in 1 Timothy 1:20 (cf. 2 Cor 2:5-11).

Some readers may point out that Christ himself forbid judging in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 7:1; cf. Lk 6:37-38). But did Jesus actually forbid people from distinguishing between right and wrong behavior? Consider Matthew 7:6. There Jesus tells his listeners not to cast their pearls before swine or give holy things to the dogs. If we understand dogs as a euphemism for wicked people (see Phlp 3:2; Rev 22:15), then Christ seems to be commanding Christians to identify (i.e. judge) a person to be evil or not. One could argue that Matthew 7:1 and 7:6 are just contradictory because they were inserted by different schools of Christian thinkers. While that position may be taken, there is no external evidence to support such a supposition. Fortunately, there is no reason to adopt that sort of skepticism because reading the context provides a straightforward solution. Matt 7:2-5 gives us the key. Christ is warning his followers to carefully evaluate their own "righteousness" before condemning others. In addition, his warning that you will be judged in the manner that you gave judgement reminds his readers to get their facts straight and err on the side of mercy or caution⁹.

Christians are, however, to judge themselves first as James assumes in 5:16. Now whether the confession of sin pertains only to those sins against those that were injured¹⁰ or should be construed more broadly¹¹ does not detract from the idea that Christians are obligated to evaluate their own behavior. But James is unfamiliar with the notion that Christian judgement is limited only to self-evaluation. For James 5:19 shows the author clearly encouraging members of the faith to watch out for each

"Deliver This Man to Satan (1 Cor 5: 5): A Case Study In Church Discipline." *Master's Seminary Journal* 3(1992), 34-46.

9 For a more sophisticated argument for this point see Walter T. Wilson. "A Third Form of Righteousness: The Theme and Contribution of Matthew 6.19-7.12 in the Sermon on the Mount." *New Testament Studies* 53:3(2007), 303-324.

10 Kistemaker and Hendrickson, 178.

11 Martin Dibelius, and Heinrich Greeven. *James: A Commentary on the Epistle of James. Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible.* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 255.

other (cf. Eph 4:25), explaining that turning a wayward brother back to the right path (i.e. truth) will cover a multitude of sins (Jms 5:20)¹². What James meant by “cover a multitude of sins” is unclear. Does he mean the sins of the wayward believer or the sins of the exhorter?¹³ Perhaps, the question forces a false disjunction¹⁴ because James says everyone stumbles (Jms 3:2). It would appear that James could have been referring to the practical reality that past (and corrected) sins were overlooked by the community as well as the fact that the wayward believer that returned to the faith would experience eschatological removal of sins in heaven¹⁵.

THE SCOPE OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Some have tried to argue that the essentials of the Christian life center on correct behavior (orthopraxy) and not correct belief (orthodoxy)¹⁶. Certainly, a simple reading of James would prove that right behavior is a critical element of the Christian life. James’ teaching is even more potent if one accepts the tradition that he was not only the half-brother of Jesus Christ but also the first leader of the Jerusalem Church¹⁷. But is there more?

Yes. Consider James’ use of the word ἀλήθεια (truth)¹⁸. He uses the

12 It should be mentioned that James seems to use the word “brethren” or its cognates to emphasize particular points which often involve uncomfortable truths (see James 1:2, 16, 19; 2:1, 5, 14; 3:1, 10, 12; 4:11; 5:7, 9, 10, 12, 19).

13 Dibelius, Martin, and Heinrich Greeven. 258.

14 D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Carlisle, U.K.; Grand Rapids, MI: Paternoster; Baker Books, 1996), 90.

15 Martin Dibelius and Heinrich Greeven, *James: A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 258.

16 Bruce Demarest, “Christendom’s Creeds: Their Relevance in the Modern World,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 21:4(December 1978): 353.

17 Simon J. Kistemaker, and William Hendriksen, *Exposition of James and the Epistles of John. Vol. 14. New Testament Commentary*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 7-10.

18 William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago

term three times (1:18; 3:14; 5:19), the last two with the definite article. In 1:16-17, James corrects the false theology that God can tempt people. Then in verse 18, James says that believers were brought forth through the word of truth. Now James could be using the phrase “word of truth” to refer to Christ (cf. John 15:6) or the gospel message (cf. Col 1:5)¹⁹. Ultimately, definitional precision in this instance does not matter because to truly encounter the truth requires an intellectual and behavioral change (Jms 3:14 where James explicitly connects behavior with theology²⁰). In other words, to follow the truth involves both correct belief and correct action. Thus when interpreting James 5:19, we should understand that straying from the truth refers to someone leaving the faith in terms of theology and/or practice²¹. Both errors are in view and upon seeing either one should cause a concerned believer to be stirred to action to save his/her brother from error.

THE PROCESS OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Matthew 18:15-20 is the classic text covering the process of discipline in the church. There Jesus lists several simple steps aimed at resolving the harm when a brother sins against you²². Interestingly, the focus appears to

Press, 2000), 43. They give three definitions: 1. Truthful, honest, 2. Fact, true, and 3. Real, genuine, and not imaginary.

19 William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 324b.

20 Contra William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 324a, which seems to have over emphasized the intellectual element of truth as against the embodiment of truth.

21 Examples of the tight relationship between theology and behavior abound in the N.T. Consider 1 Tim 1; Gal 2:11-15; Mark 8:32-3.

22 Roger L. Omanson and Bruce Manning Metzger, *A Textual Guide to the Greek New Testament: An Adaptation of Bruce M. Metzger's Textual Commentary for the Needs of Translators* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006), 29 point out that the earliest manuscripts leave out “against you”. Unfortunately, a case can be made for including or excluding the words. Art Azurdia. “Recovering the Third Mark of the Church.”

be a harm against a person, rather than deviation from a theological tenet²³. The wording is decidedly laconic in that it does not detail every possible issue, such as perhaps the victim misunderstood the perpetrator²⁴. The steps assume that the victim cannot shrug off the offense. Thus to prevent bitterness from taking root, Jesus tells (i.e. commands²⁵) the victim to confront (ἐλέγχω)²⁶ the perpetrator privately. The goal is to restore the fractured relationship as demonstrated by Mt 18:15b and the passage's position between the stories of the lost sheep (Mt 18:10-14) and the parable of the unforgiving servant (Mt 18:21-35)²⁷.

If the perpetrator does not repent after the private confrontation, then the victim is to revisit the person accompanied by two to three witnesses (again Christ commands this act)²⁸. The witness does not need to have witnessed the original sin. Azurdia argues they are to witness the second confrontation²⁹. He correctly explains that confidentiality cannot be

Reformation and Revival 3:4(Fall 1994), 65.n.7. Azurdia contends that the textual issue is not relevant because Galatians 6:1 tells us that the church is to be concerned with "...sin in general, not just when it is a direct offense experienced against one's person."

23 Prasch contends that Mt 18 refers to personal offenses while James 5 refers to theological ones. J. Jacob Prasch. "Binding and Loosing." Chap. 3 in, *The Challenge of Church Discipline Today*, edited by Anthony Royle: CreateSpace, 2016. NP. I am not completely convinced of this hard distinction.

24 Azurdia. "Recovering the Third Mark of the Church," 64-70. Azurdia does a superb job unpacking the rationale of the steps and I will be relying on his article heavily in this section.

25 Roger L. Peterson. "Discipline in the Local Church." *Central Bible Quarterly* 2:3(Fall 1959), 13.

26 J. Carl Laney. "The Biblical Practice of Church Discipline." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 143:572(Oct 1986), 358. He explains that the same verb is used to describe the Holy Spirit's work of convicting of sin (John 16:8). William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 315 entry 3 defines the word as "to express strong disapproval of someone's action," It also references Lev. 19:17.

27 See David McClister, "'Where Two or Three are Gathered Together': Literary Structure as a Key to Meaning in Matt 17:22-20:19." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39:4(December 1996), 549-560 for a compelling discussion on forgiveness within the larger subject of binding and losing.

28 Roger L. Peterson. "Discipline in the Local Church." *Central Bible Quarterly* 2:3(Fall 1959), 13.

29 Art Azurdia. "Recovering the Third Mark of the Church." *Reformation and Revival* 3:4(Fall 1994), 66.

guaranteed at this point. I would add that neither can Christians plead the Fifth Amendment Right provided by the U.S. Constitution against self-incrimination³⁰.

If the issue is still not resolved, then the matter is ultimately brought before the whole congregation (Mt 18:17). Azurdia argues that the goal of the public statement is to elicit the help of the congregation to encourage the wayward member to repent. Too often says Azurdia, the church moves to step four (i.e. disfellowshipping/excommunication) before the pressure of the church is fully felt by the unrepentant believer, thereby robbing him/her of another opportunity to repent³¹.

In the end, if the disobedient believer fails to repent (if as Azurdia, says after numerous³² attempts at resolution), then the church is to excommunicate that person (Mt 18:17b). As Paul points out in 1 Corinthians 5, excommunication does not mean you cannot talk to the person. Excommunication means that you can no longer perceive or treat that person like a brother or sister in the Lord, which in the ancient world would involve not sharing a meal with that person³³.

WHAT IS THE TONE AND EXTENT OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE?

Scripture repeatedly discusses the importance of the tone and extent of corrective discipline. Christ reinforces this concept with his repeated references to the heart (i.e. motivations, attitude) of people (Mt 5-7). The

30 <http://constitutioncenter.org/interactive-constitution/amendments/amendment-v> visited May 1, 2016.

31 Art Azurdia. "Recovering the Third Mark of the Church." *Reformation and Revival* 3:4(Fall 1994), 66-7.

32 I understand that "numerous" is a vague term. But while the structure of church discipline is clear its implementation must be flexible enough to adjust to the person's spiritual maturity, severity of the offense, etc.

33 Jonathan Schiebert. "Table Fellowship and the Translation of 1 Corinthians 5:11." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127:1(2008), 163-164.

key is two-fold, the heart of the “corrector”, as Paul says we must restore people gently lest we too become tempted (Gal 6:1-2) and the repentance of the “contrite” as Christ tells us that we must be always open to forgive the repentant sinner (Mt 18:21-35)³⁴. The goal of discipline is restoration of fellowship so that the wayward believer can return to the life and blessing of the church where he/she can continue to grow in Christ (Eph 4-5).

But even amongst those who believe that discipline is an important part of church life, the question remains regarding which sins or issues demand or require church discipline. It is a fair question. We do not want church discipline to devolve into a cult where every aberration from the status quo is condemned (cf. Titus 3:9). I believe the church in the western world is a long way from this excess (though there are some regrettable examples) but I recognize that sometimes zealous Christians commit the opposite error by over-correcting a bad behavior³⁵.

I think the first step toward resolving this thorny question is to separate different issues. First, let’s put aside conflicts between individuals and suggest that those be resolved according to Matthew 18. The thornier problem, at least on a theological level, is how to deal with moral and theological failings. Let’s begin with moral failings. The New Testament provides many vice lists³⁶. The table opposite lists the vices as they appear in the canonical order. Since I am only interested in a complete list, I have only mentioned a sin once even though readers should recognize that many are repeated elsewhere.

34 Many thanks to my wife Donna Vantassel for helping with the wording here. J. Carl Laney. *A Guide to Church Discipline*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 156. Laney argues that Eph 5:12 means that confessions should avoid excessive details because speaking of such evil things is shameful. While believing that such advice is wise, I have not found any interpreter to support that understanding of Eph 5:12.

35 Discussion of forgiveness and restoration of a repentant believer is beyond the scope of this essay. For insight see Laney, 2010 chapter 8; and Keller, *Timothy*. 2009. *Serving Each Other Through Forgiveness and Reconciliation. Redeemer City to City*. http://vinechurch.com.au/media/pdf/Forgiveness_and_Reconciliation.pdf visited June 23, 2017.

36 John T. Fitzgerald, “Virtue/Vice Lists,” ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 858.

Matt 15:19	Murder, adultery, sexual sins, stealing, lying, speaking evil of others *
Mk 7:22	Greed, evil actions, doing sinful things, pride, foolish living
Lk 18:11	Cheat, tax collector
Rom 1:29-31	Selfishness, hatred, jealousy, fighting, thinking worst of each other, gossip, hate God, rude, conceited, brag, invent ways to do evil, don't obey parents, foolish, don't keep promises, no kindness, or mercy to others. Applaud others that do aforementioned things.
Rom 13:13	Wild parties, drunkenness
1 Cor 5:10-11	Worship idols, don't associate with people that do those things and call themselves Christians
1 Cor 6:9-10	Male prostitutes, homosexuality,
Gal 5:19-21	Not being pure, witchcraft, making trouble, anger, causing people to be angry with each other, causing divisions, envy, other things like these
Eph 4:31	Bitterness, angry shouting to hurt others, doing evil
Eph 5:3-5	Evil talk, foolish speaking, evil jokes
Col 3:5-8	Evil thoughts
1 Tim 1:9-10	No religion, patricide, matricide, murder, same-sex relations, slave trading, do anything against the true teaching of God
1 Tim 6:4-5	Stands for nothing, fighting over words, evil mistrust, think serving God is a way to riches
2 Tim 3:2-4	Lovers of self, ungrateful, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, holding a form of godliness but denying its power.
Titus 1:7;	Passage explicitly deals with pastors and won't be dealt with here as I am discussing Christians in general.
Titus 3:3	Malice
1 Pet 2:1	Deceit, slander
1 Pet 4:3	Sins stated elsewhere
1 Pet 4:15	Evildoer
Rev 9:21	Sorcery, immorality
Rev 21:8	Cowardly, unbelief
Rev 22:15	Loves lying

* : I used the New Century Version and
the New American Standard Bible (updated) for wording of vice

A TABLE OF NEW TESTAMENT VICES A list of vices as they appear in the canonical order

The question is whether the church should seek to excommunicate unrepentant believers who commit these acts? We should remind ourselves that the behavior must be repeated despite admonitions³⁷. Many of the vices mentioned here assume repetition of sufficient enough to suggest the person's character is bent towards evil. Excommunication should only be applied to incorrigible members.

But are some of the sins listed above more serious than others? I would suggest that these vice lists overwhelmingly focus on behaviors that would fail to maintain the distinction between the world and the church as well as poison the fellowship in the church. Thus in light of the seriousness of those sins, I would argue that all of them are suitable for excommunication, when the member has failed to repent.

Now Moses believes that Paul distinguishes between exclusion (i.e. excommunication) and handing over to Satan³⁸. Moses argues that the incestuous man of 1 Cor 5 receives the harsh condemnation (i.e. handing over to Satan) because he not only was committing the sin but claiming theological justification for that sin. But even if we assume Moses is correct, the additional discipline only occurs following an excommunication. I suspect that the need for additional condemnation would be exceedingly rare.

PRACTICAL ISSUES

In light of all that has been stated, you might think that churches should start instituting church discipline immediately. But Kenneth Schenk makes an important observation about the applicability of Paul's comments to the contemporary (western) church. He writes³⁹,

37 Ian McNaughton, *Opening up 2 Thessalonians*, *Opening Up Commentary* (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2008), 15. McNaughton argues that Paul in 2 Thessalonians 3 makes the distinction between repentant and unrepentant Christians.

38 Robert E. Moses. "Physical and/or Spiritual Exclusion? Ecclesial Discipline in 1 Corinthians 5." *New Testament Studies* 59(2013), 179-180.

39 Kenneth Schenk. *1 & 2 Corinthians: A Commentary for Bible Students*

One of the debates that has surfaced from time to time is the question of whether the church should be a “hospital for sinners” or a “haven for saints.” Both have been true at different times and places.

However, our mega-churches today scarcely look much like any of the churches Paul founded in the first century. Our small groups and prayer meetings are much more on the scale of his house churches. We should probably consider this aspect of our situation when applying this chapter to today. We must prayerfully consider whether Paul’s goals would be accomplished today by the same disciplinary actions. Would the negative influence of an individual sinner play out the same way in a service of a thousand, which at times we treat more like the entry-way into the church as much as the church itself?

I think Schenck’s observation should cause us to pause. Many churches today lack the intense “life sharing” that the New Testament seems to assume⁴⁰. His comments carry weight only because what we call “church” is a hollow replica of what God actually has for his bride. Perhaps the first step is to build community and holiness through fellowship and the proclamation of the word before we jump on the discipline bandwagon too eagerly.

I would, however, suggest that one strategy (certainly not the only one) to encourage a greater sense of unity and bonding within the church is to institute closed communion. Anyone can attend the church at any time, but not everyone would be able to participate in communion⁴¹. I

(Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2006), 83.

40 Luke Timothy Johnson. “Making Connections: The Material Expression of Friendship in the New Testament.” *Interpretation* 58:2(2004), 158-171 argues that the New Testament frequently speaks of sharing material possessions as the quintessential concept of *κοινωνία*.

41 My thinking has similarities with early American Puritanism and Jonathan Edwards save on two points. First, Christians should not adopt a Gestapo-like approach when relating to fellow members. Second, excommunicated people can attend the church but cannot participate in communion. See Jeremy M. Kimble. “That Their Souls May Be Saved: Theology and Practice of Jonathan Edwards on Church Discipline.” *Themelios* 39:2(July 2014): Logos Edition. Note that Paul assumed non-believers attended church in his comments in 1 Cor 14:22-25. For this latter point as well as Paul’s views on insiders and outsiders See Paul Trebilco. “Creativity at the boundary: Features of the Linguistic

think one of the reasons for the lack of unity in churches stems from the easy membership policies. Membership often means little more than you are a stockholder in the church. You can vote on financial matters and possibly hold positions that involve teaching or ruling ministries. Unless you care about those issues (and most Christians do not care or they lack gifting in those ministries) then the lack of being a member results in no net loss. In all the years I have attended church, I frequently did not know the member status of most attendees. I even attended churches where I wasn't a member and often was treated no differently than the members, except being prevented from voting or teaching.

Closed communion, however, would force people to commit as they would not be able to partake unless they were full members in good standing with the congregation. Closed communion would empower church leaders whose status is often lower than the local postman and it would reconnect Christians to the corporate nature of communion. It would also reduce the practice of people leaving churches to avoid discipline and joining, and being accepted of, other churches in a casual manner. People can attend church but they would not be allowed to partake of communion unless in good standing⁴².

We must use care to not be dogmatic with this idea because Paul does not explicitly forbid the idea of open communion⁴³. But I suggest that using closed communion would reinforce the body's unity in Christ. It also would be more in line with the intent of the Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians. In the vast majority of churches, I have attended, ministers have taken the warnings of 1 Corinthians to refer to an individual's personal relationship with Christ. While that notion is important, Paul's emphasis in this passage is on our horizontal relationships, namely with

and Conceptual Construction of Outsiders in the Pauline Corpus." *New Testament Studies* 60:2(2014), 191 and rest of article.

42 Daniel E. Wray. *Biblical Church Discipline*. (Banner of Truth Trust, 1978), 347.

43 The local churches were so small and socially/culturally isolated that non-Christians would not be seeking to attend so the idea of open communion would not have crossed their minds.

how we have treated our fellow believers⁴⁴.

While Paul was specifically condemning the way the wealthy believers were treating their poorer brothers and sisters in Christ, it seems highly likely that he would have included other inter-relational sins as well. Ultimately then, communion would be a time for members to reflect on how they treated their fellow believers, not on whether they used a curse word when they were working on their car.

I understand that some will claim that closed communion smacks of Catholicism. I would point out that the issue is not whether the practice is Catholic, the issue is whether it is biblical. While the Catholic Church has many errors, even a broken clock is right twice per day. I had one minister tell me that he would not adopt the practice of closed communion because it was the Lord's Table not his church's table. This type of argument sounds spiritual but ignores the question of what the Lord has commanded in regards to the life of His church and the communion its members must celebrate.

SUMMATION

Implementing corrective discipline is difficult because it causes hurt feelings. No one likes to be the bearer of bad news. But like a surgeon removing a tumor, the infliction of pain often prevents a larger problem⁴⁵. May the Lord grant each of us the wisdom and the courage to implement his commands.

44 Gordon D. Fee. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 561–562.

45 See the spiral of conflict that results from unresolved issues. Robertson, C. K. "Courtroom Dramas: A Pauline Alternative for Conflict Management." *Anglican Theological Review* 89:4(2007), 605.

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

Lavishly Forgive Sins in order to Be Forgiven: Jesus' Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

Ardel B. Caneday

KEYWORDS:

| Confess | Forgive | Forgiveness | Guilt | Reconciliation | Remission |
| Repent | Repentance | Sin | Therapy | Therapeutic |

ABSTRACT:

Christians universally confess “I believe in the forgiveness of sins.” Yet, with psychotherapy’s ascendancy and its blending with Christian theology, Christians have come to disagree whether in interpersonal relationships repentance properly conditions forgiveness of sins. Many use Jesus’ Parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matthew 18:21-35) to endorse the popularly accepted notion of “unconditional forgiveness.” After all, to Peter’s question—“Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”—Jesus replies, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” On the contrary, Matthew’s placement of Jesus’ parable immediately following 18:15-20 shows that Jesus’s response to Peter and the parable that follows reinforces that repentance is necessary to receive forgiveness of sins in relationships with both fellow humans and God..

INTRODUCTION

To teach that forgiveness is conditioned upon repentance is to contest a widely embraced, unchallenged, sacred assumption that many Evangelicals hold in common with non-Christians, received from psychotherapy.¹ It is because pluralism's dogma of "tolerance" which infects even Christians, that to teach Scripture requires repentance in order to receive forgiveness of sins often ignites accusations of intolerance, strife, and resentment, which is the antithesis of true forgiveness which brings reconciliation and unity.² Thus, forgiveness has become a privatized transaction of the heart for the therapeutic wellbeing of wronged individuals; now, whether wrongdoers repent is irrelevant. Even many who generally resist the psychologizing of the Christian gospel reflexively accept "unconditional forgiveness." For support, they appeal to the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18:21-35).³ Do the Scriptures teach "unconditional forgiveness"? Does Jesus' parable instruct us to forgive the sins of one another without requisite repentance? What about the parallel passage in Luke's Gospel—"If your brother sins, reprove him, and if he repents, grant forgiveness to him, and if he sins against you seven times in a day and returns to you seven times saying, 'I repent,' grant forgiveness to him" (17:3-4)? Do Matthew and Luke contradict one another?

In Matthew 18:15-20 Jesus initially instructs his disciples concerning how we are to respond if someone sins against us, and he adds more steps

1 See, e.g., Johann Christoph Arnold, *Seventy Times Seven: The Power of Forgiveness* (Farmington, Penn: Robertsbridge, East Sussex, UK: The Plough Publishing House, 1997). This book features numerous accounts, not only Christian, of forgiveness therapeutically focused.

2 On such irony, see D. A. Carson, *The Intolerance of Tolerance* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

3 Cf. Brian Zahnd, *Unconditional? The Call of Jesus to Radical Forgiveness* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2011), 23-26. Cf. John MacArthur, *The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1998), 97-112. Both Zahnd and MacArthur deduce "unconditional forgiveness" from the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant," but they part ways on Matt 18:15-17, for here MacArthur claims that it is obvious that "forgiveness must be conditional" (p. 119). It is worthy of note that MacArthur finds "conditional forgiveness" in Matt 18:15-17 but "unconditional forgiveness" in 18:22-35.

if repentance is not forthcoming. This section is sandwiched between the parables of the Lost Sheep (18:10-14) and of the Unforgiving Servant (18:21-35). It outlines the process to follow concerning sin, repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. True, the words “repent,” “forgive,” and “reconcile” do not occur in Jesus’ three-step procedure (18:15-20).⁴ Yet, Christian laity, clergy, and scholars alike recognize that the concepts of repentance, of forgiveness, and of reconciliation are present in the passage. Hence, Christians historically have received this passage as essential instruction concerning church discipline that calls for repentance and forgiveness with the hope of reconciliation.

The antithetical concepts of *repenting* and *refusing to repent* are clear, for in Jesus’ repetition—“if he *listens* to you,” “if he does *not listen*,” “if he *refuses to hear*,” and “if he *refuses to hear* the church”—he portrays respectively *repenting* and *not repenting* under the imageries of *hearing* and *refusing to hear*, which signify *heeding* and *refusing to heed*.⁵ Likewise, “you have gained your brother” is imagery that signifies reconciliation.⁶ Jesus does not belabor his instruction by detailing each of the three steps, for where enmity occurs, apart from repentance and forgiveness of sin, reconciliation will not obtain. “If he listens to you” sufficiently signifies

4 The verbs and nouns respectively are “repent – repentance” (μετανοέω; μεάνοια); “forgive” (ἀφίημι; ἄφεσις); and “reconcile” (διαλλάσσομαι, συναλλάσσω, καταλλάσσω, ἀποκαταλλάσσω; καταλλαγή). The notion that a concept is present within a context *only if certain words are also present* is called the *word-concept fallacy*. It is the mistake of equating concepts with particular words. When we read or listen, we need to understand that the words used may signal that a concept is under discussion without actually using the words one might have expected to signify that concept. See, e.g., Darrell L. Bock “New Testament Word Analysis,” in *Introducing New Testament Interpretation*, ed. Scot McKnight (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 111. Cf. J. Scott Duvall, J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God’s Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*, third ed. 2012 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 166.

5 The Greek expressions are these, respectively: ἔάν σου ἀκούσῃ, ἐάν μὴ ἀκούσῃ, ἐάν παρακούσῃ, ἐάν καὶ τῆς ἐκκλησίας παρακούσῃ (Matt 18:15-17). Cf. A. B. Caneday, *Must Christians Always Forgive? A Biblical Primer and Grammar on Forgiveness of Sins* (Mount Hermon, CA: Center for Cultural Leadership, 2011), 13.

6 The Greek expression is ἐκέρδησας τὸν ἀδελφόν σου (Matt 18:15). Κερδαίνω occurs as either market or athletic imagery for various aspects of salvation in the NT in addition to Matt 18:15. Cf. 1 Cor 9:19, 20, 21; Phil 3:8; 1 Pet 3:1. Matthew’s expression is a variation on ὕπαγε πρῶτον διαλλάγηθι τῷ ἀδελφῷ σου (“Go. First be reconciled to your brother”).

repentance, and if repentance is forthcoming, the victim (i.e. the one sinned against) is obligated by grace to grant forgiveness. Likewise, is it not evident that to remit the sins of the wrongdoer who refuses to heed when reproved is to disobey Jesus' instruction? Otherwise invoking the second and third steps would be pointless. If at any of the three steps the sin is remitted upon repentance, the disciplinary process terminates. Then, love confines both knowledge of and consequences of sin. Excommunication is averted.⁷ Is it not evident that refusal to repent after receiving three distinct opportunities, each augmenting in solemnity, is the reason Jesus requires the church to excommunicate a member?⁸ Finally, Jesus' use of *binding* and *loosing* imagery respectively signifies *not remitting sin* and *remitting sin*. "Repentance leads to loosing, or forgiveness, and continued fellowship. The lack of repentance leads to binding, or retention of sin, and exclusion from the community."⁹

Against this backdrop Matthew introduces (1) Peter's question, (2) Jesus' initial hyperbolic reply, and (3) his parabolic portrayal of the Unforgiving Servant. Jesus' three-step procedure averts hasty reactions to sin and requires believers to forbear with one another in a prescribed

7 Jesus' three-step procedure confines and curtails sin with its effects by restricting knowledge of the sin. "A clear principle that emerges from Matthew 18:15-20 is that Jesus means for the process of correcting sin to involve as few people as necessary for producing repentance" (Jonathan Leeman, *Church Discipline: How the Church Protects the Name of Jesus* [Wheaton: Crossway, 2012], 68. For he teaches, "If your brother sins against you, go expose his fault between the two of you alone" (Matt 18:15). Cf. the proverb, "love covers a multitude of sins" (Prov 10:12; cf. 1 Pet 4:8), when James says, "My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone turns him back from sin, let him understand that whoever turns back a sinner from the error of his way saves his soul from death and covers a multitude of sins" (James 5:19-20).

8 Refusal to repent is the singular sin that warrants excommunication according to the NT (cf. 1 Cor 5:1-5; 2 Cor 2:5-11; see Leeman, *Church Discipline*, 28-29).

9 David L. Turner, *Matthew*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 446. "If the Word of God has been followed, then we may be assured that God registers with approval in heaven that which we do upon earth. In a word, the will of God as revealed in his Word is the same as the will of God in heaven. The decisions of the church on earth, when consonant with the Word of God, bear the authority and seal of God and we dare not plead as our comfort that such decisions are merely those of men. If they follow the prescriptions of Scripture then they are the judgments of God in heaven" (John Murray, "A Lesson in Forgiveness," *Collected Writings of John Murray* [Edinburgh, UK; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982], 3.192-193).

and orderly pattern when one sins against another. It seems apparent that the initial procedural step (18:15) prompts Peter's query, "Lord, how many times shall I grant forgiveness to my fellow disciple who sins against me? Up to seven times?" (18:21).¹⁰ If Jesus insists that a fellow disciple is to receive three orderly and solemn opportunities to acknowledge wrongdoing, it seems Peter thinks seven times may be even more generous.¹¹ The frequency of admonishing and forgiving the sin of one who heeds his rebuke is Peter's concern (18:15).

Jesus responds, "I do not say to you that you should grant forgiveness 'up to seven times' to your fellow disciple who sins against you and acknowledges the sin. No, instead, I say to you that you should remit the sin of such a one 'up to seventy-seven times'" (18:22).

But this understanding of Matthew 18:15-22, leading into the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, raises the very questions this essay endeavors to answer. This essay demonstrates agreement between Jesus' three-phased procedure for securing repentance and reconciliation and the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. Jesus neither renders repentance optional nor forgiveness unconditional but consistently affirms that repentance is antecedent to remission of sin. Peter's query receives Jesus' dual reply, (1) his hyperbolic response—"not seven times, but seventy-seven times"—and (2) his parabolic illustration features remission of sin, granted graciously and lavishly, never begrudgingly or stingily, yet correlated with antecedent repentance.¹² Contrary to a popular notion, the fact that remission of sin correlates with repentance as a condition

10 Turner observes, "The recidivist sin about which Peter is concerned probably relates to the process outlined in 18:15-17, and Peter is asking how many times 18:15 must be repeated" (*Matthew*, 449).

11 Daniel J. Harrington thinks "Peter's question about the limits of forgiveness . . . is given a response that renders the question absurd" (*The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina 1 [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991], 271).

12 "It is true that when a brother sins against us he ought with speed to come to us in confession and sorrow. But if he does not do this we ought to go to him to reprove him—'go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone' (v. 15). We must do our utmost to bring him to the right state of mind, and that means to repentance, so that we shall be in the position to forgive him and enter again upon relations of peace and harmony" (John Murray, "A Lesson in Forgiveness," 3.191).

(1) does not reduce the wrongdoer to groveling, (2) does not render the forgiver unforgiving and unmerciful, and (3) does not turn the gift of forgiveness into a commodity to be earned.

However, before pondering the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, consideration ought to be given to the origins of the widespread teaching of therapeutic “unconditional forgiveness” because now few hear teaching on interpersonal forgiveness without suffusion of Scripture’s terminology with psychotherapeutic concepts and jargon. The tendentious nature of this pervasive teaching hinders this essay’s task in at least two ways. First, the teaching’s duration, pervasiveness, effective repackaging of Christian nomenclature, and general acceptance gives the impression that to challenge it is to protest orthodoxy, if not to distort the gospel. Second, this teaching is so widely received that the careful exegesis required to identify and to correct ingrained confusion and errors runs the risk of appearing pedantic, quarrelsome, and niggling.

FORGIVENESS OF SINS: REORIENTED, REPURPOSED, REDEFINED, AND REARRANGED

From the earliest days of the church, Christians have confessed: “I believe in . . . the forgiveness of sins.”¹³ For many this confession has become confused, unclear, even conflicting with the gospel they confess. Throughout psychotherapy’s ascendancy it has rivaled Christianity by infiltration, hijacking its vocabulary and concepts to imbue them with its own substitutes that tend to privatize religion, including Christian faith.¹⁴

13 David F. Wells states, “It is my contention that theology should mean the same thing regardless of whether it is used in the Church or in the academy. There was a time when there was this sort of uniformity of meaning. In the past, the doing of theology encompassed three essential aspects in both the Church and the academy: (1) a confessional element, (2) reflections on this confession, and (3) the cultivation of a set of virtues that are grounded in the first two elements” (*No Place for Truth: or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993], 98).

14 Wells observes, “As the nostrums of the therapeutic age supplant confession, and as preaching is psychologized, the meaning of Christian faith becomes privatized” (p. 101).

Against warnings and critiques offered by some Christian psychologists, ministers, and theologians, psychotherapy infiltrated Christianity’s pews and pulpits.¹⁵ Universally acknowledged virtues surrendered to individually derived values.¹⁶ Evangelicals became preoccupied with “psychological wholeness as a substitute for holiness.”¹⁷ Within Christian teachings, perhaps rivaled only by *love, forgiveness* became susceptible to psychotherapy’s reconfiguration.¹⁸ Consequently, what many Christians confess when they say, “I believe in . . . the forgiveness of sins,” has become muddled, impaired, even egregiously wrong, especially with regard to forgiveness within interpersonal relationships. Though many evangelical teachers and authors have contributed to this confusion with misappropriation of Scripture, the influence of one looms above all others.

A generation ago, when he repackaged “forgiveness as therapy,” Lewis Smedes altered the course of Christian teaching concerning forgiveness with regard to wrongs done interpersonally.¹⁹ While ostensibly articulating

15 Two notable psychologist who published warnings are William Kilpatrick, *Psychological Seduction: The Failure of Modern Psychology* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), esp. 74-89, and Paul Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 95-110.

16 Due largely to the “values clarification technique” morality became subjected to individual preferences and feelings. Cf. Kilpatrick, *Psychological Seduction*, 102-121. “Hence, whereas the church (and even the general society) formerly recognized and condemned obvious misconduct as *sinful* (wrong) and *shameful*, now, if the behavior is too offensive to fall under the umbrella category of ‘alternative life style,’ both church and society barely muster the moral courage to label the behavior *inappropriate* or perhaps *unhealthy*, but surely without the slightest whisper of sin or of shame” (A. B. Caneday, “How Can I Live the Biblical Worldview in a Culture That Does Not Share It?” in *Christian Contours*, ed. Douglas S. Huffman [Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2011], 117. The “shift from virtues to values represents the true moral revolution of our time” (“Learning from Victorian Virtues—Interview: Gertrude Himmelfarb,” *Religion & Liberty* 5.5 [July/August 1995]: 4).

17 See David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 134.

18 Wells claims, “The church has succumbed to the seductions of our therapeutic culture, and in that context it seems quite natural to favor the relational dimensions over the moral dimension, mysticism over cognitive conviction, self-fulfillment over personal surrender, self-image over character, pluralistic religious equality over the uniqueness of the Christian faith” (*God in the Wasteland*, 136).

19 Lewis B. Smedes, *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don’t Deserve* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984). “Smedes’ book is rich in psychological insight, vividly and even at times poetically rendered; it is uncommonly good as a popular exposition of

a Christian perspective upon forgiveness, he married popular psychology and pastoral counseling. His book, *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve*, leads a parade of volumes on forgiveness that mingles psychological research, appropriation of Scripture, and anecdotal stories.²⁰ In his review, Robert C. Roberts states,

I shall argue that the kind of forgiveness Smedes expounds both overlaps with Christian forgiveness and is significantly different from it, and that the similarities and differences are revealed by comparing the grammars of the two virtues. I shall call Smedes' concept of forgiveness the "therapeutic" concept, and the other the "Christian" concept.²¹

He claims that Smedes found "a special sort of forgiving" which is "different from and at odds with that of classical Christianity."²² This teaching on forgiveness now permeates Evangelicalism because others, such as Randall O'Brien, dutifully proclaim and publish the same doctrine. *Set Free by Forgiveness: The Way to Peace and Healing*, the title of O'Brien's book (2005), reprises Smedes' teaching, aiding and abetting its widespread acceptance.²³

a therapeutic virtue. But as regards the corrosion of classical virtue concepts in the acidic atmosphere of this therapeutic age, *Forgive and Forget* only instantiates this tendency and contributes to it" (Robert C. Roberts, "Forgiveness as Therapy: A Review Article," of Lewis B. Smedes, *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve*, *Reformed Journal* 36.7 [July 1986], 22).

20 For a critical engagement of Smedes and "therapeutic forgiveness," see L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 35-69, especially 47-53; and Chris Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness: Biblical Answers for Complex Questions and Deep Wounds* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 63-73.

21 Robert C. Roberts, "Forgiveness as Therapy: A Review Article," of Smedes, *Forgive and Forget*, 21, 20. In Smedes' reply to Roberts's review, he objects that "it makes no sense at all to characterize *Forgive and Forget* as a book about 'therapeutic forgiveness' and, therefore, about something somewhat different from Christian forgiveness" ("Lewis Smedes Replies," *Reformed Journal* 36.7 [July 1986], 23).

22 *Ibid.*, 19.

23 Randall O'Brien, *Set Free by Forgiveness: The Way to Peace and Healing* (Grand Rapids: Baker 2005). In the preface to his book O'Brien states, "I still recall the title of Professor Smede's lecture: 'Forgiveness: What, Why, and How?' If imitation is the highest form of flattery, I have flattered Dr. Smedes since first hearing him in 1983. For over twenty years, I have taught in churches, at conferences, and on college campuses, focusing on the subject of forgiveness. Suffice it to say, I owe a great debt to Lewis

Forgiveness Reoriented

Psychotherapeutics *reorients* forgiveness so that the guilt of the person, who according to classical Christian teaching needs to be remitted, is not at issue.²⁴ Instead, presumption that a person who is wronged is at risk of becoming consumed with hatred, bitterness, resentment, and revenge displaces classical Christianity's distress over the gravity of the wrongdoer's sin, guilt, and need for repentance in order to receive remission of sin. Thus, forgiveness is *reoriented* to focus not on the culprit's guilt but on the innocent's *presumed risk of resentment*.²⁵ So forgiveness fixates upon the *presumed hatred* allegedly concealed in the heart of the one sinned against, not upon the overt sin *actually committed*.²⁶

Smedes. His book *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve* remains one of the best books available on the subject" (11-12).

24 Cf. Rob Bell who states, "Hell is full of forgiven people God loves, whom Jesus died for" (Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005], 146); and O'Brien, who insists, "Contrary to popular view, forgiveness *precedes* repentance! Repentance is the result of God's forgiveness, not the cause of it" (*Set Free by Forgiveness*, 73).

25 Even Miroslav Volf fastens upon this presumption, "Instead of wanting to forgive, we instinctively seek revenge An evil deed will not be owed for long; it demands instant repayment in kind" (*Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1996], 120).

26 Smedes claims, "I never had it in my head to write what Roberts calls a therapeutic book" ("Replies," 23). Even so, that he developed and published his ideas on forgiveness, featuring presumed *resentment* or *hatred* in the person wronged, in the midst of the burgeoning therapeutic culture is hardly coincidental. Smedes' appeal to internal resentment or hatred in the person wronged is in keeping with the spirit of the age in which *ressentiment* is incited, cultivated, and exploited to advance the cause of the therapeutic culture which Charles Sykes chronicles well in *A Nation of Victims: The Decay of the American Character* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), esp. 33-52. Herbert Schlossberg provides an instructive discussion of *ressentiment* in *Idols for Destruction: Christian Faith and its Confrontation with American Society* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 51-61. Though more complex than this, *ressentiment* consists in the nursing of entrenched feelings of resentment and hostility against another, accompanied by a sense of powerlessness to give direct expression to these feelings. Embers of *ressentiment* are what grievance activists stoke into burning coals in order to promote their "social justice" causes with their "expertise" as the solution.

Forgiveness Repurposed

A wrongdoer's culpability is not an essential issue if forgiveness is therapeutic. So Smedes asks, "Would it bother God too much if we found our peace by forgiving him for the wrongs we suffer? What if we found a way to forgive him without blaming him?"²⁷ O'Brien reasons, "Sometimes we have a difficult time forgiving God for allowing our adversaries to prosper. Do we not? We watch in bitter resentment as they fare well. Jonah was unable to forgive God for his *goodness* to the people of Nineveh. . . . Truth be known, God is terribly hard to forgive when bad things happen to us, *and* when *good* things happen to our enemies. . . . Sometimes God has to be forgiven for his goodness."²⁸

Accordingly, if God who does not sin is nonetheless the object of human forgiveness, it is evident that the purpose of forgiveness is not to remit another person's guilt, for God is not in need of remission of sin. So, forgiveness is *repurposed* to entail an inward, private, and invisible transaction of the heart, not to absolve the wrongdoer's guilt but to banish the resentment presumably being nursed in the heart of the one sinned against.²⁹ Smedes claims, "Forgiving is an *honest* release even though it is done invisibly, within the forgiver's heart."³⁰ Thus, forgiveness is *repurposed* for the "inner healing" of the person who is wronged, whether by fellow humans or by God's permission of evil.³¹ So, forgiveness is *our releasing ourselves* from alleged *hatred* or *resentment* induced by hurt inflicted upon us rather than our remitting the guilt of

27 Smedes, *Forgive and Forget*, 83.

28 O'Brien, *Set Free by Forgiveness*, 136-137.

29 Smedes' approach to forgiveness presumes that hatred in the heart of the forgiver will always be present wherever forgiveness is needed: "you cannot shake the memory of how much you were hurt, and you cannot wish your enemy well. You sometimes want the person who hurt you to suffer as you are suffering" (*Forgive and Forget*, 2).

30 Smedes, *Forgive and Forget*, 29. Later, he elaborates, "The only way to heal the pain that will not heal itself is to forgive the person who hurt you. Forgiving stops the reruns of pain. Forgiving heals your memory as you change your memory's vision.... When you release the wrongdoer from the wrong, you cut a malignant tumor out of your inner life.... You set a prisoner free, but you discover that the real prisoner was yourself" (p. 133).

31 Smedes, "Replies," 23.

a repentant person who has sinned against us.³² Because forgiveness as therapy suppresses the real sin and busies itself with an imagined “sin”—presumed resentment in the heart of the victim—this is one application of psychotherapy where it is permissible to “blame the victim.”³³ So, it is not uncommon for Evangelicals to indict a person who has been sinned against for resentment for not granting unconditional forgiveness to the wrongdoer who refuses to seek absolution of guilt. At work is a twisted use of Matthew 7:1—to judge sin is deemed worse than to commit sin. Thus, Roberts is warranted to contrast Smedes’ “therapeutic” concept of forgiveness with the “Christian” concept.

Forgiveness Redefined

This fixation upon our presumed resentment toward the person who wronged us and upon our need for “inner healing” from that hurt calls for redefining *forgiveness*.³⁴ Among Evangelicals awash in psychotherapy, the pervasive functional definition of forgiveness now refers to being “healed of our pain” internally and privately “even when the other person will not or cannot be reconciled to us.”³⁵ Given this *reorientation, repurposing,*

32 Given this view of forgiveness, it is understandable why a notion formerly regarded as absurd—“forgiving ourselves”—is now commonplace jargon in evangelical self-help literature and conference talks (see O’Brien, *Set Free by Forgiveness*, 161). Smedes asks, “Do you dare release the person you are today from the shadow of the wrong you did yesterday? Do you dare forgive yourself? To forgive yourself takes high courage. Who are you, after all, to shake yourself free from the undeniable sins of your private history—as if what you once did has no bearing on who you are now?” (71). He continues, “*Finally, the climax of self-forgiving; it comes when we feel at one with ourselves again.* The split is healed. The self inside of you, who condemned you so fiercely, embraces you now. You are whole, single; you have come together” (p. 74). Once more, consider Smedes: “To forgive yourself is to act out the mystery of one person who is both forgiver and forgiven. You judge yourself: this is the division within you. You forgive yourself: this is the healing of the split” (p. 77). Cf. O’Brien, *Set Free by Forgiveness*, 161-182.

33 William Ryan coined the phrase, “blaming the victim,” in *Blaming the Victim* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971).

34 O’Brien states, “*Forgiveness is the removal of personal barriers within a relationship caused by wrongdoing, real or imagined*” (*Set Free by Forgiveness*, 50). He argues that the principal barrier is the forgiver’s hurt and resentment.

35 Smedes, “Replies,” 23. That Smedes was awash in psychotherapeutics is evident in his exchange with Roberts, for Smedes states, “In any case, I never had it in my head

and *redefining* of Christian and biblical categories, presumption that the person wronged by another is infected with hatred (1) renders the wronged person in need of forgiveness (i.e., “release”), and (2) suppresses the gospel’s call for wrongdoers to seek remission of sins from those they have wronged, including both God and fellow humans.

Forgiveness Rearranged

If forgiveness (1) concerns healing the hurt and hatred of the one sinned against, not absolving the guilt of the wrongdoer, (2) is releasing ourselves from the resentment induced by that hurt, and (3) is an act done “invisibly, within the forgiver’s heart” for one’s own sake, not to remit the guilt of the wrongdoer, what follows comes as no surprise. This widely embraced concept of forgiveness *rearranges* the Christian gospel’s stated order of sin, guilt, repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, and restitution, even marshaling Scripture for authorization. If remission of a wrongdoer’s guilt is not of the essence of forgiveness, then it is reasonable to insist that forgiveness is “unconditional,” which is to say that repentance is unnecessary.³⁶

to write what Roberts calls a therapeutic book. I wanted only to describe and commend a healing action that Christ expects of us and that is widely misunderstood. If a lot of people find it therapeutic as well, I am the more thankful” (p. 23). Smedes’ default imagery of “healing” signals how thoroughly he had already displaced biblical imagery with psychotherapy’s categories.

On how prevalently within American culture psychotherapeutic categories had replaced biblical ones by the time Smedes published *Forgive and Forget*, see William Kilpatrick, *Psychological Seduction: The Failure of Modern Psychology* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), esp. 74-89, and Paul Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 95-110.

36 Classical Christian teaching on forgiveness of sin recognizes an order—sin, guilt, repentance, forgiveness, restitution, and reconciliation—with forgiveness as one distinguishable step or stage in the progression, not as containing multiple stages. Rather than follow this scriptural order, Smedes fixates upon forgiveness, repackages it as consisting of four therapeutic stages, renames sin as “hurt,” suppresses the wrongdoer’s guilt, and need for repentance and restitution, and treats reconciliation (coming together) as part of forgiveness, even if not always attainable. So, Smedes claims that forgiveness takes four stages: *hurt, hate, healing, coming together* (p. 4). O’Brien’s reprisal of Smedes’ book reiterates the same four stages of forgiveness with slight renaming: *hurt, alienation, release, reunion* (*Set Free by Forgiveness*, 52-62). O’Brien seems to sense some discrepancy in his scheme, for though he says the “final leg of the journey to

Though hardly original with him, Smedes canonized the doctrine of “unconditional forgiveness,” even as he acknowledges that repentance is necessary to receive God’s forgiveness. Yet, even here psychotherapy dominates, for Smedes queries,

But supposing we are the ones who have *been* hurt. Must we *demand* repentance *before* we forgive the person who hurt us? Should we hold back on forgiving when the other one holds back on repentance?

God takes the tough line, it seems, from what we read in the Bible. When Jesus sent his disciples to tell the world that God forgives, he also told them to ask people to *repent*. Following this lead, St. Peter put the cards on the table: “Repent so that your sins can be forgiven.”³⁷

Why does God grant forgiveness conditioned upon repentance but does not require the same in inter-human relations? Smedes explains,

My guess is that God asks us to repent, not as a condition he needs, but as a condition we need. What God wants is not only that we *be* forgiven in *his* heart and mind, but that we should also *feel* forgiven in *our* heart and mind. He wants an *honest* coming together [reconciliation] with his children. Asking for repentance was only a way of asking for *truthfulness*.³⁸

Why does it not follow that God requires repentance for forgiveness in inter-human relationships, if *honesty* and *truthfulness* matter? Smedes simply asserts: “Realism, it seems to me, nudges us toward forgiving people who hurt us whether or not they repent for doing it. . . . So we need to forgive the unrepentant for our own sake. We need to forgive people who do not care if only so that we do not drown in our own misery. Let the

forgiveness is *reunion*” (i.e., reconciliation) he finds it necessary to qualify: “Forgiveness happens to the person doing it. It may or may not affect the person being forgiven. Forgiveness is a one-way street. Reconciliation is a two-way street. Reconciliation results only when forgiveness is given *and* received” (p. 60).

37 Smedes, *Forgive and Forget*, 69.

38 Ibid.

other guy take care of himself.”³⁹ Accordingly, forgiveness is an invisible act in the heart of the forgiver but also can remain a secret from the one forgiven. “Forgiving is real even if it stops at the healing of the forgiver.”⁴⁰

CORRELATION OF DIVINE AND HUMAN FORGIVENESS

Scripture portrays forgiveness as the unequivocal act of remitting a repentant person’s guilt due to sins committed against others. Forgiveness is not overlooking an offense (cf. Prov 19:11; 10:12), nor being eager to forgive nor having a forgiving spirit, though these all are character traits of God’s children whose sins he has remitted (Col 3:13). Forgiveness is the *active remission of sins* in response to repentance and true in our relationships with both God and fellow believers.⁴¹

When Peter asks if remitting sin up to seven times is sufficient, initially Jesus offers a hyperbolic reply—“I do not say to you ‘up to seven times’ but up to seventy-seven times” (18:22). Then Jesus responds parabolically concerning the Unforgiving Servant (18:23-35).

Jesus’ Hyperbolic Reply To Peter’s Query

Matthew’s use of “then” (τότε) signals that Jesus’ teaching concerning three solemn and discrete opportunities for a disciple to repent (18:15-20) prompts Peter’s question (18:21-22).⁴² His query focuses on the first

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid., 70. “Forgiving is a process. One stage is the healing of the forgiver’s memory. If the people you forgive want to stay where they are, let them. You can make a solo flight to freedom.”

41 John Murray summarizes: “Forgiveness is not overlooking a transgression, it is not simply to be of a forgiving spirit; it is not even the readiness to forgive. Forgiveness is a definite act performed by us on the fulfilment of certain conditions: ‘If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him’ (Luke 17:3). Forgiveness is something actively administered on the repentance of the person who is to be forgiven” (“A Lesson in Forgiveness,” 3.191).

42 D. A. Carson “Matthew,” in *EBC* 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 405.

step of the procedure.⁴³ His concern is how often he should admonish and forgive the sin of a fellow disciple (18:15).⁴⁴ The short answer, according to a parallel passage would be, grant forgiveness as often as the person who sins says, “I repent” (Luke 17:3-4). Matthew’s account, however, is not as explicit.⁴⁵

We must be wary lest we reason that because Matthew’s narrative does not use *repent-repentance*, *forgive-forgiveness*, or *reconcile-reconciliation*⁴⁶ that these concepts are not present, for they are all indicated either with different words or by implication.⁴⁷ To equate

43 Turner observes, “The recidivist sin about which Peter is concerned probably relates to the process outlined in 18:15-17, and Peter is asking how many times 18:15 must be repeated” (*Matthew*, 449).

44 Nelson claims that Peter’s question “does not make much sense if forgiveness was withheld during the three step process of confrontation. Peter seemed to assume that forgiveness was granted even when the brother refused to be reconciled. If forgiveness was withheld during each of the three steps due to lack of repentance, Jesus should have answered Peter’s question, ‘Zero, unless he repents.’ Instead, Jesus responded, ‘seventy-seven times’ (18:22). In other words, your forgiveness of others should be without limit, even when you find it necessary to confront serious sins that have caused alienation” (“Exegeting Forgiveness,” 46).

45 “As the presence of Jesus’ instruction concerning disciplinary procedures in the church explains why Matthew has no need to provide explicit mention of repentance in his account of Jesus’ Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, so the placement and compression of Jesus’ saying in Luke’s Gospel explain the explicit mention of repentance when he reports Jesus’ saying, ‘If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents grant forgiveness to him, and if he sins against you seven times in a day and turns back to you seven times, saying, “I repent,” you must grant forgiveness to him”’ (Caneday, *Must Christians Always Forgive?*, 13-14).

46 Various verbs in the Greek New Testament bear the sense, “I reconcile” (διαλλάσσομαι; συναλλάσσω; καταλλάσσω; ἀποκαταλλάσσω); one noun means, “reconciliation” (καταλλαγῆ).

47 Here is an instructive illustration of what the word-concept fallacy looks like concerning Matt 18:15-20. “What is the purpose of this formal process? Is the purpose to extend forgiveness when the condition of repentance is met? This does not seem to be the case. Neither the word ‘forgiveness’ (*aphiemi*) nor ‘repentance’ (*metanoia*) occurs in these verses. Also missing are instructions on when to withhold or extend forgiveness. Mt. 18:15-17 is not about forgiveness but reconciliation: ‘you have won your brother’ (Randy Nelson, “Exegeting Forgiveness,” *American Theological Inquiry* 5.2 [July 2012], 46). Despite committing the word-concept fallacy by failing to see the concepts of “repentance” and “forgiveness” within the context without those actual words present, Nelson does recognize “reconciliation” as represented in the words “you have won your brother,” despite the absence of the noun “reconciliation” (καταλλαγῆ) or verbs signifying “to reconcile” (καταλλάσσω, ἀποκαταλλάσσω). It is obvious, then, that this illustrates another fallacy, “selective and prejudicial use of evidence,” “the kind of appeal to selective evidence that enables the interpreter to say what he or she wants

concepts with particular words is to commit the *word-concept fallacy*.⁴⁸ Matthew's account requires us to infer, just as Peter does, that *repentance* obligates *forgiveness* which leads to *reconciliation*, though Jesus does not explicitly say, "If he *repents*, *forgive his sin*; you have reconciled" (18:15).⁴⁹ The order is evident—sin, rebuke, repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation—though Jesus (1) explicitly mentions only sin and rebuke, (2) represents repentance under the imagery of hearing, (3) implies forgiveness, and (4) conceptualizes reconciliation by saying, "you have won your brother."⁵⁰ Jesus' teaching is clear even though he does not use stylized evangelical jargon. Sin provokes enmity. Repentance and remission invoke amity. Thus, because remission of guilt is the removal of barriers impeding reconciliation acknowledged through repentance, remission of sins must not be granted to those who refuse to heed reproof,

to say, without really listening to what the Word of God says" (D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, second ed. 1996 [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1984], 54). A moment's reflection renders it obvious that to move from "enmity" or "alienation" (ἔχθρα, another missing word, though the concept is present) to "reconciliation," two intermediate actions are required, for we "tell him his fault" in order to induce *repentance* that we might *grant* forgiveness.

48 See note 4 above for details and documentation.

49 Scripture distinguishes forgiveness from reconciliation. On this, Vincent Taylor observes, "In the passages which have been under review the condition of forgiveness is repentance, by which is to be understood not only a change of mind, but a turning of mind and heart to God, or to those who are wronged, and a desire for amendment. In several of these passages μετανοέω or μετάνοια is used in close connection with the reference to forgiveness. . . . The same idea is expressed by ἐπιστρέφω in Acts xxvi.18 (cf. Mk. iv.12), and by ὁμολογέω with reference to confessing sins in I Jn. i.9" (*Forgiveness and Reconciliation: A Study in New Testament Theology*, reprinted 1952 [London: Macmillan and Co., 1941], 7).

50 Nelson cites BAGD, 31-32 to warrant dismissing the conceptual presence of "repent" under the imagery of hearing by asserting, "The Greek verb 'hearing' (*akouō*) is never used for 'repent' in the NT" ("Exegeting Forgiveness," 44). Two errors are apparent: (1) entry 4a lists absolute use of ἀκούω in Matt 18:16 as *obey, listen*, which bears the sense of *heed*. In fact, entry 4 in BAGD shows ἀκούω as bearing the sense "to give careful attention to, *listen to, heed*" (BAGD 38); and (2) to say that "repentance is present in the context under the imagery of hearing" does not mean that ἀκούω should be translated "repent." Nelson cites Craig Blomberg who takes ἀκούω "to mean 'responds properly.'" But what does "respond properly" mean, if not "to repent," as Blomberg actually takes it? If Nelson had consulted lexical entries of παρακούω, he could have avoided his misstep, for entry 3 indicates the verb's use in Matt 18:17 signifies *refuse to listen to, disobey* (BAGD, 619). Cf. entry 2 b "to pay no attention to something that has been heard" with the intensified sense of "refuse to listen to, disobey" (BAGD 767).

for to do so renders the second and third steps of Jesus' outlined procedure superfluous and purposeless, exonerating the unrepentant.

Because Peter's query introduces the verb "forgive" (ἀφίημι), only implied in Jesus' saying, brief commentary is necessary. Suppressed, if not missing, from therapy's widely received teaching on forgiveness is Scripture's presentation of forgiveness as remission of sin. Remission is the removal of guilt, enmity's obstacle between God and humans or between two humans.⁵¹ Remission's omission from forgiveness may be due in part to incaution concerning the English idiom. Usual translations of Peter's question illustrate our English idiom's lack of clarity—"Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?" (NIV; cf. ESV). Clarity requires a more cumbersome translation: "Lord, how many times shall I grant forgiveness to my brother or sister who sins against me?" or "Lord, how many times shall my brother sin against me and I grant remission to him?"

In the Greek New Testament, two main verbs bear the sense "forgive" or "remit" (ἀφίημι, χαρίζομαι). With both, if the thing forgiven is stated, it is always the *direct object* (accusative case), and if the person who receives remission of sins is indicated, the person is always the *indirect object* (dative case).⁵² This is why when the Greek noun (ἄφεσις) is translated as "forgiveness" or "remission" it is regularly followed by the word "sins" (ἁμαρτιῶν).⁵³ So, within the New Testament, whenever these

51 In his survey of NT passages that entail forgiveness (including ἀφίημι, ἄφεσις), Vincent Taylor makes this crucial observation: "Everywhere it is implied that, if this object [sin] is removed, covered, or in some way adequately dealt with, the forgiveness is accomplished. Forgiveness, therefore, in these passages cannot be identified with reconciliation; it is a stage antecedent to reconciliation; it is that which makes reconciliation possible" (*Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, 3).

52 This is true of ἀφίημι, (e.g., ἀφεξ ἡμῖν τὰ ὀφειλήματα ἡμῶν, Matt 18:21; ἀφῆκεν αὐτῷ, 18:27) and χαρίζομαι (e.g., χαρισάμενος ἡμῖν πάντα τὰ παραπτῶματα, Col 2:13). In the NT there are no examples where ἀπολύω means remit where it is followed by the thing remitted in the accusative and the person to whom remission is granted in the dative. The only use of ἀπολύω meaning remit occurs in Luke 6:37 where the verb is used in the absolute twice: ἀπολύετε, καὶ ἀπολυθήσεσθε, "forgive and you will be forgiven" or "be forgiving and you shall be forgiven."

53 See Matt 26:28; Mark 1:4; Luke 1:77; 3:3 24:47; Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18; Eph 1:7; Col 1:14; Heb 9:22; 10:18. Once ἄφεσις occurs as absolute (Mark 3:29,

words are properly translated “forgive” or “forgiveness,” they invariably refer to *remission of sin* (as guilt), even when sin or transgression is not explicitly mentioned. We remit *sin’s consequence*, which is guilt. We do not remit *fellow humans*.⁵⁴ Failure to acknowledge this and to account for this in how we give expression to Scripture’s instruction has been and will be detrimental to our teaching and practice of forgiveness, both God’s and ours.

Another important clarification is that New Testament words for forgiving feature the wrongdoer’s guilt, not the wrongdoing itself.⁵⁵ Remission does not undo the sin itself.⁵⁶ Rather, to forgive means to absolve or to pardon the guilt brought about by sin. Therefore, the apt imagery of indebtedness portrays the need of remission. So Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, “And grant to us *forgiveness of our debts* as we also grant forgiveness to our debtors” (Matt 6:12). This petition features our debts of guilt that need to be remitted: “Grant to us *forgiveness of our debts*.”

This would be an apt segue to Jesus’ Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, which features the imagery of debts remitted. However, Jesus’ hyperbolic reply to Peter’s query requires additional comment. To Peter’s query whether to forgive a fellow disciple’s sins seven times is generous, Jesus offers a hyperbolic response, “I do not say up to seven times, but up to seventy-seven times.”⁵⁷ Though Peter may seem magnanimous compared

οὐκ ἔχει ἄφεσιν εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα). Twice ἄφεσις occurs in Luke 4:18, a citation from Isa 61:1-2, where the noun signifies “the process of liberating.”

54 The word “sins” in “forgiveness of sins,” entails a figure of speech, metonymy, which substitutes the cause (sins) for the consequence (guilt). See also note 52.

55 The NT expression, “remission of sins” (ἄφεσις ἁμαρτιῶν, e.g., Matt 26:28; Acts 5:31; 10:43; Col 1:14), employs bookkeeping imagery of debt cancellation (ἄφεσις) and metonymy, a figure of speech in which the wrongdoing itself (sins, ἁμαρτία), substitutes for the consequences of wrongdoing, “guilt” (αἴτιος, adj. used as a noun, e.g., Luke 23:4, 22; Jn 18:38; 19:4, 6; Acts 13:28. Cf. the adjective, “guilty,” ἔνοχος, as in Mark 3:29).

56 This is why restitution, if warranted, is distinct from remission. The OT law is rich with instruction on restitution (e.g., Ex 22 & Num 5). The primary NT passage is the Zacchaeus episode (Luke 19:1-9).

57 The expression ἕως ἑβδομηκοντάκις ἑπτὰ should likely be translated “up to seventy-seven times” rather than “up to seventy times seven times.” It is so translated by NIV, NRSV; BDAG 269. See Turner, *Matthew*, 449 Cf. Carson, “Matthew,” 405.

to a stingier standard of forgiveness the rabbis taught, his big-heartedness falls short of the lavishness Jesus requires.⁵⁸ It is likely that Peter derives his number from Scripture's frequent use of "seven times" for avenging evildoers, first with reference to the Lord's protecting the life of Cain by threatening sevenfold avenging of anyone who would slay him (Gen 4:15; Lev 26:21, 28; Deut 28:25; Ps 79:12; Prov 6:31; cf. Luke 17:4). If this is correct, then Jesus' reply may allude to Genesis 4:24, to Lamech's use of seventy-seven times (ἑβδομηκοντάκις ἑπτὰ, lxx). Lamech appeals to *lex talionis* to reason that if Cain, who murdered his brother out of malice, could be avenged sevenfold, then his own avengement ought to be seventy-sevenfold, an exaggerated number, because he killed in self-defense.⁵⁹ Likewise, Jesus exaggerates Peter's number, to emphasize that remission is boundless.

Remitting a fellow disciple's sin done against us must be boundless and free with regard to frequency or quantity.⁶⁰ "Boundless and free" does not mean unconditionally, for Jesus' parable includes a proviso, namely, acknowledgment of indebtedness. Just as with Jesus' response to Peter's query, so his parable implies that boundless remission of a fellow disciple's sins correlates with rebuke and repentance, which are not absent from the parable, though not featured. A parallel passage makes this explicit: "If your brother sins, reprove him, and if he repents, grant forgiveness to him, and if he sins against you seven times in a day and returns to you seven times saying, 'I repent,' grant forgiveness to him" (Luke 17:3-4).

58 "In rabbinic discussion the consensus was that a brother might be forgiven a repeated sin three times; on the fourth, there is no forgiveness" (Carson, "Matthew," 405). Cf. Turner who cites *m. Yoma* 8.9; *t. Yoma* 5.13; *b. Yoma* 86b-87a (*Matthew*, 449).

59 In contrast to Carson who reasons, "Lamech's revenge is transformed into a principle of forgiveness" ("Matthew," *EBC*, 8.405), I accept John Sailhamer's interpretation of Gen 4:24. "When read in the context of the Mosaic Law and of the teaching regarding the cities of refuge . . . Lamech's words appear to be an appeal to the system of legal justice. . . . If Cain, who killed his brother with malice, could be avenged, then Lamech would surely be avenged for a killing in self-defense. The point of the narrative is not to show that Lamech's sense of justice was correct or even exemplary. Rather it is to show that Cain's city and descendants had a system of law and justice representative of an ordered society" (*The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992], 115; cf. Sailhamer, "Genesis," *EBC*, 2.68).

60 Carson, "Matthew," 405.

Jesus' Parabolic Portrayal of Lavish Forgiveness

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant expands upon boundless remission of sins. Jesus employs debtor imagery to present repentance and remission of sin: “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is similar to a human king who wanted to settle an account with his servants.” The story consists of three settings with introduction (18:23) and conclusion (18:35): (1) the king cancels a servant’s enormous debt (18:24-27); (2) that servant imprisons a fellow servant who owes him a small debt (18:28-30); and (3) the king calls in the ungrateful servant’s debt (18:31-34).⁶¹

To settle accounts the king requires his servants to pay their debts. One owes ten thousand talents, an exorbitant amount in contrast to the negligible debt another servant owes this deeply indebted servant.⁶² English vernacular might use “zillions.”⁶³ Because the servant cannot pay, the king threatens to sell him and his family with all their possessions to recover some of the debt. The servant begs, “Be longsuffering with me, and I will repay everything to you” (18:26). The king’s generosity is as lavish as his wealth. He releases him from custody and remits his colossal debt.⁶⁴ The poor servant becomes financially debt-free but indebted to the king’s beneficence.

Next, this debt-free servant goes to a fellow servant to collect a paltry debt of a hundred denarii. He demands, “Pay what you owe me!” (18:28). Without a hundred days’ worth of income on hand, he begs, “Be longsuffering with me, and I will repay everything to you” (18:30). The

61 See Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1990), 240-243.

62 Turner calculates a debt of ten thousand talents. “A talent was probably worth around six thousand drachmas ... or denarii ... and a laborer was paid a denarius a day. ... Thus a laborer would have to work sixty million days, or roughly 193,000 years ... to earn this much money” (*Matthew*, 450).

63 BDAG 661.

64 Take note that when ἀπέλυσεν (ἀπολύω) does not signify “forgive/remits,” the person released is indicated in the accusative case (αὐτόν). As indicated above, when ἀφῆκεν (ἀφίημι) signifies “forgive/remits,” the thing remitted, here τὸ δάνειον (the debt), is in the accusative case and the person whose debt is remitted is in the dative case (αὐτῷ).

servant, whose vast debt was cancelled, casts his debtor into prison until he fully pays his debt.

Grief-stricken fellow servants inform the king of the unforgiving servant.⁶⁵ The king summons him again, rebukes him, and demands payment in full: "You evil servant! All that debt I remitted for you because you implored me. Should you not also have mercy upon your fellow servant, as I had mercy upon you?" (18:32-33). "And in anger his master delivered him to the torturers until he should pay back everything he owed."⁶⁶

Finally, Jesus draws the kingdom's analogical corollary as a warning of eternal punishment lest his disciples refuse to remit the sins of fellow disciples who petition them, for every disciple has incurred eternal indebtedness to the lavish beneficence of their righteous heavenly Father who cancels their eternal debt of guilt.⁶⁷ "In the same manner also my heavenly Father will do to you, if each of you does not grant forgiveness to your brother from your heart." The analogy is that just as the evil servant will never deplete his debt to the king but remain confined in the debtor's prison forever, so also will it be in God's kingdom.⁶⁸

65 Their response should also be the reader's (Donald Senior, "Matthew 18:21-35," *Interpretation*, 41 [1987]: 405).

66 The usual translation of ὁ βασανιστής is "jailer." However, R. T. France argues that "torturer" is better (*The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007], 708).

67 Overly occupied with whether the parable suggests possible perishing of one whose sins have been truly forgiven, MacArthur contends that (1) the servant represents an unregenerate person; (2) divine rescinding of forgiveness is not portrayed; and (3) the notion that the unforgiving servant represents a spurious believer is not present. Instead, "The lesson of the parable is this: Christians who refuse to forgive others will be subject to the severest kind of discipline until they learn to forgive as they have been forgiven" (*Forgiveness*, 109-111). MacArthur does not sufficiently consider that the parable, simply stated, functions as a warning lest we incur God's eternal punishment. On Scripture's warnings, see Thomas R. Schreiner & Ardel B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance & Assurance* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001).

68 Cf. Turner, *Matthew*, 452. Carson observes, "Jesus sees no incongruity in the actions of a heavenly Father who forgives so bountifully and punishes so ruthlessly, and neither should we. Indeed, it is precisely because he is a God of such compassion and mercy that he cannot possibly accept as his those devoid of compassion and mercy. This is not to say that the king's compassion can be earned: far from it, the servant is granted freedom only by virtue of the king's forgiveness" ("Matthew," 407).

As Jesus' saying on binding and loosing correlates human and divine remission of sin (18:18), so also his parable teaches that God remits the sins of people who imitate his lavish remission of sins.⁶⁹ The parable expands upon Jesus' saying, "For if you grant remission of trespasses to humans, your heavenly Father will also grant remission to you. But if you do not grant remission to humans, neither will your Father remit your trespasses" (Matt 6:14-15). This, in turn, expands upon the petition Jesus teaches his disciples to pray: "Grant remission of our debts *as we also grant remission to our debtors*" (6:12).⁷⁰

Jesus' parable features the heavenly Father's lavish remission of guilt as obligating his disciples to remit lavishly one another's sins, but this does not mean that forgiveness is unconditional, for at least two reasons. First, those within the parable who receive cancellation of debts *acknowledge* their debts and *petition* for their cancellation in accord with the presence of repentance in Jesus' three-step procedure (Matt 18:15-18), its implication in Peter's query concerning remission of sin (18:21), and its explicit inclusion in the parallel passage—"If your brother sins, reprove him, and if he repents, grant forgiveness to him, and if he sins against you seven times in a day and returns to you seven times saying, 'I repent,' grant forgiveness to him" (Luke 17:3-4). Second, Jesus configures his parable to emphasize the correlation between receipt of God's remitting our sins and our remitting the sins of one another. *Acknowledgement of guilt* (repentance), whether to God or to one another, receives cancellation of indebtedness. For God's lavish remission of our sins cancels our debt of guilt due his justice and renders us indebted to his

69 "Whatever you bind upon earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven" (ὅσα ἐὰν δήσητε ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἔσται δεδεμένα ἐν οὐρανῷ, καὶ ὅσα ἐὰν λύσητε ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἔσται λελυμένα ἐν οὐρανῷ, Matt 18:18); "and whatever you bind upon the earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose upon the earth shall have been loosed in heaven" (καὶ ὃ ἐὰν δήσης ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἔσται δεδεμένον ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς, καὶ ὃ ἐὰν λύσης ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἔσται λελυμένον ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς, Matt 16:19); "If you remit the sins of some, remission is granted to them; if you withhold remission from some, remission is withheld" (ἂν τινων ἀφέωται τὰς ἀμαρτίας ἀφέωνται αὐτοῖς, ἂν τινων κρατῆτε κεκράτηνται. (Jn 20:23).

70 Cf. Caneday, *Must Christians Always Forgive?*, 8-9.

mercy, an indebtedness that both obligates and authorizes us lavishly to grant remission of sins to fellow disciples *who acknowledge their debts of guilt* to us.⁷¹ Though the parable features remittance of debt, repentance as an antecedent condition of remission is present under the imagery of petitioning cancellation of debts.

Nevertheless, some suppose that our remitting the sins of others cannot be lavish and free if forgiveness is correlated with antecedent repentance.⁷² John MacArthur so reasons when he objects to Jay Adams's contention that forgiveness, whether God's or ours, is conditioned upon repentance.⁷³

To make conditionality the gist of Christlike forgiving seems to miss the whole point of what Scripture is saying. When Scripture instructs us to forgive in the manner we have been forgiven, what is in view is not the idea of withholding forgiveness until the offender expresses repentance. . . . The emphasis is on forgiving freely, generously, willingly, eagerly, speedily—and from the heart. The attitude of the forgiver is where the focus of Scripture lies, not the terms of forgiveness.⁷⁴

Though some may abuse requisite repentance to justify their stingy, exacting, and unforgiving spirit, this hardly nullifies the order of God's kingdom.⁷⁵ That remission of sins is to be granted to those who repent

71 Here I have a point of departure with John Piper who disparages what he calls the "debtor's ethic," for his argument is flawed with hyperbole and reductionism. See *Future Grace: The Purifying Power of the Promises of God*, revised ed. 2012 (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 1995), 29-37.

72 See, e.g., Nelson, "Exegeting Forgiveness," 35).

73 Cf. Jay E. Adams, *From Forgiven to Forgiving: Learning to Forgive One Another God's Way* (Amityville, NY: Calvary, 1994), 34. Cf. Chris Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness: Biblical Answers for Complex Questions and Deep Wounds* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2008). Ken Sande states, "Ideally, repentance should precede forgiveness . . . minor offenses may be overlooked . . . even if the offender has not expressly repented" (*The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, 3rd ed. 2004 [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997], 210).

74 MacArthur, *Forgiveness*, 118. MacArthur betrays an exaggerated reaction to Jay Adams who does not "make conditionality the gist of Christlike forgiving." by shortly afterward mitigating his own view asserting: "There are times when forgiveness must be conditional" (p. 118) and later, "It is obvious from Scripture that sometimes forgiveness must be conditional" (p. 119). He offers Luke 17:3 and Matt 18:15-17 for this claim (pp. 119-120).

75 It becomes apparent that MacArthur actually shares Adams's view despite his

does not mitigate our obligation to grant remission of sins to one another readily, lavishly, freely, and graciously.⁷⁶ Jesus' Parable of the Unforgiving Servant features God's pleasure to bestow lavish remission of our sins, which renders us both debtors to and imitators of his forgiveness. God's debtors are not miserly. From the heart they eagerly forward the lavish gift of forgiveness to others. As children we imitate our heavenly Father by delighting to grant remission of sins done against us to everyone who petitions our forgiveness. Refusal to grant remission of sins to all who seek forgiveness is to sin by being unforgiving and stingy, thus incurring God's wrath.

By good and reasonable inference, Jesus' parable also obligates us to avoid imputing an "unforgiving spirit" to fellow disciples who, eager

mischaracterization of Adams's fuller argument saying, "It is a mistake to assume that verses like Luke 17:3 . . . and Matthew 18:15 . . . are absolute prescriptions for every kind of transgression. If we were obligated to confront one another for every paltry misdeed, we would be doing little else" (p. 120). Adams accounts for those "paltry misdeeds," for "God has provided a means for handling the multitude of offenses that we commit against one another. But it is not by forgiveness. In 1 Peter 4:8, quoting Proverbs 17:9, Peter points out that those who love one another 'cover a multitude of sins' in love. It is only those sins which throw the covers off that must be dealt with by the Luke 17 and Matthew 18 processes: those offenses that break fellowship and lead to an unreconciled condition require forgiveness. Otherwise, we simply learn to overlook a multitude of offenses against ourselves, recognizing that we are all sinners and that we must gratefully thank others for covering our sins as well" (*From Forgiven to Forgiving*, 34). On overlooking offenses (Prov 10:12; 19:11) as not the same as forgiveness, remission of guilt, Adams agrees with John Murray ("A Lesson in Forgiveness," 3.190-193). So, despite MacArthur's exaggerated response to Adams, upon careful reading, they are in much greater agreement than upon first appearances, but Adams regards "forgiveness" more tightly defined than MacArthur does.

⁷⁶ Jones rightly observes that "emphasizing the centrality of repentance" for the sake of assuring that people "take questions of culpability and accountability seriously" becomes "unfortunately all too often a way to guarantee that we will either (at best) oversimplify issues of forgiveness and repentance or (at worst, and more likely) distort a Christian understanding of forgiveness by making repentance a prerequisite for forgiveness" (*Embodying Forgiveness*, 150). Thus, Jones rightly challenges Richard Swinburne who "argues that reparation, repentance, apology, and penance to the victim(s) are all necessary prerequisites for a person to remove his or her guilt and to make atonement for the past. He indicates that, following these other four actions, 'The final act belongs to the victim—to forgive'" (p. 151). Jones fills nine more pages with a critique of Swinburne's pedantic argument (pp. 152-160). His principal point is that "those who have been forgiven by God in Jesus Christ ought to be people whose repentance is never in question, who understand that holiness of heart and life can only be achieved through the unique conjunction of forgiveness, repentance, and hope found in turning and re-turning to God and to those against whom we have sinned" (p. 155).

to forgive from the heart, do not grant remission of sins to those who refuse to repentant.⁷⁷ Otherwise Jesus portrays the heavenly Father as unforgiving while demanding his children to remit sins freely and lavishly.⁷⁸ Thus, Jesus reinforces tight correlation between receiving and granting forgiveness, an emphasis he makes following his model prayer: "For if you grant to men forgiveness of their transgressions, your heavenly Father will grant to you forgiveness. But if you do not grant to men forgiveness, neither will your Father grant to you forgiveness of your transgressions" (Matt 6:14-15).

CONCLUSION

"Who can forgive sins except God alone?" (Mark 2:7). Our absolution of guilt before God, which is justification in the divine court, is his prerogative alone. Because divine remission of guilt is extravagantly disproportionate to the debts our sins incur, we are eternally indebted to God, who is merciful at his Son's expense. For Jesus Christ's "blood of the covenant" is "poured out on behalf of many for the remission of sins" (Matt 26:28). Divine remission of incalculable debts obligates us not to pay back God but to replicate his forgiveness by lavishly granting remission of guilt to others who commit sins against us. This is what Jesus teaches by way of his Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, which features lavish forgiveness of sins as a grace necessary for dwelling in God's kingdom.

77 Cf. Caneday, *Must We Always Forgive?*, 17. Lamentably, so prevalent is therapeutic forgiveness that it is not rare for Christians rashly to judge mature and godly believers as unforgiving and vengeful even as they seek wholeheartedly to obey the Lord Christ by granting forgiveness to the repentant and not to the unrepentant (cf. Luke 17:3-4; John 20:23).

78 Anthony Bash reasons that *unconditional forgiveness* "in effect insists that our forgiveness is to be more lavish and more gracious than God's, and that is clearly absurd. Since God forgives only the repentant, how can we be expected additionally to forgive the unrepentant? How can we show more grace than the one who is the source of grace itself? . . . Our forgiveness of one another can hardly be required to be more gracious than God's" ("Forgiveness: A Re-appraisal," *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 24 [2011]: 140).

Less explicit but no less essential for inhabiting God’s kingdom is the grace of repentance, for Jesus’ parable binds inextricably together *appealing* for and *receiving* remission of our debts. Forgiveness of sins is reserved for all who acknowledge their guilt and plead for remission. Jesus emphasizes this point when he concludes the parable, “In the same manner also my heavenly Father will do to you, if each of you does not grant forgiveness to your brother from your heart.” The rule of God’s kingdom on earth obligates God’s children to behave analogously to their Father in heaven who lavishly remits the guilt of all who plead his forgiveness (Matt 18:19). Every sin we commit against others increases our indebtedness to God and to fellow believers from whom we are obliged to plead remission with the gospel’s assurance that we will receive sincere remission of guilt from our Father and also from his forgiving children whose sins are remitted. For, as we all incur greater indebtedness daily, the “blood of the covenant poured out for the remission of sins” assures us that our debts are remitted that we also might lavishly grant remission to our debtors. If we refuse to forgive the sins of those who repent, we need to repent lest we incur God’s eternal punishment. Reasonable inference from the parable also compels us to acknowledge that to grant forgiveness of sins to those who refuse to repent is to distort the gospel of God’s kingdom by granting to the unrepentant what belongs only to those who heed the gospel’s rebuke of sin and who properly receive the promise of forgiveness.



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

Jesus ate with Sinners: Between Church Discipline and Hospitality

Anthony Royle

KEYWORDS:

| Church Discipline | Hospitality | Table Fellowship |
| Jesus | Inclusivism | Lord's Supper |

ABSTRACT:

Most scholars agree that Jesus' meal times with tax collectors and sinners were a major part of His ministry. This acknowledgement that Jesus ate with sinners has led to an inclusive approach to mission and function of the church by many churches today. There is a tendency to allow participation within the church community and at the Lord's Table despite individuals living in a sinful lifestyle. This, however, defies the prohibitions of Jesus, Paul, and John who prohibited that those conducting themselves in immoral acts should be allowed to eat and fellowship with the church. Therefore, Jesus' actions and teachings are juxtaposed between the open call of hospitality and the exclusive approach of church discipline. This essay seeks to harmonise these two aspects and present a principle for ministry in mission that is summarised in the Parable of the Wedding Banquet that "many are called but few are chosen".

INTRODUCTION

It is widely agreed that Jesus' association with "Sinners" during meal times is a major part of His ministry (Mt 11:19; Lk 7:34). Critics of His behaviour reflects the thoughts and attitudes of those who separated themselves from certain groups of people for religious purity and ethical reasons. Through an analysis of Second Temple Period writings, Craig Blomberg in his article *Jesus, Sinners, and Table Fellowship*, highlights general attitudes within Second Temple Judaism towards table fellowship. He notes:

Second Temple Judaism thus, in many respects, saw the drawing of even sharper boundaries between pious Jews and unclean outsiders. Table fellowship could create intimate friendship, so it was increasingly reserved for those whom a person deemed the right kind of companions, who ate the right kinds of food.¹

Jesus, therefore, ate with people who many other religious Jews would not eat with. In contrast with the Scribes and Pharisees, Jesus' association with tax collectors and sinners appeared to be "radical", if not antagonistic, towards social and religious norms of the day. Jesus has therefore been heralded as a pioneer for social justice, a man ahead of his times, an innovator of inclusivism, and opponent of oppression. Jesus' actions of including "sinners" have been described as "dangerous"² and "scandalous"³.

1 Craig Blomberg, "Jesus, Sinners, And Table Fellowship," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 19:1 (2009), 44.

2 R. K. Harris argues that Jesus' inclusive approach to eating with sinners was dangerous and that "Jesus was killed for the way he ate" (Harris, R. K. (1985) *Luke: Artist and Theologian*. New York: Paulist, 70) For a better understanding of why Jesus was killed see Darrell L. Bock, *Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism: The Charge against Jesus in Mark 14:53-65*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000).

3 Brian McLaren calls Jesus' inclusion "shocking, scandalous inclusion". Brian McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth that Could Change Everything*. (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2006), 163. Joel Green also writes of Jesus' inclusiveness as scandalous particularly in the case of the woman who let her hair down to wash Jesus' feet (Luke 7:36-50). Green notes that such action would have been seen as sexually provocative (Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke (NICNT)*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Willian B. Eerdmann's Publishing Company, 1997), 310) However, Blomberg argues that in Greco-Roman culture letting ones hair down is a sign of devotion to a deity. Furthermore, the action of weeping and use of hair express deep sorrow for her sinfulness. Luke wanted to express this woman was repenting and that Christ had forgiven her sin (Blomberg, 2009, 50).

Furthermore, it is also extensively agreed that the meals Jesus shared with others are a picture of the future Messianic banquet. Jesus' invitation to eat with him was symbolic of the invitation to the Kingdom of God. An invitation that was given to "tax collectors and sinners" rather than the pious Pharisees. Such a reading of the narrative of the Gospels has provoked many to exhort Christians to "do as Jesus did" and take on an inclusive missiological and ecclesiastical approach.⁴ It is believed that Christians should embrace "sinners" and not exclude them from participation in public worship and church-community contexts. For exclusion, "keeping out", is bad and inclusion, "taking in", is good.⁵ It is therefore those who exclude others who are the real "sinners" and are ironically excluded from the banquet of the Kingdom. The notion of inclusivism is not the same as universalism, as there are those who are even excluded from the Kingdom in the inclusivist model. These are described by Emergent leader Brian McLaren as people who are opposed to the purpose of the Kingdom, the purpose being radical inclusivism.⁶ One might suggest that such a notion of excluding people for excluding others is hypocritical, Miroslav Volf responds, "Judgement of exclusion is not exclusion, but an end of exclusion"⁷.

Exclusion from table fellowship then is something that appears to be un-Christian, not Christ-like. Such a notion, however, clashes with the words of Paul who commanded the Corinthians to not associate or eat with the "sinner" in 1 Corinthians 5. The Johannine prohibition of extending hospitality to those bringing a different doctrine (2 John 1:10) raises further difficulty as exclusion due to personal belief is considered an act of extremism by our pluralistic society. Robert Vosloo writes:

One can ask whether the exclusion of people from the table as

4 The most prominent advocate of this view is Emergent Church leader Brian McLaren

5 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996) 62.

6 EdMackenzie, "Mission and the Inclusive Kingdom of Jesus: Assessing the Missiological approach of Brian McLaren," *Missiology: An International Review* (2015), 2.

7 Volf, 1996, 68.

part of church discipline does not often result in a form of moral gatekeeping that threatens to negate the welcoming character of God's grace.⁸

How then can one understand the juxtaposition between hospitality and church discipline? Vosloo concludes that equating “hospitality with indifferent tolerance and church discipline with reductive moralism, ought to be avoided”⁹. The view that Jesus was “radically inclusive” therefore destabilises the message of grace seen within this juxtaposition. To quote Bonhoeffer it is “cheap grace”¹⁰. One needs to take into account the boundaries, the message, and the demands Jesus gave in His invitation to “take up your cross and follow me”. Once we establish a biblical perspective of hospitality and church discipline then we will see that the two are not mutually exclusive.

This essay will look at the hospitality of Jesus and the identity of the “sinners” he ate with. When we begin to understand the social situation of the Second Temple Judaism and Jesus’ call to repentance, we discover that the inclusivist reading of the Gospel narrative is misleading. The sum of Jesus’ invitation is found in the Parable of the Wedding banquet, which concludes “many are called, but few are chosen” (Matthew 22:14). If Jesus was exclusive, can we really describe exclusivism as evil? Whatever conclusion we come to concerning Jesus’ hospitality has an impact on the practice of the Lord’s Supper and whether a believer should be excluded from participating in Communion.

8 Robert R. Vosloo, “The Welcoming Table? The Lord’s Supper, Exclusion, and the Reformed Tradition” in *Strangers and Pilgrims on Earth: Essays in Honour of Abraham van de Beek*, eds. Paul van Geest and Eduardus van der Borgh (Leiden: BRILL, 2012), 484

9 Ibid 499-500.

10 See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 4*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 44. Vosloo highlights the meaning of cheap grace as “preaching forgiveness without repentance,” “Baptism without discipline of community,” “the Lord’s Supper without confession of sin,” and “absolution without personal confession”. (Vosloo, 2012, 500)

JESUS AND THE SINNER

It would be helpful in our investigation of asking how inclusive Jesus was to establish who these “sinners” were. M. J. Wilkins provides two views of how the terms sinner is to be understood. (1) Sinner is a term towards those outside the factional group. Various sectarian groups believed those outside their particular group were evil. The Qumran community responsible for the Dead Sea Scrolls referred to those outside of their group as “sons of disobedience”.¹¹ (2) Sinners are wicked ones outside of the law. This is not necessarily those who refused to obey, but rather those who could not retain ritual purity thus not keeping the law.¹² This second view is the most popular and is held by those who argue that Jesus was inclusive. The term sinner then becomes a byword for those who are marginalised. Sinner is a term that is often associated with tax collector. In turn, tax collectors are often associated with prostitutes. As Jesus ate with all of them as well as those exorcized of demons, the poor, and marginalised ethnic groups such as the Samaritans, Jesus is declared fiend of the marginalised. However, is it historically correct to brush these distinct groups of people with one broad stroke?

For example, Johnathan Draper, in response to Richard A. BurrIDGE’s *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive approach to New Testament Ethics*, correctly observes that Jesus could not be inclusive towards the poor because he was poor.¹³ The very definition of inclusion is to “take in” those who are outside. Similar logic then can be expressed in bewilderment of tax collectors being placed in the category of marginalised along with the poor. Tax collectors were often wealthy and enjoyed reasonable social status in certain circles. They collected taxes on behalf of the Roman occupying force, so were despised by fellow Jews and were seen as collaborators by

11 Michael J. Wilkins, “Sinner” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds. Joel B. Green, Scott McKnight, and I. H. Marshall, (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1992), 757.

12 Ibid, 759.

13 Jonathan A. Draper, “Imitating Jesus, yes- but which Jesus? A Critical Engagement with the Ethics of Richard BurrIDGE in *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics*”. *HTS Theological Studies* Vol. 65 (1) (2007), 3.

those with nationalistic tendencies. Being despised by the *am ha'aretz* (people of the land) does not constitute as being marginalised.

Jacob Neusner takes to task the misgivings of E P Sanders, who identifies in his book *Jesus and Judaism* that the “sinners” were people ritually unclean. Neusner argues that from a Pharasaical perspective “uncleanness is not a moral category but it is ontological”.¹⁴ He further explains:

To be able to become unclean formed a measure of the capacity to become holy, so that, the more susceptible to uncleanness, and the more differentiated the uncleanness to which susceptibility pertained, the more capable of becoming holy, and the more differentiated the layers and levels of holiness that entered consideration.¹⁵

Therefore, the status of being unclean does not imply that one is a sinner. It is clear from an ontological perspective that the opposite of unclean is holy. Confusion arises, however, that holiness can be categorised as both moral and ontological therefore uncleanness as the antonym of holiness is imputed incorrectly into a moral category. The synonym for unclean is not sinner but rather “outsider” or “gentile”.¹⁶ Jesus, of course, interacts with unclean people, but they need to be distinguished from “sinners”. Unfortunately, these two categories are intermingled and have implications in moral judgement today. Some have placed the sin of homosexuality into an ontological category and therefore our response should be to tolerate their marginalised status in society.

Neusner highlights that Sanders “has a consistent interest in portraying Jesus as a teacher who accepted, not merely the impure, but the wicked into his fellowship”.¹⁷ However, Neusner claims further separation between the terms “sinner” and “wicked” via linguistic analysis in Greek, Hebrew,

14 Jacob Neusner, “Uncleanness: A Moral or An Ontological Category in the Early Centuries A.D.?” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 01:1 (1991), 65.

15 *Ibid.*, 65.

16 *Ibid.*, 70.

17 *Ibid.*, 82.

and Aramaic. He notes from the Septuagint that the Greek word for sinner, *harmartolos*, corresponds with five root words in the Hebrew Masoretic Text (*ht'*, *hnp*, *hrs*, *r'*, *rs'*).¹⁸ The term “wicked”, *resa'im* in Hebrew, though finds its roots in the wider representation of *rs'*, however, its contextual use is more “harsh” indicating a sense of judgement. Neusner notes that in the Hebrew Scriptures the wicked are “scheduled for punishment”, whereas “sinners” are often offered chance of repentance.¹⁹ This distinction in the Hebrew text made by Neusner appears to be overstretched as the terms “sinner” and “wicked” appears together in multiple passages (Psalm 1:1,5; Psa 104:35; Prov 11:31 Eccl 9:2). However, the root to the term Sinner in the gospel derives from an Aramaic context with a softer application. Aramaic texts such as the Targum of Isaiah, the roots *rs'*, *hnp*, and *ht'* are “presented by appropriate forms of the Aramaic *hwb*”, which means “debtor” or “sinner”.²⁰

The Aramaic idiom of debtors is present in the Lord's Prayer as the Lord instructs his disciples to pray “*forgive our debts, as we forgive our debts*”.²¹ The parabolic teachings of Jesus also made use of the analogy of debt, especially in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18:23-35). This parable immediately follows the Lord's instruction on church discipline emphasising that believers have been forgiven an insurmountable debt by God and therefore should be willing to show forgiveness to those who are indebted to us.

Jesus did eat with sinners and tax collectors, people who were morally corrupt; however, they were confronted with a call to repentance.²² Tax collectors would extort money from the poor. They were involved in the financial enterprise of prostitution. So, does this mean Jesus was inclusive towards immoral people who engaged in, for example, fraud, theft, murder,

18 Ibid, 84.

19 Ibid, 84.

20 Ibid, 85.

21 Ibid, 85.

22 Draper even argues that Jesus didn't really eat with sinners because those who ate with Jesus were “repentant and forgiven”, therefore no longer under the category of “sinner”. (Draper, 2007, 2)

adultery, or fornication? The answer is both yes and no. Yes, because Jesus called those who were sinners and depraved. Jesus said “they that are healthy are in no need of a physician, but they that are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Matthew 9:12; Mark 2:17; Luke 5:31). This leads us to the answer of no, Jesus was not inclusive of immoral people. The invitation to eat with Jesus was an invitation to repent and be accepted into the Kingdom of God. Draper notes “open commensality with no concern for justice, in other words repentance and restitution, shown by Zacchaeus, would simply be a ‘sell out’ by Jesus”.²³

To view Jesus as accepting sinners without repentance would be a case of distorting the overall message of Jesus in order to fit into a particular model. This is not exegesis but rather a kind of revisionism that has no integrity at all.²⁴ We embrace certain parts of the narratives, while excluding others. For Example, in John 4 Jesus requests a drink from the Samaritan woman at the well and offering her “living water” from which she would never thirst again giving her everlasting life. This story is wonderfully inclusive as the male Jew, Jesus, asks for the hospitality of a marginalised Samaritan woman. Yet, the invitation is met with a question of her religious beliefs (John 4:21-24) and her sexual morality (John 4:16-18). The story does not end with an explicit call for repentance in the same way the story of the woman caught in adultery concludes, “go and sin no more” (John 8:11); however, John writes that this woman came to believe on Jesus, which implies that she received his call in turning away from the Samaritan religion and sexual sin. Andrew McGowan succinctly writes “*there is an exclusive element of this inclusive vision; some are invited in, others are cast out... universal in scope, but selective in application*”.²⁵

23 Draper, 2007, 2.

24 Denny Burk questions Burrige’s preference of the historical Jesus over the Gospel portrait of Jesus. Burk rightly states that this hermeneutic undermines the authority of Scripture. (Denny Burk, “Why Evangelicals Should Ignore Brian McLaren: How the New Testament Requires Evangelicals to Render Judgement on the Moral Status of Homosexuality”. *Themelios* Vol. 35 Issue 2, (July 2010), 218).

25 Andrew McGowan. “Dangerous Eating? Jesus, Inclusion, and Communion”. *Liturgy* Vol. 20 Issue 4, (2007), 16.

THE PARABLE OF THE WEDDING BANQUET

The point raised by McGowen that the banquet is “*universal in scope, but selective in application*” is encapsulated in the Parable of the Wedding Banquet in Matthew 22. The parable begins with a call to those who were invited to the wedding to come. These people rejected the call and refused to come. The King sent out servants a second time to call those invited to the wedding. On this occasion some mocked and proceeded either to their home or continued with their work. A remnant of the invited guests took hold of the servants and killed them. The king was wroth and destroyed the murderers and their cities. The King then sent the servants out a third time. This time they are told to go into the highways and byways inviting anyone they encountered to come to the wedding feast. The servants were said to have found guests both good and bad. As the king came to greet the guests he found a man not dressed appropriately for the wedding. The king was angered and ordered the servants to cast him into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Jesus concludes the parable with a phrase that sums up his inclusiveness, “*many are called, but few are chosen*” (Matthew 22:14).

Blomberg highlights that this parable reinforces Jesus’ point that he will not tolerate those who refuse his invitation.²⁶ Richard Bauckham further draws upon the meaning of the parable as stating that “*Those unworthy of entering the Kingdom of God are not only those who spurn the invitation but also those who ostensibly accept it while rejecting what it really represents.*”²⁷ The Kingdom then is offered to everyone but even those who accept the invitation without repentance will not be included in the Messianic banquet. This of course highlights a certain exclusivity to the Kingdom that many inclusivists are unwilling to accept.

26 Blomberg, 2009, 59.

27 Richard Bauckham, “The Parable of the Royal Wedding Feast (Matthew 22:1-14) and the Parable of the Lame Man and the Blind Man (Apocryphon of Ezekiel)”. *Journal of Biblical Literature* Vol. 115, No. 3, (Autumn 1996), 488.

When we read the gospel narratives of Jesus' encounters with tax collectors, sinners, the unclean, the demon possessed, we see that those people when accepting of the Kingdom, never stay as they were before. Zacchaeus changed from greedy tax collector to generous giver to the poor. The man possessed of a demon at Gadarenes encountered Jesus and then was sitting and eating in his right mind. Even those who were ritually unclean through leprosy were made clean. If Jesus was an inclusive, why change them? Surely, if Jesus was accepting of people within the margins he would not have changed them and let them remain in the margins. The moral of the story is, in fact, that Jesus took their place in the margins. Those who were changed by Jesus were now eligible to have table fellowship with the pious; however, Jesus became more marginalised. Case in point is the Gardarenes demoniac. He was able to have table fellowship with others but it meant Jesus could no longer enter the city (Mark 5:17). McGowan also explains that the *"stories in the gospels where Jesus eats with the marginalized was not to encourage Christians to eat with the poor but for them who are marginalized to come to the banquet"*.²⁸ In other words the gospels were written as a proclamation of the gospel message that Christ took the place of sinners and that we who are sinners should accept the invitation to come.

Of course, the church must follow Christ's example which is to preach the gospel to all people. Just as Christ became marginalised when he changed peoples live and preached a message of repentance, the Christian also faces similar marginalisation as we preach the gospel to transform lives. In an age of pluralism, relativism, and liberalism, Christians who hold to the gospel are marginalised for their beliefs because they diametrically oppose the "new morality" of what society says is good and evil. Therefore, in today's world it is difficult conversing with non-Christians (and some Christians) about who and what is a sinner. Many view certain tenants of Christianity as immoral. Especially Christians who engage in a particular moral evil of society today, exclusivism.

28 McGowan. 2005, 18.

IS EXCLUSION EVIL?

Volf describes exclusion as “the violence of expulsion, assimilation, or subjugation and the indifference of abandonment replace the dynamics of taking in and keeping out as well as the mutuality of giving and receiving”.²⁹ He explains that this is the “bare-bones” of what exclusion is and must be distinguished from drawing and maintaining boundaries.³⁰ He continues:

Vilify all boundaries, pronounce every discrete identity oppressive, put the tag “exclusion” on every stable difference- and you will have aimless drifting instead of clear-sighted agency, haphazard activity instead of moral engagement and accountability and, in the long run, a torpor of death instead of a dance of freedom.³¹

I agree with Volf’s distinction between exclusion and boundaries, I have to disagree that his other criteria for exclusion is altogether negative. This is to say that expulsion, assimilation and subjugation can only be seen as negative if they are practiced in a prejudiced manner. Expulsion because of race or disability is an evil that exists in the world today. Yet, expulsion towards someone who is morally depraved who refuses to repent is far from evil. It is good and just, as it is necessary to protect people. Would it be good to allow a paedophile to mix within a church with young children?

Is any sort of physical (“violent”) expulsion reasonable? Those who preach an inclusive Jesus avoid the event where Jesus drove the money changers out of the Temple. This event is recorded in all four gospels and is an important part of Jesus’ ministry as He cleansed the Temple of those extorting money from those devoted to worshipping God at the Temple. Perhaps some may say that Jesus was removing the obstacle that excluded

29 Volf, 1996, 67.

30 Ibid, 67.

31 Ibid, 64. Amos Yong agrees, “unless we draw a line – a boundary – and say that something lies outside its domain, then we can speak about nothing that lies inside with real meaning, without boundaries, there will be no system into which anyone could be invited” (Amos Yong, *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbour*. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 123).

others from worship³²; however, the physical element to their expulsion places Christian inclusivists in a difficult position. Jesus had the authority to drive out the moneychangers as the law gives the authority to officers of the law to physically remove or apprehend immoral reprobates who refuse to be brought to justice. Expulsion, then is not an evil per se, and can be used for good when contextually performed lawfully and not by prejudice.

Assimilation and subjugation are also not wholly evil. When people are forced to assimilate culturally and ethically for political advancement and power, then this is indeed wrong. Volf's thoughts relate to his experience of the war torn former country Yugoslavia in the early 1990's, where assimilation and subjugation were oppressive actions. From a Biblical Theological perspective assimilation and subjugation are expressions of self-denial. To be a Christian one must take up their cross and follow Jesus. This means that our identity is in Christ, therefore, assimilating to His ways, whether or not they be contrary to our cultural ethic or identity. Christians are those who are subject to Christ, bond servants and slaves, who serve Him by denying their freedom to "do as they like". This is a free will commitment that additionally expresses the greater objective of denying ourselves and our subjective morality thus accepting God's objective morality.

The issue of church discipline with the possibility of exclusion must be viewed in this light. Expulsion is necessary at times for the sake of the body. Assimilation and subjugation of the individual, denying their sin and changing their lives to follow what God says is right and serve him if they are to be restored to fellowship. The option for repentance and restoration must always be available. Jesus did of course eat with sinners, giving an invitation to those who were morally corrupt but only once they accepted his invitation to table fellowship accompanied with repentance.

So, what kind of impact do these principles have on the practice of the Lord's Supper in churches today?

32 See Douglas Thompson Goodwin, *The Cleansing of the Temple in the Fourth Gospel as a Call to Action for Social Justice*. (Boiling Springs, NC: Gardner-Webb University (MA Thesis), 2014), 68.

CHURCH DISCIPLINE AND THE LORD'S SUPPER

Table fellowship within churches far exceeds the practice of the Lord's Supper; however, this ordinance is considered more sacred than any other time Christians eat together for fellowship and worship. The practice of communion is multi-functional in that it is the centre piece of worship in that Christians remember the atoning sacrifice Jesus made on the cross through his pierced body and shed blood. The practice of the Lord's Supper also "proclaims His death until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26).

In the earliest church writings the practice of close communion is advocated that only baptised Christians may participate in the Lord's Supper. In more recent times there has been a precedent to have an "open" table in an evangelistic manner as an invitation to non-Christians to eat the "bread of forgiveness" and drink the "wine of release"³³. With non-Christians given a place at participating in the Lord's Supper, how then can we refuse the Lord's Supper from our Christian brothers even though they are in unrepentant sin? Gordon Fee argues a principle summarised in 1 Corinthians 5:12-13 simply as "free association outside the church, because God is judge and not the church, but strict discipline in the church".³⁴This may provide a basis for including non-Christians at the table and excluding believers under discipline; however, there is a general exclusivity to the table in the actions and words of Jesus and Paul that those who are unrepentant cannot participate.

Kathryn Tanner, in favour of open communion, argues that Jesus ate with sinners at the Last Supper, which was the prototype of the Lord's Supper.³⁵ He ate with Judas who betrayed Him. He ate with Peter who denied Him three times. How then can we refuse sinners at the communion

33 "Bread of forgiveness and wine of release" are lyrics from Michael Card's song "Come to the Table" from the album *The Life* (Navarre Corporation, 1994).

34 Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians (NICNT)*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 227.

35 Kathryn Tanner, "In Praise of Open Communion: A Rejoinder to James Farwell". *Anglican Theological Review* 86:3 (2004), 476.

table when Jesus ate with sinners at the first communion service?

Tanner's use of Judas and Peter is provocative and raises an interesting point, but rather serves the purpose of advocating exclusion from the Lord's Supper rather than inclusiveness. At the time of the Last Supper Peter had not yet denied the Lord. Peter's denial was for a short period. When Peter realised what he did and remembered the words of the Lord he wept with tears of repentance. Peter returned to the other disciples and continued as he did before, being identified as a disciple of Jesus. He was later restored (John 21) and ate once again with Jesus. Judas on the other hand was a sinner who ate with Jesus and left half way through the meal. He was not repentant and suffered the consequences of his actions (Acts 1:18-19).

The rhetorical arguments made by inclusivists in allowing anyone to the communion table firstly ignore the direct commandment by Jesus and the apostles to not eat with those who are unrepentant. Secondly, they do not understand the Jewish context of participating in the Lord's Supper. We must remember that the Lord's Supper is covenantal meal, "*Covenant ceremonies entail promises and curses that come as a result of keeping or breaking its stipulations.*"³⁶ Practicing the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner led to Christians in the Corinthian church falling ill and even dying (1 Corinthians 11:29-30). The Lord's Supper is not to be taken lightly.

The Didache, written in the Second century, instructs "No one is to eat or drink of your Eucharist but those who have been baptised in the Name of the Lord; for the Lord's own saying applies here, 'Give not that which is holy unto dogs'" (Didache 9:5). Huub Van de Sandt highlights that the Didache represent Jewish purity regulations with the shorter version of the Lord's words in Matthew 7:6 "The Didache's shorter saying is found in similarity to common expression in rabbinic literature

36 Scott Hafemann discusses the Lord's Supper with fellow scholars in Southern Baptist Journal of Theology's forum (See The SBJT Forum: The Lord's Supper. (Fall 2002) *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 06:3).

'holy things are not to be redeemed to feed them to the dogs'".³⁷ The prohibition of dogs to prevent defilement is expressed in writings of the Second Temple Period. The impurity of dogs serves as a "*mashal*" (parable), which was commonly expressed in Jewish purity discussions.³⁸ Van de Sant highlights that early Jewish writings such as Philo, Jubilees, and the Dead Sea Scrolls associated immoral behaviour with impurity.³⁹ This is different to Sander's view of associating ritually unclean people as sinners. The view expressed in these Jesus writings uses the analogy of uncleanness to express the impurity of sin.

The Didache also associates sin with defilement of the Lord's Supper:

Assemble on the Lord's Day, and break bread and offer the Eucharist; but first make confession of your faults, so that your sacrifice may be a pure one. Anyone who has a difference with his fellow is not to take part with you until they have been reconciled, so as to avoid any profanation of your sacrifice. (Didache 14:2)

Van de Sant explains that "fights, quibbles, and controversies within the community are regarded as defilement of the Eucharist so warring fellow Christians are to be excluded temporarily from Eucharistic celebration."⁴⁰ Purity of fellowship is a concern of Paul's expressed in 1 Corinthians 5 where Paul commands the church to "purge the old leaven". Sin is like leaven, a little can leaven the whole lump.

We may ask at this point that aren't we all sinners? Who is truly worthy of participating in the Lord's Supper? The example of 1 Corinthians 5 and other exclusions from church communal meals are cases of particular sins that are abhorrent and persistent. A man having sexual relations with his father's wife is a disgusting act that brings shame upon the Church and the Lord. Other examples of teaching false doctrine against the fundamental

37 Huub Van de Sandt, "Do not Give What is Holy to the Dogs" (Did 9:5D and Mat 7:6A): The Eucharistic Food of the Didache in It's Jewish Purity Setting". *Vigiliae Christianae* Vol. 56 No. 3 (August 2002), 230.

38 Ibid, 238.

39 Ibid, 243.

40 Ibid, 243.

truths of the gospel and the denial of the Father-Son relationship is a heresy that does not belong in the counsel of believers. Fee distinguishes in the case of exclusion from table fellowship the “difference between personal criticism and dealing with personal wrongs”⁴¹. Vosloo’s accusation of moral gatekeeping of church discipline excluding members from the Lord’s Table may not be wholly convincing but it does highlight that many could use the exclusion from the table as a means of placing legalistic ideals upon members. The exclusion of the member from the Lord’s Supper is also not to be the judgement of one man, the minister or the deacons own discretion in distributing the bread and wine. Such judgement must come from the whole church after the correct process instructed in Matthew 18:15-20 has been meticulously followed.

One last caveat that must be highlighted is that there is an open return for the brother or sister to return to the table as long as that person repents of their sin. There must be opportunity for that believer to repent of their wrong and be accepted back into fellowship. In the letter to the angel of Laodicea, Jesus rebukes the Laodiceans for their sins and then offers this invitation:

19 Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. 20 Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. (Revelation 3:19-20, ESV)

CONCLUSION

The inclusivist reading of the gospel narratives misrepresents Jesus’ invitation to join him in the great Messianic banquet in His Kingdom. The principle that Jesus’ invitation is “universal in scope, but selective in application” means that the wicked and the unrepentant sinner may not enter the Kingdom. Draper summarises “In other words, I would argue for a more specific focus on and direction towards Jesus’ actions in seeking

41 Fee, 1987, 228.

the reign of God than happy meals with sinners".⁴²

The accusation of Jesus as "friends of sinners and tax collectors" is also a misrepresentation as the claim is within the same breathe as the accusation that John the Baptist "had a demon" (Matthew 11:18; Luke 7:33). The accusation is a misrepresentation of what Jesus was really doing, which was changing lives, not affirming or tolerating their sin. Inclusivists may argue that this is unloving; however, Richard Hays in his excellent book *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, writes "love can demand restrictions. God's love cannot be reduced to inclusiveness. Authentic love calls us to repentance, discipline, sacrifice, and transformation (Luke 14:25-35; Hebrews 12:5-13)".⁴³

This love must be shown in Church discipline and the principles of Jesus' table fellowship must be realised in our practice of the Lord's Supper. We should no longer let the rhetoric of inclusivists dictate church practice in the ordinance commanded by God. Rather, we should follow the clear example left for us by our Lord, contained in the Gospels, and heed the instructions of the Apostles who have handed them down in the Epistles.

42 Draper, 2007, 3.

43 Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*.(London: T&T Clark, 2004), 202.



*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

KEYWORDS:

| 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..

INTRODUCTION

*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 Bonhoeffer *

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 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 Beatlesque approach to how Christians should conduct their inter-personal relationships.

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

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”¹. 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”² and “Let your soul be your pilot, it will guide you well”³. 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

1 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.

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

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

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.

“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”⁴, that is, they constitute “the most frequently misapplied verse in the entire Bible, used and abused by both Christians and non-Christians alike”⁵. Likewise Mark Dever questions whether this verse is perhaps employed as a proverbial “shield for sin”⁶, 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,

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

5 Ibid, 25.

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

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 ambiguous that there is no measuring rod against which to assess anything as sin.⁷

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

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

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 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 dismissed⁸. 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 France⁹ 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.¹⁰

W E Vine provides some further important definitions on this verb¹¹, comparing κρίνω/κριτής to its prefixed state. Vine defines ἀνακρίνω as “to examine, investigate, question, discern or to judge”¹². This verb is employed on 16 occasions within the New Testament, regularly commending the notion that one should make discernments or judgments

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

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

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

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

12 *Ibid*, 336, 702.

(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”¹³. 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”¹⁴ 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 suggests¹⁵ 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 a word play on κριτής/ὑπόκριτής, he is first calling for the removal of sin from the lives of his disciples. R. Tasker points out¹⁶ 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

13 Ibid, 336, 711.

14 Ibid, 316, 725.

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

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

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"¹⁷. 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

17 Hare, *Matthew*, (1993), 76.

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 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”¹⁸ 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

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

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 response¹⁹. 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 the Law, which punished adultery with death²⁰.

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 occupation²¹. 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,

19 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.

20 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.

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

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 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"²². 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 continues²³, 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.

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

23 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 discussion²⁴. 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 Peterson²⁵, 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

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

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

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), 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 of 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.



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

The Problem of the Others in 2 Peter and Jude

Peter H. Davids

KEYWORDS:

| False Teachers | Epicurianism | Greco-Roman Ethic |
| Eschatological Judgment | Rescue not Judgment | Eschatological Hope |

ABSTRACT:

While in Jude the “others” appear to be individuals who have entered the community with a Greco-Roman ethic that was dangerous to the “beloved,” in 2 Peter one is dealing with teachers who are influenced by an Epicurean-like ethic focused on pleasure. Jude instructs the “beloved” to “rescue” the “others” rather than expel them. 2 Peter joins Jude in urging the faithful to strengthen their faith/ethic, but rather than hold out hope for the “false teachers” he focuses on God’s ability to rescue the faithful while judging others. This means ultimate salvation for the faithful, if they remain faithful, and doom for the “false teachers.” Still, 2 Peter leaves judgment to God and does not instruct the faithful to expel the “false teachers.”

INTRODUCTION

Both 2 Peter and Jude are concerned with individuals who believe that they are part of the church, but whose behavior is not viewed as appropriate. That behavior is even viewed as a danger to others in the believing community. Thus, because of the need to set boundaries and to protect those referred to as the “beloved” in 2 Peter 3 and Jude, the situation could be called a need of church discipline. But it is there that the similarities end.¹ That is, while 2 Peter borrows from Jude, he is using Jude for his own purposes and making it speak to his own situation. Therefore, one has to be careful about reading the situation and practices of 2 Peter into Jude and vice versa. Because of this, this chapter will look at the two works in reverse order, trying to understand what each of them contributes to the concept of church discipline (in the sense of dealing with those whom one believes to be a danger to the community) in the first century.

JUDE

The situation in Jude is that, in contrast to the “beloved,” admission into the community “has been gained secretly”² by some “ungodly” persons. These “others”³ are never designated as teachers, so calling them “false

1 There is another major similarity in that the Greek of the two works is similar and is also very dissimilar to that of 1 Peter. Both Jude and 2 Peter use a lot of participles and few relative clauses, for instance; both are also written in the more bombastic Asiatic rhetorical style, rather than the more restrained Attic rhetorical style. This must be taken into account when interpreting the rhetoric, just as a Southern Baptist pastor and a Catholic pastor might both take a pro-life stance, but the rhetoric of one would not be the rhetoric of the other. They would sound different saying the same thing.

2 This is sometimes viewed as rhetorical vituperation – “they snuck in” rather than came in properly. Yet while there is rhetorical force to the language, the issue is probably that they were not recognized for what they were at the time of their acceptance into the community, whether that acceptance was as a convert or as a believer who moved into the area from another community.

3 This designation was first used by Ruth Ann Reese, *2 Peter & Jude* (Two Horizons NTC; Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans, 2007) 24-25, to designate these people without calling them something that the text does not call them.

teachers” would go beyond our evidence. Furthermore, there is no “false teaching” that is mentioned.⁴ These “others” are also not heretics in the technical sense in that they are portrayed more as a corrupting influence than one that is drawing part the community into a sectarian stance. The reader is told only two things about these “others”: they “pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness⁵ and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.”⁶

The first charge seems on the face of it clear, but then one asks, “In which society is this behavior socially unacceptable?” As one looks at the list of behaviors mentioned by Jude, it is clear that some version of most, if not all, of them would have been perfectly acceptable in at least parts of Greco-Roman society. However, the early Jesus movement, while living within Greco-Roman society, had an ethic that came from its Jewish heritage. Furthermore, its ethic had been sharpened and focused by the teaching of Jesus as passed down in the tradition. One does not have to argue that this community had the full Sermon on the Mount/Plain tradition to realize that there was an ethical tradition attributed to Jesus (a “Q” tradition, one could say) that interpreted the ethic of the Hebrew Scriptures for the various communities of Jesus’ followers.

Furthermore, it is unlikely that the denial of Jesus was a verbal rejection of his being the Anointed One (Christ) or even the exalted Lord. First, we know of no type of followers of Jesus in the first century who would do this. After all, Paul in Rom 10:8-10 makes it clear that it is precisely the acknowledgement of Jesus as Lord that makes one a member of the community of the “rescued” or “saved.” Second the choice of the term *despotēs* (master of a slave, owner) to pair with “lord” (which also

4 Even their slandering the glorious angels is an action and attitude, but without content. One can guess, but cannot know for sure, why they slandered them and about what.

5 That is, into a “lack of self-constraint which involves one in conduct that violates all bounds of what is socially acceptable.” BDAG ἀσέλγεια p. 141.

6 Much of the exegesis in this chapter is from Peter H. Davids, *The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude* (Pillar; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2006). See also the relevant sections of Peter H. Davids, *A Biblical Theology of James, Peter, and Jude* (BTNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014).

implied authority, even absolute authority in the phrase “Caesar is lord”) along with the accusations listed make it clear that denial is a denial of the authority of Jesus to control their behavior. In other words, the apostasy is ethical apostasy. This is born out in the list of offenses that follows.

Two things stand out in this list. First, both the example of the angels from 1 Enoch (Jude 6) and the Sodom and Gomorrah example in Jude 7 refer to the sexual crossing of the species boundary (angels having sex with human women or human beings attempting the rape of those who were in fact angels). It is clear that these individuals were viewed by the author as transgressing sexual boundaries. Second, in each of the three cases mentioned God rather than human beings brings about the punishment. If human beings are involved at all (in either 1 Enoch or the Hebrew Scriptures) they are trying to mitigate the divine punishment; they are not agents of it.

The same divine judgment is true of second triplet (Jude 11), for while Cain in Second Temple literature taught human beings evil, his judgment came from God (Testament of Benjamin 7.3; Jubilees 4.4). Balaam was responsible for teaching Israel sexual evil connected to idolatry (for his own personal gain), and, while he dies in battle, it is viewed as a divine punishment without reference to the human agent.⁷ And, of course, Korah rebelled against God’s order and died by a divine act. In none of the cases are they punished by human authorities.

Between the two triplets stands what may be a clue about the thinking of these individuals. The reviling of angelic beings (Jude 8) coupled with sexual sin and rejecting authority connects the two triads. In the first triad

7 In Num 3:8 Balaam comes at the end of a list of the kings of Midian, all of whom were slain in battle (“with the sword”), a battle that was commanded by God to punish Midian as a whole. The account is interesting in that earlier in Numbers it was Moab, not Midian, that wanted Balaam to curse Israel, and Moab which precipitated the sin of Ba’al-Pe’or. In this later passage there is divine revenge in which all the males are put under the ban and only women who have not had sexual intercourse are spared as captives. So the reference to Balaam is preliminary to listing all of the booty taken and then discussing why Moses ordered the women who had experienced sexual intercourse and the male children to be executed. That Balaam died in a divinely ordered war is of interest to the author, but he is by no means the focus of the narrative nor is there any description of his death, other than indicating that it was in battle.

the angel-human sexual barrier is crossed (or attempted to be crossed) twice. In the second triad Korah is spoken of as rebelling (against Mosaic and therefore divine authority). It is possible that the issue at hand is an issue of culture/ethics, namely that the “others” felt that the ethic of the Torah (which was said in Jewish tradition to have been given through angelic mediation) had been foisted upon human beings and that in slandering these beings they were showing their freedom from the (Jewish) law. That fits with the description in Jude 12 that the “others” are “blemishes on your love feasts” in that they “boldly feast together” with the “beloved.” In the first century the Eucharist was a meal following the Greco-Roman pattern: main meal, time of devotion to the gods, and then the drinking party, the *symposium*. It was this latter meal that was the Eucharistic celebration. For that reason, even though in a Greco-Roman meal wives of the male participants and other honorable women withdrew before the *symposium* (if they were present at all), in the communities of the followers of Jesus they remained for it was the main religious event. In a Greco-Roman context that would be a signal that those women were free to be seduced, and attempts to stop this (or to stop others from indulging in too much drink) might well seem as attempts to put a repressive Jewish rule on the freedom they felt in Jesus. That stance would be ample reason to slander, even curse, the angels who foisted these rules on human beings and also ample reason to flout their own freedom.

Whether or not this was the reasoning of the “others,” it is clear that Jude does not ask the “beloved” to take action, but rather gives them the example of Michael the Archangel. In the *Testament of Moses*, Michael does not curse or otherwise judge the devil (i.e. the slanderer) himself when the latter disputes Michael’s right to carry out the Lord’s command and give the body of Moses honorable burial. Instead he hands the matter over to the Lord: judgment, rebuke is the Lord’s matter. If that is true in so blatant and obvious a case, when one protagonist is holy and the other as evil as they get, how much more in the human situation involving the “beloved?”

Whether or not the logic of the argument above holds, there is another contrast towards the end of the letter. First, quoting the only writing referred to in the whole letter, Jude cites 1 Enoch 1:9 in Jude 14-15, in which “the Lord” comes and executes judgment on such individuals. While 1 Enoch was probably referring to YHWH, Jude, in the light of the early Christian expectation of the return of Jesus as ruler and judge, is probably referring the quotation to Jesus. Thus, as in the case of the two triads cited before, it is the divine figure that executes judgment.

What, then, are the “beloved” to do? First, rather than be unsettled by the appearance of these interlopers, they are to “build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God; wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.” This is a “steady as she goes” counsel. The “Lord Jesus the Anointed One” is in control, for he prophesied this. So they are to continue in their obedience to him in the light of his coming that will bring them mercy. Their “faith” is their commitment to him (assuming that the noun is read as shorthand for *pisteuō* with Jesus as the implied dative object); the Holy Spirit is their communication with him; their faithful obedience is keeping themselves in God’s love; and their future hope is Jesus himself.

Second, there are the “others” to be reckoned with. However, Jude’s response is not one of judgment, but of mercy. The first response is apologetic, convincing or having mercy on those who are wondering who is correct. The second response⁸ seems more aggressive, but no less merciful: “rescue them, snatching them out of the fire,” as if the fires of hell or the fires of desire were leaping up around them. There is no instruction about how one is to do this. But there is a warning: “Have mercy with fear, hating even the garment that is stained by the flesh.” The reference is to the undergarment, the *chiton*, of the two garments that a person wore. If a garment was stained by bodily fluids, it would not be the outer poncho-like garment, but the inner one. So the warning is to watch

8 Probably, with Ruth Ann Reese, *2 Peter & Jude*, 66-72, one should see two groups here, not three.

out in one’s rescue efforts, for one might be drawn in to their defilement rather than drawing them out. Thus one is to avoid the least compromise or defilement out of an abundance of caution.

How, then, can one summarize what Jude has to say on our topic? First, he is apparently dealing with those who have entered the community without shedding their Greco-Roman ethical assumptions and lifestyle. They have sworn allegiance to Jesus as Lord, as their exalted master, but their lifestyle contradicts his teaching. Thus they are viewed as apostate, but in an ethical rather than a doctrinal sense. The closest they come to doctrinal deviation is in their slandering of the angelic beings, presumably those who brought the law.⁹ Thus Jude is dealing with a cultural clash, the type of cultural clash that occurs when a movement like the Jesus movement with its assumption of a limited ethical dualism crosses into another culture, which does not accept its definitions of good and evil, and starts to gain adherents from that culture.¹⁰

Second, Jude goes to great length to point out that God or the Lord will judge and punish such people. In all of his examples it is God who does the judging, even in the one example in which human beings actually kill the person. Jude goes so far in terms of non-judgment that even the devil is not judged by a holy angel, who rather refers the matter under dispute to God.

Third, Jude does see fit to describe these “others” in rhetorically vivid language. He names their failings, perhaps using some stock phrases in the vituperative rhetorical tradition, but being clear enough that the “beloved” would recognize which type of people he intended. He does not, however, name names and give concrete examples of the behavior he is calling evil.

9 This could be a step towards the later Marcionite heresy, but there is no program of dejuzaization that Jude refers to and there is no reference to a lesser deity having given the Hebrew Scriptures. Thus, while there may be some Marcionite-leaning tendencies, we are a long way before Marcion both temporally and conceptually.

10 See Peter H. Davids, “Are the Others too Other? The Issue of the Others in Jude and 2 Peter” in Eric F. Mason and Troy W. Martin, eds., *Reading 1 - 2 Peter and Jude* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014) 201 – 213.

Fourth, Jude calls on two responses from the community the he refers to as “beloved.” The first is to remain faithful, living in eschatological expectation that Jesus would come and reward them. This will appear again in 2 Peter. The second is to be merciful towards the “others,” rescuing them from their self-destructive, rebellious behavior. Jude is aware of the dangers involved and warns his readers about such dangers, but still this is the one action that he commands towards these people. Mercy – rescue (salvation) – but with care are his terms of reference for this mission.

2 PETER

The vast majority of scholars believe that 2 Peter has used Jude, but an examination of this usage (principally in 2 Peter 2) shows that he is using it for his own purposes, weaving it into his argument rather than just quoting it.¹¹ That particular way of using it is because he is facing a different situation and simply quoting Jude as a whole work would not answer the questions that 2 Peter is facing. There are several aspects to this difference.

First, the “others” whom 2 Peter is dealing with are not simply individuals who have entered the church and are never said to be teachers, as in Jude, but people who were part of the community, whom 2 Peter describes as “false teachers” analogous to the “false prophets” in Israel (2 Pet 2:1).¹² They are those who have escaped from the corruption in the

11 This use is the rhetorical technique of *aemulatio*, which is described by John Kloppenborg in “The Reception of the Jesus Tradition in James” in J. Schlosser, ed., *The Catholic Epistles and the Tradition* (BETL; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2004) 93-141. That is the reason that 2 Peter follows the order of Jude and uses forms of key terms in Jude, but rarely uses whole phrases. He is making a recognizable Jude an integral part of his own argument.

12 With most scholars we are reading the future in 2 Pet 2:1 and 3:3 as a description of an actual situation. Followers of Jesus of Nazareth believed that they were already in “the last days” since the advent of Jesus, so “in the last days” refers to the present period. Likewise the vivid description of the “false teachers” indicates that they are already functioning, although from the epistolary point of view the coming of the letter and thus the Petrine interaction with the situation is future.

world through the knowledge of “the Lord and Savior Jesus the Anointed One” (2 Pet 2:20). This is precisely how 2 Peter describes God’s salvation in 2 Pet 1:3-4, what this present author has previously called “epignostic salvation,” salvation or rescue through the knowledge of God or Jesus the Anointed One.¹³ Thus he views them as members of the believing community. But they are members who, rather than going on into greater holiness (2 Pet 1:5-8) or divinization (2 Pet 1:4, “partakers of the divine nature”), have turned back (2 Pet 2:21-22) and are now again entangled by the power of evil (2 Pet 2:21). They are, in short, apostates. And it would have been better for them never to have been evangelized in the first place than to get involved in such apostasy (2 Pet 2:21). Second Peter does not hold out any hope of rescue for these apostate teachers, much as Mark 3 does not hold out hope for those who slander the Holy Spirit. It is not that they do not know enough, but as teachers they know too much and have rejected what they know.

Second, these teachers, like the “others” in Jude, have committed apostasy primarily by knowingly rejecting the rule of Jesus in their practices, i.e. “denying the Master who bought them” (2 Pet 2:1). What follows is a list of sins, partly for rhetorical effect, to be sure, but since they are exclusively moral they point to a moral departure from the standards of the community which were believed to derive from Jesus. In this these teachers parallel the “others” in Jude. But those in 2 Peter are leaders, teachers, so they have gathered others to their “destructive sects,”¹⁴ and to do so they had to explain away the doubts of their followers. The one teaching (other than their slander of angelic beings) that seems to be

13 See Peter H. Davids, *The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude* (Pillar; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2006) 156, 169-176, and Peter H. Davids, *A Biblical Theology of James, Peter, and Jude*, 233, 239-240, 246-248, 296.

14 The term *hairesis* (ἡρέσις) primarily means a sect or faction, not a doctrinal deviation. Thus in the New Testament both the Sadducees and the Pharisees are designated by this term (Acts 5:17; 15:5) as is the Jesus movement (Acts 24:5, 14 – note some inconsistency as to what to call the Jesus sect, which shows that it does not yet have a fixed name). Factions within the believing community are also designated by this term (1 Cor 11:19; Gal 5:20). Any sect or party has some reason for being, some teaching or practice that they are characterized by. Second Peter does not tell us what that is, but he does characterize these sects as “destructive.”

characteristic of this sect is that of denying future judgment (2 Pet 3:3-10). That would fit with a denial of the present or future rule of Jesus and explain why 2 Pet 1:16-18 goes through such pains to defend it by eyewitness testimony. Denying future judgement was serious, for such eternal judgment was one of the pillars of the faith (e.g. Heb 6:2), part of basic Christian catechesis.

This particular connection of ethical looseness with the denial of future judgment is what led Jerome Neyrey to designate them as Epicurean or, better, Epicurean-influenced.¹⁵ Certainly Epicurean thought was common around the Mediterranean, including in Palestine, even if contemporary readers are more familiar with the Stoic concepts with which Paul interacts. When something is “in the air,” one does not need to be a card-carrying Stoic or Epicurean to pick up the basic ideas. The core idea in Epicurean thought was that the world is made of atoms and will dissolve back into atoms and that there is therefore nothing beyond death other than the similar dissolution of the whole universe. In other words, at death the person dissolves back to atoms and eventually the whole universe will do the same. And “That’s it, folks.” If there is no future life and certainly no resurrection, then this life is all that one has to live for, so the goal is to maximize pleasure in this life. Now in Epicurean thought this was a thoughtful maximization of pleasure, for such teachers realized that too much eating and too much drinking and the like caused pain. Thus the ideal was to indulge in just the right amount so that one maximized pleasure without causing negative after-effects. But this is calculated without any eschatology, since there is none. Without eternal judgment that includes the “promise of his coming” (2 Pet 3:4), there is no reason for present suffering, no reason for restraint, and no reason for generosity, which are so common in the New Testament, for there is no future reward. Without eschatological reward, there is no basis for a *Christian* ethic, and that is the basic complaint of 2 Peter: the “false teachers” were living and

15 Jerome H. Neyrey, *2 Peter; Jude: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1993) 122-129.

teaching a hedonistic ethic (even if moderated by reason: “Do not go too far, for that will not maximize pleasure.”). And they were criticizing what they perceived as the sources of the Christian ethic of deferred pleasure: the angels (who had mediated the Torah, which was the basis of Jesus’ ethic) and the promise of Jesus’ return to judge the living and the dead. The apparent delay of the Parousia made their arguments seem plausible.

Second Peter has two lines of attack on this seemingly-plausible teaching, which was being lived out (as in Jude) at the Eucharist, which they had turned into a time of carousing and dissipation (2 Pet 2:13). First, he brackets the whole letter with (1) the purpose of salvation, namely freedom from desire, growing holiness, and ultimate divinization (“sharing in the divine nature”) and (2) the certainty of judgment, including pointing out that the Deluge gave the lie to the argument that the world was steady-state since its creation (an argument that sounds deistic). Thus the letter is sprinkled with warnings of judgment and observations that the “false teachers” are in fact prisoners of their desires, their vaunted freedom being simply a cover for slavery.

Second, he edits Jude’s material to show that the Lord can bring judgment while *at the same time* saving the righteous (2 Pet 2:9). Thus Noah is the “herald of righteousness” and Lot is “righteous” and tormented by the evil around him. This sets up the trope of the righteous sufferer who is derided by and even disadvantaged by the wicked who seem to be prospering. Certainly the “false teachers” are viewed as, “in their greed,” exploiting the “beloved;” the least bad result for the “beloved” is that the “way of truth” will be “reviled” by the culture around them.¹⁶ But that is now, and not the future. In the end God, it is argued, can destroy these wicked while at the same time saving the righteous. Could it be that an argument not mentioned in the letter was that if God were to judge

16 In other words, if the “beloved” escape being exploited by the “false teachers,” they at least suffer from the society around them deriding them either for the excesses of the “false teachers” that go beyond what the surrounding society finds acceptable or the contradiction between the Christian teaching that the society had heard and the behavior of the “false teachers.”

he could only destroy everyone, righteous and well as wicked? If so, 2 Peter's editing makes it clear that this is definitely not the case. God is quite discriminatory.

In the end 2 Peter differs from Jude in his advice to the "beloved." In Jude the "beloved" were to rescue the "others." There is not a word of that in 2 Peter. It may be that the "false teachers" were already too much in control of the situation. It may be that as teachers their arguments were too overwhelming for the "beloved."¹⁷ What is clear is that he does not hold out one ounce of hope for these individuals, but rather emphasizes over and over the certainty of their judgment, made all the worse because they were once freed from their desires and did know the truth.

What 2 Peter does say to the "beloved" is that they should strengthen their own commitment. Because of this commitment they should pursue virtue. They should reinforce their commitment by realizing that the earth is not steady-state, but headed for a cataclysm that is every bit as traumatic and dramatic as that of the Deluge. However, while the firmament (the "heavens") and the heavenly bodies (the meaning of "elements" in a context of "heavens") associated with the firmament will be destroyed, the earth will only be "exposed."¹⁸ This exposure is for the purpose of judgment – all deeds good and evil will be seen and judged accordingly. Thus the "beloved" are to fortify their conviction that there is a future for the righteous, a good future, in a renewed earth with a new heaven. What

17 The "false teachers" in 2 Peter appear to be doing more than the "others" in Jude. There the "others" appear to be making cultural assumptions that Jude views as disastrous; they may have attributed the "conservative ethic" that Jude espouses to Judaism (an ethic brought by angels). Thus there is a culture clash, at least in the eyes of the "others." The "false teachers" in 2 Peter appear to be more evangelistic in drawing others into their sect, even if in 2 Peter's view they are doing so simply to exploit them in their greed. They also appear to be more thoughtful, having realized that to support their behavior they had to take on the return-of-Jesus eschatology and its concomitant eternal judgment. Their behavior may have been driven by their perceptions of cultural suitability and personal pleasure and gain, but no thoughtful person could pursue such a course without realizing that they had to do something with the Parousia/final judgment, which were pillars of each Christian catechesis.

18 The exegesis behind this argument is laid out in the relevant parts of Peter H. Davids, *Letters of 2 Peter and Jude*, especially 256 – 297, and, in lesser detail, in Peter H. Davids, *A Biblical Theology of James, Peter, and Jude*, especially 226 – 229, 240-241.

will be new about the earth? Righteousness will dwell in it.

So they are to realize that there is delay in the coming of Jesus, but it is a purposeful delay to rescue all whom God can rescue. The extent of the delay is not revealed to anyone, so it could end at any moment. Using a phrase from Jesus’ teaching, 2 Peter argues that “the day of the Lord will come like a thief,” i.e. unexpectedly, suddenly. It will be present before one can discern any “signs.” The only proper response to such teaching is, as also in the teaching of Jesus, to be ready for his coming at any time.

The call, then, is not to leave the community (How can one leave the one community that Jesus founded?) or to convert the “false teachers” (Were not their minds already made up?) or to kick the “false teachers” out of the community (Is it possible to expel “leading lights” without fracturing the community, even if these leaders were not yet in total control?) but to focus on their own stability (2 Pet 3:17). They could yet get swept away by the arguments of these “false teachers,” for their arguments seem plausible and the resulting behavior seemed pleasurable and culturally acceptable. Thus the conclusion of the letter is a focus on (1) the “beloved” keeping their own stability and (2) their growing “in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus the Anointed One.” In other words, the letter ends where it began, with growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus, for that which freed them in the beginning will take them further on towards participation in the divine nature.



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

Self-Discipline

Douglas Groothuis

KEYWORDS:

| Self-Discipline | Self-Denial | Authority of Scripture |
| Life of the Mind | Apologetics |

ABSTRACT:

Christians are disciples. This means they must be self-disciplined under the lordship of Jesus Christ, who has all authority in heaven and on earth. There is no self-discipline without self-denial. We must resist worldliness in order to embrace godly habits of the mind. That means recognizing the truthfulness and pertinence of the Holy Scriptures and studying them arduously for the sake of the church and the world. If we do not, we may give a false witness to the gospel of God and so disgrace ourselves and the church. However, as we lean on the Lord and are filled with the Spirit, we know that our labor in the Lord is not in vain.

INTRODUCTION

For twenty-five years, I have taught philosophy full-time at an evangelical seminary, as well as teaching as an affiliate faculty of philosophy at several secular schools. My deepest joy is inspiring students to attain knowledge about things that matter most. Some students stride into class with false

assurances about their abilities. They are quickly humbled—or angered. Others slip in quietly and discover intellectual resources they knew nothing of. But wherever a student may start, I yearn that he advances intellectually, so that his thinking becomes more conducive to knowledge, especially about the nature of truth, God, morality, and salvation.¹

My greatest lament is not for those who labor long, but improve little. Nor is it for those who work much but remain weak. Sad though these cases are, I lament most for those who are smart but lazy—ill-quipped to develop their God-given skills through self-discipline. To become a Christian philosopher or apologist, you must acquire a certain cast of mind. You immerse yourself in the discipline, not just do well on assigned papers. You attend lectures, discussions, and debates related to your studies, not just give presentations in class. You need to read thoughtful books on your own time for a lifetime, not just fulfill reading assignments only to then stop reading when you schooling is done. In other words, you need self-discipline in your discipline. No book or teacher by themselves can make this happen.

THE CALL TO BE A DISCIPLE AND TO DISCIPLINE

Discipline is not optional in the Christian life. When Jesus called his first followers, they were called “disciples” and were given special authority because they were Jesus’s followers:

Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. (Matthew 10:1-4)

1 I understand knowledge in the classical sense as being “justified, true belief” (JTB).

The summons of Christ is what confers authority on the apostles. But Christ's call—and its sobering reference to Judas—is not limited to the original twelve, but is given to all who would confess Christ as their Lord and their Savior.

Then he said to them all: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self? (Luke 9:23-25)

Jesus also proclaims, "If you are truly my disciples, then you shall know the truth and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31-32). After his resurrection, the risen Lord charged his disciples to make disciples of the nations.

And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20; see also Acts 1:8)

Since Jesus possesses all authority over every realm, his disciples must make disciples and teach the world to observe what Jesus commanded for the human race. In other words, this Great Commission demands that we bring the whole Bible to the whole world that the world might recognize and obey the authority of Jesus and the Bible. This cannot possibly be done without the disciplines of teaching and learning, so that error is unmasked and so that truth may be unleashed.

Followers of Jesus were first called "Christians" at Antioch (Acts 11:26). This was because they desired to be like Christ. But in a fallen and broken world, we are not naturally Christ-like, but, rather, slaves to sin and the devil (John 8:44). Jesus did not soft sell or down play the plight of people east of Eden and under the sun.

THE MEANING OF DISCIPLINE

To be disciplined means to come under a higher authority in order to please that authority by one's thought and actions. While "discipline" can mean a kind of restorative punishment, the concept is not based on there being a need for punishment.

Jesus was without sin, but learned discipline in his earthly sojourn. But how can the perfectly righteous and sinless Son of God experience this? The writer of Hebrews explains.

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek. (Hebrews 5:7-10)

The crucial word in this passage for our concerns is "obedient." One cannot be obedient unless one has been disciplined. This is simply because one is disciplined *unto obedience*. Even Jesus, "Son though he was," became obedient to God, the Father, through his fervent desires for godliness. In this, he was made "perfect" through his life-long ardor for God, which culminated with his incomparable suffering of the Cross. It is because of all this that he "was designated by God to be a high priest..." This pattern of Jesus's obedience found in discipline compels his followers as well, since Jesus is "the source of salvation" who *obey him*.

We can also trace the idea of discipline to our first parents in the garden. Even before disobedience to God and their fall into sin and death, God told them to obey him, to be under his discipline. Before promising them all the good of the earth, God says:

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea

and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” (Genesis 1:28; see also Psalm 8)

Later, after God unveiled more blessings for man under God’s authority, he spoke again of blessings of obedience, but also the consequences of disobedience or insubordination.

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the Lord God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.” (Genesis 2:15-17)

Of course, the original man and woman turned from God and his promise of blessing aside and instead turned toward the serpent’s lie. In being disobedient, in not learning obedience through discipline, they were cast east of Eden, out of the garden, and into a world now “under the sun,” as Ecclesiastes poetically puts it. God called the man and the woman to be disciplined unto obedience—even before sin entered and effaced the human race. Thus, discipline is intrinsic to creature-hood, to our status as finite and dependent beings. As Paul preached at Athens, God “is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else” (Acts 17:25; see Hebrews 1:3).

GENERAL PRINCIPLES FOR SELF-DISCIPLINE

Christians are under the authority of God as found in The Holy Scriptures. Every discipline requires a reliable source of knowledge to inform that discipline. Lawyers must learn the legal codes to practice law well. Doctors need to master anatomy, physiology, and pharmacology to practice medicine wisely. Christians, whatever their specific vocation,

must read, study, memorize, and meditate upon God’s special revelation to humanity: the sixty six books of the Old and New Testaments. Postmodern distortions aside, the Bible carries an objective, ineradicable, and knowable authority because it is inspired by an all-good and all-powerful God.² It is not a book to augment our personal, private, and subjective “spirituality.” May it never be. We are held accountable to the Bible as the ultimate standard for all of life. This was the formal principle of the Reformation: *Sola Scriptura*. Neither tradition nor any religious spokesman can trump “the word of God,” which “is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart (Hebrews 4:12). Paul affirms this of the Hebrew Bible to Timothy, and by extension to the New Testament as well.³

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17; see also John 10:33, 2 Peter 1:16-21)

In a time of biblical illiteracy and mushy syncretism, it is incumbent that Christians know and seek to live out biblical truths. Without this self-discipline, “the salt loses its savor” and we blend in with the world, as the Apostle John warned:

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever. (1 John 2:15-17; see also James 1:27)

2 On the postmodernist attempt to undermine this concept of truth, see Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000); and Millard Erickson, *Truth or Consequences* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

3 For this argument, see Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011).

Time with the biblical text is paramount. In a media-saturated culture, followers of the Word made flesh must attend to the Word written and so avoid the manifold worldly diversions that cyberspace offers. This, too, requires a disciplined exegesis of every communications medium to discern its effect on our lives. What Paul says about prophecy applies to all our life in a fallen world: “Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:19-22; see also Galatians 1:6-11; John 4:1-6; 2 Corinthians 11:14).

Second, a Christian’s self-discipline is demanding and rigorous. The followers of Jesus are exhorted by their Lord to abide by the highest standards and to do so at the deepest possible level. The Apostle Paul, following his Lord, implored Christians to be ardent and competent followers of Christ.

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:1-2)

To the young pastor, Timothy, Paul says:

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. (2 Timothy 2:15; see also James 3:1-3)

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus strikes at the root of sin—one’s thoughts and emotions. Jesus indicts those who murder or commit adultery in their hearts, and exhorts them to strike at the root of the problem. In language that makes many balk or wince, Jesus says:

You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has

already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell. (Matthew 5:27-30)

Those who govern their thoughts will govern their bodies, and present them as living sacrifices to God (Romans 12:1). This is possible only through the Holy Spirit.

The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. (Galatians 5:19-23)

Third, we need to be sober and serious about the consequences of not disciplining ourselves through knowing the Bible and doing good works in the power of the Spirit of Truth (Matthew 7:15-23; John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13; James 2:14-26). If we claim to be Christians, then there should be evidence of a life changed for the better, a life that lives for Christ and his Kingdom (Matthew 6:33). One can never know Christ as Savior without knowing him as Lord, no matter how poor our discipleship may be.⁴ Paul delivers this clarion call to self-discipline in light of God's great redemptive work:

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this

4 See John MacArthur, *The Gospel of Jesus: What is Authentic Faith?* rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. (Titus 2:11-14)

As God’s children and heirs of grace (Galatians 4:7), God holds us accountable for our discipline or lack of it. Our thoughts and works do nothing to justify us before an infinitely holy God. Our standing with God is accomplished by “the finished work of Christ,” as Francis Schaeffer put it (Ephesians 2:1-8).⁵ When we confess our sin, we can know that God forgives our sin and cleanse us of unrighteousness (1 John 1:8-10; See also Psalm 51). However, God may chasten us, such that we become more earnest and devout disciples:

No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. (Hebrews 12:11)

This discipline may be quite severe, as Paul makes clear about partaking in The Lord’s Supper in a flippant and ungodly manner.

So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment. Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world.

5 Francis Schaeffer, *The Finished Work of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998). On the spiritual life, see Francis Schaeffer, *True Spirituality* (orig. pub. 1971; Tyndale House, 2001) and Francis Chan, *Crazy Love* (Colorado Springs, David C. Cook, 2008).

(1 Corinthians 11:27-32)

But if we are discerning about our hearts and conduct, we can avoid this strict judgment. But even if so judged, this discipline from God is restorative, “that we will not be finally condemned with the world.” And there is blessing in God’s discipline:

Blessed is the one you discipline, Lord,
the one you teach from your law;
you grant them relief from days of trouble,
till a pit is dug for the wicked.

(Psalm 94:12-13)

Fourth, if one does not discipline himself, and brings dishonor on God’s name and corruption to God’s church, he may come under the discipline of the church. Jesus tells us what pattern to follow in this—confront the person personally. If this fails to bring repentance, bring others. If this fails, it must be brought before the whole church. As the last resort, the sinner must be treated as “as you would a pagan or a tax collector” (Matthew 18:15-18). In the early church, Paul addressed these matters sternly, but lovingly as well, even commanding that an erring brother handed “over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord” (Corinthians 5:5).

SELF-DISCIPLINE AND THE LIFE OF THE MIND

As a Christian teacher and writer, I hope I can offer some wisdom on one’s discipleship of the mind. Through reading Francis Schaeffer’s book, *The God Who is There* (1968) shortly after my conversion in 1976, I discovered that the Christian worldview and the Lordship of Christ covered the whole of life. Most significantly, Schaeffer ranged over myriad topics – philosophy, theology, art, music, etc. – with intellectual

confidence and competence rooted in Christian truth.⁶ That inspired me to attempt to do the same.

The subject of teaching, learning, and publishing as a Christian has many facets, such as pedagogical philosophy, the intellectual substance of sermons, and more. These are group endeavors practiced in the classroom and the church. They are neglected to our shame. Since our topic is self-discipline, we will address ways that Christians can develop habits of intellectual discipline under Christ's absolute authority.⁷

First, a disciplined mind is an integral part of the Christian's sanctification—becoming more Christ-like as one matures in faith. In correcting passionately the false gospel being taught in Galicia, Paul explained the foundation of sanctification:

But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir. (Galatians 4:4-7)

These glorious realities of salvation must spark the Christian's zeal for intellectual discipline and achievement. Leaning on pride, ego, and status will only grieve and quench the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30; 1 Thessalonians 5:19).⁸

Sadly, many Christians fail to view intellectual self-discipline as a *spiritual discipline*. After I taught on this to a large class at Denver Seminary, a man about fifty years old contacted me. He was troubled and confessing his faith had little rational basis. I counseled him to follow

6 Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who is There* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968).

7 For a specific application of self-discipline to Christian scholarship, see Andres Kostenberger, *Excellence: The Character of God and the Pursuit of Godly Virtue* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2012)

8 See Charles Spurgeon's sermon, "Grieving the Holy Spirit" (1859) available at: <http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/0278.htm>.

Peter's admonition:

But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect. (1 Peter 3:15; see also Isaiah 1:18; Romans 12:1-2)

When Jesus was asked the toughest theological question of his day, "What is the greatest commandment in the Law?" he replied:

'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matthew 22:37-40)

On the authority of Jesus, we must love God with all our being, including the totality of our minds. Jesus himself brought his intellect to bear on all aspects of his ministry, outthinking the best minds of his day on the thorniest issues. He avoided all their traps and answered brilliantly on, for example, matters of church and state (as we would put it), marriage and the afterlife, and his status as a "son of David."⁹

As Francis Schaeffer often put it, Christ is the Lord of all of life and all of our being. His stature as a thinking pastor and prophet and apologist gave great power to these words.

True spirituality covers all of reality. There are things the Bible tells us to do as absolutes which are sinful- which do not conform to the character of God. But aside from these things the Lordship of Christ covers all of life and all of life equally. It is not only that true spirituality covers all of life, but it covers all parts of the spectrum of life equally. In this sense there is nothing concerning reality that is not spiritual.¹⁰

9 See all of Matthew, chapter 22 for these arguments. For the case that Jesus was a philosopher and apologist, see Douglas Groothuis, *On Jesus* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2003).

10 See Francis Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto* (orig. pub., 1981; Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 19.

The essence of intellectual discipline is holding oneself accountable to God for the truth and credibility of one's beliefs. This is no small task, east of Eden, as the Psalmist knew well:

Take notice, you senseless ones among
the people; you fools, when will you become wise?
Does he who fashioned the ear
not hear?
Does he who formed the eye not see?
Does he who disciplines nations
not punish?
Does he who teaches mankind
lack knowledge?
The Lord knows all human plans;
he knows that they are futile.

(Psalm 94:8-11)

Despite the “futility” of human plans—given human pride, arrogance, and intellectual sloth—we may heed God's revelation and, through cognitive discipline, attain knowledge. A fundamental element of this task is forming and perfecting a Christian worldview. Much has been written on this topic in the last few decades.¹¹ James Sire sets out a concise and helpful definition of worldview in his first edition of his modern classic, *The Universe Next Door* (1976): “A world view is a set of presuppositions (or assumptions) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously) about the basic makeup of our world.”¹² A worldview can be broken down into several categorical schemes, but three categories suffice for our purposes: creation, fall, and redemption.¹³

11 Perhaps the most thorough treatment from a Christian perspective is David Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002).

12 James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalogue* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 17. This book is now out in a 5th edition, published by InterVarsity in 2009.

13 For the development of these themes and their application to non-Christian worldviews, see Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004).

Creation:

An infinite-personal and triune God created all things out of nothing and blessed them as good. The crown of creation was man, made in the image and likeness of God, whom God pronounced “very good” (Genesis 1-2).

Fall:

The man and woman defected from God’s authority by heeding the lies of the serpent that deceived them. Because of the fall, all creation was marred and humans were subject to death. We all inherit this condition and labor under its constraints (Genesis 3; Book of Ecclesiastes; Psalm 90).

Redemption:

Despite the fall into sin and futility, God continued to reveal himself through nature, prophets, Israel, Scripture, and supremely in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christ’s redemptive mission insures that his true followers will be saved, that the Kingdom will advance, and that the universe will be purged, judged, and perfected in the end (Revelation 21-22).

For Christians to develop, maintain, and improve their Christian worldview, they must discipline their thoughts to conform to the biblical pattern. As mentioned above, this intellectual integrity requires a deep knowledge of the Bible in addition to how the Bible speaks to the perennial issues of humanity. Christians need to deny themselves some popular amusements. Since much of popular culture numbs the mind to truth, wastes time, and desensitizes the soul to the realities of good and evil, it must be shunned for the sake of better things. Paul exhorts us to discipline our thinking this way:

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever

is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. (Philippians 4:8)

When one says No to worldliness, one can dine on far richer fare. Beside the Bible, the disciplined mind finds delight in seminal Christian thinkers such as St. Augustine, Aquinas, John Calvin, Blaise Pascal, Jonathan Edwards, C.S. Lewis, Dorothy Sayers, G.K. Chesterton, and many more. We are surrounded by a great cloud of Christian witness who had earnestly attempted to conform their minds to the realities of God and his world.¹⁴ A sound knowledge of the western literary canon in general further braces Christian's mind for great things.¹⁵

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. (2 Corinthians 10:3-5)

The context for Paul's insights and incentive to destroy anything that denies the knowledge of God is church discipline at Corinth. However, it is not limited to that. We know that Paul told the Ephesians to put on "the full armor of God" (Ephesians 6:10-19), especially bearing in mind the intense occultism and spiritual darkness of Ephesus (see Acts 19:1-20). The armor involves "the helmet of salvation," which protecting the head and thus the mind in intellectual combat. It further means and arraying "the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God," which brings the divine power of Scripture (Hebrews 4:12) into every adversarial situation. Just as a military soldier must be disciplined in his battle skills and

14 See Terry Glaspy, *Book Lover's Guide to Great Reading: A Guided Tour of Classic and Contemporary Literature* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

15 Louise Cowan, Os Guinness, eds. *Invitation to the Classics: A Guide to Books You've Always Wanted to Read* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006)

obedience to his commander, the Christian must be *disciplined* to “take every thought captive to make it *obedient* to Christ.”

Although he wrote before the coming of Christ, the Preacher of Ecclesiastes left a legacy of careful and disciplined thought and writing, as the commentator tells us.

Not only was the Teacher wise, but he also imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true. (Ecclesiastes 12:9-10)

SELF-DISCIPLINE AND THE VICTORY OF CHRIST

We have seen that discipline to a higher authority is the essence of godly living. We are not the center of the universe. The God of the Bible forever holds that position. Therefore, the Christian should submit to the way of the Cross in order to rejoice in the resurrection power of God, always remembering this promise:

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. (1 Corinthians 15:56-59)



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