

The Integrity of the Local Church

In New Testament times, the only *groups* responsible for making decisions about fellowship were local churches. No denominational council existed to either put people into or out of the church of Christ. No individual or body of people had the authority to impose a creed on all of the churches. The Holy Spirit gave instructions about all matters and each local church was led by a body of overseers (pastors, bishops, elders) who were instructed to “take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers” (Acts 20:28). The variety of problems that existed in local churches in New Testament days was staggering. Along with the spiritual and well-informed, churches were filled with half-converted Jews, newly-converted pagans, idolaters, gnostics, mystics, charlatans, and cowards. I have served as a bishop in Auburn, Alabama, but I shudder to think of the responsibilities taken on by the bishops in Corinth and Ephesus and Laodicea. The Lord showed great restraint in dealing with the unruly churches of the first century. In Revelation chapters 2 and 3, he rebuked and cautioned the seven churches of Asia Minor, but he showed more patience than I am apt to grant to others. In every case in the New Testament, however, there is never a hint that anyone should correct the shortcomings of a local church other than that church itself.

The most extensive instructions given to any local church regarding maintaining the purity and integrity of the congregation are recorded in 1 Corinthians chapter 5. The occasion for the instructions was the presence of “fornication among you,” in the guise of a man who had taken “his father’s wife.” The advice was simple: no congregation can tolerate fornication in its midst. “I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators” (v. 9).

In this passage, Paul outlined in clear and simple terms the course of action that must be followed: (1) when “gathered together,” the church should “deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the Spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (vs. 4, 5) and (2) the congregation must “purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump” (v. 7, 8). The dual intent of this action was to save the one who was living in sin (which was apparently accomplished, see 2 Corinthians 2:5–11), and to preserve the purity of the congregation and its reputation among unbelievers. Of course, the instructions in 1 Corinthians chapter 5 are not limited to dealing with fornicators. The toleration of an adulterous marriage is no more dangerous to the health of a congregation than the toleration of other sinners. Paul wrote: “But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such a one, no, not to eat” (v. 11). In every case, both for the sake of the sinner and the reputation of the saints, a local church must “judge them that are within” (v. 13).

Applying the discipline needed for the rectification of wrong in the lives of individuals and for preserving the integrity and reputation of congregations often places onerous and weighty decisions on the elders of a local church. But they alone must shoulder the burden. The bishops in the church in Jerusalem or in Rome did not clean up the mess in Corinth. Corinth had to face and solve its own problems. I suppose that every Christian in the twentieth century acknowledges that some applications of God’s marriage law in particular cases pose difficult decisions for elders. Sometimes, people offer contradictory and/or ambiguous versions about the causes of their divorces. Perhaps more distressing, Christians in the twentieth century still grapple with differences of opinion on this subject. How do we resolve these knotty problems of application and interpretation?

Of this much I am certain—all such decisions are placed into the hands of the elders of local churches. Each congregation establishes its own boundaries—either wisely or unwisely—and makes its own applications. The case which needed discipline in Corinth was simple and clear. The church was tolerating “such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father’s wife” (v. 1). Cases are not always so obvious.

The elders in Auburn, like those in most places, were forced to discuss this issue at the time I was serving as a bishop. I can tell you our judgment about these matters, though I cannot tell you that it is the rule that must be, or will be established in every congregation. We assumed that people in the congregation in Auburn held some differing views about the teaching of the Scriptures on divorce and remarriage, but we did not deem it either necessary or proper to catechize every person on this issue (or any other) before accepting them into the fellowship of the church. On the other hand, the elders agreed that we would not countenance any teaching that we deemed to be false on this subject (or any other), either in the pulpit or in classes. To do so would be to compromise the responsibility we had to protect the flock. In addition, we agreed that we could not accept into the flock any person whose marriage seemed to us to clearly violate the teaching of the Scriptures; that is, anyone who had put away his or her partner, “except it be for the cause of fornication” (Matthew 19:9). To do so would be to compromise the purity and integrity of the congregation in our minds and in the minds of most of the members.

It seems to me that the overseers of every congregation must act on the same principles—though every congregation may not make the same applications. Surely it is the duty of elders to assure that the truth is taught, and to refuse to have fellowship with anyone who is, in their clear judgement, living in a marital relationship that is sinful—or with anyone who is covetous, an idolater, a railer, a drunkard, or an extortioner. We are committed to doing precisely that in Auburn. I urge the same guidelines on every congregation, recognizing that every set of elders must shepherd the flock among them.

West Ventura County church of Christ

venturachristians.com

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880 E. Collins, Oxnard, CA

February 12, 2017

We would like to welcome you to our assembly!

Men serving today:

Announcements:

Dale Moffet

Leading Lord's supper:

Ralph Myers

Song Leader:

Dale Moffett

Scripture reading:

Roberto Gutierrez

Sunday morning adult class:

Exodus

Sermon:

The Cultural Test of Modest Dress

Derrick Victor

5pm Evening Sermon:

Ralph Myers

Join us again next week!

Morning Bible class:

Exodus

Morning sermon:

Romans 7

Derrick Victor

Evening sermon:

Tim Giles

“Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.”

(I Corinthians 12:12-14)

Prayer Requests

- Cassie Hough will have knee surgery in April.
- The Adams are in Florida.
- Ryan Mealin will be away for 3 weeks, pray for his safe return.
- Lamar is recovering from knee surgery.
- Continue to pray for the Morrows.
- Ann Joseph is still recovering from a stroke.
- Spring gospel meeting with Harris Waterman, March 30 – April 2