

Church Discipline

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The church as it appears to men will never be a pure church. Just as the individual Christian must raise a constant lament over being saddled with “the body of this death” (Rom. 7:24), so the visible church, composed as it is of sinful men, will show as a composite what appears in every individual. *Das ist die Kreuzgestalt der Kirche*. Witness the rebukes and admonitions that the apostles had to apply to the individual congregations or groups of congregations to whom they wrote by inspiration of the Holy Ghost. As the individual Christian, however, is never satisfied with his present level of attainment, but says with Paul: “Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:12), so also the church is to be constantly trying to improve. Consider what Paul says: “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 fullness 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” (Eph. 4:11–15). Or consider what is written to the seven churches of the Apocalypse. In our zeal to produce a better church we need to guard against becoming overly zealous “lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them” (Matt. 13:29). On the other hand we dare never become indifferent about anything that clashes against the beauty that the bride of Christ ought to show. For that reason the Lord has commanded us, among other things, to practice what we call church discipline. A study of some of the facets of this necessary activity of the visible church is the scope of this essay.

I. A Survey of Matthew 18

As you will have noticed from the agenda for this conference, the program committee suggested that the study of church discipline be introduced with a survey of the entire chapter Matthew 18. If it is true that the influence of Matthew’s activity as tax collector is reflected in that instead of following a strict chronology he groups together related events or sayings, as I believe he does to at least some extent, it is all the more wholesome to consider the *locus classicus* concerning church discipline in Matthew 18 in its context in the chapter, for the other parts of the chapter would then be bringing other considerations which our Lord also wants us to bear in mind when dealing with a sinning brother. And certainly His earnest warning against offense does point up the urgency for church discipline, while His lesson to Peter concerning the need for a forgiving spirit indicates in what spirit church discipline is to be carried on.

With that we have already suggested the broad outline of the chapter. Verses 1 to 14 bring the Savior’s remarks about His little ones, including the earnest warning against offenses; 15 to 20 His instruction as to how to deal with a sinning brother; and 21 to 35 His parable of the unforgiving servant in answer to Peter’s question concerning the limits of forgiveness.

Verse 1: “In that hour the disciples came to Jesus saying, ‘who now is greater in the kingdom of the heavens?’” We know that their idea of the kingdom of heaven, a term which they had adopted into their vocabulary because Jesus often used it, was still very carnal. They dreamed of a restoration of the kingdom of David on a scale even more grand than anything that David had known. To be the greater, or we would have used the superlative, the greatest, in their estimation would mean getting all that the heart could desire in wealth, power, and comfort. The very fact that Jesus had called them made them sure that all of them would be

near the top. But who among them would be the top man? The parallel passage, Mark 9:23 ff., reveals that they had been arguing about the matter. Certainly the events of the last days had set them to wondering. Three of them had been with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter, James, and John. The rest, left on the plain, had failed in their attempt to cast a devil out of a lunatic. Peter had been delegated to secure the coin for the temple tax. So wrapped up were they in their speculations and ambitions that they did not have the delicacy of feeling to shy away from asking Jesus to settle their argument, although they do put their question as a theoretical question, concealing from Him the fact of their argument.

Verses 2 and 3: “And having called a child he placed it in their midst and said, ‘Amen I tell you, if you do not turn about and become as the children, you shall surely not enter into the kingdom of the heavens.’” So far from being the greatest would they be, that they would not even enter into the kingdom. And then He repeats:

Verse 4: “‘Whosoever now humbles himself as this child, this one is the greater in the kingdom of the heavens.’” It will take effort, a turning about, a lowering of self, to become like a child. They were proud, a child is humble; they were sure of themselves, a child knows that he must depend upon others for care, protection, and guidance. And is that not what the Spirit works in those who come under the gracious working of the Lord, His kingdom: a recognition of the helplessness and hopelessness into which sin has brought us, a complete dependence upon outside help for forgiveness, righteousness, and life? As far as our attitude toward others is concerned, once we have come to realize our own nothingness over against God, the same Spirit will move us to do as the Apostle says: “In lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves” (Phil. 2:3).

Having begun to speak of a child, the fullness of the heart of Jesus spills over as He goes on to tell that a child is precious not only as an example, but also precious to Him as such. Verse 5: “‘And whosoever receives one such child in my name, me does he receive.’” So precious is a child to Him that He is willing to identify himself with it, to regard what is done to a child as being done to Him. What an exalted work the church’s care for orphaned and unfortunate children becomes, how sacred it is when Christians, deprived of the blessing of children themselves, adopt a child! But note that such value is given only when the receiving of a child is done in His name, when the motive for this kind of charity is reaction to what Jesus has revealed about himself, love born of faith in Jesus. The world, too, practices charity toward children, at least now since the leaven of the gospel has transformed the thinking of the world to some extent (Matt. 13:33). But noble as this charity of the world may be in the eyes of men, it remains a “glittering vice.” The proclamation of the truth that without Jesus men can do nothing good (John 15:5) remains one of the causes why we shall be hated of all men for His name’s sake (Matt. 24:9), and we must be on our guard lest fear of the cross or craving for popularity move us to blunt our testimony in this respect.

Verse 6: “‘But whosoever offends one of the little ones, the ones believing in me, it would be to his advantage that a millstone were hanged about his neck and he were drowned in the depth of the sea.’” Because a child is precious in His sight, Jesus does not want the faith of a single child to be disturbed or destroyed. This is a strong proof passage against those who deny that a child has the capacity to believe and therefore reject infant baptism and the truth of baptismal regeneration. That little ones can believe is also borne out by the context, for we could hardly be expected to become as a child if children cannot believe. The whole trouble is that men make of faith an intellectual process that hears, weighs the evidence, and then gives assent. But faith is trust, an emotional process. Giving offense is acting as a *σκάνδαλον*, a trigger in a trap, which brings destruction when it is touched. Lest any imagine that only offense given to a little child is serious, Jesus lingers longer with the subject.

Verses 7 to 9: “‘Woe unto the world because of offenses; there is a necessity for offenses to come, but woe to the man through whom the offense comes. But if your hand or your foot offends you, chop it off and throw it from you; it is good for you to go into the life maimed or crippled, than having two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye offends you, pull it out and throw it from you; it is good for you to go into the life one-eyed, than having two eyes to be thrown into the Gehenna of the fire.’” This is one of the heroic statements of Jesus, made so strong that it will stick in the memory and make its impact even though it is

not meant to be taken literally. As for the latter fact, Jesus elsewhere has made it plain that the root of sin lies not in anything external, also not in the members of the body, but in the sinful heart of man (Matt. 15:19). His point is that offense is so serious that if the members caused it, it would be far better to be without them than to suffer the consequences of offense. For so destructive is offense that it leads to hell and deprives of the life, fellowship with God here in time and hereafter in eternity. The world being what it is since the fall, offense is bound to come, but that does not mitigate the guilt of anyone who becomes responsible for giving offense. Jesus remains general and mentions no specific kind of offense. But knowing what it is that leads to damnation, we may say that both false doctrine and temptation to disobedience to the commandments constitute offense. Offense must lie in the nature of what is said and done. If men abuse that which is good in itself and turn it into an occasion for sin, the guilt is theirs. Remember that the preaching of Christ crucified is “unto the Jews a stumbling block” (I Corinthians 1:23), where the original has “an offense.” However, love will go the extra mile (Matt. 5:41), at least in the case of weak brethren, and while upholding the moral neutrality of *adiaphora*, abstain from them if a weak brother is in danger of being offended by their use (Romans 14; I Corinthians 8).

Now Jesus reverts to His demonstration of the preciousness of a child, verse 10: “See to it that you do not have a low opinion of one of the little ones; for I tell you that their angels in heavens always are beholding the face of my Father, the one in heavens.” From the fact that Jesus speaks of *their* angels we may conclude that they do have their guardian angels. And if these exalted beings, confirmed in their holiness, as the *always* indicates, make little children the object of their tender concern and watchful care, we earthbound creatures had best not place a low estimate upon the importance of a child. More than that, since the angels are “ministers of his (Jesus’ Father in heaven), that do his pleasure” (Psalm 103:21), their charge to watch over individual children must be given to them by the great God himself. They are so precious to Him - all the more reason for us to think highly of each of the little ones who believe in Him.

And then the final evidence establishing the value of a child in the eyes of our Lord, verses 11–14: “For the Son of man came to save that which was lost. What is your opinion? If a hundred sheep belonged to any man and one of them strayed, will he not leave the ninety-nine upon the mountains and having gone seek the straying one? And if it so happens that he finds it, amen I tell you that he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that had not strayed. Even so it is not a desire before your Father, the one in the heavens, that perish should one of the little ones.” It is touching how Jesus draws His disciples, and us, together with Himself by now calling the Father our Father. We share the Father with Him. Should we then not also share the Father’s and the Son’s estimate of the value of a child? And here were the little ones, also by nature as sheep going astray (I Peter 2:25), and the Father did not want them to be destroyed with the everlasting destruction of body and soul in hell (Matthew 10:28). And He who is the Father’s Son and also the Son of Man, like the self-sacrificing Shepherd that He is, went after them, although it entailed giving His own life as a ransom for them (Matthew 20:28). So precious are children to Him. Well ought we to regard them highly.

And with the picture of the Good Shepherd seeking the lost sheep still before our eyes His Word to us continues, verse 15: “But if your brother sins, go, admonish him between yourself and him alone. If he should hear you, you have gained your brother.” Nestle omits the “against thee” with which we are familiar. I am in no position to evaluate the text-critical arguments pro and con. The best argument that I see for retaining the words lies in the fact that Peter’s question does ask about the brother who sins against him. In life it boils down to the same thing, for any who have caught the spirit of the seeking Shepherd will not omit love’s duty to a sinning brother on the technicality that the sin was not committed directly against them. And the desire like to that of the Good Shepherd is stressed in the “thou hast *gained* thy brother.” And therefore too the directive to seek to create the most favorable atmosphere by speaking to him alone, for once there are spectators and auditors of an admonition, sinful pride will all too often lead the offender to reject any implication of guilt on his part lest he lose face in the presence of others. But in man-to-man conversation the earnest desire to gain the sinner can ring through in manner and matter without any distractions.

But seeking love goes all the way, and witnesses may become necessary. Verse 16: “But if he doesn’t listen, take along with you still one or two, in order that upon the mouth of two witnesses or three every matter may stand.” Here the need for witnesses is mentioned because of the eventuality that the case may have to

proceed further. But that they are not to be mere silent spectators, but to share in the seeking of the lost, is evident from the next verse, where it is indicated that they too will have spoken.

Verse 17: “But if he turn a deaf ear to them, tell the church; but if he also turns a deaf ear to the church, let him be to you like the heathen and the publican.” And what this implies is explained in the next verse, 18: “Amen I tell you, whatever you bind upon earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose upon the earth will be loosed in heaven.” Here then are the keys, and the one who has been considered as the heathen and the publicans has had his sins bound upon him.

We contemplate the awful power and the awful responsibility that is involved in the use of the keys and approach the matter of dealing with the sinning brother with fear and trembling. Here we want to make no misstep. But how can we weak and erring human beings take sure steps? The promise of Jesus which follows is just what we need when overwhelmed with a sense of our fallibility and weakness, verse 19: “Again, amen, I tell you that if two agree from among you upon the earth concerning any matter which you may ask, it will come to them from the Father of mine, the one in heavens.” So join with those whom you have asked to help you to try to gain your brother in praying for guidance in your undertaking.

But where to find the church? Verse 20: “For where there are two or three gathered in my name, there I am in their midst.” Following hard upon His promise concerning joint prayer, it is their assurance that He is present to hear their request and the implication that He will be their mediator and assure an answer. Notice how this promise anticipates the time when He will no longer be visibly present and makes this promise timeless in its application. But this promise also implies that He will back up their use of the keys. No need then to ask where the church may be found if the seeking of the sinning brother requires that one go all the way that Jesus has outlined. If there were but two or three who could be found to gather in His name, their love’s work could be carried to the consummation that the circumstances require. That this does not imply the bypassing of those with whom He has most intimately bound us together will be evident to anyone who knows what He has elsewhere revealed about decency and order.

It is to be noted that not any group of two or three, nor even any casual meeting of two or three believers, is called church, blessed by the fulfillment of His promise and entrusted with the use of the keys, but only two or three gathered in His name. I believe that Hellenistic Greek makes no fine distinction between εἰς and ἐν, or even ἐπί (vs. 6) when they are connected with “my name.” It always involves knowing and believing what His name reveals about Him and responding in such faith to what He has revealed as His will and work. That’s what makes them part of the church and representative of the church.

Of course it would be Peter who would have something to say. Verse 21: “Then coming up to him Peter said to him: ‘Lord, how often will my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Until seven times?’” Peter got the drift: the aim in admonishing the sinning brother, the brother whose sin affected him directly, was to gain him, and that implied that Peter would have to forgive him if the brother accepted the admonition. And Peter understood Jesus well enough to know that if the mind of the seeking Shepherd were in him, he would have to be willing to repeat the process. But Peter was concerned about Peter too. He was not going to let someone step all over him. Certainly there had to be a limit. Now for Jesus’ sake he was willing to be generous. But wouldn’t he have gone far enough if the process of admonishing and forgiving had been repeated seven whole times? The *opinio legis* always wants to bargain with the Lord, and does not back down.

Verse 22: “Jesus tells him: ‘I don’t tell you until seven times, but until seventy times seven.’” Here too is a bold statement of Jesus made to leave a lasting impression. We know that He is not stretching the limit, but rather saying that our willingness to forgive ought to be unlimited.

To make His point He tells the parable of the wicked servant, which we shall not present in detail in the interest of economy of time. But the point is clear: compared with the multitude of our sins against our God, whatever sins others may commit against us are as nothing. If we appreciate the grace of God who because of the perfect sacrifice of the seeking Shepherd forgives us all of our sins, we shall gladly forgive others the few sins that they commit against us. If not, and here we bring the conclusion and application of the parable, verse 35: “so also my heavenly Father will do to you if you do not forgive every one his brother out of your hearts.” Our forgiving does not merit God’s forgiveness, but our unwillingness to forgive will surely cost us God’s

forgiveness, for such unwillingness to forgive would be evidence that our hearts have not been touched by the grace of God. But Jesus does not force us with a club to forgive the sinning brother. His parable will call forth a positive reaction, an overwhelming appreciation for the great grace of our God, which wipes our slate completely clean. And so our hearts will move us to be willing to forgive, and to rejoice when our seeking to win our sinning brother has brought him to the point where he desires not only God's forgiveness, but ours as well.

We trust that our having dwelt this long with this 18th chapter of St. Matthew will have put us in tune for an evangelical approach to the practical aspects of church discipline.

II. Church Discipline

The words of Jesus in Matthew 18 make it clear that what we call church discipline is called for when a brother sins. That does not mean that the church has no call to rebuke the sins of the world. It has the call to carry out the program outlined by its Lord: "Repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations" (Luke 24:47). And that implies pointing out sin. Thus the Apostles pointed out to their audiences on Pentecost and subsequently their guilt in causing the death of Jesus. But this is a different phase of the keys. When we speak of church discipline we refer to an activity that has as its object those who are "brethren," those who on the basis of their confession are part of the fellowship.

The initiation of discipline is called for when the brother sins. Sin must be involved. To institute discipline and even to resort to excommunication in the case of an adiaphoron would be tyranny and a horrible abuse of the power of the keys. Since an unhappy termination of church discipline would involve the binding of sins and exclusion from the kingdom, evidently church discipline is called for in the case of those sins concerning which it is written that those who live in them shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. There are the catalogs in I Corinthians 6:9, 10 and Galatians 5:19–21. Furthermore, since the Lord teaches that those who do not believe in Jesus as the Son of God who became man in order to save them from sin and guilt and damnation by dying as their substitute will be damned, church discipline is called for when a brother becomes involved in an error which denies one or more of the essential truths of the saving faith. That does not mean that no admonition is called for when there is no gross sin or gross error. Nowhere does the Word of God indicate such a limitation. And if the sinning brother refuses to heed the admonition, it will be necessary to carry on as Jesus has outlined. Impenitence in the case of any sin leads to damnation: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (I John 1:8, 9). "I said, 'I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord'; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin" (Psalm 32:5).

Whose is the duty to speak to the sinning brother? You who know of the sin, Jesus says. In our congregational life we have to contend against the reluctance of individual members, if not to admonish, then at least to carry through with church discipline. Pastors have repeated occasion to ask someone who is anxious to tell them about the sin of some brother whether he has talked to him. It's easier to leave the performance of that duty to the pastor or the elders. The trend to train our members in the techniques of evangelization may be wholesome, but one wonders whether comparable emphasis on training them in the performance of their duty in the matter of church discipline is not called for. We need to guard too against becoming so pigeonholed in our thinking that we think that we cannot practice church discipline unless a fellow member of our congregation is involved. Must a brother be allowed to go on in sin or impenitence just because there are circumstances that make it difficult to follow the ordinary processes of congregational procedure? Are two or three gathered together in His name only in the framework of congregational life? No doubt the final stage, if it must be arrived at, will involve the congregation in which the sinning brother is a member. But short of that, too much is at stake to let a brother go on in sin just because we cannot operate in the framework of congregational life.

And that leads us to speak of the purpose in church discipline. This is indicated when Jesus says: "If he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother." Ours is to be the mind of the seeking Shepherd. Here is a sheep going astray. He wants us to seek it and to shun no hardship or effort in the process. Only when that is our

purpose shall we be heeding the spirit of our Lord's command. In our congregational life we often have to contend against zealots who want to clean house, strike the delinquent members from the membership list or excommunicate them, as a punitive measure; sometimes, it seems, to take revenge on them for the grief and heartache which they cause. But our purpose must be to gain the sinning brother, if at all possible. So too it would be completely wrong to use church discipline as a club to force people into line: "If you don't change, we shall have to take you into church discipline." There is no warrant in Scripture for such an attitude.

Even if the last sad step has been taken, our purpose will still be to gain the brother. We know how St. Paul revealed this as his purpose when he took the last step with the incestuous man at Corinth: "For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such a one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, *that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus*" (I Corinthians 5:3-5). We know too from II Corinthians how love's purpose was accomplished and the solemn action of the congregation did bring the man to sincere repentance. And no doubt many a pastor can tell from his own experience how the action of the congregation accomplished what words had failed to accomplish, so that, sometimes quickly, sometimes after the lapse of a considerable period of time, the excommunicated person came back and desired absolution and reinstatement. And those who have the mind of Christ rejoiced with Him over the lost sheep that had been found.

If our purpose in the practice of church discipline is the purpose that Jesus teaches us to have, our spirit will also be His. It is the spirit that He trains us to show in His remarks to Peter and the supporting parable: that of infinite patience. As long as there is hope, based not indeed upon wishful thinking, but upon the attitude of the brother and his response to the admonition, we shall continue and not be in a hurry to get the matter over with.

The urgency of heeding what our Lord teaches us about church discipline has already been indicated from one aspect: here is a sheep that is in danger of being lost, do all that you can to save it. But another angle is involved too. That is indicated by the earnest warning of the Lord Jesus against giving offense, which we have found in the context of Matthew 18. If a brother is allowed to go on in his sin without being dealt with, his example will offend others, leading them, at least if they are weak, to conclude that what he does is all right; if he may do it, they may do it too. Those who are on a low level spiritually might reason too that if he can get away with it, so can they. You will remember that that is a second reason the Apostle advanced for stern disciplinary measures against the incestuous man at Corinth: "Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?" (I Corinthians 5:6). So more than one soul is at stake. If there is a low level of spiritual life in a congregation, the breakdown of church discipline may well lie at the root. The causes may be many: overburdened pastors, the fear of losing numbers or financial support in these days of inflated budgets, the lack of contact between members. But the warning of St. Paul ought to give us all a sense of urgency in the matter of church discipline.

We now turn to an area that is related to church discipline, but not identical with it, the area of doctrinal discipline. We have already indicated that in the case of errors that are directly soul-destroying, church discipline, as we know it from Matthew 18 is called for. But we concede that there are errors that are not immediately destructive of the saving faith. That there is a close connection between church discipline and doctrinal discipline becomes evident from the fact that the same axiom which the Apostle applied in the case of the incestuous man at Corinth is cited by him in Galatians 5:9: "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump." In the case of the Galatians, indeed, a soul-destroying error was involved. But the fact that the warning against error as an evil leaven is used and even a *little* leaven is called dangerous indicates that doctrinal discipline is called for in the case of any error.

The first step in doctrinal discipline is exposure of the error. When Peter tried to dissuade our Lord from going on into His passion, Jesus did not let him get away with it, but branded him a Satan. When Peter did not practice what he preached, Paul "withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed" (Galatians 2:11). And so we might cite example after example. So we dare never allow ourselves to be carried away by the spirit of unionism, which emphasizes the consensus and minimizes disagreement, but must expose error for what it is.

The second step is admonition, if a brother or brethren are involved. If it is a brother who becomes involved in an error, we shall in charity suppose that it was not an intentional denial of the truth, and deal with him as the Apostle indicates: “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual restore such a one in the spirit of meekness, considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted” (Galatians 6:1). Here too ours is to be the spirit of the seeking Shepherd. Here too we shall show the patience and longsuffering which Jesus taught Peter to show with the parable of the wicked servant. Consider how patiently the Lord Jesus dealt with His disciples, especially in regard to their error of expecting an earthly kingdom. We need to be on our guard lest we impede our efforts to win the brother by affecting an air of intellectual superiority or by letting personalities intrude. We wonder how often personal irritations have made the winning of an erring brother difficult or have even become an almost insurmountable obstacle.

The third step is separation, the termination of fraternal relations, fellowship relations, if in spite of admonition, patiently and lovingly administered, the error is upheld. The Lord laid down the basic principle: “Beware of false prophets” (Matthew 7:15). For if one upholds error as truth by insisting that it is truth which he is championing, he sets himself up as a prophet, a spokesman for the Lord. But since what he proclaims as truth is in fact error, he is a false prophet. Of such we are to beware, guard ourselves away from them, and remain aloof. Paul echoes this warning: “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them” (Romans 16:17). For false doctrine too is an offense, having as it does the leaven-like nature. This fact is borne out also when Paul of certain false teachers says: “Their word will eat as doth a canker (gangrene)” (II Tim. 2:17).

Separation from the persistently heterodox produces nothing new, but serves only to establish the fact of an existing condition: the *dichostasia* was there already. Neither does excommunication produce anything new: the impenitent is unforgiven prior to the passing of the sentence of excommunication. Another analogy would be proper divorce, which only establishes the fact that the marriage bond has already been broken by the guilty party. But just because separation merely establishes an existing fact, it must take place if we are to keep the abiding New Testament feast “with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (I Corinthians 5:8).

As it is the objective fact that the sinning brother will not listen to admonition, in the sense of turning from his sin, that is the evidence upon which excommunication is based, so in the case of the errorist it is the fact that he upholds error, that he *is* a false prophet, that he is one who goes on making divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which we have learned, for such is the import of the present participle. No judging of motives is involved, it is what he is doing that gives the cause for keeping aloof, for avoiding him. When Jesus says: “By their fruits ye shall know them” (Matthew 7:20), He refers to that which the false prophet as a false prophet produces. In Romans 16:17 it is the divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which we have learned which are to determine who is to be avoided. Much confusion results if motives are made the criterion instead of the objective facts in the case. How mistaken it would be to try to recognize false prophets by their manner, instead of by their teaching, Jesus indicates when He says: “Which come to you in sheep’s clothing” (Matthew 7:15). Recall too what Paul says about the appearance and manner of the false prophets against whom he had to contend in Corinth: “It is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness” (II Corinthians 11:15). It is therefore also a case of putting the cart before the horse when as an argument against applying Romans 16:17 to the heterodox it is argued that the 18th verse can hardly fit them: “For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple.” Rather, if divisions and offenses are there and the causing of them goes on, the avoiding must take place. Verse 18 is not our judgment, but the Lord’s revelation concerning the origin of the divisions and offenses. It is unfortunate that serving the belly has been taken to imply a denial of the existence of saving faith. What the Lord indicates is that the causing of divisions and offenses is not a fruit of the Spirit, of serving the Lord Jesus Christ, but rather has its origin in the human side of man. It may be the desire to let reason have a voice, it may be the desire to court popularity, but always it is something purely carnal.

We mentioned a while ago that the last step in doctrinal discipline does not always coincide with the last step in church discipline. Even the apostolic writings suggest the possibility of those who were at least

temporarily heterodox Christians, although the Apostles were quick to warn them against the ultimate consequences of error because of its leaven-like, gangrenous nature. And now that the “deceiving, and being deceived” (II Timothy 3:13) that the Apostle foretells have gone on for centuries, we know that there are many heterodox Christians. Through their own fault or the fault of others they are enmeshed in some error, but by the grace of God they are believers in Christ and heirs of salvation. We do not want to shorten the sweep of the promise of our Lord: “Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Romans 10:13). We rejoice in the knowledge that the boundaries of the *Una Sancta* are much wider than the boundaries of any one Christian denomination. But on the other hand we dare not ignore the earnestness of the Lord’s revelation concerning the danger involved in any error, nor His command to take an aloof attitude toward such who proclaim it. But it does serve to keep us from beclouding the issue if we stress the fact that obedience to the Lord’s command does not mean that we are denying the possibility or the fact of the existence of saving faith even in those with whom we do not practice fellowship. We look forward to the blessed day when all that is human will have been sloughed off for good and the Church will be, not only actually, but also visibly, one.

Little need be said about the manner of exercising doctrinal discipline within the confines of a congregation. What has been said about the subject, the object, the purpose, the urgency, and the spirit of church discipline would apply here too. The outcome when the brother has been so confused “by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive” (Eph. 4:14) that he cannot be set straight, if the error is not soul-destroying in its essence, would be separation rather than excommunication. In this area it is all the more necessary to warn against becoming so pigeonholed in our thinking that we neglect the performance of the duty of love because we are not under the same congregational roof with the offender. A professor or an official might propound error elsewhere than within the confines of the congregation of which he happens to be a member. The responsibility of dealing with him will first rest with those who know of his error. Secondly, it will rest with those in the larger fellowship who have the responsibility of supervising his doctrine and practice. If persistent adherence to error makes separation imperative, certainly the congregation in which he holds membership must also be drawn in and guided to act in line with those with who they are in fellowship.

In our wider fellowship in our church bodies we have set up the machinery for supervision of doctrine and practice. Practice, of course, comes into the picture, for it is doctrine expressed in life and activity. The most important link in the chain of contact between the church body and the individual congregation in the supervision of doctrine and practice is what we still call the conference visitor, our Missouri brethren the circuit counselor. Theirs is the responsibility of initiating action if it appears that aberrations in doctrine or practice are appearing in the life of some congregations. They are not to snoop. Nor are they to act on the basis of rumor indiscriminately. The example of Paul in I Corinthians 1:11 indicates that not all reports or information which may come to them are to be ruled out, but it must also be remembered that Paul did not hesitate to reveal the source of his information. To proceed without evidence is foolhardy. Sometimes it will be necessary to wait, for the Lord has revealed this as a principle of His providence: “There is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; and hid, that shall not be known” (Matthew 10:26). But when evidence does come to the surface, there is a call for action, firm, but in an evangelical spirit. If there is a breakdown in doctrine and practice in a church body, one of the chief causes may well be the neglect of faithful visitation. For here we are contending with an evil leaven. Officials in the higher brackets can do little if those who have the responsibility at the grass roots fall down on the job.

Finally we come to speak of doctrinal discipline as it is carried on synod to synod. The four synods that presently comprise the Synodical Conference have promised one another in the constitution that they would assist one another in seeking to remove anything that might disturb the unity in their larger fellowship. But even if there are no formal ties, if on the basis of our several confessional positions and not through church-political maneuverings we have come to recognize one another as sister bodies, appreciation for the Spirit-wrought blessing and recognition of the duty which brethren owe one another would lead us to practice doctrinal discipline over against one another. The occasion for such discipline would be deviations from what had been a commonly held position in doctrine and practice. They would appear in the position taken by such bodies in the

resolutions of the bodies, or by those who publicly or officially represent the bodies. Deviations from the official position of a body on the part of individuals or individual congregations will indeed concern us, for “whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it” (I Corinthians 12:26). But as long as there is reason to suppose that discipline is being practiced within the body, such deviations would not be the occasion for official objections on the part of a sister body lest it become “a busybody in other men’s matters” (I Peter 4:15). It is only if it appears that no corrective action is being taken that the concern of one group for the spiritual soundness of a sister body would warrant asking what is being done about the matter. The seriousness of offense and the warning against the little leaven would justify such an inquiry.

What our Lord says about the necessity of decency and order in the church would indicate that if one body must practice discipline over against the other, those who officially represent the body should carry it out. This does not exclude private contacts between individual members of the respective bodies. But it is presumption and disorderly procedure for one, who has not been called, to undertake to speak for his body to another. We recall the words of James: “My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation” (3:1).

And so we conclude. We are mindful of the advice: “Write yourself empty; read yourself full.” I have tried to heed the first part, but the lateness of my assignment and the necessity of superimposing it upon a rather heavy schedule of regular duties made the heeding of the second part a physical impossibility. But if what I have produced has stimulated thought and will now lead to profitable discussion, I hope that I shall not have wasted your time.

“In these last days of sore distress
 Grant us, dear Lord, true steadfastness
 That pure we keep till life is spent,
 Thy holy Word and Sacrament.” Amen.