

Church Discipline: Separation from a Believer or Excommunication of an Unbeliever? Comparing Matthew 18:15–17, 1 Corinthians 5:1–13, and 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15

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INTRODUCTION

Within the larger discussion of church discipline, two questions that continue to resist consensus go to the heart of the issue. The *first* question concerns the spiritual status of those being disciplined. Are they to be viewed by the church as true believers caught up in some sin and, thus, to be corrected and restored? Or, are they to be viewed as those who have made a profession of faith but who are, in fact, not saved and who should be confronted and removed? Or, does the New Testament allow for either of these two options, depending on the nature of the disobedience?

The *second* question, related to the first, addresses the nature or type of discipline meted out to the disobedient. Does church discipline invariably involve excommunication (the removal of the disobedient from the membership of the local church with a loss of all rights and privileges)? Does the New Testament teach that excommunication is the only option when exercising church discipline of the unrepentant? Or, does the New Testament allow for a step or level of church discipline that stops short of that? And, if the latter be the case, what does this level of church discipline involve?

The procedure followed in answering these two questions is, first, to examine the New Testament texts that directly deal with church discipline. Specifically in view here are Matthew 18:15–17, 1 Corinthians 5: 1–13, and 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15. These texts are selected because they give a description of those who are to be disciplined. Furthermore, they reveal something of the nature of the discipline the church is to follow and of the rationale behind the discipline. There are other texts in the New Testament that address church discipline, but these do not provide the same details as the above texts and are referenced only in so far as they contribute to an understanding of the key texts.

Following this, the information gained from these texts is then applied to the above questions to arrive at a biblical paradigm for church discipline. In particular, the information from the key texts is used to determine: (1) the spiritual status of the disobedient; (2) the nature and purpose of the discipline the church is to exercise; and (3) the number of steps in church discipline.

KEY TEXTS

Matthew 18:15–17

¹⁵“If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. ¹⁶But if he does not listen *to you*, take one or two more with you, so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED. ¹⁷If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (all Scripture is taken from the NASB, 1995 ed., unless noted otherwise).

Literary Context

Matthew structures the body of his gospel around six of the Lord’s discourses, with a record of the Lord’s birth and an account of his death and resurrection serving respectively as the introduction and conclusion to the gospel. Each of the six discourses is prefaced by a narrative sequence, setting the stage for the discourse that follows. The above passage is part of Matthew’s fourth discourse, 13:53–18:35, where the Lord instructs his followers on the nature and responsibilities of discipleship. The narrative sequence for the fourth discourse extends from 13:53 to 17:27, with the discourse taking up all of chapter 18.

The passage on church discipline is found in the fourth discourse, where it follows the Lord’s warning about the consequence of causing one of his “little ones” or followers to sin (18:5–9) and the parable of the lost sheep (18:10–14). It precedes the Lord’s teaching on forgiveness (18:21–22) and the parable of the unmerciful servant (18:23–35). The sequence in this discourse appears straightforward. The Lord begins by warning all of the seriousness of sin and, in particular, of any sin that would cause one of his “little ones” or followers to stumble and fall away. Next, the parable of the lost sheep reinforces how valuable each of the Lord’s followers is. His disciples must do nothing that would harm another follower and must do everything to see that none of these “little ones” is lost.

Hand in hand with seeing that none of his “little ones” is lost is the responsibility his disciples have in helping to restore those followers who are caught up in sin (18:15a). It is unclear whether the Lord has in mind a sin against a fellow disciple or any type of sin. A number of manuscripts have the phrase “against you” in 18:15, identifying the sin specifically as against a fellow disciple. Some older manuscripts, however, omit the phrase, making the sin non-specific. Even if the sin in view is specifically against a fellow disciple, the directives the Lord gives would still be applicable for addressing any sin.

After stating the responsibility a disciple has in seeking to restore a fellow disciple caught up in sin, the Lord spells out the procedure to be followed (18:15b–17) and highlights the authority of the congregation in disciplining its members (18:18–20). The Lord then concludes the discourse with the parable of the unmerciful servant, emphasizing the importance of showing mercy in helping the errant and in forgiving those who repent. Like the king in the parable, the Father has forgiven the Lord’s true followers; they, in turn, must demonstrate that fact by their showing mercy and by their forgiving others.

Part of the directives the Lord gives in this passage on correcting a wayward disciple includes action to be taken by the congregation or “church.” In that this is one of only two uses of the word “church” in the Gospels, there is a question over its precise meaning. The expression could refer generally to any gathering of the Lord’s disciples or it could refer specifically to the church as the body of Christ. The only other use of “church” in the Gospels is found Matthew 16:18, where Matthew cites the Lord, saying, “I will build my church.” The future tense, “I will build,” should be taken in its common use as referring to something the Lord was promising to do through his disciples in the near future, rather than as something he had already initiated.

Outside of its two uses in Matthew, the word “church” is regularly found in Acts and the epistles where it refers either to the universal body of Christ or, more frequently, to local congregations as visible expressions of the body of Christ. Based on the future tense of the Lord’s promise in Matthew 16:18 and on the meaning of “church” throughout Acts and the epistles, the expression “church” in 16:18 should be understood as referring to the body of Christ, both the universal body and its local expressions.

As already mentioned, Matthew 18:17 is the only other use of the word “church” in the Gospels and it follows the initial use in Matthew 16:18 where it refers to the church as the body of Christ. As such, the word in 18:17 should be given a similar, if not the same, meaning as in 16:18. It refers to any congregation of the Lord’s disciples, to include, in particular, the church as the body of Christ. In fulfillment of his promise, the Lord began building his church on the Day of Pentecost, and the church the Lord is now building falls under the directives the Lord gives to his disciples in this passage (see Acts 1:4–5; 11:15–18; 1 Cor 12:13, 27; Eph 1:22–23). Hence, Matthew 18:15–17 is a key text in laying the foundation for church discipline within the local assembly.

The Spiritual Status of the Disobedient

The procedure his disciples are to follow in addressing a “brother” or fellow disciple caught up in sin involves three steps. The first step is for a disciple who observes the sin to go by himself (“in private”) to the one sinning and reprove him. Reproof, in this context, means he is to confront the errant and seek to bring him to conviction and repentance. If that fails, he is to enlist two or three witnesses to assist him in restoring the errant.

It is unclear whether the witnesses are other eyewitnesses to the sin or simply those who can document his effort to correct the one sinning (Deut 19:15; cf. 1QS 5:25–6:1; CD 9:2–3). In any case, if that step fails, he is to bring the matter before the church. If the one sinning does not listen to the church, the church is to regard the one sinning as a Gentile and a tax collector. Implicit in each of these steps is the understanding that, were the errant to repent, he is to be forgiven and restored and the process terminated.

Of the two questions raised at the outset, the spiritual status of the disobedient and the nature and purpose of the discipline, only the first is directly addressed in this passage. In 18:15 the one sinning is described as a “brother.” The expression “brother” can be found in the Gospels in a literal sense of one who shares a common parentage (Matt 4:18) or common ancestry (Matt 5:22). It can also be found in the Gospels in a metaphorical sense to describe one who is a

follower or disciple of Jesus, hence a member of God's spiritual family, a fellow believer (Matt 12:50). In the immediate context of Matthew 18:15, "brother" describes one who is a member of a local church or congregation. His spiritual status as a "brother" or fellow believer is assumed by virtue of his membership in the church.

The tension with the designation "brother" to describe the one sinning surfaces at the end of the third step. Jesus states that, if the individual fails to heed the church, the church is to treat him as a "Gentile and a tax collector." Like the term "brother," the expression "Gentile" can have either a literal or a metaphorical sense. It is used in the Gospels in a literal sense to refer to the nations collectively, in contrast to Israel (Matt 5:47; 6:7; cf. Gal 2:14). But it is also found in a metaphorical sense of those outside a particular community, especially those outside the community of believers (3 John 7).

In that Jesus is speaking to his disciples, his directive that the unrepentant be treated as a Gentile means treating him as one who is outside the congregation of his disciples or fellow believers and, thus, to treat him as a pagan or unbeliever (Matt 10:18). The expression "tax collector" simply reinforces this designation. Tax collectors were Jews who were employed by the Roman government to collect various imperial taxes from their fellow Jews. Often these Jews abused their office and, driven by greed, overtaxed their fellow countrymen for their own profit. Consequently, they were viewed by the Jewish community as conspicuous sinners to be shunned and avoided. The combined rubric "tax collectors and sinners" found throughout the Gospels to describe those who were despicable and ostracized captures this sentiment (Matt 11:19).

Furthermore, the expression "*as a Gentile and tax collector*" introduces a comparative clause describing the way in which the unrepentant sinner is to be treated. The comparison can be one of similarity (Matt 24:27), treat him in a similar way as an unbeliever is treated. Or, the comparison can be one of identity (Matt 24:37), i.e., treat him in the same way an unbeliever is treated. The difference between the two options appears minimal in this context. In either case, the individual is treated as an unbeliever.

So, what is the spiritual status of this individual? Is he a believer or an unbeliever? Taking into consideration the eternal security of the believer and the perseverance of the saints, the best way to view this individual is as someone who has made a profession of faith and is a member of a local congregation. As such, it is assumed that he is a "brother" or true believer. However, his resistance to correction and his refusal to listen to the church and to repent brings that assumption into question. His failure to repent of his sins is the characteristic of an unbeliever, not a believer (1 John 1:8–10). Consequently, the church is to treat him at that juncture as an unbeliever.

Furthermore, to treat the unrepentant as a Gentile and tax collector is tantamount to excommunication. As mentioned above, a "Gentile" refers to an unbeliever, and a tax collector depicts one who is to be shunned and avoided. Although the "you" in the expression "let him be to you" in 18:17 is singular, what is true of the response of the individual is also true of the response of the congregation. This is supported by the fact that the Lord transitions seamlessly from the singular "you" in 18:17 to the plural "you" in 18:18–20. Thus, the unrepentant is to be

treated by the congregation as an outsider and, therefore, excluded from the rights and privileges of membership.

1 Corinthians 5:1–13

¹It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife. ²You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst.

³For I, on my part, though absent in body put present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present. ⁴In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵*I have decided* to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

⁶Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump *of dough*? ⁷Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are *in fact* unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. ⁸Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

⁹I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; ¹⁰*I did* not at all *mean* with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. ¹¹But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one. ¹²For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within *the church*? ¹³But those who are outside, God judges. REMOVE THE WICKED MAN FROM AMONG YOURSELVES.

Literary Context

The second key text on church discipline is found in Paul's instruction to the Corinthian church recorded in 1 Corinthians 5:1–13. The body of the letter (1:10–16:12) comes after an epistolary introduction (1:1–9) and is followed by an epistolary conclusion (16:13–24). The body itself is divided roughly into two halves. In the first half (1:10–6:20), Paul responds to problems that had developed within the Corinthian church and that had been reported to the apostle. In the second half (7:1–16:12), Paul addresses questions over doctrine and practice that the Corinthians had raised in a letter previously sent to him.

The above passage is placed within the first half where Paul addresses problems in the Corinthian congregation that had been brought to his attention. The verses record Paul's directives in response to a case of incest involving a member of the congregation, a sin that was either being tolerated or condoned by the church. The passage contributes directly to the present discussion in that it provides information on the spiritual status of the disobedient and, at the same time, on the nature and purpose of the discipline the church was to exercise.

The overall structure of the passage is fairly clear. Paul begins by describing the problem and his dismay over the fact that the church has not taken action (5:1–2). He then gives his judgment about the situation and what the church as a whole needs to do to discipline the disobedient (5:3–5). Following this, he supports his judgment and the action to be taken by drawing an analogy with the Old Testament Passover celebration and the removal of leaven as part of that celebration. In the analogy, Paul uses leaven as a metaphor for sin and directs the Corinthian readers to remove the leaven of sin from their congregation (5:6–8). Paul then concludes by linking his directives regarding the disobedient to a previous letter he had written to the church.

In the previous letter, Paul had called for the readers to separate from those members who were living in such sin (5:9–13).

The Spiritual Status of the Disobedient

It is clear from the overall context that the individual to be disciplined, the incestuous man, is a member of the Corinthian church. Paul describes him in 5:1 as “among” the readers and in 5:2 as in their “midst.” In addition, addressing the readers’ responsibility in disciplining this individual, Paul establishes the point in 5:12 that they are to judge, not those who are “outside,” but those who are “inside,” that is, those who are inside the Corinthian church. Thus, the evidence indicates that this individual had at one time made a profession of faith and had become a member of the Corinthian congregation.

In addition, Paul placed this individual in the status of one who is called a “brother” or fellow believer. In support of his directives against the disobedient, Paul in 5:11 calls their attention to a former letter he had written to them. In that letter, Paul had instructed the Corinthian congregation that they were to take action against anyone who was “called a brother” (NIV) and who was engaged in immorality or some other serious sin. Thus, to be called a brother means that the one sinning is viewed by the members of the congregation as a fellow believer, a fellow member of God’s spiritual family.

Having said that, Paul makes other statements in the passage that raise questions about the spiritual status of this individual. The first is the description Paul gives of the sin. In 5:1 Paul declares that this sin is one that was not found even among unbelievers. Paul’s point is that even unbelievers recognized and roundly condemned incest as a heinous sin. Furthermore, Paul in this same verse refers to this sin by the statement, “he has his father’s wife.” The expression “he has,” when used of a marital or sexual relationship and in the present tense as here, was a common idiom for an ongoing relationship, not just a momentary one (Mark 6:18; John 4:18; see also Lev 18:8, where the father’s wife is generally understood to refer to a second wife, i.e., a step-mother).

The tension comes in harmonizing the description of this individual as one who is called a brother or fellow believer and, at the same time, as one who is involved in flagrant immorality that is ongoing or persistent. Again, assuming the perseverance of the saints in progressive sanctification (2 Cor 3:18), in what way is such an individual persevering in the faith and in faithfulness to God and His word? How can his life not fall under the reproach of one who is characterized by sin or practicing sin? Both descriptions, characterized by sin and practicing sin, are used in Scripture to depict the conduct of an unbeliever (1 John 3:4–10).

The best way to view this individual is that he is someone who has made a profession of faith and is a member of the Corinthian congregation. As such, it was assumed that he is a “brother” or true believer, at least initially. This is consistent with Paul’s placing him in the category of one who was “called” a brother. However, his engaging in flagrant immorality brings that assumption into question. His persistence in an ongoing incestuous relationship is the characteristic of an unbeliever, not a believer. Consequently, his gross, protracted disobedience

means he is now to be viewed as an unbeliever, rather than a believer. Paul's call for the church to expel this individual supports this understanding of his spiritual condition.

The Nature and Purpose of the Discipline

The evidence from the immediate context indicates that the action the church is to take against this individual was nothing short of expulsion or excommunication. In 5:2 Paul chastised the readers by stating that the one sinning should have been "removed" from their midst. In 5:7 Paul directs the congregation to "clean out" the old leaven, a reference to the readers' removing the incestuous man from their congregation. And, in 5:13 Paul cites Deuteronomy 17:7 to the effect that the readers are to "remove" the wicked man from among them.

Added to this is Paul's instruction in 5:11 where he references his previous letter and his instruction that the readers were not to "associate" with such sinners, not even "to eat" with such ones. It is not clear what Paul intended by the expression "not to eat." Paul could be referring to church-related activities and, specifically, to the fellowship meal observed in connection with the Lord's Supper. Or, he could simply be referring to table fellowship outside the scheduled activities of the Corinthian church. In either case, the intent is clear. Paul cites his previous instruction because of its application to the present situation. They are to regard the incestuous man as an unbeliever, expel him from membership in the church, along with its rights and privileges, and limit their contact with him to efforts to bring him to repentance.

Lastly, Paul's declaration in 5:5 about turning the incestuous man over to Satan is consistent with the above conclusions. The expression "to give" someone "over" to someone has an established metaphorical use of giving someone over to the realm or authority of someone else. The only other use of the combination, "give [someone] over to Satan," is found in 1 Timothy 1:20 where it has a similar meaning. In both passages, the idea is that of placing someone in the realm and under the authority of Satan. From the larger context, Satan's realm refers to his dominion over the present fallen world of lost sinners (John 12:31; 2 Cor 4:4; Eph 2:2).

Paul, in effect, envisages two realms or spheres of existence in this verse. There is the sphere of the church, and there is the sphere of the world. Therefore, to deliver someone over to Satan means to remove that person from the sphere and protection of the local church, in which the Spirit lives and works (Eph 2:22). By doing that, the person is placed back into the community of lost humanity, where Satan exercises power and control. Thus, the expression "to deliver such a one to Satan" is simply another way of saying that the church was to excommunicate the incestuous man.

The one remaining tension with these conclusions and, in particular, the conclusion that the incestuous man was to be viewed as an unbeliever is Paul's statement in 5:5 about the purpose, or goal, of the action the church was to take against the individual. Paul specifically identifies the purpose of delivering the offending party to Satan, saying, "that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." The expression "for the destruction of the flesh" preceding the purpose clause is best taken as identifying the result of the action, rather than its purpose. The "destruction of the flesh," a reference to Satan's attacks, is the result of delivering someone to

Satan; the purpose or goal, Paul says, is that “his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.”

Paul regularly uses “saved” in its soteriological sense of salvation from sin. And, the expression “the day of the Lord Jesus” is consistently used in the New Testament to refer to the eschatological “Day of the Lord” revealed in the Old Testament Prophets. This future Day of the Lord encompasses events following the Rapture of the Church (2 Thess 2:3), to include the judgment seat of Christ (1 Cor 1:8), the Tribulation judgments (1 Thess 5:2), the millennial kingdom, and the destruction of the present heavens and earth in anticipation of the new heavens and earth (2 Pet 3:10). Thus, the combination in this verse points to the final salvation or glorification of this individual, specifically at the judgment seat of Christ.

The tension comes in harmonizing the readers’ viewing the incestuous man as an unbeliever in the action they were to take and Paul’s statement that the purpose of the action was his final salvation. In other words, how can Paul instruct the Corinthians to view the unrepentant as an unbeliever and, at the same time, speak of his final salvation? Does not Paul’s anticipation of this man’s ultimate salvation indicate, after all, that he is a true brother in Christ, and not simply one who has made a profession of faith but is not actually saved?

Without question, Paul’s statement about the purpose of the action the church was to take against this individual indicates that the action itself is intended as remedial or redemptive. Paul intends the action to have as its goal the future salvation of this person. But that fact alone does not require that the incestuous man be viewed as a true believer. Paul’s purpose statement, “that his spirit may be saved,” involves an element of contingency. Before Paul’s purpose for this individual can be realized, there is a contingency or condition that must be met. And, the contingency implicit in Paul’s statement is that the incestuous man must first repent of his sin. The converse is that, were he not to repent, he would not be saved.

Taking all of this together, the actions of the incestuous man brought into question his profession of faith. While he professed to be a believer and was a member of the Corinthian congregation, his actions were in fundamental conflict with his profession. His flagrant, protracted immorality was the characteristic of an unbeliever, not a believer. As such, the church was to treat him as an unbeliever and expel him from their membership. Yet, this action was remedial, designed to bring him to repentance. Were he to repent following his expulsion, he would show himself to be a true believer. Thus, the intended purpose or goal of the action would be achieved. However, if he were not to repent, the fact that he was never a true believer to begin with would be confirmed.

2 Thessalonians 3:6–15

⁶Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. ⁷For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, ⁸nor did we eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we *kept* working night and day so that we would not be a burden to any of you; ⁹not because we do not have the right *to do this*, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, so that you would follow our example. ¹⁰For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either.

¹¹For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like

busybodies. ¹²Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread. ¹³But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good.

¹⁴If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame. ¹⁵Yet, do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.

Literary Context

The final key text on church discipline is found in Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians. Paul develops the body of his letter (2:1–3:15) following an epistolary introduction (1:1–12) and preceding an epistolary conclusion (3:16–18). The body itself is roughly divided into two sections. The first, 2:1–17, corrects the readers' misunderstanding regarding end-time events and, in particular, whether the readers were experiencing the onset of the Day of the Lord judgments. The second section, 3:1–15, gives a series of exhortations, targeting primarily a problem that had taken root in the congregation, where certain members were willfully unemployed and not responding to apostolic instruction.

The text under consideration is found in the second section where Paul addresses the problem of willful unemployment with certain members of the congregation. Paul begins by laying down the principle that the congregation is to withdraw from any member who continues to live in conflict with apostolic instruction (3:6). Following this, Paul supports and applies the principle to the specific problem within the Thessalonian church. Certain ones among them were refusing to work and were relying on the financial support of others in the congregation. Addressing the problem directly, Paul uses his own example of industry (3:7–9) and his previous instruction while with them (3:10–11) as authoritative guidelines to be followed.

Next, Paul commands the disobedient to find gainful employment so that they can provide for their own needs (3:12). He then exhorts the congregation not to grow weary of supporting those who are truly in need (3:13). Paul concludes with a final exhortation, restating the principle from 3:6 that the congregation is to follow in disciplining the disobedient. The members are to mark those who continue to disobey Paul's directives, both in the letter as a whole and in this section specifically, and not to associate with them (3:14). Paul ends with a caution that, in complying with this directive, the congregation is not to treat the disobedient as an enemy, but as a brother (3:15).

The Spiritual Status of the Disobedient

Paul clearly views the disobedient in this passage as a fellow believer. He uses the term "brother" to describe the disobedient in 3:6. As previously discussed, the expression is commonly used in similar contexts as a metaphor of one who is a member of God's spiritual family, hence a believer. He also places the disobedient in 3:11 among the members of the Thessalonian congregation and, thus, as one who has made a profession of faith. And, he concludes the section in 3:15 by cautioning the congregation that they are to treat the disobedient member as a brother and not as an enemy when disciplining him.

Having said that, the same question is raised here that was raised in the discussion of the disobedient in Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5. How can those who continue to disobey God's word be considered a brother or fellow believer, a member of God's spiritual family? Does not

the fact that they are persisting in their disobedience bring into question their status as a true brother? As mentioned earlier, such ongoing disobedience is the characteristic of an unbeliever, not a believer (1 John 3:9).

It was argued in Matthew 18 that the disobedient or unrepentant was to be viewed by the church as an unbeliever, based primarily on how the Lord said the unrepentant was to be treated. The Lord said that the church was to treat the unrepentant as a Gentile and a tax collector. As discussed above, the expression “Gentile” is synonymous with one who was outside the community of the Lord’s true followers, hence an unbeliever.

Similarly, it was argued in 1 Corinthians 5 that the one censured was also to be treated by the church an unbeliever. This was based on two facts. The first was the nature of his sin. The individual in 1 Corinthians 5 was engaged in the kind of sin that even unbelievers reviled and condemned. As such, it is difficult to see how a true believer could be persisting in that kind of sin. The second fact was the nature of the action the church was to take against this individual. Paul called upon the congregation to expel the disobedient, placing him outside the church, precisely because his actions undermined his profession of faith. He failed to measure up to the kind of conduct consistent with a true brother and, thus, was not to be viewed as a legitimate member of the congregation.

The evidence for the disobedient being treated as an unbeliever in the present passage, however, is not as clear cut. Although the willfully unemployed were persisting in disobedience, the sin itself does not seem to be of the same stripe as the sin in 1 Corinthians 5. Disobedience is still disobedience, but willful unemployment and freeloading do not seem to measure up to the level of transgression that gross sexual immorality does. The two sins do not seem to be on the same scale.

Some, sensing the tension and seeing the two passages as addressing those who were to be treated as unbelievers, attempt to heighten the sin in view by associating it with the sin Paul harshly condemns in 1 Timothy 5:8. There, Paul declares that those in the church who fail to care for the needy among their own family are, in effect, denying the faith. He adds that such failure to care for one’s own family makes the guilty worse than an unbeliever. Thus, by linking willful unemployment with failure to care for one’s family, this approach heightens the sin in 2 Thessalonians 3 and argues for treating the disobedient as an unbeliever, rather than a true brother.

The problem with heightening the sin in 1 Thessalonians 3 in this way is that such heightening must be read into the text. The text says nothing about the willfully unemployed not taking care of the members of their own families. Paul does describe other sins the willfully unemployed are involved with in 3:11 (leading an undisciplined life, doing no work, acting like busybodies), but failure to care for family is not mentioned among these. Since such failure involves a heinous sin, it is strange that Paul does not mention this, were the disobedient in 1 Thessalonians 3 guilty of this sin as well.

Furthermore, Paul says nothing in 1 Timothy 5:8 about those who fail to care for their families as shirking their responsibility because they are willfully unemployed. In fact, the context points in

the opposite direction. Those who fail to care for family are condemned precisely because it is assumed they had the means to do so. Theirs is not a lack of means, as though unemployed, but the failure to use the means they have to care for their own. In short, the two passages offer no common denominators that suggest the sin in the one is related to the sin in the other.

Returning to the question, then, what is the spiritual status of the disobedient in this passage? Is the church to view the disobedient as a believer or as an unbeliever? The evidence thus far points in the direction that the church is to view the disobedient as a fellow believer. The fact that Paul specifically directs the church to treat him as a brother supports that conclusion. The one factor that remains is to determine the nature of the discipline the church is to exercise toward the disobedient. Does the discipline itself counter the above evidence and argue in favor of treating the disobedient as an unbeliever?

The Nature and Purpose of the Discipline

The question that needs to be answered from this passage is whether the discipline Paul calls for is excommunication or something short of that. If it be excommunication, that argues for treating the disobedient as an unbeliever. As in Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5, he may be called a brother, but if the church is being directed to remove him from membership, it would be because his actions are viewed as those of an unbeliever and not those of a true believer.

The chief argument in support excommunication is that Paul gives the church the same directive for disciplining the disobedient in 3:14 as he does the disobedient in 1 Corinthians 5:11. After directing the readers in 3:14 to publicly identify the disobedient, Paul then commands, “do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame.” The expression “do not associate with” is identical to the command Paul gives to the Corinthian believers in 5:11.

As noted above, the evidence from 1 Corinthians 5 is that the discipline there involves excommunication. Since the expression “not to associate with” in 1 Corinthians 5:11 is used in a passage calling for excommunication, the expression itself must have a meaning consistent with that context. The Corinthian believers are not to associate with the incestuous man by removing him from membership and limiting their contacts to efforts to bring him to repentance. That being true, the identical expression in 3:14 can have the same force. In a similar way, Paul is calling on the Thessalonians not to associate with the disobedient by removing him from membership and limiting their contacts to efforts to bring him to repentance.

These similarities notwithstanding, there are difficulties with this reading of the text. The general consensus is that Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5 call for the excommunication of the disobedient. Therefore, whatever is said of the disobedient in Matthew 18 can also be said of the disobedient in 1 Corinthians 5 and vice versa. In both passages, the unrepentant are to be viewed as unbelievers and removed from membership. And, in both passages, the discipline of the unrepentant is understood as the final step in church discipline.

The overriding problem in placing 2 Thessalonians 3 in the same category is the command “treat him as a brother” Paul’s gives to the congregation in 3:15. In Matthew 18:17, the Lord directed his disciples to regard the unrepentant as a Gentile and tax collector. As discussed earlier, to

regard the unrepentant as a Gentile meant that he was to be viewed as an unbeliever and, specifically, he was to be viewed as an unbeliever at the point of excommunication. In other words, the Lord's directive represents the final step in church discipline, and it is at this last step that the unrepentant is to be viewed as an unbeliever.

The tension comes in that Paul specifically cautions the Thessalonians in 3:15 that they are to treat the disobedient as a brother. Again, as discussed earlier, to treat the disobedient as a brother meant that they were to view him as a believer, as a brother in Christ. The problem in equating the discipline in Matthew 18 (and, thus, in 1 Corinthians 5) with the discipline in 2 Thessalonians 3 is that the respective designations of the disobedient are not synonymous. The semantic domains of "Gentile" and "brother" simply do not overlap. In fact, in these contexts, the two expressions are antithetical. In the Matthew passage, "Gentile" means unbeliever, while in the 2 Thessalonians passage, "brother" means fellow believer.

So, what is the nature and purpose of the discipline in 2 Thessalonians 3? When taken together, the evidence argues for taking the discipline in this context as pointing to a level of separation short of excommunication. In effect, the disobedient is given notice that his conduct is in violation of apostolic standards and told he must repent. To drive home the seriousness of the breach caused by sin, the members are to withdraw normal fellowship, to include withholding of the Lord's Supper. And, they are to give notice that, if he does not repent and find gainful employment within a reasonable time as determined by the church, he will be viewed as an unbeliever and, thus, excommunicated from membership.

Two questions remain. The first question is, if there is a step of church discipline short of excommunication, why is the disobedient in 1 Corinthians 5 not given a similar opportunity to repent before being excommunicated? Perhaps the best answer is that his sin is such that his failure to repent left only one option for the church. He is to be viewed as an unbeliever because of persistent gross immorality and removed from their midst. While a true believer can get caught up in sin (Gal 6:1) and even persist in a given sin (1 Cor 11:30), his life cannot be characterized by sin (1 John 3:9). Furthermore, from this passage it can also be concluded that there are some sins a believer simply cannot persist in and still be considered a true believer.

The second question is, if there is a step of church discipline short of excommunication, why does the Lord not include this in Matthew 18? The answer is that the Lord's statement in 18:17, "if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector," allows for an intermediate step. In other words, at what point do the Lord's words, "if he refuses to listen to the church," apply so that excommunication is required? With the disobedient in 1 Corinthians 5, that point comes when the incestuous man fails to repent after the first confrontation. With the disobedient in 1 Thessalonians 3, that point comes if the willfully unemployed fails to find work in the time determined by the church.

CONCLUSION

The information from the key texts can now be applied to the questions raised at the outset about the subjects and nature of church discipline in order to arrive at a biblical paradigm. The initial question concerned the spiritual status of the disobedient. When exercising church discipline, is

the church to view the disobedient as a believer or as an unbeliever? Two of the key texts, Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5, identify the disobedient as an unbeliever. This is directly stated in Matthew 18 when the Lord says that the church is to view the disobedient as a Gentile, a metaphor for an unbeliever. It is clearly implied in 1 Corinthians 5 where Paul directs the church to place the disobedient outside the membership of the congregation, that is, to treat him as an outsider or unbeliever.

The third key text, however, identifies the disobedient as a believer. In calling for the church to exercise church discipline, Paul warns the congregation in 2 Thessalonians 3 not to treat the disobedient as an enemy, but to admonish him as a brother, that is, as a brother in Christ, as a fellow believer. This means that, when the circumstances call for the church to discipline its members, it is to discipline both those who are viewed as unbelievers as well as those who are viewed as believers. Thus, fellow believers can be and must be the objects of church discipline, when the circumstances warrant.

The second question raised concerned the nature of church discipline. Must church discipline involve excommunication or does the New Testament allow for a level that stops short of that? Again, two of the key texts call for excommunication. This is clearly implied in Matthew 18 when the Lord says that the disobedient is to be viewed as a Gentile and tax collector. As discussed above, the combination describes metaphorically those regarded as unbelievers to be placed outside of the membership of the church. In the 1 Corinthians 5 passage, Paul specifically commands the Corinthian congregation to remove the disobedient member from among them, that is, to excommunicate him.

In contrast, the third key text calls for discipline that falls short of excommunication. The disobedient in 2 Thessalonians 3 is viewed specifically as a brother or fellow believer, to be disciplined within the church, not as an unbeliever, to be removed from the church. Paul says the readers are to “withdraw” from him and “not to associate” with him. In short, the members are to withhold normal fellowship from him in an effort to bring him to repentance. But this level of separation does not entail excommunication in that the disobedient is still considered a brother in Christ. Thus, depending on how the church views the disobedient, church discipline can involve excommunication, but it can also involve a level of separation short of excommunication.

This raises the final question that concerns the number of steps in church discipline. The Lord lays the foundation for church discipline in Matthew 18. The steps begin with private confrontation of one caught up in sin and end with excommunication of the unrepentant. At the point where the church collectively takes action, the Lord mentions only one step, that of excommunication. However, the Lord’s words allow for and 2 Thessalonians 3 expressly identifies an intermediate step prior to excommunication. Hence, the Scriptures teach that there are in fact four steps involved in reclaiming the disobedient.

The first step is when a member of the congregation sees another member caught up in sin and he goes by himself to the one sinning to convict him and bring him to repentance. If the first step fails, the second step is where the concerned member takes two or three others to assist him in confronting the sinner. If the second step fails, the third step is where the matter is brought before the congregation. Assuming the specific sin allows for a step other than

excommunication, the congregation directs the sinner to repent and initiates separation to bring about repentance. If that step fails, the final step is where the congregation excommunicates the unrepentant sinner.

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