

Excommunication Versus Self-Exclusion: An Exegesis of Matthew Chapter 18

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The Question

This essay topic originally arose in the Chicago Conference of the Southeastern Wisconsin District following a discussion concerning the propriety of self-exclusion in a case of casuistry. The author of the paper brought the question before the group.

In their book, *The Shepherd Under Christ*, Professors Schuetze and Habeck offer the following definition for excommunication:

Excommunication is the solemn declaration of the church that a sinner because of his impenitence is no longer a member of the church, that he is to be regarded as a heathen man and a publican (Mt 18:17), that his sin is bound upon him on earth and in heaven (Mt. 18:18). Exclusion from the visible church takes place because it has become evident that by his impenitence the sinner declares the Lord's verdict, which stands on its own merits and is not supplemented by any human power or authority. The purpose of excommunication is that this last and most severe preaching of the law might yet bring the sinner to see his error and that he thus may in the end still be saved. All of this implies that the congregation must be as sure as is humanly possible that the sinner is indeed impenitent.¹

The above is the most complete, brief, and Scriptural definition of excommunication that I was able to find in a book on Pastoral Theology.

The Shepherd Under Christ does not mention the term, "self-exclusion". However, the following is found under the topic heading, "Self-excommunication."

The term "self-excommunication" is inaccurate. Excommunication implies action by the church, which on the basis of evidence that the sinner is impenitent declares that he is excluded from the Christian church. If the sinner has refused to heed the summons to appear before the church to hear its testimony, this refusal is the evidence of his impenitence, which becomes the basis for excommunication. There dare be no question as to whether the sinner has received the summons to appear before the church. It may be sent by registered or certified mail or presented orally or in writing by at least two members.²

The concept of "Self-exclusion" is mentioned by Fritz in his book, *Pastoral Theology*.

If an offender absolutely refuses to appear at the meeting, he cannot be excommunicated because he cannot finally be dealt with in accordance with Christ's prescribed order, Matt. 18:17, and also because by his refusal to be dealt with he has virtually already left the congregation and

¹ Schuetze – Habeck, *The Shepherd Under Christ*, p. 173.

² *Ibid.* p. 177.

excluded himself from the brethren, 1 John 2:19. A public declaration of such fact should be made, and the offender should be treated as one who is without.³

Here we see a difference in practice between Lutherans. In one case, refusal to appear before the congregation is proof of impenitence and becomes the “basis for excommunication.”⁴ In the other case such refusal to appear before the congregation becomes the basis for the pastor declaring that the impenitent has excluded himself, with the note that “he cannot be excommunicated because he cannot finally be dealt with in accordance with Christ’s prescribed order, Matt. 18:17.”⁵

A third concept comes into the picture when we study *The Lutheran Agenda*. Here we find a form for both “Excommunication by The Congregation” and “Self -Exclusion”

Excommunication by the Congregation

Beloved in Christ: It is my painful duty to make known to you that our fellow member, N., was under discipline and, although repeatedly admonished from the Word of God, has manifested no evidence of true repentance, The assembled congregation has therefore excommunicated him until he give evidence of repentance. May the almighty and merciful God grant him grace to know his sin, work in him true repentance, and awaken him to reformation of life. Amen.

Self-Exclusion

It is my painful duty to make known to you that N., being under discipline, has declared his withdrawal from this congregation He has, thereby deprived us of the opportunity to admonish him henceforth as a brother; and we are constrained to commit his cause to Him that judgeth righteously. May the Lord, of His great mercy, grant him knowledge of his sinful conduct that he may repent and return. Amen.⁶

Note carefully the difference here between Fritz’s “If the offender absolutely refuses to appear at the meeting,”⁷ and the words of the *Agenda*, “has declared his withdrawal from the congregation.”⁸

Which is proper according to Matthew chapter 18? What is the “better” Lutheran practice according to Matthew chapter 18? (If we can speak of it that way.) In what instances might one thing be practiced and in what instances might a second or a third be practiced according to Matthew, chapter 18?

According to Matthew, Chapter 18

I do not believe that time will permit us to do a complete exegesis of Matthew chapter 18, Therefore, I would choose to do a more “topical” exegesis, if I may call it that, of this chapter. The topic of course, is excommunication, or better, “Church Discipline.” Loosely following John Peter Lange’s outline of this chapter, I would put forth the following outline for this paper:

Church Discipline, The Exercise of Our Brotherly Love

- I. Brotherly love for the little children — The basis for Church Discipline vs. 1-14
 - A. The sin of hierarchicalism and proud ambition, vs. 1
 - B. Christ’s love for the little children, vs. 2-5

³ Fritz, *Pastoral Theology*, p. 242.

⁴ Schuetze – Habeck, *Op. Cit.*, p. 177.

⁵ Fritz, *Op. Cit.*, p. 242.

⁶ *The Lutheran Agenda*, p. 33.

⁷ Fritz, *Op. Cit.*, p. 242.

⁸ *Agenda*, p. 33.

- C. A warning against offending a “little one,” vs. 6-9
 - 1. The warning, vs. 6-7
 - 2. Eternal salvation—God’s most precious gift, vs. 8-9
- D. Every soul is precious to our Lord, vs. 10-14
- II. The course of brotherly love in connection with church discipline, vs. 15-18
 - A. Brotherly love is active church discipline, vs. 15-17
 - B. The authority for church discipline, vs. 18
 - C. The power of the church vs. 19-20
- III. Absolution the ever-present goal of church discipline v. 21-35
 - A. Absolution has no limits on the penitent, vs. 21-22
 - B. Forgiveness pronounced because of forgiveness received: The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant, vs. 23-35
- IV. Items of Controversy
 - A. The question: Excommunication verses Self-exclusion, which?
 - B. The question: Should the excommunicated be spiritually shunned or evangelized by the congregation?

I. Brotherly Love for the Little Children – Vs. 1-14

A. The sin of hierarchicalism and proud ambition, vs. 1

Word Study:

ὥρα - hour—time (in a general sense)

ἄρα - inferential particle—then, therefore.

Translation:

Vs. 1 “At that time the disciples came to Jesus saying, ‘Who, then, is greater in the Kingdom of Heaven?’”

We would take the events that brought forth these words as those found in the preceding chapters, especially the incidents: the temple tax, the Mt. of Transfiguration, and the words of Christ in Matthew 16:15-20 after Peter’s confession of faith:

Matthew 16:15-20 – “He saith unto them, ‘But whom say ye that I am?’ And Simon Peter answered and said, ‘Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ And Jesus answered and said unto him, ‘Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona, for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates, of hell shall not prevail against it. And I give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.’ Then charged he his disciples that they should tell no man that he was Jesus the Christ.”

Did the disciples misinterpret the words of Christ as the Roman Catholic Church does today, giving primacy to the papacy—the so-called descendant of Peter? If they did, the word, of Matthew 18, spoken by Jesus in response to the question of primacy by the disciples in verse 1, certainly shot down such proud, hierarchical ideas.

B. Christ's Love for the Little Children, Vs. 2-5

Word Study:

- Vs. 2 προκαλεσάμενος – aor. mid part. – προκαλέω call to
 Vs. 3 σταφῆτε – aor. subj. pass. – στέφω change, turn about, twist convert.
 εἰσέλθητε – aor. subj. pass. – ἔρχομαι come into
 Vs. 4 ταπεινώσει – future ταπεινῶ literal—to level a mountain or a hill. Figurative—to humble
 Vs. 5 δεξίται – aor. subj. δεχομαι take receive

Translation:

Vs. 2-5 “And when he called a little child to him, he set him in the midst of them and said, ‘Truly I say to you unless you change and become as little children you shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven Whoever, therefore, shall humble himself, as this little child, that one is the greater in the Kingdom of Heaven. And whoever should receive one such child on the basis of my name, receives me’.”

We read in St. Mark’s account of these events that Jesus took the child up into his arms. Did he hug the child and visibly demonstrate his love for the child? We can imagine that he did.

Kittel says that στρέφω may be stretched to be used as a synonym for ματανοέω a change of mind, convert, repent. Lenski remarks that στρέφω is equivalent to conversion or regeneration.

A change must be found in the disciples. They must be changed from their ambitious rivalry and hierarchicalism as displayed in verse 1 to a humility and a dependence upon God, such as this little child showed who came so willingly at the Lord’s call.

Jesus is not making a pronouncement about this child that contradicts the Scriptural Doctrine of original sin. Christ here uses children as a symbol of humility and trust as he uses natural birth in John 3 to symbolize spiritual regeneration. In fact, this section of the Scriptures is a strong argument for infant Baptism (cf. vs. 10) The point of comparison is the simple child-like humility and trust of a little child.

ταπεινῶ presents us with a beautiful word picture of humility. The hills and the mountains of our pride are leveled off. The levelheaded trustworthy road of humility is God-pleasing.

The reach for greatness is not the reach of faith. Faith is a passive and receptive ‘Yea’ to God’s royal working; therefore the reach for greatness will shut them out of the Kingdom.⁹

A growing humbleness of mind makes us greater and greater in the Kingdom of Heaven, but true humility does not hanker after greatness. As Luther wrote in *The Freedom of the Christian Man*,

“A Christian is a perfectly free Lord of all, subject to none.”

“A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”¹⁰

This leads us into the emphasis in verse 5, ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματί μου. One who receives such a little one on the basis of the revelation of Jesus that the Holy Spirit has worked in our heart to produce faith and brotherly love, the fruit of faith, receives Christ. So close is our Savior’s fellowship with his believers. So great is his love and protection.

⁹ Franzmann, *Follow Me*, p. 150.

¹⁰ Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 31, p. 344.

παίδιον is the diminutive of παῖς and refers to a little child who is not yet seven years old. The word can also refer to one of undeveloped understanding or to the children of God in Christ. It is obvious in verses 2 through 4 that Jesus is referring to the little child of age. In verse 5 Jesus, himself, expands the definition to include one who is little in age and/or understanding, The weak Christian and the strong are all children of God in Christ. “Ye are all the Children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.” The sinner is the one for whom Christ died—all sinners—even those who sin against us. Objective Justification is our greatest comfort. The love of our Savior for all sinners for whom he died is our incentive towards brotherly love for all.

The little child shows us that our ministry should be humility and love in opposition to hierarchical claims; “of condescension to little ones, in opposition to that of ascending grades; and of pastoral watchfulness, in opposition to hierarchical pride and domination, which is here characterized and condemned both as the grand offence of the New Testament times, and as the greatest temptation and corruption of the Christian world.”¹¹

C. A Warning Against Offending a “Little One,” vs. 6-9

1. The Warning, vs. 6-7

Word Study:

Vs. 6 σκανδαλίση – aor. subj. – σκανδαλίζω – to cause loss of faith, to rob of eternal salvation. Kittel – also “to cause one to sin” thereby sending him to eternal perdition.

συμφέρει – intransitive and impersonal – συμφέρω (collect, bring together) it is an advantage, it is expedient, it is beneficial.

κρεμασθῆ – aor, subi, pass. – κρεμάννυμι - hang

τράχηλον – neck

καταποντισθῆ – aor, subj, pass. – καταποντίζομαι – submerged, drowned.

πελάγει, πέλαγος – open sea

Vs. 7 οὐαί - adverb – woe (a statement that distress shall come upon)

ἀνάγκη – necessity, constraint, compulsion

Translation: vs. 6-7

Vs. 6-7 “But whoever should offend one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be to his advantage if a mill stone would be hanged about his neck and he would be drowned in the open sea, Woe to the world because of offenses. For it is a necessity that such offenses come, but woe to the man through whom the offense comes.”

The σκανδαλίζειν denotes spiritual destruction. Sin causes that destruction. The one who traps, tempts, or leads away from Christ a little one whom Christ loves brings upon himself an eternal woe. It would be to his advantage if all he had to suffer were to have the certain sentence of death pronounced upon him—a millstone hung about his neck and he be drowned in the midst of the open sea. The only thing worse than that would be to suffer the same eternal perdition that he brought upon the little ones when he led them into sin. So much Christ loves his little ones. So careful should we be, out of brotherly love towards the world of sinners that Christ loves, lest we, by our actions cause offense and lead others into sin to the destruction of their faith. There is a necessity for offenses in the world because of sin. After saying this, the second woe of Christ becomes even more striking and the warning against causing the offense is intensified.

¹¹ Lange, *Lange's Commentary on the Holy Scriptures*, vol. 8, pg. 326.

2. Eternal Salvation, God's Most Precious Gift, vs. 8-9

Word Study:

- Vs. 8 ἔκκοψον – aor. imperative – ἐκκόπτω cut off
 κυλλόν, -ος – maimed
 χωλόν – lame, crippled
 βληθῆναι – aor. inf. pass. – βάλλω cast, throw
- Vs. 9 ἔξελε – aor. imperative – ἐξαιρέω take out, remove

Translation: vs. 8-9

Vs. 8-9 “If your hand or foot offend you cut it off and throw it away from you, It is better for you to enter into life maimed or crippled than having both hands or both feet to be thrown into eternal fire, And if your eye offends you, remove it and throw it away from you. It is better for you to enter into life one-eyed than having two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.”

These verses serve to emphasize not self-mutilation, but the importance of a soul's salvation. We pray that the Holy Ghost would cut off or subdue our offenses and our offensive actions. We pray that he would lead us to use our hands, feet, eyes—our all—to edify the little ones and not to shun them. We pray that we may always consider our soul's salvation, and the soul's salvation of others, as the most important gift of God to us. All other things are expendable. But not our soul's salvation, Without it, hell is our lot. “It is better to pluck out the eye that looks towards greatness and overlooks these little ones than to enter whole into the fiery judgment of God.”¹²

So also, as pastors, the salvation of the soul of each member of the flock over which the Lord has called us must be of primary importance.

D. Every soul is precious to our Lord. vs. 10-14

Word Study

- Vs. 10
 ὁρᾶτε - imperative – ὁράω - see
 καταφορνήσητε aor. subj. – καταφρονέω - despise, scorn, to disparage, *not to be concerned about*.
- Vs. 11
 Should not be included in the text. The credentials are doubtful. But it fits the context well.
- Vs. 12
 δοκεῖ impersonal - cum dative - it seems good. from δοκέω I seem, am thought.
 γένηται aor. subj. - γίνομαι - be
 πλανηθῆ aor. subj. pass. πλανάω - to wander
 ὄρη ὄρος mountain, remote place for pasture.
 πλανώμενον pass, part, - wander
- Vs. 13
 πεπλανημένοις - perf. pass, part,
- vs. 14
 ἔμπροσθεν (used in reverential speaking - of God) - before

¹² Franzmann, *Op. Cit.*, pgs. 152-153.

ἀπόληται aor. subj. – ἀπόλλυμαι be lost

Translation: Vs, 10-14

“See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. What do you think? If a man had 100 sheep and one wandered away, will he not leave the 99 or the mountains and journeying seek the lost one? And if he should happen to find it, truly I say to you, that he rejoices about that one lost sheep more than over the 99 who did not wander away, So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.”

One of the meanings of καταφρονέω is that of not being concerned about something. We do this when we think of something as being so little that we can overlook it with not great harm to ourselves or to any one else. We scorn its importance. What a condemnation this word places upon our actions when we are so often lax in our church discipline. And, what are our reasons?

“I don’t like to do it’.

“It’s a dirty job.”

“The worst 25% of our members take up 75% of my time.

“Its just not worth the effort, We can’t gain him anyway.”

But the Lord loves the impenitent and the wanderer after false theology. The guardian angels of these little ones “report” before the face of God daily. We are their shepherds. We are under-shepherds to the Good Shepherd. Do we show love to all those whom Christ loves—to all the sheep of his flock?

Verse 11 has very poor credentials and should not be included in the text, although nothing fits the context better than these words, “The Son of Man is come to save that which is lost.” He would have us, his under-shepherds, seek and save his wandering sheep with the condemning Law and the forgiving Gospel.

Every soul is precious to God. We think of the joy of the father at the return of his prodigal son, God help us to never run roughshod over the spiritual needs of God’s little ones!

The under-shepherd is committed to the same seeking love as Christ, the Good Shepherd, who seeks his sheep. “He works to win the sinner, not to degrade him.”¹³

This brings us to the way and the manner in which we approach the impenitent in discipline work. The proverbial wisdom of Solomon as we approach these matters is our longed-for dream. But, good Spirit-guided Christian common sense and tact will also serve us well. The “Bull in the China Shop” approach with the loud shouting at that “damned sinner” who dared to commit such a sin *my* flock is showing just the hierarchicalism that our Savior condemns and warns against in the first part of this chapter. That is just as certainly despising and degrading the little ones as is the do-nothing, “good old boy”, “tsk, tsk”, “naughty, naughty” approach at discipline.

Both such extremes show a lack of love and concern for the soul of the little one—in this case, the impenitent. In the former instance we are concerned about ourselves because the impenitent is weighing so heavily upon our conscience that we have made his sin such a personal affront to us (even if it was) that our shocked and angry attitude has become an offense that keeps the impenitent from repenting. All the impenitent sees and hears is our anger. He never hears our words. Such anger on our part makes us guilty of causing his sinful pride to arise to build a defensive wall around himself.

Need I even talk about the lack of love that the “tsk, tsk” approach shows? Oh, yes, the impenitent will not become angry with us—again, we will have protected ourselves. We may keep a friend for this earth by this process, but we will have lost a soul for heaven.

The calm, even presentation of Law and Gospel, “rightly dividing the word of truth” in every step of church discipline is of the utmost importance. One thing must be important to us and that is the soul of our brother or sister. All proud ambition and personal pride must be bulldozed down to the plateau of humility. An attitude of Christian humility in the realization of our own great sinfulness and inadequacies which seeks, with

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

the Law and the Gospel rightly applied, the soul of the impenitent is the attitude of brotherly love which the Lord tells us to have in the first 14 verses of chapter 18.

Although he rectifies it to a degree Fritz shows a sad legalistic bent in this section of his *Pastoral Theology*. “God has commanded church discipline, Matt. 18:15-17, and therefore we must exercise it,”¹⁴ is one of the worst attitudes we could have. Oh yes, I agree, it is distasteful work and our human nature rebels at it. But church discipline work is not necessary because of obedience to a legalistic command. It is necessary because of our makeup as Christians. Forgive me for grossly mis-interpreting a passage of the Scriptures. But it seems to me that perhaps we could express the necessity for church discipline as Christ does in our text with the words, “We love him (the impenitent) because he (Christ) first loved us (me, the impenitent and all sinners).” (Forgive my poor grammar, too.)

Yes, Christ’s love for all in the sense of objective justification is the basis for church discipline—for our love for all whom Christ loves. This is the motivation of the Gospel.

II. THE COURSE OF BROTHERLY LOVE IN CHURCH DISCIPLINE. vs. 15-20

A. Brotherly love is active church discipline vs. 15-17.

Word Study:

Vs. 15

ἀμαρτήση - aor. subj. – ἀμαρτάνω - sin – εἰς σέ - against you – put in text.

ἀδελφός - brother (physical brotherhood or spiritual fellow-Christian, a co-religionist, a spiritual compatriot, cf, Mt. 23:8; Lk, 22:32- calls for a relationship of love, 1 Jn 1:3.

ὑπαγε - imperative of ὑπάγω - go

ἐλεγξον - aor. imperative ἐλέγχω - bring to light, expose, set forth, convict, convince, or point something out to someone, reprove correct; punish discipline. cf. Kittel, vol II, p. 474, implies “educative discipline” also “to show someone his sin and to summon him to repentance.”

μεταξύ - between

ἐκέρησας - aor. – κερδαίνω - gain

Vs. 16

σταθῆ - aor. subj. pass. – ἵστημι - stand

Vs.17

παρακούση - aor. subj. – παρακούω - hear carelessly or incidentally; pretend not to hear; refuse to hear; disobey cf. Kittel, Vol. I, p. 223 - early “to overhear, to hear aside—later Hellenists “not to be willing to hear, to be disobedient”; “here it obviously has the sense of unwillingness to hear.”

ἐκκλησίας - the totality of the Christians living in one place; in a broader sense, the universal church.

ἔστω - imperative

ἔθνικος - gentile, heathen; cf. Kittel, vol. II p. 372 “There is no question here of national distinction, but of the inner mark of a representative of the ____.” Synonyms—hypocrites and publicans.

τελίονης - subordinate tax collectors - Jews who had to have continual contact with gentiles and therefore, the ceremonially unclean. - from (Bauer) Arndt and Gingrich. Cf. Kittel, Vol. VIII, p. 104 - “Publicans and sinners are the two groups of men who do not belong to the community; notoriously sinful Israelites who have separated themselves from the true Israel, and Gentiles; excommunicated members of the community are on this level. “ But, they can be saved.

Translation: vs. 15-17

¹⁴ Fritz, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

“But if your brother should sin (against you), go, tell him of his sin and summon him to repentance between you and him alone. If he should listen to you, you gained your brother. But he should not listen, take along with you yet one or two, that at the mouth of two or three witnesses every word might stand. But if should not hear them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen to the church, let him be to you as a heathen and a publican.”

The εἰς σέ is doubtful in authority but I would prefer to include it in the text as does the *King James*, the *NIV*, and the *Beck* translations. The course of brotherly love is filled with active concern for the brother who has sinned against us personally or against us collectively in the sense of an offense in the or to the church. There is no distinction in sin or against whom sinned or the place where the sin was committed even hinted at here. If the brother sins, brotherly love calls for concern expressed in action.

The action is shown in the imperative ὕπαγε Go to do what? ἔλεγχον! Show the sin! The aorist imperative form implies that this must really be done. Bungled and half-hearted attempts don't count. Kittel tells us that ἐλέγχω is always used in the New testament to describe the act of showing someone their sin and summoning them to repentance. The word means to convict or convince, to point something out to someone, to reprove, correct punish, discipline, expose, or set forth. The word implies educative discipline.¹⁵ Both to give and to receive ἐλέγχω is a duty—an integral part—of brotherly love.

The privacy of the first meeting is an example of the loving consideration that Christ would have us show towards our brother. Not even the sinful probability of the impenitent trying to “save face” before others dare be a σκανδαλίζων to bringing him to repentance. A one to one meeting makes it as easy as possible for the erring brother to confess his sin in true humble repentance.

God's Word will do its work. Look for success! Be positive that we shall gain our brother. “...such private expostulation implies self-denial and courage, while it gives our brother the impression that we feel for him, that we love him, and would willingly spare him. Such an assault of love may gain him.”¹⁶

If he does not listen and heed our words, yielding to the conviction of guilt and asking for pardon, let us take two or more with us. Perhaps such a multitude of brotherly love shall impress upon him the seriousness of his sin. If not, the witnesses are there to witness to his refusal. The guilty brother shall be his own judge.

If he does not hear, take it then to the church. The ἐκκλήσια is taken here by all of the commentators to refer to the local church, the assembly of believers, the congregation. Because of verses 18 - 20 we must note that Christ is not referring to the local synagogue here, but to a new entity, the Christian Church and to its power and authority.

If the impenitent even refuses to listen to the powerful expression of brotherly love made by the church, let him be unto the church as a heathen and a publican. Kittel tells us that “publicans and sinners are the two groups of men who do not belong to the community; notoriously sinful Israelites who have separated themselves from the true Israel, and Gentiles; excommunicated members of the community are on this level.”¹⁷

“If all the brotherly effort of the church fail, then the church must consider the sinner self-expelled and must take due note of that fact and act accordingly. This is the so-called ban or excommunication—the man's membership ceases.”¹⁸

“Yet, even the very severity of this action of the church is intended to bring the offender to his senses, if this be still possible. This action of the church must lead him to see the gravity of his own impenitence. Thus expulsion is the last warning to strike the obdurate conscience. He who laughs at this, laughs at his own doom.”¹⁹

¹⁵ Kittel, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 474.

¹⁶ Lange, *op. cit.*, p. 328.

¹⁷ Kittel, Vol. VIII, p. 104.

¹⁸ Lenske, *op. cit.*, p. 702.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 703.

“...the final jurisdiction in regard to a sinning member belongs to the congregation alone, and no one ought either by direct or indirect means to nullify that jurisdiction”²⁰

Let us gather together some practical advice from these words of Christ:

1. These are sins about which we have first hand knowledge. The brother has publicly lived against God and his Word.
2. In all of our dealings with the brother our words, tone, voice level, eyes, movements—everything—should be used to show God’s hatred of sin but our love for the impenitent.
3. We should be kindly, but emphatic, yet dignified.
4. Truth and uprightness must be upheld at all times.
5. Impenitence and not a list of particular sins leads to excommunication.

“The ‘three steps’ prescribed by Jesus are anything but legal prescription and casuistry, although men have all too often understood them so. These are merely the clear-cut expression of Jesus’ will for the fellowship of his disciples, the will, namely, that no sinner shall be needlessly degraded, that no sinner’s fate shall be committed to the subjectivity of any one man but shall be the concern of the collective love and sobriety of the whole church, that the new people of God shall remain a pure people of God, pure in virtue of the effective divine forgiveness at work in its midst.”²¹

B. The authority for church discipline. Vs. 18

Word Study:

Vs. 18

δήσητε - aor. subj. – δέω - bind
 δεδεμένα - perf. pass. part. – δέω
 λύσητε - aor, subj.- λύω - loose
 λελυμένα - perf. pass. part. – λύω

Translation: Vs. 18

“Truly I say to you, whatsoever you should bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever you should loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

What authority and power our Savior here gives to his church! This is the doctrine of the Ministry of the Keys. This power to absolve or to retain in sin is given by Christ to his church on earth The power is great. So is the responsibility great!

From this verse the impenitent is to know that when his fellow-Christians deal with him in loving admonition, his Savior is speaking in and through them to him. The church has been given Christ’s power to forgive or to retain him in his sins. With repentance spoken and lived on his part the penitent can be comforted by the church’s absolution. Christ himself is speaking it. But where impenitence is evident, there from this verse, the impenitent is to be reminded that most assuredly his sins are not forgiven. Christ is still speaking the law to him through the church.

On the other hand, the church should recognize its power from verse 18. It is an awesome power! It is a power to be wielded with all diligence and with all love. Love is the basis for wielding this power. Our Savior outlines this in both the first and the last sections of this chapter. He is the one who gave this power to the church.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Franzmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 153-154.

C. The power of the church Vs. 19-20

Word Study:

Vs. 19

συμφωνήσωσιν - aor. subj. – συμφωνέω - be in agreement, in harmony
 πράγματος – πράγμα - thing, matter, affair; here, about anything at all.
 αἰτήσωνται - aor. subj. αἰτέω - ask, pray
 γενήσεται - future – γίνομαι - be, done, do

Vs. 20

συνηγμένοι - perf. pass. part. – συνάγω - bring or call together, gather together.
 ὄνομα - name. cf. Acts 4:12 - the whole content of the Message of Salvation.
 εἰς τὸ ὄνομα causal - Christ is the basis on which the two or three meet.

Translation: Vs. 19-20

“Again I say to you that if two of you on earth should be in agreement concerning anything at all that they should ask, it will be done for you by my Father who is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My Name, there am I in the midst of them.”

The power of the church to forgive or to retain in sins exists in the church because Christ is the Mediator between God and men. He is the Great High Priest. We, his believers, are his priests (the priesthood of all believers.) Because Christ is the Mediator between God and men the church is comforted by the power of prayer. It seems obvious that every discipline call should begin with prayer; prayer for the success of the call; prayer for the Holy Ghost that he will give us the words to speak and that he might open the ears and the hearts of the impenitent to hear and heed. The assurance of the power of our prayers given in these verses is a treasure to be dearly held by every Christian.

The Lord shall bless His Word. The Lord shall be with us to give us the courage to do his work. As with all of the Gospel, this “*sedes doctrinae*” for the doctrine of the Church is written for our comfort.

The “Name” of Christ (vs. 20) refers to the whole content of the Message of Salvation. (Acts 4:12) “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.”

The εἰς τὸ ὄνομα is causal. Jesus Christ is the basis, the reason the purpose for the two or three to be meeting together. They have come together to worship him and to do his work. There he is in the midst of them. He is the power and the authority of the church.

III. ABSOLUTION, THE EVER-PRESENT GOAL OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE vs. 21-35

A. Absolution has no limits to the penitent. Vs. 21-22

Word Study:

Vs. 21

ποσάκις - adverb - how many times, how often.
 ἀμαρτήσῃ - future – ἀμαρτάνω sin
 ἀφήσω - future – ἀφίημι - let go, send away; cancel, remit, pardon,

Vs. 22

ἑβδομκοντάκις - 70

Translation: Vs. 21-22

“Then Peter coming before him said, ‘Lord how many times shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I say not up to seven times but up to seventy-seven (or, 490) times’.”

Once again the emphasis is upon the one sinned against, Lange tells us that the rabbis preached to forgive three times. Peter stretches that here to seven times. To a degree, at least, Peter had understood the implications of Christ’s words. But Jesus expands the readiness to forgive to the idea of infinity—seventy-seven times. Can we imagine stretching our patience to that limit? Yet, in the case of alcohol and drug addiction seventy-seven times may be a rather small number. But the exact number is not important here, Jesus is not encouraging us to keep track on a score card of the number of times that a person was forgiven by us. Whether the text reads 77 or 490 is not important either. The thought is important. Go way beyond any preconceived limits in patience and forgiveness in dealing with the open sinner. Where genuine repentance is evident, there grant genuine forgiveness and absolution, time after time. Did not Christ die for all of our sins? Is not this our prayed for goal in all discipline work, namely, that the sinner repent and that absolution be granted?

**B. Forgiveness pronounced because of forgiveness received.
The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant. Vs. 23-35.**

(I will not offer a lengthy word study or translation for these verses.)

Vs. 23

The *διὰ τοῦτο* makes the parable related to the foregoing discussion of forgiveness. The king’s satraps are brought before him for judgment—not on Judgment Day, but during their lifetimes.

Vs. 24

As the man had to be brought before the king so also on his own account no sinner ever comes to a reckoning of conscience for his sins against God. The Holy Spirit present in God’s Word must be there for the reckoning to occur. In false security we sinners like to keep on piling up our sins in a sort of credit-card-o’ mania gone wild. It is a blessed thing for us when God’s law brings us to an account before it is too late, “But how, shall they hear without a preacher?” Here is the responsibility that is every believers as we exist in a fellowship of love with one another in the church.

The ten thousand talents (several million dollars) is a staggering debt which emphasizes, our inability to pay for our own sins in God’s sight. This all pictures our human spiritual bankruptcy:

Vs. 27

Out of the king’s pity and grace the debt is canceled. The justification is instant and complete. This is a beautiful picture of Biblical justification.

Vs. 28

The small debt of the man’s fellow servant, (one hundred denarii – several dollars) in comparison to the huge debt that the man had owed his king emphasizes how trifling are the sins of others against each one of us in comparison to our sins against God.

Vs. 29-30

How sad to read about the unforgiving heart of the man to whom so much had been given and forgiven.

Vs. 35

“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from the heart.” (NIV) So, we have come full circle again in this chapter. We forgive as Christ forgave us. Let us not hard-heartedly refuse the repentance of our brethren by our unforgiving attitude. The souls of these “little children” are loved by the Lord, He would not, have us trample upon them. He would have us follow his example of love. He forgave us. We forgive others in his Name.

IV. ITEMS OF CONTROVERSY

A. The Question: Excommunication Verses Self-Exclusion, Which?

As we have defined excommunication we note that it is the act of the congregation which publicly states how the impenitent has judged himself—as one excluded from the Christian Church. He has judged himself. Excommunication is the church’s public pronouncement of the impenitent’s self-exclusion. Therefore, there can be no self-excommunication. Nor can the pastor or the Board of Elders excommunicate. It is the work of the congregation.

In the beginning of this essay (page 1) we quoted a portion of Fritz’s *Pastoral Theology*, note #3. We wish to requote it here.

“If an offender absolutely refuses to appear at the meeting, he cannot be excommunicated because he cannot finally be dealt with in accordance with Christ’s prescribed order, Matt, 18;17, and also because by his refusal to be dealt with he has virtually already left the congregation and excluded himself from the brethren 1 Jn 2:19. A public declaration of such fact should be made, and the offender should be treated as one who is without.”²²

We do not agree with the reasoning found in the above paragraph but we do agree with the conclusion of the paragraph and we do agree that this practice of self-exclusion” would be acceptable with the condition that the “public declaration of such fact” which should be made includes the same strong preaching of the Law that you would include in a letter or a declaration of excommunication, namely, “By your continued impenitence you have excluded yourself from the Christina Church on earth and from heaven itself,” and with the further condition that this be the action of the congregation and not just of the pastor or the Board of Elders. Then, of course you could call this an excommunication and not a case of self-exclusion, couldn’t you? We probably should refer to it in that way since the term “excommunication,” means something to our lay people while I think that the term, “self-exclusion,” unless it is accompanied by a paragraph of explanation, will usually imply a less harsh preaching of the law.

We do not agree with the portion of Fritz’s statement that reads, “If an offender absolutely refuses to appear at the meeting, he cannot finally be dealt with in accordance with prescribed order, Matt18.17...”²³ This is legalism, plain and simple.

Christianity is a religion of the Word. When people are urged to “seek the Lord” (Jer. 29:13) they are not urged to try to see him with their eyes, but to hear him and to seek him in his word. “These are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing ye might have life through his Name “ (John 20:31) Jesus said, “Search the Scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me. And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life “ (John 5:39-40). How did they not come to Jesus? They certainly came to see him. He was talking to them. But they did not come to him in the sense of believing in him. They came not to hear and heed his word but to mock and “kick against the pricks.” Note carefully how St. Paul writes, “So then faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the Word of God.” (Ro 10:17)

²² Fritz, p. 242.

²³ *Ibid.*

“Hearing, then, is always the reception both of grace and of the call to repentance. This means that the only marks to distinguish true hearing from purely physical hearing are faith (Mt 8:40; 9:2; 17:20, etc.) and action (Mt 7:16; 24:36; Rev 2:13, etc).”²⁴

(Matt 8:8-10) The centurion answered and said, Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof; but speak the word only and my servant shall be healed. For I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me: and I say to this man, Go, and he goeth; and to another, come, and he cometh; and to my servant, do this, and he doeth it. When Jesus heard it he marveled and said to them that followed, Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith no not in Israel,”

(Matt 7:16) “Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?”

If no fruits of repentance (hearing and actively applying God’s Law to ourselves) are evident, how can repentance be there? Must the impenitent be present at a congregational meeting to express his impenitence verbally, having been fully advised of the fact that the purpose of the meeting is to admonish him and hear his repentance? Should not the congregation be able to judge, on the basis of the undeniable proof that he knows of the purpose of the meeting, that the man is impenitent because he would not hear the congregation’s admonition? I would say wholeheartedly, yes!

Perhaps to make the proof even more undeniable, the vote to excommunicate might not be taken at the first meeting that the impenitent refuses to attend, but at the second; again, after there is proof that is supported by witnesses that the person has been informed of both the first and the second meetings and their purpose. Sometimes we hear a pastor say, “We tried to admonish hem but he refused to even talk to us. He is therefore not our brother any longer. So we just dropped him from our membership.” This sounds like a convenient solution to the problem, doesn’t it. Everybody stays happy. The pastor and the congregation do not have to go through the heartbreak, the agony, and the hard work of disciplining a person who doesn’t want to be disciplined and the impenitent is happy because he knows that no one will be going to try to activate his conscience again. He doesn’t have to be bothered with the matter any more.

But such a philosophy and a practice of disciplinary work doesn’t show much love for Christ’s “little one” which he spoke about in the first 14 verses of chapter 18, does it? If this is what is referred to by the term, “self-exclusion,” I feel that we are then speaking about a practice that is not in tune with the proper Scriptural practice of brotherly love.

What if the impenitent brother under discipline declares publicly in writing or before witnesses that he no longer desires to be a member of the congregation? Then I would say that brotherly love demands of us that we publicly admonish him of the seriousness of his action and urge him to remain in the congregation. If he refuses to recant, then we may choose to publicly, as a congregation, ratify his self-exclusion. I would suggest that these words of the *Agenda* be read into the motion:

“N, being under discipline, has declared his withdrawal from this congregation. He has thereby deprived us of the opportunity to admonish him henceforth as a brother; and we are constrained to commit his cause to him that judgeth righteously. May the Lord, of his great mercy, grant him knowledge of his sinful conduct that he may repent and return.”²⁵

I would also suggest that a part of the motion include words to the effect:

²⁴ Kittel, Vol. II, p, 220.

²⁵ *The Lutheran Agenda*, p. 33.

“He has by his refusal to be admonished shown his impenitence. By his impenitence he has excluded himself from the Christian Church on earth and the joys of heaven.”

This motion, as passed by the congregation, should then be sent to the impenitent.

The important thing in all of our practice of brotherly admonition is not the use of the words, “self-exclusion,” or “ex-communication”, but that we explore and exhaust every avenue and opportunity to show love to our impenitent brother.

B. The Question: Should the excommunicated be spiritually shunned or evangelized by the congregation?

The traditional answer to this question is that expressed in *The Shepherd Under Christ*: Excommunication is the final word of the church, and this includes the pastor... the initiative toward restoring fellowship must be taken by the one being excommunicated. Excommunication is never a matter of vindictiveness. Where it has become necessary, that action has been taken for the eternal good of the sinner, seeking to bring him to repentance by this action in a case where words have failed (2 Co 2:6,7); for the congregation, demonstrating that sin is something serious (1 Co 5:6; 1 Ti 5:20); and for those outside the congregation, showing them that the congregation means what it confesses.” (1 Co 10:32).”²⁶

Yet others today are saying that we should consider the excommunicated as prime prospects for evangelism work. They base their statement upon the fact that Matthew (Levi) and Zaccheus were tax collectors and that Jesus converted so many of the publicans and often ate with them.

Let us study further the use of the terms “publicans”, and “heathen” to find an answer to this controversy.

“The Rabbi demanded in principle that a thief or robber who wanted to ‘convert’ should restore the goods illegally taken or make good any loss; otherwise his conversion would not be recognized as complete.... Since tax-gatherers were regarded as thieves and robbers they had to make appropriate restitution too if they wished to repent,”²⁷

“Zaccheus, himself, in accordance with Rabbinic statutes, voluntarily swore that he would make restitution to any whom he had wronged and also give a certain amount of money to the poor. It is worth noting that full salvation is promised to this house by Jesus even before the penitent restitution is actually made.”²⁸

“There is no question here of national distinction, but of the inner mark of a representative of the ἔθνη”²⁹

“The conversion of publicans and sinners is not only defended by Jesus, Lk 15:1-32; Mt 20:13-16. It is also used as a model and a warning, Mt 21:28-31.”³⁰

²⁶ Schuetze - Habeck, *op cit.*, p. 177.

²⁷ Kittel, *op. cit.*, Vol. VIII, 103.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

²⁹ Kittel, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, P, 372.

³⁰ Kittel, *op. cit.*, Vol., VIII, P. 105.

That the impenitent, who has been excommunicated, may repent as the publicans and the heathen could also repent is obvious. This is the prayed-for conclusion to the whole disciplinary process. The question is, would the evangelism call upon the excommunicated jeopardize the final and the continuing preaching of the Law in excommunication? I feel that it very well would in a case where the impenitent has shown no signs of repentance.

I would add here that we should expect the impenitent to desire to repent and should make ourselves available to hear their repentance.

We should also note here that Jesus in Matthew 18 is not talking about individual heathen and publicans. He is rather talking about a class of people noted by the religious of his day as being impenitent sinners who were outside the Kingdom of God and under the condemnation of God's Law. We also should consider the impenitent who has been excommunicated to be a member of this class. Our silence in things spiritual will reinforce the preaching of God's Law to the impenitent that was done during our discipline work and in the proclamation of the excommunication. As hard as it may be for us to do, Jesus describes it as a work of love. God help us all to love all whom He loves.

ADDENDUM

ST. PAUL APPLIES THE PRINCIPLE OF LOVE IN HIS LETTERS TO THE CORINTHIANS

A. Expel the immoral brother! I Corinthians 5

1. The offense. Vs. 1
 - a. It is public
 - b. It is an offense in the general community. "even among the pagans" vs.1
2. Their lack of love vs. 2a "and you are proud"
 - a. There is obviously no repentance
 - b. Their lack of love is a danger to the impenitent. Vs. 5
 - c. Their lack of love is a danger to the congregation. Vs. 6
3. The action of love they were to take
 - a. "filled with grief" Vs. 2b
 - b. "expel him!" Vs. 2b, 5, 7, 11, 12-13
 - c. The purpose for their action of love
 - 1) for the impenitent Vs. 5
 - 2) for the congregation Vs. 7 - 8
4. The procedure for their action of love.
 - a. The congregation's action vs. 4a
 - b. The pastor's leadership as the shepherd of the flock. Vs. 3
 - c. "in the name of the Lord" Vs. 4b
 - d. The communication of the action. Vs. 5
 - e. For the good of the impenitent (out of love) Vs. 5

B. Reaffirm your love for him. 2 Corinthians 2:5-11

1. The Passage - 2 Co 2:8
 - a. "Reaffirm" (*NIV*) "your love for him." *κυρῶσαι* is the aorist infinitive of *κυρόω* "1. Confirm, ratify, validate. 2. Make valid, affirm, reaffirm. M. - M." from Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich.

It is interesting to note how Kittel, Vol. III, p. 1099, expresses law used in love. "In 2 Co 2:8 *παρακαλῶ ὑμᾶς κυρῶσαι εἰς αὐτον ἀγάπην* 'I admonish you to resolve on love for him,' two alien concepts are combined, namely, *ἀγάπη* (I, 49ff) the basic ethical principle of the Pauline Gospel, and *κυροῦν* the legal term of developing church law, and affective oxymoron is by no means

accidental result. The congregation has now to make another decision in the case of the ἀδικήσας (7:12, cf. 2:5) whom it has punished (2:6) and who now sincerely repents of his fault (2:7). Paul desires a decision whose content is love. Right is to be replaced by right as pardoning love dictates and crowns the final legal decision.” Am I reading it right that the author of the above does not view excommunication as stated by Jesus in Matthew 18 and practiced by Paul in Corinth in 1 Corinthians as a statement of love?

2. The background
 - a. grief to the congregation vs. 5
 - b. punished vs. 6
 - c. repentant vs. 7b
3. Therefore, reinstatement
 - a. Therefore, forgive and comfort vs. 7a, 8
 - b. The Ministry of the Keys vs. 10
 - c. Love - vs. 11
4. Paul’s joy at their action 2 Corinthians 7:10, 12 (8-13a)
5. A final warning
 - a. grief caused by love for souls 2 Corinthians 12:21
 - b. be certain, let there be no doubt 2 Corinthians 13:1

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