

WORK IT OUT BETWEEN YOU

Discipline in the Church

Look at it this way If someone has a hundred sheep and one of them wanders off, doesn't he leave the ninety-nine and go after the one? And if he finds it, doesn't he make far more over it than over the ninety-nine who stay put? Your Father in heaven feels the same way He doesn't want to lose even one of these simple believers.

1. If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell him - work it out between the two of you. If he listens, you've made a friend.
2. If he won't listen, take one or two others along so that the presence of witnesses will keep things honest, and try again.
3. If he still won't listen, tell the church. If he won't listen to the church, you'll have to start over from scratch, confront him with the need for repentance, and offer again God's forgiving love.

Take this most seriously: A yes on earth is yes in heaven; a no on earth is no in heaven. What you say to one another is eternal. I mean this. When two of you get together on anything at all on earth and make a prayer of it, my Father in heaven goes into action.

Matthew 18, 10-19, © The Message.

It seems to me that the principles are these:

1. **We make every effort not to lose even one believer** and it is worth leaving the flock in the care of an assistant to go and find the straying person.
2. **We make every effort to contain the knowledge (and gossip) of sin** by keeping it a one-to-one conversation for as long as possible.
3. **The immediate goal is to make a friend not an enemy.** I would suspect there needs be multiple approaches on level one, and maybe level two, as well as allowing a reasonable time interval between levels as we can all be slow to change habits and ways, even if we know to do so. Grace, grace, prayer, prayer and more grace.

I think that telling the church involves a consultation with all the church leaders, not a confrontation, before ever informing the general public of the congregation. Even if we get to stage 3 then it is rarely case of sending the person out of the church, rather we understand that **we are probably dealing with an unrepentant heart or maybe even an unbeliever** however long they have been in church. The AV/NIV translation to treat them as a "pagan or tax-collector" is accurate enough but there is no following verse commanding us to send them away. An exception is the rare and very **serious sin situation** of 1 Cor. 5,1-5 in which case whatever we decide on earth will be ratified by heaven and out they must go if they are unwilling to change and live for a while under accountability and supervision.

The fact is that the Church exists to welcome "pagans and tax-collectors" in the hope that they will genuinely turn to Christ. We have no mandate to make anyone feel rejected by the Church or by God although we do need to keep an close eye on the ones who think they are believers but are not yet. It is back to square one in our conversation and witnessing to them so they are under no illusions.

Take it easy and take time! From experience if we ever get to level 3 especially without very good reason we will do well to salvage the situation, as people either leave at this point to pursue their sin or they leave through embarrassment. Either way they tend to justify their embarrassment and blame the congregation, sometimes becoming a lifelong enemy of Church universal or local, and maybe even an enemy of the Lord.

Be sensitive. This can also happen at level 2 where much grace, kindness and hope is essential in the conversation. Level 2 may be best handled in the person's home to ensure privacy and to **avoid onlookers and ears** that overhear.

Our authority is **to serve not to dominate**, the leader is the servant of all who gives His life for his friends. The Bible way is the inverse triangle with the most gifted and strong at the bottom supporting the congregation, not the popular secular pyramid model with a man at the top being supported by everyone else to do what he wants to do.

The dilemma is to balance the need for gentleness and patience with an **uncompromising** stand for holiness and Kingdom standards. No "anything goes, everything is alright, a free for all if it doesn't hurt anyone, lots of grey areas, unequal yokes and worldly living."

It is worth mentioning that some believers that **transfer** to our churches may be the "pagans and tax-collectors" from other churches whose leaders may have dealt with them harshly or they have run away at the first hint of trouble and embarrassment. It is good to find these things out without making judgments either way in the beginning.

It was said of Jesus that He was **a friend of sinners**, a fact that everyone of us will be glad of as life unfolds.

Not easy! If you are not sure take advice, count to ten, maybe to a hundred and take a few deep breaths before launching out. Be sure you have all the facts and discover the reasons.

This is not intended to be infallible doctrine. These are only a few opening thoughts on a difficult subject which is worthy of considerable study and prayer to find the way forward in each congregation and case. If they help you as a starting point or as a stepping stone to finding the Lord's guidance for yourself that will be good.

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