

## THE PROPER WAY TO DEAL WITH PROBLEMS IN THE CHURCHES

Because the church is composed of redeemed sinners who are in the process of transformation, it is inevitable that there will be problems among the saints. No one can say that they no longer have sin or that they have been transformed to the extent that their flesh, self, or natural life is no longer an issue. Beginning from Acts 5, the New Testament makes clear that in a genuine local church, many serious problems can occur. Indeed, Paul's Epistles addressed problems in various local churches, the most striking example being his Epistle to the church in Corinth. Furthermore, it is no coincidence that the Lord Jesus, in unveiling the church in its local aspect in Matthew 18, did so in the context of how to deal with a problem in the church (vv. 15-20).

The New Testament provides clear guidelines for dealing with problems, guidelines that the co-workers in the Lord's recovery affirm and seek to practice. Problems in the church are dealt with in fellowship, by honoring God's governmental arrangement, and in love with a view to preserving and restoring those who are involved. Those who make public accusations violate all of these principles.

### **Solving Problems through Genuine Fellowship**

The New Testament makes clear that all the problems in the church should be addressed in and with proper fellowship. The problems that arose in the church in Jerusalem in Acts chapter 6 and the church in Antioch in chapter 15 were dealt with in this way. In his ministry Witness Lee also emphasized fellowship as the unique way to deal with problems in the church: "All problems can and should be solved through proper and adequate fellowship by praying together sincerely and thoroughly. Any question and any problem can be solved by fellowship" (*The Intrinsic View of the Body of Christ*, 98).

Those who have left and now deride the local churches, the ministry to the churches, and the leadership among the churches, have departed from the way the Lord gave in Matthew 18 and the pattern seen in Acts 6 and 15 to address any problems. Some have cut themselves off from the fellowship of the churches. Some, having publicly expressed a desire to influence others to do likewise, have become those who promote divisions and are factious (Gal. 5:19-20; Jude 19). Those who have stumbled saints through public accusations have trampled the scriptural pattern of dealing with problems through proper fellowship.

### **By Honoring God's Governmental Arrangement for the Administration of the Church**

Those who demand that the co-workers in the Lord's recovery be beholden to them in addressing problems in the church disregard God's governmental arrangement for administering the church as His household. The New Testament shows that in His household God has ordained two offices to represent Him governmentally—apostles and elders. The apostles labor among and minister to the churches as a whole and appoint elders in the local churches (Rom. 1:5; Acts 14:23). Elders administrate a local church and shepherd the saints in its locality (1 Pet. 5:2). The elders have the responsibility to deal with problems among saints in their locality. Problems that are extra-local, that involve elders, or that a local eldership is unable to resolve may be dealt with by the apostles (Acts 15:1-21; 1 Tim. 5:19; 1 Cor. 1:11).

First Corinthians gives an example of this. The household of Chloe alerted Paul to the strifes in the church in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:11), and some reported to Paul concerning the gross sin of fornication that occurred among the Corinthians (5:1). Because these matters were unaddressed by the elders there, Paul addressed them himself through his first Epistle, both instructing the elders how to deal with the situation and also promising to come himself to set in order any matters that remained (5:13; 11:34). This is a proper pattern for dealing with serious problems in the church. Those who reported to Paul concerning the problems in the church in Corinth did not leave the church, publicly condemn it, and then require Paul,

Peter, and the other leading ones to come to them and answer for the situation in the church there as some are doing today. They have left the church life, reviled the ministry and the churches in the Lord's recovery, and insisted that the co-workers be answerable to them.

Furthermore, problems that occur in a locality among saints are firstly the responsibility of the eldership in that locality to address. As those who take the lead, the elders are uniquely responsible for overseeing the saints and the situation in their respective localities (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:1-2). The elders deal with problems that come to them according to the Spirit's leading and with a view to guarding the saints, their families, and the testimony of the church from undue damage. There is no ground in Scripture for saints to demand that the elders give a public accounting as to how a particular matter will be, or has been, addressed. Public assaults on the co-workers or the leadership in the church are tantamount to assailing God's arrangement for the administration of the church.

### **In a Spirit of Love**

Any problem that arises among the saints should be addressed in a spirit of love with a view to preserving and restoring those who are involved (2 Tim. 1:7; Gal. 6:1; 2 Cor. 2:7). This is not to excuse those who have sinned or to fail to deal, even severely, with serious offenses that may occur in a local church. However, even in a case as serious as the sinning brother spoken of in 1 Corinthians 5, Paul exhorted the brothers to forgive, comfort, and confirm their love toward him when he repented, so that they would not be taken advantage of by Satan, who is always seeking to damage God's people (2 Cor. 2:7-11). We should care for the building up of the Body of Christ and, as much as possible, not allow any member to be stumbled (11:29). Handling problems in a reckless way with careless talk that unnecessarily exposes others' failures damages them, their family members, others who may have been affected, and those who hear. All of this frustrates the building up of the church.

Matters of sufficient severity may require the exposing of certain saints or of certain situations (1 Tim. 1:19-20; 5:20; 2 Tim. 2:17-18; 4:14-15). However, this must be done in a wise way, with a proper spirit and heart, and to the proper degree by the responsible leading ones. Some advocate what amounts to an unbridled exposing of others' alleged sins under the guise of bringing such matters "into the light." Yet in doing so they betray both a vindictive spirit and a regrettable lack of concern for the preservation of the saints and building up of the church. All matters must be done in love and with a view to what is good for building up (Rom. 14:19; 1 Cor. 14:26; Eph. 4:16, 29).

### **Hypocritical Demands**

Those who revile the ministry in the Lord's recovery at the same time they claim to be seeking constructive "dialogue" cast aside the scriptural way to deal with problems in the church as presented in the New Testament. They are like Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem in the book of Nehemiah, who, even while mocking and actively opposing the rebuilding work of the city of Jerusalem, called on Nehemiah to come and meet together with them (Neh. 2:19; 4:1; 6:2). Their disingenuous invitation sought to undermine the rebuilding work under Nehemiah's leadership (vv. 4-7). Similarly, the present calls for "dialogue" disguise an attack on the leadership in the ministry and work in the Lord's recovery. Nehemiah's response was to rebuff their deceit and to intensify the rebuilding work (v. 8-9).

This is not to deny the existence of problems in and among the churches. However, we should always take the scriptural way to deal with problems in and through fellowship, by honoring God's governmental arrangement of having elders and apostles to manage the affairs of the church, and with a heart of love, a spirit of forgiveness and restoration, and a view to accomplishing the central work of building up the churches as the Body of Christ.