

# Brotherly Admonition in the Congregation: God's Seeking Grace

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If excitement over “brotherly admonition” doesn’t well up within you naturally, you’re in good company. It’s not God’s first choice either. Through the prophet Isaiah, God declared, “The LORD will rise up as he did at Mount Perazim, he will rouse himself as in the Valley of Gibeon – to do his work, his *strange* work, and perform his task, his *alien* task” (Isaiah 28:21). If we stretch the anthropomorphism, we might say God feels strange when our continued rebellion forces him to jaw at us with his judgment rather than lavish us with his love; he feels out of place when our deaf ears will only perk up to the winds, fires, and earthquakes of life rather than listen to the converting power of his still small voice. God has always preferred mercy over sacrifice, especially when we as the crowns of his creation are the ones doomed for sacrifice. First and foremost, God wants his grace connected with saving, “For God so *loved* the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him *shall not perish* but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, *but to save* the world through him” (John 3:16, 17).

But even in his displeasure, God has a purpose. “As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?” (Ezekiel 33:11). God goes after wicked people like us with real threats that shake us to the bone because he wants us to see our sin, stop us in our tracks, and be spared the judgment. Jesus, widely portrayed these days as love without bite, nonetheless regularly preached a fierce sermon whose theme Matthew captured as: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (Matthew 4:7). “Repent” not only beckoned to people to believe in Jesus as the Savior from sin, but more narrowly it called them to contrition over their sins. Jesus’ message was comforting because he proclaimed the good news of forgiveness, but it was also confrontational because he went after sinners in a spirit of admonition. God’s grace moved him to *save* sinners. But his grace also moved him to *seek* sinners. Wasn’t that Jesus’ toast at the feast at Zacchaeus’ house, “For the Son of Man came *to seek* and *to save* what was lost” (Luke 19:10)?

It is stunning how many Bible stories tell about God seeking straying sheep, that is to say, about his brotherly admonition. Already on page ten of my Bible God is walking in the Garden of Eden in the cool of the day, ready with a simple question of location that will awaken Adam’s conscience in brotherly admonition. God didn’t owe it to Adam and Eve to seek them and offer them the first glimpse of the gospel. He had been abundantly clear about his prohibition concerning the tree and the consequence of defying it; “You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will *surely* die” (Genesis 2:17). Yet, after their first sample from the tree, Adam and Eve didn’t keel over in death. The LORD preserved their physical life, not so that they should die an agonizing and eternal death still in league with Satan, but so that they could be “born again” by God’s grace. Though Adam and Eve didn’t deserve it, God sought them in the Garden in order to open their eyes to the cost of their new-found communion with the devil and to offer them his promises of a renewed

communion with him. In his heart, God determined to save sinful Adam and Eve. That desire drove him to seek sinful Adam and Eve. The uncomfortable exchange between God and his creatures in Genesis 3:9-13 is the very first account of “brotherly admonition.” It is God’s seeking-grace in action.

We barely turn the page on God’s admonition of Adam and Eve, when he is right at it again, with Cain. Wander a little further and God is admonishing Abraham, then he’s wrestling with Jacob, or he’s chastising Moses. Neither did God spare kings his brotherly admonition, but sent Nathan to David. The message of the Old Testament prophets was generally a call of brotherly admonition to straying Israel. The New Testament records more of the same. Jesus gave Peter “that look” as his final curses fell from his lips and then pulled Peter aside for “brotherly admonition” on the shores of Lake Galilee. In a moment of déjà vu, Peter was admonished later in life by Paul up in Antioch. Nearly every one of Paul’s letters, together with the other New Testament epistle writers, includes a section of brotherly admonition, sometimes even naming names! It may feel strange and alien, but God’s written record is full of his brotherly admonition. His love not only compels him to save sinners, but to seek them.

Adam, Eve, Cain, even Peter, dealt with God directly. Today, God deals with sinners through others. We are his mouthpieces to the world. We are the hands and feet through whom God shows his love to the world or seeks the sinners who have strayed or are lost. The means by which God seeks and saves is the same as it was when he confronted and comforted Adam and Eve, namely, his Word, the law and the gospel. In the latter God acts in his saving grace; in the former God acts in his seeking grace. God’s call to his church in general and to his pastors in particular toward brotherly admonition is a call to put God’s seeking grace into action. Strange and alien as it may feel, it is our privilege and joy to serve as God’s masks in brotherly admonition.

#### Brotherly Admonition in the Congregation: God’s Seeking Grace The Prevention

Ask a group of pastors which kind of house call they would rather make, an outreach visit or a discipline call, and the majority would choose evangelism. Brotherly admonition is uncomfortable. Pointing out the sins of others is an unpleasant and unpopular task. If only there were something we could do before the situation called for our mediation. There is! Brotherly admonition actually begins long before the pastor has to announce an excommunication. It begins with equipping the saints to exercise a measure of self-discipline. A truly evangelical practice of brotherly admonition in the congregation understands that the process outlined by Jesus in Matthew 18 isn’t the first step of church discipline; the first step is laying the foundation for God’s people to diagnose and deal with their sins. This initial step requires the faithful teaching and preaching of God’s Word in the classroom and from the pulpit.

How can people live with self-discipline or be admonished by others if they don't know the difference between right and wrong? God taught this to Jonah when he spoke compassionately about the Ninevites, "Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?" (Jonah 4:11). Jesus shared that concern too, and so he tasked his church to "[teach] them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:20).

Because human beings no longer possess an innate understanding of God's law, we need to be taught. Though the law is written on our hearts, our own sinful nature has so obfuscated the issues that our perception of God's will is cloudy at best. Even those who have been called to faith are unable to understand or perform God's law completely. The framers of the Formula of Concord explained:

And, indeed, if the believing and elect children of God were completely renewed in this life by the indwelling Spirit, so that in their nature and all its powers they were entirely free from sin, they would need no law... However, believers are not renewed in this life perfectly or completely... Therefore, because of these lusts of the flesh the truly believing, elect, and regenerate children of God need in this life not only the *daily instruction and admonition, warning, and threatening of the Law*, but also frequently punishments, that they may be roused [the old man is driven out of them] and follow the Spirit of God.<sup>1</sup>

This general lack of understanding, certainly among the unbelieving, but also among the elect, demands that God's truth be taught before there can be any discipline, whether by self or otherwise. Not surprisingly, then, we find the apostle Paul urging his young protégés in the ministry, Timothy and Titus, to make teaching a priority. In the last half of his first letter to Timothy, listen as Paul encourages Timothy both to teach others and to discipline himself, all within the context of brotherly admonition. (The verses below are included in their context so that we can also see the evangelical purpose that Paul always had in mind. Paul had a greater goal in mind than mere morality when he urged Timothy and Titus to teach and admonish; Paul had eternity in mind.)

If you *point these things out* to the brothers, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, brought up in the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed. Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. For *physical training* is of some value, but *godliness* has value for all things, *holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.* (1 Timothy 4:6-8).

*Command and teach* these things. Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in

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<sup>1</sup> Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article VI:6-9, *Concordia Triglotta: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921, pp. 963,965).

purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, *to preaching and to teaching*. (1 Timothy 4:11-13)

*Give the people these instructions*, too, so that no one may be open to blame. (1 Timothy 5:7)

The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is *preaching and teaching*. For the Scripture says, “Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,” and “The worker deserves his wages.” Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. Those who sin are to be *rebuked publicly*, so that the others may take warning. (1 Timothy 5:17-20)

*Command* those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. *Command them* to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, *so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life*. (1 Timothy 6:17-19)

Paul’s advice was no different for Titus. The entire second chapter of Paul’s letter to Titus is about who and what Titus should teach, culminating in this encouragement in the final chapter, “Our people must *learn* to devote themselves to doing what is good, in order that they may provide for daily necessities and not live unproductive lives” (Titus 3:14). For these young ministers, teaching was to be an ongoing part of their ministry, “Keep reminding them of these things” (2 Timothy 2:14). Evidently, teaching is to be a vital part of ministry as it gives people the tools for self-discipline and lays the foundation on which to exercise church discipline.

When Martin Luther participated in a visitation of the evangelical churches in Saxony, he witnessed firsthand both people and clergy who were unable to distinguish “their right hand from their left.” It was the impetus for him to write a catechism, “The deplorable, miserable condition which I discovered lately when I, too, was a visitor, has forced and urged me to prepare [publish] this Catechism, or Christian doctrine, in this small, plain, simple form.”<sup>2</sup> Luther advised pastors, “to devote yourselves heartily to your office, to have pity on the people who are entrusted to you, and to help us inculcate the Catechism upon the people, and especially upon the young.”<sup>3</sup> The encouragement which appeared above each section of the catechism was aimed at the people, “as the head of the family should teach them in a simple way to his household.”<sup>4</sup> Clearly Luther wanted the Catechism to serve as a teaching tool in order to lead both pastors and people out of their spiritual ignorance.

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<sup>2</sup> Small Catechism, Preface:1, *Triglot*, p. 533.

<sup>3</sup> Small Catechism, Preface:7, *Triglot*, p. 533.

<sup>4</sup> Small Catechism, I:1, *Triglot*, p. 539.

The importance of teaching these basics for brotherly admonition can be seen in Luther's irony laden comments on Matthew 18 in 1537, a little less than ten years after the visitations:

Praise the Lord, the world is now so pious that one does not need the ban even though it is drowning in sins. For it is full of greed, hatred, envy, deceit – in a word, it is full of shame and vice. There is still no sin one could ban. Now everything is called doing what is decent and honest, or seeking food. Everything must be holiness, and all have become pious in the devil's name. This is why this ban of ours concerning daily living is now no longer practiced. We cannot establish this ban.<sup>5</sup>

Even a generation after the Catechism first appeared, Luther felt there was not sufficient understanding of God's Word to execute any church discipline. Brothers and sisters in Christ could hardly admonish other brothers and sisters in the spirit of Matthew 18 when there was still an utter lack of self-discipline; when "shame and vice" were still being hailed as "decent and honest." More teaching was needed, and the Catechism served as the basic textbook.

Luther's Small and Large Catechism, with their Biblical foundation and masterful simplicity, can still serve the church as tools for equipping God's people for self-discipline. Teaching and training God's people in the truths of God's Word so that they can honestly recognize their sins and truly repent of them is the evangelical thing for us to do in the church. The place to begin is with the instruction of the youth of our congregations, both at home by the parents and formally with the pastor. Congregations promise to do just this in the rite of baptism contained in *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*:

Our Lord commands *that we teach his precious truths to all who are baptized*. Christian love therefore urges all of us, especially parents and sponsors, to assist in whatever manner possible *so that \_\_\_\_\_ may remain a child of God until death. If you are willing to carry out this responsibility, then answer: Yes, as God gives me strength.*<sup>6</sup>

Our "Yes, as God gives me strength" ought to inspire a rich program of thorough and dedicated training, combining the informal efforts at home with formal instruction by the church. However, in an effort to adapt to a society no longer willing to give the church large segments of its week or squeezed aside by priorities other than Christian instruction, the church has begun to short change this vital part of brotherly admonition. We can hardly complain if we find our churches in a "deplorable, miserable condition" when we've relegated the formal training of our youth to a few weeks at summer camp.

Teaching as a way of arming God's people to do daily battle with their sinful nature may begin with the youth, but it ought not to end there. Adults new to the faith deserve to have the

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<sup>5</sup> *D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 47 (Weimar: Hermann Bohlau und Nachfolger, 1883-1948), pp. 189,290, as quoted by Dr. Holger Sonntag in his essay "The Ban and Church Discipline in Holy Communion: God's Pedagogy in Action." <http://acelc.net/userFiles/2001/the-ban-and-church-discipline-in-holy-communion-sonntag.pdf>, p. 64 (accessed September 5, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> *Christian Worship: a Lutheran Hymnal* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993), p. 14.

church lay the same solid foundation for self-discipline as she does for the youth. A Bible Information Course does more than familiarize someone new with our brand of doctrine or fulfill a requirement for membership. It teaches them God's truth. It provides them with the training so that they, too, can recognize their sin and turn to the Savior for mercy. It is their first step in brotherly admonition, arming them both for their battle within and, potentially, for the battles that wait without. How long does it take to lay that foundation? ...20 lessons? ...12 lessons? ...a weekend seminar? The church would be wise to err on the side of completeness rather than on the side of brevity.

Once the foundation has been laid, the church ought immediately to build a framework of mutual admonition. As the writer to the Hebrews encouraged, "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:24,25). This means instilling within neophytes and long standing members alike an attitude that not only seeks to admonish others in a brotherly way, but also is willing to receive admonition from their fellow brothers and sisters in the faith. Part of the responsibility of being a member of God's family is to look out for the other members of the family. Part of the comfort of being a member of God's family is to know others are looking out for you.

Teaching God's people so that they can live with self-discipline is a lifelong process. Luther recognized this both for himself and for others. In his 1530 preface to the Large Catechism Luther writes:

As for myself, let me say this. I too am a doctor and a preacher. In fact, I am as educated and experienced as any of those who have all that nerve and brazen self-confidence. Yet I continue to do as a child does that is being taught the Catechism. Mornings, and when I otherwise have time, I read and recite word for word the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, Psalms, etc. I must still read and study the Catechism daily, yet I cannot master it as I would like, but must remain a child and student of the Catechism. This I do gladly. But these dainty, choosy fellows want to win a doctorate above all doctorates and learn all there is to know in merely one rapid reading. So be it. But that is also a sure sign that they despise both their office and the souls of the people, yes, also God Himself and His Word. They need not anticipate failing; they have already failed all too horribly. What they do need is to become children again and start learning their ABCs, which they falsely imagine they already long ago had under their belts.

I heartily beseech these lazy drones and arrogant saints that they would for God's sake get it into their heads that they really are not – repeat, really are not – such learned and lofty doctors of theology as they think. Though they suffer under the illusion that they know these parts of Christian doctrine contained in the Catechism far too well already, I implore them never to imagine that they have mastered them, or that they have even an adequate knowledge of them. Even if their knowledge of the Catechism truths were perfect (something that in this life is impossible), yet to read it daily and to make it the

subject of one's thinking and conversation has all manner of practical results and brings fruitful rewards. In such reading, discussion, and meditation the Holy Spirit is present to supply always more light and new insights. Thus we come to relish and appreciate the Catechism better and better day by day. This bears out Christ's promise in Matthew 18:20, "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them."

To occupy oneself with God's Word, talking about it and thinking about it, is also a most tremendous help against the devil, the world, the flesh, and all evil thoughts. Psalm 1:2 calls those blessed who meditate on the law of the Lord day and night. It is certain that you will be offering up no incense or candles more potent against the devil than by occupying yourself with God's commandments and words, by talking of them, by singing them, and by meditating on them. That, let me tell you, is the true holy water, the sign before which he flees and by which you can rout him.<sup>7</sup>

Notice how Luther's encouragement to lifelong study is not in order to gain a trivial knowledge of theology, but in order to take on the challenges against temptation. Luther wanted the study of God's Word to equip the saints for self-discipline. His admonition to continued growth in God's Word was a first step in brotherly admonition.

Luther's encouragement has a contemporary ring to it. Too many in the church today reached the pinnacle of their Christian training at confirmation, only to absent themselves from the study of God's Word shortly thereafter. Predictably what follows is a lack of self-discipline which may finally call for others or the church to step in with brotherly admonition. Lifelong study of and faith in God's Word builds the Christian up in self-discipline and may prevent the need of admonition from others. When the church regularly teaches in her Bible classes the clear mandates of God's law together with the life-giving promises of God's gospel, she is taking the first evangelical step in brotherly admonition. Being able to diagnose our own sins and apply the cure of Christ ourselves is an ounce of prevention that's worth a pound of cure.

Teaching generally occurs outside the context of corporate worship. But that doesn't mean corporate worship cannot also help lay the foundations for Christian discipline. Paul not only encouraged Timothy and Titus to teach, but also to preach. "All Scripture is God-breathed and is *useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness*, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16,17), Paul told Timothy and then quickly followed that up with the forum in which the Scriptures can be applied in those ways, "*Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage--with great patience and careful instruction*" (2 Timothy 4:2). Preaching is that place where the pastor connects most regularly with the widest range of his people. Pastors rightly trained to "preach the gospel" cannot, however, avoid the instruction that comes with preaching

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Large Catechism: A Contemporary Translation with Study Questions*, translated by F. Samuel Janzow (St. Louis: Concordia Pub. House, 1988), pp. 6,7.



the law. Good and faithful preaching, therefore, instructs with both specific law and pointed gospel not only so that the sinner is convicted and comforted on the spot, but also so that the sinner is equipped to do the same in the future. Luther was aware of the danger to avoid the law in preaching, especially among those who had tasted the radical refreshment of the gospel. He called them “fine Easter preachers, but... very poor Pentecost preachers,”<sup>8</sup> because their focus was only on redemption (second article) and rarely on sanctification (third article). Luther would go on to explain:

Christ did not earn only *gratia*, “grace,” for us, but also *donum*, “the gift of the Holy Spirit,” so that we might have not only forgiveness of, but also cessation of, sin. Now he who does not abstain from sin, but persists in his evil life, must have a different Christ, that of the Antinomians; the real Christ is not there, even if all the angels would cry, “Christi Christi” He must be damned with this, his new Christ.<sup>9</sup>

Certainly preaching is an art whose purpose varies as driven by the text of Scripture and the context of the congregation. Not every sermon can convict, proclaim, instruct, comfort, encourage, evangelize, etc. But that doesn’t mean instruction should be avoided and placed only in Bible class. The orderly reading and preaching of God’s Word in worship may be the most regular instruction some people receive. The sermon, too, can be another ounce of prevention in preparing God’s people to discipline their own lives.

The above reference to the “orderly reading” of God’s Word, in addition to preaching, was intentional. Liturgical worship in its entirety assists in godly training and instruction. Teaching offers a forum for give and take, preaching provides for proclamation, and in the liturgy we find the repeated rhythms of the Christian faith in both Ordinary and Proper. Concerning the benefits of such worship Melancthon writes in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession:

But just as the dissimilar length of day and night does not injure the unity of the Church, so we believe that the true unity of the Church is not injured by dissimilar rites instituted by men; although it is pleasing to us that, for the sake of tranquility [unity and good order], universal rites be observed, just as also in the churches we willingly observe the order of the Mass, the Lord’s Day, and other more eminent festival days. *And with a very grateful mind we embrace the profitable and ancient ordinances, especially since they contain a discipline by which it is profitable to educate and train the people and those who are ignorant [the young people].*<sup>10</sup>

Teaching, preaching, orderly worship – and we haven’t the time to explore the ongoing significance of one’s baptism, the training benefits of private confession or the role of suffering

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<sup>8</sup>Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, American Edition, Vol. 41 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-1986), p. 114.

<sup>9</sup>*Luther’s Works*, Vol 41, p. 114.

<sup>10</sup> Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article VII. VIII:33, *Triglot*, p. 239.

in Christian discipline – all these are preventative measures within brotherly admonition. In the spirit of brotherly admonition, the church seeks to equip her members with the armor of God so that they can fight against sin and temptation. Armed with the knowledge between right and wrong, trained by the Spirit both to see their own sin properly and to find in Jesus their sin-bearer, and confident in Christ's gifts of salvation given by faith through Word and Sacrament, God's people live with a measure of self-discipline. But what happens when God's people can no longer self-discipline or even self-diagnose? What happens when God's people can no longer rule over sin, but sin has become the master? What happens when in the struggle between the new man and the old self, the old self gains the upper hand? When prevention has failed, then brotherly admonition *from others* is the needed cure.

### Brotherly Admonition in the Congregation: God's Seeking Grace The Problem

Of the two greatest summary commandments the second mandates love for our neighbor. Seven of the Ten Commandments specifically direct my relationship with my neighbor. In truth, I need my neighbors to "love [me] as [themselves]" (Matthew 22:39) and I need to love them. It's how society operates and how God shows his love to the world. Love for my neighbors, however, is more than helping and befriending them in every bodily need or improving and protecting their property and means of income. Love wants my neighbors to know and believe in Jesus so that they can share eternity with him. And should my neighbors already confess Christ, love will do all it can to encourage my neighbors to remain in faith.

It seems, however, that there is little lack of brotherly *encouragement*. When my neighbor falls into sin and needs my brotherly *admonition*, love sometimes hesitates to act. But brotherly *admonition* is as much an expression of love for my neighbor as brotherly encouragement. Paul explained it to the Galatians this way, "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:1,2). And what is the law of Christ? "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34). Love for our neighbor, therefore, prompts us to seek the straying sinner in brotherly admonition. It's part of being a good neighbor.

How Christians are to deal with their straying brothers is one of the rare instances in which God has laid out a fairly clear "how to". Not only does Jesus outline the steps we ought to take when seeking to regain our brother in Matthew 18, but Paul also gives us a real life example in a case in Corinth. Let's take a closer look at God's seeking love in action through the eyes of Matthew 18.

The verses of greatest interest are Matthew 18:15-20. But if we jump right to those verses without examining the context in which they appear, we will miss the *attitude* with which

Jesus encourages us to exercise our brotherly admonition. In the early part of the chapter a question about greatness in the kingdom of heaven prompted a sermon from Jesus about the seriousness of sin. With striking hyperbole, Jesus spoke about the length to which one would go to avoid sin and remain in the kingdom. It's self-discipline in the extreme. But what if the cutting and gouging doesn't work? What if the sheep still strays? "Will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off" (Matthew 18:12)? This is the attitude with which to approach the steps that follow. It's seeking grace in the extreme, for "your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost" (Matthew 18:14).

Keep reading beyond verse 20 and see how Jesus teaches us the attitude we ought to have while we're leading the sinner to repentance. It is an attitude of forgiveness. The parable of the unmerciful servant is a stunning story of the wealth of God's forgiveness and of the sin involved when we refuse the same toward the penitent. As stated earlier, brotherly admonition is not interested in coldly advancing mere morality; it is rather God's seeking grace in action with the goal of forgiveness and restoration to the kingdom in mind.

Nestled between God's seeking grace and his forgiving grace are the steps to be taken in brotherly admonition. The first step influences all the others. It introduces us to the what and the who and the how of each admonition, "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you." Go to the verb, first! There has to be real sin involved (that is, a person missing the mark of God's Word) before brotherly admonition can take place. This may seem obvious. But part of Luther's disagreement with the church of his time was the use of excommunication in matters that did not pertain to real sin. In an exhortation to the evangelical representatives in Augsburg Luther wrote:

The use of the ban is another thing. It should be for the punishment of public offenses, such as robbery, adultery, fornication, murder, hate, usury, drunkenness, also heresy, blasphemy and the like, for our Lord Christ teaches in Matthew 18:17<sub>2</sub> that the ban shall be put upon those who will not hear the Church, or congregation. Thus the Church teaches in harmony with God's Word.

Now tell me, what is good and ancient about the ban that has remained among you? What new and mischievous abuses have not arisen around it? *I shall not bring in the fact that you have banned, cursed, damned, and slain innocent and pious people as heretics.* The ban is used for nothing else than to collect taxes and debts and cause great misery to poor people. For the arbitrary power that the knaves, officials, and commissaries have exercised in this matter is already known to you in part.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *D. Martin Luthers Sammtliche Schriften*, Ed. Johann George Walch (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1980), Vol. 4, p. 104ff, as translated by Charles M. Jacobs, available at <http://bookofconcord.org/exhortation.php>, (accessed September 5, 2012).

Nor is it a problem only faced by 16<sup>th</sup> century Christians. As recently as twenty years ago a pastor of a Congregational church answered the question on a survey “on what grounds can a person be excommunicated?” this way:

If, by excommunication, you mean dismissal from the community (that is the congregation, in our case) we can do that for almost any reason one can think of, so long as we do it in accordance with our by-laws, at a congregational meeting properly called...

At such a meeting... we could dismiss a person for singing off-key, for wearing orange socks, or for being named Irving. We would, I hope, not do such a thing, but we could. Activities which threaten the unity and the peace of the congregation are about the only likely causes of such an action by our congregation.<sup>12</sup>

Though there's a bit of tongue-in-cheek in this pastor's comments, notice the very real lack of appeal to the standards of God's Word in favor of the congregation's by-laws. Can we say that this hasn't happened in our circles? Can we say, as individuals, that we haven't wanted to confront someone with “a sin” that wasn't necessarily a clear violation of God's will? Brotherly admonition that truly seeks sinners must first determine if there is really sin involved.

Equipping people to diagnose sin takes us back to the first part of this essay. Preaching and teaching God's Word not only lays the foundation for God's people to self-discipline, it also gives them a basis on which to evaluate the sins of others. Consider again the comment by Luther mentioned earlier. After evaluating the lack of knowledge and discipline among the evangelical churches, he admitted, “This is why this ban of ours concerning daily living is now no longer practiced. We cannot establish this ban.” Luther felt churches could hardly proceed with the final steps of brotherly admonition when the people had little or no basis on which to evaluate what was sin and what wasn't. With the re-paganization of our society, one wonders to what extent neophytes or even long-standing members influenced by the attitudes of the world can properly evaluate sin. Might we reach a point at which we will have to admit “this ban of ours concerning daily living is now no longer practiced. We cannot establish this ban”? Without a doubt, preaching and teaching as core ministry activities are as vital as ever in the exercise of brotherly admonition.

Once we've established that there needs to be sin involved, we naturally ask, “Which sins?” All sins! Any sins! The pastoral theology textbook *The Shepherd Under Christ* suggests:

Any brother who sins is to be admonished. *There are no restrictions.* The “against thee” of Matthew 18 has weak textual support. To show concern only when we are hurt directly would ill reflect the attitude of the seeking Shepherd who wants none of His sheep to perish. To restrict admonition to cases of “mortal sin” (1 Cor. 6:9,10; Ga 5:19-

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<sup>12</sup> Pastor Dick Buchman (personal letter in response to a questionnaire, May 1991).

21) is to fail *to see in every sin* a violation of the majesty of God which calls forth His curse and condemnation.<sup>13</sup>

If all sins are fair game, then wouldn't we be spending all our time admonishing one another? No, not when we keep other considerations in mind. First, remember that we are talking about *brotherly* admonition, not admonition of the entire world. Though unbelievers need to be admonished about their rejection of Jesus, they fall outside our discipline according to Matthew 18. Brotherly admonition is executed by God's right hand; the world is brought to justice by God's left hand. Second, there really is no need for us to admonish privately those whose sin is patently public. In his discussion of the eighth commandment, Luther notes, "Up to this point the reference has been to secret sins. But where the sin is so public that the judge and everyone else are aware of it, then you can without sinning avoid and abandon the wrongdoer as one who has brought the disgrace on himself."<sup>14</sup> Third, true justice always leaves room for mercy. Earlier we quoted Paul's letter to the Galatians, "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently" (6:1). Don't miss that word "gently." "Gently" is the opposite of "harsh" or "exasperated" against which Paul warns men when dealing with their wives or children. A constant nagging over each sin we become aware of seems harsh and would lead to exasperation. Mercy, however, keeps in mind what Peter advised, "Above all, love each other deeply, because *love covers over a multitude of sins*" (1 Peter 4:8). Luther and Melancthon appear to breathe this spirit in their *Instructions for the Visitors of the Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony*: "The pastor, who knows his people and daily associates with them, must distinguish between the weak and the obstinate. He can easily observe those folk who have a good disposition, who gladly listen to the preaching and gladly want to learn and be rightly guided thereby."<sup>15</sup>

The above considerations, however, do not give us an excuse never to exercise brotherly admonition. Love drives us to seek lost sheep because we want them back in the fold. Perhaps that word "lost," borrowed from Jesus' parable near the beginning of Matthew 18, can help guide us in knowing what sins to confront in brotherly admonition. "Lost" infers losing faith or the Holy Spirit, a very real possibility as indicated by the framers of the Formula of Concord,<sup>16</sup> "But when the baptized have acted against their consciences, *allowed sin to rule in them*, and thus have grieved and *lost the Holy Ghost in them*, they need not be rebaptized, but must be converted again, as has been sufficiently said before." Loss of faith, however, is a matter of the heart, a place into which we cannot see. Nor is what we can see always the best indicator of what is going on in the heart. The gravity of the sin does not always correspond with maintaining or losing faith. However, when the sin of which we become aware is, to the best of our knowledge,

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<sup>13</sup> Armin W. Schuetze and Irwin J. Habeck, *The Shepherd under Christ: A Textbook for Pastoral Theology* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1974), p. 166.

<sup>14</sup> Luther, *Luther's Large Catechism: A Contemporary Translation with Study Questions*, p. 58.

<sup>15</sup> *Luther's Works*, Vol. 40, p. 292. As a side note, notice the emphasis they place on the pastor who knows his people. There is little that can substitute for a pastor's visitation of his membership.

<sup>16</sup> Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article II:69, *Triglot*, p. 907.

no longer a mere weakness or done in ignorance, but is done against conscience and intentional, love for the lost demands that we seek them in brotherly admonition. Or to say it another way, when a brother or sister in Christ can no longer live with self-discipline, then, as their good neighbor, their fellow brother or sister in the faith, we must step in to admonish them with Christian discipline.

There is a sense of humble duty involved in Jesus' words. Those doing the admonishing are "brothers," fellow members of God's kingdom, who not only trust the power of the gospel to save, but also understand the depths from which they themselves have been saved. The humility of one *sinner* seeking another *sinner* for salvation can help extinguish the fiery accusations of being holier-than-thou. The attitude with which we approach brotherly admonition says as much, if not more, about our evangelical approach than do the words and actions by which we actually admonish. That attitude not only recognizes our own sinfulness when we seek to discipline another sinner, but it also recognizes that those needing discipline are still considered "brothers." Not until a sinner has remained impenitent even before the church are we to "treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector" (Matthew 18:17). Until then, we continue to hold out hope that the sinner will remain our brother in the faith as he once confessed.

Our duty comes in what Jesus asks brothers and sisters to do when they've become aware of a fellow believer caught in sin, "go and show him his fault, just between the two of you" (Matthew 18:15). It is such a simple command, but so difficult to execute – "go." Our Old Adam would prefer Jesus had said something like "gossip" or "ignore" or "get the pastor to deal with it", but "go" means we'll have to deal with the sinner face-to-face. To indulge these impulses of the Old Adam would be of no benefit either for the sinner in need of our help or for ourselves. Luther addresses the matter in the Large Catechism:

But the right way to go about this would be to follow the order given in the Gospel, in Matthew 18:15, where Christ says, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone." Here you have a fine, most valuable lesson on how to rule the tongue, a lesson we should carefully note in order to avoid the repulsive sins of the tongue. Conduct yourself according to this rule so as not to begin talking behind your neighbor's back and spreading reports about him, but rather admonish him privately in order to help him to change. Likewise, if someone whispers in your ear what this or that person is supposed to have done, tell the whisperer to go himself and reprove the man in case he saw him doing the wrong, but if he did not see it, tell him to keep his mouth shut.<sup>17</sup>

However, in an age fluent in world-wide communication and addicted to information overload, whose source can potentially come from a single anonymous and/or falsely identified click on the computer, it can be easy to expose or judge the sins of our brothers and sisters without attempting to actually "go". Jesus didn't have "*virtual* brotherly admonition" in mind;

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<sup>17</sup> Luther, *Luther's Large Catechism: A Contemporary Translation with Study Questions*, pp. 56,57.

his evangelical heart urged the members of his kingdom to “go... just between the two of you.” In addition, the pastor ought to guard himself against becoming the “go-to-guy” for every sin that the members in his congregation witness. When a member informs the pastor about the sin of a brother, his gut reaction may be to take the matter on to fix it. However, his first question ought to be, “Have you gone to this person?” When we have the sinner’s welfare at heart, we will want to seek them out. We will want to go directly to the sinner. Such a “confrontation” may make us feel uncomfortable, even alien or strange, but it is the evangelical thing to do.

Nor will we be satisfied that we’ve gone once and in this way fulfilled our duty. The “go” imperative is in the present tense, “keep on going.” Jesus’ outline in Matthew 18 isn’t a three step waltz that we perform to fulfill a duty legalistically. Jesus is showing us how to seek the sinner to save them. “Keep on going,” Jesus commands. Step one of Matthew 18 may not be a one-time event. A person may go multiple times to discipline the sinner. The same may occur as the steps progress. Matthew 18 limits neither the time frame between the steps nor the number of visits one makes with the sinner. Schuetze and Habeck highlight this evangelical approach when they state, “Each stage of the admonition outlined in Matthew 18 may be repeated and will often be repeated. *Our Lord is not showing us the quickest way to get rid of a sinner, but the lengths to which love will go in order to gain him.*”<sup>18</sup>

There’s no denying that evangelical brotherly discipline is difficult. On the one hand, we are tempted to run off too much at the mouth in gossip, on the other hand we are tempted to keep our mouth shut in hopes that the problem will go away. And when we do finally engage the sinner, the danger of legalism always lurks within and among us. None of these helps the sinner in danger for their soul. The antidote? Remember that the purpose of God’s seeking grace is that he might be able to apply his saving grace, “If he listens to you, you have won your brother over” (Matthew 18:15). Even in its final stage of excommunication, brotherly admonition is still seeking to save. In Corinth, the situation needing discipline had obviously reached the point of excommunication, nonetheless notice how Paul keeps the end goal in mind, “When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed *and his spirit saved* on the day of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 5:4,5). Why would we gossip about the sins of a fellow sinner when to do so not only damages his reputation but may also harden him against any brotherly admonition? Why would we hesitate to intervene in a fellow believer’s downward spiral from faith, when to do so not only damages the reputation of God’s Word but may also fail in ever retrieving the sinner for the faith? Why would we impose a strictly by-the-book approach to our straying brother when to do so not only exposes our own cold hearts but also may give the sinner further reason for resisting the advances of the Holy Spirit? God willing, we wouldn’t. But it happens among God’s people and in Christian congregations when we lost sight of the goal of forgiveness in exchange for a self-righteous morality. Brotherly

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<sup>18</sup> Schuetze and Habeck, p. 169.

admonition that seeks the sinner in the hopes of sharing God's grace with the penitent, avoids the above mentioned pitfalls and maintains an evangelical spirit.

Unfortunately, sinners don't always listen to the godly advice of one, two, or more of their brothers and sisters in the faith. When Jesus calls on us to "tell it to the church" (Matthew 18:17) or when Paul advised the Corinthians to "put out of your fellowship the man who did this" (1 Corinthians 5:2), we are making public use of the keys. Little needs to be said about the evangelical nature of publicly using the loosing key, that is, forgiving the sins of the penitent, even those who have previously and publicly fallen from faith. However, the public use of the binding key, that is, refusing forgiveness to the impenitent, is rarely viewed as evangelical. Though excommunication has the feel of finality, it ought to be carried out with the same evangelical spirit and purpose as the others steps. Excommunication is the final act of God's seeking grace, spoken not privately by one or two, but by the entire church and with the backing of God himself, "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 18:18).

The binding and loosing that occurs within the private context of brotherly admonition is an exercise of the priesthood of all believers. All Christians can forgive as Paul urged the Colossians, "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Colossians 3:13). Correspondingly, all Christians can withhold forgiveness while a person remains impenitent, as Jesus indicated on Easter evening, "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven" (John 20:23). In those initial steps of brotherly admonition, the pastor need not be informed of or involved in what is taking place between fellow believers. But when the matter requires the interjection of the church, the pastor is the representative of the congregation through whom the matter is primarily dealt with publicly. The public use of the keys, both binding and loosing, is not arbitrary, but is an orderly way that people and their pastor together seek to save. Though not part of the Catechism as it appears in the Book of Concord, our present Catechism adds a final chief part concerning the Use of the Keys and Confession, which supports the mutual work between pastor and people in the carrying out this final act of love toward the impenitent sinner. It reads in part:

Second: How does a Christian congregation use the keys?

A Christian congregation *with its called servant of Christ* uses the keys in accordance with Christ's command by forgiving those who repent of their sin and are willing to amend, and by excluding from the congregation those who are publicly impenitent that they may repent. I believe that when this is done, it is as valid and certain in heaven also, as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us himself.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> David P. Kuske, *Luther's Catechism: The Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther and an Exposition for Children and Adults Written in Contemporary English*, 3rd ed. (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1998), p. 266.



The duty of announcing the final act of love to the congregation and to the sinner generally falls to the pastor. It is a duty filled with trepidation and discomfort. Just ask those who have had to be such a mouthpiece. But when we are certain that our action complies with God's Word and when love for the lost motivates us, we can lay both fear and anxiety aside.

How this is carried out by a congregation and the verbiage which accompanies it may vary from place to place. Perhaps our congregations would benefit from a more detailed study of their constitutions and bylaws with an eye toward simplifying the categories we presently carry in defining those who have severed their relationship with the congregation. For example, if communion with the congregation is most intimately expressed in the reception of the Lord's Supper, often referred to as communion, can someone be "suspended" from communion without viewing that as an expression of excommunication? In other words, is suspension from communion really a separate category or by refusing communion to a member have we already announced his or her excommunication? Similar questions remain concerning such categories as "termination of fellowship," "removal," or "release."<sup>20</sup>

Regardless of category, excommunication is often viewed as the church "kicking someone out" of the congregation. There may be no changing the minds of some as to the true purpose and spirit of excommunication. The church, however, is really effecting nothing in this last desperate, but loving, attempt to seek the sinner. It acknowledges in words and actions what, by the time it comes to this, has already taken place in the heart of the hardened sinner. Luther writes in his *Sermon on the Ban*, "It is certainly true that wherever the ban is rightly and deservedly imposed it is a sign, a warning, and a punishment. In this way he who is put under the ban should acknowledge that he himself has delivered his soul up to the devil through his own transgression and sin, and that he has deprived himself of the fellowship of all the saints with Christ."<sup>21</sup> Publicly admitting that someone has left the fold always hurts. Furthermore, such a stern preaching of God's law as a way to get our attention, to open our eyes to our sin that we might repent and believe, feels strange and alien. But that is the nature of seeking grace:

Consequently, it is true that the ban as such destroys, condemns, and makes no one worse. Rather, it seeks and finds a ruined and condemned soul to bring it back, for it is the nature and character of all punishment to correct sin. The ban is a pure and motherly punishment. That is why it makes no one either worse or more sinful. Instead, when it is justly imposed, it is instituted only to restore the inward spiritual fellowship.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> A good place to start this conversation is a paper delivered in the mid 1970's by Dr. John Brug entitled *The Terminology of Church Discipline: Excommunication, Suspension, Removal, Etc.*, available at <http://www.wlssays.net/files/BrugDiscipline.pdf>, (accessed September 5, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> *Luther's Works*, Vol. 39, p. 10.

<sup>22</sup> *Luther's Works*, Vol. 39, p. 11.

## Brotherly Admonition in the Congregation: God's Seeking Grace The Practical

This assignment included an encouragement to leave the participants with an analysis of improper admonition together with an outline for evangelical practice of brotherly admonition within a congregation. God willing within the context of the above pages you have found improper practices exposed and godly practices highlighted. Through an intentional system of Biblical preaching and teaching God's people can be equipped to self-discipline and church discipline. Furthermore, when brotherly discipline is needed, an evangelical understanding of Jesus' outline in Matthew 18 provides the structure for a corresponding practice within the congregation. I would not presume to give you a better outline than one our Lord himself has already given us. However, in the spirit of practicality, I would offer the following list of "do's and don'ts" gleaned from my own years of experience and from the godly advice of fellow brothers in the ministry. The following list intends to be neither complete nor exhaustive. Rather it is a beginning from which you can add your own insights, based on your experience and conversations with others.

- DO look for fruits of faith from the penitent, though what that fruit should be can't always be determined.
- DO find a partner in ministry to help shoulder your burden, especially when dealing with an exceptionally difficult or public case.
- DO pray for the right spirit with which to admonish a brother. The spirit of your discipline is as important as your words and actions. "In no phase of a pastor's ministry is there more call for the evangelical spirit than in a case of discipline"<sup>23</sup>
- DO love sinners enough to go after the one lost sheep. Jesus said "go" to the sinner not "wait" for him to come to you.
- DO create a culture in the congregation in which people feel free to confess their sins to one another or to the pastor.
- DO teach people both how to rebuke and how to receive rebuke. Make it a part of your new member orientation that they understand by becoming a member they "agree" to receive brotherly admonition should they be found straying from God's fold.
- DO visit the membership, regularly; it helps lay the foundation for brotherly admonition.
- DO take advantage of times when casuistry is discussed within the confines of your circuit.
- DO communicate with your brothers when brotherly admonition must be taken over by someone else (for example when a pastor or parishioner moves away).
- DO believe that only God can read hearts; you might get duped by sinners who know the rights words to say and the right actions to do without ever repenting of their sin.

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<sup>23</sup> Karl F. Krauss, "The Evangelical Practice of the Pastors" WLS Essay file, <http://www.wlssays.net/files/KraussEvangelical.pdf>, p. 7 (accessed September 5, 2012).

- DO make brotherly admonition a regular topic of study, especially among your elders.
- DO recognize that you seldom know all the facts, and certainly not when it concerns a case in which you are not involved.
- DO practice confession and absolution in your home.
- DO realize that forgiveness is a fruit of faith; it takes strength to forgive.
- DO try to get the sinner to see the sin on their own.
- DO...
  
- DO...
  
- DO...
- DO NOT confuse forgiveness of sin with the consequences of sin.
- DO NOT act on hearsay. Find out what is meant by hearsay and avoid it.
- DO NOT consider the internet a legitimate forum for public rebuke that deserves to be private and personal.
- DO NOT talk first to others about someone's sins; speak to the sinner, first.
- DO NOT offer to admonish a member on behalf of someone else; urge the offended party to speak privately to the sinner, first.
- DO NOT confuse laziness or lack of faith with an evangelical spirit.
- DO NOT transfer members under discipline.
- DO NOT assume that telling the elders to "make some visits" will inspire them to do so. Lead the elders to love the membership in Christ and be specific with visitation requests.
- DO NOT conduct a congregational study of excommunication in reaction to a situation in the congregation. Study it beforehand, when it is not an issue.
- DO NOT proceed with brotherly discipline on a hunch, but make sure you have evidence that a sin has actually occurred.
- DO NOT harass the sinner. Know when it is time to shake the dust off your sandals.
- DO NOT become a private detective.
- DO NOT...
  
- DO NOT...
  
- DO NOT...

Previous topic studies at this symposium undoubtedly held more gospel appeal than the topic of Brotherly Admonition, things like Lutheran Schools, Worship and Outreach, Holy Communion, or Holy Baptism. It may be difficult to get excited about that aspect of ministry that most would rather avoid – confrontation, consequences, and even condemnation. But strange and alien as it may feel, sinners need others to seek them when they stray. To do so

reveals a pastoral heart. John W. Doberstein, in his *Minister's Prayer Book*, included these words of Friedrich Zündel under the heading *To a Discouraged Minister*, “it is no help to an unrepentant one to be annoyed with him; what he needs is seeking love.”<sup>24</sup> God help us all to have such a spirit of brotherly admonition among us that we seek straying sinners with God’s seeking grace.

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<sup>24</sup> John W. Doberstein, *Minister's Prayer Book: An Order of Prayers and Readings*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), p. 240.