

November/December 2020 • \$3.95

FrontLine

BRINGING THE TRUTH HOME



THE FUNDAMENTALS:
A Pure Church



A Pure Church



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Although biblical separation is not considered one of the foundational doctrines of Christianity even by most separatists, it is an essential topic as we consider the ongoing issues related to the publication of *The Fundamentals* and the rise of the biblical fundamentalists a century ago. There are theological, historical, and practical reasons for this. First, separation is a necessary consequence of belief in the fundamentals. A fundamental is not a fundamental to you unless you are willing to separate over it. For example, it is self-contradictory and absurd to say that you believe the full deity and humanity of Jesus Christ is essential to Christianity and at the same time label “Christian” an institution or teacher that denies that very truth. Either it is not a fundamental belief, or the denier is not a Christian; both cannot be true. Thus, the split between the historic fundamentalists and the modernists was only a matter of time. Those who treat the fundamentals as truly fundamental and those who do not cannot coexist under the same ecclesiastical roof.

This of course leads to the historical consideration. One way or another, the split did occur, and the biblical fundamentalists began building their own institutions. Just as this question was finally being settled, the new evangelicals sought to undo the result and get back into dialogue and partnership with modernists in order to win them over. This led to a division within the fundamentalist coalition between those who pursued this strategy of “infiltration” and those who were convinced that it was naïve at best and treasonous at worst. Therefore, there arose the debate over whether faithful believers must refuse to endorse or associate with “indifferentists” who participate in ecclesiastical fellowship with heretics and apostates. This is one of the points that still divides fundamentalists from mainstream evangelicalism today.

The history, then, leads naturally to the practical question: does the failure to practice separation from those who promote known error lead to corrosion of the faith? The fundamentalists believe that the question has been answered decisively in the affirmative. Beginning only a few years after the decision to dialogue with the modernists, evangelical institutions began chiseling away at their own doctrinal foundations. This was lamented early on by Harold Lindsell in his critiques of Fuller Seminary and is echoed by the modern conservative and confessing evangelicals, who wish to reestablish some doctrinal lines between truth and error within broader evangelicalism. The result of the abandonment of separation seems to be consistent with both the nature of error and with common sense. Error has the tactical advantage of being deceptive, whereas truth will always be honest. False teaching sneaks into groups, and unless it is marked and expelled, like a cancer it will grow and metastasize. Both the biblical history of Israel and the subsequent history of the church bear abundant testimony to the corrosive power of failing to deal with evil and error decisively when it arises.

It should be noted that biblical fundamentalists, while seeing the force of these arguments, do not rely on them to

support a doctrine of separation. Rather, we believe that this teaching and practice to be firmly rooted in the Scriptures. As with all biblical truths, we must be reminded of the basic principles undergirding biblical separation. Ben Heffernan’s article takes on this task with both clarity and passion. This basic theological study is complemented handsomely by an article by Larry Oats, who provides a fascinating and profitable historical study of how the biblical fundamentalists’ understanding of the church and the end times led them to emphasize and practice separation in opposition to the views of the new evangelicals.


We must be careful to avoid giving the misimpression that we separatists have not had our own set of problems and failures. Prominent among these has been the challenge of determining when, how, and over what we must separate. What about Calvinism versus Arminianism, church government, Bible versions, end-times interpretations, and music, to name a few? Although biblical fundamentalists agree on the necessity and importance of practicing separation, applying the biblical teaching is still an area of great disagreement and difficulty. In this issue Kevin Bauder provides a helpful framework for thinking about decisions of spiritual fellowship and separation, including decisions involving professing believers and Christian institutions. Along the way, he develops the helpful thesis that even within the Christian circle of the true gospel, the degree of spiritual unity necessarily determines the degree of practical fellowship professing believers can have with each other.

While in agreement on this point, an article of my own (condensed from an earlier issue of *FrontLine*) argues that it is important to distinguish breaches in practical fellowship that occur as a result of questions of wisdom and conscience from those that result from clear and serious disobedience. Layton Talbert and Robert Vincent add a further nuance in their article on church discipline. In their exegetically rigorous and thoughtful analysis, they distinguish between ordinary church discipline and a more serious form that requires that a professing believer not only be expelled from fellowship but also be spiritually turned over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh. They also provide a recommendation for how this sad and extraordinary step can be carried out in a God-honoring way in a local church.

The issue is rounded out by two of practical articles. One is by a pastor of many years, John Vaughn, who helps us think through the context and, most of all, the appropriate attitude for the practice of church discipline. Finally, Kristopher Schaal provides us helpful condensation of a letter from John Newton that provides essential advice for how we should engage in these kinds of controversies, a reminder that is relevant in the present days of viral posts, virtue signaling, and outrage mobs.

It is our earnest desire that all of God’s people be committed to loving Him and remaining loyal to Him in a wicked and perverse generation and that we would practice biblical separation, as we should with all biblical teaching, with wisdom, holiness, and Christian charity.

—David Shumate



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Edward and I appreciated the recent issue [titled] *Creation and Its Implications*. The issue dealt with timely subjects. Also the article “Evangelical and Gay?” by Brett Williams was very well written. We agree that we need to reject contemporary words and categories and see people instead of their sin.

Thank you again for helping produce such a wonderful magazine. *Elizabeth Estelle, Stamford, NY*

FrontLine magazine continues to be a favorite birthday subscription for my missionary son in Kenya! *Lenna Raines, Mukwonago, WI*



We are gratefully receiving (albeit delayed via snail-mail) physical, hard-copy issues of *FrontLine* magazine from our sending church, Faith Baptist Church, Taylors, SC. We often remove an edition from our stack of past issues to share with others that we are discipling or with other missionaries that would benefit from the articles. Speaking with the Managing Editor today, I again realize how vast the experience and professionalism is of the contributing authors and pastoral articles. We are grateful to the editorial staff for the balanced and objective approach to the philosophies and doctrines pertinent to the spiritual health of families, churches, and missions. Mrs. Roger Duvall is every ministry’s “ministry-person”! However busy she is, she gives of her time freely and informatively. We always receive sincere and relevant (coworker /edification); and creative (inspirational) ways to expand the usage of *FrontLine* magazine. As for the content and biblical expositions, we could not gather a better selection of ministry-valued material and resources anywhere close to what *FrontLine* offers.

Should any readers . . . have copies of *FrontLine* in your possession, as I have, please consider sending your missionaries a hard copy also. We realize that it may be more cost effective to send and receive an electronic version but realize also that intrinsically, “As cold waters to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country.”

Kris Blumer, Lima, Peru

Dr. Charles J. (Bud) Bierman, 81, went to be with the Lord on October 26, 2020. Dr. Bierman accepted Christ as his Savior at age sixteen and was called to preach shortly thereafter. He and his wife, Joyce, served together for fifty-three years, and Dr. Bierman served for thirty-five years as Bob Jones University’s director of alumni affairs and staff evangelist. In 2006 he became the director of church planting and staff evangelist for Gospel Fellowship Association. He served as director of church planting until 2011 and staff evangelist until 2017. During his forty-five years as an evangelist, he preached nearly 1200 evangelistic campaigns, revivals, Bible conferences, and youth rallies throughout forty-eight states and more than twenty countries. BJU alumni and many others will miss his warm smile and his down-to-earth, practical preaching style.



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Separation

Honoring the Distinction between Good and Evil

The cause of chaos in America today stems from a malicious refusal to agree with God's definition of goodness. Many, therefore, call evil good and good evil; they put darkness for light and light for darkness to their own hurt (Isa. 5:20). These evil days remind believers of the value of truth and goodness. There is a fundamental distinction between that which hurts and that which heals, between that which tears down and that which builds up, and between that which destroys and that which blesses. This vital distinction undergirds the foundation of a much-maligned doctrine: the doctrine of separation. At the heart of the doctrine of separation is the ability to recognize evil, the courage to condemn it, and the willingness to reject it. Believers must practice biblical separation because it honors the fundamental distinction between goodness and evil. Ignoring this doctrine makes one guilty of being an accomplice to evil and contributes to the deception that evil is good.

God's Character Is Separate from Evil

The doctrine of separation starts with the essence of God as pure and holy.¹ "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). Just as darkness is the absence of light, so evil is the absence of goodness. Our God is completely and only good (Ps. 135:3)! He is the only source of goodness in this world (James 1:17), and goodness characterizes all His works without exception (Gen. 1:31; Pss. 72:18; 145:9). His goodness manifests itself in a hatred for evil (Zech. 8:17). His purity turns His eyes away from sin (Hab. 1:13), and His holiness turns His zeal for righteousness into a consuming fire (Heb. 12:29). The only response sinful man can have in the presence of this thrice-holy God is self-repudiation (Isa. 6:5; Luke 18:13), and partaking of God's holiness is essential for fellowship with



Him and entrance into His glory (Heb. 2:11; 12:14). Separation from evil, therefore, reflects the very nature of God.²

God Chooses to Separate Good from Evil

At the very beginning, God created light as a symbol of His character and goodness (Ps. 104:2; 1 Tim. 6:16; 2 Cor. 4:6), and immediately He separated light from darkness (Gen. 1:3–4). God's separation of light and darkness in the physical world becomes an illustration of the fundamental distinction between good and evil. In the beginning, Adam and Eve knew only the goodness of God. But when they sinned and ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they tasted for the first time the bitterness of evil (Gen. 3:6–8). The result of sin was that God had to separate them from His presence in the garden of Eden (Gen. 3:24). God consistently repeats His initial actions toward sin throughout the Scripture. He stresses the importance of separating the profane from the holy (Lev. 10:10; Ezek. 22:26), and because He will not allow anything to defile the place of His presence (Rev. 21:27), He fixed a great, impassible gulf between heaven and hell (Luke 16:26).

God has always separated between the righteous and the wicked. He separated between righteous Noah and the rest of the wicked world (Gen. 6:5–8; 2 Pet. 2:5), between righteous Lot and the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:25; 2 Pet. 2:7–9), and between the children of Israel and the Egyptians (Exod. 8:23; 11:7; 14:20). He will separate between the wheat and the tares (Matt. 13:30), between the humble and the proud (Ps. 138:6), and between the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:32–33). A biblical separatist, then, simply mirrors the ways of God.

The Scripture not only reveals *that* God separates good from evil but also *why* He does so. In response to Covid-

19, some of my church members with elderly parents have illustrated the motivating principle behind separation quite well by taking precautionary measures to avoid getting and spreading the virus. No one condemns them for protecting those whom they love from contracting a contagion, nor does one reprimand a doctor for washing his hands to prevent the spread of germs. So, separation from evil protects and preserves that which is good. Just as a father's love compels him to protect his children from danger, so God's love compels Him to separate His own from evil. God has reserved the godly for Himself (Ps. 4:3). Separation, therefore, is not antithetical to love, but rather is a necessary expression of love.

Some argue that the incarnation of Christ in a fallen world and His example of eating with publicans and sinners shows that God does not separate from evil but rather reaches out to sinners in love. Christ's actions, however, do not reveal a reversal of God's fundamental hatred toward evil, nor does the gospel make evil more palatable to Him. Rather the gospel demonstrates the savagery of evil because sin caused Christ's agony and death. Indeed, God's grace does provide a way to bring evil sinners to God, but God defines this way as turning men from darkness to light (Acts 26:18; 1 Pet. 2:9). Christ's choice to eat with sinners was not a polemic against separation but was rather the acceptance of those who recognized their need for a Savior (Mark 2:17). Only by ignoring the clear, contextual theme of repentance can Christ's actions be cast as a repudiation of the distance that God maintains between good and evil.

Jesus Christ came to manifest God's light in human flesh (John 1:4–5; 8:12; 12:46) to a world of people who love darkness because their deeds are evil (John 3:19). This mission of light now defines the purpose of the church as well (Matt.

5:14–16; Acts 13:47; Phil. 2:15). Yet darkness cannot possibly illuminate darkness. The church, therefore, must imitate the One who was “separate from sinners” (Heb. 7:26) in order to shine the light of the gospel and to fulfill God’s mission of love to this world.

God Commands Separation from Evil

God commands men to be imitators of His holiness (1 Pet. 1:16). Believers, therefore, should hate evil because they love the Lord (Ps. 97:10). The entire doctrine of separation finds a fitting summary in the words “hate the evil, and love the good” (Amos 5:15; see also Rom. 12:9). Because believers are children of light, they should have no fellowship with the works of darkness (Eph. 5:8–11). Paul points again to the familiar illustration of light and darkness as polar opposites in the natural world to teach the insolubleness of righteousness with unrighteousness, the unalterable opposition between Christ and Satan, the complete lack of commonality between faith and unbelief, and the incompatibility of idols in the temple of God (2 Cor. 6:14–16). The application then for believers is to be separate from all defilement so that they can walk as His people in a close, filial fellowship with God (2 Cor. 6:17–18).

Just as God’s command in the garden separated between good and evil (Gen. 2:16–17), so today God’s Word provides the light for understanding how to distinguish between good and evil (Ps. 119:105, 130). The New Testament commands separation, and these commands can be organized into two general categories: personal separation and ecclesiastical separation, both of which contain two subcategories.

Personal Separation

The doctrine of separation starts with personal repentance. You must recognize the destructive nature of sin to a relationship with God and become aware of evil’s pervasive presence within your own heart. It is a passionate love for God and His goodness that fuels hatred for all that is contrary to Him

(Ps. 5). Godly zeal that produces an intense loathing of evil will condemn sin wherever it is found. Biblical separation, therefore, requires a deep humility before God because it is imperative to remove the beam from your own eye before the speck can be identified and removed from someone else’s (Matt. 7:3–5). True biblical separatism is never a hypocritical focus on externals but flows from a genuine love for God and His ways.

Personal separation also encompasses a recognition that this world system (i.e., all the unregenerate organized and controlled by Satan) incorporates and propagates an anti-God philosophy and lifestyle (Eph. 2:1–3).³ Although God created the physical world good, and daily activities can in themselves be morally neutral, a biblical separatist must identify the impact of evil upon any cultural activity, worldview, valuation, form of speech, dress, entertainment, or pursuit of pleasure and possessions. To adopt the worldview and lifestyle of this unbelieving world places one at enmity with God (James 4:4). Love for this present evil world reveals an absence of a love for the Father (1 John 2:15), an abandonment of the purpose of salvation (Gal. 1:4), and a refusal to be transformed into a living sacrifice for God (Rom. 12:1–2). Personal holiness demands a rejection of worldliness. If the believer neglects personal separation, it ensures moral compromise with evil that will certainly weaken the knees of any other stand for Christ against sin. The crumbling of ecclesiastical separation among biblical fundamentalists results from a failure to practice diligently personal separation.

Ecclesiastical Separation



Ecclesiastical separation involves responding to two groups of professing believers: false teachers and disobedient brethren. Separation from false teachers includes identifying false doctrine and the refusal to commend or condone those who teach it through extending these teachers Christian fellowship (2 John 1:9–11). Truth is the sister of light (Matt. 5:14)

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and a shield to all that is good, for evil always comes on the wings of deception. When grievous error erodes the foundation of truth, the entire house of Christian doctrine, mission, and practice collapses. Paul pronounces a curse upon those who would undermine the gospel with another message (Gal. 1:8–9), and Jude exemplifies the duty of warning against attacks upon the faith (Jude 4; Acts 20:29–31). Godly men taking a bold and dogmatic stand for the fundamentals of the faith is the heritage of our biblical fundamentalist forefathers.⁴ The fundamentals of the faith are those doctrines when once denied undermine the gospel or the authoritative nature of the Bible (1 Tim. 6:20–21). When men denied the clear teaching of Scripture, they were publicly rebuked, and they were not given the honor of being called Christian brethren (Titus 1:10–14; 3:9–11; Rom. 16:17–18).

Separation from disobedient brethren must occur when a professing believer commits an evident sin and willfully refuses to repent. Believers are to identify those who disobeyed Paul's example and instruction and withhold any normal Christian fellowship (2 Thess. 3:6, 14–15). Paul commands believers in Corinth to withdraw themselves and even to refuse to eat with anyone who claims to be a brother in Christ yet will not repent of sin (1 Cor. 5:5–11). Unconditional acceptance of a person in sin is not an act of love but of pride (1 Cor. 5:2). God wants believers to rebuke graciously and patiently those who sin (Matt. 18:15–17) because the goal of such confrontation is restoration (Gal. 6:1–2). While much could and should be written about when and how to apply this kind of separation,⁵ it must be noted that separation from disobedient brethren is clearly biblical. While the New Testament's teaching on separation from disobedient brethren arises from specific situations in those churches, each context explicitly communicates principles that should be applied to any professing believer who will not obey the Bible nor listen to his Christian brothers who seek his restoration. To dismiss the Bible's commands to separate from a disobedient brother makes one a disobedient brother.

Conclusion

Dealing with evil is painful, but ignoring it only multiplies its sorrows. Each aspect of the doctrine of separation reflects the holy character of God and honors the distinction that He has placed between evil and good. May God give His children the wisdom and love needed to be biblical separatists to His glory!

Dr. Benjamin Heffernan is the pastor of Bethel Community Baptist Church in Fort Scott, Kansas. He received his PhD in Theology from Bob Jones University in 2017. He and his wife, Elizabeth, have seven children.



¹ Mortz, Fred, *"Be Ye Holy": The Call to Christian Separation* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 1994) 7–19; McCune, Rolland, *Promise Unfulfilled* (Greenville, SC: Ambassador International, 2004), 138–41. Geerhardus Vos presents a good explanation of holiness and its relationship to ethical purity in his book *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (1948; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2007) 245–49.

² God's nature demands a separation from evil in accordance with His nature, and "He could demand no other behavior in this regard and be consistent with Himself" (Mike Harding, "The Necessity of Personal Separation in Biblical Fundamentalism," *FrontLine* [May/June 2009], 32; Rolland D. McCune, "Separation," *FrontLine* [May/June 1993], 15–17).

³ An excellent resource on separation from the world is Randy Leedy's book *Love Not the World: Winning the War against Worldliness* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 2012).

⁴ Several resources that examine separation from an historical point of view are David O. Beale, *In Pursuit of Purity: American Fundamentalism since 1850* (Greenville, SC: Universal Publications, 1986); Ernest D. Pickering, *Biblical Doctrine of Separation* (Clarks Summit, PA: Baptist Bible College, 1976); Iain H. Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided: A Record of Crucial Change in the Years 1950 to 2000* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2000).

⁵ Mark Sidwell, in his book *Set Apart: The Nature and Importance of Biblical Separation* (Greenville, SC: JourneyForth Academic, 2016), 57–58, provides some suggestions for handling differing circumstances appropriately.

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A Three-Dimensional Matrix

Applying Biblical Separation

In 1979 Ernest R. Pickering published *Biblical Separation: The Struggle for a Pure Church* (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press). Over forty years later it remains the most comprehensive published discussion of separation. In its pages Pickering lists certain pitfalls that separatists face: an improper spirit, over-occupation with the issues, uncontrolled suspicion, a desire to dominate, failure to see the larger picture, caustic language, and employing public instead of private rebuke (230–33). He elsewhere warns against the danger of letting separation be “shipwrecked on the shoals of human pettiness” (116). If Pickering is correct, then Christians sometimes apply biblical principles of separation wrongly. Applying them rightly requires sound judgment.

Forming sound judgments about fellowship and separation can be difficult because we must weigh more than one consideration. Indeed, we must base each judgment upon a matrix of at least three dimensions. The purpose of this discussion is to introduce these dimensions and to show how each affects decisions about fellowship and separation.

The Doctrinal Dimension

The first is the *doctrinal* dimension. A doctrine is a teaching. The Bible teaches us what we ought to believe, how we ought to live, and how we ought to feel. These three areas (knowing, doing, and feeling) sum up the Christian faith.

Think of Christianity as a circle. Certain doctrines define the perimeter of the circle. Anyone who rejects these boundary doctrines is outside the circle (outside Christianity). These boundary doctrines are necessary to the existence of

Christianity, so they are sometimes called the *fundamentals*. They are like the foundation upon which Christianity is built. Damage the foundation and the building collapses.

The Christian faith also has a center. The center is “all the counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). It is the sum of all that God wants His people to know, do, and feel. It is the complete superstructure that rests upon the foundation. The goal of the Christian life is to know, do, and feel everything that is required by the whole counsel of God.

In a well-designed building all the elements matter, but not every element is equally critical. Certain load-bearing elements cannot be altered without damaging parts of the superstructure. Other elements may simply contribute to the building’s overall utility, balance, and harmony. The first are essential to the existence of the building; the second are necessary to its complete functionality.

The Christian faith is like a well-designed building. It rests upon the fundamentals. Damage one of them and whatever is left will no longer be Christianity. These fundamentals have been revealed with the greatest clarity and have been held widely by true Christians. They are “first of all” in importance for the Christian faith (1 Cor. 15:3).

Other doctrines (the ones inside the boundary) are like the superstructure of Christianity. They are of varying degrees of importance, not essential to the existence of the Christian faith, but necessary for its utility, balance, and harmony. They are revealed with varying degrees of clarity, and genuine Christians have differed as to their truth and meaning. These

teachings are still important, but we recognize some latitude in understanding them.

Thus, biblical doctrines range along a scale of importance. Their importance can be gauged by the clarity with which they have been revealed, the extent to which they have been held by true Christians, and their effect upon other doctrines within the system of faith and practice.

The Fellowship Dimension

The second dimension in the matrix deals with the nature of *fellowship*. The Greek word for fellowship (*koinonia*) denotes joint ownership. If you and your spouse have a joint bank account, then you hold it in *koinonia*. If both of your names appear on the deed to your house, then you own it in *koinonia*. In other words, fellowship is common property.

What joint property do all Christians hold in common? The most obvious answer is the *gospel*. To become Christians, we must believe on Christ for salvation; we must believe the gospel. We are not Christians until we believe the gospel, and someone who denies the gospel must never be recognized as a Christian.

All Christians hold the gospel in common. Belief in the gospel, symbolized as following the true Shepherd, makes them members of the one flock (John 10:1–5, 16). Believing the gospel is also the occasion upon which God’s Spirit unites them to the one new man, the one body, the holy temple, namely, the Church, which is Christ’s body (Eph. 1:22–23; 2:14–22). The gospel is the first and greatest ground of all genuinely Christian fellowship.

The gospel is not, however, the only common property that Christians can claim. Paul envisioned successful ministry as arriving at “the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God” (Eph. 4:13). This unity consists in nothing less than all the counsel of God. It is the whole body of truth to be believed, obeyed, and experienced. Jointly holding the whole counsel of God is a far greater level of fellowship than holding the gospel.

Believers can also hold ministry in common. For example, during their first missionary journey Paul and Barnabas shared the work of advancing the gospel and planting churches throughout Asia Minor. When their time came for a second journey, however, they did *not* share an interest in bringing along John Mark as a coworker. Over this issue they disagreed sharply and subsequently “departed asunder” (the word is *apochorizo*, which means *separated*) from each other.

Think of Christian fellowship as a circle. The fellowship that comes from holding the gospel in common is the outer ring of the circle. It is *minimal* Christian fellowship. The unity that comes from sharing both the whole counsel of God and ministry priorities is like the center of the circle. It is *maximal* Christian fellowship. In between these two is a range of possible levels of fellowship, each determined by the number and significance of the elements of the Christian faith and ministry held in common.

Of course, when most Christians think of fellowship, they think of something experienced, something more along the lines of doing stuff together. In this sense we can experience fellowship over a shared coffee, or a shared labor, or membership in the same church. Here is the rule: our *experience* of fellowship must be grounded in and regulated by the real,

inner fellowship that already exists. It is always hypocritical to act as if we hold more in common than we really do.

Seen in the above way, Christian fellowship is not all-or-nothing. It is a matter of levels or degrees; we experience greater fellowship with some Christians than with others. Ernest Pickering acknowledges how important it is to recognize these levels of fellowship (218). He argues that Christians can enjoy fellowship at one level without necessarily enjoying it at another. He also suggests that it is not possible to enjoy harmonious fellowship with all believers at all levels (219).

Pickering is right, but neither he nor anyone else has mapped all the possible levels of Christian fellowship. Some levels are obvious. The outer ring of the circle is individual, personal fellowship. The circle’s center is local church leadership, the office of pastor. In between is a host of different levels.

- Providing and receiving hospitality (Acts 16:14–15, 40; 3 John 5–8)
- Giving and receiving support and encouragement (Phil. 4:17)
- Personal discipleship (as between Paul and Timothy)
- Solidarity and partnership (Gal. 2:1–2, 9)
- Ministry collaboration (Paul and Barnabas or Silas)
- Itinerant ministry (3 John 7; Acts 18:24–28; 19:1; 1 Cor. 1:12; 3:4–5)
- Church membership (1 Cor. 5:4; 2 Cor 2:5–6)
- Church service (Acts 6:1–7; 1 Tim. 3:8–13)
- Church messengers (Phil. 2:25–30; 4:18; Acts 15:2–3)

This partial listing shows the variety of different fellowship relationships that Christian individuals, churches, and institutions can experience. Each level carries its own criteria. Gospel deniers are outside of the circle: we can have no fellowship with them. Personal fellowship is the outer ring, possible with anyone who is a genuine believer and who wants to live for Christ. As we move toward the middle of the circle the levels become more accountable. Fellowship at a higher level requires a greater degree of unity in the whole counsel of God. We hold our pastors accountable for the greatest mastery of the entire system of faith and practice.

Differences over the content of Christianity necessarily limit our fellowship. The more serious the difference, the greater the limitation. Differences over the least important points may restrict fellowship very little. Differences about load-bearing beliefs and practices may hinder fellowship at many levels. Some departures from the whole counsel of God give a believer joint ownership in the evil done by apostates (2 John 7–11). Some call for complete cessation of Christian fellowship (1 Cor. 5:2, 5, 7, 11, 13).

To this point we have two circles: one for doctrine and the other for fellowship. Our task in making decisions about fellowship and separation is to juxtapose the levels within these two circles. Doing that requires us to judge rightly both the importance of individual doctrinal differences and the requirements for each level of fellowship. As

Continued on page 28

Separation versus Limited Participation

Is There A Difference?



Introduction¹

I began to consider the distinction between separation and limited participation while teaching a seminary class on the practical ministry about twenty years ago. One student challenged our understanding of separation by stating something to this effect: “We separate over things like attending movies.” “No, we don’t,” I replied. His rejoinder was that the school had a rule against it.

As an advocate of biblical separation and walking circumspectly in the world, I was taken aback. It is true that individuals, families, and ministries regularly must make decisions about what they will participate in and about what they will support. Some parents allow their children to watch certain things that other parents forbid. Some churches will decline to have an evangelist with whose ideas about conversion they disagree. Pastors recommend or do not recommend Christian colleges or seminaries for various reasons.

As legitimate as these decisions may be, however, I would like to draw a distinction between them and what is commonly called biblical separation. On the one hand, I believe that failing to see this distinction can lead to undervaluing the important biblical command to separate from certain kinds of people and institutions. On the other hand, it can cause us to make a “separation case” out of sincere but uncertain or relatively unimportant disagreements. I believe that as Scripture presents it, separation has specific and important conditions and commands that do not apply to other areas of limited participation.

Separation from a Professing Brother

The focus of this article is on the decision not to participate or fellowship with a fellow professing Christian or Christian institution. It is neither a defense nor a comprehensive explanation of separation from a professing believer (sometimes called secondary separation). However, several Bible passages form the foundation for this practice: Matthew 18:15–20, 1 Corinthians 5, 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15, and Titus 3:8–11. These passages embody several central principles concerning separation from a disobedient Christian—principles which stand in stark contrast with the concept of limited participation.

Separation from a professing believer demands a clear scriptural justification. The first pertinent characteristic of these passages is that they all require a clear biblical basis for separation. In each case there is clear, biblically defined wrongdoing on the part of the offender. In Matthew 18 Christ begins by assuming that the brother has sinned, and the process implies that his sin is not in doubt. In 1 Corinthians 5:11, the kinds of professing believers that Paul commands believers to withdraw from are all in violation of obvious biblical norms for Christian living. Second Thessalonians 3:6 talks about the brother that “walketh disorderly.” When Paul commands Titus to withdraw from a “heretic” after one or two warnings, he points out that such a person “is subverted” and is sinning (vv. 11–14).

In all these cases, the disobedience must be clear and not just a matter of differences of interpretation and application. Neither can they only be issues of conscience (as important as

those are for decisions about our own behavior). Moreover, I would assert without taking time to demonstrate, that each of these passages involves significant sins that threatens the integrity of the body or its public testimony.²

Separation is mandatory. When the conditions of each of these passages is met, then separation is not optional. To fail to separate in such cases is itself disobedience to the Word of God. All these passages involve authoritative instruction and imperatives. Separation from a Christian brother in case of clear, willful, and persistent disobedience is neither optional nor a matter of simple prudence; it is mandatory.

Separation aims to bring the wrongdoer to repentance. If a fellow believer has committed a clear and significant violation of God's Word, the most loving thing that we can do is to work for the offender's repentance and restoration. There is no room to "agree to disagree" or simply to avoid talking about an unpleasant situation. Restoration is at the center of Christ's instructions in Matthew 18 ("thou hast gained thy brother"). Paul also makes it clear that the result of the withdrawal of fellowship is that the erring brother should "be ashamed" (2 Thess. 3:14) and presumably repent. In 2 Corinthians 2:1–11, Paul instructs the church regarding restoring a repentant brother who had been disciplined by the congregation.

Separation is public. In at least some cases, the process of discipline begins in private, and the circle of exposure expands only insofar as necessary to bring about the desired repentance. Nevertheless, if the brother is stubborn, then the command is to tell it to the church, with expulsion as the next step. Once the matter has come to the point of separation, the entire congregation knows about it. It is, at least as far as the Christian community is concerned, a public matter. A response that allows brethren to simply part ways while keeping the reason for the breach between themselves is inconsistent with the purposes of separation—the restoration of the believer through group admonition and the protection of the public testimony of the assembly.

Separation involves significant disassociation. Although there may be some variation in the degree to which we avoid a person from whom we separate, the break that we must make is very significant. It involves treating him as an unbeliever (Matt. 18:17), "[delivering] such an one unto Satan" (1 Cor. 5:5), not having table fellowship with him (1 Cor. 5:11); rejecting him (Titus 3:10); and refusing to keep company with him (2 Thess. 3:6).

Other Limits on Participation and Fellowship

Often believers choose not to participate with other professing Christians or Christian institutions even when the above biblical requirements do not apply. Are such believers sinning? I do not believe so. It is true that if our disagreements with our fellow believers are simply mat-

ters of preference or private opinion, then our response should be mutual deference. (The proverbial church split over the color of the new carpet comes to mind.) Nevertheless, I believe that there is a middle category, one that neither rises to the level that mandates separation nor falls to the level that requires deference.

Theological Basis for Prudential Limits on Association. There are many examples that fall within this middle category. You might decide not to participate with fellow believers in certain amusements or other activities because you do not think they are God-honoring or spiritually helpful for you. Christian parents may place restrictions on their children that are not required by the church youth group. Church leaders may feel the need to caution their members against the certain emphases of a Christian movement or teacher without condemning that movement or teacher. For those responsible for the care of others, whether parents or pastors, such practices make common sense. The question remains, however, whether they are biblically justifiable. Two principles form the basis for personal and ecclesiastical liberty in this area: individual soul liberty and the autonomy of the local assembly.

Soul liberty is the idea that the individual believer's conscience is not bound in matters of faith by the opinions or dictates of others. Where the Bible is clear, all believers must submit to it. Also, soul liberty does not mean that believers are exempt from the rule of legitimate authorities in practical matters. It does mean, however, that a Christian's conscience is answerable to the Word of God, not the dictates of people.³

One implication is the respect that we owe to one another when we honestly disagree. With soul liberty comes the believers' responsibility to live according to their sincere convictions and allow other believers to live according to theirs. Paul makes this point clear in his discussion of dietary restrictions and special holy days (Rom. 14). Even when a brother's conscience is "weak," it is wrong to attempt to pressure him to violate it. How much more should we respect the conscience or judgment of brothers or sisters where there is an honest difference of interpretation, application, or wisdom?

Paul summarizes his point by saying, "Let every man be fully persuaded [or "fully convinced"] in his own mind" (Rom. 14:5).

Related to the concept of soul liberty is the idea that a local church is a voluntary association of regenerated persons. Although believers have a spiritual obligation to join themselves to a local assembly, they are not assigned to one as in a parish system. They therefore have the liberty to make this choice based on conscience and the degree of accord between the ministry in question and their sincere Biblical convictions.

What is true of individual Christians is also true, in varying degrees, of those who are in authority over others. Parents, pastors, and Christian school administrators have an obligation not

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simply to enforce explicit biblical commands but also to practice biblical wisdom when it comes to those in their charge. This authority varies according to the relationship between the persons involved.

The Principle of the Autonomy of the Local Church. A central feature of congregational polity is the autonomy of the local church. The local assembly retains the right and responsibility to manage its own affairs free from the control of any other ecclesiastical body. Local churches may cooperate in various ways to advance the Lord's work. However, each church is free to participate or not as it understands its responsibility to the Lord. Churches must decide what missionaries to support, what activities to become involved in, and what colleges to recommend to their young people. In some cases these decisions are mandated by Bible precept. In other cases they are matters of prudence. In such cases the church can and should make distinctions based on its understanding of Scripture and its sense of its mission and convictions.

A decision not to participate in an activity or not to join an association, for example, is limited in scope. It does not prevent personal fellowship or mutual encouragement. Neither does it necessarily imply that believers or ministries who disagree about certain things cannot participate together in other areas. One is certainly not entitled in these cases to treat the brother with whom one disagrees as an unbeliever or even to insist he is disobedient. In fact, one may need to take pains to indicate that, while there is a strong disagreement, there is still mutual esteem as fellow servants of Jesus Christ.

What Is the Difference?

These principles and examples show, I believe, that the kind of limited participation being discussed here is not simply different in degree, but it is also different in kind from ecclesiastical separation. Separation from a disobedient brother must be based on clear biblical commands or principles, is mandatory, is public, is significant, and is designed to bring about repentance. On the other hand, nonparticipation arises from personal convictions or conscience, is based on prudence, may be limited in scope and public exposure, and often allows the disagreement to remain.

It is true that the closer the cooperation between individuals and institutions the more they must agree. You may have a speaker at your church who believes in and practices a different type of church polity than you do, but you could not plant a church together. (You cannot have different systems of church government on alternating weeks.) It is also true that the term *separation* could apply to this kind of decision. Nevertheless, I believe it is important, in order to safeguard the biblical command to separate from certain types of sinning Christians, that we

understand the disjunction between it and decisions about associations based on prudence or conscience.

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¹ This is a condensation and adaptation of an article published in an earlier issue of *FrontLine* (May/June 2009).

² Even in the case of Matthew 18, the sin for which the offender is eventually separated from the assembly is not the original offense but for refusing to submit to the judgment of the assembly.

³ Romans 14:12: "So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God."



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The Doctrine of the Local Church (Ecclesiology) and Biblical Separation

Introduction

Biblical fundamentalism as a definable movement came into existence in reaction to false teachings by theological liberals,¹ most notably their rejection of fundamental biblical truths, such as the deity of Christ (including His miraculous conception), the sinfulness of humanity and thus the necessity of salvation by God, and the inspiration of Scripture. While the emphasis of battles between fundamentalism and liberalism was theology, these battles took place primarily in churches and denominations. When the fundamentalists realized that they were not going to be able to remove the liberals from the major denominations, they left those organizations and began their own fellowships, associations, and, in some cases, their own denominations.

Foundations Baptist Fellowship International has been one of the movements that initially tried to remove the liberals from the Northern Baptist Convention and eventually left the convention to become a fully separatist fellowship. As this was taking place, a new form of compromise, “New Evangelicalism,” arose. While more conservative theologically, this new movement still rejected important biblical teachings. One of these doctrines that is important to fundamentalists, and especially to fundamental Baptists, is the

New Testament teaching on the nature of the church. A correct view of the church is essential for an accurate understanding of biblical separation.

The Purity of the Church and Separation

A central distinctive of biblical fundamentalism is the belief that the purity of the church or denomination is more important than the unity of that individual church, denomination, or even of Christianity as a whole. Presbyterian J. Gresham Machen expressed this view in his 1923 attack on liberalism.

The Church of today has been unfaithful to her Lord by admitting great companies of non-Christian persons, not only into her membership, but into her teaching agencies. . . . What is now meant is not the admission of individuals whose confessions of faith may not be sincere, but the admission of great companies of persons who have never made any really adequate confession of faith at all and whose entire attitude toward the gospel is the very reverse of the Christian attitude.²

Although biblical fundamentalists are now known for the practice of separation, at first separation was not their goal. Instead, separation for them was a result of their desire to obey God’s Word and keep the church pure. New evangelical Harold

James Ockenga also realized the importance of the doctrine of the church in this debate.³ In his criticisms of fundamentalism he opposed the premillennial, dispensational view of the church so common in the fundamentalist movement.⁴ While not all fundamentalists were thoroughgoing dispensationalists, the movement drew support from dispensationalism's pessimistic view about the future of the institutional church.⁵ Dispensationalism generally taught that apostasy had set in early in church history. Passages such as 2 Timothy 3:1–7, interpreted from a dispensational point of view, taught that the last days would be preceded by large-scale apostasy, eventually led by the Antichrist who would use apostate churches and denominations to carry out his purposes. The result would be the corruption of professing Christendom and the rise of the apostate Babylon church of Revelation 17 and 18.

The fundamentalists' viewpoint required them to separate from any church or denomination that had turned away from the faith and to preserve the purity of the true church until the Lord returned. Motivated in part by their belief that the Lord could rapture His church at any moment, the dispensationalists emphasized personal holiness. This holiness requires that individual believers avoid worldly practices ("personal separation") and that they withdraw from doctrinally corrupt churches and denominations ("ecclesiastical separation").⁶ Faithfulness to the Word of God was more important than faithfulness to any human organization or fellowship.

The doctrine of the church was part (although certainly not all) of the reason for ecclesiastical separation. While leading fundamentalists differed in their views of the church, they agreed as to their core understanding. Their central concept of the church helped mold the character of the separatism of fundamentalism.

Within biblical fundamentalism, fundamental Baptists' understanding of the church was far more consistent with the Scriptural model. For fundamentalist Baptists, the church as an organization (as opposed to the Body of Christ to which all believers belong spiritually) is the *local* church, not a denomination or hierarchy. Believers have the freedom to join the church of their choice, and each local church is independent. It may voluntarily become part of a larger organization, but such organizations have no authority over their member churches. Therefore, fundamental Baptists insist on autonomous local churches that are free from denominational influences.

The Supremacy of the Scriptures

The basis of the fundamentalists' view of the church was their view of the Bible. For them, the Bible, and especially the New Testament, was not just a starting point for the church, from which the church was then free to develop and to take on other forms. Instead, the New Testament established the church's pattern for all times. This belief was a result of the literal interpretation of the Bible commonly practiced by dispensationalists. Chester Tulga, an early spokesman for

Fundamentalism has historically placed its emphasis on the purity of the church . . . even at the price of unity.

the Fundamentalist Fellowship and then of the Conservative Baptist Fellowship⁷ argued that before the development of modernism, almost all Christians were convinced that there was a definite body of truth delivered to the church (Jude 3), although they did not always agree on exactly which of their various interpretations constituted that body of truth. They did agree, however, on the source of that truth: the Scriptures. This truth was to be defended and preserved; it also served as the basis for fellowship.

By the early twentieth century, modernism had denied the final authority of the Scripture. Modernists held, therefore, that

the teachings of Scripture could not be used to limit fellowship between those who call themselves Christians. Experience became the source of truth and basis for fellowship. In the middle of the twentieth century, fundamentalism became concerned that new evangelicalism was following the same path. The fundamentalists believed especially that evangelicals interpreted the idea of being "being born again" so loosely that it had come to mean almost any kind of religious experience. Because of this, the fundamentalists feared that evangelicals would consider almost all modernists as Christians based on their experience, no matter what their doctrine.⁸

Fundamentalists were also concerned about how evangelicals were interpreting the Bible—that they were abandoning "that biblical literalism which opens the Word of God to the average man or woman, and [making theology] a field for specialists for which it was never intended."⁹ Fundamentalism was convinced that the church must be subordinate to the Scriptures, but the evangelicals were making the Scripture subordinate to the experience of the church. The Bible, and the Bible alone, is the church's authority. When it comes to the doctrine and function of the church, Baptists believe that the New Testament is the sole authority, since there was no church in the Old Testament. Fundamentalists separated from those who placed tradition, experience, or any other human authority over or beside Scripture.

Believing Church Membership

The authority of the New Testament over the church has important implications. First, it means that only professing believers can be members of churches and church organizations. In the New Testament no one was accepted for baptism, the Lord's Supper, or church membership until that person had trusted Christ as Savior. Failure to practice this truth means that believers would be religiously joined with unbelievers in violation of 2 Corinthians 6:14–18. Early fundamental Baptists knew that there were some believers in the modernistic ecumenical movement, but they did not belong there. There was no place for genuine Christian fellowship in modernistic churches or organizations. Likewise, when the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) began, unbelievers were welcomed there, but they had no right to be there. The mixture of regenerate and unregenerate people in the evangelical NAE was, to the fundamentalist, no different

from the mixture of regenerate and unregenerate people in the liberal National Council of Churches.

Concern over the issue of a scripturally born-again church membership carried over to fundamentalism's view of evangelistic efforts. Fundamentalists insisted that winning souls was the domain of the churches. Fundamentalists contrasted this with Billy Graham's "cooperative" evangelism. In evangelistic campaigns he worked in partnership with churches and individuals that denied the fundamentals of the gospel that he preached. This included cooperation with modernists who rejected the Bible, the historic Christian faith, the blood atonement, and whose "churches and pastors . . . are definitely unchristian."¹⁰ Moreover, when people who were members of apostate churches made professions of faith in his campaigns, he directed them back to their unbelieving and Christ-denying pastors and churches, in effect sending the lambs back into the care of the wolves. The issue between Graham and fundamentalism was *not* over who should hear the gospel message but over who could be sponsors of the meetings. Could Bible-believers and infidels partner together to promote revival campaigns and turn converts over "to Christians and infidels alike"?¹¹ The biblical fundamentalists answered no to both parts of the question.

Purity Versus Unity

The discussion of the relationship between unity in the churches and purity within the churches was a natural outcome of the preceding issues.¹² Fundamentalism has historically placed its emphasis on the purity of the church (and thus of organizations made up of churches or church representatives), even at the price of unity. Fundamentalism criticized New Evangelicalism for their "almost total lack of interest in purity of doctrine in the church of God." Fundamentalists believed this lack of interest was a direct result of "affirming the inspiration of the Word of God and disregarding its authority."¹³

The fundamentalist emphasis on doctrinal purity was not something to be taken lightly. The custody of the faith is a sacred trust. The purity of this faith is more important to the cause of Christ than any institution. "Since the church was founded to spread the true faith, when this faith is corrupted and compromised, the reason for any church's existence is destroyed."¹⁴

Conclusion

The church is a special creation of God. While not all fundamentalists were dispensationalists, most believed that the church began at Pentecost and that it was specifically or at least especially a New Testament institution. This, however, was not at the heart of the difference between fundamentalism and new evangelicalism, since some of the new evangelicals were also dispensationalists. A more important difference was a common emphasis on the primacy of the local church that included the belief that the universal or invisible church (the Body of Christ) was distinct from the local or visible churches. Apostasy was the expected result of the visible church, and apostasy requires separation. Fundamentalists, in general, were not eager to separate. It was a costly decision from a human standpoint. They gave up buildings, pensions, friends, and position. The belief in the necessity of a pure

church, however, left them no choice. The previous generation had failed in its attempts to remove modernism from the great denominations. The fundamentalists, therefore, had to separate or dishonor God.

NOTE: This is a summary of a chapter of *The Church of the Fundamentalists* (Larry R. Oats ([Watertown, WI: Maranatha Baptist Press, 2017])). Copies may be ordered from <https://www.mbu.edu/seminary/church-of-the-fundamentalists/> or Amazon.

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¹ Theological liberalism, sometimes called modernism, was the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century attempt within Christian groups to make Christianity more acceptable to the modern mind. This was often done by changing or abandoning core biblical teachings.

² J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1923), 159.

³ Harold J. Ockenga, "Foreword," in Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 11.

⁴ Premillennialism is the teaching that Christ will return physically and reign upon the earth, based largely on a literal (i.e., normal) interpretation of promises to Israel in the Old Testament. Dispensationalism, following the same scriptural understanding, holds that the New Testament Church is distinct from national Israel, and that the present Church Age will end with the Rapture of the church, followed by the rise of Antichrist during the Great Tribulation.

⁵ Most fundamentalists were premillennialists; the *Scofield Reference Bible* was their common Bible. Scofield described the visible church as "that visible body of professed believers called, collectively, 'the Church.' . . . The predicted future of the visible Church is apostasy (Lk. 18. 8; 2 Tim 3. 1-8)" (C. I. Scofield, *The Scofield Reference Bible* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1945], 1276).

⁶ Timothy Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism, 1875-1925* (New York: Oxford, 1979), 58.

⁷ The Fundamentalist Fellowship changed its name to the Conservative Baptist Fellowship when it separated from the Northern Baptist Convention.

⁸ Chester Tulga, "More Than Evangelicals," *Sword of the Lord* 22 (27 July 1956), 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁰ John R. Rice, "Cooperative Evangelism," *Sword of the Lord* 24 (20 June 1958): 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² It must be noted at this point that all too often the discussion of unity and purity was not the *result* of theological arguments but the *cause* of the theological study. In some instances the belief in ecclesiastical separation drove the theological discussions, instead of growing out of them. It must be noted, however, that theology frequently develops in this manner. Much of theology historically has grown out of crises.

¹³ Chester Tulga, "Fundamentalism: Past and Future," *Sword of the Lord* 23 (4 October 1957), 12.

¹⁴ Chester Tulga, "The Christian and the Problem of Religious Unity," *Sword of the Lord* 25 (2 January 1959): 11.

Church Discipline

Purity in Love

The fragrance of brotherly love and mutual ministry that flows from the New Testament is a reminder of the Psalmist, “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!” (Ps. 133:1). It is a beautiful picture—brothers and sisters ministering to each other both in times of fellowship and friction, including both encouragement and rebuke, edification and confrontation. Sadly, the New Testament contemplates cases where professing believers trapped by sin resist efforts by their fellow believers to restore them privately. In these cases, wider, more public appeals for repentance from the entire church are needed.

In modern Western culture, however, we are reluctant to practice biblical church discipline, damaging the spiritual health of our people and the purity of our churches. Our culture is increasingly ignorant of scriptural truth, and this has influenced professing Christians to be less committed to the church and to view sin as an entirely private matter. As a result, they often ignore and even resist clear direction from the Head of the Body (Eph. 1:22–23) for how to deal with sin in His church. In this environment, church leaders are often intimidated into inaction.

Church discipline is a family matter (Heb. 12:5–13). When practiced scripturally within the church family, it demonstrates brotherly love in imitation of God for the purpose of holiness. Though scriptural discipline is often caricatured

as unloving, authoritarian, unforgiving, nosey judgmentalism, it offers a path to wholeness and purity that displays the wisdom of God (Eph. 3:10). We desperately need that wisdom to maintain “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). A natural fear comes whenever we find ourselves in these waters—uncertainty about exactly what to do and concern about the consequences. Both leadership and congregation feel vulnerable during such times. But if we earnestly seek God’s wisdom (Prov. 2:3–4), He will give it (Prov. 2:6) and give it lavishly (James 1:5) because God stores up wisdom for the upright as a shield to those who walk with integrity (Prov. 2:7).

What direction about church discipline does our Head provide to His body? We will categorize the New Testament’s teaching in two broad categories drawn from two key passages.¹ In Matthew 18:15–20 the Lord Jesus gives instructions for ordinary church discipline, and in 1 Corinthians 5 the apostle Paul gives instructions for extraordinary church discipline.

Ordinary Church Discipline

Matthew 18:15–20 focuses on two key themes: (1) instructions for how to deal with sin in the congregation, and (2) promises that the church has heavenly authority when it follows these instructions.

How to Deal with Sin in the Congregation. The passage focuses on responding to sin. Jesus refers to “trespass” (18:15), “fault” (18:15), “sin” (18:21), and “trespasses” (18:35). He establishes the procedure for dealing with a brother who has sinned, starting with private confrontation and leading, if necessary, to church action. The steps are as follows: (1) private (“between thee and him alone”); if that fails, (2) representative (“take with thee one or two more” as witnesses); if that fails, (3) ecclesiastical (“tell it unto the church”); and if that fails, (4) excommunication (“let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican”).²

The purpose of the process is restoration, and even the final step of excommunication does not mean complete rejection or shunning. That is how the *Pharisees* reacted to gentiles and tax collectors, but it’s never how Jesus did. He treated them as sinners (cf. Matt. 5:46–47), but as sinners to whom He reached out (Matt. 9:10–11) and who were capable of still being won over (Matt. 10:3; 21:31–32). Therefore, the final step of discipline simply means that you start all over at square one and relate to this one as though he is an unbeliever who still needs the first movements of the grace of God in his heart.

The Authority to Deal with Sin in the Congregation. Not only are we responsible to deal with sin in the church, but Christ has given us the authority to do so. Matthew 18:18–20 contain some well-known promises:

Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

These promises are often claimed by believers in various contexts, but it is important to understand that Christ is giving them in the context of church discipline as described in verses 15–17.³ He is affirming in the strongest terms the authority of the church to deal with an erring disciple. The church, on the authority of Christ, has both the duty and the right to extend or withhold Christian recognition and fellowship in the case of sinning “brethren” based on how they respond to correction. It should be noted that this is talking about how they are to be treated by the church. It is a determination of their relationship to the assembly (“he shall be **to thee** as an heathen man and a publican”), not a determination of their eternal destiny.

Other important passages explain how ordinary congregational discipline is to be carried out. They include Galatians 6:1 and 2 Timothy 2:24–26. In the latter passage Paul instructs Timothy that whenever such communal action is necessary, it is to be carried out in a certain manner (not harshly but gently, instructively, patiently, and with humility) and with a specific purpose—to bring about repentance, to give offenders a serious perspective, and to help them avoid even more serious consequences.

Extraordinary Church Discipline

First Corinthians 5 deals with a publicly known, immoral relationship between a professing believer in the church at

Corinth and his father’s wife. Paul’s treatment of this grievous problem implies that certain situations demand a heightened level of church discipline.

The first question to ask is who, exactly, is the offender? Obviously, the man *professes* to be a Christian. His presence in the Corinthian assembly can be seen by Paul’s use of the phrases “among you/yourself” (5:1, 2, 13) and “judge them that are within” (5:12).⁴ At the same time, the phrase “that the spirit *may be saved*” (5:5) assumes that nothing is *certain* about his genuine spiritual condition. Paul is careful not to draw any conclusions about the man’s salvation. Instead he describes him as “one” (5:1), “he that hath done this deed” (5:2), “him that hath so done this deed” (5:3), “such an one” (5:5), “any man that is called a brother” (5:11), “that wicked person” (5:13). Paul never identifies him outrightly as a “brother” precisely because whether he is one remains to be seen.

Paul is not willing to accept the offender’s claim to be a brother at face value—because his life is inconsistent with his profession.

Paul does not answer the question of whether the man is presently saved. . . . However, future salvation is not a foregone conclusion for any who claim to be fellow believers but are sexually immoral (v. 11). It is not that ethical failure results in the loss of salvation, but that [evidence] of salvation depends in part on ethical progress [i.e., sanctification, cf. 2 Pet. 1:3–11] (Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 209).

Although salvation is by grace through faith and not by works of righteousness (Eph. 2:8–9), there are things that give evidence that a person has been truly born again. These evidences include (1) lifestyle consistent with profession (James 2; 1 John 3; 1 Cor. 6:9–11; 2 Cor. 5:17), (2) perseverance in one’s faith-profession (Luke 8:13; 1 Cor. 15:1ff; Col. 1:21–23; 1 Peter 1:5; Heb. 3:6, 14; 1 John 2:5), (3) divine discipline when one’s lifestyle contradicts that profession (Heb. 12:5–8), and (4) one’s response to discipline (Heb. 12:9–31).

Paul’s “wait-and-see” approach to the offender’s spiritual state is consistent with this scriptural emphasis throughout the NT. Likewise, his immediate and joyful extension of forgiveness and assurance when the offender responds appropriately is equally scriptural (2 Cor. 2:6–11, which interestingly, like 1 Cor. 5:5, also mentions Satan).

If Paul’s evaluation of the offender’s actual spiritual state is unclear, his exhortation to the church in this profoundly serious situation is not. He spells out clearly that the man is to be expelled from the congregation: he should “be taken away from among you” (5:2); he should be “deliver[ed] . . . unto Satan” (5:5); he should be “purge(d) out” (5:7); he should not be associated with (5:9, 11); and he should be “put away from among” them (5:13). Although Matthew 18 also involves restriction of fellowship if the sinning brother will not listen to the church, in the present passage, Paul goes further by insisting that the offender be “deliver[ed] unto Satan” (5:5). This phrase expresses the extraordinary nature of this level of discipline.

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2021

February 1, 2021

Rocky Mountain Regional Fellowship
Westside Baptist Church
6260 West 4th Street
Greeley, CO 80634

February 8-9, 2021

FBFI Winter Board Meeting
Northwest Valley Baptist Church
4030 West Yorkshire Drive
Glendale, AZ 85308
623.581.3115

March 1-3, 2021

South Regional Fellowship
Berean Baptist Church
1405 Hewatt Road SW
Lilburn, GA 30047
252.256.1351

March 8-9, 2021

Northwest Regional Fellowship
Westgate Baptist Church
12930 SW Scholls Ferry Road
Tigard, OR 97223

June 14-16, 2021

Annual Fellowship
Colonial Hills Baptist Church
8140 Union Chapel Road
Indianapolis, IN 46240

July 26-28, 2021

Alaska Regional Fellowship
Hamilton Acres Baptist Church
138 Farewell Avenue
Fairbanks, AK 99701
907.456.5995

October 16, 2021

New England Regional Fellowship
(Meeting with the New England
Foundations Conference)
Heritage Baptist Church
186 Dover Point Road
Dover, NH 03820
603.749.0762

2022

April 4-6, 2022

Northwest Regional Fellowship
Grace Baptist Church
2731 Matson Road
Victoria, BC V9B 4M5
CANADA

2023

April 23-24, 2023

Northwest Regional Fellowship
Monroe Baptist Church
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SOUND WORDS

HOLD FAST THE FORM OF SOUND WORDS—2 TIMOTHY 1:13

First Partaker

The *Mayflower* Pilgrims and God's Providence

On a recent Monday, five other pastors and I met for a meal, fellowship, and prayer. By the time you read this, we will (Lord willing) have met again the second Monday of November to discuss two books we agreed to read. The first is *The Pilgrim Fathers: The Promise and Price of Religious Freedom* (Day One Publications, 2015). The second is one of the most important writings in the history of America, William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation*.

Our selection of books was prompted, of course, by this year's being the 400th anniversary of the voyage of the *Mayflower* and the founding of Plymouth Plantation ("Plimoth" was Bradford's spelling), just up the coast from the base of Cape Cod. We didn't discuss any further plans, but some of us may be wanting to commemorate those unique events with a sermon or special service in connection with this year's Thanksgiving celebrations.

September 6 was the date that the *Mayflower* finally set sail, after a sad series of setbacks which repeatedly nearly scuttled the voyage. The story has been retold to generations of American school children and has exercised a generally ennobling influence upon our national psyche. Sadly, modern historical revisionism tends toward cynicism (for example, William Bradford's wife, Sally, didn't drown by slipping overboard, it's now said, but from dispirited suicide) and caricaturization (e.g., the Pilgrims callously grew corn on the graves of

their buried dead and gloated for twenty-five years over the impaled head of an Indian foe). Ironically, many secularist historians seem blind to the fact that in projecting Bradford as a kind of self-serving revisionist of the facts of the colony, they expose themselves to be shameless practitioners of that very accusation.

We don't want the true character of the Pilgrims' venture to be debased, much less forgotten altogether. This November was a once-in-our-lifetime opportunity to recall and retell (especially to our children) the Pilgrim story as a remarkable display, not so much of human daring or endurance, but of indisputable divine providence. At least half of the passengers on the *Mayflower* were Puritan refugees from religious oppression. They were the Lord's hard-pressed people, our Christian brothers and sisters of yesteryear. We may believe that they mistook certain biblical passages. And we may feel the need to note this respectfully whenever we retell their story. But in this at least they were not mistaken: that it was God alone who was to be glorified for transporting them safely across the stormy, winter Atlantic, landing them intentionally (not mistakenly) on the exact strip of coastal soil where they settled, sustaining them through the harrowing deprivations of disease, weather, and warfare, and granting them, against all odds, an astonishingly slender but secure foothold for unfettered, scriptural living and worship in an entirely new world.

To honor this 400th anniversary I'd like to recover an unabashedly spiritual perspective of the 1620 events. I'll draw from two sources primarily. One, of course, will be Bradford's own account. The second will be from the pen of one who, just eighty years later, asserted the unmistakable hand of God in all that transpired. His name was Cotton Mather, the third-generation American Puritan known best to us as the pastor of Boston's Second Church. He included in his massive *Magnalia Christi Americana* (*The Great Works of Christ*

"The husbandman that laboureth must be first partaker of the fruits"
(2 Tim. 2:6)

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in America, 1702) a brief account, which he began by explaining both his objective for writing and his dependence upon God as he did. He wanted, he said,

to do something that the memory of the *great things done for us by our God*, may not be *lost*, and that the story of the circumstances attending the *foundation and formation* of this country, and of its *preservation* hitherto, may be impartially handed to posterity.

But in Mather's estimation, the greater purpose at work in America's millennia-old isolation from the rest of the inhabited world was divine governance: the overwhelming Providence of the great God is to be acknowledged, as well in the concealing of America for so long a time, as in the discovering of it.

Mather's word *impartially* is significant. It indicates not only that he regarded what he recorded to be verifiable fact, but also that he anticipated that telling it would accomplish his purpose (displaying God's providence) through its own unvarnished character alone. These are considerations which modern historians easily pass over. Nor do they give sufficient consideration to Mather's prayer, in which he pleads specifically that he would be kept from stooping to any underhanded editorializing in order to gain his point.

Grant me thy gracious assistances, O my God! that in this my undertaking I may be kept from every false way: but that sincerely aiming at thy glory in my undertaking, I may find my labours made acceptable and profitable unto thy Churches, and serviceable unto the interests of thy gospel; so let my God think upon me for good; and spare me according to the greatness of thy mercy in the blessed Jesus. AMEN.

William Bradford himself had set the example for this scrupulous factuality. He began *Of Plymouth Plantation* with the claim that he would endeavor to tell the story *in a plain style, with singular regard unto the simple truth of all things; at least as near as my slender judgment can attain the same.*

Providence: The Concealing of America

Cotton Mather began his recounting of Plymouth by calling attention to a historical phenomenon that had persisted, remarkably, almost right up until the colony's founding. He called it the *concealing of America*.

Mather quoted a passage from Plato indicating that the ancient Greek philosopher knew of the existence of *an Island in the Atlantick Ocean . . . larger than Africa*

and Asia put together. Mather referred to the New World expeditions of Columbus, of Spanish explorers, of the fifteenth-century sea captain John Cabot (commissioned under Henry VII), and of English commercial fishermen and settlers who preceded the Pilgrims. Nevertheless, Mather pointed out, despite the discoveries of these and other adventurers, America remained virtually untouched and its native peoples almost entirely isolated from European influence up until the seventeenth century.

It was possible that Satan's work lay behind this, Mather noted. It might have been the Devil who conspired to detain America in this primitive, darkened condition in order to keep its inhabitants *out of the sound of the silver trumpets of the Gospel*. But in Mather's estimation, the greater purpose at work in America's millennia-old isolation from the rest of the inhabited world was divine governance: *the overwhelming Providence of the great God is to be acknowledged, as well in the concealing of America for so long a time, as in the discovering of it.*

The fullness of God's time finally ripened, Mather believed, due to three memorable events: the *resurrection of literature*, the *opening of America*, and the *reformation of religion*. By God's providence, the fifteenth-century printing press came first, followed by America's gradual opening. Then, in turn, came the reformation of religion, pioneered in this spiritually virgin environment by these devoted Pilgrims. And the providentially sheltered beachhead on which they birthed this reformation was divinely provided:

part of America, lying and being in breadth, from **forty degrees** of northerly latitude . . . to the **forty-eighth** degree of the said northerly latitude inclusively, was the spot of **earth** which the God of heaven **spied out** for the seat of such **evangelical**, and **ecclesiastical**, and very remarkable transactions as require to be made a history. **Here** 'twas that our blessed JESUS intended a **resting place** . . . a little accomplishment of his eternal Father's promise to him . . . of **having the utmost parts of the earth for his possession.**

Providence: The Pilgrims' Chief Objectives

In telling the "History of New-England," Cotton Mather deliberately passed over previous English attempts to plant settlers on its coast. His concern was to show that for this particular English plantation, setting on foot *the gospel in these dark regions of America* was not only a **main end**, but the **sole end** of their undertaking.

The people who founded Plymouth were characterized by Mather as being mainly *devout and serious Christians* who desired to *attend the worship of our Lord Jesus Christ with a freedom from humane inventions and additions, but also to enjoy all the Evangelical Institutions of that worship*. In order to achieve this end, they at first *peaceably and willingly embraced a banishment into the Netherlands*.

Mather devotes less than a page to the twelve years

of willing exile the pilgrims spent in Holland. What he highlights is that when they embarked for America, they did so primarily for spiritual reasons. *The concern which they most of all had, he notes, was for their posterity.*

William Bradford had explained the thinking of the separatist exiles in Holland. Here were devout Christians who had sacrificed everything precious in earthly terms, in order to practice scriptural religion. But Bradford explained, *many of their children, because of the great licentiousness of youth in that country, and the manifold temptations of that place, were drawn away by evil examples into extravagant and dangerous courses, getting the reins off their necks and departing from their parents . . . to the great grief of their parents and dishonour of God.* These godly parents, Bradford said, were concerned that *their posterity would be in danger to degenerate and be corrupted.*

And when it came to the final consideration that drove them to the New World, Bradford writes,

Lastly (and which was not least), a great hope and inward zeal they had of laying some good foundation, or at least to make some way thereunto, for the propagating and advancing the gospel of the kingdom of Christ in those remote parts of the world; yea, though they should be but even as stepping-stones unto others for the performing of so great a work.

Providence: God's Protection and Provision

The voyage across the North Atlantic could scarcely have been at a more dangerous season of the year. The Pilgrims had intended to embark in the summer and arrive in the fall. But a disheartening succession of difficulties had so delayed the departure that when at last they left England the menacing winter months loomed up almost immediately.

For sixty-five days the *Mayflower* battled its way against prevailing head winds, the Gulf Stream, and waves that sometimes towered as high as steeples. Sea sickness, foul air, cramped quarters, vanishing provisions, and various illnesses, including an outbreak of scurvy near the end, depleted their physical and emotional reserves day after day. And, of course, these things were just the birth pangs of their sorrows. For when they finally sighted Cape Cod, nothing lay before them but unsettled, untamed winter wilderness; icy, overcast, and grey. No familiar sounds, no docks upon which to offload, no carts to transport their goods, no roads to their destination, no inns, no lights, no fires, no replenishing supplies, no welcomes, no warmth. Just empty, bleak shoreline, bone-chilling cold, wet winds, surf, and silence.

What could now sustain them but the Spirit of God and His grace? May not and ought not the children of these fathers rightly say, "Our fathers were Englishmen which came over this great ocean, and were ready to perish in this wilderness; but they cried unto the Lord, and He heard their voice and

looked on their adversity," etc. "Let them therefore praise the Lord, because He is good: and His mercies endure forever." "Yea, let them which have been redeemed of the Lord, shew how He hath delivered them from the hand of the oppressor. When they wandered in the desert wilderness out of the way, and found no city to dwell in, both hungry and thirsty, their soul was overwhelmed in them. Let them confess before the Lord His lovingkindness and His wonderful works before the sons of men."

Providence: The Mayflower Compact

Of the 102 passengers on the *Mayflower*, almost forty were what the Christians called "strangers." These were settlers (and their servants) recruited by a company of London businessmen hoping to profit from investing in the founding of the colony. Their spiritual sympathies are generally unknown. What is known is that from the beginning there were severe tensions over the arrangements of the financial relations between the Pilgrims, the "strangers," and the London businessmen (the "London Merchant Adventurers," as they called themselves). The disputes created such acrimony that Robert Cushman, a leader among the Pilgrims, wrote to an interested party less than a month before the *Mayflower* left England,

Friend, if ever we make a plantation, God works a miracle, especially considering how scant we shall be of victuals, and most of all ununited amongst ourselves and devoid of good tutors and regiment [leaders and discipline]. Violence will break all. . . . If I should write to you of all things which promiscuously forerun our ruin, I should over-charge my weak head and grieve your tender heart. Only this, I pray you prepare for evil tidings of us every day.

William Bradford passes over the sixty-five days of the voyage in just three paragraphs, much of which are taken up with relating the cases of two ship members: a proud, profane sailor who harassed them unmercifully but was the first to die en route, and a young man named John Howland who was miraculously rescued after being washed overboard during a great storm. We don't know, therefore, how relationships fared between the Pilgrims and the "strangers" during the voyage. But after arriving, and when the master of the ship Christopher Jones decided that the passengers would have to settle at Cape Cod rather than in Virginia, at least some of the mercenaries were so discontented that they determined that once they were ashore, they would break off from the Pilgrims and do as they pleased. This, of course, would reduce the number of able-bodied men who could be counted upon for defense against the Indians and for the heavy labors of felling timber and constructing shelters and fortifications in the dead of winter.

At this critical hour someone suggested the form-

ing up of an agreement to which they would solemnly subscribe their mutual submission. No one knows the author of the short statement which resulted, but its provisions included the colonists' agreement to abide by *laws, ordinances, acts, constitutions and offices* drawn up for the good of the colony, to work together to further a single *civil body politic*, and to do these things *for the glory of God and advancement of the Christian faith*. The document came to be called *The Mayflower Compact*. Not all of the men signed it, but the vast majority (41) did, and Bradford was able to record that the *better part*. . . *clave faithful together* in sticking to it.

Historians consider the *Compact's* significance to lie in its being the first document to provide for democracy in the New World. But surely the greater significance lay in its binding together of two parties with a deep, *spiritual* fissure between them, yet each impossibly small for the immense challenges confronting them immediately. Agreeing to undertake *the glory of God and the advancement of the Christian faith* placed the adventurer "strangers" under an obligation that effectually meant that the Pilgrims, not the secularists, would have final determining say in all things.

Providence: The State of the Indians

William Bradford related sadly that within *two or three months' time, half of their company died*. Records reveal that at least sixteen of these were adult males; leaving only twelve men who were of the Puritan persuasion, and about the same number among the "strangers." How could this handful of emaciated, sickly men possibly withstand the likely event of the Indians' implacable opposition?

What the *Mayflower* passengers did not know was that by the grace of God, they had made landfall at a stretch of New England whose native American population had been nearly extinguished entirely by disease. Mather wrote,

Had they been carried according to their desire unto Hudson's River, the Indians in those parts were at this time so many, and so mighty, and so sturdy, that in probability all this little feeble number of Christians had been massacred by these bloody salvages [sic], as not long after some others were: whereas the good hand of God now brought them to a country wonderfully prepared. . . . The Indians in these parts had newly, even about a year or two before, been visited by such a prodigious pestilence, as carried away not a **tenth**, but **nine parts of ten**, (yea, 'tis said, **nineteen** of **twenty**) among them.

Subsequent investigations have pieced together a remarkable series of events. It seems that about 1616, plague surfaced along the coast of Maine. It swept swathelike down the coast at a width of about fifteen


miles, finally turning inland and burning out in 1619, right about where the Pilgrims landed. Estimates are that 70% or more of the native peoples in that region died, and that the place most completely decimated was the village of Patuxet. It had been a large settlement, housing upwards of two thousand Wampanoag Indians. By the time the *Mayflower* arrived, scarcely a year later, Patuxet lay abandoned; the bones of unburied Indians lying all about. It was here, at Patuxet, situated beautifully and provided with a creek of fresh water, that the pilgrims chose to plant Plymouth.

And yet there were enough Indians surviving at the borders of the region as to provide a buffer from stronger, warlike tribes unreduced by disease. A mighty man named Massasoit, chief of these survivors, would soon agree to a peace treaty for mutual benefit which would endure for twenty-four years. Perhaps even more significantly, among his people was an Indian named Squanto. By the strangest possible twists of providence, this Indian spoke English. It enabled him to serve as the necessary translator between the settlers and Massasoit, to teach them how to ensure the growing of corn, and to acquaint them with many other necessities for their survival. But in addition, his time in England had so impressed him with its powers, that he had told his people that if they attacked these newcomers, King James would destroy them all. Mather relates that he had terrified them with a ridiculous story, *which they believed, that this people kept the plague in a cellar (where they kept their powder), and could at their pleasure let it loose to make such a havock among them, as the distemper had already made among them a few years before*. Mather asked his readers in conclusion, *Who sees not herein the special providence of the God who disposeth all?*

The historic catechisms produced by Bible believers of nearly all denominations (Presbyterian, Congregational, Methodist, and Baptist) ask the question, *What is God's providence?* Almost unanimously they answer, *God's providence is His most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing of all His creatures and all their actions, to His own glory*. After detailing numerous examples of such preservings and governings, the Psalmist stated, "Whoso is wise, and will observe these things, even they shall understand the lovingkindness of the LORD" (107:43).

The story of the Pilgrims in 1620 and afterwards is a shining chapter in our Christian heritage. What ought we to do with it in this 400th anniversary year? William Bradford was the first to raise and answer that question.

May not & ought not the children of these fathers rightly say: Our fathers were Englishmen which came over this great ocean, and were ready to perish in this wilddernes; but they cried unto ye Lord, and he heard their voyce, and looked on their adversitie, &c.? Let them therfore praise ye Lord, because he is good, & his mercies endure for ever.

Amen, and amen! 

Dr. Mark Minnick pastors Mount Calvary Baptist Church in Greenville, South Carolina. You can access his sermons at mountcalvarybaptist.org/pages/sermons/default.aspx.

Bring . . . the Books

Thomas Armitage, *History of the Baptists*

Thomas Armitage's *History of the Baptists* (New York: Bryan, Taylor & Co., 1887) has been one of the most prominent in a long line of books on Baptist history. Armitage was born in England into a Methodist family in 1819. His father and mother died when he was very young. His dying mother gave him her Bible and prayed that he would come to know Christ as his Savior and become a preacher of the gospel. Armitage was soon saved and preached his first sermon when he was only sixteen.

In 1838 Armitage left England for New York, where he became a deacon and then an elder for the Methodists. At his ordination in New York, he expressed doubts about the Methodist form of church government, sinless perfection, falling from grace, and infant baptism. In 1839 he witnessed a Baptist baptism, which led him to a thorough study of the biblical teaching concerning baptism. By 1848 he had become a Baptist, had been immersed, had undergone Baptist ordination, and was the pastor of the Norfolk Street Baptist Church in New York City.

In 1882 Armitage was asked by the publishers Bryan and Taylor to write a history of the Baptists. He set before them the histories that had already been written, showing them the strengths of each one. The reply was that while each had its strengths, they were all narrow studies of one place or era. The Baptists needed a complete history. Armitage wrote to a handful of men he thought better equipped than himself to write such a comprehensive work, but they all to a man responded that he had spent years studying the Baptists before he finally became one and that he was the man to do this work.

Armitage's initial chapter lays out his premise in four significant truths. First, "Christ never established a law of Christian primogeniture . . . making it necessary for one church to be the mother of another." In this declaration he established the right of men such as Roger Williams to simply begin a New Testament church without seeking approval, ordination, or baptism from an already existent church.


Second: "Our Lord never promised an organic visibility to his church in perpetuity, amongst any people or in any age." Christ's promise to His disciples was not that there would always be a visible thread of true churches on earth, but that there would be a web of churches sometimes seen and sometimes not. At times "her organization has been broken, her ordinances suspended, her officers slain, her members ground to powder; but she has come forth again, not in a new array of the same persons, but in the revival of old truths amongst a new people."

Third: "Christ never promised to his churches their absolute preservation from error." Christ's promise to His disciples was that the New Testament would be produced by them without error, but once that was accomplished the promise was ended. "To have pledged them unmixed

purity for all time despite their own self-will was to endow them with infallibility, which is precisely the doctrine of Rome." His history of the Baptists and related groups was therefore a history of truth at times mixed with error, with the ultimate hope that his readers would learn to distinguish the two and practice the truth of the New Testament in their lives and churches.

Fourth: "The world is vastly more indebted to a line of individual men who have contended for the truth, each by himself, than to any organic churches, which can be traced by visible succession from the apostles, under any name whatever." The Landmark Baptist movement claimed that the only true Baptist church was one that could trace its existence back through mother churches to the church at Jerusalem; Armitage was in vigorous opposition to such a necessity. For Armitage, truth was based on Scripture, not on succession.

Armitage was a thorough researcher. He used every source to which he had access and was careful to document them. Many of the works he cites are available to us today, thanks to the digitizing of so many older works. For instance, he begins with John the Baptist and, using T. J. Conant's book *Baptizein*, he argues that *baptizo* in the Greek clearly meant immersion and nothing else (33ff). This was a repudiation of his earlier Methodist baptism and of the baptism of almost all other denominations. Armitage moved on to the life of Christ, to the start of the church at Pentecost, to the apostolic era of the church and the penning of the New Testament, and then on to his thorough study of the history of the churches that sought to pattern themselves after the New Testament and especially those who practiced the ancient rite of immersion.

This work is occasionally reprinted in its original form, and while an original copy is hard to find, the reprints are readily available. There is a scanned version available in Google Books. These contain the nearly two hundred etchings which make Armitage especially valuable. It has also been converted to a fully digital book. Logos has a copy in the Classic Baptist Books collection (produced by Maranatha Baptist University a number of years ago) which is fully searchable and contains all the etchings. There are other digital copies, some of which contain the etchings and some not. Some digital copies do not contain the Introduction (which lays out the cultural milieu of Armitage's day) and the Introductory Chapter (which delineates his four principles for the history and rejection of Landmarkism). 

“. . . when
thou comest,
bring with thee
. . . the books”
(2 Tim. 4:13)

Larry R. Oats is professor of Systematic Theology at Maranatha Baptist Seminary in Watertown, Wisconsin.

But which of you, having a servant plowing or feeding cattle, will say unto him by and by, when he is come from the field, Go and sit down to meat? And will not rather say unto him, Make ready wherewith I may sup, and gird thyself, and serve me, till I have eaten and drunken; and afterward thou shalt eat and drink? Doth he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I trow not. So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do. Luke 17:7–10

What situation or scenario would bring to pass this not-so-subtle rebuke from Jesus to His apostles? To gain an answer we must be careful not to divorce our present parable from all that has preceded it. Going back to Luke 13:10 and through our present text, Luke is giving us insight into Jesus' interaction with various groups of people over the course of what appears to be a single Sabbath day. The people included in these discussions are a ruler of the synagogue (13:14), lawyers and Pharisees (13:31; 14:3; 15:2; 16:14), publicans and sinners (15:1), old and new disciples (16:1; 17:1), and Jesus' apostles (17:5). While addressing certain individuals or groups specifically, Luke's writing of the text indicates that others are always close by and are often privy to Jesus' conversations.

Just prior to our parable, Jesus had informed His disciples of the inevitability of "stumbling blocks" (offences that can cause others to sin). But while the reality of offenses might be inevitable, Jesus warned His disciples against being responsible for such offenses: "But woe unto him, through whom they come! It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones" (Luke 17:1–2). The phrase "little ones" brings thoughts of literal children to mind, but contextually it would seem appropriate to consider this term addressing young or yet immature disciples. Interestingly, however, Jesus seems more concerned with the way in which His disciples will themselves respond to these inevitable offenses: "If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him" (Luke 17:3–4).

Jesus' disciples need to be willing to confront their brother if he sins against them and then, if he repents, forgive him. Additionally, Jesus says, there should be no limit to their willingness to forgive!

Whether or not Jesus was primarily addressing His apostles with these words we cannot know for sure, but

they are the ones who respond. His apostles cry out, "Increase our faith" (17:5). We cannot discount the possibility that this request by the apostles is taking all of Jesus' instruction on this day into account, but it would seem likely that they are most concerned with

Jesus' present commandment. In response Jesus replies, "If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye might say unto this sycamine [i.e., mulberry] tree, Be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea; and it should obey you" (17:6). Given the current discussion, one has to wonder if Jesus is implying that if simple mustard seed-sized faith has the ability to accomplish such an incredible miracle as uprooting a tree and casting it into the sea, surely His apostles possess enough faith to follow this simple directive given to them by their Master!

Jesus now comes to the parable with which we began. In this parable Jesus describes His apostles as small landowners or husbandmen with one servant in their employ. Jesus wonders if whether, after a long day of work as their servant makes his way back from the fields, they will invite their servant to have a seat and be comfortable while they go and prepare a nice meal for him. Jesus knows what answer they will give. They will rather tell their servant to go and properly clothe himself, prepare and serve a meal for them and then, only after they have fully finished eating and drinking, will the servant be free to get supper for himself and sit down to eat and to drink.

In addition, Jesus has another inquiry for His apostles: will they thank their servant because he performed the duties he has been commanded to do? In other words, are they beholden to their servant for the service he has rendered on their behalf? This question is obviously rhetorical in nature, and Jesus expects us all to register the correct response: no! There is no need for any thanksgiving, for this man is a servant!

Jesus Himself then provides the application of the parable. If and when His apostles accomplish the things which they have been given to do, they should not look upon their actions as worthy of the Master's reward or blessing, but should see themselves for what they actually are: simple, unworthy servants.

This parable may be intended to address the apostles' attitude concerning any of the responsibilities listed in this section, but given the immediate context, it seems fair to assume that this parable is designed to address the apostles' immediate struggle with offering forgiveness to those who have sinned against them. And if this is the case, then we learn from this parable that being willing to forgive the sins of others against us is no cause for celebration, or action worthy of the Master's commendation, but simply our duty as one of Jesus' unworthy servants. ☞

**"Rightly
dividing
the Word
of Truth"
(2 Tim. 2:15)**

Back in March 2020 I joined a lot of other Americans to watch ABC's live broadcast of Nik Wallenda walking a tightrope across the gaping mouth of the Masaya Volcano near Managua, Nicaragua. The active volcano rises 2083 feet above sea level and is one of eight volcanos in the world with an active lava lake at its peak. The wire stretched 1800 feet end-to-end, crossing over the center of what is called "The Mouth of Hell." The crossing took thirty-one minutes—thirty-one minutes of walking on a thin wire across a crater that is spewing hot, noxious gases, with cross winds gusting between twelve and eighteen miles per hour in the center. It was a challenge not for the faint of heart.

And yet there was probably little doubt that Wallenda would make the walk successfully. Nik Wallenda is no stranger to such daring feats. He comes from a family of acrobats and tightrope walkers. Wallenda is a seventh-generation member of the Flying Wallendas family. He began participating in circus acts as a child and made his first professional tightrope walk at age thirteen. This is the guy who has set world records by riding a bicycle on a 250-foot-long tightrope suspended 135 feet above the ground. In June 2013 he walked a tight rope across the Grand Canyon. He was the first person to cross directly over Niagara Falls on the high wire. He walked between three skyscrapers in Chicago blindfolded. He certainly had the experience to walk the wire across the volcano.

Though he had years of experience, Wallenda took several precautions for the volcano walk, such as wearing protective goggles and a respirator. He wore special shoes, and of course he carried the critical thirty-foot-long pole that helped him maintain balance. For the volcano walk Wallenda also chose to be harnessed to a safety cable. Losing his balance over a volcanic lava lake would not have a good ending.

Balance in Ministry

If Christians lose their balance in ministry, it also does not have a good ending. Part of the balance Christ's followers must maintain is the work of community. God gave us that picture of the work of community in Paul's letter to the Christians in Ephesus.

And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of

Christ: That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love (Eph. 4:11–16).

Christ the Church Builder gave gifts or capacities for service through men whom He expects to equip the saints. The word "equip" means to strengthen, complete, or in some cases, to repair and prepare for service (Matt. 4:21; Mark 1:19; Luke 6:40). This word comes from the same root that is found in the story of Jesus calling some of His first disciples. Matthew (4:21) and Mark (1:19) relate how Jesus was walking along the shore at the Sea of Galilee on an appointment to find a couple of His followers. He found Peter and Andrew casting their nets into the sea because that is what fishermen do (Matt. 4:18).

Going a little farther down the shoreline, Jesus came upon two brothers: James and John, who were in business with their father Zebedee. Matthew tells us that they were mending their nets. That is what fishermen do. In order to be prepared for the next night's fishing venture, the fishermen had to inspect their nets and mend the torn sections. Then they would set the nets out to dry so they would be ready for the next night's labor.

That, too, is what the gifted men, the evangelists, pastors/teachers, and possibly prophets (in a "forth-telling" sense) do for Christ's saints. The saints gather with all manner of spiritual needs and spiritual deficiencies. The gifted men get busy, working with them to build them up, repair, prepare, and complete them so they are ready for service. We call it community—capable men engaged with saints to prepare them for service.

The work of equipping leads to a unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God. Unity is the desired character of the saints because we each are quite distinct according to Christ's design. His plan for the Church is to fill it with spiritual gifts of many kinds and variations. "When He ascended up on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men" (Eph. 4:8). That does not mean that Christ gave

"To every preacher of righteousness as well as to Noah, wisdom gives the command, 'A window shalt thou make in the ark.'"

Charles Spurgeon

many of the same kind of gifts to the Church. Rather, as Romans 12:1–8 and 1 Corinthians 12:1–31 indicate, Christ gives many different kinds of spiritual capacities for service in His Body. We are one body, but we are engaging with each other according to our capacity to serve. That is what *doing the work of service looks like*. We all contribute to the spiritual growth and strength of the Body while we are becoming more like Christ.

"One Another" Relationships

Down the road from our church facility is a large manufacturing plant. In front of the plant a sign reads, "Mitsubishi Polyester Film." That might strike some people as odd, especially if they drive a Mitsubishi automobile. Someone else might argue that Mitsubishi is not a manufacturer of film or cars, but rather it is the company that built the copy machine in his office. Actually, the Mitsubishi Group is a very large and multifaceted conglomeration made up of forty different companies, all organized under three "houses." To describe the company as diversified would probably be an understatement.

That is Christ's plan for His body: unity in diversity. Each of us is responsible to be engaged in service with others. That is called community. Members of the community of Christ are busily working to build each other up to become more like our Head, Jesus Christ. Practically that is accomplished through "one another" relationships. A quick search through the New Testament reveals that there are over fifty different "one another" passages that explain believers' relationships with each other in the local assembly. Those interactions include everything from washing feet (John 13:14) to loving each other (2 John 1:5).

Part of the goal for community interaction in the local assembly is to help each of us mature so that we do not get swept up in "every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming" (Eph. 4:14 NASB). Herein is the problem. Maturing Christians ought to be able to spot blatant doctrinal error quiet easily. But "the trickery of men" and "craftiness in deceitful scheming" are not so easily spotted. That is the point. What happens when a believer finds more comfort, encouragement, and just generally feels much better after meeting with a "ministry group" of really nice folks that is too often characterized by pooled biblical ignorance? That is what falling off the tightrope on the "community" side looks like.

So is it better for the believer to avoid "community" or too much interaction with other believers who come in various levels of spiritual maturity? One could almost argue that way when we consider how important our identity in Christ is.

There is a threefold statement in Ephesians 4:20–21 that focuses on the importance of learning: "You did not **learn Christ** in this way, if indeed **you have heard Him**, and have been **taught in Him**" (NASB). None of those statements are what we would naturally


expect to read. We would expect to read, you did not "learn **about** Christ," and "if indeed you have heard **about Him**," and you "have been taught **by Him**." This focuses on the point. Growing in Christ, maturing to be like Him, and avoiding doctrinal error happens because our identity is in Christ, not in community.

Christ is not a topic comparable to the focus of our study in education. He is a real being, our Savior, our Teacher. But unlike our relationship with human teachers, our whole identity is fixed in Him. That is why, while we are learning (being sanctified), we are growing into Him.

That learning process involves the renewing the spirit of our minds. The renewing is necessary because we are born in sin, opposed to Christ and His character. That character, that power is the resource of the renewing process. It is not a potential resource, but an "already granted" resource. Peter described it this way: "His divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue: Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust" (2 Pet. 1:3–4). These precious promises are the necessary shoes, pole, goggles, respirator, and safety harness that allow Christ's followers to navigate the high wire of Christian living in a world so influenced by Satan that we might call it "The Mouth of Hell."

If Juan Ponce de Leon had actually found the Fountain of Youth in Florida during his excursion in 1513, do you think he would have shared that discovery with the outside world? Something in me doubts that he would have reacted like the four lepers who were sitting outside the gate of Samaria in Elisha's day when they discovered the Syrians had run off and left all their stuff (2 Kings 7). They quickly concluded they needed to share the good news.

It would have been tempting for Ponce de Leon and his band of explorers to revel in their discovery (if they had found the magic fountain), drinking in all they could and vowing never to leave. We who find such assuaging of our thirst in learning Christ must also guard against falling off the high wire on the that side. Christ's plan for His Church truly expects those of us who learn Christ to be an important part of the community that is involved in the "one another" ministry.

Christ is building His Church according to His plan. It is the perfect plan. It requires His followers to be so identified in Him that we learn Him, that we virtually absorb His character. We will never learn Christ by absorbing the character of our friends. At the same time, Christ's plan requires our interacting with others. What we learn in Christ will always be helpful to encourage others to grow in His likeness. 

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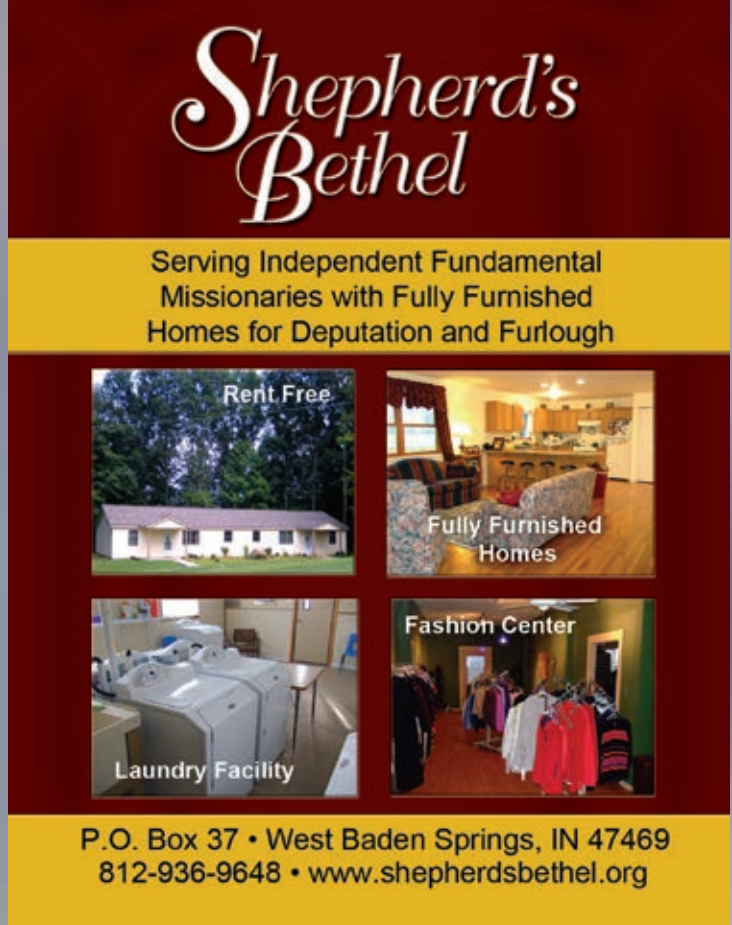
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At this point, several questions suggest themselves. Who is supposed to “deliver” people to Satan? Apostles, to be sure (1 Tim. 1:20) but also the church even in the personal absence of an apostle (1 Cor. 5:4–5).⁵ Who are “candidates” for this extraordinary level of discipline? Professing believers unrepentantly involved in serious, open sin like sexual immorality (but not limited to that particular sin since Paul commands the church to deliver “such an one as this” to Satan, 1 Cor. 5:5). Other cases in the New Testament include someone who has rejected (lit., pushed away, shoved aside) faith and a good conscience and is blasphemous in word or life (1 Tim. 1:20), someone who teaches false, injurious doctrine (2 Tim. 2:17–18), and someone who resists apostolic teaching (2 Tim. 4:14–15). Together, these passages suggest that the sin compromises of the Christian message in teaching or in conduct.

Even so, the desired outcome of this discipline is not condemnation and permanent separation. Rather, there are several constructive goals: (1) physical chastisement and spiritual cleansing centering on the destruction of the offender’s carnal desires (“for the destruction of the flesh,” 1 Cor. 5:5); (2) spiritual rehabilitation (“that the spirit may be saved,” 1 Cor. 5:5); and (3) the purity of the church (1 Cor. 5:6–7).

What is meant by “delivering” one to Satan? Charles Hodge identified two major interpretations “from the earliest times.” One view is that it simply refers to disfellowshipping and excommunication. Mere removal from the church’s fellowship, however, does not seem to account adequately for several factors: (1) Paul’s assertion in 1 Timothy 1:20 that he *personally* delivered two individuals to Satan, which seems to convey more than that he simply refused to fellowship with them or even that he excommunicated them on the church’s behalf; (2) the explicit terminology of “delivering to Satan,” as opposed to terminology indicating simply “excommunication from fellowship” (cf. Matt. 18:15–17); and (3) the fact that other examples of sin result in commands for excommunication (Matt. 18; 2 Thess. 3), but not in the harsh terms of delivering them to Satan. These factors suggest that 1 Corinthians 5 and 1 Timothy 1 set forth a distinct, extraordinary, and even more sober level of church discipline.

Consequently, others believe that “delivering to Satan” involves spiritually placing that person under the power of Satan. It is a *conscious, specific, deliberate, and express act*⁶ in response to extreme, public, and unrepentant cases of blasphemy in life (immorality) or doctrine (active, public heterodoxy). It is necessary because these are areas where public sin gravely threatens the moral purity (1 Cor. 5:6) or doctrinal purity (2 Tim. 2:17–18) of the church. That it includes expulsion and disfellowshipping is obvious from the other terminology used (“take away,” “purge,” “do not keep company,” “put away”). But the scene depicted in 1 Corinthians 5:4–5 especially suggests a solemn and public pronouncement of this specific intention in the context of a public assembly.

Even for those who see “delivering to Satan” as equivalent to expulsion or excommunication and nothing more, it is a serious, sober, and sometimes necessary step in a process that aims not at punishment but at restoration—or perhaps at conversion, if that is the need. When and if the final and churchwide level is reached, that is not only a step of separation, but a final step of appeal. When one voice has been

insufficient, and the voices of a representative few unheard, the hope is that the united voice of the church corporate will have weight. Scripture directs us to exercise this discipline publicly only when (1) the sin is publicly known and/or potentially contaminating if left unaddressed,⁷ and (2) the guilty party is unrepentant and unresponsive to private efforts at restoration. And if the person who is so disciplined repents, the appropriate response is congregational forgiveness as described in 2 Corinthians 2:5–11.

Conclusion

There is an abundance of mercy in the Scripture process. In Matthew 18 no specific time limit is identified between steps, and even in the case of the false teacher in Thyatira Jesus Himself gave “space to repent” (Rev. 2:21).⁸ Nor should the three-phase process in Matthew 18 be understood to limit discipleship efforts to three appeals only.

The ultimate aim of any disciplinary action is not to judge but to restore. If discipline is successful, as evidenced by the offender’s godly sorrow and true repentance, Scripture commands genuine forgiveness. But for church discipline to be effective, the Christian community must act in solidarity. It is sad but true that this solidarity is often lacking in the fragmented independence of our American Christian community. This, however, is no excuse for a church to ignore the discipline of another assembly.

Church discipline is a serious matter, particularly in the extreme moral or doctrinal cases that require excommunication. It is damaging and dangerous to the body when the church (like the Corinthians) displays a nonchalant, even arrogant, posture toward the offense. We imperil the health and holiness of Christ’s church by failing to follow Christ’s directives and to trust Him with the results.

Church *discipline* is a means of *discipleship*. It is a necessary part of God’s process in equipping His people to do the work of the ministry, in helping us all grow up to maturity, into a Body that corresponds to our holy Head (Eph. 4:11–16). When discipline is faithfully and scripturally implemented, believers will build each other up through a loving watchfulness over each other (Heb. 3:12–12). The resulting environment will optimize spiritual growth (2 Tim. 2:19–21), keep the church distinct from the world while it is in the world (Eph. 5:3; 1 Pet. 2:12; 4:4), and nourish a more faithful and effective reflection of Christ to the world (Matt. 5:16; 1 Pet. 2:12).

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¹ For a thorough and helpful discussion of church discipline, see chapter 6 of Gregg R. Allison’s excellent book *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Crossway: 2012).

² Incidentally, don’t forget that the one recording this teaching is Matthew, *the tax collector*.

³ In fact, these promises are bookended by two indisputably clear references to the same subject—how to win a sinning brother (18:15–17 and 18:21–22, followed by a lengthy parable on the

same subject in 18:23–35). Matthew 18:18 duplicates the language of 16:19 in connection with the giving of the keys of the kingdom. In 16:19 it pertains to extending recognition of who has access to heaven, based on their confession of Christ. In 18:18 it pertains to extending Christian recognition and fellowship based on one's response to his or her accountability to the community of God's people. In both cases the actions and pronouncements of the church on earth reflect and ratify the previous determination in heaven (not vice versa). Another indication that Matthew 18:18–20 is a continuation of 18:15–17 is the language used: "If two of you shall agree (lit., *symphonize*) on **earth** as touching any thing (lit., any *pragma*, a word that often has judicial connotations) that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in **heaven**"—ties back to the "**earth** . . . **heaven**" language in 18:18, which expands on the issue addressed in verses 15–17 regarding the church's dealing with a sinning member of the community. (It is a first plank in the platform to which Paul will later add in 1 Cor. 5.) "That we have not left the topic of how to deal with sin is indicated by the following passage . . . so that this unit is sandwiched contextually by this one topic" (Bock, *Jesus According to the Scriptures*, 244–45).

⁴ Of the two people involved in this moral sin, only the man is a professing believer and therefore only the man is the subject of church discipline. The woman appears to have no connection to the church since she is not included in the discussion or in the disciplinary action commanded.

⁵ If one argues that this act requires a direct, personal apostolic command and is therefore no longer applicable, what is to prevent that argument from being extended to virtually any direct apostolic command in the epistles?

⁶ Luke 22:31 is perhaps the closest parallel concept.

⁷ Unresolved personal conflicts (Matt. 18:15–20); divisiveness (Rom. 16:17–18; Titus 3:10); false teaching (Gal. 1:8–9; 1 Tim. 1:20; 6:3–5; 2 John 9–11; Rev. 2:14–16); sexual immorality (1 Cor. 5:1–13); and any unrepentant practice of sin: greed, anger, gossip, bitterness, etc.

⁸ That Jesus Himself calls His churches to exercise discipline with its errant members is clear from His rebuke to Pergamos for harboring (Rev. 2:14–16) and to Thyatira for *permitting* (Rev. 2:20) teachers in the church whose doctrine induces lawlessness, immorality, and idolatry.

Church Discipline: Delivering Over to Satan?

What might it "sound" like to "deliver . . . one [over to] Satan"? The first thing to note in 1 Corinthians 5 is the express appeal to the authority (name) and power of Christ (5:4). He alone possesses the ultimate authority and power for such permission (cf. Luke 22:31). At the same time, Christ committed to Peter (Matt. 16:19) and the disciples (Matt. 18:15–18), and hence to the church, the "keys to the kingdom." These passages seem to provide an analogy to the authoritative carrying out of this level of discipline within the church. The following prayer seeks to model a sober and scriptural approach to such an extraordinary level of church discipline. (References are to 1 Corinthians unless otherwise marked.)

O Lord, by Your gracious calling You have translated us out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of Your beloved Son. We are Your cultivated field [3:9] from which You harvest glory to Yourself. You have indwelt us by Your Spirit, making us Your holy temple [3:16–17]. But defilement has entered your temple [3:17a]—defilement over which your indwelling Spirit grieves [3:16; Eph. 4:30], over which we Your people mourn [5:2], over which even the watching world stumbles [5:1], and which defiles Your holy temple and therefore deserves Your destruction [3:17].

Father, we are gathered together in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ [5:4] who, in just such a context as this, promised His presence wherever two or three gather in His name [Matt. 18:20], and who granted to His disciples the keys of the kingdom that we should, by His authority, proclaim both the remission and retention of sins already decided in heaven and revealed in Your Word [Matt. 18:18]. You are our witness, Lord, that we have followed the injunctions of Your Word [Matt. 18:15–17] and earnestly sought to recover this one from sin and defilement. But he is resolute in the pursuit of what You Yourself condemn. Were he a worldling who made no claim to Christ and professed no attachment to Your church, we would have no authority or desire to judge in this matter [5:12a, 13a]. But You have commanded us to judge those that are within [5:12b], so

that we have no choice but to obey You and to consider him a heathen [Matt. 18:17].

Therefore, by the power of our Lord Jesus Christ [5:4], who has given His sacred assurance that whatever Your people agree on earth will be done [Matt. 18:19], and who alone possesses the ultimate authority to give anyone into the hand of the wicked one [Job 1–2; Luke 22:31], we solemnly agree, by Your power and according to the charge of Your Word, to deliver this one over to Satan [5:5]. As we, in obedience, remove this wicked person from our midst [5:13], we ask You to remove him from the blessings and protections of attachment to the people of God, from the promises of assurance and provision in Your Word, from the benefits of any association with Christ's kingdom. Grant to Satan, Your enemy-slave, whatever degree of permission You please. Set this one loose in Satan's domain and give the wicked one as much leash as You see fit. Make him a prey to the powers of the kingdom of darkness, for the destruction of his flesh with its carnal appetites, its mind which is enmity against You and leads to death [Rom. 8:7], its will that is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be [Rom. 8:7].

O heart-knowing God [Acts 1:24; 15:8], You know it gives us all pain and no pleasure to take this action or pray this way. Our only pleasure resides in the hope "that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." So in wrath remember mercy. But do whatever is necessary, both in this one, and in each of us, to purge and purify Your church. Grant Your people who hear these things to fear [Acts 5:11]. Grace us to detect and reject even the leaven of little sins that will work insidiously and relentlessly to defile us [5:6]. Grace us to remember the sacrifice of Christ, our Passover Lamb who bore Your righteous wrath in our place, that we may observe continually the feast of salvation to which You have called us, purging out the leaven of our old lives of sin and corruption from which You delivered us, pursuing a life of transparent genuineness and loyalty to our profession of faith in Christ [5:7–8].



Accountability to the Local Church

The Case for Separation in Church Discipline

Of all the ways that biblical separation should apply—whether to worldliness and those who love it, heresy and the false teachers who promote it, or blatant, unrepentant sin—the separation that occurs in church discipline is perhaps the most hopeful. Its goal is not merely to purge the church of troublesome people but to purge people of their troublesome sins so that they can become genuinely growing and fruitful believers. Forgiveness and restoration must be the focus. Simply put, if professing believers persist in acting like the unregenerate, the church may have to profess that they may, in fact, be unregenerate. Repentance is the only right response for the person under church discipline. The church does not declare in anger, “Get out, and stay out!” but rather declares in love, “Get right, and stay right!” Although there are other important passages of Scripture that further explain church discipline, Matthew 18 explains the process.

The two words “Matthew 18” are often used by Bible believers as synonymous with the words “church discipline.” Sometimes the concept of church discipline is reduced to verses 15–20 or even to verses 15–17, but doing so takes the process out of context, a possibly unintended consequence of a heading embedded in the text of the *Old Scofield Reference Bible*. Since Dr. Scofield placed the essential verses under the heading, “Discipline in the future church,” it is possible to disconnect the steps of action in those verses from the context of childlike humility and trust found in the beginning of the chapter, and the patient, persistent forgiveness in the last section of the chapter.

Another example of letting an editorial comment dominate the text is in Scofield’s heading to verse 20, where he inserts “the simplest form of a local church.” Nevertheless, the Lord’s point is primarily that the God-ordained process of church discipline affirms that they are gathered together in an act of church discipline! When a celebrity preacher promises and promotes the notion that all you need to insure that God will

answer your prayer for riches or healing simply by recruiting a fellow believer to “agree to believe with you,” he wrests this Scripture. On the contrary, the promise made here is that when the church follows the process Jesus taught regarding unrepentant church members, the Lord Himself is present and in agreement with the decision. Literally, verse 18 states, “Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be *dedemena* [having been bound] in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be *lelumena* [having been loosed] in heaven.”

God is not bound by merely human decisions but has promised to work through obedient believers who follow His process of accountability. That is why it is important to follow the prescribed steps taught by the Lord. The implied first step in church discipline is self-discipline. We are to “trust and obey.” But when sin occurs and the sinner refuses to take responsibility, to repent in his heart, and to confess to God and any others involved, another believer with knowledge of the sin must go to the offender alone seeking his restoration. If restoration is rejected, the next step is for the one who has confronted the sinner to take one or two others for another confrontation so that the sinner’s response can be witnessed. If that fails, the matter is taken to the congregation. In that case, rather than just two or three believers praying, there is a larger company of friends involved in prayer. Think of it as the increasingly broader ripples of prayer that begin with the initial confrontation moving out in increasingly larger circles.

Going before the Church

Finally, it may be necessary to take the official step of removing the offender from the church. Thus the believers seeking to restore their brother change their approach from one of Christian fellowship to one of focused evangelism. A church member under church discipline is, according to Matthew 18:17, more like a “heathen” who shows no true understanding of the saving grace of the gospel, or the

“publican” who is too proud to humble himself before the Savior. The “heathen man and the publican” are candidates for evangelism, not fellowship with the church. In this context, verse 20 provides comforting assurance that God has ordained this process and will be present with those who obey it.

It is a common complaint of unbelievers that Christians take the Bible out of context when presented with something unbelievers do not understand or refuse to believe. Yes, believers sometimes do take things out of context, often unintentionally, or through ignorance. Without a well-informed biblical world view, a believer might reject a clear biblical teaching because it seems contrary to his view of the meekness and love of Christ. The often-stated mandate to “follow the teachings of Jesus” as sufficient for salvation and spiritual growth, seems not to prepare such a one for Matthew 18, a chapter that consists in its entirety, except for three transitional verses, of Christ’s teachings. A quick glance at a red-letter edition of the Bible should provide all the evidence required that whatever Matthew 18 teaches, it was taught by Jesus Himself. Consequently, to understand the disciplinary steps Jesus taught in Matthew 18:15–20, the reader must consider the context of the entire chapter and its emphasis on loving accountability. Clearly, Matthew 18 teaches believers how they are to treat their offending brethren. To reject the requirement of eventual separation in the church discipline of an unrepentant, sinning believer is naïve at best, and possibly rebellious, regardless of the good intentions of one trying to protect the Savior from the appearance of meanness. The person who bases his view of Matthew 18 on the claim, “I just can’t imagine that Jesus would say such a thing!” should examine whether he is trusting the God of the Bible or a god of his own imagination.

The larger context of the verses on church discipline is not just the one found in Matthew 18 but in the entire Book of Matthew. Christ’s first sermon, the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7, introduces the important message of life in the kingdom of heaven. By the time we arrive at chapter 18, Peter is asking Jesus, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Christ responds with a lesson on the greatness of humility, with the specific response in verse 4, “Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” The humility of childlike faith is a mark of true greatness. Yet some do not have that humility; they want to follow their own path and are led astray. “Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish.” (v. 14). Just as the shepherd leaves the flock, going into the mountains to seek the one that has gone astray (v. 12), Jesus instructs believers to go after the one who has gone astray, to restore him to fellowship with the assembly (vv. 15–20), even if that effort requires them to demonstrate that a stubborn refusal to repent is inconsistent with the rebel’s profession of faith. True repentance is essential to true forgiveness.

Again, Peter seeks clarification and details, “Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?” (v. 21). The Lord Jesus answers with a parable about forgiveness, driving home the point that mature accountability is the fruit of a loving, forgiving response to believers’ sins. The ultimate goal is restoration to genuine fellowship. In the same way the ultimate goal of all discipline is restoration to genuine fellowship if at all possible.

In practice, the prior step of self-discipline should make church discipline unnecessary. Just as a well-structured home life provides the necessary discipline for children to come to the maturity of self-discipline, so does the well-ordered church provide the necessary accountability to its members with regard to the accountability of a loving, private confrontation from a loyal brother when necessary. Rejection of that approach invites a weightier confrontation from two or three believers who illustrate the cooperation of biblical fellowship. Thus, the confrontation is between those who represent the loving fellowship of the church and the corporate response to one who rejects accountability to the church. Accordingly, if the appeal of the representatives is rejected, they must report to the church what they have witnessed (vv. 16–17).

Two Clarifications

Two helpful clarifications are appropriate. The “witnesses” in this process are not necessarily witnesses to the original offense, but to the offender’s response to the confrontation. An old commentary stated that everyone who is placed under church discipline is disciplined for “contumacy,” or the stubborn refusal to be held accountable. Webster defines it as “stubborn refusal to submit to authority.” Thus, all church members who are placed under church discipline are disciplined for the same sin: contumacy. We seldom use this word today, but the concept is important because the sinner is the focus and not just the sin. Most Baptist churches include in their church constitutions something about discipline. The following paragraph is quoted from the constitution of the Faith Baptist Church of Taylors, South Carolina.

Concerning Discipline of Members: Members who persist in sin after the scriptural procedures found in Matthew 18:11–22 have been exercised are to be excluded from the fellowship of the church and from the Lord’s table, as commanded in II Thessalonians 3:6–15, Titus 3:10–11, and I Corinthians 5:4–8. Mere termination of membership is not scriptural discipline. All excluded brethren are to be held up in prayer and encouraged to repent at every contact with another member of this church.

The concept of separation in church discipline is that believers in the local church must follow the command to disassociate from those who stubbornly refuse to be accountable to their fellow believers. But, treating a professing believer like a heathen or a publican does not mean that all contact is to be cut off. All sincere believers understand the importance of evangelistic contact with “heathen and publicans.” Prior to discipline, relationships are based on biblical principles of fellowship. Discipline does not end the relationship, it changes it. All contact with the one disciplined is like the contact we have with unsaved neighbors or friends. Believers are to behave toward the unsaved with an awareness of their spiritual needs. Every opportunity for evangelism must be pursued; every effort toward restoration must be made. But there must be a separation from sin. Contumacy is an offense to the Lord and His church. Evangelistic zeal leads to actual pleading with sinners to come to Jesus. Likewise, church discipline should lead to prayer and pleading for

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Lessons from John Newton's Letter "On Controversy"

John Newton is best known as the slave-trader-turned-pastor who wrote "Amazing Grace." However, Newton's greatest gift may have been writing letters.¹ Newton wrote thousands of letters, in which he counseled friends, family members, acquaintances, and even strangers who wrote him seeking advice.

Once, Newton received a letter from a fellow pastor who planned to publish an article refuting what he believed to be the unbiblical teachings of another pastor. Newton did not attempt to dissuade the pastor from writing; instead, he challenged him about how to do so profitably. Newton urged his new friend to examine his motives and to strike a tone that was gentle and lowly. Newton's letter, now known as "On Controversy," is a treasure trove of godly wisdom. It rings true especially in our modern context of Twitter "roasts" and "discernment bloggers." In this environment, it is very easy to say something in the hearing of hundreds or thousands of people that you later regret. We need Newton now more than ever.

The rest of this article consists of quotes from Newton's letter.² I have reproduced about fifty percent of it and added headings to help distill the lessons.³ May the Lord drive these ten points deep into our hearts, and may we engage in controversy in the spirit of John Newton.

"Consider Your Opponent"

1. Pray for him.

As to your opponent, I wish that before you set pen to paper against him, and during the whole time you are preparing your answer, you may commend him by earnest prayer to the Lord's teaching and blessing. This practice will have a direct tendency to conciliate your heart to love and pity him; and such a disposition will have a good influence upon every page you write.

2. If he is a Christian, love him like a brother.

If you account him a believer, though greatly mistaken in the subject of debate between you, the words of David to Joab concerning Absalom, are very applicable: "Deal gently with him for my sake." The Lord loves him and bears with him; therefore you must not despise him, or treat him harshly. The Lord bears with you likewise, and expects that you should show tenderness to others, from a sense of the much forgiveness you need yourself. In a little while you will meet in heaven; he will then be dearer to you than the nearest friend you have upon earth is to you now. Anticipate that period in your thoughts; and though you may find it necessary to oppose his errors, view him personally as a kindred soul, with whom you are to be happy in Christ forever.

3. If he is an unbeliever, have compassion on him.

But if you look upon him as an unconverted person, in a state of enmity against God and his grace (a supposition

which, without good evidence, you should be very unwilling to admit), he is a more proper object of your compassion than of your anger. Alas! "He knows not what he does." But you know who has made you to differ. If God, in his sovereign pleasure, had so appointed, you might have been as he is now; and he, instead of you, might have been set for the defense of the gospel. You were both equally blind by nature. If you attend to this, you will not reproach or hate him, because the Lord has been pleased to open your eyes, and not his.

"Consider the Public"

4. Do not drive away unbelievers by exasperating them.

If you write with a desire of being an instrument of correcting mistakes, you will of course be cautious of laying stumbling blocks in the way of the blind or of using any expressions that may exasperate their passions, confirm them in their principles, and thereby make their conviction, humanly speaking, more impracticable.

5. Do not drive away unbelievers through your ungodly spirit.

[Unbelievers] are very incompetent judges of doctrine; but they can form a tolerable judgment of a writer's spirit. They know that meekness, humility, and love are the characteristics of a Christian temper; and though they affect to treat the doctrines of grace as mere notions and speculations, . . . yet from us, who profess these principles, they always expect such dispositions as correspond with the precepts of the gospel. They are quick-sighted to discern when we deviate from such a spirit, and avail themselves of it to justify their contempt of our arguments. The scriptural maxim, that "the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God," is verified by daily observation. If our zeal is embittered by expressions of anger, invective, or scorn, we may think we are doing service of the cause of truth, when in reality we shall only bring it into discredit.

6. Do not embolden those who agree with you to scorn your opponent.

Whatever it be that makes us trust in ourselves that we are comparatively wise or good, so as to treat those with contempt who do not subscribe to our doctrines, or follow our party, is a proof and fruit of a self-righteous spirit. . . . Yea, I would add, the best of men are not wholly free from this leaven; and therefore are too apt to be pleased with such representations as hold up our adversaries to ridicule, and by consequence flatter our own superior judgments. Controversies, for the most part, are so managed as to indulge rather than to repress his wrong disposition; and therefore, generally speaking, they are productive of little good. They provoke those whom they should convince, and puff up those whom they should edify.

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A background image of a young man with dark hair and glasses, smiling and looking down at an open book. The image has a blue tint.

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A Three-Dimensional Matrix

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if that task were not hard enough, another dimension also affects this matrix.

The Personal Dimension

It is the *personal* dimension. Decisions about fellowship and separation always involve other persons. The personal dimension requires us to ask not only what differences might affect our fellowship, but also what the others' attitudes toward those differences might be. We will ask how strongly they are identified with the differences, whether they are able to avoid making them an issue for the sake of the desired fellowship, whether they are changing in their views, and if so, in what direction they are moving.

It would be impossible to draw up a list of rules that would cover every conceivable decision about fellowship and separation. Certainly, the Bible never offers one. Some situations are clear; others require a greater exercise of judgment. In these judgment calls, brethren will sometimes differ, partly because they perceive the personal dimension differently. If we exercise bad judgment, we should expect our brethren to challenge us.

At least some limitations upon fellowship must be viewed as separations. Should the word "separation" be reserved only for the most severe limitations, those which are responses to clear disobedience involving important biblical doctrines? Possibly so, but Luke speaks of Paul and Barnabas separating over an emphasis in ministry. I am inclined to think that we can legitimately use the label "separation" for any limitation of fellowship that arises

from a disagreement over Christian belief, duty, affection, or priorities. Whether we speak of separation or simply of noncooperation, however, we are really talking about the same thing.

Consequently, I see fellowship and separation as correlative terms, inversely proportional to one another. To the degree that we can legitimately fellowship, we are not separated. To the degree that we separate, we are limiting our fellowship.

In any event, the decision to fellowship or to separate is not like a simple, on-off switch. We may well separate at some levels (say, church membership) while nevertheless fellowshiping at other levels (say, sharing a platform). For example, the Presbyterian minister Ian Paisley would never be qualified to become a member of a Baptist church, but he regularly appeared with Baptists on conference platforms.

In this short discussion I have outlined the major considerations that go into making decisions about fellowship and separation. I have tried to show why questions of fellowship and separation do not always have easy, yes-and-no answers. With those who deny the boundary doctrines, the decision is fairly simple: no fellowship can exist. Among those who profess loyalty to the true gospel, however, decisions about fellowship and separation require wisdom and skill. No wonder these decisions are sometimes the focus of controversy! Yet we cannot avoid making them, so we must try to choose carefully. Recognizing all three dimensions of the matrix will help us to do that.

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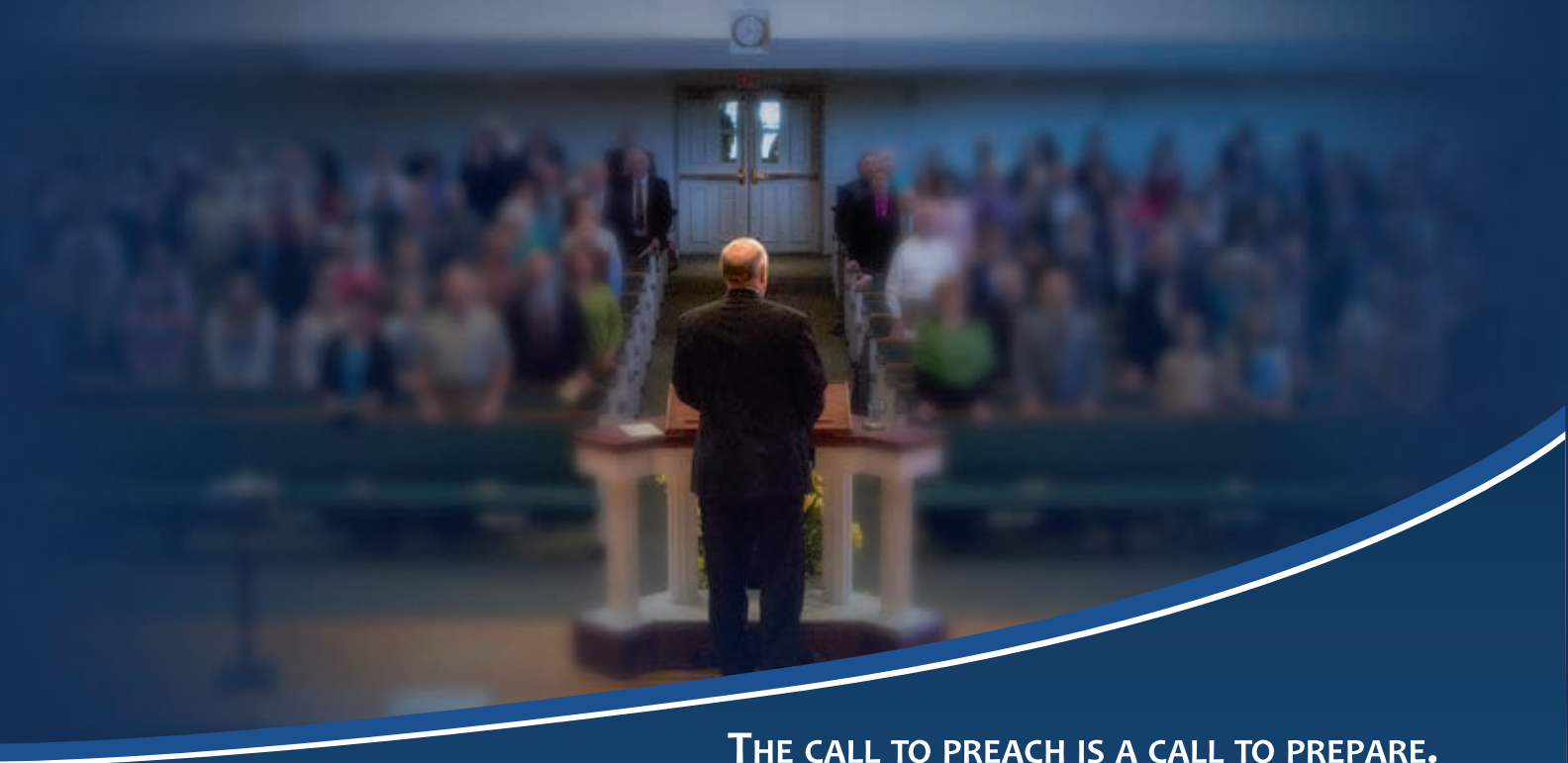
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FrontLine Magazine

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ON LANGUAGE & SCRIPTURE

After forty columns and almost seven years, it's time for me to resign from my *FrontLine* column, *On Language & Scripture*. I thank John Vaughn and Kevin Schaal for affording me the privilege of serving you. But I've taken on a new and more demanding role at Faithlife, one in which I'm tasked with writing very similar content—and I need to give my employers first dibs on that content. (If my regular readers are interested, look out for "Word Nerd: Language and the Bible" on YouTube and in *Bible Study Magazine*.)

I want to write a farewell column that is also a thank-you column, because I don't know when or if I'll get another chance like this. I want to thank the one man most responsible for whatever ability I have to rightly divide the word of truth: Mark Minnick.

Growing up, I heard far too many Bible interpreters saying things that just didn't come from the text. But Dr. Minnick, my pastor since I was sixteen, preached the *Bible*. I wanted to be like him. Still do.

It was my respect for Pastor Minnick that led me to join FBFI. If he thought it was worth his time to be a part of FBFI, then I thought I should pay attention to it too. It was my respect for Dr. Minnick that led me to pursue a degree that was almost terminal. It was also my respect for Mark Minnick—I want to say this—that led me into my work on the King James Version. I love the KJV, and I absolutely do not believe that anyone should throw it away. But Pastor Minnick told my college and career Sunday school class twenty years ago that the divisive and false doctrines of KJV-Onlyism (which FBFI has repeatedly denounced) were eating up fundamentalism, and that we needed to push back. It took a while, but I finally did take up his charge.

I esteem Pastor Minnick highly in love for his work's sake, even though I moved away and haven't been a member of his church for five years. I think of him all the time, I quote him till people in my church wonder what's wrong with me, and I frequently ask God for the gracious spirit he modeled.

Language is fun in its own right, but I got into the study of language because of my interest in Scripture, in interpreting and preaching it rightly—like Mark Minnick does. He once said that expository preaching is caught as much as taught; I think that's true of a sound approach to language and Scripture. Thank you, Pastor Minnick—and thank you, *FrontLine* readers.

Mark Ward, PhD, is editor in chief of Faithlife's *Bible Study Magazine*.



Redundant as the title may sound, it's not. The evangelical academic world has for some time been occupied with grasping and expressing a comprehensive yet concise statement of the theme of the Bible as a whole. As my previous column noted ("The Bible as Story"), this isn't really new. But a biblical theology of the Bible is different than a systematic theology of the Bible.

Systematic Theology

Systematic theology (ST) is *the logical synthesis, categorization, and organization of teachings derived deductively from the full breadth of Scripture, including logical inferences, and characterized by culturally relevant articulation*. ST collects and arranges the teaching of Scripture on a whole range of important doctrinal topics agreed upon by theologians and applied as a sort of topical grid superimposed on the Bible. What exactly does the whole Bible teach about God, angels, man, sin, Christ, the Holy Spirit, salvation, the church, and last things? That list of topics comprises the basic table of contents (with minor variations and occasional rearrangements) of virtually any ST you might pick up.

ST is an invaluable and essential theological discipline and pedagogical tool for the church. Without ST we would have less appreciation for the Bible as a holistic, unified, self-consistent, univocal vehicle for communicating God's revelation on every topic necessary for man's knowledge and welfare.

Biblical Theology

Biblical theology (BT) is *the discovery and expression of the message that emerges from the Bible when explored inductively on its own terms and interpreted in its own context*. This inductive exploration employs the tools of historical, literary, and exegetical disciplines. BT can be conducted on the level of topics or themes (a theology of grace or a theology of divine wrath), books (a theology of Romans or Ecclesiastes), corpuses (a theology of the Pastoral Epistles or John's Writings), testaments (a theology of the Old Testament), or the whole Bible. The goal of BT is the theology of the biblical authors themselves, expressed in terms of their own vocabulary and emphases.

BT is a distinct but equally invaluable and essential theological discipline and pedagogical tool for the church. Without BT we would have less appreciation for the Bible as an organic, multivocal, historical-literary vehicle for communicating God's revelation on a wide variety of issues not usually included in ST, but equally intended for our instruction, edification, and enrichment.

A sound, wholesome theology requires maintaining (a) a healthy appreciation for both ST and BT, and (b) a relationship between them that is symbiotic, mutually

informative, and mutually corrective. The primary focus of this column, however, is a particular kind of BT.

Whole-Bible BT

A BT of the Bible asks, "What are the major theological themes that dominate the landscape of God's self-revelation through divinely selected, Spirit-directed, human authors, and how does the Scripture itself relate those themes to one another?"

The Bible is not a random collection of the sacred writings of one predominant people group. The Bible is, from beginning to end, a story. A long story. A single, unified message that flows like the river out of Eden, tumbles down through time, and deltas out into distant vistas beyond the Book of Revelation. Sometimes rushing headlong, sometimes meandering slow and silent, but always moving, always growing as each narrative along the way, each psalm and sermon, each prophecy and poem, trickle into it like tributaries to swell the stream. It's not just a true story, it is *the* true story because it is God's story.

As I noted in my previous column, referring to the Bible's storyline does not in any way deny the absolute reality of these themes or the historical groundedness of the Bible that contains them. A child asks his father for a "story" about when he was a boy, or an adult may ask his grandpa for "stories" about when he was in the war; neither is implying their doubt in the factuality of those stories. History is story, and true story is history. God is the One who chose to put so much of His revelation in the form of story and to unfold reality in a way that has a traceable storyline, rather than merely a series of propositional truths and commands.

Big stories have multiple themes. Even a human creation—like a Dickens novel—can have a highly complex, multilayered, multithemed, multistorylined structure. It would be overly simplistic to say that *David Copperfield* is "about" David Copperfield, or even that it is "about" Charles Dickens in a semiautobiographical sense. It is about money, and love, and power, and hypocrisy, and forgiveness, and a dozen other themes, all of which intertwine in the telling of a single, large story. Life is complex and richly textured, and so is good writing that is true to life (even if it's fictional). Humans derive that creativity from the One who created us in His image and gave us the greatest complex, multilayered, multithemed, true story of reality.

That's why there are multiple themes running through Scripture, and multiple ways of summarizing the Bible's overarching message, identifying its seams, and tracing the progression of its narrative. Because the Bible possesses multiple organizing themes, it can be viewed from a variety of different angles.

Theology of the Bible

The Glory of God. Jonathan Edwards's sermon essay "The End for Which God Created the World" demonstrates scripturally that the ultimate goal of God through human history—the end for which He made all things—is to show and to share the glories of His attributes and character. So the Bible can be explored and unfolded by tracing the theme of God's glory in human history.

Creation, Fall, Redemption, Restoration. The story of the Bible is the story of God's *creation* of a world peopled by creatures like Himself in important ways, the *fall* of that race into sin and rebellion against their Creator (and its ongoing evidences and consequences), and the extraordinary steps God takes to *redeem* us from the consequences of our fallenness and to *restore* His original intentions for us. So the storyline of the Bible can also be summarized as God's Redemption of His fallen creation.

The Covenants. The Bible actually *divides itself* between the Old Covenant (OT) and the New Covenant (NT). The distinction between these two divisions is not merely chronological but also covenantal. The Old and New Covenants form the intrinsic organizational framework of the theological structure of the Bible (not to be confused with covenant theology, which is something entirely different). In addition, the story of God's relationship with man can be told in terms of the series of covenantal arrangements recorded in the Bible. So the division of the Bible into Old and New Covenants is yet another rubric under which one can trace the Bible's organically connected storyline.

The Kingdom. "Kingdom" is one of the major overarching, framing themes in the Bible. If there is a downside to all the freedom and self-determination of modern Western Civilization, it is that this historically rare and mostly recent social model called democracy has rendered a kingdom mentality very foreign to us. (Witness the bumper sticker, "Elect Jesus King of your life." You don't elect kings; you submit to them.) Yet the kingdom model was in place for most of human history.

It is worth noting that the first expression of God's relationship to man—if we are going by the words that God himself actually uses (BT)—does not feature a covenant but a command (Gen. 2:16–17). There is no agreement, no mutuality. It is the word—the first recorded *relational* word—of an absolute sovereignty to His created subject. (The first reference to "covenant" does not show up until Gen. 6:18.)

The Kingdom theme is one of the most dominant themes that God Himself has built into His revelation of reality, and one of the threads woven close to the core of the Bible's storyline. God Himself has chosen to describe reality in Kingdom terms. It's the primary model He uses across both testaments to describe His *relationship* not only

to His people but to the world and to human history (Ps. 2:1–12; 10:16; 45:6; Jer. 10:7; Dan. 4:34; Mal. 1:14; Luke 1:33; 1 Tim. 1:17; 2 Pet. 1:1; Rev. 19:16). So from beginning to end the Bible frames the history of the world as the story of the King and His Kingdom.

Plotting a Storyline

These overarching paradigms are not in competition with each other, and none is "righter" than the others. All of them emerge from Scripture and function like Spirographs—overlapping, intersecting, and complementary outlines of redemptive history. Each of them contributes something to our understanding of what is going on in the world and of our place in it. The big-picture themes proposed by biblical theologians tend to gravitate around one of these big ideas:

- Theocentricity: It's All About God
 - His Being/Presence
 - His Character/Self-Revelation
 - His Purpose/Glory
- Sovereignty: God Is Lord Alone
 - Cosmology—creation and ownership
 - Kingdom—dominion and rule
- Strategy: God Has a Plan
 - Creation/Fall/Redemption/Restoration
 - Salvation through Judgment*
- Infallibility/Integrity: All God's Words Are Reliable
 - Covenant/Promise/Prophecy

Can these be combined in a way that not only makes sense but accurately reflects the Bible's correlation of these themes? Here is my contribution in that direction:

The sovereign God who created and owns all things has revealed His purpose through a series of gracious covenant promises ultimately designed to restore fallen humanity to His presence and fellowship by judging sin through His self-sacrificial atonement so that we can fulfill our original purpose as vice-regents of God's kingdom over creation, all for His ultimate glory.

It's a mouthful; but so is the Bible. And it's just a start. Where it goes from there is, as far as I can tell, beyond both divine revelation and human comprehension. It's a magnificent story—*The Magnificent Story*.

Dr. Layton Talbert is professor of Theology and Biblical Exposition at BJU Seminary in Greenville, South Carolina.

*James Hamilton's theme includes the fact that God glorifies Himself by accomplishing salvation through the self-infliction of His own judgment on Himself to appease His own righteous wrath against us.

The Most Important Thing

Jim Tillotson

Telling people about Jesus Christ, who He is and what He has done, is one of the most exciting and sometimes scariest things we can do. It is also the most important thing we can share with those around us. When sharing the gospel, it is really helpful if you can give a story or illustration to help someone understand what you are trying to share. Jesus often used this method in the New Testament not only to explain but also to help the hearer remember. How many of us remember the illustrations used in a sermon far longer than the points of a sermon? However, as we reflect on the illustration, we then remember the point. Many times an unbeliever will not become a Christian the first time he hears the gospel, so you want him to remember what you were trying to communicate.

Here are a few illustrations to get you started.

The number one wrong answer I hear from most people when I ask if they think they will go to heaven when they die is, "Yes, because I'm a good person." Unless you know this person really well, this is not the time to correct him and tell him he is actually a terrible sinner. This will put him on the defensive. Instead, let me encourage you to illustrate the situation like this. What if you asked, "What if I had a glass of clear, pure water and put one drop of arsenic in it? Would you drink it?" Usually the answer will be "no." Even though the glass of water is 99% good, that 1% can kill you. I then ask the person if he feels he has lived a perfect life. Only one time in my thirty years of witnessing did someone tell me they are perfect. Most would agree they are not perfect. I then point out that though they are 99% good, that 1% will kill them and keep them from heaven.

Another thing to keep in mind is that statements tend to make people defensive, but questions cause people to open up. Put another way that I heard often in college,

"Questions prick the conscience. Accusations harden the will." If I come out with a statement such as, "No. You're not good. You're a sinner," now we end up debating about how good they are, which is not the point. The point is they probably are good, but they still need a Savior. An illustration can draw them in and help them understand the point.

Another issue that often comes up when giving the gospel is that many people believe there is a heaven, but they are unsure whom to trust in telling them how to get there. Again, I use a personal illustration. I have two grown daughters, but let's pretend to wind back time for a minute. Let's say that it's Christmas time and my oldest daughter is three years old. She came up to me one day and showed me the exact dollhouse she wants. I then go out and purchase that dollhouse and hide it in the attic—a place no three-year-old could ever reach. I tell her that I have purchased the dollhouse she wanted, but I have hidden it somewhere in our house, and if she can find it, she can have it. She takes off with all the energy and excitement of a three-year-old and comes back after half an hour puzzled and says she can't find it. I encourage her to look again, knowing she can never get into the attic. She comes back an hour later with her little lip quivering and tears streaming down her face, telling me she has looked everywhere. And I respond, "Not everywhere." In this scenario, am I a good dad or a mean dad? The obvious answer would be that I was a mean dad. I then ask, "If God made heaven, but did not tell us how to get there, would He be good or mean?" Because God is good, He authored the Bible to tell us how to get there.

I hope this gets you thinking of questions you can ask and illustrations you can use to cause people to listen rather than be defensive and to remember what you were trying to share. May we all have gospel opportunities this next month, and may we continue to improve in our presentation of the gospel.

Accountability to the Local Church

Continued from page 25

restoration. Wise leaders will find ways to keep the matter of discipline in place to help the one under discipline continue to experience the grace of God offered through it. For example, when the church comes to the Lord's table, if the offender is present and selfishly remains with the congregation, a wise deacon or pastoral staff member should discreetly approach him, take him to a private place and plead with him to make things right. If he stubbornly refuses to leave the service, those passing the elements of communion must not offer them to him. If he refuses to submit, he demonstrates his contumacy to the entire body. In that case, since his offense is public, it would be entirely appropriate to offer public prayer for him.

Sad though it is to consider any other steps of action, pastors should be aware of the laws in their state, county, or city. Churches are usually protected by local ordinances that protect all types of public assemblies from disruption. At the

proper time, congregations should be instructed that law enforcement may legally remove a person who disrupts a public assembly. Both firmness and forbearance have their place. Often conflict over matters of discipline are soon recognized as a conflict over "my rights," vs. "what's right." Wisdom requires proper preparation in biblical principle and practice, consistent application of policy, and compassionate readiness for restoration. No church should be eager to separate from a fellow believer or church member, but all believers must strive lovingly and consistently to be accountable to each other, and to hold each other accountable when necessary.

Careful, consistent, Christlike application of biblical church discipline honors the Lord, the Word, and the obedient believers that make up the congregations of bible-believing churches.

Dr. John Vaughn pastored Faith Baptist Church of Taylors, South Carolina, for thirty years, and served as the president of FBFI for fourteen years. Since 2011 he has served churches internationally through the John C. Vaughn Evangelistic Association, Inc.



Walking on the Water

It was three a.m. The disciples should have been ashore and asleep long ago, somewhere safe and dry. But instead they were still rowing and bailing water through the black night, exhausted and drenched by the waves being hurled into their boat by an angry wind. They'd reached the middle of the lake, so it was too late to turn around. They had to keep rowing.

They were experienced sailors who knew the dangers of the Sea of Galilee and would never have set sail if they'd seen signs of an approaching storm. There weren't any, but suddenly the storm was there—and Jesus wasn't.

They'd expected Him to leave with them, but He'd constrained them to go on alone. He'd join them later at Bethsaida, He said. So they left without Him—and rowed right into this most horrible storm. So bewildering. Where is He? And why did He send us out here?

Then things got even worse. A ghost—coming toward them across the waves! Panicked screams—we're going to die!

But they didn't die. Above the shrieking wind they heard a familiar voice. "Don't be afraid. I'm here." This wasn't a specter or phantom or grim reaper. It was their own beloved Jesus. Even before He had stepped into the boat and stilled the storm, they had peace. Jesus had come walking on the water, and that was enough.

And he went up unto them into the ship; and the wind ceased: and they were sore amazed in themselves beyond measure, and wondered (Mark 6:51).

When the Black Clouds Break

When conflict, sickness, loss, rejection, or failure break their black clouds over us, we're soon drenched in fear and convinced we're about to drown. We row for dear life and dogpaddle for all we're worth, frightened and confused. We were just doing what He told us to do, and now this. Where is Jesus and why has He sent us here to die?

And then He comes walking on the water.

You open your Bible and a verse you've read a thousand times before suddenly begins to *glow*. You wake in the night and angels are singing a hymn in your ear. Your eyes open with the dawn and a Scripture you didn't even know you knew is flowing through your head. You catch the middle of a radio sermon and the preacher's words are God's words to you. The words of an old and familiar song suddenly grip your heart. A friend's text promises prayer. "Just thinking of you," she says, when there was no reason she should. Or maybe like me, you're on a road trip when He comes.

My husband and I were on a long drive through a cold rain, on our way to spend a few days in ministry together. We'd been going through a heart-crushing trial. The pain was sharp, the ache relentless, the doubt deep.

For the next two days I was going to be speaking to women who needed to hear words of confident trust in a God who does all things well. But my faith tank was empty, and I had nothing to offer. A storm was raging in my soul, and all I wanted to do was go home, hide under the covers, and cry.

Refilling the Faith Tank

The day grew dusky-dark and we got hungry. I wanted to do a quick drive-through-grab-and-go for dinner, mostly so I wouldn't have to talk, even to a waitress. But David had heard of a restaurant in a small town along the way that served warm homestyle meals prepared by an Amish family, and he thought that was what we both needed.

He was right. It was a gentle place, welcoming and nourishing with smiles, soft rolls, and creamy coffee. It helped. I even felt like walking around the attached gift shop before we headed back out into the cold. After just a few minutes, though, despair came back in a rush. Tears welled and my knees wobbled. I headed toward a wooden rocker, sat down, and talked to God.

When I opened my eyes, I found myself literally surrounded by truth. In that corner of the shop, God's promises—painted, printed, embossed, or embroidered—hung in frames, covering every inch from wall to wall and floor to ceiling. I whispered them to myself, every one of them, and felt them sink down into my soul.

When I got up, my faith tank was full. I can't tell you a single verse I read, but maybe it wasn't the words themselves that met my need. It was knowing this: Jesus had seen my panicky rowing and bailing and had come to say, "Don't be afraid. I'm here."

The storm wasn't over yet. In fact, first it got a little worse, but the peace I found that day lasted to its end. No more panic. Jesus had come walking on the water, and that was enough for me.

Claudia Barba and her husband Dave serve the Lord through Press On! Ministries, their itinerant ministry helping new and struggling churches in the USA (www.ipresson.com). Claudia is the author of Bible study books for women and of *The Monday Morning Club*, a book of encouragement for women in ministry. The Barbabs have three grown children and seven perfect grandchildren.



Bringing Hope and Comfort in Tragedy

On July 30, 2020, a company of Marines loaded a platoon of Amphibious Assault Vehicles (AAVs) to depart from a remote training island just off the coast of California and return to the ship. A dozen or more Marines piled into the back of each AAV, wedged in their gear, and prepared for the dark, noisy, and sloshy ride from the beach to the ship.

The massive twenty-six-ton armor-plated vehicles revved their diesel engines, kicking up sand and entering the surf. Just as they had done so many times before, these vehicles “splashed” once again. Unknown to anyone when they left that beach, this time would be different. Not everyone would come home.

One AAV entered the water with fifteen Marines and one Navy Corpsman on board. According to those present that day, the AAV sank rapidly, soon making its way to the sea floor some 385 feet below.

Six of the Marines were able to make it out alive. For the other eight Marines and the Corpsman, no escape was possible.

The US Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and other organizations conducted a massive search, hoping that some made it out and were still alive in the Pacific. However, the search was unsuccessful.

Pfc. Bryan J. Baltierra, 18; Lance Cpl. Marco A. Barranco, 21; Pfc. Evan A. Bath, 19; Navy Hospital Corpsman 3rd Class (Fleet Marine Force) Christopher Gnem, 22; Pfc. Jack-Ryan Ostrovsky, 20; Cpl. Wesley A. Rodd, 22; Lance Cpl. Chase D. Sweetwood, 18; Cpl. Cesar A. Villanueva, 21; and Lance Cpl.

Guillermo S. Perez, 19, all perished that day in the deadliest AAV accident in Marine Corps history.

The Role of Chaplains

In tragic times like these, the US military looks to chaplains to provide comfort, care, and support.

Immediately the chaplains aboard the ships involved started to provide care for shipmates and fellow Marines. Other chaplains dispatched as part of Casualty Assistance Calls Officer (CACO) teams, assisting in delivering the tragic news to families. Correspondingly, chaplains from the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force (IMEF) stood up support at the Base Chapel at Camp Pendleton to minister to families, service members, and others who sought prayer and counsel.

When divers recovered the remains, a chaplain was present at the site. While others were reconstructing the tragedy's events, a quick-thinking chaplain filled a small bottle with sand from the sunken AAV's last location on dry land. When the remains departed for Dover, Delaware, to be prepared for burial, chaplains once again provided care for families and fellow service members, weeping with those who wept. In the days and weeks that followed, a handful of chaplains closest to the units involved remained engaged, continually giving counsel, praying with others, and lending shoulders to cry on.

A Personal Response

On August 21 the unit, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, held a memorial service for all nine who perished. In respect to



the families and fellow service members who were grieving, the event was closed to outside media and attendees.

I genuinely considered the Marines and Sailors of that unit to be “my people.” I was not the chaplain for the unit at the time of the tragedy. I detached from the command just thirty days earlier. But I had been with the people of that unit for almost three years before my detachment. I had talked with each one of these men. We spent time in the field together, sweating, hiking, and sleeping in the dirt—doing all the things Infantry Marines do.

Because of my recent history with these men and the unit, the command and the current chaplain graciously extended an offer to participate in the memorial service. Families wept, comrades paid their respects, and superior officers expressed their heartfelt sorrow. And in the midst were a handful of chaplains, comforting the hurting, encouraging the broken-hearted, and sharing the truth that Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life. As a gift to the families, the unit’s chaplain and his assistant distributed small vials of sand taken from that beach to each of the families, giving them a tangible token of remembrance.

The memorial service that day is one that many of us in attendance will never forget. In answer to much prayer, the Lord has already used this tragedy to draw people to Him. I pray that God’s good work, even in the midst of such heartache, would continue.

A Bottle of Sand

When I became a military chaplain, I had no idea what it would be like to serve with such a close “band of brothers” as the Infantry Marines. The Lord in His goodness has granted me the immeasurable privilege of preaching, praying with, and walking alongside these Marines. Presence consistently opens the door for ministry.

As I prepared to leave base that day, another chaplain handed me an unexpected gift. Knowing that I had loved, prayed for, and served with these men who died, the chaplain handed me one of the bottles of sand. Today that sand sits in my office, reminding me of the brevity of life, the urgency to win souls, and the reality of a fast-approaching eternal destiny.

Every day the men and women of our military and first responders put their lives on the line. And every day, there are faithful chaplains among them who seek to share God’s grace and truth through Jesus Christ.

Would you pray for our chaplains, who seek to share the light of Christ in a dark world? Truly the harvest is plenteous, but the laborers are few.

Chaplain Hoyle is currently the Base National Capital Region Chaplain for the United States Coast Guard. He was endorsed for military chaplaincy in 2013. He is married to Amanda, and they have three children.

Lessons from John Newton’s Letter “On Controversy”

Continued from page 26

“Consider Yourself”

7. *Earnestly contend for the faith.*

It seems a laudable service to defend the faith once delivered to the saints; we are commanded to contend earnestly for it, and to convince gainsayers. If ever such defenses were seasonable and expedient they appear to be so in our own day, when errors abound on all sides and every truth of the gospel is either directly denied or grossly misrepresented.

8. *Guard your heart.*

And yet we find but very few writers of controversy who have not been manifestly hurt by it. Either they grow in a sense of their own importance, or imbibe an angry, contentious spirit, or they insensibly withdraw their attention from those things which are the food and immediate support of the life of faith, and spend their time and strength upon matters which are at most but of a secondary value. This shows, that if the service is honorable, it is dangerous. What will it profit a man if he gains his cause and silences his adversary, if at the same time he loses that humble, tender frame of spirit in which the Lord delights, and to which the promise of his presence is made?

9. *Do not take things personally or allow yourself to become bitter.*

Be upon your guard against admitting anything personal into the debate. If you think you have been ill treated, you will have an opportunity of showing that you are a disciple of Jesus, who “when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not.” This is our pattern, thus we are to speak and write for God, “not rendering railing for railing, but contrariwise blessing; knowing that hereunto we are called.” The wisdom that is from above is not only pure, but peaceable and gentle; and the want of these qualifications, like the dead fly in the pot of ointment, will spoil the savor and efficacy of our labors.

10. *Aim for far more than winning the argument.*

If we act in a wrong spirit, we shall bring little glory to God, do little good to our fellow creatures, and procure neither honor nor comfort to ourselves. If you can be content with showing your wit, and gaining the laugh on your side, you have an easy task; but I hope you have a far nobler aim, and that, sensible of the solemn importance of gospel truths, and the compassion due to the souls of men, you would rather be a means of removing prejudices in a single instance, than obtain the empty applause of thousands.

Kristopher Schaal serves as the youth and discipleship pastor at Northwest Valley Baptist Church in Glendale, Arizona.



¹ Many have praised Newton’s letters. J. I. Packer endorsed a recent edition of *The Letters of John Newton* by calling him “perhaps the greatest pastoral letter-writer of all time” (<https://www.monergism.com/letters-john-newton-ebook>).

² If you get a chance, I encourage you to look up and read the whole letter. It will take only about ten minutes and will be well worth your time.

³ The main headings (“Consider Your Opponent,” “Consider the Public,” and “Consider Yourself”) are from Newton; the subheadings are mine.



Blessings through My Blunders

Have you ever made a bad blunder that turned out to be a rich blessing in your life? To illustrate this truth, let me share with you what happened to me recently. By the way, this can happen to anyone, whether he or she is in full-time ministry or not.

Not too long ago I received a phone call and the sad news that my cousin had passed away. His family asked me if I would come to Lorain, Ohio, and preach his funeral. I said yes, because my cousin was the one who invited me to the church where I first heard the gospel and later got saved. He was a man I deeply loved and was one of my spiritual heroes.

My wife and I drove to Ohio and attended the funeral service. On our way back to South Carolina, I stopped at a gas station to put diesel fuel in my truck. After pumping forty dollars' worth of fuel in the tank, I realized that I had picked up the wrong nozzle and put gasoline instead of diesel in my truck! By the way, in case you aren't familiar with diesel engines, this was a big, bad blunder—a very serious mistake!

Well, here I was in Dover, Ohio, and didn't know whom to call for help. I saw a truck driver and asked him for suggestions. He said he would call a nearby wrecker service. The owner of the wrecker service came by and drove us to a nearby hotel. Then he suggested for me to have my truck loaded on the flat bed of his tow truck and drive it to my mechanic in Starr, South Carolina. So the next morning my wife and I joined the owner, Greg, plus the driver, Rick, and took off for South Carolina.

As we started, I prayed for the Lord to lead me in witnessing to these two men. We started some casual conversation; eventually, one of them asked me where I was from. I told them that my cousin had died and I had just preached his funeral in Lorain, Ohio.

The owner of the wrecker service, Greg, turned around and said to me, "Well, let me tell you what happened to me twenty-five years ago. I went through a divorce and was very troubled. One morning a man named Jerry walked into the parking lot of my business and said to me, 'Something is

bothering you, what is it?' I told him I had just gone through a divorce. He began to tell me about the Lord Jesus Christ who died for my sins, then he asked me if I wanted Christ to save me, and I said yes. Right there in the parking lot, I received Christ as my Savior. Then for the next four years, Jerry came by twice a week and taught me the Scriptures. One day, during the fourth year, Jerry walked into my office and I told him, 'Jerry, you don't look well.' He said, 'Let's go outside and get some fresh air.' We went outside and he asked me to pray for him. I did, and when I finished praying, Jerry dropped dead from a heart attack. Isn't it something that I was saved in the parking lot, and the man who led me to Christ died at the same spot four years later?" Greg then told me that in the past twenty-five years, he had led more than thirty people to Christ. What a testimony!

When Greg finished his story, the driver Rick shared his testimony. He said he was a judge at car shows; one night he was driving home from a car show when an oncoming car sideswiped him. Rick's car rolled down a steep embankment into a field, and Rick's legs were pinned in the car and crushed. He said at that time he was saved but terribly backslidden. He prayed to the Lord for three hours and made things right with Him. Then he prayed for someone to find him. Suddenly he heard a woman's voice calling to him, and he answered. She called an ambulance and got him to the hospital. When he arrived there, the doctors told Rick they would have to amputate his legs. Rick refused. The doctors told Rick he would never walk again . . . but he did! What a testimony!

I can say from my heart that I am glad for my blunder in putting gasoline instead of diesel fuel in my truck. I never would have met these two men who were a blessing and inspiration to my wife and me!

Evangelist Jerry Sivnksty may be contacted at PO Box 141, Starr, SC, 29684 or via e-mail at evangjsivn@aol.com.

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