

November 23, 2016

The Importance Of Church Discipline (Part 5)

Matthew 18:16, **“But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.”**

Unrepentant sin in the Body of Christ is like a cancer that spreads. The sin cannot be allowed to just remain unaddressed and thus corrupt the Body of Christ. In Matthew 18, Jesus outlines for us a process by which we must deal with sin in the church. In the last article we looked at verse 15 and the first step in the process which is a one on one, private confrontation with the sinning brother or sister. Often times this is all that it takes and the sinner repents and makes things right with those they have hurt and the brother and sister returns to the fellowship of believers without anyone really knowing. Unfortunately there are times when the sinning brother or sister is unrepentant even after being confronted and when that happens the Lord Jesus Christ has given us a second step in verse 16, **“But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.”**

What is the reason for two or three witnesses? There are two main reasons for this. First of all it ratchets up the pressure on the sinning brother or sister. The fact that you are taking one or two others with you represents the beginning of the entire church’s knowledge and involvement in the matter. The sinning brother or sister is then put on notice that if they continue in their sin, the outcomes will only grow more and more severe. I think it needs to be reiterated again that the objective of all of this is nothing less than gaining your brother or sister back. Essentially you are repeating step one but this time you are doing it with one or two witnesses and it must be done patiently, lovingly, and carefully to show them their sin once again.

The second reason that you involve others is so that they can serve as witnesses. Deuteronomy 19:15 established this Biblical principle: **“A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established.”** This Biblical admonition was designed to ascertain guilt beyond a reasonable doubt before a verdict could be rendered - especially in judicial proceedings. Therefore, having some witnesses along for the second step suggests that the end of the process will be a form of judgment if the sinner does not repent of their sin.

Sometimes the question is asked about whether or not the witnesses need to have been witnesses to the original offense? That is not the meaning here in the context of this passage – if the witnesses were already aware of the offense, then that means they had an obligation to go privately to that person and confront them in their sin.

It is also true that if the sinning brother or sister denies that the offense actually occurred, there needs to be a second witness or some other evidence to establish the offenders guilt. The Old Testament passage that is cited here in Matthew 18 which is Deuteronomy 19:15 still applies. Every fact has to be established by the testimony of at least two or three witnesses. What this means is that if a dispute boils down to nothing more than the word of the accused against the word of the accuser, a mere accusation is not a sufficient basis for the pursuit of church discipline, which means that the matter had be dropped at that point.

But if the sinning brother or sister does not dispute the accusation and they still refuse to repent or forsake the sin, witnesses have to be brought in to establish the fact that the offender has been confronted and refused to repent of their sin. These people are not necessarily witnesses to whatever the original offense was, but instead they are objective parties who are witnesses then to the confrontation. They are there, if necessary, to confirm what was said privately in case the matter has to come before the entire church. They are witnesses to the fact that the discipline process has been appropriately followed. Their presence at this point is as much a protection for the one being accused as it is for the accuser.

A man or a woman is not to be accused of non-repentance before the entire church just on the testimony of a single person. In fact, the one or two others might become witnesses in favor of the accused, if it turns out that the accuser is being overly harsh or unfair. But if the accuser was not being overly harsh, and if the process moves beyond the second step in the process, the fact of the sinning brother or sisters non-repentance will need to be confirmed by two or three witnesses.

Often times the man or woman who is confronted in their sin responds to the second step in the process with repentance. If this is what happens then the matter is settled and it is over. There is no need then at this point to broaden the circle of knowledge and involvement beyond those who are already witnesses.

James 5:19-20 says, **“My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.”**

Despite our cultures call to tolerance and to never confronting sin, in the church we are supposed to be different. We are to lovingly confront sin, we are not to cover it up and refuse to expose it. True Christian love demands that sin be lovingly confronted. Unfortunately sometimes step two does not lead to repentance and it is then at this point that step three has to be taken. In the next article we will look at the third step which our Lord outlined for us.