

DEALING WITH SIN IN THE LIVES OF CHRISTIANS

James W. Garrett

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What should be a church's response to sin in the life of one of its members? In America there typically are two opposing responses. Most mainline churches travel the road of non-involvement. "Judge not," is the message spoken by their functional style. "Unconditional love," is expressed by the attitude, "Whatever you do, I will not judge you; I will love you, accept you, try to build your self-esteem, and through this positive response to you, hope to see you grow in constructive behavior." This attitude fits well into the American trend toward individualism, expressed by Frank Sinatra's song, *I Did It My Way*. "How I live is between me and God; my behavior is none of your business unless I invade your private territory."

The opposite response is demonstrated by some Pentecostal groups, cults, discipleship movements, and fundamentalist churches. Dress codes, spiritual regimen, and strict codes of conduct are enforced. Those who violate the standards of the group face "discipline," which may consist of excommunication, banning, or shunning. Often, such severe pressure to conform is put upon a non-conformist that he leaves on his own - HE ESCAPES!

The Church's concern with holiness and purity among its members is a Scripturally correct concern. The epistles are replete with such exhortations as the following:

Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the Living God; just as God said,

*"I will dwell in them and walk among them;
And I will be their God, they shall be My people.
Therefore, come out from among their midst and be separate,"
Says the Lord.*

*And, "Do not touch what is unclean
And I will welcome you,
And I will be a father to you,
And you shall be sons and daughters to Me,"
Says the Lord Almighty.¹*

¹ II Corinthians 6:14-18

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."²

But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler- not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges. Remove the wicked man from among yourselves.³

One of the questions that must be faced is, "What sins or character flaws merit action on the part of the church?" To persist in a known incestuous relationship is one thing, but what about knowingly writing checks when there is insufficient funds in the bank to cover the checks? Does such deception and fraud demand church discipline? This is not an easy question to answer.

Along with the concern for purity, there must be concern for avoiding witch-hunts and undue disruption in the life of the Church. This is the concern of Jesus' Parable of the Tares:

He presented another parable to them, saying,

"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares also among the wheat, and went away. But when the wheat sprang up and bore grain, then the tares became evident also.

And the slaves of the landowner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?' And he said to him, 'An enemy has done this!' And the slaves said to him, 'Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?' But he said, 'No; lest while you are gathering up the tares, you may root up the wheat with them.

Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, 'First gather up the tares and bind them into bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn.'"⁴

When the disciples asked for an interpretation of this parable, Jesus made it evident that this was a parable about the Church, the Kingdom of Heaven.⁵

² I Peter 1:14-16

³ I Corinthians 5:11-13

⁴ Matthew 13:24-30

⁵ Matthew 13:37-43

Two concerns relevant to our topic are expressed in Scripture:

1. Purity in the Body of Christ
2. The ultimate salvation of every believer.

Scripture recognizes the fact that believers will commit sin. I John, addressed to Christians, makes this assertion:

My little children, I am writing these things to you that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.⁶

If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.⁷

This epistle defines the difference between the incidental "sins" of the believer, and the "sin" of the ungodly.

*...the one who **practices sin** is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that he might destroy the works of the devil. **No one who is born of God practices sin**, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.⁸*

The difference between the sin referred to in the first references above and that of the final reference is this:

1. In the first instance, John writes of those stumblings and failures that seem to be a part of our lives, even though we are Christians.
2. The second citation above refers to one who claims to be a Christian, but persists in open sinful behavior.⁹

⁶ I John 2:1-2

⁷ I John 1:8-10

⁸ I John 3:8-9

⁹ Such as one who practices adultery, versus one who succumbed to temptation in a given situation and had an isolated failure.

SECTION ONE GENERAL GUIDELINES

Our study will be broken into two sections:

Section I: General Guidelines for Dealing with Sin in the Lives of Believers

Section II: Dealing with Sin among Leaders

A summary of conclusions will be presented at the end of each section.

A SURVEY OF RELEVANT SCRIPTURES

In this section of our study, we will survey and comment on the New Testament Scriptures that relate to how the church should respond to different expressions of sin the lives of members.

JAMES 5:15-16

...and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.

The implication of these verses is that at least some sickness is the result of sinful deeds. Note that the terminology is, *if he has committed sins*. Either God sovereignly punished sin with a sickness, or the sickness was the result of some natural law through which sin produced physical illness.

In this case, there is no instruction to punish, excommunicate, or to restore the sinner to fellowship. Instead, there is an injunction to all Christians to confess their failures to one another so that healing and health might be obtained.

Again, this passage acknowledges the presence of sin in the lives of Christians. It also urges compassionate ministry to those who experience the consequences of their sin.

GALATIANS 6:1

Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted.

The KJV, *overtaken*, suggests the idea of a sudden temptation's springing upon a believer before he has a chance to defend himself. This would tend to palliate the guilt of the offender. The Greek,¹⁰ however, denotes one who is discovered in the very act of sin. There is an element of surprise in the terminology. The NAS, *caught*, conveys this sense. Thus, the emphasis is on the

¹⁰ καὶ προλημφθῆ (kai prolempthe)

reality of his guilt.¹¹ The passage is urging tender treatment of actual offenders. The Greek terminology¹² enforces the idea that **even guilty brethren should be treated with kindness.** *Brethren, if a man be actually detected ... deal tenderly with him in a spirit of meekness,* is the sense of this sentence. This reminds us of the woman caught in the act of adultery.¹³

The Greek verb translated, *restore*,¹⁴ can denote the original construction of a mechanism (*e.g.*, of the human body and of the universe in Heb. 10:5; 11:3), but more often the term refers to the readjustment of a mechanism (*e.g.*, the setting of a broken limb, or the mending of nets, as in Matt. 4:21).¹⁵ In this passage, the term refers to the correction of an offender with the ultimate goal of restoring him to his role and function in the church.

The transition from the plural verb, *καταρτίζετε* (*katartizete*), *all of you restore*, to the singular, *σκοπῶν* (*skopon*), *considering thyself*, is instructive. The task of restoring belongs to the collective body, but each member must examine himself individually, in order that he might perform his part in the restoration with humility and sympathy.¹⁶

From this passage, we draw the following conclusions:

1. Excommunication or shunning is not the automatic response to moral failure.
2. Any action taken will have redemption as its goal.
3. To be complete, restoration would include a return to full function in the body.
4. The situation must be addressed in a spirit of gentleness or kindness. The attitude should be, "Brother, let me help you to overcome this fault," rather than, "You wicked sinner, you need to repent." The *spiritual* brothers should impress upon the one being corrected that he is loved and cared for.
5. One motivation for gentleness is the fact that the correcting brothers are aware that they too might stumble. They will treat the fallen brother as they would want to be treated if the roles were reversed.

MATTHEW 18:15-18

And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed.

¹¹ The Greek structure, ἔν τινι παραπτώματι, (*en tini paraptomati*) implies an episode of sin or struggling with weakness, rather than one who is committed to a lifestyle of sin.

¹² The preceding και (*kai*)

¹³ John 8:1-11

¹⁴ καταρτίζετε (*katartizete*)

¹⁵ Interestingly, this is the term used in Ephesians 4:12, translated, *perfecting*, in the KJV and *equipping*, in the NAS. In this passage the term (καταρτισμός) refers to placing each member in the place where he belongs in the Church, so that he can function as he is spiritually gifted to function, for the good of the Body.

¹⁶ Robertson Nicolle, *The Expositors Greek New Testament*, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing Co., Reprinted 1976). p.188-189

And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer. Truly I say to you, whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

This passage presents a scenario in which the Church may have to exercise judicial authority because of sin in the life of a member.

The Received Text (KJV) reads, *if your brother sins against you*. The expression, *against you*, is found in some manuscripts and versions and not in others. Therefore, it is uncertain as to whether or not the original text of Matthew contained these words. This uncertainty forces us to ask, "Is the sin referred to a sin done against the person being addressed, or of sin in general?" Even if the doubtful, "against you," is disallowed, the language of the text seems to refer to private personal offenses, rather than sin against the Christian name. The statement, *you have gained your brother* (by confronting him, and keeping the confrontation confidential), implies the restoration of a broken relationship. Offenses that divide brothers must be addressed, whatever they are. Relationships in the Kingdom are of top priority.

Should the confidential approach fail, the matter is not to be dropped, but to be pursued further. A second meeting should be held, with two or three witnesses listening to the exchange. These witnesses will listen and comment. If this does not solve the problem, then the matter is to be brought before the church, which will function as a court.

Should the parties involved fail to abide by the judgment of the Church,¹⁷ then the one who will not heed the voice of the Church is to be treated as an outsider; he is to be loosed from the ties of brotherhood.

This passage poses a problem. Jesus told us to forgive every offense against us; to pray for those who spitefully use us, etc.¹⁸ In the parable of the Unmerciful Slave, Our Lord emphasizes the importance of total forgiveness *from the heart*, if we are to expect any mercy from Him.¹⁹ One truth becomes immediately apparent: Since forgiveness and forbearance are priorities, it is inappropriate for us to rush forth and begin *reproving* each time we feel that we have been wronged.

The question must be raised, "If forgiveness is to be the priority - 'from the heart'- then why reprove at all?" Two reasons come to mind. The first is out of concern for our brother. If the sin has exposed a character flaw that needs to be faced, loving concern will motivate us to alert the brother to this flaw.

The second reason is that in some way the sin has separated brethren from one another. In the Kingdom of God, relationships are of a high priority. Broken relationships should not be ignored. Usually, if someone sins against us, they no longer are able to relate intimately with us. Not only that, but one who can sin with impunity against his brothers probably does not have a

¹⁷ i.e., what the Church "binds" upon him.

¹⁸ Matthew 5:38-45; 6:12, 14-15; 18:35; Mark 11:25; Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:12-13.

¹⁹ Matthew 18:21-35

true relationship with them. This needs to be corrected. It would be out of concern for the soul of the sinning brother, and out of concern for the quality of relationships that are to exist in the Kingdom, that Matthew 18:15-18 would be activated.

The Greek verbs of this passage, translated, *bind*, and *loose*, are verbs in the periphrastic future perfect tense, passive voice. A near literal translation of these verbs would be, *shall already have been bound*, and *shall already have been loosed*. The Church has the authority to bind and loose what God already has declared bound and loosed. If disputing brothers come before the church for arbitration, and one of the brothers refuses to abide by the pronouncement of the church, then heaven already has declared him to be excommunicated. The church only enforces what heaven already has declared.

How is a church to function in its judicial role? Acts 15 gives the only pattern found in Scripture. The church government met together to hear the presentation. This was a public meeting, in which the congregation witnessed the proceedings but did not participate.²⁰ After the hearing was completed, the church government pronounced its decision.

By holding an open meeting, the church leaders prevented the losers in the dispute from circulating false reports of the proceedings.

I CORINTHIANS CHAPTER FIVE

I Corinthians 5 is in the midst of a section of the epistle in which Paul defends his right to exercise authority in the Corinthian Church. The crises of authority is what seems to hold chapters 1- 6 together.²¹ The references to the arrogance and boasting in Chapter 5²² echo the attitude in Corinth that the church was too spiritually advanced to be instructed by Paul.

*It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife. And you have become arrogant, and have not mourned instead, in order that the one who had done this deed might be removed from your midst.*²³

The sin of incest between a man and his father's wife is a sin that even the morally loose pagans did not accept. Yet, this church seemed to be so morally insensitive that it tolerated such behavior in one of its members. Paul scolded the church for being arrogant. It should have been in mourning over this sinful condition.

I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus...Do you not know that a little

²⁰ The congregation did agree with the leadership's decision to communicate the ruling by a circular letter to the churches involved. However, the congregation is not described as influencing the ruling itself.

²¹ Gordon Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1987), p. 195

²² vs 2, 6

²³ I Corinthians 5:1-2

*leaven leavens the whole lump of dough: Clean out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened.*²⁴

Two motives, (a) ultimate salvation of the sinner²⁵ and (b) the purity of the church²⁶, are stated as reasons for the expulsion ordered. In the light of Galatians 6:1 and other verses already considered, we would expect Paul to exhort the church to call the man to repentance. Instead, he ordered them to move immediately to the ultimate action, *Expel the man!*²⁷

The focus of this chapter is more on the church's failure to deal with sin, than on the sinful man. The message of this chapter is, *Corinth, you need to repent of your tolerant attitude. Hold to a Godly standard, and deal with the sin in your Body! Because of the attitude of the church, Paul called for a sign of repentance - Take action now!*²⁸

The first truth to be gained from this section of Scripture is that a church that tolerates blatant sin among its members is a church that is in error.

The second truth is that the goal, even of expulsion, is the redemption of the sinner.²⁹

The question has to be asked, "What does Paul mean by *...deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh?*"³⁰ Because the action that Paul called for was expulsion from the church, then expulsion must be understood as delivering someone to Satan.

How would expulsion fit this description? Certainly, one way would be the denial of Godly social contacts. The only social intercourse available to the expelled member would be with those outside of the church. Being forced back into the course, "dog eat dog," world outside of the church would be quite painful for anyone who has experienced the Community of *Agape* Love.

No longer being the recipient of the benefits of the prayers of brethren, and perhaps even out from under angelic protection, the expelled member would become the defenseless victim of all of the evil that motivates godless society.

²⁴ I Corinthians 5:5-7

²⁵ v5

²⁶ v6-8

²⁷ It may be that the nature of the sin was so despicable that Paul went to the extreme action of expulsion without first offering the sinner the opportunity to repent. However, it seems more likely that the condition of the church caused him to take this extreme action.

²⁸ II Corinthians 2:9 also informs us that Paul gave this command to see if the church would be obedient to him. It was a test: *For to this end I wrote that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things.*

²⁹ v5

³⁰ In I Timothy 1:19-20, in the very same terms, Paul describes his action toward two others - Hymenaeus and Alexander. Hymenaeus expressed his love for the world through a false doctrine that he had developed (2 Tim. 2:17). Alexander, through unspecified actions, dealt much harm to Paul (2 Tim. 4:14).

Scripture also presents the principle that God's patience has its limits. There does come a time when God removes His Grace and allows a sinner to experience the natural consequences of his sin - disease, dissipation, alienation, etc. Thus, no evil experience or sad consequence is beyond possibility in the life of those expelled from the church.

In time, the sin which had appeared so beautiful becomes an ugly illusion. The worldly human relationships that promised so much fail to satisfy. As pain replaces pleasure and emptiness replaces the filling of the Holy Spirit, the "disillusioned" sinner cries out for the restoration of his relationship with the Family of God. Thus, the flesh, with its desires and hopes, is destroyed.

Again, we are reminded that the goal of expulsion is repentance and restoration of the sinner.

The action of expulsion is to be carried out as a public action of the church. Paul said, *When you are assembled together.*³¹ Again, we would look to Acts 15 as a pattern for how such a problem would be handled. The action would be taken by leadership, following discussion or explanation, with the congregation being witnesses to the discussion. The action would be taken *in the name of Our Lord Jesus and with the power of Our Lord Jesus.*³²

Two observations:

1. Action cannot be taken in Our Lord's Name unless He has authorized it. Church leadership needs to be very careful about taking action without clear biblical authority.
2. When actions are taken in obedience to commands and declarations of Our Lord, the power to execute such commands is resident in the church.

We must return to the question, "What kind of sin demands that the sinner be expelled?"

First, **the sin must be a defining trait of the sinner's life.** "He is an immoral person," describes someone who lives a life that is known for immorality. This is not someone who may on occasion succumb to the temptation to glance at the cover of a *Penthouse* magazine. The man described in I Corinthians 5 is a man who was living in a sexual relationship with his father's wife - he was an immoral person. Expulsion should be the church's response only in these instances:

1. when there is **a behavioral lifestyle** that Scripture clearly is labels as *sin*, especially when the behavior is effecting the life of the church;
2. when there has been an effort to bring the person to repentance and these efforts have failed.³³

³¹ v4

³² v4

³³ In the light of Scriptures already considered, this is the norm. In Corinth, for reasons described above, Paul by-passed this norm.

II CORINTHIANS 2:5-10

This section reveals the results of the expulsion of the sinner, as mandated by Paul in I Corinthians 5. The results were what Paul had hoped for. The Church had expelled the man; the man had repented. Paul now had to exhort the church to receive the man back. The Corinthian Church seemed to be prone to the error that most congregations have to fight against when expulsion has taken place - a tendency to become hard and judgmental. Paul urged the church to

1. forgive the man
2. comfort the man
3. reaffirm their love for the man³⁴

No further punitive action or probation was to be taken. Paul said that it is possible for a repentant sinner to be "overcome by excessive sorrow." The church's role is to help the repentant sinner to put the past behind him and to move on with life.

Paul makes the point that Satan's maneuvers are so unchangeable that they can be anticipated. Satan's main thrust in his battle against the church is to bring separation and alienation. The expulsion of the man and his full reception back into the church, is the apostle's tactic to defeat Satan's maneuvers.

II THESSALONIANS 3:14-15

And if anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that man and do not associate with him, so that he may be put to shame. And yet, do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.

In these closing verses of Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians, he makes another reference to shunning.

The theme of both of Paul's epistles to Thessalonica is the return of Our Lord and the resurrection of the saints. Two problems had developed at Thessalonica because the church had misunderstood Our Lord's promise to return. The Thessalonians expected Christ to return before any of them died. This did not happen and so there was disappointment and confusion. They thought that their deceased brothers and sisters had missed Christ.

In a grand description of Our Lord's return, Paul assures the Thessalonians that the resurrection of deceased believers will be the first event following the heavenly trumpet blast and angelic shout, announcing Our Lord's return.³⁵

The other major error in Thessalonica involved the manner in which some Christians awaited the Lord's return. Many quit their jobs and sat down to wait. These loafers were looking to the church treasury to support them in their idle vigil. Paul labels these loafing saints, "disorderly" and "busy bodies." To these, Paul said, "If a man will not work, he should not eat."

³⁴ vs 7&8

³⁵ I Thessalonians 4:13 - 5:11

Paul concluded this section of his epistle with an exhortation to disassociate one's self from any church members who do not obey this injunction. The anticipated result is that the loafers would be shamed by this treatment and make a change. It seems that the injunction refers more to the private social intercourse between individual believers, than it does to official expulsion. Those needing correction are not to be regarded as enemies, but brothers who need adjustment.³⁶ Paul was prescribing a dose of "reality therapy":

1. Don't feed them and thus enable them to continue in idleness;
2. Don't associate with them and by association express tacit approval of their lifestyle.

AURICULAR CONFESSION

In two passages considered above, I John 1 and James 5, confession is presented as a response to sin. Acknowledgement of sin and the efficacy of Christ's blood for cleansing from sin is the subject discussed in I John 1. Since I John is written to Christians, reference is to sin in a believer's life and the believer's personal response to its presence. The prescription for cleansing is confession.

The question naturally arises, "To whom should confession be made; is confession to be made to God or is confession to another believer required?" Roman Catholicism advocates the necessity of "auricular confession," the confession to clergy. The confession called for in I John 1 certainly would include confession of sins to God, but is that the only confession to be made?

I John speaks of "sins," implying sinful deeds, rather than "sin," which would speak of the underlying condition of the heart. The confession referred to then would be specific, concerning things done, said, felt, or thought. Honest and contrite confession to God is declared to be the means of receiving forgiveness for sins committed by the believer.

One purpose of the Lord's Supper is to bring the believer to an examination of his life. In the early years of Christianity, this was the focus of the weekly gathering of believers. Each Christian examined his own heart weekly. There was an obligation for believers to acknowledge to himself and to God any sins that he had committed since his last confession.

As we already have noted, James 5:16 is in a passage that addresses the physical and emotional consequences of sin. Confession to another believer is presented as an agent of healing. Confession is to precede healing prayer. Oral confession is important because it allows believers to pray for one another's weaknesses and it also brings sin into the light.

Thus, I John presents confession as a means of forgiveness - this involves salvation. James presents confession as a means of healing - this involves deliverance from the physical and emotional consequences of sin. It would seem that confession to God is required for forgiveness; confession to other believers is required for healing from sin-caused illness.

³⁶ Idleness is not a "sin," but "behavior unbecoming a Christian."

A SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS FROM SECTION ONE

1. Every Christian will sin from time to time.
2. Confession of sin to God results in forgiveness.
3. Confession of sin to another believer is a means of healing when the sickness is the consequence of sin.
4. If a believer sins covertly and is discovered in his sin, the church should endeavor to bring the sinner to repentance and a restored relationship with God.
5. There must not be any haughtiness or self-righteousness on the part of those who discovered the sinner. Each believer must acknowledge his individual potential for sin.
6. Effort should be made to restore the repentant sinner to full function in the Body.
7. Where sin has alienated brothers, reconciliation is of primary importance.
8. When efforts have been made to bring a sinner to repentance, and he refuses to respond to these efforts, expulsion may be required.
9. The purpose of expulsion is not to punish, but to bring the sinner to repentance and restoration.
10. A church that ignores and tolerates a sinful lifestyle among its members is a church that is disobedient to God.
11. When a sinning Christian who has been expelled repents, he is to be embraced immediately and received back into fellowship.
12. A church should not be on a "witch hunt," looking for sinners to expel. Only when there is obvious sin, and an unrepentant attitude should discipline be undertaken.

ADDENDA TO SECTION ONE

In a practical note, comment must be made on the risk that church leadership faces if church discipline is exercised. In recent years, there have been a number of lawsuits against churches that expelled members because of persistent sin. Some of these have resulted in judgment against the church leadership.

Church attorneys now recommend that each church have a written church discipline procedure. This document should be given to every new member, upon his reception into the church. This will not prevent a lawsuit, but probably will protect the church from losing the lawsuit. The members of the church have voluntarily and knowingly entered into the "contract." If church leaders follow the procedures in their document, they would be protected.³⁷

³⁷ The Tulsa Christian Fellowship *Church Discipline Procedure* is attached as an appendix to this study as an example of such a document.

SECTION TWO

DEALING WITH SIN AMONG LEADERS

When leadership sins, the result is not like hidden leaven, gradually influencing the whole loaf. It is more like a sledge hammer, bringing immediate destruction to the Temple of the Holy Spirit. The more wide-spread the influence, authority, and fame of the leader, the greater the destructive potential of his fall.

Because of this, the New Testament contains special comments and instructions concerning leaders who fall into sin. For example, James cautions Christians about the danger of becoming a teacher.

Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.³⁸

Teachers will incur a stricter judgment than other members of the church. James states that the risk of erring as a teacher is a very great risk because anyone who does not stumble in what he says, is a perfect man.³⁹

The reasons for this stricter judgment are apparent.

1. Teachers mistakes will have multiplied effect in the life of the church
2. Teachers have more knowledge than most members of the Body. Stricter judgment will be required of those who possess the greater knowledge.

In this study, we will examine the New Testament passages that address the issue of sinning leaders.

THE TRAGIC FATE OF DESTRUCTIVE LEADERS

Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are.⁴⁰

The issue before Paul in this passage is the condition of the local church and the party spirit that was growing in the Corinthian church. Four different parties are named in the opening chapter of the epistle:⁴¹

³⁸ James 3:1-2

³⁹ James' discourse on the uncontrollable nature of the tongue (3:2-13) is a tangent that radiates from his warning to teachers.

⁴⁰ I Corinthians 3:16-17

⁴¹ I Corinthians 1:10-15

1. The Paul party
2. The Cephas party
3. The Apollos party
4. The Christ party

It seems that neither Paul, nor Cephas (Peter), nor Apollos had done anything to form the parties named after them. The various groups were birthed from the human tendency to focus on a charismatic leader, combined with the human tendency to argument and division. The implication of Paul's comments is that even those who said that they were *of Christ* did so in a party spirit.

Unless corrected, this party spirit would result in the fracturing and destruction of the local church. The first four chapters of the epistle call the Corinthian Church to a correct view of leadership. They are told to stop exalting God's messengers and to view them as servants of God and servants to the church.⁴²

To make his point, Paul describes the local church as being a temple of the Holy Spirit, built upon the foundation of Christ.⁴³ He then gives solemn warning to all who have instigated, led, or contributed to the formation of parties.

*If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him.*⁴⁴

Evidently, the spirit of division was so wide-spread that there was no opportunity to single out guilty individuals for discipline. Since Paul's authority was being challenged by those of the Apollos, Cephas, and Christ parties, Paul was in the position of being able to do no more than give this warning. To do otherwise would have been viewed as self serving and would have resulted in the very destruction of the local church that he sought to prevent.

Ultimately, the Lord Himself is the one to whom all will answer. This is one of the most sobering verses in the Bible, as far as leadership is concerned. The horror contemplated in this verse should give pause to any leaders who are prone to cavalier action.

WOLVES AND HERETICS

*Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.*⁴⁵

⁴² I Corinthians 3:4-9

⁴³ I Corinthians 3:10ff

⁴⁴ I Corinthians 3:17

⁴⁵ Acts 20:28-31

In his address to the Ephesian elders, Paul warns them about the certainty of the emergence of self-serving leaders. He warns them that there will be some who come from outside of the flock. These he calls "wolves." Others will arise from within the eldership itself.

A wolf is defined as, "One who does not care about the sheep; in a wolf's eyes, the sheep exist only for the benefit of the wolf." Such men come into the church only for personal gain. The same thing is true for those from within the flock who begin drawing people to themselves. They have a need to be "somebody" and so they manipulate the people into following them. The most prevalent tool for such manipulation is perverted teaching.

Paul warned Timothy about the certainty of this phenomena:

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths.⁴⁶

To Titus, Paul gave similar warning:

For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach, for the sake of sordid gain.⁴⁷

What should be done when such "drawing away of disciples" occurs?

First, it is the responsibility of apostles and elders to build the church upon the truth. By devoting themselves to the constant teaching of sound doctrine and exhorting the people in it, apostles and elders create a prophylactic against the members' vulnerability to false doctrine. Those who have been indoctrinated with the truth will not be so easily enticed into error.

It also is the responsibility of apostles and elders to refute the false teachers. Thus, Paul says that anyone chosen to be an elder must be equipped to do this.⁴⁸

Apostles and elders must answer to God for the flock.⁴⁹ Too often elders have watched silently while various "teachers" have drawn members of the flock to themselves through television, radio, books, and large rallies. Usually, such speakers have a dramatic or distinctive doctrine that "tickles the ears" of the people.⁵⁰ As distasteful as the task may be, elders must lose their timidity about addressing the false teaching manipulation of these ministries. Such teachers are wolves.

⁴⁶ II Timothy 4:3-4

⁴⁷ Titus 1:10-11

⁴⁸ Titus 1:9

⁴⁹ Hebrews 13:17

⁵⁰ II Timothy 4:3-4

Within the flock there also will be those who seek to generate a following. Often, those guilty of this offense are unconscious of their own motives and tend to rationalize or justify both their actions and the results. It is not uncommon for a member of the church staff or an elder to be guilty of such an offense. Neither is it unusual for a member of a church board or a council of elders to feel that he represents a certain "constituency" within the Body. Such divisive situations must be addressed.

Paul instructed Titus that such men should be given no more than two warnings. If change does not occur after two warnings, the man is to be rejected or avoided.

But shun foolish controversies and genealogies and strife and disputes about the Law; for they are unprofitable and worthless. Reject a factious man⁵¹ after a first and second warning; knowing that such a man is perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned.⁵²

Similar instructions are given to the Roman church:

Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting.⁵³

Considering these two passages together, we make the following observations:

1. These instructions are given both to leadership (Titus), and to the whole church (Romans). The instructions to "keep away from them," if followed, will stifle the activity of "heretics." Such people thrive on opportunities for "friendly discussion".
2. The instruction to Titus, "have nothing to do with him," is realistic. Further efforts to change the behavior of such persons, after two attempts, is not good stewardship of time. It also would give the offender an undeserved sense of importance.
3. Again, the "teaching you have learned," is an antidote for the poison of divisive teaching.

In none of these instances is the church told to do more than to approach a schismatic and attempt to get him to abandon his divisive activity. If that does not work, then he is to be shunned. Those who do not repent, are to be left in God's hands for judgment.⁵⁴

Of course, his teaching is to be refuted if it is being presented publicly. Paul wrote to Titus that such refutation is one of the primary duties of eldership:

⁵¹ The Greek word is αἱρετικόν (*hairetikon*), *heretic*. This is the only place that this term occurs in the New Testament. It means one who insists on his own opinions, which are devoid of true Scriptural basis and which produce division.

⁵² Titus 3:9-11 NAS

⁵³ Romans 16:17-18

⁵⁴ The darkest pages of Church History are those that contain the record of the torture and execution of "heretics." There is no New Testament authority for such horrors.

...holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict. For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach, for the sake of sordid gain.⁵⁵

This is what Paul did in Galatia, when Peter succumbed to the pressure of Judaizing teachers.

But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, 'If you being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?'⁵⁶

SPECIFIC INSTRUCTIONS REGARDING SINNING ELDERS

Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses. Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also may be fearful of sinning. I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and His chosen angels, to maintain these principles without bias, doing nothing in a spirit of partiality. Do not lay hands upon anyone too hastily and thus share responsibility for the sins of others; keep yourself free from sin... The sins of some men are quite evident, going before them to judgment; for others, their sins follow after. Likewise also, deeds that are good are quite evident, and those which are otherwise cannot be concealed.⁵⁷

These verses do not refer to those who are in some wandering ministry, nor are they heretical sheep. The reference is to men who are in the established role of elder in the local church.

Paul began this section by cautioning against responding to every complaint brought against an elder. There always will be those who do not like any authority over them. The perversity of the flesh consistently stimulates criticism of leadership. If two or three witnesses bring a charge against an elder, it is to be heard. Otherwise, it should be ignored.

When two witnesses bring charges, and an investigation proves them to be true, all of the procedures and actions related to any sinning brother should be followed.⁵⁸

If the sinning elder does not repent, then the airing of these matters should be held before the whole church. This will tend to prevent two kinds of sin:

1. False accusations against elders;
2. A casual attitude toward sin.

⁵⁵ Titus 1:9-11

⁵⁶ Galatians 2:14

⁵⁷ I Timothy 5:19-25

⁵⁸ See Section I

Persistently sinning elders⁵⁹ are not afforded the privilege of privacy. Their sins are to be dealt with in public. Even though the rebuking of a fellow elder and dear friend may break the heart of the other elders, it must be done. No partiality or preference should be allowed to interfere.

Two questions must be asked at this point:

1. What sins merit such action?
2. What happens after an unrepentant elder is rebuked?

Both of these questions are difficult to answer.

The best answer than can be given to the first question is that charges must involve deeds that clearly are labeled, "sin," in the New Testament. Such things as not spending enough time in prayer and Bible reading, not putting enough money in the offering bag, watching too much television, drinking coffee, clothing styles, etc., are not the sort of thing that would call for a hearing before the church. Adultery, lying, stealing, and other blatant sins do merit such a hearing.

The second question is not so easy to answer. Much depends on the outcome of the hearing.

Since the passage before us does not spell out what is to be done, we must look to other passages for guidance. The only example that seems to be pertinent is Matthew 18:17, the scenario in which a church member refuses to abide by the judgment of the church. If the sinning elder refuses to repent and submit to the judgment of the local church government, then he must be excommunicated.⁶⁰

In the case of a repentant brother, the answer becomes more difficult. Certainly, forgiveness and the desire to see full restoration must be on the heart of the church members. This is consistent with Galatians 6:1, discussed in the earlier section of the paper.

However, a decision must be made about the restoration process. Should the repentant elder be immediately restored to full function as if nothing had happened? Experience leads us to conclude that this is not a wise move.

Several factors must be considered. First, is the question of the elder's own well being. Is the sin evidence of a spiritual or character flaw that needs to be overcome? If so, it would be unfair to put him immediately back under the pressure of church leadership responsibility.

A second factor is one of trust. Will the members of the congregation trust his leadership?

⁵⁹ The form of the Greek participle in this passage implies persistent sin. The NAS correctly communicates this sense by the terminology, *Those who continue in sin*.

⁶⁰ Who should hear the case? Ideally, the council of elders in the local church. If this is not possible, or if it does not seem feasible or wise, apostolic brothers should serve as the court. Of course, in denominational churches, the appropriate denominational authorities would serve in this capacity.

A third consideration is his reputation in the community. One qualification for eldership is that he have a good reputation among non-Christians.⁶¹ Sinful behavior by church leaders causes the Bride of Christ to be looked upon with mockery and scorn. The church must send a signal to the world that the Kingdom of God is a society in which sin is not tolerated.⁶²

Wisdom, therefore, would dictate that even though the sinning elder has repented, he should be removed from the council of elders. Depending upon the circumstances, he may be given an extended sabbatical or he may be removed totally.

Although the sabbatical has come into vogue as an almost routine response to elder sin, removal would seem to be more appropriate. When the leader is given a sabbatical, the assumption is made that he will return to the role of elder. This creates expectations that may interfere with his healing of the man, the building of trust, and the message sent to the world.

Removal avoids all of these problems. The man is freed to seek his identity and worth in Christ, not in his role as an elder. The church can love him and support him as a person, not as an elder. This would enhance his healing. The church and the world would observe him as he rebuilds his life and his relationship with Christ - not for the purpose of regaining his position in leadership, but for the purpose of being holy.

Throughout the early months, the church must be diligent in helping the repentant former elder through encouragement, accountability, and expressions of love. He is a casualty in the battle, not an enemy.

If the elder had been salaried by the church, it would be appropriate to continue the salary for a period of time, as he re-adjusts his life. The cutting off of income would be punitive.

The goal is the restoration of the man, as a person and as a member of the body. All things should be done with gentleness.

Should he return to the role of elder? Perhaps. This would depend upon the will of God. The other elders, or apostolic leadership, may receive in prayer a witness that this man is to become an elder once again. If this happens, then formal restoration before the assembled church should take place. The information available to us from the Apostolic Fathers indicates that this would be done by the laying on of hands and prayer.

⁶¹ I Timothy 3:7

⁶² The church is an "alternative society." Sin always will be a part of the world. The church, however, is a society which offers an alternative to life in the world. This distinction often is missed by those who seek through legislation and political activity to make society conform to the standards of God.

A SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS FROM SECTION TWO

1. The sin of leaders is more serious than sin among the flock because of the multiplied effect upon the Church.
2. Those leaders, official or unofficial, who destroy a local church will face destruction by God.
3. Those leaders, official or unofficial, who draw disciples away after themselves and their false teaching are wolves.
4. Divisive teaching and behavior must be exposed and rebuked.
5. Heretical teaching is to be refuted, but the heretic is to be left in the hands of God for punishment.
6. No accusations should be received against elders unless it is substantiated by at least two witnesses.
7. Sinning elders should be confronted in private.
8. Unrepentant elders must be publicly exposed and removed from office.
9. Repentant sinning elders should be removed from office and helped to rebuild their lives.
10. If there is a witness from the Holy Spirit that a former elder is to be returned to his role, restoration should begin with a public meeting in which hands are laid on the elder as a part of his re-instatement.
11. All of the Scriptures that apply to dealing with sin in the lives of Christians also apply to church leaders.

APPENDIX

TULSA CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP CHURCH DISCIPLINE PROCEDURE

When the elders become aware of the persistent practice of a sin (acts that Scripture clearly prohibits and/or labels as sin) by a member of the congregation, they shall take the following steps in an effort to motivate the member to forsake his sinful behavior. The purpose of this action is to insure the salvation of the member and to preserve the holiness of the congregation.

SECTION I

Elders' efforts to obtain repentance

1. The first action by the elders shall be as follows:
 - A. If the sinning member is a male, one of the elder shall go to him and reason with him concerning his sin, calling him to repent and to forsake his sinful practice.
 - B. If the sinning member is a female, an elder and his wife shall go to the woman and reason with her concerning her sin, calling her to repent and to forsake her sinful practice.

The purpose of this first step is to deliver the straying member from his sinful practice without causing public embarrassment. The attitude of the elder making this contact must be one of humility and gentleness, as expressed in Galatians 6:1-2. The elder shall report to the council of elders the results of his efforts in behalf of the sinning member. If the result is repentance and the forsaking of sin, then the matter shall be dropped. However, the elder who made the contact shall continue to aid the repentant member in rehabilitation through accountability, encouragement, and support.

Should this first action by the elders fail to produce repentance and the forsaking of the sinful practice, step two shall be initiated.

2. The second effort by the elders shall consist of two or three elders going to the sinning member (male or female) and reasoning with him, urging him to repent and to forsake his sinful action. The purpose of this second effort by the elders is to follow the Scriptural pattern in Matthew 18:15-17 and to deliver the straying member from his sinful practice without causing public embarrassment.

During this second effort, the elders will provide a copy of this church discipline document to the member as a reminder of the church procedures. They will remind the member of what subsequent steps will be followed should the member fail to repent.

During this meeting, if the member is not willing to repent, the elders shall read or recite Hebrews 13:17 to him, explaining that they must give account to God for his soul. Then they shall recite or read Acts 20:28, explaining that they are responsible for the local congregation and must answer to God for this body of believers. They will remind him

that Matthew 18:17 instructs that the next step will be to notify the church of the member's sin if the member does not repent. They will inform him that he will have seven days to think this over before the elders notify the church.

Additionally they will remind him of the disfellowshipping procedure if he fails to repent after the church has been notified of his sin.

The elders making this second contact shall report to the council of elders the results of their efforts in behalf of the sinning member. If the result is repentance and forsaking of sin, then the matter shall be dropped. However, at least one of the elders who makes the contact shall continue to aid the repentant member in rehabilitation through accountability, encouragement, and support. Should the second effort by the elders fail to produce repentance and the forsaking of the sinful practice, step three shall be initiated.

3. If during the seven day period referred to in SECTION I, 2, above, the sinner does not contact the elders and express repentance, the elders shall proceed as follows:

On the first Sunday following the above mentioned seven day period, a letter shall be read to the congregation, stating that the member has been engaged in a persistent practice of sin, and that the member has been unwilling to repent. A brief description will be given of the steps that have been taken thus far to encourage repentance. Unless the elders deem necessary, the sin shall not be specified, in an effort to protect the privacy of the individual, especially where the elders have privileged information. The congregation will be asked to pray for the member. They will be reminded of the Scriptural pattern being followed in Matthew 18:15-17, in the attitude of Galatians 6:1-2. The sinning member will be given an additional week to repent prior to the disfellowshipping step specified in Matthew 18:17 and I Corinthians 5:9-13.

SECTION II

The act of disfellowshipping an unrepentant sinning member

If during the seven day period following initial notification of the church, the sinner does not contact the elders and express repentance, the elders shall proceed as follows:

On the first Sunday following the above mentioned seven day period, a letter shall be read to the congregation, stating that the sinning member is disfellowshipped. Unless the elders deem necessary, the sin shall not be specified in an effort to protect the privacy of the individual, especially where the elders have privileged information. Should the sinning member repent and forsake his sinful practice prior to the reading of the letter to the congregation, the elders shall go to him, expressing their acceptance and at least one elder shall continue to aid him in rehabilitation through accountability, encouragement, and support.

SECTION III

A false statement of repentance

CHURCH DISCIPLINE PROCEDURE, Scriptures

Heb 12:11 (NASB)

All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

Gal 6:1-2 (NASB)

¹ Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; *each one* looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.² Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.

Matt 18:15-17 (NASB)

¹⁵ "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.¹⁶ "But if he does not listen *to you*, take one or two more with you, so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED. ¹⁷ "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Heb 13:17 (NASB)

Obey your leaders and submit *to them*, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account.

Acts 20:28 (NASB)

Paul, speaking to the elders of the church at Ephesus:

"Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood."

1 Cor 5:9-13 (NASB)

I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people;¹⁰ I *did* not at all *mean* with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world.¹¹ But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one.¹² For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within *the church*?¹³ But those who are outside, God judges. REMOVE THE WICKED MAN FROM AMONG YOURSELVES.