



A Closer Look

AT THINGS PERTAINING TO THE FAITH

June 2004

The Forgotten Commandment

An Interview with Ed Smithson

Ed Smithson wrote a book a number of years ago by the same title as this issue. When this interview began, the book had already been out of print for a number of years. So, we thought an interview to extract the gist of the book was in order. Since then, Ed has reprinted the book in an 8 1/2 X 11 format, comb bound. Ordering information can be found at the end of the interview.

Ed has preached the gospel for the past 54 years. Most of his work was done in Oklahoma and Missouri. Of late, he has lived in California and is planning to move back to Texas to be near family.

Tom Steed, of Ripon, CA conducted the interview.

Tom: Ed, you wrote a book titled, *The Forgotten Commandment*. What is the “forgotten commandment?”

Ed: “The Forgotten Commandment.” The forgotten commandment is church discipline. There are several passages in scripture that insist, even command, the church to discipline those who misbehave. The title for the book came from the late Delmar Owens. Delmar preached a long time for the Eastside church in Tulsa, Oklahoma. I was in the process of studying and collecting material for this work, not really knowing I would write a book. In a conversation with brother Owens I was asking him what he thought about it and why the church did not practice it. He said, “Ed, that is a forgotten commandment.” That’s how the title came.

A sincere adherent of scripture cannot deny this command. Paul wrote to the Corinthians when they had trouble with an immoral situation where a man “hath his father’s wife.” The church at Corinth probably treated it much like many in the church today treat flagrant

disobedience to certain commands. He told them, “For I verily, being absent in body but present in spirit, have already as though I were present judged him that hath so wrought this thing, 4 in the name of our Lord Jesus, ye being gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, 5 to deliver such a one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” (1 Corinthians 5:3-5) ASV

It is so plain, none can deny it, but we have “forgotten” it, thus we do not use it.

Tom: Why do you think that church discipline has become the “forgotten commandment” in the church today?

Ed: No guts! I realize I am being a little crude. But I don’t have enough time left to be “really nice” and not offend. It takes courage to be a real Christian and a real leader. Today most members of the church are members of a “club.” Rules are OK but are not to be adhered to without question. The world is too much with us. We have people

in the church that look to their leaders to “satisfy” their “needs.” They want leaders to satisfy their “wants.” Many cannot seem to distinguish between needs and wants.

Too many church leaders, which will include elders, have fed too long at the trough of the corporate structure to be good, effective spiritual leaders. They think the way to lead the church is to “satisfy” people. That’s all right in the corporate structure because you are not dealing with absolutes. Corporate leaders are afraid of the “rank and file,” and leaders with a corporate attitude feel the same way in the church.

The church belongs to the Lord and the Lord makes the rules, not man. Once we get it through our heads the truth of that and realize we are to be saving souls, not saving feelings, the “Forgotten Commandment” will no longer be forgotten.

Tom: What exactly is “church discipline” and why must the church practice it?

Ed: Church discipline is actually the cessation of fellowship with an individual whose conduct has rendered them unacceptable companions of righteous people.

I realize that is not something people like. In fact, many of our own brethren would contend “we are not to judge.” However, such is not the case and a careful Bible student would know and understand it.

Why must we practice church discipline? The fact is, we don’t! It is seldom used. In fact I have known very few churches over the last ten years that has so acted, and only then, in the face of such flagrant sins that they could not be ignored.

The reason we must practice it is that it is commanded in no uncertain terms. Paul told the church at Corinth, for instance, “I wrote unto you in my epistle to have no company with fornicators; not at all (meaning) with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous and extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world: but as it is, I wrote unto you not to keep company, if any man that is named a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such a one no, not to eat” (ASV 1 Cor 5:9-11). He also wrote the Thessalonians, in 2 Thess 3:6 “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which they received of us.”ASV

I don’t know how to make it plainer than that.

Tom: Can you offer any guidelines as to how a

congregation determines if someone’s conduct is a matter over which they must cease fellowship?

Ed: In discipline, as in all other things pertaining to the church, we must draw on the teachings of the Bible. Discipline and disfellowshipping or withdrawing fellowship to many today are ugly words. However, the Bible plainly teaches we should “withdraw from every brother that walketh disorderly.” (2 Thess. 3: 6) Then there is a difference in opinions as to how to determine, and from whom we should withdraw.

I will try to be as brief as possible, but there is a lot of material in the Bible on this subject:

1. Certainly those guilty of immoral behavior are candidates. In the Corinthian church there was a man that had taken his father’s wife. Paul said he had judged this situation as if he were there and they should take up the work of disciplining one of their own. Plainly he says, “in the name of our Lord Jesus, ye being gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, 5 to deliver such a one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor 5:4-5) ASV.
2. Those who cause division are subject to the discipline of the people of God. Paul wrote to the Roman church about such: “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them that are causing the divisions and occasions of stumbling, contrary to the doctrine which ye learned: and turn away from them.” (Rom16:17) ASV. Then he gives the reason for this action. In the next verse he says “For they that are such serve not our Lord Christ, but their own belly; and by their smooth and fair speech they beguile the hearts of the innocent.” (Rom 16:18) ASV. There is a lot of this going on today and for some reason, brethren are afraid to deal with it.
3. There are many that would come under the heading of “disorderly conduct.” That covers a lot of territory. 2 Thess. 3:6-7 talks about those who “walk disorderly” and do not follow the “traditions” he and the brethren had taught.
 - a. For instance, a person who claims to be a member

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of the church and does not attend the services regularly, uses bad language, associates with a crowd of thugs, etc., is doing irreparable harm to the church. He should be counseled, and if he will not repent, fellowship should be withdrawn. How can the church thrive with someone like that supposedly representing it. Many, many examples could be cited to show serious damage has been done by members like that.

- b. A person who gossips and tattles causes undue stress and destroys lives with their tongue and should be disciplined. One of the hotbeds of these kinds of people is idleness (2 Thess. 3:11; 1 Tim. 5:13).
- c. What a church should do is begin with the most obvious offenders. They should always follow the scripture to guide them in those who should be so treated. Caution is important, prudence is necessary and obedience is a must.

Tom: You spoke of the damage that is done to the local congregation when it fails to discipline as needed. What can happen to churches and Christians when impenitent members are never corrected?

Ed: First, people lose their souls. There is something about sin that convinces a person he is “all right” or “not that bad,” and therefore lulls him into a “sense of security.” The longer he goes the less he feels about it until the time comes when he is totally unconcerned about his condition. The conscience is a strange thing. One can engage in such activities so long their conscience is “seared” and it is impossible for them to be reached. (Hebrews 6:6; 1 Timothy 4:2)

Second, it influences others. One reason Paul gives for correcting the person in Corinth was “a little leaven, leaveneth a whole lump.” (1 Corinthians 5:6) It is like the old illustration about the rotten apple in the barrel. If it is left there it will ruin the entire barrel. So it is in the church. If a person is blatantly practicing sin and nothing is done about it, soon others will see that “it is OK” and they will not be as careful to listen to the truth of the Bible.

Third, it will kill a congregation’s influence for good. This is especially true in the metropolitan areas of the world. I have never

been a place for long but that I found out where one could go whose marriage was “not quite right” or where one could go and engage in worldly pleasures and nothing be said. Soon that church becomes the “dumping ground” for all those people who still want the “association” but do not want to “practice.”

Tom: You no doubt are aware of cases where church discipline was either abused or was not administered with the love and concern the Lord requires of us. Unfortunately this has caused some Christians to reject the idea altogether. Can you offer any warnings or “words of wisdom” to elders and churches to insure that they practice church discipline in a manner and attitude that reflects the mind of Christ?

Ed:

1. *Education.* It has always surprised me that my brethren do not know what the Bible teaches about this subject and some of them even believe the Bible does not address it at all. I have always recommended, before any congregation try to deal with the subject they teach the congregation, either by a series of sermons on the subject or by class Bible study. The book was designed for a 13 week study and has proven very effective when the church has studied the subject and when most of the members understand what is being done. If a church wants real trouble, try to discipline a member without the church understanding the subject.
2. *Get the church involved.* Far too many times the “leadership” tries to do this either on their own or on the quiet. It cannot be done. Notice Paul’s statement to the Corinthians, “in the name of our Lord Jesus,

**“Brethren, even if a man
be overtaken in any
trespass,
ye who are spiritual,
restore such a one in
a spirit of gentleness;
looking to thyself, lest
thou also be tempted”**

Galatians 6:1

ye being gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus,”(ASV) (Emphasis mine). Too many leaders in the church do not trust the membership enough. If they are taught the truth and it is explained to them what is to be done, they can be invaluable in this process. In one instance, when it was announced to the congregation, after teaching, what and who was going to be the object of such work, the church was asked for their assistance. The elders asked members to visit these people, talk to them, and encourage them to

repent. This resulted in several responses before the

next step was taken.

3. *Be understanding.* No, not condoning. But these people are flesh and blood, prone to make “mistakes” and sin as anyone else. Remember the caution of Paul to Galatia, Galatians 6:1, “Brethren, even if a man be overtaken in any trespass, ye who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; looking to thyself, lest thou also be tempted. (ASV) (Emphasis mine.) Arrogance not only will be ineffective, it can cause the person trying to restore another to be in danger of losing his own soul.

Tom: With all the “bad press” the idea of church discipline gets today maybe you could address some of the ways the Lord can actually bring blessings to a congregation when they practice discipline in a loving and consistent manner.

Ed: Church discipline, mishandled, causes “bad press.” When brethren get the idea, or read in scriptures what should be done, many times they forge into it with little consideration. As I mentioned before, education is not only advisable but critical to the success of any endeavor and it is doubly so where discipline is concerned.

1. Church discipline properly practiced, will strengthen a church in the following ways:
 - a. By causing the members to think more seriously about what the Christian life is about.
 - b. By promoting more study (the education quotient) therefore strengthening their knowledge.
 - c. By increasing their faith when they see the response to church discipline properly carried out.
 - d. By causing joy over the sinners who have repented because of such action.
2. The church will become stronger in the community because sincere, right thinking people will see that the church really stands for something.
3. The church will assuredly be more pleasing to God because they are actually trying to fulfill “all His will.”
4. Individuals will become stronger because they have actually “participated” in an effort that has brought someone back from the world into the fold.

We must always remember that church discipline must be done with great care for souls, prayer to God for strength and help, and with the idea of salvation rather than destruction.

It is granted that many will not respond, but in my experience many more have responded than have not. The benefits are almost innumerable.

Tom: Would you like to offer any final words of exhortation about church discipline?

Ed: There is a “prevailing attitude” with many that as long as one is “religious” they are going to be fine. I think God did not put anything into His New Testament that is superfluous. He meant for everything to be observed. Many of the problems the church is having today is because it has paid little attention to maintaining purity. It was important in the first century, and is no less important today. I would reiterate some of the points made before:

1. Never, never, never try to practice church discipline without educating the church. The way that is done is up to the local church but it MUST be done in order for it to be effective.
2. Make sure the “leadership,” whether elders or men of the congregation, is “on board” and really believe in the necessity of it.
3. It is one of the most direct commandments in the New Testament and it is puzzling that so many are unacquainted with the concept.
4. God will bless those who follow His word, in this as in all other things.
I believe it, I have seen it come to pass and I know it is true.



Ordering Information

Since this interview was conducted, Ed has put together a number of copies of this book in 8 1/2 X 11 format, comb binding. You can order them from him by writing him at:

P. O. Box 791
Highland, CA 92346

The manuscripts are \$8.00. Shipping and handling included.