

The *Pulpit Exchange*

It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. (1 Corinthians 1:21)
So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading. (Nehemiah 8:8) Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend. (Proverbs 27:17)

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Biblical Excommunication and Shunning

For a text Scripture I would like to turn to Proverbs 24:30. The subject of Biblical Excommunication and Shunning is not exactly a pleasant subject. It is a subject that may be small in some ways and yet major in others. Finally, what we tolerate is what we will have. I would like to look at the passage here in Proverbs 24:30–34 it says, “I went by the field of the slothful, and by the vineyard of the man

void of understanding; And, lo, it was all grown over with thorns, and nettles had covered the face thereof, and the stone wall thereof was broken down. Then I saw, and considered it well: I looked upon it, and received instruction. Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep: So shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth; and thy want as an armed man.” I realize I am taking this out of its context

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a bit. This is speaking about slothfulness with our natural labours. I would like to apply it to church life.

Slothfulness in church life. It can come in under the pretense, or under the category of being merciful, tolerant, flexible and so on, but the end result is like we see here. It is “a little sleep, a little slumber,” a little sweeping it under the rug and not taking care of matters. After a while we have a vineyard that is totally

destroyed. I believe that is a picture of many churches.

Historically, the doctrine of excommunication has suffered misuse, abuse and neglect. We also have in history where many churches have been faithful in applying this form of discipline and have received blessings because of it. Many churches, many liberal churches and many professing churches have simply taken the route of winking at matters that should have been

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disciplined, and the church has suffered because of it. However, as I said, on the other hand we also have historical evidence of where it has served its purpose well in the church.

1) *The importance of church membership.* It certainly is a popular thought to feel that church membership is neither here nor there. It is not that important a matter as long as I have a relationship with God, and whether I have been baptized and a member of any church that is not really important. That lack of conviction in church membership makes excommunication basically ineffective. There is the thinking “Big deal, if I have been put out of church. Membership is not important after all.”

Therefore, I would like to first of all consider the importance of membership, what place membership has, what the Scriptures say, and what God intends for the believer. I would also like to validate the importance of the local church membership, and the local church authority. I believe that is foundational to the subject of excommunication. Let us turn to Matthew 16:18 as we think of the validity of the church, the local body and the authority of the church. “And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my

church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. (19) And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:18, 19). Christ said that He is would to build His Church upon this rock. He first of all asked them, “Whom do men say that I the Son of man am” (verse 13)? Peter said, “Thou art the Christ” (verse 16). As I understand Jesus, He is saying “upon this rock,” — upon Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the Cornerstone. He is the Foundation. Upon this foundation the New Testament Church will be built. (Putting it into my own words here) “I will leave, and the local authority I will pass over to the Church — this body of believers.” Then, Jesus says to Peter and to the apostles, “Whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” We see that Jesus is transferring authority (authority that He has exercised) over to the body of believers here on earth. He was going to leave the earth.

We have somewhat the same thought in John 20:23. Jesus was about to leave the earth and it

says in verse 22 to all the apostles and believers “And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained.” What do we think that means? He is talking about authority. He is speaking to the apostles and the Church, and the body of believers, that there is some authority, that He is vesting to the Church.

We would like to look at several Scriptures in Acts where we see Christ at work building the Church. “And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples, and said, (the number of names together were about an hundred and twenty,) Men and brethren, this scripture must needs have been fulfilled” (Acts 1:15, 16). The number of names given is about one hundred and twenty. It gives the number there of the body of believers, who were the nucleus of the New Testament Church. Why did it give the number? It was emphasizing the reality of the local visible body. It is numbers here — a number of believers. Then, in Acts 2:41, “Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three

thousand souls.” Who is that “them?” I believe it is the one hundred and twenty souls. Therefore, we have an addition to that original nucleus, of three thousand souls.

“And when Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple” (Acts 9:26). “Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied” (Verse 31). Some give the thought today that the Church — the universal church — we are all a part of that and we have a direct relationship with God. They view the local body (the visible body) an institution of man, However, we notice in verse 31 that it says, “then had the churches.” Those churches were local visible bodies. That is what they were. “The churches had rest.” Paul tried to join himself to one of these but they had some second thoughts. They had some misgivings about Paul, what he now represented, and was this a trick or what was it. He tried to join himself to the local visible body in Jerusalem. What I am trying to point out here is that the Church finally

comes down to a local visible body. Yes, I believe there is the universal Church that Christ will return for which are all the bodies combined, but finally the Church happens right on a local level.

Acts 15:4 says, “And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church, and of the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them.” They came down to Jerusalem and there they discovered a local body of believers — those who had been baptized and become a part of that local body. “For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things” (Acts 15:28). Here we gain an insight into these church bodies. They were not simply loosely connected, but there was uniformity. There was an authority that was binding not only in Jerusalem. They chose to send out letters to all the other churches and there was some authority that was passed down to the other congregations.

In Acts 16:4, 5, we read “And as they went through the cities, they delivered them the decrees for to keep, that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem. And so were the churches established in the

faith, and increased in number daily.” Notice the authority in verse 4 that they passed out to the different congregations. We notice the local body and how that they went around to these different congregations and finally that was the Church. That was the believers. They found themselves in congregations where they were committed and accountable together, and where they were responsible to a higher authority.

We could turn to Revelation 2 and 3 where the seven churches of Asia were addressed by Jesus in His Revelation to John unto the church at Philadelphia, unto the church at Sardis, unto the church at Pergamos. They were individual congregations. He spoke to them. He addressed them as individual congregations. “For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within” (1 Corinthians 5:12)? Paul gives the picture there, and in our settings today, of within and without. Is that not typical today? Yet, if we go out to nominal Christianity the concept of within and without is totally obliterated. There is not much there. Whether you are a member or your name is on the church role, is merely a vain thing. However, Paul makes it clear

here that there is something like being within and something like being without. Therefore, the Church is a body that is a local visible body. We commit ourselves to that and we are initiated into it through baptism, and membership is important. The tenor of the New Testament addresses the Christian in the context of a local visible body. It is important that we maintain that vision. Once we lose that vision, then the subject that is before us has little effect.

Throughout the New Testament membership is assumed and expected for the believer. That is simply a part of it. When they were baptized, they became a part of the local body. As we lose the seriousness of church membership, and it is no longer serious, important, or no longer necessary, the significance of excommunication will be lost as well. We can see that in nominal Christianity, when the one goes, the other goes. How many churches, years ago, believed in excommunication, and putting sinners out of the church? Today membership is not important, neither is excommunication. The two go hand in hand. Finally, what it really boils down to is a breakdown in the validity and the authority of the local visible body. People want

to bypass that. They say, “I have a relationship with God and that is all that matters.” That is not what I understand from the Scriptures. The Scriptures make it clear that there is a local visible body.

In the Old Testament you were born as a Jew. As a Jew you were born into the Church (as it were) — the Old Testament Church. You became a part of the Church whenever you were born and then through the rite of circumcision. That was the Old Testament plan. However, the Church today is comprised of those who voluntarily choose and make the decision that “thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die” (Ruth 1:16, 17a). It is a commitment to a body of believers. Those of you who are members of a congregation, have voluntarily chosen to be a part of the Church of Jesus Christ right where you are. That is a choice that you made.

It is open to everyone, “whosoever will,” whosoever chooses to be a part of the Church. Thus, the Church, church membership is exclusively for the blood washed redeemed. That is what Church membership is all about. Those who have been washed, cleansed, have committed themselves, and have made vows

before God and witnesses. As you knelt and were baptized, you committed yourself and made vows and commitments before God and witnesses to be true to God, true to the Church, and the authority of the local visible body.

Church purity is a part of the New Testament Church. It is important that the local church maintains its exclusive membership of born again believers. Whenever we move away from that we open the doors to anyone, any attitude, and any thought. It is no longer the church. In the book of Revelation, Christ condemned the churches that allowed certain false groups in the church. The purity of the Church is important.

II) *I would like to look at the Biblical teaching on the thought of excommunication.* We have several Scriptures that bring it out clearly. “Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be

unto thee as an heathen man and a publican” (Matthew 18:15–18).

I would like to turn to 1 Corinthians 5 and we will be pulling the remainder of our thoughts from these Scriptures primarily. Read 1 Corinthians 5. The Corinthian church was quite a carnal church. They were found in an environment, and a city of commerce where there was much evil and corruption. The church faced these worldly pressures and found herself very weak and corrupted in many ways. There is also the Scripture in 2 Thessalonians 3:13–15, “But ye, brethren, be not weary in well doing. And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.”

We have several Scriptures that make it quite plain that there is a time and an occasion where strong disciplinary measures such as excommunication should be used. A) *What is the purpose of it excommunication?* In 1 Corinthians 5, we notice it was 1) *For the purity of the Church.* Paul says, “a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump” (verse 6). If we will tolerate sin in the congregation, it sends a message about how we feel about that sin and how serious we feel it is. It

has a way of affecting others in the congregation and leavening the whole group. It may be an attitude, a doctrine or some gross sin. If it is tolerated or let go, then others may come along and be destroyed by that. They feel like it is not so bad after all.

Ephesians 5:26, 27 says, "That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish." Christ will return for the Church and He wants the Church to be a pure body, a spotless virgin, not all contaminated, not with a history of sin and corruption. That is what He is looking for in the Church.

The churches in Revelation were reprov'd for the toleration of sin and heresy. Some of them were told that if they did not address that He would remove their candlestick. We see in Matthew 22:11–14 that maintaining church purity is important. "And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding garment: And he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless. Then said the king to the ser-

vants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few are chosen." These people were invited. A man came in who was not prepared for the wedding. He did not have a wedding garment on, and he was cast out. Thus, church purity is one of the reasons for excommunication.

2) *We are to excommunicate (put someone out of the church) for the destruction of the flesh.* We read in 1 Corinthians 5:5, "for the destruction of the flesh." Discipline is doing for someone what they should be doing for themselves. It is stepping in and helping someone to do for themselves what they did not have the grace, or the power to do. Excommunication is for the destruction of the flesh. It is like discipline and dealing with the flesh the way the brother should have dealt with it to start with.

a) *Restraint.* Eli failed to restrain his sons. He failed to put a check to their fleshly behaviour. Excommunication is for the destruction of the flesh. Chastisement is inflicting pain on the flesh to get a person to yield and repent. What is the reason for that? For one thing, it helps a person to realize the consequence of going the way of the flesh.

The sentence of death is on the flesh. They that “live after the flesh” (Romans 8:13), shall die. Therefore, we chastise our children. We inflict pain to leave the message that if you live after the flesh then there is physical consequence for living after the flesh. I think that is part of the meaning there, with the thought that they are excommunicated for the destruction of the flesh that the spirit may be saved in the final judgment.

b) *Excommunication is for the purpose to bring a person to repentance.* It makes people think seriously, “Where am I? I am outside of the Church. I have been dealt with.” We had an experience in our school where some boys lied seriously. The school board took the route of using the paddle some, and also they were expelled from the school for several days. The parents testified that expelling really had an effect on those boys. They realized that they were put out of the school — they were expelled from the school. They were not worthy to be in the school because of their behaviour. Excommunication makes a person think seriously of where I really am. It sends a clear message to them of the thought of alienation. He can comprehend through this physical alienation,

more clearly, his spiritual alienation from the body of Christ.

3) *Punishment.* 2 Corinthians 2:6 suggests another purpose for excommunication. We read in 1 Corinthians 5 where Paul recommended that they excommunicate this gross sinner. Then, in his second letter to the Corinthians in 2:6, I think he is responding to the discipline they applied. Paul says, “Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many.” I know sometimes it is thought that we do not excommunicate for punishment, but the thought is when we punish our children, we are teaching them that there are physical consequences for sin. I believe the same applies in church discipline. There is a sense in which it is punishment. It is not that it pays for their sin, but that it sends a clear message that there are physical consequences for your behaviour for this sin.

III) *The procedure.* In Matthew 18, Jesus gives clear teaching that we do not impulsively jump on a case and decide we will put them out of the Church. There is an order that is followed so that we can avoid its misuse. Historically, in the Mennonite church, there have been times (especially in the Netherlands) where I believe that

excommunication was misused. There was a time there where bishops excommunicated whole congregations. Then, that congregation would turn around and their bishop would excommunicate the other congregation. It was sad, but that is what happened in Holland, where it has been misused.

1) *Following the plan that Jesus laid out here there are three steps.* It helps to avoid the misuse of excommunication. First of all, in Matthew 18 we are supposed to go to our brother personally — a one to one basis and give him the opportunity. We fail in this when we can go around and tell everyone else in the community about something. I appreciate whenever we follow this plan that we go to the brother first and share with him.

I have found that many times things are not quite like what we thought. We can hear something and it seems that we were quick to believe the worst sometimes. We can hear something about someone and without ever going to him we will go and start spreading it around. “Did you hear what brother so and so did?” Go to him first and give him the opportunity to explain himself and explain what happened or what the situation is. If we find that it is indeed something to be

concerned about, then there is a place for getting others involved. Is my judgment correct here? Is this something to be concerned about? Should this brother repent, or should he change his ways here?

At that point, we take several others with us and we evaluate that. If the conclusion from that grouping is “Yes, this is serious,” and the brother is not responding to that then it needs to be taken to the church, and the church needs to consider it. Is this something that a few brethren are making an issue of? If their evaluation is the same then the member is put out of the church and he shall be “unto thee as an heathen man and a publican” (Matthew 18:17). Jesus has laid out a clear and organized plan that we can follow. It is a procedure and we do not haphazardly decide, “You know, brother so and so, he offended me last week and I will not agree with him. I do not think that I can be in fellowship with him.” We can get kind of carnal like that sometimes where we get an attitude and we would be ready to excommunicate him right now. However, in the Scriptures, Jesus gives a plan that we can follow to avoid that impulsive and personal attitude struggle.

2) *It is also expected that the*

bishop be the executive in excommunication. We can read in Revelation where the “angel of the church,” (Revelation 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14) was held accountable finally for what was tolerated in the church. This is a heavy responsibility for our bishops and we need to pray for our bishops that they would have the courage to step forward, address sin and handle it carefully. That is a heavy responsibility which is laid on our bishop’s shoulders.

It has been the custom in our Anabaptist churches that the bishop is the one who finally makes that final decision. That would be a little bit like in the government where the President is the one who makes the final decision to invade a certain country or to declare war on a certain country. It becomes the President’s responsibility. In a similar way it becomes the bishop’s responsibility, “Yes, we will need to excommunicate here.”

3) *It is also the practice and custom in our churches that they receive the approval of the church before they proceed with that.* This is not necessarily the case of gross flagrant sins that are clearly obvious and that we all know that should be dealt with. There are times where the bishop did not look into a situation entirely or seek counsel from

other bishop brethren. Usually, in cases of gross sin they are excommunicated without the counsel of the church taken.

With regard to the counsel of the church sometimes I believe that we misunderstand our place in giving counsel. I have noticed some individuals that feel like they feel obligated to sort through every detail of a case. Unless they know every detail and sit in every meeting then they cannot properly give counsel. As lay members in the congregation, we need to give our counsel on the basis of what we know and what is shared. There are some things, in some situations, where it is not appropriate to (shall I say) drag all the dirt out on the table and to mull through everything. It is not healthy for the congregation, neither is it appropriate. It is not kind to those involved. Finally, we must have some confidence in our leadership, that they have searched things out and that they have considered matters. Maybe however, there is something that someone in the congregation knows that the ministry is not aware of, and in our counsel we can bring those things out. However, as far as every individual in the congregation feeling like they have to know 100 percent of the details before they can give their

approval, I believe, shows a lack of confidence in those whom God has set over us to search some of those things out.

IV) *I would like to consider degrees of discipline.* In 2 Corinthians 2:6, we read “Sufficient to such a man is this punishment.” There are degrees of punishment. What is sufficient punishment? The punishment should match the sin. We do not use excommunication on every sin. Rather, through experience, discretion and wisdom it is applied to certain sins and to certain situations, and sufficient to the sin should be the punishment. It is the same way with our children. If we have the rule that no matter what your child does, he has thirty-nine stripes, how consistent is that? How effective is it? Rather, we apply discipline according in degrees depending on the nature of the sin.

Therefore, excommunication can be used too freely to the point where it is really not effective. If we simply use it every turn of the way and for any kind of sin and for any little disagreement, after a while it is ineffective. Rather, excommunication is something that should be used sparingly and for the greatest of sins. I trust I am being understood in that. In our churches, we would use a measure of disci-

pline that we call putting someone on proving where we would withdraw the greeting maybe, or we would not take them along to communion. In a sense that is to a degree a form of excommunication. They have been barred from the communion table. They have not been put entirely out of the church but they have been barred from the communion table. In some churches that is as far as excommunication goes. It goes no further than that. They are simply barred from the communion table. Yes, I believe that they would say that they are no longer a member but that is as far as the discipline goes.

The second degree is much more severe and that is where shunning is applied. I would like to look at several Scriptures here on the Biblical teaching on shunning and avoidance in 1 Corinthians 5:9, 10. Paul explains clearly, “I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world.” As I understand that, Paul’s recommendation in a former epistle was that we are to separate ourselves from fornicators, covetous, and extortioners. He is talking about the doctrine

of separation. In our daily life, as we mingle with the world, we are to maintain a separation and not to keep company with the ungodly people of the world. I think that is what he was teaching.

Now however, he is saying here what he is recommending for a believer (for a member of the church that has been found in that sin) “But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat.” (verse 11) He is saying here, “If you apply this same shunning to the world as you do your brother that has fallen away, then you must needs go out of the world.” We could not even exist in our community. We would need to separate ourselves to that degree. He was recommending as regards the believer who had fallen away and was excommunicated that we would separate ourselves to a greater degree. (If I am saying that right). Do you understand what I am saying?

3) *Then, there is total avoidance.* Matthew 18:17 says that he should be considered, “an heathen man and a publican.” He is put out of the church. The way that the Jews related to the heathens and the publicans was that

they would not have anything to do with them. They would not sit down and eat with them. Then, in Romans 16:17 we read, “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them.” We are to avoid them and stay away from them. Do not associate with them. This is avoidance.

Those Scriptures make it clear that it was the Biblical plan that whenever someone is excommunicated, or put out of the church, that we would avoid them, we would not eat with them and we would not socialize with them, such that there would be a clear separation in that way. This is more so than the doctrine of separation in keeping ourselves from the ungodly world.

Historically with regard to the doctrine of shunning the Dutch Mennonites applied shunning severely. Menno Simons was a strong believer in the use of shunning. Menno Simons and Dirk Philips and some of those original founders of the Mennonite church were strong proponents of shunning. They believed that it was Scriptural. The Swiss brethren on the other hand, only applied it to the communion table. If you understand Mennonite history, Anabaptism

arose in two areas in Europe. One was in Switzerland and the other one was in Holland. Anabaptism was born about the same time in both of those areas. The descendants of the Dutch Mennonites went east into Germany, Poland and Russia. The Russian Mennonites today are the descendants of the Dutch Mennonites.

On the other hand, the Swiss Anabaptists, is where most of us would find our ancestors. In Zurich, Berne and South Germany, where the Swiss Anabaptists were, they did not apply shunning as such. In 1693 Jacob Amman, as a young bishop felt that shunning was the Biblical teaching. That was the start of the Amish Mennonites. That was a strong point that Jacob Amman had that shunning was the Biblical plan.

Prior to that the Swiss Brethren did not apply shunning. In fact, a couple of the Swiss brethren travelled to Holland and tried to convince Menno Simmons that he needed to back off on his teaching on shunning, but they were not successful. They went home and instead wrote some pamphlets and some tracts to the churches themselves — Menno Simons' churches. They presented Menno Simons as a “fickle leader” and suchlike.

Menno Simons then wrote some rather strong pamphlets in response to that. That was some of what went on in Europe on the matter of shunning.

My understanding is that the Old Colony Mennonites and some of the Russian Mennonites, descendants of the Dutch Mennonites still practice shunning today. Most conservative Mennonite churches may only apply excommunication to the communion table and would not practice shunning. However, different revival groups that started up in the Old Mennonites throughout American history such as the Reformed Mennonites (I am not sure about the Holdeman Mennonites) and the Stauffer Mennonites, did come back to the doctrine of shunning along with excommunication.

I would like to read what the Dortrecht Confession of Faith from 1632 has to say on it. Article XVI, Excommunication, or Expulsion From the Church

“We also believe in and acknowledge the ban, or excommunication, a separation or spiritual punishment by the church, for the amendment, and not for the destruction, of offenders; so that what is pure may be separated from that which is impure. That is, if a person, after having been enlightened, and received the knowledge of the truth,

and has been received into the communion of the saints, does willfully, or out of presumption, sin against God, or commit some other “sin unto death”, thereby falling into such unfruitful works of darkness, that he becomes separated from God, and is debarred from His kingdom—that such an one—when his works are become manifest, and sufficiently known to the church—cannot remain in the “congregation of the righteous”; but must, as an offensive member and open sinner, be excluded from the church, “rebuked before all”, and “purged out as a leaven”, and thus remain until his amendment, as an example and warning to others, and also that the church may be kept pure from such “spots” and “blemishes”; so that not for the want of this, the Name of the Lord be blasphemed, the church dishonored, and a stumbling block thrown in the way of those “without”, and finally, that the offender may not be condemned with the world, but that he may again be convinced of the error of his ways, and brought to repentance and amendment of life.”

Article XVII, The Shunning of Those Who Are Expelled

“As regards the withdrawing from, or the shunning of, those who are expelled, we believe and confess, that if anyone, whether it be through a wicked life or perverse doctrine — is so far fallen as to be separated from God, and consequently rebuked by, and expelled from, the church, he must also, according to the doctrine of Christ and His apostles, be shunned and avoided by all

the members of the church (particularly by those to whom his misdeeds are known), whether it be in eating or drinking, or other such like social matters. In short, that we are to have nothing to do with him; so that we may not become defiled by intercourse with him, and partakers of his sins; but that he may be made ashamed, be affected in his mind, convinced in his conscience, and thereby induced to amend his ways.”

“That nevertheless, as well in shunning as in reproofing such offender, such moderation and Christian discretion be used, that such shunning and reproof may not be conducive to his ruin, but be serviceable to his amendment. For should he be in need, hungry, thirsty, naked, sick or visited by some other affliction, we are in duty bound, according to the doctrine and practice of Christ and His apostles, to render him aid and assistance as necessity may require; otherwise the shunning of him might be rather conducive to his ruin than to his amendment.”

“Therefore we must not treat such offenders as enemies, but exhort them as brethren, in order thereby to bring them to a knowledge of their sins and to repentance; so that they may again become reconciled to God and the church, and be received and admitted into the same — thus exercising love toward them, as is becoming.”

V) *I would like to consider some specific questions we get asked sometimes.* 1) “Should someone who has come forward

and voluntarily confessed some gross sin and it is a voluntary confession (they were not found out or they were not pinned down) be excommunicated? I believe there is a principle in 1 Timothy 5:20 that is important. It says, "Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear." The testimony of the church is at stake. I do not know if you noticed that or not in the confession of faith, but the testimony of the church is at stake. The way the church deals with that sin sends a clear message about how we feel about the sin. It is important as it says here in 1 Timothy 5:20 that those who sin are rebuked before all. It is in public. I believe that excommunication is order. That is the position that our churches have taken.

Also the Scriptural command is "Prove all things" (1 Thessalonians 5:21). Therefore, we would observe a time of proving. Many of these greater sins are not something the person has all of a sudden slipped into. Yes, I realize that some have been caught off guard and they fell much further than they ever expected to fall. Yet, there is a decline and a course that a person takes in going down to that. Therefore, time must be given to prove "Are they really sincere

here?" Is their confession sincere? Have they truly amended their ways? Have they changed? "Lay hands suddenly on no man" (1 Timothy 5:22). We must "Prove all things," before we quickly take them back into the Church.

I read some years ago, in *The Martyr's Mirror* that in the Early Church, the Church fathers, whenever a person was dealt with or excommunication because of drunkenness or some public or some gross sin or some immorality, that even though they confessed they were not to be taken back into the Church immediately. They were to be given a time of proving, until that confession was proven. I believe also that there is a punishment aspect we already spoke of. Excommunication is a punishment that follows for that sin.

I went out of town to Nicaragua a while ago. On my way home I rode beside a Catholic. He was a nurse and we had quite a bit of discussion. He told me that he was divorced, but the Catholic church does not recognize a legal divorce. The church itself needs to give a pardon before he can get a legal divorce in the United States of America where he is divorced so that he can go and remarry. In the Catholic church he would be

excommunicated because that would be sin. He said that he would need to go to the Catholic authorities and get a pardon for having divorced his first wife before he could marry another one. He said that if he does this it would not be a big issue.

That is not what I see in the Scriptures. There needs to be a remorse for sin. There needs to be repentance, and there are consequences that follow that. It is not simply a matter of going to the priest, confessing my sin and I go right back out and live the way I want to.

Question 2, “Must we be convinced that a person is lost if we are excommunicating them?” I answer that one carefully. One thing I think we need to keep in mind — lost or saved — that judgment is finally God’s. No matter how clearly we may think that we see, finally that judgment is God’s and God makes the decision when He will remove the candlestick. He makes the decision. The responsibility that He has laid on us though is that if someone has violated or sinned against the church and has brought heresy and the voice of the church is that this is sin and this is wrong, then the call to the church is that they must be put out. The part of whether they are saved or lost is God’s decision.

We must leave that in God’s hand. We may try to take responsibility on ourselves whether they are saved or lost and we try to make God’s decision. In dealing with church life, it is a much greater decision than what we should ever make. God alone knows the heart. I believe there is something like the church excommunicating and putting someone out and there is the possibility that God gives a warning to them, and yet God has not fully removed the candlestick. I am thinking that there is that possibility. I put myself up for correction on that.

I simply believe that our responsibility, as far as the brotherhood looks at it, we consider that it is sin, or gross sin, that it is wrong, we cannot have it in the church, it is leaven in the body, and our responsibility to deal with it. As far as that person’s direct relationship with God that is gone. We are responsible to keep house locally.

Question 3, “Should shunning be applied in the marriage relationship?” I believe that the context of Scripture would indicate that an unbelieving husband or wife should dwell together with the believing. While some churches in the past have applied it that way, the context of the Scriptures would not give that as

the official recommendation. Rather, husband and wife should be loyal to each other.

One other thought here yet, is *effectiveness*. As offenders, if we are being dealt with, we can be so quick to look and say it was not saying it right, it was not done properly. We can try to justify ourselves in that way. Finally, though the church gives counsel and even thinks that way, and there will be cases, there will be things that are not 100 percent done right. Yet, God has left the authority to the local church body and the church made a decision to deal with it whether it is a small thing or greater. We need to take the call seriously the call. Otherwise, it will not be effective. I believe that is the work of the devil who gets into our hearts and says here that you did not love me, you did it with the wrong attitude. That is what they are counting on, and they are trying to justify themselves that it was not done right.

We need to check our hearts and we need to make sure that it is done right. Also, it is my recommendation that we take our discipline, even if it turns out that maybe we do not understand it. I remember when I was a boy my father needed to paddle me. He would take a hold of me with the paddle and say “stand still,”

while he would paddle me and I did. We need to stand still and take our paddling (if I can say that plainly).

One final thought, we must be very careful about disregarding the discipline of other churches. Many churches have suffered because they lightly regarded the discipline of other churches. That makes quite a confusion, whenever a church will feel that excommunication of another congregation is not right or to take it lightly. I appreciate in our congregations where someone leaves to go somewhere else where that congregation will go back and carefully consider what the discipline was, and put the brother on proving or whatever. It is important that we respect other church's work. If we do not do that we are bound to take the same road as we relate to the authority of others, so we can expect that others will relate to our authority in a similar way.

May God bless us in this matter. Understand those churches in history that have neglected to apply this doctrine have suffered seriously from it. Let us apply it according to Scripture that the Church can be a pure bride when Christ returns for the Church, that it is without spot and without blemish.

Scripture References

	2:41	228	2:6	233, 236
Ruth				
1:16, 17a	230	9:26	Ephesians	
Proverbs		9:31	5:26, 27	232
24:30–34	225	15:4	1 Thessalonians	
Matthew		15:28	5:21	240
16:13	227	16:4, 5	229	
John		Romans	2 Thessalonians	
16:18, 19	227	8:13	3:13–15	231
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Acts		5:6	Revelation	
20:22	228	5:9, 10	2:1, 8, 12, 18	235
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Acts		5:12		
1:15, 16	228	229		
		2 Corinthians		

From the Previous Issue:

Dress and Spiritual Life

From a message by Glenn Sensenig

Sunday, September 11, 2005

Latimore Mennonite Church

Book Reprint (Continued)

One Hundred Lessons In Bible Study

LESSON 2.

The Ministry of John.

I. Introductory.

1. His coming foretold. — Isaiah 40:3; Malachi 4:5; Luke 1:13.
2. His fitness and preparation.
 - a. Of a priestly family. — Luke 1:5.
 - b. Foreordained a Nazarite. — Luke 1:15.
 - c. Life of self-denial. — Luke 1:80; Matthew 3:4.

NOTE. — In his preparation we notice the following: Good antecedents, a life of temperance, purity, and self-denial, separation from the sins of the world, filled with the Holy Ghost. These conditions were factors in the development of the man of whom Christ said, “Among

them that are born of women there has not risen a greater than John the Baptist” (Matthew 11:11).

II. The ministry.

1. His first public utterance. — Matthew 3:1, 2.

NOTE. — Suddenly he emerges from his hermit life and startles the world with his bold declaration, “Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Truly Elias had come.

2. The success of his ministry foretold. — Luke 1:14–17.

3. Relation of his ministry to that of Christ. — Malachi 4:5; Matthew 3:1–3, 11; 11:10; Luke 7:24–29.

NOTE. — John’s early life was a preparation for his own ministry. His ministry was a preparation for the higher ministry of Christ.

4. His baptism.

a. Baptism of the multitudes. — Matthew 3:5, 6; Mark 1:5.

b. Baptism of Jesus. — Matthew 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:21, 22.

c. A type of Holy Spirit baptism. — Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16.

d. The baptism of repentance. — Matthew 3:7, 8; Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3; Acts 13:24; 19:4.

5. His prison-life.

a. Cause of his imprisonment. — Matthew 14:3, 4; Luke 3:19, 20.

b. Sends his disciples to Jesus. — Matthew 11:2–6; Luke 7:19, 20.

NOTE. — The question which these disciples put to Jesus seems to, at first glance, indicate that John, like many others, had expected Christ to set up a literal, earthly kingdom. However, in keeping with John the Baptist’s role as a prophet and a forerunner of Christ, we can see that in light of his soon death, he sends his disciples to follow Christ and to confirm to John’s disciples His role. Was it John or his disciples who needed the confirmation? Christ’s answer doubtless had the effect of confirming him in his former testimony (John 1:29, 36), and should be conclusive in the minds of all who have asked similar questions. John knew the role of Christ was as a Lamb.

c. Christ’s testimony of John. — Matthew 11:7–14; Luke 7:24–29.

d. Beheaded in prison. — Matthew 14:3–12; Mark 6:17–29.

NOTE. — The death of John the Baptist reminds the reader of the resemblance between his life and that of Christ. (1) The office of each had been foretold in prophecy (2) The birth of each had been previously announced to parents. (3) Both practiced great self-denial. (4) Both had enthusiastic followers. (5) Both drove away professed admirers by presenting plain truth. (6) Their first recorded public utterance is the same (Matthew 3:2; 4:17.) (7) They both suffered persecution and martyrdom.

1. Did John the Baptist ever perform any miracles?
2. John was the forerunner of Christ. Explain.
3. Wherein does John the Baptist resemble Elijah the prophet?
4. Does the name Baptist bear any relation to the term baptism?
5. Locate the places mentioned in connection with John's ministry.

LESSON 3.

Early Life of Christ.

[From the birth of Jesus to the beginning of His ministry in Galilee.]

I. The service in the Temple.

NOTE. — This was forty days after the birth (Leviticus 12:4), and thirty-two days after the circumcision (Luke 2:21; Leviticus 12:3).

1. Presented to the Lord. — Luke 2:22, 23 (Exodus 13:2).
2. Blessings received. — Luke 2:25–38.

II. Flight into Egypt.

1. The warning. — Matthew 2:12, 22.
2. The journey. — Matthew 2:14, 15.
3. Return to Nazareth. — Matthew 2:19–23.

III. Domestic life.

1. Poverty of the family. — Luke 2:24 (Leviticus 12:8)
2. A favored child. — Luke 2:40, 52.
3. A carpenter's son. — Matthew 13:55.
4. A carpenter. — Mark 6:3.

5. Lack of education. — John 7:15.

IV. At the age of twelve.

NOTE. — In this narrative we notice, (1) the faithfulness of Joseph and Mary, (2) their concern that the child Jesus might be instructed in the principles of the law, (3) a tender reproof of a loving mother, who had not yet comprehended His true Mission, (4) the attitude of Jesus as a learner, (5) His wisdom in propounding questions, (6) the astonishment of the lawyers and doctors at the wisdom of the child, (7) a declaration of His mission, (8) the recognition of God as His Father.

V. His baptism.

1. Age. — Luke 3:23.

NOTE. — The age at which priests were consecrated. There was here a direct succession from the Levitical to the new order of priesthood. (See Hebrews 8).

2. His superiority recognized by John. — Matthew 3:14, 15.

NOTE. — The only instance in Scripture where the baptized instructed the baptizer.

3. Manifestation of divine sanction. — Matthew 3:16, 17; Mark 1:10, 11; Luke 3:21, 22.

NOTE. — Here is recorded the introduction of Christ to the world. The baptism with water had taken place. His superiority had been recognized. He was on the bank of the river praying, when the heavens were opened, and the Spirit of God in the bodily shape of a dove lighted upon Him. With the eyes of the world then turned upon Him, the voice of God is heard saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

VI. Temptation in the wilderness.

1. Forty days of fasting. — Matthew 4:2; Luke 4:2.

2. The lust of the flesh. — Matthew 4:3, 4; Luke 4: 3, 4.

3. The lust of the eye. — Matthew 4:8–10; Luke 4: 5–8.

4. The pride of life. — Matthew 4:5–7; Luke 4:9–12.

5. The tempter overcome. — Matthew 4:11; Luke 4:13.

NOTE. — On the question of temptations, we observe:

1. That the temptations which Christ overcame are those which usually beset man. (1 Corinthians 10:13; 1 John 2:16).

2. That the tempter sometimes tries to confuse the mind of the

tempted by quoting Scriptures.

3. That the devil can make no headway as long as we remain firm.

4. That Christ showed us how to overcome temptation by the Word — the sword of the Spirit.

5. That there is joy in overcoming.

1. Have we any evidence that Christ and John the Baptist met before Christ's baptism?

2. What does the descent of the dove at Christ's baptism signify?

3. How often and for what purpose did Joseph and Mary come to Jerusalem during the childhood of Jesus?

4. Was Jesus a carpenter?

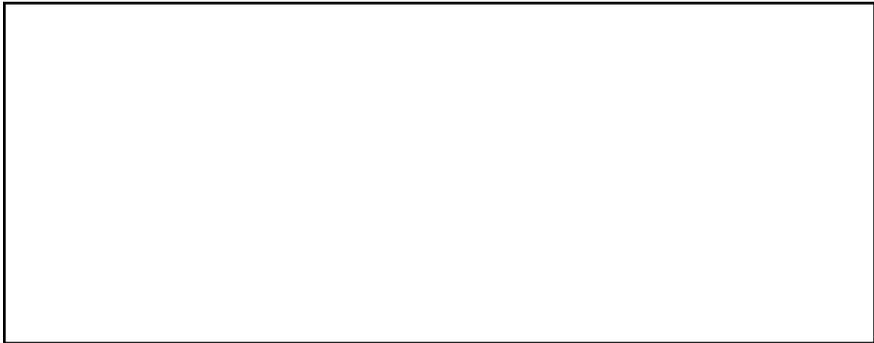
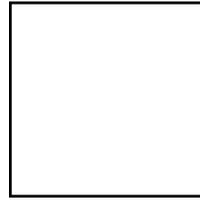
5. What was Christ's strongest weapon during temptation?

FIFTY FUNDAMENTAL FACTS

17. Under the Gospel Dispensation this day of rest and worship is the first day of the week.

Under the Mosaic Law it was the seventh day of the week. But from the day of the resurrection of Christ the members of Christ's Church observed the first day for this purpose. Christ set the example by rising on this day; and the disciples followed the example by meeting together, Christ sanctifying the meeting with His presence. They met on this day "to break bread" (Acts 20:7) and for purposes of preaching; and from the writings of the Ante-Nicene fathers we have plenty of evidence that it was the custom of the Christian Church during the first few centuries to

meet for worship on the first day of the week, rather than the seventh. The ceremonial Law having been nailed to the cross (Colossians 2:14), the ceremonial sabbath went with it. It is to the New Testament that we must look for light on the subject. As "the Son of man is Lord even of the sabbath day" (Matthew 12:8), and as the New Testament is absolutely without the least hint of a command that the seventh-day sabbath of the ceremonial Law should be continued, and also as the first day of the week was observed as the sabbath (or day of rest and worship) from the time that Christ rose from the dead and thus set the example, the right thing to do is to keep up the Lord's day observance in a



way that will enable us of a truth
to say with John, "I was in the

Spirit on the Lord's day"
(Revelation 1:10).

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