



The Reflector

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Gentleness or Sharpness or Both?

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When dealing with those in error, it obviously requires a great deal of wisdom to know how we “ought to answer every man.” (Cf. Col. 4:6). It not a matter of one size fits all. Different people and situations require different approaches. Jude wrote, “And of some have compassion, making a difference: And others save with fear, pulling (snatching - asv) them out of the fire; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh.” (Jude 22-23 KJV).

I, quite frankly, am becoming a bit weary of some brethren, still a bit wet behind the ears, suggesting that many, if not most, of the problems the church faces now is because of my generation’s “harsh” approach toward those in error. If we had **always**, in **every** case, used a more **gentle** approach we would have grown more and had less conflict during the past few decades. The impression is left is that we should have **always** used a soft and gentle tone and **never** used sharpness of speech. It is true that the New Testament is replete with references to the gentle approach – but it also replete with references to a more sharply-worded approach when needed.

For example, Gal. 6:1 tells us to restore one “overtaken” in a fault in the spirit of meekness or gentleness. The word “overtaken” is from a word that means to be caught with an element of surprise in it. It is not talking about the hardened transgressor, but one who is trying to live right as a Christian and is overtaken, caught, or surprised by a transgression. Such a one needs to be dealt with gently considering ourselves because any of us

could be caught or surprised by such a fault at anytime. This person does not need a sharp rebuke because he is struggling to do right and in spite of that he has been caught by this fault and needs to be gently led out of it.

In writing to Titus, Paul commands an approach to a different scenario. “For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision: Whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake. One of themselves, even a prophet of their own, said, The Cretians are always liars, evil beasts, slow bellies. This witness is true. Wherefore **rebuke them sharply**, that they may be sound in the faith; Not giving heed to Jewish fables, and commandments of men, that turn from the truth.” (Titus 1:10-14 KJV).

Jesus demonstrated both a gentle and sharp approach during his personal ministry. He could softly and tenderly rebuke his disciples with “O, ye of little faith.” Then given a different situation with fellows Jews, the Pharisees, he could direct a series of “Woes,” calling them hypocrites and charging them with all manner of sins. He reacted in a way each time that the occasion called for.

To take only those passages that teach the gentle approach and conclude that this is the **only** approach is like taking those passages that speak of salvation by faith and concluding that faith is the only element in our salvation. May we all pray for wisdom to know when the gentle approach is called for and when the sharp approach is needed. ■

Why "Churches of Christ" Differ So Widely?

Sewell Hall

A sign reading "Church of Christ" in front of a building tells you very little these days. Most any doctrine or practice may be found inside. This is frustrating to many people.

Outsiders make fun of the situation, saying, "You preach unity but you are the most divided people we know." They may add, "This just proves you are not the true church." This last statement shows a total misunderstanding of what the true church is, but it is a misunderstanding shared by far too many "members of the church."

How Can We Explain It?

First, many churches that claim to be churches of Christ are not "of Christ" at all. Any church can claim that designation, but only one that truly recognizes Christ as its head is justified in using it. There is no denominational accrediting board that can certify a church as a true church of Christ, the Lord Himself is the judge of that.

In addition, there are churches, claiming to be churches of Christ, that intend to follow Jesus but have widely differing ideas of what that involves. Some, like the Sadducees, "are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God" (Mt 22:29). Others know the scriptures but construe them loosely, rejecting only those things that are forbidden. Still others believe that only those things clearly authorized are to be practiced; but even among these there may be differences as to what is authorized. When such congregations are truly autonomous, it is inevitable that there will be noticeable differences.

Such Differences Are Not New

Differences existed among churches established by the apostles even while the New Testament was still being written. The "seven churches of Asia" (Revelation 2 and 3) provide good examples.

A visitor in Ephesus would have found an old established church that was doing everything right but with a lack of love (Rev 2:4). Moving on to

Smyrna, he would find a rather poor little group that had a bad reputation among the Jews in town (Rev 2:9). Visiting the church in Pergamum, he might well hear a teacher defending idolatry, approving the eating of meat sacrificed to them (Rev 2:14). And if that was not shocking enough, going on to Thyatira he might meet a woman in the church who claimed to be a prophetess and was actually teaching and seducing the men to commit fornication (Rev 2:20).

If the traveler expressed concern about what he had found thus far, he might well be told that he would find things better in Sardis where there was a church widely known as a really lively church. But on arriving there, he would be disappointed to find that, as far as doing what God wanted them to do, they really were dead (Rev 3:1-2). Moving on to Philadelphia, he would find a church made up of good people, but relatively small and with "little strength" (Rev 3:8). Finally, in Laodicea, visiting the church he might be met by greeters at the door offering him a brochure and telling him how rich and self-sufficient the church was; but on closer inspection he would find that they really were spiritually "wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked" (Rev 3:17). At least, that's what the Lord found.

Were all of these churches right because they would claim to be "of Christ"? No! Two of them were threatened with total rejection by the Lord (Rev 2:5; 3:16) and three others were warned of dire consequences if they did not repent. Did the remaining congregations comprise the "one true church?" NO! The one true church is not composed of congregations but of faithful individuals saved by the Lord (Acts 2:47). In spite of the false teaching and immorality in some of the churches there were still some who had "not defiled their garments." The faithful remnant in these and other churches made up the "one true church."

What All Churches Must Do

In John's epistles, written about the same time, we see echoes of the same problems. He speaks of those who questioned both the divinity and humanity of Jesus (doctrine of the Nicolaitans?); of those claiming they could sin without guilt and of some who hated their brethren. There had even been divisions which John explains by saying, "They went out from us because they were not of us" (1 Jn 2:19).

John stated the solution. Approximately ten times in 1 and 2 John he speaks of "the beginning." Most often that expression seems to refer to the beginning of the church on Pentecost under the direction of the apostles of Jesus (see 1 Jn 2:24). After warning of false teachers (1 Jn 4:21) he provides the standard by which they are to be tested. As an apostle he writes: "We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error" (1 Jn 4:6).

We cannot be responsible for every church in the world that calls itself a church of Christ. Our responsibility as congregations is to go back to being the church as it was in "the beginning" and to the apostles doctrine in which that church continued steadfastly (Acts 2:42). As individuals we must make sure that we are a part of the faithful remnant that makes up the "one true church."

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Forgiveness Is a Two-way Street

Philip North

Much has been preached, taught, and written on how mankind, especially Christians, should and must practice forgiveness. No doubt, it is a command, not a mere option. After saying what has come to be known by many as "The Lord's Prayer," Jesus said the following in His Sermon on the Mount: "For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your

Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:13-14). Then upon completion of the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant, Christ also said, "So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses" (Matthew 18:35). These words were spoken because in that parable, the lord of this unmerciful servant delivered him to the tormentors for not forgiving a small debt owed to him by a fellow servant, while he himself owed a much bigger debt to his lord (Verses 32-34). Paul mentioned the necessity of forgiving in some of his epistles (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13). Certainly, it is seen how the New Testament shows forgiveness to be a necessity for us all – not just the best thing to do, nor merely "good advice."

However, like most anything else in life, there is a misuse and an abuse of forgiveness practiced by some, yea, perhaps many, and such ought not to be. There are individuals who definitely frustrate this command! When someone repeatedly wrongs somebody else, either by maliciously committing the same sin(s) constantly to another person, or by simply wronging the same individual constantly, the appeal is made often to what the Bible says about forgiving someone "seventy times seven." That is to say, it must always be done, no matter how many times someone is wronged by the same person. While Jesus does tell Peter that one must be forgiven "seventy times seven" in Matthew 18:22, the book of Luke has something interesting to say on this. In chapter 17:34, Jesus said to His disciples, "Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and *if he repent*, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee saying, I repent: thou shalt forgive him." (Emphasis in italics, mine-PN)

Gentle reader, this shows that the one committing the wrong(s) needs to have a penitent heart! Jesus clearly and unavoidably said, "if he repent." Let the reader please not let those important words of Christ go unheeded. Every effort should be made not to continue in one's

sinning against that other person! It appears that many people tend to “hide behind” this verse, (like untold numbers cowardly “hide behind” the 5th Amendment in the U.S. Constitution!) while they continue wronging the same individual time and time again, and/or carelessly, repeatedly commit the same wrong(s) to that same individual! “Repent” means “turn away from.” It means to make a 180-degree move, known in the military as an “about face.” Hence, the one seeking forgiveness should be sincere in doing so. God demands it. Our Creator does not wish for us to, as the old saying goes, “play upon someone's sympathies.” This is every whit toying with that person's temperament and merciful side! When Paul wrote on this, he said in 2 Corinthians 7:9-10, “Now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance: for ye were made sorry after a godly manner, that ye might receive damage by us in nothing. For *godly sorrow* worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death.” (Emphasis in italics, mine again-PN). True repentance must carry with it “godly sorrow,” and it must, therefore, be “after a godly manner.” Only then can it be said that this individual “sorrowed to repentance,” and thus, truly repented.

Indeed, forgiveness too is a “two-way street,” as we just plainly noted in the Bible. Yes, the one who has been wronged must forgive. Howbeit, the one who committed the wrong doing **must truly repent!** The offender who, again, misuses and abuses the “seventy times seven” command by Jesus needs to correct his heart. He needs to realize – and accept – that the Saviour Himself said true repentance must be felt. To continually try someone's patience and tolerance level is not approved by God. “Godly sorrow” must be in one's heart. Otherwise, how can one expect God to forgive him of his own sins? He need not, for Satan still has that one in his clutches. Such behaviour manifests this type of person to be nervy, defiant of the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12), lacking in self-discipline, and void of true spirituality. ■

Who Is in Charge?

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A lady was driving past a public park early one morning and noticed a young man walking around picking up trash, pulling up weeds, and generally tidying the place up. She stopped and asked, “What are you doing?”

Young man: “Cleaning this place up.”

Lady: “Who is doing this?”

Young man: “I am.”

Lady: “No, no. You don't understand. What organization is sponsoring this project? Who assigned you this job?”

Young man: “Oh, no one. Just me.”

Lady: “You mean that no civic or church organization is behind this? Then why are you doing it?”

Young man: “No, ma'am, no organization. I just saw the trash and weeds and just decided to do it. Would you like to help me?”

Lady: “No, I can't. I am on my way to my club meeting. They sponsor several wonderful projects, I will write a nice check for one of those.”

The lady in this fictional story illustrates so much of the thinking of our day. Almost every phase of our lives is so top-heavy with organization and bureaucracy that it is hard to conceive of just individual initiative getting anything done. This is true of government at various levels. It has affected religion as well. Local churches, especially larger ones, are becoming so top-heavy with church sponsored “ministries” and “committees.” They assign members to one or more of these projects in order to project the idea that this is a really active church.

A Methodist preacher friend, once lamented to me that his church was becoming so super organized that if two of them were to fall out of an airplane that they would not be able to hit the ground until the church organized a “landing committee.”