

Sanctuary Churches

A relatively new phenomenon in our nation is the emergence of what are known as “sanctuary cities” in which people who have committed certain federal crimes are immune to deportation. Needless to say, this has created great controversy among the citizens of our nation. Unfortunately, a similar problem exists among our brethren regarding corrective church discipline.

Corrective discipline is neglected in many congregations. We ought to ask ourselves how it happens that churches that are known for going “by the book” are able to ignore the command to “withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly” (2 Thessalonians 3:6). We might be tempted to blame it on influence from the permissive attitude in our current culture that values “tolerance” over truth. While that may make matters worse, the problem has been around far too long for that to be the real answer. I suspect one of the main deterrents to corrective church discipline lies with the fact that almost everyone has close family members or friends who have become unfaithful and many are unwilling to obey the apostle’s command to “not keep company” with them (i.e., 1 Corinthians 5:11).

If my suspicion is accurate we should be reminded of what Jesus said about familial relations taking priority over Him: “He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me” (Matthew 10:37).

Another deterrent to church discipline is the unpleasant nature of it. Even the scriptures testify that “no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but grievous . . .” (Hebrews 12:11a). This truth is in the context of respecting the discipline of the Lord, illustrated by discipline fathers administer to their children (vv. 5-10). The lack of joy is not only for the one receiving discipline, but also for the ones administering it. However, whether it is the Lord’s discipline, a father’s discipline, or church discipline, “nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (v. 11b).

Even if a congregation is faithful in disciplining one who continues in sin, he is likely to simply seek out another congregation who will accept him with no questions asked. This diminishes the effectiveness of the chastening. Of course, a congregation has an obligation to determine whether any previous withdrawal was justified, but too often no effort is made in that regard. The need and desire for greater numbers causes many brethren to adopt the “I know nothing” approach. Some express the fear that any inquiry would be a violation of local autonomy, while others simply don’t believe in corrective church discipline except in extreme situations.

Though no congregation would likely admit they have become a “sanctuary church,” there is no doubt that there are churches that are known for harboring those from whom other brethren have had to withdraw themselves. Sometimes they are even willing to

accept some about whom we are commanded to “deliver unto Satan” (1 Corinthians 5:4-5).

The existence of “sanctuary churches” has made it possible for backsliding members of faithful churches to employ a clever scheme to avoid any effective corrective discipline. What they do is let it be known that they have “placed membership” with another congregation and shortly thereafter just quit attending, knowing the “sanctuary church” will do nothing.

Signs in front of our meeting places often include the inviting words, “Everyone Welcome.” It is true that we should welcome everyone to hear the word proclaimed, but this does not mean that we should accept everyone into fellowship with us in our work for the Lord. When Saul of Tarsus tried to join the disciples in Jerusalem the disciples rejected him until Barnabas vouched for him (Acts 9:26-28). Later in life, as the apostle Paul, his reputation was such that he needed no “letters of commendation,” like some others (2 Corinthians 3:1). These examples make it clear that the early church recognized the right and need for a local congregation to control who will be part of its fellowship.

Often when brethren move from one community to another we already know of their faith and can accept them without any question, but when they are not known to us we would do well to make sure they are true disciples and have the endorsement of faithful brethren from whence they came. We should especially be wary of those who leave a congregation near to where they live in favor of a church that is more distant lest we harbor ones who are avoiding responsibility or simply evading corrective discipline.

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