

## THE DILEMMA OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 5:9-13, *Good News Bible*

Our Scripture Reading (as well as other biblical passages) creates a dilemma in the church. From the beginning of the Christian church, sex has been one of the most difficult areas of human existence to bring completely into captivity to the will of Jesus Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 5:1 Paul says, "There is reported that there is immorality among you (and the word here for immorality means sexual immorality)." He says it is of a kind that is not even found among pagans. Apparently a prominent member of the church was living with his stepmother. Presumably the father was dead for Paul does not accuse the couple of adultery. We don't know whether this woman was the man's concubine or his wife. All Paul says is that they are living in an immoral relationship to which Paul objects on two grounds:

1. It is a violation of the teachings of the church. Under the Jewish law this act would have called for stoning for having sexual intercourse with your stepmother or mother. (See Lev. 18:8 and Lev. 21.
2. He also objects because it is a flagrant violation of the culture. Not even the Roman Empire tolerates that kind of behavior. Yet in the Christian community of Corinth, the church was not only tolerating it but also allowing it to be flaunted.

Paul's concern is that the church must react to that sin. Paul is so vehement in his language in the first few verses that he actually invokes a curse on these people. He says, "You are to hand this man over to Satan for his body to be destroyed." Going on the end of that phrase, however, he says, "that his spirit may be saved in the Day of the Lord."

Even though Paul's words were strong and harsh, he ends by saying that his fundamental, overriding concern about this person is his redemption. (It is interesting that the woman is not mentioned.) We don't know why this couple got into this arrangement. We don't know why the church accepted the situation.

While we change centuries, clothing and cultures, people don't change. Even though we aren't going to talk about incest per se in this sermon, we are going to discuss the problem of disciplining people, particularly in the area of sexual sin.

Church discipline is not easy. Because the large churches of Seventh-day Adventism are severely understaffed, many people who belong to them find it relatively easy to do as they please without being found out. They find some satisfaction in keeping their names on the church books and accepting fellowship even though they know that they are far from being consistent with the Gospel.

Small churches do not afford such a luxury. While we may complain about the rumor mills and the gossipy members in small congregations, they also impose on their members a high degree of accountability for the sins they commit which affect the spiritual health of the whole church.

The church at Corinth, while probably not very large by our standards, was a good-sized congregation

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in the early Christian community. Since Paul had founded this church, he was still considered its pastor in a special sense. From the textual evidence it is clear that the congregation was divided over how to treat a member whose behavior was in flagrant violation of moral principles, so someone wrote to Paul and asked for his counsel as one of the founders of the church.

I must admit that when I read this passage I'm nervous about Paul's response. I don't want Paul to become just another "witch hunter"—one who sees a sinner behind every bush and can't wait to shake him out. What usually happens is that this kind of person, in cutting out sin, actually cuts out his own heart of compassion and mutilates many people who do not deserve it. I call such moralizers the "Joe McCarthy's" of the church. Simply to be suspected of evil is enough. Proof is unnecessary.

On the other hand I have to be sensitive to Paul. While not on a vendetta, he does not want to be sentimental either. Sentimental believers "forgive and forget" and want to ignore everything that goes on in the church and to keep the peace by keeping quiet. Their argument runs like this: "People who sin openly and with impunity should not be driven further away from the church by being disciplined." Let's "love them, stay "close" to them and pray that they will feel the guilt of their situation and repent.

We have, therefore, a tension between the "witch-hunter, Joe McCarthy" approach and the sentimental "let them do anything they want" approach. Going between those two extremes is the dilemma of church discipline. It is a dilemma which gets worse and more pronounced as time goes on.

In trying to deal with the problem of church discipline, Paul Johnson, one of the foremost authorities in the field of pastoral care, made this statement:

The religious cure for guilt is especially effective because it is a saving experience of a damaged interpersonal relationship. In the close-knit fellowship of a religious community what touches one concerns all, and the moral standards of the body are binding upon each member. Therefore every sin is a serious breach in the unity of the entire body, and the unity of the whole is affected by what the individual does even in secret. For this reason public confession was a natural course in the early Christian Church. (*Psychology of Pastoral Care*, pp. 122, 123.)

Johnson goes on to say that it is especially important in a religious community that a *religious* cure for guilt be found, one which is often different from a psychotherapeutic cure. Cures of the latter type may say, "Why feel hung up about it? That's just your own moral taboos coming back in." A religious cure for guilt is one where the individual senses that he is confronting God. As David points out in the 51<sup>st</sup> Psalm, you are sensing that your wrong is against *God* and not simply against other people, and you find forgiveness from God.

A lot of people rationalize their behavior this way: "God is a stern, unfeeling, non-compassionate being. God's reactions to me and to my life are anger, rejection and hostility. Because God is that way, I have a secret satisfaction in revolting against him. I rebel against a God that I cannot worship and admire."

What is actually happening with some people is that they are making God into this kind of being in order that they can *justify* their rebellion against him.

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To fail a loving Father is too disturbing to bear, and man resorts to repressing his guilt into the unconscious by projecting the blame upon God as threatening him with anger. (ibid.)

In 1 Corinthians Paul is reiterating the Bible principle that the only way to cure sin in the church is by confrontation. Somebody must confront the situation. He wasn't saying the whole church had to get involved in the confrontation; it could be done privately by one or two leaders. But the individual must confront his situation before God. Paul says that running away from sin should not be tolerated. *Only* through confrontation can reconciliation, healing and joy take place (verse 5).

Confrontation is a harsh word, but it can be compassionate, understanding and sensitive. Not long after I accepted this position I took a class at Wesley [Theological Seminary] for pastors of large churches. The principle that kept coming through in that class is confrontation. We went through many case studies and the answer was always *confrontation*—deal with the problem, confront the individual, get it worked out and be reconciled, and stop the undercurrent of upsetting conditions.

I want to unburden some things that I share as a pastor—not specific cases but a collage of people, places and situations. We pastors are told a great deal about what goes on in these churches. I know things that you don't know I know. Some things are told to us by the individuals who are struggling with sin and I always admire and respect someone who comes and says, "I need help. No one else knows about this but I am coming for help."

Then there are others who come and tell us about someone else: "What I am going to tell you is absolutely and strictly confidential, but if you in any way let that member know that you know the problem, they will know that I told you and then our friendship will be ruined. You can't say anything to them." Their hope is that in some subtle way one of us will be able to get close to that person and minister the gospel to him and get him/her to confront the reality of the problem. Most of the time that does not work. The situation goes on and on. The very tool that is needed by the church to deal with the problem is denied us. Someone must be able to confront the person with the problem. If you will not do it as a Christian friend and fellow believer, don't come to the pastors of the church and tell us, expecting us to work a miracle. If you know something, then you ought to deal with it with that person. If you come to us, don't ask us to make promises about confidence keeping that tie our hands so we can't help the person.

I am well aware of the pain that stands behind many of the problems that people get into. People do not fall into sexual sins just because they woke up one morning and decided to be unfaithful. I have dealt with enough people to know that when they behave in those kinds of ways they are reacting to pain, rejection and unhappiness.

Such pain may have been behind the man who was sleeping with his stepmother in Corinth. I can imagine the story. She would say that her husband was cruel and beat her, and that while he was alive she often found compassion in her husband's son by a previous marriage. He understood what she was going through. Without anybody planning on it happening, they fell in love. Then the cruel husband and father died and they simply could not live without each other. The emotional ties had gotten too strong; the currents were running too swiftly. The people in the church who are close to the situation are sympathetic; they can understand what is happening. But it is not justifiable.

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That is why the apostle drew the line. He called for confrontation. Their behavior was hurting the church, bringing reproach upon the people of God. It was so shameful that even the pagans in the community were laughing at the Corinthian church. The young people in the church were getting cynical about standards of sexual behavior.

The parallels, brothers and sisters, are too obvious. Besides the damage it is doing to the participants, the worst part is the impact that it has on the church and the example it sets. We have a problem in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Many of our young people are as cynical about sexual faithfulness and fidelity in marriage as any generation has ever been. If they opened up the secrets that they know themselves about the members of this church, it would be enough to take care of a soap opera for the next decade. Everybody is afraid to confront these situations and avoids taking the steps necessary for discipline. The spiritual life of the church ebbs.

I'm not advocating Joe McCarthy tactics. I respect sensitivity, discretion and carefulness. People's whole lives and careers may be at stake in some of these situations. I want to insist that secrecy and avoiding confrontation is not the way to handle the problem. Paul is absolutely correct when he says that, "Sooner or later if you care about this person's salvation, something has got to be done."

I'm not interested in punishing people. Those who behave this way have usually already been punished. Its redemption, trying to get them back on course, trying to be more responsible—that is the work of the church. What I worry about is that things which I know about which are right now private and secret, if they persist, will become public. When they become public, those of us who are pastors can't deal with them in the way that we might have while the situations were private. When people have confided to me but demanded strict privacy, I have to tell them that I can only deal with the problem when I begin hearing about it from other sources and then I must assume that it is out of my hands.

I am concerned that by not confronting the people who have problems, we are ultimately leaving them defenseless and naked before the church.

The following is a common example. Some young people say to themselves: "Before I get married, knowing all of the problems my parents have had and some of the problems my friends have had, I'm going to make sure that I live with the person I'm thinking of marrying, just to make sure it will work." Or, if the person has been married and is in the process of getting a painful divorce, he may say, "I'll live with someone before I marry again because I don't want to make the same mistake again."

I understand the human dynamics. I understand the problem. As one woman said to me, "I will never marry anyone again if I don't live with him first! I don't care what you say." I had to tell her, "You are assuming that where there is no pastor and no paper, there is no pain. You are wrong! It has nothing to do with legal documents. It has to do with the fact that you share the most intimate realities of human existence with each other. I don't care whether you signed a piece of paper or not, when you split it is going to be as painful as a divorce and don't deceive yourself otherwise." The pain is in the separating, not in having some decree handed down. I want to say that breaking up with a live-in mate is just as devastating as breaking up with a live-in legal mate. Sociologists can prove it.

It can be safely argued that when you are in a relationship in which you feel that there is not really

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much of a commitment and you can be thrown out of the house the next day with the garbage, that is not the kind of security you need to develop a growing, loving, trusting relationship. A lot of people will change partners every time they think they've got a problem and they project that problem onto their partner. A lot of people who get into the promiscuity pattern are avoiding the reality of what is happening in their own lives. It is easy to say in any kind of intimate relationship, "The reason I'm unhappy is because of the person I'm living with, so I will just get rid of him and my problems will end." They spend their whole lives getting rid of problems. That is not reality. I've had these people say to me, "Why do I have such rotten luck in picking out partners?"

With that kind of situation and those involving divorce and remarriage, the dilemma of church discipline is that we can't always lay blame only on one person. Now that we have no-fault divorces and the courts won't decide who's guilty for us, we can't figure it out. I don't believe it's the role of the church pastors to hire detectives to go out and follow people around!

But we have people who will not accuse one another of adultery and then one or both of the partners remarries, and the church is placed in the position of not knowing whether it should be involved in any disciplinary actions. [I can understand why this happens. Many parents are unwilling for their children to learn all of the sordid details as to just why a divorce was unavoidable.]

While many people have insisted that divorce for any reason other than adultery should be punished, and that people who are then remarried should be disfellowshipped, the church has been very reluctant to treat the matter as quite that simple.

I feel the dilemma very keenly as to what is appropriate in these kinds of situations. As of now there is only one kind of discipline the Adventist church has—disfellowshipping. We can "censure" people but the *Church Manual* defines censure as a warning. It is simply a statement that your problem has come to the attention of the church and if you do not correct it you will be disfellowshipped. There are really no other forms of church discipline.

We have the problem of the individual who needs the fellowship of the church while he is going through some difficult situation, who is in pain, and who may be participating in immoral actions. Yet if you discipline these people, all you do is drive a further wedge between them and the church. If you don't discipline them, you have the problem that Paul is addressing in our Scripture Reading—the cynicism of the other members. What happens to the people involved who never sense the ominous overtones of their decisions? We feel like we are caught in an "all or nothing" proposition and it is an uncomfortable dilemma for church pastors and leaders.

If you go to a small church where people tend to know what is going on and the pastor is very strict and likes to use the ax on a regular basis, people are getting "lopped" off one right after the other. So they flee to Sligo or to another large church. Then they can get immersed in this sea of people and their private lives can go on as they choose.

Some responsible pastors are so concerned about this that they are working on different kinds of discipline which can be imposed in various situations. These disciplines would reflect on one hand the church's standards and concern for the gospel, but on the other hand, would articulate and demonstrate the compassion, the love, the grace and the mercy of Jesus Christ. To try to do those two

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things in a loving way is a Herculean task.

The present approaches to church discipline need to be looked at and reevaluated. We need to come to some better way of handling these problems—something more equitable; something that summons people both to accountability and responsibility before God, but does not cut them off from the body of Christ to which they desperately need to feel they belong.

We need to pray much about this. I want to encourage people to be more honest in acknowledging their need and more courageous about confronting their close friends about their needs. We often call the church a family—brothers and sisters. Family members are unafraid to save another member from disaster. To love, yes, absolutely and always. But to discipline, that must be done, too, for there is no true love without discipline. As the prophet said, “For whom the Lord loveth, he chasteneth.”