

DOCTRINAL ESSAY

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by

The Rev. E. R. Stallings, Pastor Holy Scripture Ev. Lutheran Church, Windcrest, Texas

The Need, Purpose and Function of Admonition and Discipline in the Christian Congregation

In giving His Great Commission, Christ, the Lord and Head of His Church, said, *“Go ye therefore and teach [make disciples of] all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost”* (Matthew 28:19). Christ then added these words: *“Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.”* By these words Christ commanded that all the doctrines of Holy Writ be taught and enjoined in the Church. For this reason the Apostle Paul was compelled to assure the elders of Ephesus, *“For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God”* (Acts 20:27).

Since Christian or brotherly admonition is one of the many commands which Christ has discharged to His Church on earth, every faithful Christian pastor must, therefore, teach the members of his flock what the Scriptures say on Christian admonition and church discipline. The matter of admonition and discipline is not optional. Christ says, *“If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone”* (Matthew 18:15). To the Thessalonians Paul said, *“Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother”* (II Thessalonians 3:15). Paul said to Timothy, *“Them that sin rebuke before all, that others may fear”* (I Timothy 5:20). Paul said to Titus that he must *“both (to) exhort and (to) convince the gainsayers”* (Titus 1:9). He then added: *“Wherefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith”* (Titus 1:13).

That admonition is God’s will is also amply demonstrated by Christ and the Apostles. St. Mark tells us that after Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to His disciples, He *“upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen him after He was risen”* (Mark 16:14). He even rebuked His own mother at the wedding in Cana, saying, *“Woman, what have I to do with thee? Mine hour is not yet come”* (John 2:4). We also note two incidents where Paul gave admonition. First, Paul did not withhold from admonishing Peter in Antioch when Peter’s public actions denied that believing Jews and Gentiles are all one in Christ Jesus and that the ceremonial separations of the Old Covenant were abolished in Christ. Hence Paul tells us, *“But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because*

he was to be blamed” (Galatians 2:11). Secondly, when the Corinthians dallied in admonishing and removing a fornicator, Paul rebuked the church and said, “Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person” (I Corinthians 5:13).

That brotherly admonition and discipline are not optional needs to be emphasized for several reasons. One reason is that we live in an age when visible Christendom, and especially outer Lutheranism, is infested with antinomianism. To be antinomian means to be against the Law. Antinomians are opposed to the proper use of the Law of God. Today the proper use of the Law in external Christendom is almost non-existent. As a result of this reluctance to use God’s Law to denounce sin or to condemn anyone, brotherly admonition and church discipline have become all but extinct.

Another reason we must emphasize that Christian discipline is not optional is that there occurs on occasion a false application of an article in our Lutheran Confessions. The Epitome of the *Formula of Concord* in its opposition to the Schwenckfeldians rejects the following Schwenckfeldian position, namely, “That it is not a true Christian congregation [church] in which no public excommunication [some formal mode of excommunication] or no regular process of the ban [as it is commonly called] is observed” (*Triglotta*, 846, 26). Likewise, the Solid Declaration of the same article rejects as erroneous, “That a congregation in which no public excommunication or regular process of the ban is observed, is no true Christian congregation” (*Triglotta*, 1100, 34). Here our Confessions rightly reject the notion of the Schwenckfeldians that a lack of a regular, on-going process of discipline resulting in excommunication renders a church no longer a true Christian church.

What spawned the position of the Schwenckfeldians? The Schwenckfeldians were what Luther called “*Schwärmer*” or enthusiasts. They were enthusiasts of the highest order. They denied the means of grace and believed only in the immediate working of the Holy Spirit. As such, they were also pietists and, like most pietists, were highly legalistic. Hence, they had a legalistic view on church discipline. They deemed a congregation not a true or orthodox church which did not have a regular, systematic exercise of the ban or excommunication. Yet, a congregation does not cease to be a Christian congregation if discipline has been lax, or even if the greater ban for a period of time is not exercised. The true Christians in a congregation, the true sheep, the very people who make a congregation a Christian church in the proper sense (the hypocrites are members only improperly), are still there in spite of the lack of the ban. Also, circumstances might make the exercise of the third step, “*tell it unto the church,*” not possible. In the days of the Reformation, Luther and his fellow confessors were so busy with the Reformation that, except for the most flagrant of cases, the ban was not practiced. This did not render the congregations non-Christian, nor did it even render them no longer orthodox. In addition, in new congregations where indoctrination has just begun, there may be such a lack of knowledge and such a degree of immaturity that gaining unanimity in a Voters Assembly may be very difficult, if not impossible.

However, this provision in the *Formula of Concord* against the Schwenckfeldians must not be abused by using it as a justification for persistent or chronic neglect of brotherly admonition and the exercise of the ban. Persistent, chronic neglect of brotherly admonition and the failure to exercise the ban where Scripture requires it would at the very least certainly call into question the orthodoxy of a Christian congregation. In the final analysis, because brotherly admonition and discipline are commanded by Christ and the Apostles, we cannot therefore call such admonition and discipline “optional.” Indeed, the very fact that Christ has entrusted to the Holy Christian Church on earth, especially and in particular to every local congregation, the Office

of the Keys, indicates the importance of the faithful exercise of the Keys. In Matthew 16:19 Christ says, *“And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”* Again, in Matthew 18:18 our Savior says, *“Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”* And again in John 20:18-19, Christ says, *“Receive ye the Holy Ghost: whose soever sins ye remit they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained.”*

Therefore, our essay will address **“The Need, Purpose, and Function Of Brotherly Admonition and Discipline In The Christian Congregation.”**

Part One: The Need and Purpose of Brotherly Admonition

Since the need and purpose of brotherly admonition are so closely joined together, we shall consider them together under this first section. Yet we can and should also distinguish between need and purpose.

At the very outset, the NEED for brotherly admonition is due primarily to the fact that Christians in this world are sinners. It is true, of course, that by faith in Christ we are saints. In God’s sight we are in and through Christ pure and holy. *“But ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God”* (I Corinthians 6:11). Nevertheless, due to our Old Adam, our sinful nature, we are also sinners. The Apostle John says, *“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us”* (I John 1:8). Moreover, Paul says in Romans 7:18, *“For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not.”* In like measure Galatians 5:17 says, *“For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.”* Indeed, Christ’s words, *“For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies”* (Matthew 15:19), also apply to the Christian’s natural heart.

Therefore, even though Christians do not sin willfully and maliciously, they do nevertheless sin out of weakness. Often in charity we overlook those sins of weakness without admonition, as the Bible says, *“For charity shall cover the multitude of sins”* (I Peter 4:8). Yet where even sins of weakness take on habit and are no longer being combated with a concerned heart, even these ought to be admonished lest they grow into something which is being justified and defended. Sins of weakness, like a small weed sprout, if not pulled out, will grow deeper, larger and stronger until they are no longer sins of weakness. For example, a Christian may unintentionally react to a certain situation with fleshly anger. He may well have been provoked to such anger. In such a case there may be no need to admonish him since right away he himself sees his sin and immediately repents of it. Yet if the brother shows himself repeatedly getting angry, he must be admonished with such Scriptures as, *“Be ye angry and sin not, let not the sun go down upon your wrath”* (Ephesians 4:26), or *“Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, show to wrath: for the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God”* (James 1:19-20).

Another need for admonition is that the Church Visible is ever subject to being infested with

tares among the wheat. False sons, hypocrites, although hidden from men for a season, will usually make themselves manifest. In Christ's day, the scribes and Pharisees showed themselves to be hypocrites. Of them Jesus said, *"This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoreth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me"* (Matthew 15:8). Their hypocrisy moved Christ to utter some of His severest condemnations. Over and over again in Matthew 23 Jesus said, *"Woe unto you scribes, Pharisees, hypocrites."* Moreover, when Ananias and Sapphira attempted to cover their lie to the Holy Ghost, Peter sternly admonished them, and since his admonition was not heeded, both husband and wife were struck down by God Himself. Furthermore, Paul warned the elders of Ephesus, *"For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also, of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them"* (Acts 20:29-30). Jesus warns, *"Beware of false prophets which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves"* (Matthew 7:15). Moreover, the churches of Galatia were being infiltrated by the Judaizers, Jews who professed faith in Christ but who claimed circumcision was necessary for justification. Their inroads were seriously influencing the congregations.

If such false prophets and exposed hypocrites are not admonished and brought to repentance or, in the absence of repentance, put out, the unity of faith is destroyed in the congregation. The Word of God demands unity of faith. The Bible says, *"endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"* (Ephesians 4:3). Again the Bible says, *"Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you: but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment"* (I Corinthians 1:10). In conjunction with this, Paul also says, *"Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them"* (Romans 16:17). Thus, admonition and discipline are needed to maintain the God-demanded unity of faith in the congregation. Indeed, how could a congregation partake of the Lord's Supper if its members are divided due to some members living in sin or others promulgating false doctrine?

Furthermore, the very need for admonition and discipline in the Christian congregation serves also to give the PURPOSE for admonition and discipline. The most obvious purpose of brotherly admonition and discipline is to rescue and restore the erring for the saving of their souls. II Timothy 2:25-26 says, *"In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; and that they may RECOVER themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will."* Paul also writes, *"Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual RESTORE such an one in the spirit of meekness..."* (Galatians 6:1). When Paul instructed the Corinthians to put out from among them the fornicator, he again explained the purpose. He said, *"To 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"* (I Corinthians 5:5). Also, James wrote, *"Brethren if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall SAVE a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins"* (James 5:19-20). Likewise, Jude 21-22 says, *"Keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life. And of some have compassion, making a difference; and others SAVE with fear, pulling them out of the fire; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh."*

That one of the purposes of Christian discipline is the rescue and saving of souls needs to be emphasized in the face of the hesitancy and reluctance of some congregations to carry out the third step of discipline where Christ instructs the church to declare an impenitent person *"an heathen man and a publican"* (Matthew 18:17). It is not unusual for Voters' Assemblies to get

“cold feet” when an impenitent person refuses even to hear the church. The men may let their emotions and feelings, and no doubt the whispering of Satan, cause them to think that declaring a person an heathen man and a publican is judgmental and unloving. Rather, failure to declare an impenitent person a heathen is truly unloving, in that it permits him to continue in sin. An impenitent person must be told the unvarnished truth that if he does not repent he is damned even as he lives. When he dies, he will most certainly suffer eternal damnation in hell. Where the heart is impenitent, there is no saving faith. Impenitence equals unbelief, for Christ says, *“He that believeth not shall be damned”* (Mark 16:16).

Indeed, to neglect or to fail to warn an impenitent person that he will perish unless he repents, is to take his blood upon one’s own self! This is no more soberly enunciated than in Ezekiel 3:17-21 where God says to Ezekiel, *“Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me. When I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; and thou givest him not warning, nor speakest to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life; the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand. Yet if thou warn the wicked, and he turn not from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but thou hast delivered thy soul. Again, when a righteous man doth turn from his righteousness and commit iniquity, and I lay a stumblingblock before him, he shall die; because thou hast not given him warning, he shall die in his sin, and his righteousness which he hath done shall not be remembered; but his blood will I require at thine hand. Nevertheless if thou warn the righteous man, that the righteous sin not, and he doth not sin, he shall surely live, because he is warned; also thou hast delivered thy soul.”* These words are so clear they need no further comment.

Moreover, not only do admonition and discipline serve the purpose to rescue and save the erring wayward soul, they also serve to keep the faithful on the straight and narrow path. Believers, true sheep, can become complacent. They need to be reminded of the potential for falling. In those well-known words of Paul, the Scripture says, *“Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall”* (I Corinthians 10:12). Hence, even before Peter denied his Lord three times, the Savior warned him for the purpose of keeping him from falling. The Savior said, *“Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: but I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren”* (Luke 22:31-32). And O how such prior warning was needed! Right after Jesus spoke this word of admonition, we read how this warning fell on deaf ears. The Bible says, *“And he said unto him, Lord, I am ready to go with thee, both into prison, and to death. And he said, I tell thee, Peter, the cock shall not crow this day, before thou shalt thrice deny that thou knowest me”* (Luke 22:33-34). Nevertheless, the Lord’s admonition and prayer, coupled with Christ’s grieved look at Peter after the cock crew, did bring about immediate repentance and the rescue of Peter’s soul. As the Bible says, *“And he went out, and wept bitterly”* (Matthew 26:75). The admonition of the Lord had come flashing back into Peter heart!

We mentioned earlier about the Galatians being infiltrated by the Judaizers. Paul gave warning to them so that they would not turn to another Gospel. He said, *“I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the Gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed. For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ”* (Galatians 1:6-10). Again, for the purpose of keeping the Galatians in the

true doctrine of justification by grace through faith, Paul earnestly entreated the Galatians, “*O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you? This only would I learn of you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh? Have ye suffered so many things in vain, if it be yet in vain?*” (Galatians 3:1-4).

Moreover, admonition and church discipline serve to promote the life of sanctification in the congregation. In that regard it works in tandem with the third use of the Law in the Church, namely, a rule or guideline. When members are admonished, this serves to perk up other members to be more diligent in their own life of sanctification. After Ananias and Sapphira were struck dead, what we might call God’s own swift excommunication, we are told in the Scriptures, “*And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things*” (Acts 5:11). In these last days when Christian congregations are lax in sanctification and prone to lukewarmness such as was found in the lukewarm church of Laodicea (Revelation 3), admonition and discipline serve as a “wake-up call.” Many years ago when this writer’s pastorate had just begun, he found that he had inherited a congregation laden with “dead wood,” delinquent members, many of whom had not been in church in two, three, even four or more years. After the pastor took his elders with him to visit and admonish these grossly delinquent members, some still refused to repent of despising the means of grace. They refused to come to church. They were then excommunicated. In the subsequent Sundays thereafter, church attendance took a sudden upswing and stayed up. Great fear came upon the congregation! A proper fear of God was restored in the congregation.

Furthermore, discipline is not only condemnatory, but exhortatory. When fellow members are not only warned against gossip, against sinful judging, against fornication, against worldliness, but also shown the corresponding Godly ways as set forth in Scripture, the congregation is thereby being encouraged and cultivated in letting its light shine even among its own members as well as in the world. Discipline for the purpose of exhortation is the exercise of the *third use* of the Law. Such was the nature of Paul’s instructions to the Romans when he wrote, “*Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good. Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honor preferring one another; not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer; distributing to the necessity of saints; given to hospitality*” (Romans 12:9-13).

Ultimately, of course, brotherly admonition and discipline, as any other faithful adherence to the Word, redound to the glory of God. When an erring person or fallen person repents, the members give glory to God, and God Himself rejoices. Christ our Lord says in His parable of the Lost Sheep, “*And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbors, saying, unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost. I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance*” (Luke 15:6-7). Likewise, at the conclusion of the Parable of the Lost Coin, Christ says, “*And when she hath found it, she calleth her friends and her neighbors together, saying, Rejoice with me; for I have found the piece which I had lost. Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth*” (Luke 15:9-10).

Part Two: The Function of Christian Admonition and Church Discipline

At the outset of this section, we do well to explain how the word **function** is being defined and used. Function has to do with operation, procedure, method, or execution. When it comes to church discipline, we are not left to our own reason and judgment, although good judgment guided by Scripture most certainly must be exercised. Where there is a lack of discretion and necessary tact, the end goal of having an erring brother reconciled may be seriously impeded. Otherwise, as we shall see, Christ our Lord takes from us all need to be creative, inventive and imaginative in dealing with erring persons in the church. Moreover, in this section on function, we must also include the manner or attitude with which the functions are to be exercised.

As stated, the function or procedure in carrying out church discipline is not left to the church to decide. Scripture tells us how to proceed when the sin committed is private, and also how to proceed when the sin committed is public at the outset. We shall take them one at a time.

Here it needs to be pointed out that the Christian congregation exercises discipline only when sin is involved. In this regard, not our feelings and not our personal subjective assessments define sin. God's Holy Law alone defines what is sin. I John 3:4 says, "*For sin is the transgression of the law.*" Also, not only sins of life, but also doctrinal error is a matter which warrants church discipline. If the error in doctrine involves a fundamental doctrine necessary for saving faith (e.g., the Virgin Birth, the deity of Christ, the bodily resurrection of Christ, justification by grace alone through faith alone, etc.), the unrepentant errorist must be declared an unbeliever. As for non-fundamental doctrines, persistence in the error results in the cessation of church fellowship.

With respect to sins which are not public, Christ sets forth the so-called "three steps" of discipline. The "three steps" are outlined for us in Matthew 18:15-17. The first step is this: "*Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.*" Because the sin is private or not publicly known, it should not be made public, but must be dealt with privately. This is why Jesus says, "*Go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone.*" Therefore, if a private sin is exposed, this in itself would be a sin. It is making public what is no one else's business. This also deprives the erring brother of the opportunity to repent in private and to keep the matter contained. Indeed, should the erring brother repent, the matter is over; and others need not and must not know that the matter ever existed.

Concerning this first step, we ought to understand properly Jesus' words, "*If thy brother shall trespass **against thee.***" The initiation of the first step is not done only if the sin is specifically committed against you personally. You may go on a hunting trip with a fellow Christian. He takes along a bottle of Jack Daniels and that evening forgets himself and drinks too much. He did not specifically sin against you but against himself and God. Nevertheless, you must admonish him. Even though his sin was not committed against your person, it was nevertheless against you in that his sin was an offense to you and violated your mutual brotherly spiritual relationship.

However, with respect to this first step of dealing with a brother who sins and who must be admonished in private, there is a proper patience to be observed. This first step need not be conducted just once. Obviously if the person repents, no more efforts are necessary. The matter is over. You have gained your brother. However, if the brother is not gained by one visit, it would be wise to try again at that level. It may well be that the admonished brother has been pondering the first admonition, and his conscience is bothering him. A second timely visit may gain the brother. If so, the matter is then over, and no one needs to be apprized of the matter.

However, when it becomes evident that the *first* step has gained no progress, one must proceed with the *second* step which our Savior sets forth. He says, “*But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.*” These one or two brethren are called in to witness what is said, both by the admonishing brother and by the offender. They confirm that what the accused has been charged with is indeed sin, and that the offender was properly admonished with the Word. Indeed, it has been well said that the one or two brethren called in ought to be upright, mature Christians whom the offender respects and knows to be objective and unbiased. It would be foolish to take one or two persons whose conduct has been offensive or whose lack of knowledge makes them unable to give solid, Biblical admonition.

The taking of one or two more persons as witnesses has a two-fold purpose. First, should the matter eventually have to go to the church, the church will hear of the matter out of “*the mouth of two or three witnesses.*” Then, as Christ says, “*every word may be established.*” The church cannot and must not take up cases where there is not the Scripturally required witness. [We will expand on the necessity of witnesses under our discussion of the *third* step.] The other purpose for taking one or two more is that the very presence of one or two other brethren will serve to impress more heavily upon the offender that his sin is not a mere matter of excusable weakness, but a matter where the soul is in jeopardy. As witnesses, the one or two more should not be merely passive witnesses, but should also join with the first brother in admonishing the offender. Indeed, the two or three are to speak as one voice with the Word of God. If the offender senses lack of unanimity among those bringing the admonition, this undermines the strength of the admonition. Howbeit, if, by the grace of God, the offender should repent as a result of the exercise of the second step, the penitent one is to be declared forgiven and the matter ceases. No further action is necessary, and the matter must not be publicized.

However, should this *second* step (which may be repeated) also not result in repentance, the *third* step must follow. Christ says, “*And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church.*” Obviously, although apparently not so obviously to the WELS, ELS, and CoLC, the church here mentioned in Matthew 18:17 is the divinely instituted local congregation. Yet in the Wisconsin Synod’s official pastoral theology book, *The Shepherd Under Christ*, in the chapter dealing with church discipline, there is a very revealing paragraph. It purposely makes hazy and ill-defined the meaning of the word church in Matthew 18:17. That paragraph reads: “There is nothing in Matthew 18:17 to indicate that the church which is involved in church discipline must be organized in a specific manner. The presence of the church is determined by the fact that the means of grace are in use in the midst of a number of professed believers; that they are gathered in Jesus’ name (Matthew 18:10), that is, in response to the Gospel revelation to perform functions which the Lord has assigned to them. Our Lord’s concern is not to grant a special privilege to a group organized in a specific manner, but to make sure that a sinning brother is given every possible opportunity to be confronted with the seriousness of his sin. To read more into Matthew 18 than is there can lead to a restriction of New Testament liberty and flexibility by the introduction of a ceremonial law, to hierarchical attitudes which consider excommunication valid only if declared in the presence of a pastor and announced by him, or to an evasion of a duty of love when an offense occurs of which no one in the offender’s congregation knows” (Armin W. Schuetze and Irwin J. Habeck, *The Shepherd Under Christ*, Northwestern Publishing House, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1974, page 169). This entire paragraph reveals the WELS’ false doctrine of the Church and Ministry! They foster the idea that any casual gathering of believers using the Word is “church.” They see the local Christian congregation and its shepherd as not the only divinely instituted grouping of Christians. Hence, what confusion is created when discipline must be exercised.

However, it is obvious that when Jesus says, *“Tell it unto the church,”* He means that the two or three are to tell it unto the local Christian congregation of which the offender is a member. This is Christ’s own divinely designated group of Christians given the authority to exercise publicly the power of the Keys, and especially to carry out the third step of discipline. Hence, not a Bible study group, not a synod or conference, nor the entire Holy Christian Church on earth can possibly exercise the third step.

When the sin and impenitence of the offender is told to the church (the local congregation), it is told out of the mouth of the two or three witnesses. Here the witnesses of the second step become crucial. In both the Old and New Testaments, God sets forth the requirement that witnesses give testimony of a sin before a final judgment may be rendered. The following passages set forth this requirement and principle:

Numbers 35:30 — *“Whoso killeth any person, the murderer shall be put to death by the mouth of two or three witnesses: but one witness shall not testify against any person to cause him to die.”*

Deuteronomy 19:15 — *“One witness shall not rise up against a man for any iniquity, or for any sin, in any sin that he sinneth: at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be established.”*

Matthew 18:16 — *“But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.”*

II Corinthians 13:1 — *“This is the third time I am coming to you. In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established.”*

Also, with respect to the requirement of witnesses in a charge against a pastor, Scripture gives the following requirement: *“Against an elder receive not an accusation but before two or three witnesses”* (I Timothy 5:19). This passage teaches us that the church is not even to receive a charge against its pastor which is not properly witnessed and substantiated by *“two or three.”* Here the comments of the Lutheran commentator, R. C. H. Lenski, are pertinent: *“Timothy is not to receive an accusation against an elder so as to take further steps about it, make an investigation, hear even the elder himself regarding the accusation, except on the basis of two or three witnesses. The honor due the office demands this protection, for even a charge of which an elder is acquitted nevertheless damages his office and his work to some degree. Paul’s purpose is to have no case taken up in which the verdict will after all have to be acquittal; also, and in the very first place, to prevent anybody from bringing such a case. This is to be a special safeguard that is to protect the good name of the office and its incumbents in the interest of the church itself. Ordinarily the witnesses are cited at the time of the trial; in the case of an elder they must be cited at the time the accusation is preferred, otherwise the accusation is not to be received”* (R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon*, Augsburg Publishing House, 1945, page 684).

When, however, an erring or sinning brother’s case is told to the church, then the church must call the offender to appear before the church (which is the Voters’ Assembly composed of the adult male communicant members of the congregation —women and children are not to have rule in the church— to be admonished by the church. At this meeting, the church, on the basis of the testimony and evidence presented by the two or three witnesses, calls upon the offender

to repent. The offender is given opportunity to speak, yet not to hold forth and propagandize, but to repent of his sin. Should he maintain his innocence, he must do so with witness and evidence which clearly disprove or nullify what has been testified against him. However, should the offender in the face of undisputed evidence or the witnessed charges against him still not repent, Christ instructs the church on what it must do. Christ says, *“Let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican”* The church is to declare the impenitent person a heathen, an unbeliever. The person must be declared an heathen man for the simple reason that his steadfast impenitence has already rendered him such. The church is declaring publicly and formally what the person has already made himself to be: *“An heathen man and a publican.”* Thus, he is not to be considered merely no longer a member of the congregation, but no longer a member of the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints. And just how sure and certain is the church’s action of declaring an impenitent person *“an heathen man and a publican”*? Jesus says in Matthew 18:18, the verse which immediately follows the three steps, *“Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven”* As Luther writes in his Small Catechism, *“This is as valid and certain, in heaven also, as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us Himself.”* For this reason, should this excommunicated person continue to come to church (which may happen), then the pastor must faithfully carry out the declaration of the church by forbidding the person to receive the Lord’s Supper.

However, by the grace of God, the offender having been called to appear before the Voters may repent. What a wonderful and happy result of the entire, patient exercise of the Keys! As we quoted earlier, Jesus says, *“I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance”* (Luke 15:7). Then the congregation has the joy of officially and publicly declaring the repentant person to be forgiven or absolved. This, too, *“is as valid and certain in heaven also, as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us Himself”* (Luther). Christ says, *“Whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven”* (Matthew 18:18). And again, *“Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them”* (John 20:23). Indeed, this is ever the ultimate prayed for and striven for goal of church discipline.

With respect to the third step, it has been asked if the offender must in every case be present to hear the church. While this is preferable, it is not required by the text. Jesus simply states: *“If he neglect to hear [i.e., literally, turn away his hearing from] the church.”* Hearing the church is not necessarily audible hearing. Usually the offender is summoned to appear before the church by way of a letter. The letter sets forth the sin for which the offender is being called upon to repent. Hence, even the invitational letter is the church’s addressing the impenitent one. If the person refuses to appear, the church may deem it proper to extend a second invitation. However, if the offender, without valid reason, simply will not appear and refuses in every way, even by letter or other communication, to express his repentance, the church is thereby NOT prevented from declaring the offender an heathen man and a publican. The emphasis is not so much on the physical hearing of the church, but on heeding the church’s admonition. The impenitent one is not hearing the church when he or she refuses to submit to the church’s call to repent of the sin which has been presented on the basis of two or three witnesses.

At this juncture of our discussion on function or procedure, we need to address how to proceed when a sin is public at the outset. I Timothy 5:20 says, *“Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear.”* When Peter gave public offense by his conduct in Antioch, Paul did not take him aside to rebuke him privately, but rebuked him before all. Galatians 2:14 says, *“But when I saw that they walked not uprightly according to the truth of the Gospel, I said unto Peter BEFORE THEM ALL, if thou, being a Jew, livest after the manner of Gentiles....”* The obvious

reason a public sin needs to be rebuked publicly is that there is no privacy to protect. There being no privacy involved, the first two steps of Matthew 18 are not applicable and are unnecessary. Even more importantly, the rebuke must be as wide as the offense. The public rebuke must correct the false doctrine or practice as far and wide as the sin caused offense. It must bring correction to all who had been exposed to the sin or error and were in danger of accepting the error.

However, there may be instances, due to the age and spiritual maturity of the offender or due to other special conditions, when even after the public sin has been publicly rebuked and an immediate repentance is not expressed, the offender may be further dealt with by the pastor and elders so as to bring about repentance. In other words, the sought after repentance not gained at the time of the public rebuke may well be obtained in the semi-privacy of a meeting with the Pastor and elders. Should repentance be gained, the repentance must then be made public. Normally the repentant one should make his confession before the church. However, should the person be of a timid disposition or have other personal impediments which may make a public confession not possible, the repentance given before the pastor and elders, who together are witnesses, could then be announced to the church, and the church would accept the witnessed repentance.

Having detailed the function and procedure of church discipline, it is here that we should bring in the proper attitude and conduct which is to prevail throughout church discipline, beginning even at step one. Because our goal is to save a soul, the admonishing Christians, whether one at the start, whether two or three at the second step, or whether the Voters at step three, are to deal with the offender with genuine humility, courtesy, tact, and sincere concern for the brother's soul. Here the words of Galatians 6:1 are golden. "*Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.*" If the admonishing brethren are haughty, over-bearing, patronizing, or come across as self-righteous, this could well place a stumblingblock before the offending brother and cause him to be further galvanized in his impenitence. Thus, not only must we speak the truth, but as our Convention theme-verse reminds us, we must "*speaking the truth in love*" (Ephesians 4:15). [Of course, such speaking the truth in love does not mean that firmness is out of order. If the offender is haughty and belligerent, speaking the truth in love will require a firmness and sharpness which the belligerence dictates.]

Furthermore, we should realize that we could well have been the one who fell. As Paul says, "*Considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.*" We should approach our sinning brother with the full realization that, but for the grace of God, it could have been "I." When Jesus informed the disciples at the last Passover on Maundy Thursday that one of them would betray Him, they all asked, "*Lord, is it I?*" Each disciple (Judas, of course, was *hypocritical* in saying, "*Is it I?*"), yes, each disciple could indeed have been guilty of this sin, even unknowingly. Thus Luther once remarked that a true Christian upon hearing an accusation against him does not simply dismiss the accusation as being utterly impossible or improbable.

The humble, sincere attitude of the admonishing brethren manifests their genuine concern and love for their erring or fallen brother. One must ask himself, "Do I want my fellow church member to be lost? Do I care about his soul in harmony with the care which the Lord has for souls? The Lord Himself says, "*As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live*" (Ezekiel 33:11). Likewise, Peter reminds us that the Lord "*is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance*" (II Peter 3:9). And again, the Bible reminds us that "*(God) will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth*" (I Timothy 2:4).

Conclusion

In these last days of sore distress, especially as people increasingly “*will not endure sound doctrine, but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears, and shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables*” (II Timothy 4:3-4), the need for brotherly admonition and discipline will surely not decrease, but may increase. This is why Paul also added, “*But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry*” (II Timothy 4:5).

Moreover, let us remember the words of our Lord in Luke 18:8, “*When the Son of man cometh, shall He find faith on the earth?*” These words of our Savior tell us that not only will few be believing or be in the faith, but also that few will still be holding “*the faith,*” the body of true doctrine. Thus, while in the exercise of brotherly admonition and discipline we must take care not to fall into the loveless, pietistic legalism of the Schwenckfeldians, we should also take equal care that, when warranted, we not neglect to exercise sincere, loving brotherly admonition among us. By such loving, faithful, brotherly admonition, we shall contribute to the saving and preserving of the few who will still be believing at our Lord’s return. It is all in the interest of the Gospel of our salvation. May God help us to carry out this solemn responsibility.

*“Now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling,
and to present you faultless before the presence of
His glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God
our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power,
both now and ever. Amen” —Jude 24-25*