

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

Living Toward One Another
with the Word of God

HARRY G. COINER

Homiletics

Brief Studies

Theological Observer

Book Review

Vol. XXXVI

October 1965

No. 9

Living Toward One Another with the Word of God

HARRY G. COINER

A STUDY OF MUTUAL CARE AND DISCIPLINE IN THE CHURCH

Many forces are at work in our society today which combine to make personal interest an abiding motivation. The pleasing art of being social has assumed the doubtful coloration of the slick professional impersonality. People seem to become "involved" with people only "in a role" and not in a personal and meaningful way, not so their "heart feels it," as we say. The drive for individualism is bred into us from our American heritage, and we have become a breed of people skilled in the devices of keeping away from people while living with them and working with them and even becoming intimate with them.

This self-protective impersonality has affected the life and witness of the church. There are unmistakable signs in the church that many people need the fraternal care of fellow Christians, but so few Christians are able or willing to do anything about it. The fact that people are sometimes received into membership of the church with minimal instruction may lead to another fact—their neglect of the means of grace and a corresponding low level of participation in the life of the church. There is growing evidence in the church that after a period of mutual irresponsibility and neglect, impersonally automatic procedures are concocted by which the "deadwood members" are chopped off the membership rolls. Or under the constant pressure of meeting the synodical budget, con-

gregations may make some effort to tighten up their membership rolls in order to meet the "assessment." This "adjustment" may result only in frenetic or perfunctory efforts to "reclaim" the nonproductive members.

It is also obvious that when pastors allow themselves to become imprisoned in their offices with reports and the "mail that has to go out" and all the rest, they do not provide the pastoral care that is necessary and that they are called to provide. Weak hands and feeble knees may multiply in such parishes, and the faithful may become concerned and raise the question whether a good stiff jolt of church discipline should not be employed "to shape up the troops." If the machinery of church discipline is revved up and allowed to roll over the weak, the untidy, and the indifferent in the church, irreparable damage can be done. And when the principle of longsuffering and forbearance and brother-keeping is capsuled into a mere automatic procedure "according to Matthew 18," the honest Christian work of "lifting up the hands that hang down and strengthening the feeble knees" is not done, as it should be done, by careful and consistent application of the Word of God. It must be flatly affirmed that the mere procedure of church discipline can never be a substitute for the ministry of mutual love and helpfulness which should be in constant motion in the parish. There is

no way of escaping, excepting at the cost of some penalty and weakness, the calling which Christians have under the Gospel to seek one another out, to build up one another, to nurture one another, and to endeavor to be faithful with the Word of God in the task of mutual growth and edification.

Many people are wondering what has caused the sort of deep freeze that has settled down upon the mutual concern of Christians for one another. Preoccupation with the organization may be named as a reason. Undoubtedly, the root cause goes deeper. Perhaps the problem is just as simple as this: we have not been bringing the Word of God to bear upon one another as we should; our lives have not been coming together with spiritual meaning. It may well be time to talk about living toward one another by the judging-forgiving Word of God and to define the motions which are to take place in the church as Christians work as the instruments of the Holy Spirit to fit one another more securely into the body Christ.

I

We Are to Take Care of One Another

This conviction is basic. It is actually an article of faith.¹ When the Christian

¹ Martin H. Franzmann, *Follow Me: Discipleship According to St. Matthew* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), p. 150: "The way of fellowship on which He [Christ] sets His disciples is the way of faith (Matt. 18: 1-35) . . . When He asks the disciple to seek the lost and to forgive his sinning brother, He is appealing to their faith . . . He points them to the God whom He has revealed to them, the Shepherd-God who seeks the lost and the Royal God who releases the debtor (Matt. 18:12-15, 21-35)."

says, "I believe in the holy Christian church . . . the forgiveness of sins," he is confessing his faith in the building action of the church. That is to say, at the heart of the church's building operation is one Christian member bringing the forgiveness of sins to another. Our Lord speaks of His followers who in a given place assume the responsibility for the spiritual life of a brother as being the church (Matt. 18: 17). The Pauline term "body of Christ" is fully descriptive of the church when it means "Christ in the body," that is, the church is Christ acting in history, today, now, in visible, solid form embodying His reality in common life. Richard Caemmerer and Erwin Lueker join in this observation of what the term "body of Christ" means:

This headship of Christ and allegiance of His people to Him is for a purpose, carried out through a constant activity: that of mutual care and love for one another. . . . Just as in the human body the members are together not simply for the sake of completing a body but for mutual usefulness, so the members of the body of Christ, the believers who are members of the church, are to function for the sake of each other's spiritual life and well-being. . . . The gifts of the Spirit to the church are not "talents" or qualities in people, but they are tasks and offices in which each member is of service to each other one. (1 Cor. 12:4-14)²

Christians have been rescued from the tyranny of sin and given the life of God, are God's own free people, His chosen possession and the sanctuary of the Holy

² Richard R. Caemmerer and Erwin L. Lueker, *Church and Ministry in Transition* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), p. 27.

Spirit. But as long as they live in this world, sin remains in them and runs like poison in their veins. Daily they are exposed to the battle of the spirit against the flesh. The battleline cuts through the life of every baptized Christian and is in constant flux in the ebb and flow of the battle. The people of God fight by remembering the grace of God and by proclaiming God's forgiveness and the victory of Christ through Word and Sacrament. The battle is a condition that must be endured, yet the individual Christian does not undergo his conflict alone. He has comrades in arms who stand with him in the battle and see to it that he does not go down in the fight or become a captive of the enemy.

The church becomes a caricature of itself when individuality crosses over to become individualism, when the priesthood of believers is taken to mean that every man is his own priest, or when one Christian looks at another to say, "I have no responsibility toward you, nor do I have any need of your concern for me" (1 Cor. 12:14-26). When once a person is baptized into the body of Christ, there can no longer be for him any really independent existence. He must live in the happy tension of having his life hidden in Christ and, at the same time, invested in the corporate life of all believers.³ If he is strong, he bears the burdens of the weak.

³ In Romans 12:1, St. Paul is using the language of sacrifice to describe the ordinary business of being a faithful church member! The church comes into being "by the mercies of God," and its members are to put themselves at the disposal of one another. This is part of their reasonable service (λατρεία), and the full dimension of it is both vertical and horizontal, as the remainder of the chapter reveals (cf. also 1 John 3:17; Matt. 25:31-46).

If he is weak, he draws upon the strength of those who can build him up. The church's faith supports his fearfulness, the chastity of others bears the temptations of his flesh, and the prayers of others plead for him. He finds God in the mouth of his brothers. At the same time, wherever the Christian happens to meet the needs of his brothers, those needs become a cross which he must willingly carry, seeking strength in Christ to do it.⁴

The New Testament abounds with evidence that the Christian faith operates in community toward mutual edification and fraternal correction and that this activity of taking care of one another with the Word of God is the flexing of the spiritual muscles of the church. The need for the personal exchange, the give and take, the push and pull of spiritual care, must of necessity cancel out the possibility of isolation in individualism. No one in the church can well afford not to offer brotherly service to others or deny himself the service which others may offer him, or even to seek it from his brothers in the faith.⁵ Whoever is cavalier here cuts himself off from the admonition, comfort, en-

⁴ Note Rom. 15:1, 2; 24:19; Heb. 10:19-39; 2 Thess. 3:14, 15; 2 Tim. 2:25; 4:1-3; Titus 1:9-13; Rom. 15:14; Col. 3:16.

⁵ Lewis S. Mudge, *In His Service* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1959), p. 130: "The church is the one place in society where we dare even to tell each other how we have sinned. Not only are we to share our inner doubts and conflicts with our fellow Christians; we are also to take on the burden, and the unquestionable embarrassment, of knowing about their weaknesses, complexes, and downright acts of unfaithfulness. . . . We are able to carry on this ministry only because it has been laid upon us as a duty in consequence of the acceptance, understanding, and forgiveness we have received in Christ."

couragement, warning, and mutual conversation of faith.⁶

God is at work in people when the Word of God gets woven into the fabric of the spiritual and physical concerns which people share. God is at work in the everyday rub of person on person, and He has willed that we should seek and find His living Word in the mouth of our fellow Christians; and when we have heard that Word, we are to speak it to others. One of the signs of a vital Christian community will be that the Word of God is voluntarily offered and received by all of its members, the Word that comforts and the Word that reproves. The word of admonition and rebuke must be ventured where defection from God's Word in doctrine or

life threatens the Christian fellowship. The time inevitably comes when one Christian will have to declare God's Word and will to another. "Brethren," says St. Paul, "if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Look to yourselves, lest you too be tempted." (Gal. 6:1)

A certain holy pragmatic principle is at work in the community of sinners when the Word of God is being sounded from member to member and as it declares them guilty of sin and declares them righteous in Christ. The apostle Peter notes that evil is rampant in the world and, because Christians are living in the last days, they are to keep sane and sober for their prayers, practice hospitality ungrudgingly to one another, and, above all, manifest unflinching love for one another, "since love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4: 7-9). The apostle James notes the same practical blessing which flows out of the care which Christians exercise toward one another. "My brethren, if any one among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins." (James 5:19, 20)

It is almost trite to suggest that when people become members of the church, they ought to be instructed in the business of brother-keeping. That brother-building and brother-keeping are evident and legitimate concerns of the Christian fellowship is expressed by Dean Lueking in this way:

Though the church is hidden in its empiric form upon earth—and that means far from perfect, always approximate, never complete here on this side of eter-

⁶ Frederick E. Mayer, in "The New Testament Concept of Fellowship," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, 23 (1952), 635, develops Friedrich Haupt's insights (in Gerhard Kittel ed., *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, III, 804—810) that there are three sides or aspects to *κοινωνία*: *Anteil haben, nehmen und geben*. The first use of the term denotes a frame of mind in which two or more consider all things common (*κοινός*); where two or more hearts beat as one, Gal. 2:9. The second use of the term denotes joint participation in the same blessings. The third meaning expressed the communication of one's gifts to others. Christian fellowship is a vertical and horizontal activity of sharing. Christians share with Christ and receive from Him the gifts of the Spirit which in turn are shared with others. The Christian also received the blessings of Christ which others share with him. Paul Althaus says the *communio sanctorum* is not only the assembly of the saints but also "the sharing of the members with one another, each becoming a partner with all others, each active for the others; the brothers are in a fellowship of grace and burden." ("Communio sanctorum," *Die Gemeinde in luth. Kirchengedanken*, 1929, I, 40). Cp. C. August Hardt, "Fellowship with God," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, 15 (1944), 505—529; "Christian Fellowship," 16 (1945), 433—466, 513—533.

nity—the church is never invisible in the sense that it's detached or divorced from the people, from forgiven sinners who then have a calling under the Gospel to seek one another out, to build up each other, to nurture each other, and to attempt to be faithful under God's plan of causing his own work of growth and edification of the body of Christ to go on.⁷

II

"Fraternal Conversation and Consolation" as a Means of Mutual Care

The power of Christian discipline and forgiveness is a gift to the church and flows out of the words of Christ to the eleven, "As the Father has sent Me, even so I send you. . . . Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20:21-23). Different language is employed by our Lord in Matt. 18:18 when He speaks to His disciples (an indefinite number). He said, "Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Matt. 16:19 is the only passage in the New Testament that uses "keys" in the sense in which we use it when we speak of the "office of the keys" or the "authority of the keys" (*potestas clavium*). In view of the many exegetical and other problems that stud this verse, it would be precarious to erect too ambitious a theological edifice on this slender foundation. It might further be noted that the metaphor in "keys" is not the same as the metaphor in "binding and loosing."⁸

⁷ "The Theology of the Church," Minutes, Workshop on Church and Ministry, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo., 1963, p. 202.

⁸ In the course of the church's history, "office

All of us know that the three-question section headed "The Office of the Keys" in our synodical editions of the Small Catechism is not an original part of the Catechism, that it is not a part of the Book of Concord, and that it is not from Luther's pen. Its view, however, is that of the Lutheran symbolical books in thinking of the "office of the keys," this "unique spiritual authority that Christ has given to His church on earth," as being exer-

of the keys" became a technical term to describe the entire ministry of bishops and pastors, or, more narrowly, that aspect of their ministry comprehended in the authority to "govern" the church by exercising the "authority" or "office of the keys." This "authority" was the "authority of jurisdiction" or *potestas jurisdictionis*. (The other major aspect of the office of the bishops and pastors was to "sanctify" the church by proclaiming the Gospel and administering the sacraments. This was the "authority of order," or *potestas ordinis*. On the distinction between these two "authorities" or *potestates*, see Apology XXVIII 13.)

It is thus that the Lutheran symbolical books understand the "authority of the keys" or "office of the keys." For example, Augsburg Confession XV 4 connects the "power of the keys" with the absolution pronounced upon the penitent by the confessor after formal confession. Augsburg Confession XXVIII, now headed "Of the Power of the Bishops" (German) and "Of Ecclesiastical Authority" (Latin), was originally headed "Of the Authority of the Keys," as the preliminary draft preserved in the archives at Weimar shows. Paragraph 5 of this article equates the "authority of the keys" with the "authority of the bishops," and defines it as their "divine authority and command to preach the Gospel, to forgive and retain sins, and to administer and apply the sacraments." Apology XI 2 equates the "benefit of absolution" and the "authority of the keys." Apology XII throughout (6, 7, 13, 21, 22, 26, 39, 40, 101, 118, 138, 154, 156, 176) consistently relates the "authority (or ministry) of the keys" and the confessor's "absolution." Smalcald Articles, Part Three, IV, carefully differentiates (*und auch*) the "power of the keys" from "mutual fraternal conversation and consolation." Smalcald Articles, Part Three, VII 1 implies the connection between the confessor's absolution

cised concretely when "the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command" in expelling manifest and impenitent sinners from the Christian community and again in absolving and reconciling those who repent of their sins and affirm their intention to do better.

The present discussion is therefore not about the "office of the keys" or the "authority of the keys" in the strict sense. It is not about the function of the pastor in his unique office and ministry as he exercises his authorities of order and of jurisdiction, but about the function of Christians generally as they engage in the "mutual fraternal conversation and consolation" of which Smalcald Articles, Part Three, IV declares that through it also a superabundantly compassionate God gives us needed aid and strength against

and the power of the keys, while VIII 1 equates them. The "authority of the keys" is described but not named in Smalcald Articles, Part Three, IX, as well as in Tractate 31 and 60. Tractate 23 notes that Christ gave the keys and mission to all the apostles. Tractate 24 points out that the keys belong not to a single person by individual right (St. Peter, for instance) but to the church; on that account — since the church exercises the ministry of the keys through its bishops and pastors — the church, rather than the pope or the bishops in communion with him, possesses as originating principle the legal right to call men into the episcopal-pastoral ministry. Tractate 36 detests the pope's conversion of the keys into a worldly authority. Tractate 61 points out that the authority of the bishops and of pastors is identical, regardless of their title. Tractate 67—68 asserts that the ultimate possession of the keys is lodged in the church and that for that reason the church retains the right to call, choose, and ordain clergymen to exercise this authority. (In a case of life-and-death emergency like imminent shipwreck, even a layman can exercise a pastoral ministry toward another individual by giving the latter status in the church through baptism or through reconciliation, as the case may require.)

The fact that the Gospel is to be applied "through the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren" means that in a wider sense the loosing power of the keys is entrusted not only to particular persons but to all members of the church. Where the Word of God is, there God's people are, and there God is at work. God's people in their totality are, in the first place, the object of His divine calling activity and after that they are the instrument of His saving purpose for mankind. All Christians, according to their respective vocations and opportunities, have been given the task of proclaiming the Gospel, understood as the entire doctrine of Christ, a preaching toward repentance and the remission of sins. The task of Christians also includes the preaching of the Law because Law and Gospel, as Lutherans understand these terms, must be preached together, with the Law always serving the purposes of the Gospel. Wherever the Word of God is active, both Law and Gospel function in a unique interplay or in what may be termed a delicately balanced situation, and always to the end that the sins of men may be forgiven and that they may receive the life of God in Christ.⁹

⁹ Cyril Eastwood defines the power of the keys as working a positive end in the Gospel. "To the church is given the inestimable privilege of declaring to men the terms of divine pardon as well as the power of delineating the conditions under which that offer of pardon may be accepted. The power to loose is the continued proclamation of the Gospel of forgiveness, the word of Him 'who hath loved us and loosed us from our sins'; the power to bind is the power to ensure those proper conditions in the church so that judgment as well as mercy may be unceasingly proclaimed in it." *The Priesthood of All Believers* (London: The Epworth Press, 1960), p. 36.

Hopefully, the reader now sees that as Christians employ the Word of God, they are speaking Law and Gospel, the Word that binds and the Word that looses, and always toward the end that men may be set free from the bondage of their sins. God's Word is an acting Word, serving God's purposes. It is the means to God's end. It is a Word that declares men sinners and pronounces men righteous, that condemns and makes alive.

The Word of God in mutual care, then, is a Law-Gospel Word, a threat-promise Word, a judgment-mercy Word. The Word that goes out does not return empty; it accomplishes what God purposes (Is. 55:11). If people will not live by the gracious promises of the Gospel, the only alternative is that they must remain under the threats and punishments of the Law.

Luther's concept of God's dealing with men through an authority "which is above the conscience and concerned with the things that relate to God" will illustrate the function of this Christian witness to and through God's Word. Luther states that this authority is of two kinds: the one, which was founded by Moses, is based on Law, to teach us what sin is and what sin is not, for grace and forgiveness can be neither truly perceived or desired if we first do not know our tremendous sin or the nature of our plight. The second kind of government aims to show us how this sin can have no eternal claim on us. Revealed to us also is the fact that Christ is indeed Ruler over both kingdoms, which can also be viewed as sin and righteousness, life and death.¹⁰

Members of the church should understand that the Word of God which they speak is the means by which people are moved from the one power or rule (where they are by nature captive) to the other (the kingdom of Christ's rule). Some will hear the Gospel and believe. The church affirms that whoever believes is under the power of God unto salvation and encourages faith to lay hold of the promises of God. To some the Gospel will be a stumbling block and a scandalous offense. Upon these the church cannot bestow forgiveness but calls out, "Look, man, see what your sad condition is, you are bound in your sin and unbelief, will you not believe the Gospel and be free?" The Word of God confronts all men with mercy or with judgment. When people believe, their sins are forgiven. When they do not believe, they continue in their sins by their refusal to believe the Gospel. Not being willing to live by the Gospel which brings life, they must remain under the Law which brings only death.

Mutual care in the church is primarily the speaking of the Word of God, person to person, and discipline in the church is really the discipline of the Word of God. Both proclamation and application of the Word are involved as Christians grapple together with the Law and Gospel and what it means in terms of living it out under the gracious activity of God. If, in this process, the Law must be used to serve the Gospel, by all means let this be done.¹¹

John Nicholas Lenker (Vol. XI in *The Precious and Sacred Writings of Martin Luther* [Minneapolis: Lutherans in All Lands Co., 1906]), 385-W[eimar] A[usgabe], 49, 143.

¹¹ Luther: "It is necessary to preach and urge the Law in order that people may thereby

¹⁰ *Luther's Church Postil: Gospels*, II, trans.

Christians need to understand that spiritual care is not the responsibility of the pastor of the church alone, or that the discipline of the brother or sister is exclusively the task of the clergy, the vestry, and the voters' assembly of the parish.¹² Christians need to know and believe what it means to speak the Word of God; that it is the proclamation of the Law and Gospel; and that the Word will forgive or harden as it confronts men. Christians need to know that the Law must be spoken to make men conscious of the sin ingrained in the flesh and blood of every man, and that the Gospel must be spoken to cure what man himself is helpless to cure.¹³

learn to recognize their sin, so that they will be moved by the terrors and threats of the Law to yearn for grace and reconciliation. No one can repent and obtain forgiveness unless he knows and feels God's wrath." "Selected Psalms," II, *Luther's Works*, XIII, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 316. WA, 41, 185.

¹² Luther emphasized the responsibilities of the Christian as a priest of God, using the Old Testament priest as a prototype, stating specifically that the life of the Christian involves teaching, intercession, and sacrifice. He said further that Christians are in fact fellow priests with Christ; that through his priestly glory the Christian is all-powerful with God because God does the things which he asks and desires. *Works of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1943), II, 324 f. WA, 7, 57-58.

¹³ A word addressed to all Christians is 2 Cor. 3:6 and 2 Cor. 5:19, 20. Christians are "ministers of the Spirit" and "agents of reconciliation" who are to speak grace and forgiveness of sins. "Holding forth the Word of life" is how St. Paul puts it in Phil. 2:16. Caemmerer notes that "The church which is functioning as the body of Christ is therefore composed of people who speak the truth to one another, make the truth effective in one another, in love (Eph. 4:15); or in the language of Col. 3:15, 16, it is a company of Christians who are governed by the peace of God in their hearts, and so they

The *διακονία* of the laity is emphasized today, and properly so. At the heart of this *διακονία* is the Word of God which all Christians are to exercise privately, that is, each in his own station and vocation in life.¹⁴ The layman's *διακονία* of the Word certainly includes a mutual helping of one another to maintain the disciplined life, the life of faith that permits God's righteousness to prevail over ours, the life of faith by which we are incorporated into the body of Christ and given the power to strive with perseverance in our calling, namely toward sanctification. When Christians share the gifts of the Holy Spirit with one another, they help one another to walk worthy of their calling in the Gospel in every sphere of life. And the only way to do this is by daily recalling the Gospel and reminding one another that their whole life depends on the promises and power of God.

A case is made, therefore, for personal

cause the Word of Christ to dwell in them richly in all wisdom, 'teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.'" Richard R. Caemmerer, *Feeding and Leading* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), p. 33.

¹⁴ Luther's discussion of Psalm 110 sketches the office of the public ministry as flowing from the priesthood of Christ, but he includes also the priestly service of Christians as the working out of the priesthood of Christ. He says, "After we have become Christians through this Priest [Christ] and His priestly office, incorporated in Him by Baptism through faith, then each one, according to his calling and position, obtains the right and the power of teaching and confessing before others this Word which we have obtained from Him. Even though not everybody has the public office and calling, every Christian has the right and the duty to teach, instruct, admonish, comfort, and rebuke his neighbor with the Word of God at every opportunity and whenever necessary." "Selected Psalms, II," p. 333. WA, 41, 211.

and private use of the Word of God among Christians. The church fights against the kingdom of Satan not only by means of the word of forgiveness of sins but also through the denial of forgiveness. Christians remind one another of God's judgment and mercy over against sin and unbelief. When men will not hear the Gospel and believe, they must hear the Word of the Law which condemns and binds them in their unbelief. This does not mean anything like a sad and solemn announcement and no further word, a cutting off, and rejection. But it does mean the frank and forthright teaching of the Law, not for the purpose, however, of binding the neighbor and forsaking him (he is bound already), but for the purpose of dealing with his sins. The use of the Word of God is a positive action; both Law and Gospel serve positive ends; and the unique interplay is a positive power.

Where Christians care for one another, they will operate with the Law to serve the purposes of the Gospel. They will speak words of Law in the hope that its thunder will penetrate hearts, arouse consciences, make their fellows aware of sin, and awaken the desire to be loosed. Jesus said that the Son of Man came not to destroy but to save men's souls (Luke 9:56). St. Paul stated that the Lord gave him power to edification and not to destruction (2 Cor. 13:10). This understanding is fundamental if Christians are to believe what happens as they speak the Word of God to one another in the kindness of mutual care. Christians have the Holy Spirit breathed into them by their Lord to give validity and vitality to their witness. And we believe that the work of the Holy Spirit is to enlighten

and sanctify and to bring forgiveness of sins. We can believe that the real work of the keys is bound up with the message and mission of the church. The binding and loosing are the inevitable result of the apostolic preaching in the sense of "He who hears you hears Me, and he who rejects you rejects Me." (Luke 10:16)

III

Matthew 18 as Basis for Mutual Care

Dietrich Bonhoeffer observes:

Where Christians live together, the time must inevitably come when in some crisis one person will have to declare God's Word and will to another. . . . The basis upon which Christians can speak to one another is that each one knows the other as a sinner, who, with all his human dignity, is lonely and lost if he is not given help.¹⁵

Our Lord knew that His disciples would face the problem of human weakness and sin among their own number. Some would sin against the others. What was the right way to go to the sinner, the right way to think about him, the right way to speak to him and deal with him? Christ had brought redemption for all, and they were to take care of one another in the light of that fact and speak the truth in love. Where defection from God's Word in doctrine and life became evident, the word of rebuke and admonition had to be ventured. Bonhoeffer notes:

Nothing can be more cruel than the tenderness that consigns another to his sin. Nothing can be more compassionate than the severe rebuke that calls a brother back from the path of sin.¹⁶

¹⁵ *Life Together* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954), pp. 105 f.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

Jesus called His disciples to a ministry of mercy and told them what ultimate offer of genuine fellowship they should make when a brother sins.

A. *The doctrine and application of Matt. 18:15-17 must be understood in relation to the wider context of the chapter itself and notably vv. 12-14 and 19-35.* This context cannot be ignored if the pericope is to have true meaning. Martin H. Franzmann has sketched the wider context of the section which he sees beginning at 13:53 and ending at 18:35.¹⁷ Here Jesus separates His disciples from Israel and from the tradition of the elders, and the shadow of the Law's jot and tittle becomes substance in Him—"A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you" (Ezek. 11:19). Jesus gives His disciples eyes to see that a new people of God will arise from the wreckage of the old, and He calls them from outward observance of the Law to the inward obedience of faith in the Gospel. His disciples were "the seed of a new growth," and He would build His church on faith in "Christ the Son of the living God," and faith in the cast seed of the Word of God would create and determine the fellowship of His disciples with one another.¹⁸ He gave

¹⁷ *Follow Me*, pp. 126—156.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 150: "When He bids the seekers after greatness turn and become as children, to become great in the Kingdom by humbling themselves, He is speaking of an act of faith (Matt. 18:1-4). When He bids them receive the child and the childlike in the conviction that they are thus receiving Him, He is calling for an act of faith (Matt. 18:5). When He warns them against setting stumbling blocks in the way of the little ones who believe in Him . . . He is speaking to faith (Matt. 18:6, 7, 10). When He asks the disciples to seek the lost and to forgive the sinning brother, He is appealing

them the unlimited promise that in faith they should move mountains and become the instrument of God employed by Him in His royal reign as they followed a higher piety than that of Judaism. Theirs was a fellowship of forgiveness. The new order of values in the Kingdom is related to the seeking love of God, whose will it is to save even those who go deliberately astray.

The narrower context of Matt. 18:15-17 reveals that the disciples were aiming at power, not service. They had chosen jealousy and selfish ambition. Adolf Schlatter notes that Jesus reveals "the goal to which the fellowship newly founded must direct their joint efforts" and arranges "the intercourse of the disciples with one another."

These sayings of Jesus, as all the sayings of Jesus, are under the central concept "love." After the disciple is acquainted with the objective of Christ and has united himself with Him, it is made apparent to him what the Christianity of Christ really is. In view of the glorified Christ, the disciple receives a faith which gives him the almighty assistance of God, the freedom from the Law which is valid for Israel, and unity with one another that is eager to serve, a love which bends down to the lowly. The ordering of these principles makes apparent what Matthew calls Christianity.

The question concerning greatness received its great importance because the striving to be great permeated the whole of Palestinian piety. At every opportunity, at the gathering for divine worship, at court proceedings, at common meals, at every get-together, the question contin-

to their faith. . . . He points them to the God whom He has revealed to them, the Shepherd-God who sees the lost and the Royal God who releases the debtor" (Matt. 18:12-15; 21-35).

ually arose, who is the greatest? In fact, the measuring out of the honor due to each one became a constant activity which was regarded as very important. By the very fact that Jesus drew His disciples away from this tradition, He gave them a completely new form. Hence the struggle of Jesus against greatness is not only found here but in Matt. 19:14; 20:1-16; 20:25-28; and 23:6-12. It also occurs in 5:38-41 and 6:1-6, where the waiving of one's rights and the separation of piety from public life remains impossible if the will which constantly grasps for power is not broken down but receives instead support and strength.¹⁹

In answer to the question "Who is the greatest?" Jesus implants the faith of the child in the hearts of His disciples and gathers them about Himself as One who is "gentle and lowly" in heart. Jesus tells them that those who would desire to be His disciples must seek true greatness in self-abasement (vv. 1-4) and employ all diligence in efforts to avoid teaching or causing another to sin (vv. 5-7). They are to deny themselves and be ready to excise from life everything which would keep them from rendering a proper obedience to God (vv. 8-10). They are to exercise individual care of one another and with painstaking and unwearied love seek to reclaim those who have strayed from God (vv. 12-14).²⁰ Moreover, the disciples were given great power for this cause (vv.

18-20) and, united in the strong bonds of brotherly love, they were to be willing to forgive great offenses (vv. 21-35). Because they believed that Christ would hear their prayer and because they trusted His presence among them, they would move toward one another with the Word of God to combat the sin that plagued them and so take care of one another. Out of the love which they had received would grow the obligation of love toward the brother who had gone astray.

The verses following Matt. 18:15-17 highlight the fact that Christ Himself is involved with His people ("there am I in the midst of them") and in their decisions one toward another (v. 20), and that no limit is to be set to the efforts toward restoration and forgiveness. If God forgives them, they are to forgive.²¹ The parable of the debtor (vv. 23-35) points up the staggering difference between our debt to God and our debt to our fellowmen. There is nothing that man can do to us which can in any way compare with what we have done to God; and if God has forgiven us the debt we owe to Him, we are to forgive our fellowmen the debts they owe to us.

B. *The context gives sharper and more certain meaning to the passage.* If one pays proper attention to the meaning of the context of Matt. 18:15-17, one cannot escape the consideration that should be

¹⁹ *Der Evangelist Matthäus* (Stuttgart: Calwer Vereinsbuchhandlung, 1948), p. 543.

²⁰ The disciples were committed to that seeking love because the basic relationship among them stemmed from the act of God. He sought and found them, and this new relationship with God was to eventuate, and did, in a new forgiving relationship with one another. Refusal to forgive a brother would mean the rejection of the ties that bind men to God and one another.

²¹ Peter probably thought that he was being generous. He was indeed showing keen theological insight. He had not missed the point. He had doubled the injunction given in the Talmud to forgive three times and added one for good measure. Jesus answers his question, "Shall I forgive my brother till seven times?" and says, "Not seven but seventy times seven." The disciple must not refuse to forgive when the wrongdoer repents and asks forgiveness.

given to the particular Jewish background against which Jesus spoke His words about the individual care of a fellow disciple who falls into sin.²²

One may state without fear of contradiction that whatever the Jews were doing in their ecclesiastical courts, they were not

²² The antithesis of Matt. 18:15-17 helps to clarify the passage. In the Jewish community, the elders of the congregation exercised discipline, a mixture of ecclesiastical and civil punishment meted out in the hope that the offender would repent and amend his life. Many scholars have, after the example of Elias Levita (1469 to 1549) in his *Tisbbi*, distinguished three different kinds of penalty, *niddui*, *cherem*, and *shammatha*, each progressively more severe. Only the distinction between two kinds has been handed down: *niddui*, or temporary exclusion, and *cherem* or permanent ban. It is difficult to determine how old this distinction is; the New Testament allusions to certain regulations of the synagogue — the ἀφορῶν (Luke 6:22) or ἀποσυνάγωγον ποιεῖν or γίνεσθαι (John 9:22; 12: 42; 16:2) — suggest that the distinction may possess considerable antiquity.

The Pharisees were most conscientiously on guard lest sin should gain dominion over them, and also on guard that they might admonish and warn others to be watchful also. Pharisaism declares: Man shall will what is good, and he is able to will what is good and perform it. The Christian view is that man must receive a new life in order to do the good (Matt. 7:18; John 3:3; 2 Cor. 5:17). Another way of stating the antithesis is that Pharisaism held that one should repent and so bring in the kingdom; Jesus proclaimed that the kingdom had come, therefore the believer brings forth the fruits of repentance (Cf. Hugo Odeberg, *Pharisaism and Christianity*, trans. J. M. Moe [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964]). Against this background, one can understand what Jesus is saying about the person who will not hear the word proclaimed by the disciples of the New Israel: he is not a person "born again," but one who is to be considered as a heathen and publican. To attempt to transform his life by punishment in the hope that he will choose to do the will of God is certainly not what Jesus meant in Matt. 18:15-17. A new principle of action is demanded under the Gospel.

doing what Jesus now tells His disciples to do when a brother sins.²³ Certainly Jesus reveals His tender concern and intense longing for every "lost sheep" and would not have had any intention of setting up a system comparable to that of the Jews for dealing with a sinner.²⁴ When Jesus spoke the words recorded in Matt. 18:15-17, He rejected any legalistic, mechanistic, and loveless approach to the brother of which the synagogue could well have been guilty. His disciples were to be regulated by a different principle entirely. In His teaching He called His disciples to fulfill the will of God and cleared away the incrustations of legalism from what had always been a problem in the religious community — what to do when a member became weak or stubborn, or when people have "church quarrels." When we understand the setting of Matt. 18:15-17, we see what Jesus was doing for His disciples and for His church in a clearer light.²⁵ Instead

²³ Synagogal discipline included the administration of justice, of judgment, and of punishment. The Torah was more than a body of religious truth; it was the lawbook of the land. The officials of the synagogue were not only the leaders of the religious assembly, but civil authorities as well. To the Jew, law and religion were one. Cf. Gerhardt Mahler, "Discipline in the Ancient Synagog and Matt. 18," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, 4 (1933), 411.

²⁴ When a brother sins, "there must be an all-out, concerted, determined, inexorable effort at recovery, as the Lord illustrates by the parable of the shepherd devoting himself with sacrificial zeal to the finding of the lost sheep." Herbert J. A. Bouman, "Biblical Presuppositions for Church Discipline," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, 30 (1959), 511.

²⁵ Various sources describe the shape of synagogal discipline, although it is difficult to capture the exact picture of what obtained in the time of Jesus. Much of the evidence is fragmentary. One may study the following sources with profit: John Buxtorf the Elder (1564 to

of going to the courts and demanding one's rights and receiving redress, the offended person trusts God, whose hand is fearfully inescapable in its judgment and wondrously effective for salvation. In faith, the wronged person gets involved with his sinning brother and turns to him in love with the Word of God that judges sin and offers mercy. The Word confronts the brother with the Christ Himself. When the Word is accepted, it will set free, but where rejected, it will bind and commit to the judgment of God.

Franzmann emphasizes:

Forgiveness is the ground which the disciple walks on, and the air he breathes; he exists only in terms of forgiveness. . . . The disciple who will not live toward his fellow disciple by the forgiving Word which he has heard from his God has forfeited the forgiving Word of God. If he violates the fellowship with the brother whom God has placed beside him, he forfeits his fellowship with God.²⁶

C. Presuppositions of the study of the

1629), *Lexicon chaldaicum, talmudicum et rabbinicum*, cols. 827—829 (s. v. *cherem*), cols. 1303—1307 (s. v. *niddui*), cols. 2462—2470 (s. v. *shammatha*); Campegius Vitringa (1659 to 1722), *De synagoga*, pp. 729—768; Emil Schürer, *A History of the Jewish People* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1924), II, Second Division, 59—63; Solo W. Baron, *The Jewish Community* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1942), I, 89—93, 169; II, 32, 46, 228, 230—233; Rudolf von Bohren, *Das Problem der Kirchenzucht im Neuen Testament* (Zurich-Zollikon: Evangelischer Verlag, 1952), pp. 16—29; Herman L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (Munich: Beck, 1922 to 1928), IV, 1, 294 f., 330; IV, 309 ff., 294, 296, 305; II, 760; I, 787, 792, et passim; Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1912), II, 183.

²⁶ Franzmann, p. 154.

text. The question now is: How does one interpret Matt. 18:15-17? ²⁷ First, we share the conviction of Franzmann that "the 'three steps' prescribed by Jesus are anything but legal prescription and casuistry, although men have all too often understood them so," ²⁸ or even desired to make them so. In the minds of many Christians this is the fundamental text for a theology of Christian discipline. Yet the framework of the entire chapter leads to the thesis that Matt. 18:15-17 does not intend to give concrete and specific directions regarding church disciplinary procedure as such. The pericope rather shows how a brother should leave nothing untried in order to lead a sinning brother to

²⁷ William Barclay is representative of those who hesitate to treat this passage as a genuine saying of Jesus. He says that in many ways this is one of the most difficult passages to interpret in the whole of Matthew's Gospel. He lists these reasons: (1) It does not sound like Jesus; it sounds much more like the regulations of an ecclesiastical committee than like the words of Christ. (2) What does it mean "to take things to the church"? The word *ἐκκλησία* as used by Jesus is recorded only twice. (3) The passage seems to speak of tax collectors and Gentiles as irreclaimable outsiders, but Jesus never labeled them so. (4) The whole tone of the passage seems to indicate that there is a limit to forgiveness, that there comes a time when a man may be abandoned by his fellowmen as beyond hope, but it is impossible to think of Jesus as making such a statement. *The Gospel of Matthew*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1958), p. 206.

²⁸ *Follow Me*, p. 153. Franzmann goes on to say: "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." (Matt. 18: 15-18)

repentance and faith and so bring him again to the kingdom of God to which he would be lost as a consequence of his unrepented sin. Secondly, the pericope does not teach a method of church discipline leading to excommunication by action of the church, but the whole thrust is individual care of the brother and how that responsibility should be carried out.

We signal a conclusion that will be developed in the study of the pericope that follows, that it is untenable to read excommunication, as the term is conventionally understood, into any of the statements of this passage, and that it is therefore doubtful if an express or explicit prescription of excommunication or ecclesiastical action is found in the passage. It is true that v. 18 states that Christ's disciples have the power to loose sins on earth (declare them forgiven) or to bind them on earth (declare them unpardoned), but in this verse Jesus is merely reaffirming the principle already stated in Matt. 16:19.²⁹

D. *Clarification of the teaching of Matt. 18:15-20.* When a Christian brother sins,³⁰

²⁹ Since it is the Word of God that awakens and preserves the spiritual life of man, Christian admonition as an action must involve the Word of God. The church does not pretend that it can effect true repentance or sanctification through a procedure of discipline alone. The Word of God which works judgment and mercy must be proclaimed. Belief or hardening will occur in the confrontation with that Word. If the call to repentance and faith is rejected, the calling Word becomes a word of judgment.

³⁰ εἰς σέ, "against you," is wanting in a number of manuscripts, e. g., **N** and **B**, the Sahidic and Thebaic translations, as well as Cyril, Origen, Basil, and in modern times Westcott-Hort, do not have the phrase. In Luke 17:3, 4, the documents which omit the phrase are more numerous. The words "against you" were easily introduced from v. 21. If these words are an addition, it may have been added to denote

he must be sought out and faced with what it means both for his life and for the life of the community.³¹ From the outset the offender is treated as a brother in Christ, not with contempt nor a mere waiting for him to come and confess his fault as in Matt. 5:23, 24, where Christ binds both the doer and the sufferer of the wrong to seek to end it.³² The focus of concern is not on the hurt inflicted but on the fact that the brother is in danger if he does not hear the Word of God and repent.³³ The con-

that private rebuke presupposes a private wrong, which, however, is far from being the case. James Morison says, "Even had the expression been omitted, it would be needful to supply it mentally; for we might not otherwise know that our brother had sinned; or, on the other hand, we might know of the sinnings of so many brethren that it would be utterly impossible for us to take in hand to deal with each individual case. Nevertheless the emphasis is on the word *sin*. It is the *sin* of our brother that is to excite our solicitude, not our suffering in consequence of it." *A Practical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1902), p. 320.

³¹ The word "brother" implies one with whom one has had a meaningful experience of *κοινωνία*.

³² Dietrich Bonhoeffer says with some irony that "the pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners. Many Christians are horrified when a real sinner is suddenly discovered among the righteous. So we remain alone with our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy." *Life Together*, p. 110.

³³ The context supplies the directive that the sin is of such nature that it cannot be permitted to pass as a weakness and fault such as we all commit. ἀμαρτάνω, "to miss the mark," denotes a specific act of sinning. Manifest sins of the flesh are indicated in Rom. 16:17; 1 Tim. 5:8; Gal. 5:19-21; 1 Cor. 6:9 as causes for confrontation. In no case are Christians to pick on one another. "Unintentional sins" are inevitable and one can trust that confession of sin and forgiveness comes about in the individual's private and corporate use of the means of salvation.

frontation is to be private — "Go and tell him his fault between you and him alone."³⁴ To receive an injury is to be invested with special power and duty; no one else can act the priestly, healing part so well. Richard Glover makes the comment that Jesus "teaches us that the more innocent we are in the matter, the more power we have to heal the variance, and the more responsible we are for doing so."³⁵ Not unwilling to brave the chance of the other's anger or a repetition of insult or wrong, the Christian acts in privacy and does not tattle or expose, but full of charity which covers sin, he goes to the brother alone. Happy the man who, falling into sin, has faithful friends who will help him, and happy the man who, being injured by another, turns with love to help that other to repentance.

Privacy is for the sake of the sinner, but face-to-face confrontation is often quite difficult. For one sinner to face another to convince him of a fault is not usually an easy matter. Perhaps Christians can never get over the feeling that to discuss one's spiritual welfare is just a little bit vulgar. The fact of our mutual sin makes us hesitant. The fact that it is precisely when a person discerns his or her own foibles in another that he or she is prone to condemn that person with particular severity may well cause ambivalent feelings. Not only is it usually difficult for one to accept reproof, it is also a matter of having the

ability to give it properly and without causing damaging results (cf. Lev. 19:17).³⁶ Negative criticism oftentimes suffers a certain backlash.³⁷ Yet the onus of reconciliation rests on the offended. What is more, the needs of people will differ. For exam-

³⁶ Our Lord warns, "Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment that you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your eye? Or how shall you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye" (Matt. 7:1-5). St. Paul cautions that pride dare never rear its head, that the approach be gentle, having nothing in it of contempt or disparagement (Gal. 6:1, 2). Certainly the spirit of meekness, kindness, and humility must prevail in brotherly admonition. For one sinner to rebuke or admonish another is a precarious business which must be steeped in grace if it is to bear grace. St. Paul notes "the spirit of gentleness" that must prevail and says, "Look to yourself, lest you, too, be tempted." When we see a brother overtaken in a "fault," doing himself and the cause of God great hurt (perhaps unconsciously), it is both fraternal and dutiful to go to him and explain the matter kindly to him in order that he may have opportunity to correct himself and come to proper soundness. But when the act is affected graciousness and only the cover of self-vaunting conceit and jealous-hearted desire to disparage and humiliate, it is so spurious a zeal and so malignant a mercy that the Savior hurls upon it His anathema — "Thou hypocrite!"

³⁷ St. Gregory the Great speaks of the dangers inherent in pastoral care. He says, "It is very difficult (when the mind of the teacher is incited to reprove) not to break sometimes into expressions that should have been avoided. It commonly happens that when the fault of a subject is corrected with harsh invective, the master is driven to excess in words; and when reproof blazes forth immoderately, the hearts of the sinners fall into dejection and despair." Saint Gregory the Great, *Pastoral Care*, Trans. by Henry Davis. (Westminster, Md.: The Newman Press, 1950), p. 85.

³⁴ Franzmann notes, "Even here, when the little one has sinned, he (the brother who approaches him) cannot despise him and dare not risk ruining him by a sharp and pitiless exposure of his sin." P. 153. Cf. Gal. 6:1; Lev. 19:17.

³⁵ *A Teacher's Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1956), p. 205.

ple, the insolent will need to be admonished in one way, the fainthearted in another.

We should approach the brother, in the first place, in order to forgive him for the wrong that he has done to us. If we fail to go to him, how can he know we want to offer him the word of forgiveness? Our forgiveness is offered in Christ's name when he confesses his sin under our gentle and humble "rebuke." Luke 17:34 notes that "if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him; and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive him." Sin, as a force, tends to withdraw a person from the community and isolate him. A sinner often moves away from his fellows as though sin would demand to have a man by himself. So we are to go after him and seek him out.

The act of going to the brother in order to get confession and give absolution has been emphasized at length because the first step is both the difficult one and the important one. It is at this initial point of movement toward the brother that procrastination most often takes place. It is most often at this initial point that the real test comes to *κοινωνία*. Can we face our brother, even though we are ourselves, with him, sinners in fellowship with people who sin? It takes faith and grace to stand over against him, to face him with the wrong in him, to take it out of his tormented life and hold it up before him as sin against God, to lead him to admit it as sin. If we have allowed others to speak the Word of God to us, and have accepted gratefully even severe admonitions, then we will be more trained to

stick both to truth and to love. When we stick to the Word of God and let it lead us to our brother, and seek nothing for ourselves, we are enabled to help our brother with that Word.

Whatever we do, we are to endeavor to get through to our brother with the forgiving word of Christ, not to degrade him or expose him or pass judgment on him. If our brother will hear our word (*ἀκούσῃ*) so as to yield the conviction and confess his sin, all is well. He bears the mark of a Christian; God has forgiven him in Christ, and all is well. God's Word has saved him. In his confession the breakthrough to community takes place, and he is regained for God and restored to love and fellowship in community. "The expressed, acknowledged sin has lost all its power. It has been revealed and judged as sin. It can no longer tear the fellowship asunder."³⁸

If a personal and private word fails, if the brother pays no attention, denies his action, excuses and evades and will not be convinced (*παρακούω* — "hear amiss, overhear, disregard"; compare Is. 65:12; Mark 5:36), another conference is indicated and necessary. Others may be and should be enlisted to help, not only to establish the facts of the incident but also the sinner's penitence or impenitence.³⁹ Two or three more will assure, moreover,

³⁸ Bonhoeffer, p. 113.

³⁹ Franzmann notes that "the church's love works cumulatively to win the brother. The call to repentance and the proffer to renewed fellowship are made more insistent, more urgent, and more winning by the added voices of one or two brothers more" (p. 153). Arthur Lukyn Williams says: "Our Lord applies the phrase 'at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall a matter be established' (Deut. 19:16), not to the usage of the law

that the brother is being approached impartially.⁴⁰ The situation should be confirmed and legitimized by others. One's judgment of the act may be wrong or prejudiced, the one brother may not be hearing what the other is saying, malice or spite may be involved, or the one or the other may be suffering psychoneurotic or psychopathic weakness, etc. The purpose of the two or three is their united effort at reconciliation, and, if need be, to give evidence to the church that they had tried to convince the sinner. It may well be that it is *we*, and not the other man, who are in the wrong. The rabbis had a wise saying, "Judge not alone, for none may judge alone save One, that is, God." Proverbs makes a point: "He who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him" (18:17).⁴¹

courts, but to the prudent and kindly action of a believer in dealing with an offended brother." *The Hebrew-Christian Messiah* (London: SPCK Press, 1916), p. 188.

⁴⁰ Matthew quotes from Deut. 19:15, which reads: "One witness shall not rise up against a man for any iniquity, or for any sin, in any sin that he sinneth; at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be established." Cf. also John 8:17; 2 Cor. 13:1; 1 Tim. 5:19. An evangelical meaning is certainly given to the matter of witnesses by Jesus and Paul.

⁴¹ There are many reasons for making sure that the confrontation is loving and proper and not dictated by prejudice or passion. The wronged person's attempts at reconciliation should be affirmed objectively as should also the response which the wrongdoer makes to them. Has the word of mercy and judgment been proffered lovingly and clearly? Has the sinner been forced or "railroaded" in any way? Is the real issue at stake validated? The focus of concern is not to be on the brother's sin but rather on his attitude toward it and what he intends to do about it. Moreover, others may help to persuade the erring brother to yield. In any case, one should not bring disgrace upon his brother by rashly divulging secret offences.

If the efforts of the "two or three" fail to open the heart of the brother, then recourse is made to the maximum resource, the collective assistance of the congregation to which the parties concerned belong. The witness, prayer, love, and fellowship of the church is enlisted in whatever form it can best be related to the situation.

The words εἰπὼν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ (literally, "tell the church") have been made to mean "bring the matter before the congregation as such."⁴² The question is, does the text

⁴² Edgar J. Otto, "Church Discipline," *The Abiding Word*, ed. Theodore Laetsch (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1947), II, 550. Commentators do not at all agree on the meaning of ἐκκλησία. Karl Ludwig Schmidt ("The Church," *Bible Key Words*, I, trans. J. R. Coates [New York: Harper and Row, 1951], 50) says that "the command to report an erring brother's fault to the ἐκκλησία should not be explained as obviously an item from an early Christian catechism, but understood as referring to the synagogue, the Old Testament congregation." R. Newton Flew (*Jesus and His Church*, [London: Epworth Press, 1951], pp. 89 ff.) concludes that the church is a new creation of Jesus, a real community whose constitution is "the blood of the New Covenant." Plummer says "it means the Jewish assembly in the place where the parties live." McNeile says the term means the small body of the Lord's followers as distinct from the Jewish synagog. Cf. also Beza, Fritzsche, Calvin Meyer. Argyle says it means the local body of Christians in a town or area. Some (e.g., Martindale) say this is a proleptic statement (DeWette, Julius Müller), but this seems unwarranted because the *qahal* of the believers actually existed. Lenski finds no reference here to any kind of organized structure. Peloubet identifies the ἐκκλησία as a body of representatives. Arndt-Gingrich suggest that the word is used in the sense of the totality of Christians living in one place, the assembly of the faithful. It should be noted that the conventional Lutheran interpretation of Matt. 18:17 is not that of the Lutheran symbolical books. This passage receives specific treatment only in the Large Catechism, Eighth Commandment, 279—280; "Christ teaches further, 'If he will not listen to you, take one or two others along with you, so that everything is established by

demand that the church be informed of the particular sin and the sinner be exposed to all the members of the church? "Tell the church" implies marshaling the help of the church, but it can hardly mean the exposure in detail of the sin involved. Does it not mean merely that the church is informed that the brother refused to hear two or three and that therefore there is a serious problem to be handled?⁴³ This is the most direct meaning of the text. Would it not be proper to say that the leaders of the church, the constituted body

the testimony of two or three witnesses,' in such a way that one always deals directly with the person in question and does not gossip about him behind his back. But if this does not help, then take the matter publicly before the community (*Gemeine*), before either an ecclesiastical or a secular court. Here you will not stand alone, but you will have your witnesses with you, through whom you can prove the offender's guilt and upon whose evidence the judge can base his decision, hand down a verdict, and assess punishment. In this way one can in a rightful and orderly fashion get to the point where one either stops the evildoer or brings about his improvement."

⁴³ It must be noted that Jesus nowhere prescribed the outward organization of the church nor did He indicate anywhere the precise mode of obtaining assistance from the church in reference to a brother who does not hear two or three. Our Lord left such details as the number, names, and specific duties of church officers to the spiritual judgment of His people as the circumstances might require or dictate (cf. Acts 6:3; also Rom. 15:14; 1 Thess. 5:11; and Col. 3:16, where responsibility for the purity of the church resides at first, and continually, in all members; also 1 Tim. 4:13; 5:1; 6:3; 2 Tim. 4:2; Tit. 1:9; and 2:6, 15, where the leaders are urged to admonish; also 2 Tim. 2:25, 26, where the leader of the congregation has the duty of παιδεύειν, "correcting, disciplining"; also in Col. 1:28 and Acts 20:31, where Paul says it is his duty of νοθετεῖν, "setting right," and the duty of Timothy and Titus of "reproving, rebuking," ἐλέγχειν, in 1 Tim. 5:20; 2 Tim. 4:2; Tit. 1:9, 13; and 2:15).

with authority given by the whole church, should be alerted to the fact that a brother refused to hear the Gospel, that there is a spiritual problem which efforts so far have not resolved?⁴⁴ We are reminded of Luther's directive that the matter should be brought before the civil or the ecclesiastical tribunal (L[arge] C[atechism], Eighth Commandment). The context of Luther's statement certainly argues against public exposure of the details of the sin. Herbert J. A. Bouman says:

The successive grades of admonition indicate loving concern in keeping each level as private as possible. The sinner is not to be publicly humiliated if that can possibly be avoided. The increasing number of people drawn into the case manifests the rising temperature and tempo of the fervent love exerted on behalf of the sinner's forgiveness and restoration.⁴⁵

The text deals primarily with what the individual does, and does not indicate what the church is to do. The members of the church may handle the matter according to their best spiritual judgment. The pastor may be informed, and he may be able to handle the problem. The pastor may enlist the help of the elders and others. The church may be called upon to pray for a brother in trouble and for the brothers who are trying to help him. Depending upon the nature of the relationships involved, the help of members of the

⁴⁴ Heinrich Meyer comments: "It is not inconsistent with this passage to suppose that under the more developed circumstances of a later period . . . there may have been some representative body, composed of individuals chosen for the purpose of maintaining discipline." *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of Matthew* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1884), p. 330.

⁴⁵ P. 513.

offender's family or his friends may be enlisted in a special way. In extreme cases, the witness of the congregation may be mustered, especially if the offender has been an active and faithful member of the congregation, in order to confront the sinner not so much with the fact of his sin as with the seriousness of his unwillingness to repent and seek the mercy of God.⁴⁶ The congregation can express its collective concern and grief and raise the question if the person involved loves his sin more than he loves them and Jesus Christ. But just how the church gets busy with the Word of God for the sake of the brother is not indicated in the text. The church must decide what the best procedure might be in each individual case. The principle is this: Let the church speak with united voice so the sinner will hear.

The crucial words which often have been interpreted to mean excommunication are these: "And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." The first impression is that the man must be abandoned as hopeless and irreclaimable. We posit that that is precisely what Jesus did not and could not have meant. A literal reading of the text shows that the relationship involves the sinner and "you," the second person singular. Verse 17 reads: "let him be to you (σοι) as a Gentile and a tax collector." What the offender *is* to the church is not specifically stated. One may conclude that if the man is as a Gen-

tile and a tax collector to the individual, he is also that to the church. Possibly so. The point is that when the individual has informed the church he has not unloaded his responsibility over against the sinner. His approach toward the sinner shifts gears when it has become clear with whom or with what he is dealing in his continuing efforts to save. The sinner is to be regarded as one who is no true member of the church, but rather as missionary material, as one bound in his sin because he will not hear. The Christian is to work on him as a person who needs the Law that he might listen to the Gospel.

The Word of God will bring repentance or faith or it will harden and exclude. So he who first approached the offender as a brother in Christ can do no more than try to win him back to Christ. The person becomes once more one of those to whom the church has a special duty of preaching the Gospel, one in whom she must fight the battle against Satan. If the church should bind the offender in his sin, in the sense that it withholds forgiveness, this does not mean that the ultimate purpose of individual and church efforts change. Both individual efforts and church efforts continue toward the same end, that of saving the sinner.⁴⁷ If therefore the church looks upon the notorious sinner as a heathen and publican, it is in order to

⁴⁶ Bouman affirms that "there is always only one sin that excludes from the fellowship of God's people, and that is not the specific sin that first evokes our concern. It is rather the sinning brother's unwillingness to hear the pleas and admonitions of his brethren, the sin of persisting on the sinful course and of refusing to come to repentance." (P. 515)

⁴⁷ Meyer states that "in this passage Christ says nothing, as yet, about formal excommunication on the part of the church" and adds a footnote which includes a quotation from Grotius: "I would not deny that for this purpose a strong argument can be drawn from this place." Calovius, says Meyer, in common with the majority of the older expositors, asserts that the institution of excommunication, is, in the present passage, already expressly declared. (P. 330)

have once more with him that original relationship of Christ with sinners.⁴⁸

If, however, the church is understood as the subject which deals with the object as "a Gentile and tax collector," does this mean that the church must formally excommunicate him? Or does it mean that the church will consider him as one who is primarily and properly missionary material upon whom they press the Word of God in clear and unmistakable terms of Law and Gospel in the hope that God's love will break its way through to him through judgment? Were not the Gentiles and tax collectors (of which latter group Matthew was once one) the objects of Jesus' concern? ἐθνικοί and τελῶναι are not synonymous with outcasts beyond the concern of God's people because they were not hopeless in Jesus' eyes, and He expressed sympathy for them (cf. Matt. 9:10; 10:3; 11:19; 21:31 f.).⁴⁹ In 5:46 f. and 6:7 their standard of kindness and of prayer is contrasted with that demanded from disciples and it comes off lacking, but Jesus came to seek and save them, too. Therefore "Gentile and tax collector" is not the last word in church discipline.⁵⁰ At

⁴⁸ Solomon Schechter notes, "We find even that friendly relations were entertained with sinners in the hope that intercourse with saintly men would engender in them a thought of shame and repentance." *Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1923), p. 321.

⁴⁹ Floyd V. Filson says that "Jesus personally does not scorn such people. He here uses current Jewish terms of reproach to describe the wrongdoer as an unworthy outsider. Only a Gospel with a Jewish-Christian setting could comfortably use such terms, which sound strange on Jesus' lips." *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1960), p. 202.

⁵⁰ One may read into "Gentile and tax col-

lector" the meaning (and many commentators do) that here are people who yield to no admonition and that any dealing with them is contaminating. One may also say that the Gentile was outside of Israel and that the publican was expelled from the commonwealth of Israel as a defector and was regarded as one who had separated himself from God's people. This interpretation, however, is not clearly presented in the text.

In some cases, in the face of consistent and urgent appeals, a person may become hardened against the Word and turn away from his brothers and thus separate himself from the church, placing himself apart from efforts to reach him (moving away from the word of grace because he has fallen from grace and wants nothing of it). If then the person in question is declared excluded from the fellowship of the con-

lector" the meaning (and many commentators do) that here are people who yield to no admonition and that any dealing with them is contaminating. One may also say that the Gentile was outside of Israel and that the publican was expelled from the commonwealth of Israel as a defector and was regarded as one who had separated himself from God's people. This interpretation, however, is not clearly presented in the text.

⁵¹ *The Expositor's Greek New Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, n. d.), I, 240, defines the action called for when the ultimate influence of the church has failed. It says, "The offender puts himself outside the society, and there is nothing for it to do but to treat him as a heathen or a publican; which does not mean with indifference or abhorrence, but carefully avoiding fellowship with him in sin, and seeking his good only as one without. There is no reference in this passage to ecclesiastical discipline and church censure."

gregation, it is because he has separated himself from it. The congregation merely recognizes a state of affairs that already exists. Does this mean, however, that the excluded person has no further claim on the Christian community in the sense that he is no longer to be an object of its concern? The church bears within it the hope that the flax, if it is still smoking, will not be quenched and that the reed, if it merely be bruised, will not be broken.

In v. 18 our Lord repeats essentially the words of Matt. 16:19.⁵² The promise given in the present passage has to do with the mission of the church as it proclaims the Word of God. V. 18 assures the disciples that their decisions on earth regarding binding and loosing would be approved in heaven (cf. Luke 10:16). Because the church deals with sin and sinners with the Word of God, one of two things must take place—either sins are loosed, if men hear the Gospel and believe it, or sins are bound when men do not hear and believe the Gospel.

Since the church labors in weakness and lives with a dread responsibility in its hands, Jesus makes it clear that the Spirit-guided decisions of His disciples will be

⁵² The comments on this passage range from "the reflection of a current rabbinic phrase for forbidding and permitting practical questions of conduct" (Flew, p. 96) to "exclusion from or admission to the Christian community" (Strack-Billerbeck, I, 738—742). "To bind" or "to loose" were technical terms in the language of the rabbis. First of all, the words indicated excommunication to which one was condemned (bound) or from which one was absolved (loosed). Their meaning was extended to the doctrinal and juridical decisions in the sense of forbidding (binding) or permitting (loosing). Jesus is giving His church the faculty of admitting into the Messianic kingdom or of excluding from that kingdom and also of making decisions in doctrinal and moral matters.

accepted by God. They will apply the revelation of God's will which they have received to the various problems which confront them and will be given discernment to decide what is right and what is wrong.⁵³ The church of faith is a church of power and must preserve its life from the invasions of error and corruption by declaring what is forbidden and what is permitted.

Because the church is related and committed to the accomplished fact of forgiveness, it speaks a divinely valid word of forgiveness to the sinner. And because the church lives in a world of sinful men, it inevitably speaks also a word of judgment that binds. Offenses will arise from thoughtlessness as well as from willful sin. There will be fainthearted Christians who need the support of the Gospel. There will be rebellious and obstinate Christians who need the Law. Yet faith enables the church to witness with voice and life as it takes part in the eschatological struggle. Christ is with His church and each act His people perform, however small it may be, becomes an act of decisive significance for the kingdom of God.⁵⁴

The last verse (v. 20) stands in seeming contradiction to making the matter always a concern of the congregation. Jesus makes it clear that a crowd is not necessary. He is telling His disciples that even when two or three meet in His name,

⁵³ Flew, p. 96.

⁵⁴ "When men acting in Christ's name and with the power of His Spirit are resisted, and the sinner will not repent, the sin they bind on his conscience as needing to be repented of, God binds on His conscience also. When God's people succeed and win the sinner to repentance, and forgive him, God forgives the sin as well, and looses it from his conscience with the great pardon." (Glover, p. 206)

seek His guidance and power, and act with faithful concern for the good of individuals and the church, His will is to grant what is best for them. When men pray together as disciples, they are more likely to ask such things as God can answer. (Matt. 6:7-13; 7:7-11)

To Luther "if two of you agree on earth" and "where two or three are gathered in Christ's name" meant this (we paraphrase somewhat freely): When two or three come together and converse in the name of Christ on what would be of service for the salvation and happiness of their souls, and ask it of Him, it will be done for them. And when one makes known his weakness and temptations to his brothers, and the brothers understand that the Law has the one in a dilemma, that sin is pressing him hard, that his life has come apart, that his heart is despondent and terrified, that he is wrestling with doubts and the pain of his life afflicts him; if then the brothers begin to comfort and speak to him in the name of Christ who dies for his sins, then let the brother be comforted and believe and be sure that his sins are forgiven and that death cannot harm him. And how can two or three be sure that this is true? Christ our Lord has said, "Where two or more are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."⁵⁵ Change this to a situation in which a "brother" does not have these pains at all, is secure and arrogant, and the script changes. The word that binds may be spoken, but always for the end that the word that looses may be spoken in the name of Christ.

These words of Jesus—"if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask,

it will be done for them by My Father in heaven"—constitute a very weighty promise. Often the hardest thing for us to believe is the fullness of Christ's purpose for us, including even the plainest thing we have to do. We are to go to another man in his suffering and lift that suffering to God as if it were our own. And we can, two or three of us, go to another man in his sin and ask God for common forgiveness as men whose need is as great as his. We can hope to make visible to the sinner the Christ whom he cannot see, to take his sin and suffering on our heart and to pray for him and agree to do what needs to be done about him; to stand beside him, our sinfulness beside his sinfulness, asking that we might both be forgiven.

When Christians say of a sinner "He has got his religion all wrong," they may be merely sorry for him or they may be angry with him and stay away from him. But when they agree that "He has got Christ's love for him wrong," they cannot stay away. They go where they can be used. They go and sit where the poor sinner sits, and await what Christ will show them.

When a man sins, if there are two or three who will get together to pray for him, Christ is in the midst. Perhaps we are afraid of the love of God and fail to speak the truth to one another in love. But the true church is the fellowship of people, perhaps only two or three, in whom the old human life is breaking down and the new life in Christ is being formed. We are to get together in Christ's name and with understanding and faith and nearness encourage one another when the defenses are crumbling and we are not yet sure of what is to come—perhaps when

⁵⁵ Lenker, pp. 394 f. WA, 49, 147 f.

we are like the potter's vessel which must be broken and made again. In any event, our being together and the form of our fellowship is to be shaped by our willingness in faith to be workers together with Him.

IV

The Principle of Discipline in the Church in 1 Corinthians 5

An urgent problem of immorality existed in the Corinthian congregation. A man was living with his father's wife—probably a widowed stepmother or concubine—and it was a scandal generally known, a scandal "of a kind that is not found even among pagans." Equally disturbing, or more so, was the complacency of the church, which had done nothing to correct the scandal.⁵⁶ The Corinthians had written St. Paul about kindred questions (5:9 ff.; 6:12 ff.; 7:1 ff.), and Paul in reply had warned them about associating with immoral people. Well he might, because Corinth was the Sodom of the Grecian world. Instead of mourning at the thought of the offense, they were "puffed up," haughty and proud, convinced of the high quality of their religious life. The witness of the church had gone awry.

⁵⁶ J. Stanley Glen discusses the nature of the complacency and pride. He suggests that the Corinthians were thinking that no sin is ever sufficiently serious nor any case ever so hopeless that the sinner should be expelled from the church; such was the high confidence of their religious success. If they thought they were spiritually filled and rich, and reigning as kings (4:8), why should they fear the presence of one incestuous man? How could he harm them when they were so clearly delivered from the sin that enslaved him? The important consideration would be their influence upon him, and not his upon them. *Pastoral Problems in First Corinthians* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964) p. 76.

Paul's reaction is quick and decisive. He places the blame on both the man and the church and calls for the expulsion of the incestuous man. He urges the Corinthians to remove him (v. 2),⁵⁷ deliver him to Satan (v. 5), clean house of his evil influence (v. 7), not even to eat with him (v. 11), and indeed to drive him out (v. 13). The apostle does something which he knows must be done—to make up for what the Corinthians failed to do. Although absent from Corinth, Paul exercised his apostolic authority and pronounced judgment (κέρινα—"I have judged, I have decided") on the guilty man and called upon the congregation to "deliver" the man to Satan "for the destruction of the flesh that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (v. 4, 5). St. Paul pointed out the duty which the church had and called upon them to perform it. "Let him who has done this be removed from among you . . . drive out the wicked person from among you." (Vv. 2, 13)⁵⁸

⁵⁷ The verb ἐπευθήσατε indicates a result produced independently of the Corinthians. The root verb often means "to conduct a mourning" and the aorist form cannot merely indicate a feeling of inward grief but a positive solemn deed, of something like a day of repentance and fasting, on which the whole church before the Lord deplored the scandal committed and cried to Him to bring it to an end. Cf. F. Godet, *Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1957), I, p. 242.

⁵⁸ "To deliver to Satan" is found in only one other passage in the New Testament, 1 Tim. 1:20. Some who expound this verse say that this man had to be put outside (solemnly excommunicated) and handed over to Satan (who it was believed had power to cause disease) in the belief that sufferings of the body would assail him and work repentance and salvation in him, even if they ended in bodily death. Cf. Luke 13:16; 2 Cor. 12:7. Theodore Zahn (*In-*

Even if St. Paul's expression resembles ancient invocations of punishment⁵⁹ and may possibly reflect his rabbinic conception of Satan as an instrument for carrying out the judgment of God, the important consideration is the ultimate objective that the man's spirit would be saved in the day of Jesus Christ. If the man was refusing to judge himself, then in order that deliverance might be secured, he had to suffer the judgment of God imposed on him by the church.⁶⁰

Introduction to the New Testament, I [Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1909], 278) maintains that "as shown by the relation of vv. 2 and 13 to Deut. 17:7, 12; 24:7, the only atonement which Paul deemed adequate was the extermination of the offender at the hands of the church." J. N. D. Kelly (*A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* [New York: Harper and Row: 1963], p. 58) says that "The formula was a technical one, probably derived from Job. 2:6, and connoted excommunication, that is, the expulsion of the sinner from the church, the realm of God's care and protection, and the formal handing of him over to the power of Satan," where "such a man was thought to be really exposed to the malice of the evil one, and physical disaster was fully anticipated. It is practically certain . . . that Paul expected his sentence to be followed by the guilty man's death. Cf. also the fate of Ananias and Sapphira and the blinding of Elymas (Acts 5:1-11; 3:11)." However, 1 Tim. 1:20 and 2 Tim. 2:17; 4:15 will not support Kelly's argument.

While some find here the idea of excommunication (Calvin, Beza, Olshausen, Bonnet, Henrici, etc.), others, including Zahn and Kelly, ask why St. Paul used an expression so extraordinary to designate an action so simple as that of exclusion from the church. They note that that formula was never in use to denote Jewish excommunication.

⁵⁹ Cf. Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, tr. Lionel R. M. Strachan (New York: Harper, 1927), pp. 301—303. Lenski, among others, disagrees.

⁶⁰ One should note that St. Paul uses the terms σάρξ and πνεῦμα. The word "flesh" denotes more than body, it expresses natural life

The exact explanation of such remedial judgment as St. Paul proposes, and particularly the manner in which the instrumentality of Satan is associated with the possibility of salvation, escapes us. Just how St. Paul meant to apply Law and Gospel here we do not know. Perhaps he was saying in our language, "Hand him over to

in its totality, the natural life under the power of sin (Rom. 8:4, 5, 12). The body itself is hardly to be destroyed (Ch. 15). The word "spirit" denotes the substratum of spiritual life, the spirit itself as an element of human existence, the essential man. The flesh had mastered the man, and he was yielding to the principle of the old nature, which was supposed to be on the other side of the cross. It would seem that St. Paul meant that the man should be cast into the world where Satan rules until that principle of yieldedness to the flesh is ended, until the principle of the "self-life" is finished (cf. Rom. 7), and the spirit in him experiences again the life of God. In Rom. 1:22ff., Saint Paul notes that when a man fails to honor God and give thanks to Him, God's reaction is to give him up to the lusts of the heart; to let him learn what the power of sin is and what it leads to. In Rom. 8, St. Paul denotes the principle that might be applied to this concrete case in Corinth. The warfare is fierce between the flesh and the spirit. "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God and those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (v. 7). "But if Christ is in you, although your bodies are dead because of sin, your spirits are alive because of righteousness" (v. 10). If the sinner in Corinth was "of the Spirit," he would be plucked as a brand from the burning. St. Paul put the situation to the test.

F. Godet does not hesitate to say that εἰς ἄλθρον τῆς σαρκός means the earthly existence of the man is destroyed; that St. Paul condemned him to death in view of the saving of the spirit at the final coming of Christ. Godet argues that St. Paul in virtue of his spiritual position feels at liberty to determine the means which the Lord will use. "The real matter in question here," he says, "is the destruction of one of the elements of his being with a view to the salvation of the other, which is the more precious. St. Paul is saying, 'My God, strike him, strike him dead, if need be, if only he can be saved.'" Pp. 254—258.

Satan before whose authority he has been surrendering. Let the Law have him in order that it may work its therapy. Cut him off from Christian fellowship and remove him from any false feeling of security within it. Expose him to the dreadful and loneliness of his sin. Put him out for the destruction of carnality, until he, like the prodigal son, sickens of evil when he has had enough of it."⁶¹ In spite of our difficulty in understanding Paul, it must be affirmed that he believed the drastic remedy would benefit the man.

Any attempt to connect 1 Cor. 5 to 2 Cor. 2:5-11 is debatable. There simply is no clear evidence that St. Paul is or is not speaking of the same case.⁶² If the same person is meant, the passage indicates that there was no rigoristic severity in the apostle's discipline. Rather, he was emphasizing the fact that overmuch sorrow without comfort may well lead to despair; that despair of God's mercy is the deepest guilt by which a man can be swallowed up. If the case is not the same, St. Paul is most likely referring to a per-

sonal insult to which he had been subjected at Corinth, and which had taken place posterior to the sending of the first letter.

"Paul's primary purpose was to discipline the congregation so that they might discipline the offender," says Glen.⁶³ This seems a reasonable thesis in view of Paul's statement to the Corinthians about their being the temple of God which they should not defile (3:16,17). Paul wanted the Corinthians to be protected, or to protect themselves, from the man who might corrupt them. His evil could not be regarded as a neutral or static quality, but an influence comparable to yeast in dough. To the Jews leaven was a symbol of corruption and at Passover all impurity was put out of the household (Ex. 12:15,19; 13:7). One guilty person in the situation that obtained in Corinth, if permitted to remain in the congregation, was enough to corrupt it. The new "Passover" meant the elimination of gross evil from the church of Christ. One can understand why St. Paul desired to protect the congregation not only from the man but from its own placid acceptance of sexual license and perversion. Discipline had failed. The sin of one member was the sin of the whole body; yet the church felt no responsibility. St. Paul put the situation into the right context. He called on the Corinthians to clean house that they may celebrate Christ's death for sin "with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth." An open sin within the intimate fellowship of the church must not be compromised or tolerated. As the leaven contaminates and causes the dough to rise, so the sin of one person defiles and sets in revolt against

⁶¹ Cf. R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Columbus: Lutheran Book Concern, 1935), p. 221.

⁶² Many commentators insist that St. Paul is speaking of the same person and insist that the incestuous man was restored to the church. They do this to point up the fact that discipline in the church is beneficent. The reference in 2 Cor. 7:7 ff. has also been understood to refer to the affair of the incestuous person. The word ἀδικηθέντος (he to whom a wrong has been done, v. 12) must be referred to the guilty man's father, and this does not make sense since the very fact of the incest necessarily supposes the father's death. Cf. Adolf Hilgenfeld, *Historisch-kritische Einleitung in das Neue Testament* (Leipzig, 1875), pp. 284 f. Sometimes 2 Cor. 7:12 is quoted as proof that the father was still living. The term ἀδικηθέντος can only refer to Paul himself.

⁶³ P. 78.

God the whole church, so closely are its members bound together. In Corinth the whole church was involved in the demand for repentance and the action toward the sinner. "In insisting on severe treatment of gross immorality, Paul is not demanding that the church go out of the world, but that the world go out of the church."⁶⁴ For the sake of their life together in Christ, the church in a place must apply Law and Gospel. The Lutheran Confessions maintain the principle that the power of excommunication is a divine right which is exercised by the pastors of the church upon those who live in manifest vices and crimes and persist in them: Ap., VII, 3; XI, 62 (where the German paraphrase of Justus Jonas specifies prostitution and adultery as examples); S[malcald] A[rcticles], Part Three, IX; Tr[actate] 60, 74. The confessions likewise maintain the principle that those who repent are to be absolved: A. C., XII, 2; (Ap., XVIII, 13).

V

Principles Which Guide the Motions of Mutual Care in the Church

1. Mutual care in the church occupies the place which lies between the Word of God and sinful man. In places where the Word of God must be applied toward admonition, discipline, and forgiveness of sins, Christ has put the people He has redeemed and called to faith. They are His ministers who call out to men in the world, "Be reconciled to God."⁶⁵ Christ

⁶⁴ William Baird, *The Corinthian Church — A Biblical Approach to Urban Culture* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964), p. 70.

⁶⁵ Isaiah's prophecy (61:1, 2) picks up the motion of Christ's saving purpose: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has

willed that His disciples would confront men, not in their own strength or wisdom, but with a message which in their mouths would be so great a power that sin, death, and hell must yield to it. When the Word of God is proclaimed, even by sinful men to sinful men, one of two things will happen — either sins will be forgiven or they will be retained.

"In My name" is the essential principle of disciple action.⁶⁶ "In Christ's name" the power of the keys is given to all Christians, all are bearers of the Word of God which forgives or retains sins. However, the spiritual office of preaching, teaching, administering the sacraments, counseling, hearing confession and giving absolution, has not been left to the whim of each individual believer. God has ordained that the public ministry of the keys be established in the church. The believers rally around this public ministry and support it by their private use of the Word as they admonish, reprove, encourage, speak the forgiving Word or the Word that judges whenever and wherever one has

anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." The motion is extended from Christ to the eleven in John 20:21-23: "As the Father has sent Me, even so I send you. . . . Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

⁶⁶ Note that in Matthew 9 Jesus says to the people when He healed the paralytic, "But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins — Rise, take up your bed and go home." The passage goes on to note, "When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men."

need of it.⁶⁷ The spiritual growth and nurture of Christians in a place, whether it be in the congregation, in the family, or wherever it is that Christians meet face to face, depends on their will to bear the common weakness of all, to exhort, admonish, put back on the right track, to remind one another of who they are because of what God has done, and to do this in love, kindness, and meekness.⁶⁸

2. Mutual care in the church, or the lack of it, must eventually affect the life of all (1 Cor. 12:12-26). Members of the church cannot afford to be indifferent about sin in their lives or in the lives of fellow members. A living faith will feed upon the daily diet of the forgiveness of sins. When any one member no longer lives by what God gives in Christ, unholiness exists in the church. When one does not forgive nor receive forgiveness, the ties that bind him to Christ and to Christ's people have been rejected.

When mutual care is practiced in the church, this does not mean that Christians will be busy prodding and pushing and picking on one another in order "to perfect the saints." Moreover, sin will rightly be seen not as mere acts alone, as behavior

evident on the surface of life; the faults and frailties which all people have. Rather, sin will be recognized as the real trouble of every person in the church, the sinful nature which oppresses the heart and conscience of every believer before God, the lot of every man broken as he is under God's holy law, a sinner even before he sins.

It seems to be very difficult for us to understand what it means to belong to the church of Christ. Faith strives to accept the almost unbelievable promises and the apparently impossible commands which are wrapped up in the Gospel. Caught up in the church are people good and bad, weak and strong, lovable and unlovable. And yet the miracle of the church, its mystery, is that God accepts sinners, delivers them from the power of sin, and gives them new life—and that He does it through the instrumentality of the people who belong to Him. And we are not to stay outside the circle of God's love because we are sinners; we are to come within because we are like that. Let no one in the church be offended because there are some in the church who do not yet look like the people of God. Rather faith will look upon other Christians as men and women in whom Christ is making all things new.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Richard R. Caemmerer points up that Christians endeavor "to bring God's plan of redemption in Jesus Christ to come true in one another." He says that Eph. 4:15 means that Christians are "truthing" one another when they speak the Word of God back and forth. Christians lay God's claims upon one another in the truth of His Word, whether that truth be Law or Gospel, so that God's plan may come true in them. *Feeding and Leading* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), p. 33. Cf. also WA, 10 III, 394, 27 ff.

⁶⁸ Cf. Psalm 110, *Luther's Works*, "Selected Psalms, II," ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), XIII, 330 to 334. WA, 41, 206—214.

⁶⁹ J. W. Stevenson in *God in My Unbelief* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960) describes his change in attitude toward a man who had opposed his ministry. He says, "I know now that I had been standing over against him, analyzing the wrong in him, proving to myself why it was wrong, trying to show him how the wrong appeared to me, taking it out of his tormented life and holding it up before him to shame him and make him turn from it. Seeing him like that, I could not truly see the Cross, for all my preaching of it; and I could not forgive, for all my words of forgiveness." (P. 32)

Mutual care in the church is more than one person going to another to tell him of his need, more than urging the claims of the church; it is one person being poor with another in need of God's grace, so poor that he dares not look upon his brother and judge him to be more urgently in need of saving than himself.⁷⁰ All members of the church must come together before Christ for His judgment and His mercy. Mutual care begins where two or three claim the power of Christ for one another and ask that He will give new shape to their fellowship in His death and resurrection.

3. Mutual care in the church means enduring, in the words of St. Augustine, a "mingled" church, a *corpus permixtum*; and yet the church keeps on working to build up itself as a community obedient to Christ and faithful to His Word. The church lives in fear and trembling, and yet trusts that God is at work in its midst.

Within the circle of the baptized there are always "evil men and hypocrites" in the "outward fellowship of the church" who share in the "external things and rites" of the church without the obedi-

ence of faith (Ap., VII, 3, 5).⁷¹ They are merely "mingled" with the church, they are not members of Christ. The church will either tolerate these false members or expel them when it becomes obvious that they do not wish to be Christians. The church must not attempt to separate all sinners from the godly, in the sense of purging itself, but rather must seek to sanctify the sinners through the Gospel. Too strenuous efforts to attain a pure church on earth may well result in the pulling up of the wheat with the tares (Matt. 13:29). The sanctification of the church is God's own work; likewise it is His domain to judge.⁷²

⁷¹ The Lutheran Confessions state that "in this life many false Christians, hypocrites, and open sinners remain among the godly" (A. C., VIII, 1). "There is an *infinite* number of ungodly within the church who oppress it" (Ap., VII, 9). The Confessions expressly forbid the church to separate itself from all evil people, not because it is impossible to excommunicate all sinners, but because the church has not been given the right to make that separation of the good and evil which only the returning Christ will perform.

⁷² Edmund Schlink comments: "The question involuntarily suggests itself: 'Why practice church discipline at all if the sinners may not be excluded from the church before Christ's return?' The confessions provide no further basis for church discipline. Since it cannot be the church's purpose to purge itself, the concern remains in force to protect the church by means of discipline against offenses and seduction. However, the decisive reason is that Christ has commanded His church to forgive *and* to retain sins. The church has no right to cut this command in half" (p. 216). The judgment of the Kingdom does not belong to the church except as there is already a judgment in the Word (John 3:17-20; 12:48). The preaching of the Gospel is itself the breaking into the present of the final judgment of the Kingdom, yet the judgment exercised by the church is expressly distinguished from Christ's final judgment (1 Cor. 5:3-5, 9-13; 2 Cor. 6:14). Since the sphere of the church's existence is not identical

⁷⁰ Bonhoeffer reminds us that "only he who lives by the forgiveness of his sin in Jesus Christ will rightly think little of himself. . . . If my sinfulness appears to me to be in any way smaller or less detestable in comparison with the sins of others, I am still not recognizing my sinfulness in all. My sin is of necessity the worst, the most grievous, the most reprehensible. Brotherly love will find any number of extenuations for the sins of others; only for my sin there is no apology whatsoever. Therefore my sin is the worst. . . . How can I possibly serve another person in unfeigned humility if I seriously regard his sinfulness as worse than my own? Would I not be putting myself above him; could I have any hope for him?" (Pp. 96 f.)

Mutual care in the church means enduring the fact that each of its members is *simul justus et peccator*. The Christian, even though forgiven, lives out his service to God and neighbor in the tension of his flesh (self-rule) against the Spirit (God-rule), a tension which exists as long as he lives (Gal. 5:16 ff.) The old man which remains needs the Law to beat him down to repentance and drive him back to the forgiveness and graciousness of the cross of Christ (Gal. 3:24). Although the Christian is in Christ, he does not always respond to Christ's Lordship. His works will be perfect and his obedience impure. This fact forces the Christian to "abide in Christ" and in His church where the Word of God, Law and Gospel, is ministered to him for the necessary dying and rising again which must be an ongoing experience.

4. However, the church must of necessity decide who is to be among its members and must exclude from its fellowship those who persist in manifest vices and contempt of the sacraments (Ap., XI, 4; Cf. XXVIII, 13).⁷³ Excommunication is

with the realm of Christ's rule, the boundaries of the church cannot be set by men with finality. The church can only draw proximate and tentative lines. Just where the "fringe" is cannot always be determined. Claude Welch says, "Where the light of Christ ends and the darkness of Satan begins is a question which will be given different answers from various viewpoints." *The Reality of the Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), pp. 212—216.

⁷³ Schlink observes that "the statements of the Lutheran Confessions concerning church discipline have their most important exposition in the Lutheran church constitutions. Here the brief, essentially only basic, hints of the Confessions are unfolded in concrete directives regarding the premises and method of disciplinary procedure. The fact that there is so much disparity in detail demonstrates that these regula-

reserved for the notorious, obstinate sinners (S.A., Part III, IX). That is the negative aspect of the order of forgiveness which is invoked when repentance is refused. The objective of such discipline may be understood in terms of possible conflict between an individual and the corporate ethos. Impenitence is withdrawal or removal from the collective "we" of the church into the isolation of self-will and personal determination of one's life. Repentance and faith is readmission into the "we," liberation from solitariness, and restoration into the chain of communal surety.

The church must fight against the kingdom of Satan not only by means of the word of the forgiveness of sins but also through the denial of forgiveness; not only by giving the Lord's Supper but also by excluding from the Sacrament. The power of the keys is always twofold (S.A. Part III, VII, 1) and is entrusted to the whole church through Christ's command. The church is not helpless against the stubbornness, unteachableness, and impenitence of men. When men will not hear the Gospel but persevere in their sin, the church has the right to make a decision or judgment about them—their sins are not remitted, they must remain bound in them. The church does not simply ignore those who sin nor stay away from them, but it exercises an action of judgment, that is, it operates with the Law in order that the purposes of the Gospel may be served. The discipline of the church, therefore, is to serve the

tions were established by the church in the liberty of faith without confusing the identity of the church with the identity of a specific constitution." (P. 211, fn.)

order of love and forgiveness.⁷⁴ There can be no room in the church as the body of Christ for a discipline which serves only punitive ends. The key which binds "is profitable for the sinner inasmuch as it reveals to him his sin, admonishes him to fear God, causes him to tremble, and moves him to repentance and not to destruction."⁷⁵ Since there is no neutrality before God, the alternative is faith and the mercy of God or unfaith and the judgment of God. The forgiveness of sins is offered properly with the preaching of repentance. The two actions go together. It is the will of the Lord Himself that the Gospel should not be given to the dogs. If the church refuses to face the fact of sin in its body, it is unworthy of the trust of the Gospel.⁷⁶

5. To those to whom the ministry of the Word and Sacraments has been committed belongs also the jurisdiction of excommunicating those guilty of manifest crimes and again to absolve those who repent (Tr., 60; Ap., XXVIII, 13).⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Luther notes that binding in Christ's sense is "directed toward a desire to deliver the sinner from sins and by its binding seeks nothing else than this, that the sinner's conscience may be free and rid of sins." WA, 30 II, 467, 23.

⁷⁵ *Luther's Works*, American Ed., ed. Conrad Bergendoff (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), 40, pp. 372, 373. WA, 30 II, 503.

⁷⁶ Rudolf von Bohren suggests that in order to be authentic the church would have to decide between forgivable sin and definite apostasy. Cf. von Bohren, pp. 97 ff. Stated in another way, the church is faced with the decision whether the person dealt with is fighting weakly and needs support or whether he has given up the fight and has surrendered to the enemy.

⁷⁷ Apology, XI, 4, states: "Excommunication is also pronounced against the openly wicked [those who live in manifest vices, fornication, adultery, etc.] and the despisers of the sacraments."

Pastors exercise this right by God's Word alone (A.C., XXVIII, 21) and do it in connection with their responsibility over against the administration of the Holy Communion. The binding (or suspension from the Holy Communion) can be carried out by the pastor without hesitation (S.A., Part III, IX). One may consider this a part of his obligation to administer the sacraments properly (*recte*). This action is what the Lutheran Confessions term the "lesser excommunication," which "excludes those who are manifest and impenitent sinners from the sacraments and other fellowship of the church until they mend their ways and avoid sin." (S.A., Part III, XIV). Yet this must not be done in isolation from the counsel of some part of the church because people in the church are not to come under the subjective judgment of any individual.

6. Luther distinguishes between the *external* excommunication, which excludes from the church's sacramental fellowship, and the *internal* excommunication (sin and unbelief), which excludes from the fellowship of Christ.⁷⁸ That is to say, the ban which the church imposes excludes only from external (the outward bodily and visible fellowship) membership in the church, but cannot really separate a person from the church if he is in personal fellowship with his Lord. No excommunication or any other human action can touch the inner spiritual and invisible fellowship of the heart. Sin and unbelief cause a separation from Christ, and the real excommunication therefore, is put into effect not by the church but

⁷⁸ Cf. "Treatise Concerning the Ban," *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1943) II, 35—54 (cf. p. 10). WA, 6, 61—75.

in a sense by the person himself when he sins against God and chooses to remain in it by refusing to repent. The binding key, as it were, turns in his own heart when he refuses the Word of God that will loose him. When this fact becomes evident (perhaps after the pastor suspended him from the Sacrament of the Altar and after sincere efforts have been made by the pastor and others to convince him to repent), no choice remains but to confront him with the fact of his sin and declare him excommunicate. Some have maintained that the person declared excommunicate really excluded himself, and that the formal excommunication merely recognized that fact. In a sense this is true, but exclusion is the proper action which the church exercises for a purpose in the name of Christ. Whatever it is that the person does when he removes himself, the formal excommunication is something else.

7. Since no man can truly judge another nor exercise ultimate judgment concerning him, the Lutheran Confessions affirm that "the keys have not the power of binding and loosing except upon earth, according to Matt. 16:19" and have "not the power to impose penalties . . . , but only the command to remit sins to those who are converted, and to convict and excommunicate those who are not willing to be converted. For just as to loose signifies to remit sins, so to bind signifies not to remit sins" (Ap., XII, 176).⁷⁹ It is

⁷⁹ Luther comments: "When you speak a word concerning a sinner, it shall be spoken in heaven, and shall avail so much as if God Himself spoke it in heaven; for He is in your mouth, therefore it has the same force as if He Himself spoke it." Luther elsewhere notes that "the power to kill and make alive" is not absolute.

possible for the church to exercise discipline just because it does not confuse that discipline with God's ultimate judgment.

The church exercises the ban (we use Luther's term and the term of the Confessions) as medicine, not poison, as a discipline, not a destructive uprooting insofar as the one subjected to it does not despise it. Jesus said that the Son of Man came not to destroy but to save men's souls (Luke 9:56). St. Paul states that the Lord gave him power to edification, and not to destruction (2 Cor. 13:10). Luther also stresses that the ban is a sign whereby one should recognize that he himself has deprived himself of the fellowship of all saints and of Christ. The purpose is always that he should see the consequences of his sin and be led back to the fellowship of Christ and the church. Since sin is not primarily an act against the church but an offense against God, the ban is employed as a pedagogical means by the church, and by no means is it a scourge by which one is cast into hell but rather drawn out of it and freed from condemnation.⁸⁰

8. The spirit of mutual care should pervade the whole life of the church. Perhaps this is too much to ask for in every case. Where *κοινωνία* is at a low

"When Christians open and shut, it does not mean that it must be open and shut. Christ's meaning is: You shall have the power to speak the Word, and to preach the Gospel, saying, Whosoever believeth has the remission of his sins; but whosoever believeth not, has no remission of sins. We are only servants and ministers who shall preach the Word by means of which we incite people to believe." Lenker, p. 360. WA, 12, 522.

⁸⁰ "A Treatise on the Ban," pp. 42, 43. WA, 6, 67, 68.

level, mutual care is hardly possible, and may even be risky when attempted.

The exercise of discipline is not confined to formal assemblies in the church. It begins when two or three get together. If the sin is of such a nature that it can remain a secret between two persons (a personal offense), the offender can be summoned to repentance and the matter may be settled. The church is involved only as the final recourse to ultimate resource. No individual dare expose his brother needlessly or spitefully, or exercise his subjective judgment upon him. No individual can put another out of the church or practice private excommunication in the sense that he cuts off the sinner. Nor should the Christian give up on his brother. The Christian is involved all the way and "stays on his brother's back" as long as opportunity is present to apply the Word of God.

The Christians, the church officers, and the pastor are always on duty to practice mutual care and discipline. Christians are to face the problem of a brother's sin wherever they meet it. Sometimes the sin is public and therefore it is the church's concern. In any case, the activity of brotherly admonition is to go on across all areas of the church's life because this is the only form of protection against daily trials and temptations and against apostasy within the congregation. The shape or form of mutual care among Christians is assumed in obedience to Christ and His Word and is practiced in faith and in common responsibility for their life together.⁸¹ Jesus

⁸¹ The Lutheran Confessions give no specific directions about the procedure of church discipline; they neither prescribe a specific formula of excommunication nor clarify the relationship of congregation and pastor in bringing about

said, "Receive ye the Holy Spirit," and Christians are moved by the Spirit and act in faith. The basic Scriptural principle is: When Christians need to get together to exercise mutual care, they get at the task. If there is a problem which needs to be nipped in the bud, they don't fool around. They get all the help they need, and keep faithfully at the task in meekness and in patience, trusting God to work through His Word which they speak.

The pastor in the church exercises discipline care in his shepherd role, particularly in connection with the Holy Communion when he admits or does not admit people to the Sacrament or when he admits or does not admit people as sponsors at Baptism. The father and mother in the home exercise discipline in conversation, in decision, and in counsel toward each other and their children. Members of the church practice discipline in their mutual conversation and comfort.

9. Who is to be excluded from the church? Ap., VII, 48, asserts that "we should forsake wicked teachers because they no longer function in the place of

excommunication beyond specifying excommunication as part of the office of bishops and pastors and placing excommunication in the competence of every pastor. Churches may put regulations into effect in the liberty of faith and in obedience to the Gospel, yet church order above all other considerations should serve the Gospel. To the extent that humanly instituted ceremonies are involved, "the community of God in every place and at every time has the right, authority, and power to change, to reduce, or to increase ceremonies according to its circumstances, as long as it does so without frivolity and offense but in an orderly and appropriate way, as at any time may seem to be most profitable, beneficial, and salutary for good order, Christian discipline, evangelical decorum, and the edification of the Church." Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, X, 9.

Christ but are antichrists." (1) We may conclude from this that the spreader of antichristian heresy must be expelled from the church. This does not, however, refer to every teacher who has sinned, only to the one who advocates and spreads false doctrines and persists in his error in spite of all instruction and admonition. It is not always easy to draw the line between unprofitable opinions and lethal error. (2) Those who live in manifest vices or who are guilty of notorious crimes and persist in them (Ap., XI, 4, where, as we have seen, the German paraphrase specifies prostitution and adultery; S. A., Part Three, IX; Tr., 60; cf. 74). The act itself is not the ultimate cause of exclusion, but the denial of the Gospel is. "Whoever does not desire forgiveness, or desires it only as a cloak for persisting in vice, is to be excluded from the church, says Schlink.⁸² (3) "Despisers of the sacraments" have excluded themselves already from the Lord's Supper and are listed with the "openly wicked." Ap., XI, 4.

10. Whether a certain procedure is followed in the action of the congregation is immaterial. The Lutheran Confessions inveigh against the erroneous articles of the Schwenkfeldians which stated "That it is not a true Christian congregation [church] in which no public excommunication [some formal mode of excommunication] or no regular process of the ban [as it is commonly called] is observed" (Formula of Concord, Epitome, XII, 7). In other words, no demand is made upon the congregation to establish some formal process or regular procedure of church discipline. Moreover, the practice of excommunication is not a mark of the church.

To follow certain procedures may be a proper effort as long as the effort remains a sign intended to proclaim that the decision for or against God is demanded with the utmost urgency. Such effort becomes wrong when the church finds in church discipline procedures its self-justification in terms of Romans 11:17 ff. What is vital is not whether discipline is carried out in one way or another, but the aim of the action: the application of the Word of God.

Perhaps we have been more concerned about the machinery of church discipline than about the use of the Word of God. It could be that we have trusted the niceties of casuistic practice more than the promises of God. Any false separation between what Christians are to do with the Word of God in mutual care and the procedures involved in carrying it out causes mayhem in the church. Perhaps we have made it so complicated because we have thought that we were doing the job, having forgotten that God does the job through the Word. Could the whole matter begin between people wherever they meet and move from there, when and if necessary, to the concern of the pastor and the church? Is it as simple as this? John is talking with Bill about Jim. "Jim really took me on that car deal," says John, "and when I took the car in and showed him how bad the transmission was, he only said, 'Tough luck,' and gave me the run-around. I thought I could trust a member of our church."

"What are you going to do about it?" asked Bill.

"What can I do about it? I guess I got stuck. You bet I will write Jim off my book from now on."

⁸² Schlink, p. 214.

"So? I think you have a problem to work out."

"What kind of problem?" asked John.

"If you just let Jim alone and don't face him with his sin, you are actually binding him in it because you are not helping him to get loose."

"What sort of double talk is that?" asked John.

"I mean that if you accept Jim's doing wrong, he is caught in sin, and you are doing nothing to help him get free."

"You mean that I ought to put him in a bind about what he has done so that he can get free?"

"Yes, and since I know about it, I am putting you in a bind until you do something about it. None of us is free as things stand. If you need help in helping Jim, I stand ready to help you help him."

Unbelievable? It's merely a sketch of ministry in action, the ministry of mutual care which is to be practiced among Christians, the person-to-person basis of all discipline in the church. Essentially it is the ministry of the Word of God, the service of the Office of the Keys that has been given to the people of God by Christ in order to keep the Law and Gospel at work in their lives. Mutual care and discipline in the church is a servant of the precious grace of God. In 1522, Luther preached a sermon on Rom. 15:4-13 with the theme: "Admonition to Bear the Imperfections of Our Neighbors." Here follow some quotes:

Now, Paul teaches us here to have patience and to bear with the weak . . . to coincide with them and become weak with them until they also become stronger in faith. . . . The weak and defective in faith he [the Christian] should instruct in a friendly manner, and mildly bear with them; but the raving and ranting, he

should oppose with earnestness. . . .

There is also and will remain at all times among the people of Christ persons who are weak and sick in good works. . . .

None of whom Christ desires to be rejected, but to have all received, so that Christian love may have an abundance in which to exercise itself, to do good, and heal and bear with its neighbors . . . in faith and conduct. . . . The character of a Christian hatred of sin is this: It discriminates between vices and persons;

it endeavors to exterminate the vices only, and to preserve the persons themselves. Therefore, it neither flees from, nor evades, nor rejects, nor condemns anyone,

but it much rather receives, freely interests itself in him, and treats him in such a manner as to relieve him from his vices, admonishing him, instructing him, praying for him, being patient, and bearing with him; it does nothing but what it would desire others to do to it, were it in similar circumstances of imperfection. . . .

Let us therefore learn from this Epistle that a Christian walk and love do not consist in seeking pious, upright, and holy people, but in making people pious, upright, and holy; and let it be the labor and exercise of a Christian on earth to make such people, whether by admonition, prayer, patience, or otherwise. Even as a Christian does not live to seek wealthy, strong, hale persons, but to make such out of the poor, weak, and infirm . . . not only to bear with our neighbor's spiritual imperfections, both as to his faith and conduct, but also to receive him, and to heal him, removing his infirmities. For those who do not do this create seditions, sects, and divisions; as in former times the heretics, Donatists, Novatians, and many others separated themselves from the church, being unwilling to tolerate sinners and defective persons among them; it cannot be otherwise, there must

be heretics and sects where this doctrine is not observed.⁸³

⁸³ The translation is that of Ambrose Henkel in *Dr. Martin Luther's Church-Postil, Sermons on the Epistles*, (New Market, Va.: Evangelical Lutheran Publishing Company, 1869) pp. 16, 18, 19. WA, 10 I, 2, 64, 67—69.

The church today could well afford to take a leaf from Luther's book. A new and serious look is needed at our mutual care behavior and our willingness to engage in "fraternal conversation and consolation" in the church.

St. Louis, Mo.