

Forgiveness and Church Discipline

Jesus' ministry focused on the teaching and proclamation of the kingdom of God. Central to that teaching was the preaching of forgiveness of sins, the understanding that Jesus came to forgive sins and through that pardon of sins we are brought into a right relationship with God. It is recorded many times through out the Gospels that Jesus forgave a person's many sins if they had faith to believe in Him. However, it should not stop at just hearing you are forgiven but a daily living out your forgiveness. It is in the understanding and living out forgiveness that one can truly reflect all the fullness of God in their life. Holiness is achieved through forgiveness, which leads to repentance, and not through discipline alone. I believe the church is established to invoke the discipline of forgiveness and not just the discipline of living a "good" life. Church discipline is to produce healing and restoration of people and not the mere production of perfect people. Forgiveness needs to be the product of church discipline. And church discipline is ultimately a part of the bride, the church, making herself ready for the return of Christ (Revelation 19:7).

In Luke 5:17-26 it states that Jesus first told a paralytic man's sins were forgiven because of his great faith in Him, before ever healing the man. This shows Jesus' focus was on the healing of the heart and soul of a person and not the physical healing. Jesus was concerned about people seeing the kingdom of God and that can only happen through one being brought into right standing before God, holy and blameless. The forgiveness of sins needed to be preached in order for people to see the kingdom of God. This is the foundation for Christ's ministry. However, Christ exclaimed, "repent and believe the good news" (Mark 1:15). If ever forgiveness is preached, repentance must be exclaimed as well. "God does not forgive sin indiscriminately without repentance and serious amendment of life. By repentance and faith in God's atoning action, divine forgiveness is not made an arbitrary matter or an act contrary to the divine holiness but an act consistent with God's holy love" (Oden, Volume III, p.102). Throughout the book of Acts the preaching of repentance and faith in God went always together (Acts 3:19, 19:4, 20:21). In order for forgiveness from God to take place it must be in the context of repentance. Now whether repentance or faith comes first in receiving forgiveness is up for debate, however, "the

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prevailing logical-consensual order in interpreting the sense of scripture is that faith's first work is repentance, and penitent faith is the condition of regeneration" (Oden, Volume III, p. 103). We cannot separate faith in Christ from repentance; it must be one in receiving God's divine forgiveness.

To truly understand divine forgiveness we must realize that judgment from God of our sins must occur first. Sin can only be recognize as sin if there is a holy God that sets the standard for what is right and what is wrong. A holy God is our measuring stick and this is where judgment for our actions comes from. "Human sin is forgiven only because it is confronted and judged. But that judgment is wholly in the service of mercy, reconciliation, and new life" (Jones, p. 15). Holy judgment comes from a merciful judge, Jesus Christ, who desires to rescue us from our sins. To be reconciled to God is to accept the judgment of our sins, believe in the forgiveness that came through the work on the cross of Christ, and repent from our sins. This repentance is not just having a sorrowful mindset for what you have done but a total change of heart. Repentance "denotes a radical change of mind and heart followed by a behavioral reformation of sinful life, a sorrowing for sin so as to forsake sin altogether" (Oden, Volume III, p.86). You can view repentance as a preparation "to receive God's grace, but in another more profound sense we discover through our repentance that God's grace has already found us" (Jones, p. 16). God's judgment on sin is not to condemn us but it is the means for us to be forgiven by a holy, righteous and loving God. We must first recognize that we are lost, marred and stricken to die because of sin but God's love brings forgiveness, healing and restoration from our sin through His Son's work on the cross. We can not bring forgiveness about on our own, it is the complete work of God through Christ. "While there are no conditions for God forgiving us, we must engage in practices of repentance in order to appropriate that forgiveness" (Jones, p.146).

Forgiveness is truly a life experience that should be lived out daily. Forgiveness involves learning to unlearn habits that lead to sin. Also, forgiveness should not "be confined to a word to be spoken, a feeling to be felt, or an isolated action to be done; rather it involves a way of life to be

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lived in fidelity to God's Kingdom" (Jones, p. 5). It is the concept of "embodying forgiveness" (L. Gregory Jones) that one must live out in order to receive this divine forgiveness of sins. This embodiment of forgiveness must occur in the life of a Christian if the divine forgiveness through Jesus Christ has been accepted. This should be acted out in the believer's life in all interactions with others in the church and outside of the church. Jesus gives a clear understanding of this concept in the parable of the unmerciful servant stated in Matthew 18:23-35. "The point of this parable is that when people claim to have received the unconditioned and unmerited forgiveness of God, which is one of the gifts of the Kingdom, and then are unwilling to forgive relatively trivial offenses against themselves, they deny the reality of their very profession of divine forgiveness and by their conduct contradict the life and character of the Kingdom" (Ladd, p.113). This parable is a warning to all who do not live out or embody forgiveness in their everyday lives. Christians need to learn to embody forgiveness in habits and in practices that speak of a righteous and holy life led and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Christian "forgiveness is a habit that must be practiced over time within the disciplines of Christian community" (Jones, p.163). A forgiven life will show great gratitude towards God and love towards others because they know they have been forgiven much. This is shown in the story of the sinful woman that fell at Jesus' feet and anointed Him with her perfume told in Luke 7:36-47. "In this account, Jesus' comment in verse 48, 'Your sins are forgiven,' simply reaffirms a fact that has already been shown by the woman's love. She has not earned her forgiveness through the repentance of extravagant love; because she has been forgiven, she is able to repent by showing such love" (Jones p. 161). That is the essence of embodying forgiveness. Life is an outpour of what has been given through Christ Jesus. It is the same mentality the Apostle Paul had when he, after experiencing divine forgiveness, gives his life to Christ and later states, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 7:24-25). I believe this was not a one-time experience for Paul but a life long mentality and understanding of true forgiveness and repentance.

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What is the church's role in encouraging the body of Christ to live as a people embodying forgiveness? "The church is called not only to a ministry of reconciliation, but a ministry of nurture to those within her gates. Part of that nurture includes church discipline . . ." (Sproul, p. 182). The discipline of the church needs to be patterned after the idea that the Lord disciplines his children just as an earthly Father would discipline his own child. It says in Hebrews 12:6 "...the Lord disciplines those he loves." Hebrews 12:10-11 states, "Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in His holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." This is the module and ultimate goal for the church in practicing church discipline.

I believe the church must first encourage public profession of one's faith in God and confession of sins against God. "The pursuit of holiness requires our ability to confess - to confess the praise of God, the truthful acknowledgement of our sin, and the proclamation of our faith. We need to do this both in relation to God and in our relations with others" (Jones, p. 183). The church needs to emphasize the confession of praise of God. I believe the body of Christ has lost the understanding of why we gather as a church to worship God. Often the mentality of believers is that they should receive something from the church or God. They have lost the understanding that the main purpose of the church is worship and confession of praise and faith to God. The church seems to have lost the idea of this public confession of one's faith in setting a pattern of worship unto to God. Also, relationships are crucial in church life. Out of relationships, love for others and fellowship of believers brings honor and worship to God and out of relationships true discipline can occur.

Confession of sin is essential to break off the root of all sin. "Faith requires a continuing self-denial, confession, reparation, and ongoing penitence (Rev. 2:5, 16; 3:3, 19)" (Oden, Volume III, p. 99). In James 5:16 it states, "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."

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Confession and prayer go together. The church must encourage the body of Christ in confession, which leads to prayer for and not condemnation of the person in sin. This imparts the process of embodying forgiveness in the believer's life. The church needs to be constantly aware of the Holy Spirit's leading in a confession and not rely only on the thinking and leading of the one hearing the confession. This is why confession and prayer are inseparable. If one within the church turns to sin and chooses not to live as a forgiven man then the church must do all the more to love and pray in hope to bring that lost man back to living life as a forgiven child of God. "In I Corinthians 5:1-5, Paul enjoins the community to 'hand over' an impenitent man 'to Satan for the destruction of the flesh'; but, Paul adds, they are to do this so that the man's 'spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord'" (Jones, p. 255). The church's mission is to always draw people to Christ and never push people away just to get rid of the "bad" person. Jesus said, "But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). Discipline within the church should always include a readiness to love and forgive. This is the church embodying forgiveness. The church must never forget that they have been forgiven much and not become like the unmerciful servant in the parable Jesus told about in Matthew 18:23-35.

How then do we proceed practically with church discipline? Carl Laney states, "Church discipline may be broadly defined as the confrontive and corrective measures taken by an individual, church leaders, or the congregation regarding a matter of sin in the life of a believer" (Laney, p. 14). Matthew 18:15 & 16 states, "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you... But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." I believe the first step to church discipline is confrontation with the person at fault. The second step is to clearly communicate a means to restoration. This is the confession, repentance and receiving forgiveness as I mentioned above. Just as the Apostle Paul exclaimed to King Agrippa in Acts 26:20, "...they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds," this should also be exclaimed to the one who is receiving discipline by the church. Once the first two steps have been accomplished then the final step of drawing the person back into fellowship and

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continuing to aid in their healing and growth to complete recovery can take place. The Apostle Paul stated in II Corinthians 2:7-8 another module of forgiveness to a brother in the church, “Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.” Every step of church discipline must be covered in love and done always with the intent of drawing the person back into fellowship with the body of Christ.

Being forgiven by God is a supernatural experience that produces a transformed life. “God’s forgiveness transforms us so that we are no longer bound by or condemned to repeat the destructive patterns of the past; rather, we are enabled by God to remember the past so that we can be freed for new life in faithful witness to God’s inbreaking Kingdom” (Jones, p. 184). Of course learning to embody forgiveness is a life long process. The Christian will struggle but the pursuit of holiness is always in sight because of the divine forgiveness he has received. If one receives divine forgiveness the life of that person is characterized by gratefulness, love and holiness. The church is a tool to help encourage and motivate the believer to live out their forgiveness not just to reprimand and punish. True church discipline is characterized by a mission of drawing a person to Christ through love, prayer, and instruction for further growth in Christian discipleship.

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