

Overcoming Objections to Personal Responsibility

By Brian Dowler



There are many approaches that people take when attempting to bypass their personal responsibility to do right before God. The purpose of this study is to enable Christians to identify, understand, and lovingly counteract objections that are raised by those who do not want to accept responsibility for their actions.

This study is presented in the spirit of the Galatians 6:1-2, which states, *“Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”*

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Table of Contents

Lesson One: The Responsibility of Christians to Confront	4
Introduction.....	4
Guidelines for Confrontation	6
Some Thoughts on Confrontation.....	8
Lesson Two: General Objections and Defensive Approaches.....	10
Questioning Your Right to Condemn or Criticize	10
Questioning Your Worthiness or Place to Condemn or Criticize.....	11
Defending the Action as Not Wrong, or Not Worthy of Criticism.....	11
Accusing You of Misunderstanding or Mishandling the Situation	11
Refusing to Address the Issue, Listen, or Make Changes.....	12
Implied Threats	12
Lesson Three: Questioning Your Right to Condemn or Criticize	14
“Only God Can Condemn”	14
Lesson Four: Questioning Your Right to Condemn or Criticize (Continued).....	20
“Judge Not”	20
“He Who Is Without Sin Among You, Let Him Be the First to Throw a Stone”	23
Lesson Five: Questioning Your Worthiness or Place to Condemn or Criticize	26
“What I Am Doing Is Not As Bad As What Others Are Doing”	26
Lesson Six: Questioning the Authority of the Accuser	32
“This Is Between Me and God”	34
“I Have Not Formally Placed Membership, So You Have No Authority Over Me Here.”.....	35
Lesson Seven: Questioning Your Worthiness or Place to Condemn or Criticize (cont.).....	38
“The Elders Have No Authority in This Matter”	38
“I Am Sure You Have Your Own Set of Issues to Deal With”	40
“The Church Isn’t Perfect, So They Have No Right to Point at Me”	40
“The Closed Minded Accusation”	41
Lesson Eight: Defending the Action as Not Wrong, or Not Worthy of Criticism.....	46
“Spirituality vs. Religion”	46
Lesson Nine: Defending the Action as Not Wrong, or Not Worthy of Criticism (cont.).....	50
“None of Your Business”	50
Special Case – Platonic Cohabitation	54
Lesson 10: Defending the Action as Not Wrong, or Not Worthy of Criticism (cont.).....	58
“The Love Defense”	58
“God Is Not One to Condemn”	59
“The Grace Of God Will Cover Me Here...”	61
Lesson 11: Defending the Action as Not Wrong, or Not Worthy of Criticism (cont.).....	64
“The Good Person”	64
“Being Baptized Will Not Make Me a Better Person”	68
“All Sins Are the Same”	69
Lesson 12: Accusing You of Misunderstanding or Mishandling the Situation	72
“Leaning on Feelings”	72

“Offended”	74
Lesson 13: Accusing You of Misunderstanding or Mishandling the Situation (cont.)	78
“Interpretation”	78
“Why Are There So Many Different Christian Interpretations?”	80
“Unfairly Targeted”	81
Lesson 14: Refusing to Address the Issue, Listen, or Make Changes	86
“I Can’t Change”	86
“I Can’t Change” (cont.)	89
“Refusing to Change”	91
“Refusing to Face the Issue”	91
Lesson 15: Implied Threats	94
“I Might Leave”	94
“Affecting Others”	95
“Backfire”	97
“Backfire” (cont.)	98
Postscript One: What Prevents Me From Being Baptized?	102
“I’m Not Ready”	102
“I’m Afraid”	102
“I’m Not Sure”	103
“I Don’t Believe”	104
Postscript Two: What Are Opinions?	106
Thoughts and Acknowledgments	111

Lesson One: The Responsibility of Christians to Confront

Introduction

The mature Christian has a responsibility to provide guidance to those Christians who are not as mature, or who are caught up in some action or activity that is destructive to their Christianity.

“Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility toward all men.” (Titus 3:1-2) Note that we are to:

- Remind people of how they should act. We are to remind people to keep obedient. This implies responsibility of the Christian toward his fellow brothers and sisters.
- Do this in a way that is peaceable, considerate, and humble.

Galatians 6:1-2 indicates how we are to go about confronting someone: *“Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”*

Note a few key points about this passage:

- The ones who should confront must be spiritual.
- The confrontation must be gentle. Our goal is to restore some one, not to punish someone.
- We must watch ourselves, that we are not also tempted to fall into the same sin is the person we are confronting.
- We are to carry each other's burdens.
- If we cannot agree that this passage is a commandment to confront, can we not at least agree that it authorizes the Christian to confront one who is caught in sin?

The whole purpose of spiritual discipline - either by a single Christian or the entire church - is to restore the erring Christian. It is not about getting even or making us or the church look better. In I Cor. 5 it is clear that the purpose of intervention is to protect the church and to save the erring one from their sins. We want that Christian to be in salvation through Christ for their entire life and to spend eternity with them in heaven.

“If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.” (Luke 17:3) Here we see that we have a responsibility both to rebuke and to forgive, if true repentance is offered.

“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.” (Heb 12:11) In this passage we learn that discipline and brings a *“harvest of righteousness and peace”* - in other words, lovingly confronting those who are doing wrong, for the purpose of helping them to correct their ways, will bring holiness and peacefulness to the church. Note that those who have been disciplined or considered to have been *“trained by it.”*

Rev 3:19 says, *“Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent.”* While this quote refers to God as being the one who rebukes and disciplines, the same principle applies to Christians who rebuke and discipline others. We do it out of love. We do it so that others will

be earnest, and repent. Just as parents have the responsibility of correcting their children, Christians also have the responsibility of correcting fellow children of God.

But what should our attitude be toward those whom we are forced to confront? We are to have a forgiving spirit, as is told in Matthew 18:21-22, “*Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."*” The goal of the confrontation is repentance. If the true repentance is offered, our response should be true forgiveness.

Matt 18:15-17 gives us some guidelines about how we are to approach someone. This passage states, “*If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. 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.'*” *If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.*”

Note some key points about this passage:

- The first confrontation is between two people. Keep in mind that in this passage, the approaches mentioned are in regard to some fault between two individuals. When dealing with a public sin, that has affected more than just two people, it may be appropriate for more than one person to do the initial confrontation.
- The goal is to get the brother to listen to you, and to be won over to the truth. Note that this is to be done in private; it is just between the two of you. If this is a private sin, between two people, there is no need to involve the entire church, at least not as long as the issue can be resolved between yourselves.
- If he or she does not listen, then the others are to be involved, such that at least two or three witnesses hear the testimony. Two or three witnesses are needed to confirm something, as is stated in I Timothy 5:19, “*Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses.*” See also Deut 19:15.
- If the person refuses to hear you, and repent and change, then the matter is to be taken to the entire church. If he refuses to listen to the church, then the discipline of disfellowship is appropriate.

We are also warned in the book of Titus, not to rebuke or approach someone over foolish controversies or menial arguments. At the same time, we are commanded to warn those who are divisive: “*But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless. Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.*” (Titus 3:9-10)

In I Cor 5:12, we read, “*What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside?*” Here, Paul informs us that it is our duty to judge those inside the church. This verse is in response to a situation where a man’s relationship was causing harm to the church – and the Corinthian church was told to “expel” that brother. Clearly, it was their responsibility to confront this erring brother as part of the process.

Paul warns us in Gal 5:9, "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough." If we do not fulfill our responsibility in confronting error, we run the risk that the entire church will be negatively affected.

We read of a situation in second Thessalonians 3 where some people were not working. "We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat." (2 Thes 3:11-12) These people were being lazy, living undisciplined lives and no doubt letting other people support them. Paul gives further instructions a few verses later, in verses 13 through 14: "If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother." Note what we can learn from this passage:

- People who are our brothers in Christ deserve the respect to be admonished as a brother.
- We are not to look at our brothers and sisters in Christ as enemies.
- However, if they do not obey the instructions of the Bible, we are not to associate with them.
- This implies that there must first be a warning (a confrontation) before there is a disassociation. So the purpose of the confrontation is to avoid a disassociation if possible. However, if the erring brother is not willing to repent and change, disfellowshipping may not be avoidable.

Guidelines for Confrontation

I found the following information during an Internet search, which I found to be very useful. I am reprinting it here (slightly modified) for your reading and use. (Brian)

Prepared by Dave Brubaker MCS March, 1988, <http://www.cpt.org>

Very few people enjoy confronting someone else. Even fewer relish being confronted. A primary reason is that our experiences in confrontations have often been very painful. For that reason, most people tend to avoid confrontation at all costs. The result is that unresolved issues fester because no one is willing to deal with them. These "suggestions" are intended to offer guidance in knowing when and how to confront.

When to Confront

Not every issue on which you disagree with someone else merits confrontation, but some do. Not every relationship matters enough to you to justify the emotional energy of confrontation, but some do. A good rule of thumb: When you care a lot about both the issue and the person, it may merit confrontation. A better rule of thumb: When the issue is endangering the soul and salvation of the person or others, it definitely merits confrontation.

Plan the Confrontation

Effective confrontation requires planning. Think through how you will approach the person, what you will say, how the person might respond. The goal is to prepare mentally and emotionally for the confrontation, not to become obsessed with all the possible nuances.

Seek a Safe Environment

The confrontation will more likely result in a positive outcome if the environment feels "safe" to the person you are confronting. Examples of "unsafe" environments: in front of a large group of people, or across from your desk if you are the person's superior. Try to find more informal, neutral or "home" turf for the person you are confronting.

Ask Permission

Most people will respond better to confrontation if you allow them the opportunity to help schedule it. Some personality styles insist on this, and will respond negatively with a demand to "talk about this issue now." A better approach: Inform the person that there is an important issue that you would like to discuss with him or her. Ask when would be a good time to get together and talk about it. The person may or may not respond, "Let's do it right now," but will nonetheless appreciate the opportunity to have input.

Be "Hard on the Issues. Soft on the Person"

When confronting, it is important to be open about the issues which concern you. "Beating around the bush" is often perceived as manipulative and confusing. But dealing clearly with the issues does not mean you also have to be hard on the person. It is often helpful to (honestly) affirm things you appreciate about the person even while you are identifying issues that concern you.

Own Your Feelings and Beliefs

During the confrontation, speak for yourself, not for others who aren't there. It is particularly unhelpful to say things like, "Everybody else feels this way about you but doesn't have the courage to tell you." Instead, own your own concerns through the use of "I-Statements." An example: "I felt angry and confused last Thursday evening when you said that no one in our group cared about you. I care a lot about you and it hurt me to hear you say that I don't."

Be Honest About Your Own Preferences

The general reason for confronting is that we are hoping for a change of behavior in the person we are confronting. Thus, it is generally helpful to be honest about your own preferences, rather than to leave the person guessing as to what you are hoping to see. An example of a preference statement: "I would prefer that in the future you come to me personally when I do something that concerns you. I've found that I respond best when I'm confronted one-on-one, rather than in front of a group."

Be Prepared to Listen

Anytime we confront someone we are asking them to take seriously our concerns. Often these concerns are issues of a personal nature about which the person may feel very strongly. Thus, it is essential that we be prepared to listen to the person after we have shared our concerns. A possible way of helping this to happen: "Thanks for listening so carefully when I shared my concerns with you. I don't expect you to instantly agree with everything I said, and really want to hear your perspective. How do you think and feel about the things I've said?"

Accept Confrontation as a Normal Part of Life

It is inevitable that in most caring relationships confrontation will occasionally need to occur. Once it has, accept it as part of life. It would be unhelpful to try to pretend that it never occurred, or refuse to talk about it later. In fact, the person confronted may need ongoing opportunities to talk about the issues that were identified in the initial confrontation. At a later meeting, you may wish to offer this opportunity. "Thanks again for the way you listened to me the other day when we talked about X. Have you had any further thoughts since then that you'd want to share with me?"

Some Thoughts on Confrontation

Many people get hung up on the word "confrontation", as in our society it often carries a negative connotation. Confronting is not inviting an argument (a confrontation). It is saying honestly and without exaggeration what another person needs to hear. The goal is to help the person improve their actions, and ultimately to remain a faithful servant to God.

We have the ability to choose what to confront about. It is generally best to keep it simple – pick one or two key items, and deal with those. We do not have to confront someone about everything we can see that is not right about the person's behavior. If we do this, we will get "bogged down" and we run the risk of appearing to "nit pick" on trivial matters.

If we solve the big problems, the small problems often take care of themselves. If not, they can be dealt with later, at a more opportune time.

Attack the issue, not the person. When we deal clearly with issues which divide us, rather than attacking the person who disagrees with us, we often develop new insights and even a deeper relationship with the person with whom we disagreed.

When you confront, give the other person a chance to respond. Do not go in with the attitude that you have all the answers. By listening, you can often dig down to the root problem. For example, you may be confronting someone about a lack of participation in the church – only to find out that they want to be more active, but they have health or relationship issues that are preventing this. Digging deep to uncover the root problem allows you to be the most helpful to the person you are aiming to support.

Choose not to argue when you confront. Do not allow the other person's reaction to determine your self-esteem or your willingness to confront again. I have a favorite saying, which I taught my kids from the time they were young: "Do not allow what others say about you to affect how you feel about yourself." It hurts to be attacked when you confront someone out of love. Just remember, the attack on you is usually a defense mechanism that they are using to shield themselves from criticism. Knowing to expect it, and educating yourself on how to deal with it, is critical to your success.

Remember that your ultimate goal is not to attack the person, but to help them. The time may come when it is necessary to “shake the dust off your feet” or to “mark them”, but this is a last resort.

Questions

1. Would you describe confronting erring brothers and sisters as a responsibility? Would you describe it as a command? Would you agree that it is authorized?
2. What other passages come to mind, when you think about the need or authority for confrontation?
3. Is it appropriate to apply Matthew 18 as the guideline for all situations in which someone needs to be confronted? What about in the case of a public sin?
4. Is Titus 3:9-10 a better “template” than Matthew 18 for dealing with public sins? Or should this be applied only to divisive behavior?

Lesson Two: General Objections and Defensive Approaches

There are as many reasons why people do not want to accept the personal responsibilities as there are people. Everyone's situation is different; it is not the intent of this study to imply that this is not the case. That being said, when talking with people about why they are not living their lives in the way that God intends for them to live, certain patterns of responses began to emerge.

Most objections are basically defensive statements, designed to deflect criticism away from the person who is being confronted. Others are intended to cut off the conversation, so that the accused will not have to deal with the accusations. Many of these are no different than statements made among quarreling children - the patterns of defending our wrong actions are developed at a very early age.

When you are attempting to lovingly confront someone, it is to be expected that objections will be raised. In order to be most effective, Christians should train themselves to identify the type of objections, and to understand how to best deal with the objection, so that the person who is being confronted will ultimately be forced to deal with the consequences of their actions.

Approaching someone for the purpose of correcting or rebuking them is very difficult. However it is important and it is something which we have a responsibility to do. It is imperative that we train ourselves to do this effectively. Part of this is gaining an understanding of how to deal with these common objections.

Another benefit of considering these common objections is that it may prevent us from falling into the trap of using these objections when we are confronted ourselves. None of us are perfect; all of us are likely to be confronted by someone from time to time in regard to our actions. It is important that we set the right example in how we deal with our own shortcomings. This paves the way toward having others accept us when we approach them to discuss some shortcoming in their own life.

The normal objections can be lumped into a few categories, such as:

Questioning Your Right to Condemn or Criticize

Only God Can Condemn - "You can't condemn me. Only God can condemn!" This argument is similar to the "judge not" argument below. In this case, any confrontation is labeled as condemnation, and the right of the accuser to condemn is brought into question. Another statement might be, "God is the only one worthy of my explanation - not any man on earth."

Judge Not - "You have no right to judge me", or "The Bible says that we are not to judge." This argument is based on the classical misinterpretation of Matthew 7:1.

The First Stone - "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone." This is of course from John 8:7. People use this verse as a defense against anyone who would confront them with some issue.

Questioning Your Worthiness or Place to Condemn or Criticize

What I Am Doing Is Not As Bad As What Others Are Doing - “What right do you have to talk with me, when you are doing _____ yourself?”, or “He did at first, he started it...”, or “Why are you talking to me, when _____ is doing something much worse than I am?”, or “What about the beam in your own eye?”

Questioning Authority of the Accuser - “You have no authority over me”, or “I have not formally placed membership, so you have no authority over me here.”, or “This is between me and God”, or “The elders have no authority in this matter”, or “I am sure you have your own set of issues to deal with”, or “The church isn’t perfect, so they have no right to point at me.”

The Closed Minded Accusation - “You are being intolerant”, or “You are not open-minded”, or “You are being a Bible thumper”

Defending the Action as Not Wrong, or Not Worthy of Criticism

Spirituality vs. Religion - “I don’t need organized religion”, or “I am closer to God when walking in the woods than when I am here...”

None of Your Business - “This is a private matter – what happens behind closed doors is none of your business.”

The Love Defense - “God is a God of love”, or “God is not one to condemn”, or “The grace of God will cover me here...”

The Good Person - “Look, I am a good person. I treat people with respect, I am a good citizen, I am a good family man”, or “Being baptized will not make me a better person.”

All Sins Are the Same - “God looks at all sins the same, therefore you should not be picking on me because what I’m doing is no worse than what any other Christians do”, or “There are no degrees of sin, so you should not be picking me out for this particular sin”, or “Why are you coming to me because I have several sins? That is no worse than someone else who only sins once, so you should be talking to everyone in this congregation has any sin...”

Accusing You of Misunderstanding or Mishandling the Situation

Leaning on Feelings - “Well, I think...”, or “I feel...”, or “I don’t believe I have any problem at all.”

Offended – “You are offending me by discussing this”, or “I can’t believe you are even bring this up – you are offending me by asking me to even talk about this.”

Interpretation - “Well, that’s your interpretation - not mine”, or “I can’t find anything in the Bible that specifically says that this is wrong”, or “That’s your opinion”, or “I think I am living righteously, and many other people do also.”

Understanding - “Do you understand the Bible perfectly?”, or “When you have a perfect understanding of what it says about _____ then you can come talk to me.”

Unfairly Targeted - “You are just picking on me because this is a sexual sin. There are others doing bad things that are not being addressed.”, or ““You are just picking on me because ...”

- We’re related
- I’m a man/woman
- I am a Bible class teacher / active / not active
- I’m young / old / in the prime of life
- You don’t like me
- I’m new here / I’ve been here a long time

Refusing to Address the Issue, Listen, or Make Changes

In this case, the person being accused simply refuses to address the issue, or flat-out denies that they have any problem at all. The types of statements that you may hear could be like this:

I Can’t Change - “I have always been this way, and I will be this way until the day I die”, or “You can't teach an old dog new tricks”, or “There's no way I can be baptized, because of the type of person I am now”, or “Maybe I'll change at some point in the future, but I'm just not ready now.”

Refusing to Change - “I don't care what the Bible says. This is how I choose to live my life”, or “Well, if I'm going to hell then I will have a lot of good company with me.”

Refusing to Face the Issue - “I don’t want to discuss this with you.”

Implied Threats

I Might Leave - “I have been attending here because I am comfortable here. If you push on this, I may decide to attend elsewhere.”

Affecting Others - “My wife/brother/girlfriend/son has been discouraged that this has been mentioned to me, and this is hindering their progress toward becoming a Christian.”

Backfire - “You are pressuring me. If you continue to pressure me, I will never change. The only way I will change is on my own terms and at my own time”, or “If you keep pushing me on this, it will just drive me further into sin. It is better that I deal with a little sin in my life than fall totally into sin.”

Questions

1. Can you think of other statements which people often make when confronted?
2. Into which of the six categories above would you put that statement? Or, do you believe there are other categories of defensive statements?
3. Which of the above categories do you believe would be the most difficult to overcome when confronting an erring brother or sister? Why?

Lesson Three: Questioning Your Right to Condemn or Criticize

“Only God Can Condemn”

- “You can't condemn me. Only God can condemn!”
- “God is the only one worthy of my explanation - not any man on earth.”

This is often used as a defense when someone criticizes a “way of life” - for example, homosexuality, living together before marriage, or lack of involvement in the church family. It can also be used in an attempt to deflect criticism away from any sinful action.

In this case, any confrontation is labeled as “condemnation”, and the right of the accuser to condemn is brought into question. So, how should you deal with objections such as these?

This defensive approach is best dealt with by using the Bible as well as a reasonable approach of common sense:

1. The first step is to discuss what is meant by the word “condemn”, because this word has several meanings. The “you can't condemn me” argument is effective when used against one who does not know how to properly categorize the different meanings of the word. This is because in the case of one of the meanings of the word, their statement is actually correct.
2. The second step is to get them to agree on which category of “condemnation” is actually being applied.
3. The third step is to use the Bible to clearly show that Christians not only can condemn sin, but that we are commanded to do this! Furthermore, the condemnation comes not from us, but directly from the Word of God.

There are different types of condemnation or condemning:

1. Condemning “to hell”. This is pronouncing judgment. Clearly, only God can do this. When someone says that only God can condemn, we agree that only God can condemn a sinner to an eternal punishment in hell.
2. Condemning someone's actions as wrong. Pointing out the fact that what someone is doing is contrary with the will of God is condemning that action. This is by necessity based upon Biblical teaching. It may be helpful to point out that nearly every law in society is condemning some action as wrong.
3. Critiquing. Passing along a critique of someone's actions that is based on one's personal opinion. This could be in the form of general advice. This “condemning” advice may not be wanted or desired; therefore someone could request that we not critique their actions if they do not wish to hear it. While our critique might be beneficial if acted upon, in this case it is their choice whether or not they wish to entertain our thoughts in this case.

When reasoning with someone, we can agree that we have no place in condemning them to hell. We can also agree that they are free to either accept or reject any advice or critique that is based upon our personal opinion. The goal should be to focus on (# 2 above) a biblical condemnation of their actions, and to build the case that as Christians we are authorized, and in fact

commanded to condemn when we see a fellow brother or sister acting in disobedience to God's will.

Let's examine the scriptural basis for Christians to engage in identifying, confronting, and correcting sinful behavior. As you will see, the biblical authority is extensive:

Recall what was stated earlier about Galatians 6:1-2, "*Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.*" We pointed out that even if we cannot agree that this passage is a commandment to confront, an honest person will at least agree that this passage authorizes the Christian to confront one who is caught in sin.

1 Tim 4:6 "*If you point these things out to the brothers, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, brought up in the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed*". When the passage mentions "these things", it is in reference to false teaching. We are told that if we point out those who do false teaching to our brothers, we are good ministers of Christ.

Luke 17:3 "*If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.*" This passage clearly gives the Christian authorization to rebuke another brother engaged in sin. In fact, this passage goes beyond authorization to command us to do this for the benefit of the church as a whole.

I Tim 5:1, 19 "*Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father.*", and "*Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses.*" Note that these passages do not say that we are not to rebuke or to give accusations, but give instructions on how we are to do this.

I Tim 5:20 "*Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning...*" One cannot be rebuked unless his actions are condemned.

Gal 2:11 "*When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong.*" In this passage, Paul has to confront Peter in a public way, because of his actions in regard to the Gentile brothers.

In second Timothy chapter 4, Paul publicly condemns the actions of some brothers who have gone astray. In verse 10 he calls out Demas, who has loved the world and who deserted Paul. In verse 14, he calls out Alexander, the metal worker, for doing him a great deal of harm. In 3 John verses nine and 10, John calls out Diotrephes for loving gossip, refusing to accept some brothers, and for putting himself first. John goes on to say that he will call attention to these actions if he comes to the church.

Titus 1:9-13 "*He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it. For there are many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision group. They must be silenced, because they are ruining whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach—and that for the sake of dishonest gain. Even one of their own prophets has said, 'Cretans*

are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.’ This testimony is true. Therefore, rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith.” Again, we are to refute those who oppose sound doctrine, or who are rebellious or deceivers. Here we must keep in mind that when someone is acting in opposition to the will of God, they are rebelling against God, and therefore are rebellious people.

Heb 13:4 *“Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.”* At first glance, this passage would seem to fall in line with the argument that only God can condemn. However, let's think this through.

- Purity is found in the marriage bed.
- Adultery, sexual immorality and fornication are clearly condemned throughout the Bible.
- Sex is pure in marriage; therefore outside of marriage sexual activity is not pure.
- If we know that God will judge and condemn those who engage in these un-pure activities, should we turn a blind eye to it? Or, is it our responsibility to warn those whose very soul is in peril?
- How about the case of elders, who will be required by God to give account for the souls of those in their congregation (Heb 13:17)? Can we expect these elders to turn a blind eye? Or should it be our expectation that burdened with this responsibility, they will feel obligated and are authorized to warn those who are engaging in sinful activity?

Matt 14:3-4 *“Now Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, for John had been saying to him: "It is not lawful for you to have her."* There is no doubt that John the Baptist clearly confronted Herod about his sinful relationship with his brother's wife. He condemned this relationship. Would it have been valid for Herod to tell John the Baptist, “Only God can condemn”?

II Tim 4:1-2 *“In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.”* Here Paul is instructing Timothy in the proper work of an evangelist. Part of that work is to correct, rebuke, and also to encourage. An evangelist is a Christian who accepts special responsibility for preaching the word and taking the Gospel to those around him. But, an evangelist has no higher authority than any other Christian. If an evangelist has authority to correct and rebuke, then this same authority is also given to any Christian. We are all to preach the word, to instruct, to encourage, and yes, to correct and rebuke.

I Cor 5:1-5 *“It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.”* A careful examination of chapters 5 and 6 of first Corinthians provides clear teaching that we are to identify and condemn immoral behavior. But the following key points about this passage:

1. There was a man in the congregation engaging in sexual immorality. The church there was aware of it, and did nothing; but they should have put him out of their fellowship. How could they have done that, unless they identified the sin and condemned it?
2. Paul passed judgment on the man, even though he was not present.
3. The congregation was to disfellowship the man - handing him over to Satan, in the hopes that this would force him to see the nature of his sin and return to God.
4. Neither Paul nor the church had the attitude that only God could condemn this man.

I Cor 5:11 *“I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat.”* Later in the chapter, we see that the church is not to even eat with fellow Christians who are engaging in immoral behavior. Again, how can they identify these people and act on Paul's commands, unless they point out and condemn the sinful actions?

Matt 18:15 and following, *“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you.”* I would challenge the person who says that I have no authorization to condemn their behavior to read this passage and then tell me what I am doing wrong by lovingly confronting them. Confronting is just one way of showing someone their faults.

Rom 16:17 *“I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them.”* We are to watch out for those who are divisive, or who put obstacles in our way contrary to the teaching of the Bible. Allowing a person to openly continue in sinful activity while maintaining unhindered participation in the church will be an obstacle and stumbling block to others who are faithful. To watch out for that behavior requires us to see it, and address it. If pointing out the sinful behavior is considered condemnation, then condemnation is clearly biblically authorized.

2 Tim 2:24-26 *“...the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.”* Those who serve the Lord must instruct those who oppose us, in a gentle way. Clearly, to do this we must confront them, and point out the error of their teaching.

2 Tim 3:16 *“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness...”* Clearly the Scripture cannot be useful for rebuking or correcting unless the Christian is authorized to rebuke or to correct.

In summary, when someone makes a statement that only God can condemn, our approach should be to examine the meanings of the word “condemn” and to gain agreement through pointing out biblical passages that it is the Christian’s right and obligation to confront and condemn sinful activity among our fellow brothers and sisters. We can agree that it is only the place of God to pronounce final judgment on someone - thus either giving them a heavenly reward or condemning them to an eternity in hell. We can also agree to focus on scriptural objections to their behavior, leaving behind any personal opinions.

Questions

1. Why are people quick to accept the rights of society to “condemn” through laws, yet quick to reject the right of the church to condemn unrighteous actions?
2. What do you feel is the best approach to deal with one who says you have no right to condemn his or her actions?
3. When starting a dialog with a person who makes such statements, why is it so important to agree up-front on the Bible as the basis for all understanding on the issue?
4. The third definition of “condemn” in this section is “passing along a critique of someone's actions that is based on one's personal opinion.” Does a Christian have the right to give such opinions? Do we also have the right to either receive or reject it?
5. The word “condemn” is often thrown out in defense, because it appears harsh. In our society, we tend to have a negative connotation of the word “condemn”. Why is this?
6. Because of this negative connotation, should we try to steer away from this word? If so, what alternatives would you suggest? Or should we not be afraid to use it?
7. What should be the purpose of any condemnation?

Lesson Four: Questioning Your Right to Condemn or Criticize (Continued)

“Judge Not”

A parallel argument to the claim that we have the right to condemn is a statement that we are not authorized to judge each other.

There are many today who claim that it is an outright sin to judge other people. They say these things especially at times when they, individually, are caught red handed within some particular sin or another or some particular false doctrine or another. They say this as an excuse from dealing with the truth of God's word on any particular subject in which they stand condemned before God.

The passages that are often cited in support of this defense are:

Matthew 7:1 – *“Judge not, that ye be not judged.”*

John 12:47 – *“As for the person who hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge him. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save it.”*

James 4:11 – *“Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it.”*

The way to deal with this argument is to expose it for what it is - pulling verses out of context to make an invalid point that was never intended.

Jesus did not intend to forbid judgments of all kinds. It may be useful to point out some examples:

- In John 7:24, he said, *“Judge not according to appearance, but judge righteous judgment.”*
- Jesus told Simon Peter, *“Thou hast rightly judged”* in Luke. 7:43.
- To others, our Lord asked, *“Why even of yourselves judge ye not what is right?”* Luke 12:57.
- The apostle Paul wrote, *“I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say”* (I Cor. 10:15)
- Again, Paul declared, *“The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment”* I Cor. 2:15. It is our positive duty to judge.
- In I Cor. 5:12-13, we read, *“What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. Expel the wicked man from among you.”*

In fact, we are told in I Cor. 6:1-2 that saints are to judge matters between ourselves; in fact, we will judge the entire world. *“If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the*

ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases?"

John, an inspired apostle, judged an evil man in the church, Diotrephes (3 John 9). Paul admonished Titus to *"Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned."* (Titus 3:10-11) Ask the person who says "you can't judge me!" whether we are to judge the divisive man before we warn him.

It is the duty of the church to *"... keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us."* (2 Thes. 3:6-12). This, of course, requires passing judgment upon the conduct; and disposition, of the person, or persons involved (Rom. 16:17).

The Bible teaches that there is a sense in which the Christian must judge. This is judgment based on the word of God. When we judge in this manner, the word of God is judging.

When someone throws Matthew 7:1 your way, asked that person to move a little further down in the chapter:

- Jesus also said in Matthew 7:6 *"Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you."* Who are the "dogs" in this passage? Who are the "swine" in this passage? How do we determine that? We must make judgments. We, as Christians, have obligations to judge certain situations. Jesus taught us to do this in regard to false teachers, people who are not living morally, and those who have proven themselves unworthy of the gospel.
- In Matthew 7:15-20, the passage teaches that we are to *"...judge men according to their fruits"*. As a tree is known by its fruit, we judge of the character of men by their conduct. It is impossible to watch out for false teachers without making a judgment about them.

There are times what it is necessary to speak boldly and firmly against of those who bring false teaching movements in the church, which if left unchecked would destroy it. This task often falls upon the elders of the congregation, but all members are also instrumental in protecting the church. To fail to do this is to become derelict in duty and faithless to our trust. When someone tries to tell you that it's not right to judge anyone, ask them how we are to protect the church in this manner. How can you possibly point out false teaching or sinful actions, unless you judge a person who is bringing them into the church? Here are just a few of many examples:

- 1 Tim. 1:3-4; *"As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. These promote controversies rather than God's work—which is by faith."*
- 1 Tim 1:18-20; *"Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight,*

holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith. Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme.”

- I Tim 6:3-5; *"If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain."*
- 2 Tim. 2:16-17; *"Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. Their teaching will spread like gangrene..."*
- 2 Tim 4:14-15; *"Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done. You too should be on your guard against him, because he strongly opposed our message."*

To really understand Matthew 7:1, you must look at the entire passage in context. Read the first five verses of this chapter. When Jesus said, "Judge not," he is not talking about all judging. Jesus is talking about hypocritical judging.

- In verse two, Jesus says *"For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."* In the very next verse after saying "judge not", Jesus discusses that we will be measuring others, and judged according to the same standards by which we judge others.
- Jesus then goes on to say, *"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."*
- Note in verse five the Jesus implies that it is okay to remove the "speck from someone's eye", but only if you do not have an even bigger fault with yourself. Rather than say, "do not remove the speck from a brother's eye" – he gives guidance on how to do it!
- Jesus is saying that we should not judge, when we have a fault within our life bigger than the fault in the life of the one whom we are judging. If so, we would be a hypocrite in judging. That is the kind of judging that Jesus is condemning. So to use this passage to say that ALL judging is wrong is simply a misuse of the passage.
- People who are kind and forgiving toward others usually experience tolerance from others themselves; those who are harsh, censorious and critical toward others find that others exhibit much the same disposition toward them.

The same is true of the passage in James chapter 4. This passage is speaking out against slander and other forms of unrighteous judgments and characterizations.

It is often helpful after pointing this out, to bring the discussion back to what Jesus said in John 7:24, *"Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment."* This is the

difference. The one type of judgment - hypocritical judgment - is condemned. The other type of judgment - righteous judgment - is approved and encouraged.

If we take a verse or a part of a verse out of its setting, we can make the Word of God appear to teach the very opposite of what it really does teach. And those who do this cannot escape the judgment of God for twisting His Word (II Pet. 3:16). Let this be a warning to us to not take a text of scripture out of its context to suit our own selfish desires.

Questions

1. Why is the “judge not” defense made so often?
2. Why are these simple passages so widely misunderstood?
3. What do you think is meant in I Cor. 6 when it says that the saints will judge the world?
4. When someone accusing you of “judging them”, are they not passing judgment on you?
5. What do you think would happen to church if elders were forbidden to pass any judgment at all?
6. What does it mean to be “handed over to Satan”?
7. What should our approach and attitude be toward those who accuse us of judging?

"He Who Is Without Sin Among You, Let Him Be the First to Throw a Stone"

This is from John 8:7, in the instance of the woman caught in adultery. The situation is brought to Jesus as a test. Under the law, men were authorized to stone the woman to death. Knowing that Jesus was sympathetic toward sinners and the common people, they want to trap Jesus into either asking for her release, or participating in the lawful punishment of death.

- If he asks for the men to release her, he would be accused of being “soft on the law” or in violation of the law.
- If he participates in her stoning, then he can be considered a hypocrite – associating with sinners when convenient, but accusing them and punishing them when in the presence of the hard liners.

Jesus escapes this trap by asking any who is without sin to throw the first stone. And one by one, from the oldest to the youngest, every person leaves. At the end it is only the woman with Jesus.

People use this verse as a defense against anyone who would confront them with some issue. By quoting the words of Jesus, *"he who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone"* they are hoping to deflect any criticism on a wrong or sinful aspect of their own lives. They place themselves in the position of the woman, and place you in a position of those men

who were carrying stones. Thus, they imply that you must walk away, just as the men in the presence of Jesus walked away. They say that no one can judge, because there is no perfect or impartial judge.

When confronted with this defense, you can use many of the same passages as have been outlined in these sections on "Judge Not" and "Only God Can Condemn". These passages can show that Christians are indeed authorized to pass judgment.

This helpful to point out some key differences between the situation in John chapter 8, and the present situation where you are confronting a person with some sin in their life:

- In John chapter 8, the woman still faced judgment. She faced judgment from Jesus himself.
- Jesus in no way condoned her behavior, or meant to imply that that behavior could not be judged or criticized. He acted the way he did out of mercy, in order to save her life, and to give her a chance to repent and change her life for the better. In fact, Jesus did not even say that it would be improper for those men to pass judgment or even to stone the woman. The decision not to stone her was their choice; not the choice of Jesus.
- Jesus did not walk away without passing judgment on the woman. He pointed out that no man had "condemned" her - a sentence that would have resulted in her death. In the same way he did not condemn her - he did not allow her to be put to death, as was permitted under the law. As God and the author of the law, Jesus was permitted to extend exceptions to the law. But, Jesus left her with the statement, "*Go now and leave your life of sin.*" Note that he judged her actions, and plainly called it sin. He commanded for the change her way of living! The woman did not escape any consequences for her sin just because that the men who accused her were not sinless themselves.
- Today, we do not have Jesus living in our midst to personally handle these types of situations. It is up to us to give "righteous judgment", and to protect the church.

The argument that no one can "cast a stone" because we are not perfect is an invalid argument. If the statement were true, then no one could ever have been stoned in the days of the Old Testament. You could just as well argue that no policeman could make an arrest, no jury could vote to convict, or no judge could set a sentence, because none of them are perfect. The men in Jesus midst were still authorized under the law to cast their stones- it was they who elected to walk away and give up their right under the law.

In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul tells the Corinthian church that they are carnal; they are spiritual babies; they are fleshly Christians. Yet in spite of their imperfections, the Corinthians are told to exercise church discipline in chapter 5.

Every person is a sinner, and no believer is perfect. But willful sin is not to be tolerated in the church. Open rebellion against the Word of God in the life of a believer is to be dealt with according to Scripture. Once again, do not let anyone take a single verse out of context as a means of defending themselves against righteous judgment.

Questions

1. Under the Old Testament law, was stoning of a person caught in adultery a commandment or a right that could be either acted upon or not?
2. Were the accusers wrong in seeking the death of the woman? If so, why?
3. Even though not perfect, the accusing men still had the right to stone the woman. Why do you think they walked away?
4. Why did this progress from the oldest to the youngest?
5. Jesus left both the woman and the accusers free to follow their own choices. But it was actually the woman who he “accused” of sin; the men in effect accused themselves. What can we learn from this approach?

Lesson Five: Questioning Your Worthiness or Place to Condemn or Criticize

“What I Am Doing Is Not As Bad As What Others Are Doing”

- “What right do you have to talk with me, when you are doing _____ yourself?”
- “He did at first, he started it...”
- “Why are you talking to me, when _____ is doing something much worse than I am?”
- “What about the beam in your own eye?”

A common strategy when someone is confronted to “deflect” attention away from themselves to others. This serves to “buy time” by taking the heat off themselves onto some other party. The attempt may be made to deflect criticism to the “accuser”, or to other parties. The strategy taken will vary, depending upon several factors.

As Christians, we should expect such attempts, as these are natural and instinctive, having been learned from the earliest days of our lives, when playing with other children. Think about it; comments such as “She started it” or “Why are you picking on me when Johnny did ____?” are learned when we are toddlers.

This approach applies not just in religious situations, but to everyday life as well. Here’s one example, a little “tongue in cheek” here, but it gets the point across: “But officer; why are you giving me a ticket when some guy passed me like I was sitting still 5 minutes ago?”

As further evidence of the “oldest trick in the book” status of this defense, consider the first documented sin in the Bible - the fall of Adam and Eve. We all know the story - the serpent tempts Eve - then she and Adam eat fruit from the forbidden tree the middle of the Garden of Eden - then they obtained the knowledge of good and evil. But look at their reactions after committing this sin in Genesis Chapter 3:

- The first thing that they do is hide. This is also usually the first reaction of people who sin to this day. They attempt to hide the sins, doing it in secret, under the cover of darkness, or taking steps to prevent others from learning of its disclosure.
- Next, they made clothing out of fig leaves to cover themselves. When they realized their sins could not be fully hidden, they attempted to cover it up. In the same way, people today will attempt to mask over or cover-up their sins.
- Then, when confronted by God, they attempted to deflect the criticism. Look at what Adam said, *“The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.”* So Adam deflects the criticism of his own sin onto Eve.
- Then Eve attempts to deflect the criticism from her onto the serpent: *“Then the LORD God said to the woman, ‘What is this you have done?’ The woman said, ‘The serpent deceived me, and I ate.’”*
- The serpent is at the bottom of the line, he has no one to deflect the criticism on to, so he must bear the brunt of the God’s judgment without defense.
- Another interesting aspect of this passage is that Adam and Eve did not suffer the consequences for their sin alone. Verse 21 of this chapter says, *“The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.”* So, some animals had to die

in order to provide coverings for Adam and Eve. In a way, this could be considered the first sacrifice of the Bible. What was true for Adam and Eve is often true today - when one person sins, other people often suffer consequences.

- Consider the effect of sexual sins on spouses, children, and even extended families of those who commit these actions.
- When one person steals, someone else loses their possessions.
- When a harsh word is spoken, the feelings of self esteem of others are affected.
- What a Christian falls away from God, this affects the entire church family.
- When a person is divisive, an entire congregation can be split.

Pointing out the effects that someone's sin is having on those around them is often helpful in getting them to realize and acknowledge the seriousness of their actions.

When the "deflection" defensive strategy is thrown your way, there are a few things that you must keep in mind. First and foremost, your goal should be to not allow the discussion to become distracted by this approach. Some of the defensive statements may be true; for example, there will no doubt be others who are doing worse things than one in your confronting. Other people may have started the situation. And certainly we are not considering ourselves as perfect human beings when we confront someone else.

Sometimes the best strategy is to acknowledge what they are saying, but then to remind them that this does not change the basic situation. For example, considering the following statements:

- "You are right. There are other people in this world who are doing things much worse than what you are doing. But these people are not Christians. You are a Christian; because of this you have a higher calling. We are here today to discuss what you are doing, not what other people are doing."
- "You are right. There are other Christians who are doing things that are worse than what you are doing. They will have to give an account to God for their actions, just as you will. And right now, I'm concerned with you and the fate of your soul. Let's not get off track - I want to discuss what you are doing, not what other people are doing."
- "It is true that I have my faults. I have never claimed that I'm perfect, and I'm very mindful of my own deficiencies. However, this does not change the facts about which I'm coming to talk to you today."
- "I'm sorry that you feel that I have a beam in my own eye. I will be glad to discuss this with you, and if I've done wrong, then I will apologize and make it right. That is all that I am asking you to do at this time. I'm not asking you to do anything that I am not willing to do myself."
- "Yes, we are aware of other issues in the church. We are also dealing with these situations in a confidential manner. We have a responsibility to deal with all of these situations, including yours. I'm here today to discuss your situation. We will be dealing with other situations at another time."

Note that in all of the above statements, we do not deny or discount their statements. (Of course, we would do that if their accusations were known to be untrue.) Rather, we acknowledge their statements but remind them that there is an obligation to deal with the present situation. We cannot allow ourselves to get sidetracked to discussing other people's problems, and not dealing

with the situation at hand. If we took this approach, then person "A" could tell us that first we need to go to deal with person "B", then when we went to person "B" he could just send us back to person "A", and so on.

Another approach might be to ask the person to clarify the relevancy of his or her attempts to deflect the criticism onto others. For example:

- "John, it is certainly true that there are other people with problems in the church. Does that somehow remove me from my obligation to confront you on this issue?"
- "Susan, I'm aware of some of the issues with other people that you're pointing out. But let me ask you a question. Does the fact that these other problems exist resolve you of your obligation to live your life the way that God want you to?"
- "Dave, if what you're saying about Trevor is true, then you have an obligation to go speak with him about that issue, as Jesus taught in Matthew chapter 18. I encourage you to do that. In fact, I am fulfilling the same biblical obligation by coming to speak with you today. So let's deal with this issue first, and then you can deal with Trevor at another time." In many cases, the person will bring up an issue which they should have attempted to resolve themselves. The best approach in that case is to remind them that they have the first responsibility to resolving the issue. Call their hand; do not allow them to push their responsibilities onto you. If necessary, pull out your Bible and review the teaching of Jesus on this matter in Matthew chapter 18.

If you are anticipating that the person will attempt to put the criticism back onto yourself when you approach them, it may be best to deal with this upfront, in effect beating them to the punch. For example, consider the following statement:

- "Scott, before we begin, I want to make an apology to you. I'm sorry that I let this go on so long, that I have not come to you sooner. I could make excuses about why I haven't done this, but that's all they would be excuses - not valid reasons. I acknowledge that I have not always followed through on my own Christian obligations, and I apologize to you for that. And I really will try to do better in the future."

Consider the above statement. There are times when such an approach will be effective. There are other times when this approach will not be effective, and may in fact put your discussion off on the wrong foot. This is something that must be considered, given the person you are confronting and the exact situation.

- This approach can be positive, in that it can deal with and remove one of their potential objections before they even had the chance to utter it. It also sets the stage; you are demonstrating a willingness to acknowledge wrong, and to apologize for this. When you show the willingness to do this, it often makes it easier for them to do the same.
- However, this approach may not always lead to a positive outcome. I'm reminded of the old adage, you should never began a speech by apologizing for your lack of ability in speaking, as this may turn off the audience before you even begin. The same may be true here. You may want to consider your relationship to the person you're confronting. An elder who is approaching the situation as one having authority over the matter may approach the conversation differently than someone else.

Consider using Gal 6:4-8 to point out that each of us are responsible for our own actions. In verses 4-5, “*Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, for each one should carry his own load.*”

And continuing, “*Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor. Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.*”

2 Cor 5:10 says, “*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.*”

It may be helpful to point out I Samuel 15: 20-23, which discusses a similar excuse made by Saul. He carried out most of the Lords commands concerning the Amalekites, but he did not follow through in utterly destroying them. He also attempted to deflect some of the criticism away from himself and onto the people:

"And Saul said to Samuel, 'But I have obeyed the voice of the LORD, and gone on the mission on which the LORD sent me, and brought back Agag king of Amalek; I have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. But the people took of the plunder, sheep and oxen, the best of the things which should have been utterly destroyed, to sacrifice to the LORD your God in Gilgal.'

So Samuel said: 'Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, As in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, And to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He also has rejected you from being king'.

In summary, do not allow this defensive maneuver to sideline you from the task at hand. Also, you must have the willingness to acknowledge any true and relevant accusation made about your own life, and then demonstrate that you are willing to make it right. By doing this, you set the proper example, and take away their ability to criticize you for being unyielding yourself. The best possible approach is to examine yourself before confronting others, and making whatever changes are necessary in your life to remove issues that you have which may be stumbling blocks to others.

Questions

1. What are your thoughts about beginning a conversation in which you're confronting someone with a problem with an apology, as the one outlined above? One might this be effective, and when might it not be effective, do you believe that this is a wise approach?
2. How can you prevent and "upfront" apology from damaging your approach, rather than helping your approach?
3. Under what conditions might be necessary to terminate your conversation to go deal with some other situation that is brought up in an attempt to deflect criticism?

4. Would it be helpful to "call them out", and point out that what they are doing is attempting to deflect attention away from themselves?
5. What approach might you take if the person refuses to discuss the situation with you until you deal with another situation that they point to?

Lesson Six: Questioning the Authority of the Accuser

- “You have no authority over me”
- “I have not formally placed membership here, so you have no authority over me here.”
- “The elders have no authority in this matter”
- “This is between me and God”
- “I am sure you have your own set of issues to deal with”
- “The church isn’t perfect, so they have no right to point at me.”

In this approach, the person being confronted takes a slightly different tack. Rather than deflecting criticism away from themselves onto others, they question the authority of the one who is accusing them to confront them on the issue.

Let’s approach each of the above sample statements one at a time.

“You Have No Authority Over Me.”

This would most commonly be used when someone who is not in a position of authority (for example, someone who is not an elder) confronts another brother or sister in regard to their sin.

The best way to answer this objection is a two fold approach:

- First, point out that any authority in this matter comes directly from God. God has created laws, passed down to us through his Word. When we confront a fellow brother or sister in regard to their sin, we are pointing out to them that they are in violation of God’s law, not ours. Like Moses was to Pharaoh, we are merely the mouthpiece of God.
- Second, point out that we are given authority to confront our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ when we see them in violation of God’s commands. In fact, it goes beyond authority to the point of obligation. The best way to illustrate this is through the use of select scriptures.

Go back and review the section, “The Responsibility of Christians to Confront”, in a previous chapter of this book. This chapter outlines a solid case for authority to confront, as well as the obligation to confront.

When there is a problem in the church, the church is told that the problem must be confronted. The critical question to be addressed then is, “who should confront the individual”?

If the matter is of a personal nature between two people, then the matter should be handled correctly between them, as outlined in Matthew chapter 18.

If the matter is of a more public nature, and then there are additional options.

- First of all, it should be someone to whom the offending party would listen; otherwise it is self defeating to the process. This should be carefully and prayerfully considered. A person is usually more likely to listen to and respond to someone with whom they have a friendship or personal relationship, and respect. This may not be the minister or an elder.

- In I Cor. 6, Paul suggests that there should be some "wise men" in the church to judge matters of dispute. In cases involving women, it may be that the best approach is for other "wise women" to handle the situation. When considering to should approach the individual, take into account listening skills, spiritual maturity, compassion, concern for individuals, and patience.

In regard to the "authority to confront", James 4:19-20 gives accolades to the Christian who confronts a sinning brother to rebuke him and turn him from his sin.

And we read in Galatians 6:1-2, "*Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.*" Again, note that we "should" restore someone, and in doing so that we are "fulfilling the law of Christ".

It may be helpful to remind the person we are confronting of our purpose for doing so. The intent is not to embarrass them, to make their sin even more public, or to drive them away from the church. As outlined in Matthew 18:15, this clearly shows that a meeting in private with a desire toward winning, not alienating, the person is the goal of the process.

It may also be helpful to point out some logic in regard to why sinful actions must be confronted:

- First of all, failing to do so sends a very bad message to non-believers, who witness the church appearing to condone sinful actions. Failure to confront sin will be seen by nonbelievers for what it is - a weakness on behalf of the church, and a failure to follow through and take seriously the commandments of God.
- Secondly, it is important for the church to be consistent in this. We should not take the position of confronting one person, and then letting another person get away with the same action, for any possible reason. To do so is hypocrisy. Additionally, the failure to confront equivalent offenses equally may open the door for a lawsuit against the church. Such lawsuits are based on "unequal application of the law" when the church leadership decides to pursue discipline involving another person committing a similar offense that had been previously ignored.
- But the most important reason to confront is because this is God's plan. As stated in Hebrews 12:10, "*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.*"

If we ever find ourselves in the position of being confronted, we should be thankful that someone loves us enough to approach us gently, in order to help us steer our way back onto the path of righteousness. As one writer once stated, "If a bill of rights were ever created for the church member, the member's right to loving confrontation and corresponding discipline should be high on the list."

Questions

1. What other arguments might you make in order to establish your biblical authority to confront someone?
2. Do you believe that there are other reasons why people engage in "church hopping"?
3. In what situations is that appropriate for a woman to do the confronting? In what situations is it inappropriate?
4. Is it ever appropriate for a woman to confront a man?

“This Is Between Me and God”

This is another statement that is used to challenge the authority of the accuser to broach the subject. Basically, they are implying that this is an issue of a personal nature, between them and God, and that you have no right to discuss it with them.

The approach and scriptures that you should use here should be similar to the one used with the “you have no authority over me” discussion above, as it is in effect the same argument.

It may be helpful to pull in some use of logic to get the person to see whether what he says is true, that his or her sin is truly “only between them and God”. Consider the following questions:

1. Are they the only ones who know about the sin?
2. Are they the only ones affected by the sin?

The fact that you are confronting them about their sin makes the answers to the first question obvious. At least two people know about it, as you are aware of it.

The real question is that posed as number two above – are others being affected by their sin?

- First, do not allow yourself to be pinned in by this question. Even if they say that others are not being affected, then you still have the right and the responsibility to confront the person. After all, you know about it, and you can make the statement that “your sin is affecting me”.
- If the person makes the statement that what they are doing is not affecting others, recognize this for what it is; a denial and an attempt to deflect the criticism away. Very few sins do not have a negative affect on others. The person’s actions may be affecting their family, friends, and fellow Christians. You can state that their sin is affecting you – as you are worrying about their well being. It may also be affecting their reputation, and how others are thinking about them and reacting to them.
- This way of thinking is sometimes reinforced by those who talk of things like prostitution being a “victimless crime.” This is not at all true in reality, as it overlooks the affect of this sin on society, that many prostitutes are being forced into their lifestyle, etc.
- If their sin is affecting others, then others have the right to discuss the situation with the sinner, as they are affected, and concerned about his or her well being.

“I Have Not Formally Placed Membership, So You Have No Authority Over Me Here.”

This is a statement that will often be made by those who engage in "church hopping". Some people want to drift from congregation to congregation, never formally placing their membership in any one place. They often do this as the "safety measure" - by doing so they feel they insulate themselves from responsibility.

Once again, it may be useful to point out that the foremost authority which they must answer to is God. If they are violating one of God's commandments and by doing so they are affecting a person or persons in the local congregation, then that is a matter of consequence to the congregation – whether or not they consider themselves “members” of the congregation in the formal sense. They are, after all, a part of the “family” if they are worshipping with us. If their actions are affecting other members, the congregation has the authority to deal with it.

Consider Hebrews 13:17: *“Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.”* The offending Christian would argue that they have no leader to whom they must obey, because they are not pay "formal" member of the congregation, and therefore are not "under an eldership". But this is taking the wrong attitude. They are only taking the very first part of the passage, and pulling it out (“I don’t have any leaders...”) to suit their own purposes. They need to consider carefully the commandment to "submit to their authority" and to "obey them". This is to be done to their own advantage; by doing so, they have someone who will watch over them, and take on the responsibility of giving an account for their spiritual walk.

One who refuses to do this by "church hopping" is in effect refusing to work within the pattern that God has supplied, in which there are congregations of his people which are being shepherded by godly men. Their refusal to work within God's pattern does not remove the authority of the congregation and the elders to guard against the bad influences of sinful actions. Brethren who want perpetually to "visit around" from one congregation to another without "belonging" to one particular church are not only hurting their own souls, but are crippling the work of the local church which can only thrive when brethren can be depended on to be present for worship, to take part in the work, and to contribute financially every first day of the week.

The expression "place membership" is misleading to some who do not understand the way in which we are using it with reference to the local church:

- When anyone obeys the gospel of Christ, he is a member of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:26-27; Rom. 12:5).
- The denominational notion of "getting saved" independently of the church then later joining the church is therefore contrary to the word of God.
- While every child of God is a member of the Lord's body by virtue of the fact that he is a child of God; we worship and serve the Lord as a part of a local group of brethren.
- When we speak of "placing membership" we simply mean identifying with a particular congregation so that the elders and members there can recognize us as a part of that church. When Saul went to Jerusalem, "he tried to join the disciples" (Acts 9:26). He

was already a disciple of Christ, a member of the church of Christ, but he made it known that he wanted to "associate" (NASV) with the disciples in that place.

- This is essentially what we are doing when we place membership with a local church.

Additionally, the Bible does not say that we are to only mark those who are "of your own congregation." Rom 16:17 states, "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them." It may be that those who are committing offenses or causing divisions are not members of our congregation, or even members of the church. We still have the obligation to mark those people, and to deal with sin. Otherwise, the church is left wide open to be torn apart by the abuses of anyone which wishes to attack it.

Think of this in logical terms. Visitors to a country are not citizens, but they are still subject to the laws of the country when they are there. Otherwise, the country would be subject to "anarchy" as non-citizens would be free to violate any law free of any penalty. Foreign diplomats who enjoy "diplomatic immunity" may be free of the concern of the penalty of law, but they are still subject to expulsion if they violate the law. In the same way, the church must not be left without defense against those who wish to divide it or destroy it.

Questions

1. Is it a "requirement" for someone to "place membership" with a local congregation?
2. What should our approach be towards someone who wishes to worship with us on a long-term basis, yet indicates that they do not want to be recognized as a member of the congregation?
3. Do we have the authority to "mark" people who are not members of our congregation?
4. What are appropriate ways to "mark" divisive people or false teachers?

Lesson Seven: Questioning Your Worthiness or Place to Condemn or Criticize (cont.)

“The Elders Have No Authority in This Matter”

This defense would be made by someone who refuses to submit to the authority of an eldership. Quite often the argument may be coupled with a statement such as, "Elders are to lead only by example. They have no authority to tell anyone what they can or cannot do".

This argument must be dealt with head on, through an examination of scriptures dealing with the authority of elders. Here are several pertinent passages:

Heb 13:17 *“Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.”* This is a passage that by necessity must be attacked by those who state that eldership has no authority, and that they are to lead only by example. However, the wording of the passage is quite clear, laying out in both the authority and the deep responsibility of the elders of each congregation.

Acts 14:23 *“Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.”* Each church, our congregation was to have its own plurality of elders. This passage indicates that the local congregations have a say in the selection of the elders; men were selected in whom they had placed their trust.

Acts 20:28-31 *“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.”* In order to watch over the flock, and to turn away false teachers, it is necessary that elders have the authority to examine, make judgments, and deal with false teaching. The same principle must by necessity apply toward any sinful action which could cause divisions or harm the church. Does a shepherd “lead only by example” or does he have responsibility toward and authority over the sheep?

Titus 1:5-9 *“The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you. An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.”* This passage primarily lays out the qualifications for elders. However, note at the end of the passage the elders have the authority to compare things that are done and taught with sound doctrine and to

refute those who oppose it. No restrictions are made that they can refute only those “in the flock”. In fact, it makes sense in that “wolves” who come in to attack the flock are not part of the flock!

I Peter 5:1-4 *“To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.”* This passage lays out the way in which elders are to oversee the flock; not "lording it" over the congregation, but serving in a humble and loving manner, being examples to the flock. Many who oppose the authority of elders point to the wording “not lording it over...” in this passage. But note that the same text mentions “oversee” – which by necessity requires authority.

I Tim 3:1-7 *“Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.”*

Again, this passage outlines the qualifications for elders. Does anyone argue that a father has authority over his children? It is true that the father leads his children by example; however, clearly there are times when a father must exercise his authority and properly discipline his children. This is all part of managing his family well. Likewise, his children are to understand and recognize this authority, treating him with proper respect. In the same way, an elder leads by example, yet also has authority to protect the flock.

I Tim 5:17 *“The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.”* Here we see the primary duty of the elders; to preach and to teach. Yet those who attempt to limit eldership to these actions is clearly neglecting other pertinent passages. It is the dream of every eldership to be able to focus primarily on preaching and teaching. However, all too often the eldership must rise up and fulfill their obligations to protect the flock, either from false teaching, or sinful and divisive actions.

This passage also mentions “directing” the affairs of the church. This requires submission by those being directed. If elders lead by example, yet many of the members decide not to follow the example, the end result is confusion, lack of progress, and division. Arguing that elders do not have authority will only lead to such negative consequences.

Questions:

1. Which of the Following Terms Imply Authority?

Obey	Lead	Honor
Direct	Feed	Guide
Rule Over	Shepherd	Decrees
Submit	Pastor	Ordained
Watch For	Bishop	
Accountable	Overseers	

2. Do you believe elders have authority, or do you believe they are empowered to lead only by example?
3. What does Acts 15:6 say or imply about the role of elders in making decisions that affect the local church?
4. Do you agree with this statement? “Logic alone implies that elders have authority over the affairs of the local congregation.”

**“I Am Sure You Have Your Own Set of Issues to Deal With”
“The Church Isn’t Perfect, So They Have No Right to Point at Me”**

These arguments are very similar to the “What about the beam in your own eye?” and “Let he who is without sin cast the first stone...” statements we dealt with earlier. They are additional defensive statements, designed to protect the sinner by putting you in the position of not being “worthy” to discuss the sins in their life because you are not perfect yourself.

The approach to these statements is the same – acknowledge your own imperfections, but do not let that interfere with your right to confront.

In regard to the perfection of the church, it has been said that “The church is a perfect body of imperfect people.” The church is perfect – it is the beautiful bride of Christ. At the same time, every person who makes up a part of the church, the universal body of those who obey God, is imperfect. But even though we are imperfect, through the gift of Christ we are made perfect in the eyes of God:

Col 1:28 *“We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.”*

Heb 10:1 *“The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship.”*

Heb 10:14 “...because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.”

“The Closed Minded Accusation”

- “You are being intolerant”
- “You are not open-minded”,
- “You are being a Bible Thumper”

All of these statements are similar in that they accuse you of being overly harsh and coming down “too hard” on the person based upon what they have done. In effect, these statements accuse you of “making a mountain out of a molehill.” Let’s examine each statement briefly:

“You are being intolerant” – this statement implies that you should be more tolerant toward the person, or more specifically, toward the action they have committed. Thus, the person is making the argument that you are treating their actions more harshly or strictly than God or Jesus would if they were in your position.

“You are not open-minded” – similarly, this statement implies that in coming to the person to address some action which they have done, you are being “closed-minded.” In other words, this accusation states that you are “binding where the Bible does not bind”. It further implies that you should be more “open-minded” – willing to accept what they have done as something not worthy of condemnation.

The best way to approach such statements is to:

- 1) State clearly the action which you are dealing with so there is no misunderstanding.
- 2) Work toward agreement that the Bible should be the guide to determine whether the action is acceptable or unacceptable.
- 3) Study the Bible together to determine if their action is right or wrong.

In other words, you are steering the conversation away from the whether you are being intolerant or closed minded, to how the Bible (and thus God) judges the situation.

When accused of being “intolerant” or “close-minded” ask the person, “On what basis are you making this accusation?”

- Chances are, they will respond with a statement that begins with “I think...” or “I feel...” This opens up the opportunity to discuss the fact that feelings and opinions are not acceptable guides to determine whether God views something as right or wrong. (See Chapter 12)
- They may point to the scriptures in an attempt to make their point that you are being intolerant. If this happens, use this to nail down agreement that the Bible should be the guide for determining the outcome – that if they can use the Bible to prove that what they are doing is acceptable, you will agree to be “more tolerant” – but that if you can use the Bible to prove that what they are doing is wrong, they will agree and make things right.

Without a scriptural basis to decide what is right and what is wrong, any discussion could lead to a meaningless point – counterpoint argument. “I think you are being intolerant.” “Well, I think you are being too tolerant.” This round of reasoning leads nowhere. Calling someone “intolerant” and walking away may be satisfying – but it is like using a gunfight to settle an argument in the Old West. The last one standing may have the fastest trigger, but this has no bearing on who was actually correct in the original argument. Settling things by using the law is fairer than settling them by gunfights.

“You are being a Bible Thumper” – A “Bible Thumper” is defined as someone who “beats you over the head” with the Bible. They may be correct in their doctrine, but their approach is considered heavy handed. A good example would be someone who harshly “dresses down” a new Christian for some minor infraction. Rather than confronting them lovingly and gently, they use their knowledge of the Bible as a weapon to attack the person in a bout of self-righteousness.

Another term that may be used to convey this is to accuse one of being “Pharisaical” or a “modern day Pharisee.”

When such an accusation is made, a good reaction would be to ask them specifically what you have done to cause them to accuse you of this attitude. First, seek to understand why this statement is made.

1. You should be willing to engage in honest self-reflection to ensure that you have not acted improperly or with the wrong attitude. If you find that they have legitimate cause for accusing you of being heavy-handed, then you should ask for forgiveness and then approach the issue with the proper attitude. You should first take care of your own attitude – but then go back to the original issue which you were attempting to deal with.
2. In most cases, this is just a defensive statement – designed to deflect attention away from their own improper action or actions. You must point out that the Bible should be the source for determining whether a particular act should be pointed out as sinful.

Remind the person that you are confronting – that a disagreement over the approach you are using does not change the facts of whether what they are doing is right or wrong. You may not ever agree on exactly how the issue should be dealt with – but this does not ultimately have any bearing on whether what they are doing is in fact right or wrong. Remind them that ultimately your desire is to help them – and you are doing this to the best of your ability.

Do you think Jesus himself may have been accused of being “heavy handed” at times? There were times when Jesus was very gentle – showing mercy when others were not willing to do so. Yet there were also times when Jesus came down very hard on the religious teachers of the day. Read the following passages and think about the approach used by Jesus:

- Matthew 23
- Matt 21:11-13
- Matt 15:6-8
- Matt 16:23

The Apostles and early church leaders may have been accused of being “heavy handed” at many times in their ministry:

- Gal 2:10-11 (Paul, with Peter)
- Acts 5:1-10 (Ananias and Saphira)
- Acts 7:51-53 (Stephen)

There is a time and place for a “heavy handed” approach. This is with those who are hard-hearted, and who should “know better” – and are acting in willful violation of what they know should be right.

In most cases, however, a gentle and loving approach should be taken – at least initially. Unfortunately, when this approach is not successful, it may be necessary to deal with sin in a firm manner – whether this is through confrontation, “marking” someone as being a danger to the church, or disfellowship. These actions are of course a last resort.

We do have guidance in abundance on the techniques we might employ to the benefit of the brother or sister we are trying to restore:

- Eph. 4:26 – In your anger do not sin
- Eph. 4:29 - Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouth
- 2 Tim.1:7 - Do not be timid, but have a spirit of power
- 1 Peter 5:5 – Clothe yourselves with humility toward each other
- Acts 4:31 - Be bold
- Gal 6:1 – Be gentle
- Eph. 4:15 - Speak the truth in love
- 1 Thes.5:14 - Warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone
- Romans 12:15 - Mourn with those who mourn
- Proverbs 16:23 – Let your heart guide your mouth; Be persuasive in instruction
- James 3:14 - Do not harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition
- Colossians 3:9 - Be honest, do not lie
- Luke 6:42 – Take care of your own sin first
- 1 Thes.5:11 - Be encouraging
- Isaiah 5:20 - Do not call good evil or evil good
- Eph 4:2 - Be patient
- Rom 6:16 - Do not be proud or conceited

Questions:

1. What other accusations may be made which would accuse someone who is confronting another as being “closed minded”?
2. Why is it important to have a universal standard to decide the level of tolerance that should be given to a particular action?

3. If we are accused of being closed-minded, intolerant, or heavy-handed, how much time should be given to allow for self-reflection to determine if this accusation is true? Can this be done “on the spot”?
4. How do we determine if these “return accusations” have any elements of truth to them – or if they are simply defensive approaches being used to deflect criticism?
5. At what point is it appropriate to switch from a gentle approach to a firm approach?
6. Can you think of other approaches that could be taken when those being accused make accusations that we are closed-minded or intolerant?

Lesson Eight: Defending the Action as Not Wrong, or Not Worthy of Criticism

“Spirituality vs. Religion”

- “I don’t need organized religion”
- “I am closer to God when walking in the woods than when I am here...”

These statements are used to downplay the importance of an active participation in the worship and fellowship of the church. These types of statements are typically thrown up as roadblocks when confronting someone about their lack of attendance or participation in the local body.

When these statements are made, it is necessary to use the scriptures to show the importance of fellowship to those who are neglecting fellowship with the other saints. One good approach is to start with a study of the meaning and purpose of fellowship.

The English word, “fellowship” is the translation of the Greek word, “*koinonia*.” This Greek word is derived from the root, “*koinos*,” which was a prefix in ancient Greek meaning “to hold something in common.” *Koinonia* was used to describe groups such as labor guilds, partners in a business, and marriage relationships. From the usage, we can conclude that fellowship is dependent on more than one individual. It is an interdependent relationship.

It is interesting to note that “fellowship” was never used to describe man’s relationship to God before the coming of the Holy Spirit to indwell the church. It is an exclusively New Testament, post-Pentecost relationship.

Additional insight into the meaning of “fellowship” can be gleaned by comparing it to its New Testament synonyms. The four synonyms of *koinonia* in the New Testament are:

1. *Philos*, which means “related by love for outward characteristics”
2. *Hetairos*, meaning someone who shares in a common enterprise
3. *Sunergos*, meaning a fellow-worker
4. *Metochos*, a participant

Each of these words denotes a unity which is expressed outwardly. This is true of fellowship but by contrast, fellowship is also an inner unity. This inner aspect of fellowship may be seen in verses such as 1 Corinthians 1:9, “*God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*”

Fellowship is primarily an action word! *Koinonia* is used nineteen times in the New Testament and in addition to being translated as “fellowship” it is also translated by the words, “contribution,” “sharing,” and “participation.” A close study of the usage of this word shows that action is always included in its meaning. Fellowship, you see, is not just being together, it is doing together!

Thus, a biblical definition of fellowship is “a relationship of inner unity among believers that expresses itself in outer co-participation with Christ and one another in accomplishing God’s will

on earth.” It is an inner unity expressed outwardly. It is not just being together but working together to accomplish God’s will.

The importance of fellowship to the church can be seen first in the fact that fellowship occurred naturally as a result of the establishment of the church. Nobody had to come to the disciples and other new believers on the day of Pentecost and say, “You need to practice fellowship.” The Holy Spirit had come upon these people and formed an inner unity and their natural inclination was to exercise it outwardly.

Acts 2:42 *“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”*

Acts 2:44-47, *“All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”*

This working together to accomplish God’s will continued in the church with the practice of a diversification of activities, such as giving to the needy, exercise of different spiritual gifts, support of missionaries, prayer, group worship, encouragement and in other ways.

I Tim 4:13, *“Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.”*

2 Tim 4:1-2, *“In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: ²Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.”*

Fellowship is the indispensable means of accomplishing the God-given purpose of the church. Read the following passage very carefully.

Eph 3:8-11 *“Although I am less than the least of all God’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

The phrase “through the church” in vs. 10 shows that the church is to be God’s instrument in accomplishing His eternal plan. The purpose of the church is to show to the world the manifold wisdom of God – holding God up to the world to display every glorious aspect of His being for all to see. No individual working alone could ever fulfill this plan. So, the very nature of God’s plan necessitates the Godly capacities of many individuals added together in fellowship.

There are always those who wish to be partial- or non-participants. They think the church can make it without them, and that they can make it without the church. However, 1 Corinthians 12 makes it clear that every *single* member of the body is necessary for its proper functioning. Because of the importance of fellowship, no one has the right to amputate themselves from the functioning body of Christ, the local church.

It is interesting that at the end of this chapter, Paul writes, “And now I will show you the most excellent way” – which then transitions beautifully into Chapter 13, his beautiful discourse on love. Fellowship will occur naturally if we have the love we should for one another. If we refuse fellowship, then we are committing at least two separate sins:

1. Not doing our part to fulfill God’s plan for the church through fellowship. We thus render ourselves ineffective and damage the ability of the church to complete her mission.
2. Not showing love toward one another as we should.

This can also be reinforced through a careful examination of Eph 4:1-16. This passage states that God has given us a diversity of gifts and talents, “*so that the body of Christ may be built up¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*” The passage culminates in a description of how this fellowship renders the church effective, in that “*... the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*”

Who are faithful Christians to have fellowship with? The simple answer of the scriptures is: all those who have fellowship with God. Your fellowship with fellow brethren in Christ is contingent upon your maintaining your fellowship with the heavenly Father:

I John 1:3 “*We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.*”

I John 1:6-7 “*If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.*”

Additionally, we are commanded to work together, as a team, in unity:

Phil 1:27 “*Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel.*”

Rom 15:5-7 “*May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.*”

This can only be accomplished in fellowship. The “every man for himself” model does not work in accomplishing these commands.

Paul laid down the bounds of scriptural fellowship in no uncertain terms. *"Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?"* (2 Cor. 6:14). Christians cannot and must not have any religious fellowship with those in false religion or those who persist in sin without repentance!

The practice of fellowship, the outward exercise of our inner unity in doing God’s will, is not only natural but indispensable in accomplishing God’s purpose for the church.

References:

1. *The Importance of Fellowship in a New Testament Church*, Bob Gillam, bible.org
2. <http://www.lawtonchurchofchrist.com/>

Questions:

1. Can we have fellowship with God and with Christ, and not with each other?
2. Why do so many people find it undesirable to engage in fellowship with their fellow Christians?
3. What other approaches might you take to convince someone of the importance of fellowship?
4. In the case of refusal of fellowship, two separate sins are listed above as a result. Can you list others?
5. Is a lack of attendance and fellowship a sin? If so, is this a sin worthy of church discipline?
6. Are there approaches other than the ones outlined above that have worked for you in similar situations?

Lesson Nine: Defending the Action as Not Wrong, or Not Worthy of Criticism (cont.)

“None of Your Business”

- “This is a private matter – what happens behind closed doors is none of your business.”

This statement is often thrown out as a defense, in which someone calls into question whether the action for which they are “accused” should be the concern of others, whether an individual or the church as a whole. When this happens, it is necessary to examine whether, in fact, the action is strictly personal or whether it should be the concern of others.

One way of establishing this is by asking the following questions:

1. Is it public, or private?
2. Is the action putting the soul of the person in danger?
3. Is the action putting the soul of others in danger?
4. Is the activity affecting the reputation of the church (or have the potential to do so?)
5. Does the activity have the potential of causing problems within the church?

As a means of evaluating this approach, consider a hypothetical situation, in which a man who is a member of the church has a woman who has moved in with him, but they are not married. (This situation is the “classic” situation in which the “none of your business” approach is thrown out). Here are some statements received in the past from those who were confronted with this situation:

- “What happens behind closed doors in another man's house is none of my business. I expect that same respect from others. ”
- “I should not be forced to talk about my living arrangements with anyone if I choose not to do so.”
- “I have no idea what the living arrangements are for other unmarried members of the congregation, nor does it matter to me. That is between them and God. ”

Now, in light of this situation, let’s see what happens when we steer the conversation to applying the five questions above to the situation:

1. Is it public, or private?

The Bible speaks both about private sins and public sins and what our attitude should be toward both. In thinking about private sins, there are two types. The first are private sins that are known only between God and us, individually. When we sin in this way, we have the obligation to confess that sin to God. John writes in 1 John 1:9, *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”* Once we have repented and made that confession to God then the blood of Christ forever erases that sin.

There is a second kind of private sin that can be committed as well. This is when one brother sins against another brother. This kind of “semi-private” sin is not public because it was only

committed in the presence of a one or a few Christians. The Bible teaches that when such a sin is committed that we are to handle it in as discreet a way as possible. However, Jesus makes it clear that while our attitude should be to deal with this in a private way, if the person who has committed the sin refuses to repent of that sin, then others are to get involved.

Consider again Matthew 18:15-17, *"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. 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.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector."*

However, in our “hypothetical” situation, you are confronting a brother whose living situation has become known to others. As soon as others know about it – it is public knowledge. The number of people who know about it may be limited – but the entire church does not have to have knowledge of something for it to be considered “out in the open”. You may be the only other person to know of the situation. You may even be a blood relative, in addition to a brother in Christ. But you still have the responsibility to confront – and the brother has the responsibility to listen to you and respond in a Godly way.

We have already thoroughly covered the fact that the Christian has not just the right, but the obligation to confront. If a brother is living in a sinful state, and you are the only Christian who knows about it, then you have the responsibility to try to steer your brother back onto a righteous path. So if he is your brother in Christ, and the action is sinful, then it is not a “private matter” in which you have no business or responsibility to confront.

Public sins, however, are handled quite differently within the New Testament. The first public sin that was committed within the church was that of Ananias and Sapphira, Acts 5:1-11. The great failure of this couple was not in that they sinned, for all men commit sin according to 1 John 1:8 and 10. The problem was that they failed to confess their very public sin in a public way - before Peter and the rest of the church. Had they made confession, no doubt, they would have been forgiven.

In Acts 8 we read of another public sin. Simon the sorcerer was watching how the apostles were bestowing miraculous gifts to the newly converted Christians and offered Peter money for the ability to bestow miraculous gifts as well. Notice that Simon was given the opportunity to repent just like Ananias and Sapphira. However, he did repent and asked for them to pray for him. Simon gives us an example of one who sinned publicly and then realized his mistake and made correction. The result was that he confessed his sin, asked for prayer and was forgiven.

In Galatians 2:11 Paul tells us that Peter committed a public sin. Paul writes, *"But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed."* Paul rebuked Peter in a public way for Peter's hypocrisy. Again in this example we find public sin dealt with in a public way.

Finally, we have the example of the man who was committing fornication in the church at Corinth. The sin in which this man was engaged was a public sin. Paul writes in the first part of

the chapter that it was "*commonly reported*" regarding this man's situation. The remedy that Paul gives for this problem was to handle it in a very public way. In 1 Corinthians 5:13 Paul tells the church at Corinth to "...*put away from among yourselves that wicked person.*" The problem was not that he had committed a sin, but that he refused to admit his sin and repent of it.

We find in 2 Corinthians 2:6-7 this man did repent, but that the church in Corinth refused to forgive him. Paul writes, "*The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. ⁷Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.*" What do we learn from this example? There was a public sin. The man initially refused to repent. The church withdrew fellowship from him. He then publicly repented and confessed. The church then was obligated to forgive him. This is the pattern for dealing with public sin today.

In James 5:16 we read, "*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.*" This is perhaps the most direct passage of scripture that deals with confessing sins one to another.

The Bible teaches that there is a process for private sin, semi-private sin, and public sin. We must honor God's pattern in this regard. God is consistent, however, with each of these situations. If we sin privately and we refuse to confess to God privately, then we will have no forgiveness. If we sin semi-privately and we refuse to confess semi-privately we will have no forgiveness. If we sin publicly and we refuse to confess publicly then we will have no forgiveness.

2. Is the action putting the soul of the person in danger?

Again, I refer to the earlier section on the "Responsibility to confront". If we are aware of any activity which puts the soul of a fellow brother or sister in Christ in danger – then we have the responsibility to approach them in love to attempt to make things right.

3. Is the action putting the soul of others in danger?

Very few sins do not affect others. Even "private sins" known only by you and God may affect others – because of the effects of that sin on your actions. For example, the sin of lust will affect your relationship with your spouse. The sin of gambling will affect your family due to negative effects on the family finances.

In the specific case we are considering, a brother is living sinfully with another woman. His actions are certainly affecting her. If she is a Christian, then this sin is also separating her from God. If she is not a Christian, then she certainly will not be led to Christ by the actions of the man who is fornicating with her.

In this case, I would appeal to the man to be guided by his love for her. If he really loves her with all his heart – how can he turn his back on God and put her soul at danger? Should he not be focused, instead, on leading her to Christ? Would not the best way of doing this be to end the shared living arrangement, as he explains to her that he is doing this out of love and concern for her eternal well-being?

4. Is the activity affecting the reputation of the church (or does it have the potential to do so?)

When two people are living together sinfully, this casts a negative light on the church. Friends, neighbors, and family members see this situation and will make a judgment on those involved. No doubt, some will think or say something like, “Well, he claims to be a Christian – but look at what he is doing - living with a woman who is not married!. So much for that group of so-called Christians!”

When our sin affects the reputation of the church – we sinned against both God and our fellow Christians. By our actions, we have negatively affected the effectiveness of the church in carrying out her mission.

Note: Some argue that all sins are only “sins against God”. If this comes up, point to passages such as:

I Cor 6:18 *“Flee from sexual immorality. All other **sins** a man commits are outside his body, but he who **sins** sexually **sins against** his own body.”*

I Cor 8:12 *“When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.”*

I Cor 11:27 *“Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of **sinning against** the body and blood of the Lord.”*

Matt 6:14 *“For if you forgive men when they **sin against** you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.”*

Matt 18:21 *“Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he **sins against** me? Up to seven times?”*

Luke 11:4 *“Forgive us our **sins**, for we also forgive everyone who **sins against** us. And lead us not into temptation.”*

Luke 17:3-4 *“If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. ⁴If he **sins against** you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.”*

5. Does the activity have the potential of causing problems within the church?

Many sins have the potential of causing problems within the church. Consider a few possibilities for the hypothetical situation in question:

- The sin of the member affects the reputation of the church.
- The church loses the talents of the sinner, who is no longer an effective, working member of the body.

- Members are discouraged over the situation and worry about the souls of those in question.
- Time is spent dealing with the issue by the elders, ministers and other members; this time is then lost and is not spent on other more productive activities to reach out to the lost.
- If the situation is not dealt with, then when others end up in the same situation, the church will not be able to deal with them without being called out for inconsistency or favoritism.

Special Case – Platonic Cohabitation

In the case of two people living together while unmarried, they will sometimes acknowledge that sex outside of marriage is fornication and sinful – but state that they are only “sharing living space” and living together in a platonic, non-sexual arrangement. This could be due to convenience, for sharing expenses, or just to see how they “get along” before marriage. Or, they could acknowledge that the relationship was once sexual, but they have gone back to a platonic situation but cannot afford separate living quarters. There have even been cases where a husband and wife were divorced – but stayed in the same home to save on expenses.

Thus, their argument is that this “platonic cohabitation” relationship is not, in fact, sinful, as there is no sexual activity going on.

There are several problems with this argument:

1. If this is the case, they are placing themselves in a position of extreme temptation. They run a high risk of violating their purity. *“Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.”* (Heb 13:4) James 1:14 expresses the wisdom, *“...each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed.”*
2. Even if this is true, most people will not assume it to be true. The appearance of sin is there. In the case of those outside the church, most certainly would not believe it. And many will see the situation with no opportunity to be told “this is the case” – so how will this look to them? Such a situation damages the reputation and effectiveness of the church, as well as their ability to be a positive influence as a Christian.
 - a. It is not accordance to I Thess 5:22, where we are commanded to *“Abstain from all appearance of evil.”*
 - b. Eph 5:3 says, *“But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people.”* Can those who practice “platonic cohabitation” argue that their relationship lives up to this standard?
 - c. This approach toward righteous living is reinforced in Eph 5:15; *“Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise.”*
 - d. I Cor 6:18 says to *“Flee from sexual immorality”* – can anyone really state that “platonic cohabitation” adheres to this Biblical principle? Are they fleeing from it, or flirting with it?
3. Even if the platonic form of the relationship is true, how will they make it known to the church? Without some sort of “announcement”, how would they ensure that other Christians would not assume they were in fact not committing fornication? And even if

this was announced, do they really believe most other Christians would believe them? It seems that this situation would fall under the “eating meat sacrificed to idols” situation as outlined in I Cor 8:13, “*Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.*”

4. This also opens up an “out clause” where anyone who is cohabitating can just say “Well, we are living together but we are not fornicating” in order to “get the church off their backs”. This renders the church ineffective in dealing with these situations. All members must be held to the same standards, and treated equally – the alternative would cause division and calls of favoritism which could divide the church.

Paul made a practice of avoiding activities that he knew would be offensive to others. Some of the things he avoided were not because they were wrong or sinful, but because he knew some people would have a problem with them. The principle is called "deference." Deference is limiting your freedom for the sake of others. For example, some Christians do not believe it is wrong to take an occasional alcoholic drink – as long as they do not become intoxicated. But these same people may not drink at all – because they do not want it to be a stumbling block to others.

One way of dealing with this situation might be through a careful study of I and II Peter, where Peter makes a passionate plea for Christians to lives that are pure and holy. Consider the following passages from these short books:

- I Peter 1:13: “*Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed.*”
- I Peter 2:11-12, and 15: In verse 12, Peter starts out by saying, “*Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.*” Then, in verse 13 he outlines a pattern for living – one that leaves no room for Christians to be accused of wrongdoing, “*Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.* The reason for all of this is summed up in verse 15, “*For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men.*”
Consider the following questions about “platonic cohabitation”:
 - Does it put you in a position to abstain from evil desires?
 - Does it open the door to people accusing you of doing wrong (sinning)?
 - Does it glorify God?
 - Does it silence the talk of critics, who would accuse you of sinful behavior?
- I Peter 3:16 “*...keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.*”
- I Peter 4:7, “*...be clear minded and self-controlled...*”, and 5:8, “*Be self-controlled and alert...*”

- 2 Peter 1:5-6, “*For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; ⁶and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness;*” The reason for exercising this self control is given in verse 8, “*For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” One might argue that they are in fact exercising incredible self-control by living platonically while cohabitating; but this is not control that makes one effective and productive in their work toward God – it makes their work unproductive because it opens them up to charges of hypocrisy. A Godly form of self control is to remain platonic and to do this in such a way that it does not appear that fornication is being committed.

- 2 Peter 3:14, “*...make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him*”

If you are truly “cohabitating” but not sexually active - can you honestly look at the passages we have outlined here and argue that your situation is acceptable before God, before the world, and before your brothers and sisters in Christ?

So what advice can be given in such a situation?

1. Explain to your partner why you need to separate. Don't waiver in your conviction on this. If they really love you they will come around. If they don't you may have saved yourself a great deal of pain later in life.
2. Put an immediate end to any sexual immorality (if taking place) and take steps to protect yourself from it in the future.
3. Third, deal fairly with the financial issues but don't let a loss of some finances keep you from pleasing the Lord and doing what you know is right.
4. Finally, be sure to pray always during this process for God's help, favor, and courage to do what you must do.

References

<http://www.the-churchofchrist.com>, Kevin Cauley, “*Does a public sin need to be confessed publicly?*”

Questions

1. Are there other approaches that you feel would be helpful when someone states that their sin issue is “none of your business” or a “private matter”?
2. How many people must know of a situation for it to be “public”?
3. What are your thoughts on the “special case” presented above?
4. Do you feel that “cohabitating without sexual activity” is sinful?
5. In such a case, should the church push for two people to not live under the same roof – even if doing so would cause financial hardship or other difficulties?

Lesson 10: Defending the Action as Not Wrong, or Not Worthy of Criticism (cont.)

“The Love Defense”

- “God is a God of love.”
- “God is not one to condemn”
- “The grace of God will cover me here...”

The “God is Love” argument implies that God is such a loving God, that he would not condemn or punish the action being called into question. Therefore, this argument is designed to “set you back on your heels” – after all, how can you condemn something that God himself would not condemn?

It is true that God is called a God of love.

- He is the author of the covenant of love (Deut 7:9) *“Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands.”*
- Rom 8:39 says, *“...neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*
- I John 3:1 says, *“How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!”*
- The entire book of I John is a treasure for those seeking to know about the God of love. For example, *“Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love”* (chapter 4, verse 8).

God allows us freedom of choice. When we make wrong choices, the end result is evil, disappointment, pain, injustice, and suffering. Because of his love for us, God has given us freewill – the ability to either choose him, or reject him. He demonstrated that love in sending to us his son, Jesus, so that through his sacrifice we have access to forgiveness and eternal salvation.

But why, if God is a God of love, why would he subject men to punishment? It is a necessary by-product of the freewill he has given to us. He is a God of justice (Deut 32:4). He has done all he can do, even to the point of sacrificing his beloved son. The rest is up to us. We can either accept his commands as Christians, or live in evil that demands punishment. *“If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the Law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” and again, “The Lord will judge his people.” It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God”.* (Heb 10:26-31).

God is therefore by necessity multi-faceted. Anyone who believes that God is not capable or willing to punish those who are in disobedience is not an honest student of the Bible. Consider:

- Rom 1:18 “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness”
- Paul also wrote in Rom 2:5, “*But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed*”
- Isa 30:18 says, “...*he rises to show you compassion. For the LORD is a **God of justice***”
- But this justice demands that he reward those who obey him and punish those who do not. To do otherwise would be to “pervert justice” as is declared in Job 8:3, “*Does **God** pervert **justice**? Does the Almighty pervert what is right?*”
- In other passages, God is called names such as “*a consuming fire*”, “*a jealous God*”, “*a man of war*”, “*a mighty terrible one*”, “*He that judges righteously*”, “*He that ought to be feared*”, “*Judge of all the earth*”, and, “*the Lord who strikes the blow.*”

Also, the Bible is full of examples of God exacting his punishment on those who did not obey him.

It is true that the Lord wants all to be saved. “*The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance*” (2 Peter 3:9) But the wrath of God will be given to those who do not obey him. As we read in 2 Thess 1:7-9, “*And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power*”

The “God is a God of Love” argument falls apart completely if you take it to the logical conclusion. If this is true, then God could not, in effect, punish any sinful behavior – does He not love all of us? But a system with no punishment for wrongdoing is not “just” or fair. In fact, it leads to anarchy, as we find in Judges 17:6, “*In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes.*” Furthermore, it is violation of I Cor 14:33, “*For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace*”

“God Is Not One to Condemn”

This argument is sometimes brought up with a “proof text” such as “*For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved,*” from John 3:17. Others sometime argue that only Satan condemns us, not God.

It is ironic that some people try to get out of being held accountable for their actions by stating “Only God can condemn”, while others state that “God (or Jesus) is not one to condemn”

We have already shown in a previous chapter that there are at least three kinds of condemnation:

- 1) Condemnation to eternal punishment – only meted out by God.
- 2) Condemning sinful actions in the present – carried out by Christians on God’s behalf.

- 3) Critiquing – opinions or advice – which may not be directly backed up by the word of God, but which may be correct based upon moral principles.

Jesus condemned sin while on this earth. For example, look at the example of the woman caught in adultery, in John chapter 8. Note that in this case he did not condemn the woman, but her sin. *“Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” “No one, sir,” she said. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.” (verses 10-11)*

Once again, this argument can be best overcome by pointing to scriptures which state that God does indeed condemn sinful actions, as well as to Biblical examples of God condemning sin. Condemnation of sin is not a bad thing, but a wonderful work of God:

Consider Romans 3:5-9: *“But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.) Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? Someone might argue, “If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?” Why not say—as we are being slanderously reported as saying and as some claim that we say—“Let us do evil that good may result”? Their condemnation is deserved.”* Note from this passage that:

- 1) God will be just in bringing his wrath upon sinners.
- 2) God will be just in judging the world. Judging implies that some will be saved, others condemned.
- 3) Condemnation of sinners will be rightfully deserved.

Jesus advised, *“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven”* (Luke 6:37) But the scriptures also explain that, *“God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh”* (Rom 8:3) Here we see that God has condemned sin through the law.

Condemnation of sin is not the work of Satan, but the work of God. Satan recommends and encourages sin. He is in the business of blinding us to and enslaving us in sin. But Satan has no authority to condemn us because of our sin.

Jude 1:14-15 makes it clear that God will judge sinners for their sins, *“See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones¹⁵ to judge everyone, and to convict all the ungodly of all the ungodly acts they have done in the ungodly way, and of all the harsh words ungodly sinners have spoken against him.”*

Note carefully the words of 2 Cor 3:9: *“If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness!”* If God did not condemn sin, he would not be glorious! He is glorified by meting out justice in this way. But, he is made even more glorious when people obey him and take on his righteous image – that is what God really desires.

So, where do we come in? Not in judgment and condemnation of people – that is God’s work. We do not condemn people – but we do condemn their sin, with the full backing and authority of the scriptures. The Word of God is what judges the sin; not us. We have a duty to condemn sin and fight against it. We subject ourselves to the same standards as the ones whose sin we judge; *“Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions”* (Rom 6:12)

As God’s ambassadors, we are authorized to engage in teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness. *“...and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work”*, 2 Timothy 3:15-17

You can review lesson #3 for a full discourse on the right of men to condemn.

“The Grace Of God Will Cover Me Here...”

This is an excuse that is literally “as old as the book”, for we can read in Jude 1:4, *“For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.”*

Many people are sadly mistaken that as long as they are good people who accept Christ as the Son of God, and live a “decent” life, that the grace of God will cover their sins and they will escape punishment. They forget the warning of Jesus in Matthew 7:21-23, *“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”*

Much of this thinking is a by-product of the incorrect teaching about grace by many religious groups, which leads to un-biblical conclusions, such as the “once saved, always saved” doctrine. This is a comforting doctrine, because it leads people to believe that they cannot lose their salvation. However, there are many passages in the New Testament which clearly indicate that Christians may sin so as to fall from grace, such as the book of I John; Galatians 5:4; Hebrews 6:4-6; Hebrews 10:26; and 2 Peter 2:20-22.

It is not the place of this study to refute this doctrine; that can be done elsewhere. Rather, we are only pointing out that this false doctrine is used as an excuse by some to remain sinning when they should be striving for perfection.

Consider Rom 6:1-3, *“What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?”* This passage clearly teaches that we cannot fall back on the grace of God to cover up sins which we willfully

commit. We are to die to sins, and not live in them any longer. As we read a little later in verse 12, *“Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires.”*

In fact, it is specifically because we are under God’s grace that we are called to cease from sinning! In verse 14 of this chapter, we read, *“For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.”* The conclusion of the chapter, in verses 22-23, sums it up beautifully, *“But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

We are told in Gal 5:3, *“You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature”*

A similar passage is I Peter 2:16; *“Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God”*

Rather than hiding under the umbrella of grace, we should instead be fearfully striving to flee from all sins, as we read in Heb 10:26-27; *“If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.”*

Real grace does not “cover up” sin – it is productive in accomplishing good works! *“But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.”* (I Cor 15:10)

Questions

1. If God is a God of love, why does he subject us to punishment?
2. What are some additional ways you might approach talking to someone who believes that God will not punish them – or who does not believe in Hell?
3. Is it necessary for God to provide punishment? Why?
4. What are three types of condemnation?
5. What does it mean in John 3:17 when it states, “God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world...”?
6. Is there a difference between condemning sin and condemning a person?
7. Does the grace of God cover all sins? If not, then what sins will be forgiven by grace?
8. Are there approaches other than the ones outlined above that have worked for you in similar situations?

Lesson 11: Defending the Action as Not Wrong, or Not Worthy of Criticism (cont.)

“The Good Person”

- “Look, I am a good person. I treat people with respect, I am a good citizen, and I am a good family man.”

This is another excuse offered up by those who are often genuinely religious, believing in God, and who are living moral lives – but who have either not obeyed the gospel or who are not in fellowship with the local church family.

First and foremost, do not doubt what they are saying. It is very likely that they are indeed good people – and you should start by commending them for living moral and upright lives.

One approach to dealing with such people is to get them to confirm several Bible “truths”.

First, it may be helpful to point out that the reason so many people who are not Christians live morally – is because God has placed in each of us a moral code, so that we can tell right from wrong. This can be pointed out in Romans 1:18-20, *“The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.”*

Rom 2:14-16 states, *“...(Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.) This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.”*

2 Cor 5:10-12 states, *“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad. Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience. We are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart.”*

Second, point out to them that God wants all people to go to heaven. 2 Peter 3:9 says, *“The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”* We know that John 3:16 states, *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son,^[a] that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*

This naturally leads into the question, “What must I do to be saved?” Ultimately, you need to steer them to admit that the only basis for knowing that we are saved is the Word of God.

Consider the following conversation:

“Karen – I am so glad that you are open to discussing religion with me. Perhaps it is best if we start with some very basic questions.”

“Ok – that would be fine.”

“Good. First, let’s establish a few baselines. Do you believe in God?”

“Yes – of course I do.”

“I’m sure you do! Do you believe that the Bible is the word of God?”

“Yes – I do. But I must admit I don’t spend as much time reading it as I should.”

“Well – you are certainly not alone there. Very few of us really spend time with God’s word as we should. Karen, why do you think God gave us the Bible?”

“Well, I guess it is his way of talking with us. You know – telling us about himself, and how we should live our lives.”

“So you would agree that the Bible is God’s instruction book for us – to show us how to live our lives?”

“Yes – I would agree with that.”

“Do you believe that Jesus was the Son of God, and that he came to earth to save men from their sins?”

“Yes – I believe that. My mother taught that to me from the time I was child.”

“That is good. We now have a solid basis on which to discuss things. Karen, are you in a saved condition? If you died tonight, would you go to heaven?”

“Yes, I believe that I am in a saved condition.”

“Upon what basis do you believe you are saved?”

“Well, I am a morally upright person, I live a good life, I take care of my family, and I am a good person. I know I don’t go to church very often – but I still feel close to God somehow. I think God will judge me as having lived a good life.”

“Karen – I have known you for many years, and I have seen how you live your life. And I agree that you are a very good person. I am so glad we are neighbors. But I want to discuss this in a little more detail, because it is so important. So – it seems to me that your basis for believing that you are saved is basically your own feelings?”

“Yes – I suppose you could say that.”

“Here is my concern. How do you know that your feelings are right? Isn’t it possible that someone who is not living the life that God wants them to could think they are saved – that they are ‘good enough’ - when they are not?”

“Well, I suppose that could happen... I just don’t feel it applies to me.”

“I agree with you that this can happen. In fact, in the New Testament there are several examples of good people who thought they were living a righteous life – but who found out that there was more to the story. They had to make changes to bring themselves into a saved condition. In fact, the Bible teaches that no responsible person is “good enough” to go to heaven.

Look at what it says in the book Romans, Chapter 3, verse 10 and verse 23. As God views us, *‘there is none righteous, no not one. . . for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God.’* Did you know that when we sin that separates us from God?”

“Well – I guess I knew that. But just because we make a few small sins here and there, does that really make us sinners? I mean, it’s not like I murdered anyone, or that I am an evil person.”

“Karen – we know you are not an evil person. But remember what is says here – all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. That means we must be saved from our sins. The question then becomes how we are saved from our sins. But before we go there – I want to come back to our discussion about being a good person. There is one in particular I would like to study with you – his name was Cornelius. Have you heard of him?”

“Yes – wasn’t he a soldier or something?”

“That’s right – he was a Roman Centurion – that means he was the captain of 100 men. We can read about him in the book of Acts, Chapter 10. Look at what is says in verse 2 – he was a devout man, he feared God, he gave alms to the people, and he prayed continually. Does he sound like a good person?”

“Yes – he does.”

“Look at how he is described by his own servants and one of his soldiers in verse 22 – they say he is a just man, who fears God, and has a good reputation. You’re right – he was a good man. Because God saw that he was a "good man," He sent His apostle Peter to Cornelius to preach to him the Gospel of Jesus Christ so that Cornelius and his family could be saved.”

We will end the imaginary conversation here – but the discussion is off to a good start. Using Acts 10 as a launching point, you can point out the following items:

- An angel of God commanded Cornelius to send for Peter (verses 1-8)
- Before he departs, Peter has a vision which confirms that God wants all people to be saved – both Jews and Gentiles (9-16)
- Peter travels to Caesarea to visit Cornelius and his household (17-23)
- Cornelius was acknowledged as a good man whose prayers and alms were noticed by God (24-33)
- Peter preaches that we are all saved through Jesus Christ (34-43)
- The Holy Spirit comes upon Cornelius and his household. This special event proved to those present that God was accepting Gentiles into the church. (44-46)
- Cornelius and his household were baptized (47-48)

Cornelius was not saved because he was a good man - he was saved because he heard the Gospel, he believed in Christ, he repented of his sin, was baptized for remission of his sin, and he obeyed God.

The Bible does NOT teach that the good people of all churches will be saved. In the Day of Judgment many who thought they were saved will be lost (Matthew 7:22-23). Salvation is only in Christ (2 Timothy 2:10), in His body, the church (Ephesians 1:22-23).

The Bible teaches that one can never be good enough to be saved by his own goodness. If people could be saved by their good deeds, then it would not have been necessary for Christ to die for our sins. The Apostle Paul wrote: *“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast”* (Ephesians 2:8,9).

Paul also wrote: *“For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the*

ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:6-8).

Even the very best people, who have lived long enough to know the difference between right and wrong, have sinned. The Bible says: *“What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks, that they are all under sin. As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one. . . . For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:9,10,23).*

The point of your study should be to show that it is not enough to be a good person. God demands more from us to be in obedience to him.

Other examples include:

- Saul (Paul), who in Acts 23:1 was living “in good conscience” – but he was persecuting the church in his zeal toward God. The story of his conversion can be found in Acts 9, and again in Acts 22.
- In Acts 19:1-7, we find some disciples of Jesus who are living good lives in Ephesus. They were good men. But we find out that they had not received the proper baptism. This situation required that they be taught properly – and when they obeyed and were baptized God confirmed them through the Holy Spirit.
- Apollos was eloquent, and “mighty in the scriptures”. He taught fervently the things of the Lord – but he also only knew the baptism of John. He was a good man. But Aquila and Priscilla took him aside, and explained the word of God to him more accurately. He then no doubt received the proper baptism, like the disciples in Ephesus, and became a great help to the church in Achaia.

Will all good people be saved? The answer is “no,” for even the best people have sinned and just one sin can keep a person out of heaven. John wrote, *“But there shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life” (Revelation 21:27).* The only way to remove sin is by the blood of Jesus Christ (Revelation 1:5). This is done in our obedience to the gospel of Jesus Christ. We read in Acts 22:16, *“And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.”*

All good people will not be saved. Neither will all religious people be saved. It is not enough to be religious, but one must be right religiously. Jesus said, *“Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted” (Matthew 15:13).* He also said: *“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven” (Matthew 7:21).*

Not all good people will be saved. Those who will be saved are those who humbly submit to our Lord Jesus Christ in obedience to His gospel and who ever after live for Him doing His Will. *“...though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him.” (Hebrews 5:8,9).*

We leave the discussion here. The basic point should be to get the person with whom you are studying to agree that being a good person is admirable – but that alone is not enough to ensure salvation. Feelings cannot be trusted – we can only know we are saved when we know God’s desire for us, and obey what he has commanded. Once that basis is agreed upon, the next logical step is to study God’s plan for salvation, leading them toward accepting the gospel.

“Being Baptized Will Not Make Me a Better Person”

This is sometimes offered up as a reason to not become baptized. In some cases, it may be just an excuse. However, it is also possible that the person feels inadequate – not worthy of salvation.

The wrong approach in this situation would be to argue with the person. After all, what they are saying is essentially correct. The problem is, what they are saying is missing the point – baptism does not have the purpose of making you better - it has the express purpose of making you saved.

Even though Jesus Christ was perfect in all His ways, He nevertheless set the example for His disciples (present and future) by being baptized by his cousin John.

It has been said that the church is a perfect body of imperfect believers. All of us are sinners – both before and after we are baptized. The difference is that if we are in the body of Christ (obtained through baptism) then we can have these sins forgiven and washed away.

There is no command that we reach a certain level of spiritual perfection or proficiency before we are baptized. Rather, God asks only that we believe, that we repent of our sins (which involves a genuine intent to move away from sin), we confess Christ as the Son of God, and be baptized to gain salvation.

You might take the approach of acknowledging what the person is saying – and apply it to your self:

“Phil, you are 100 percent right. After all, being baptized did not make me a better person either. But, being baptized allowed me to become a better person since that time. After all, it was when I was baptized that I had my sins forgiven, that I became saved, and I received God’s gift of the Holy Spirit, which strengthens me in my daily battle.

Looking back on it, baptism itself did not make me a better person – but it did make me a saved person. And in this saved condition, in my communication with God and in fellowship with other Christians, I have been able to become a better person.”

“All Sins Are the Same”

- "God looks at all sins the same, therefore you should not be picking on me because what I'm doing is no worse than what any other Christian churches do. There are no degrees of sin"
- “Why are you coming to me because I have several sins? That is no worse than someone else who only sins once, so you should be talking to everyone in this congregation has any sin...”

This argument is sometimes made in an attempt to deflect criticism; it is in reality a subtle variation of the “remove the beam from your own eye” argument. When someone argues that their sin is no worse than others, or that we are wrongly focused on them, they are attempting to separate themselves from justifiable criticism.

At this point, it may be helpful to review the comments made when dealing with the “Beam in your own eye” argument. It is also appropriate to acknowledge that everyone is a sinner; if we could not deal with any one particular sin until our own faults or the faults of others were fully removed, then no sin would ever be dealt with.

In this case, it is good to gently remind the person that the purpose of your discussion is out of concern for them; that you are there to deal with a specific issue, and other issues will be dealt with in proper time.

It is then necessary to deal with the “all sins are the same” argument. While it is true that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God”, it is not true that all sins are looked upon equally by God. There are several passages which can be used to make this point.

Jesus answered, *"You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin."* - John 19:11

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former” – Matt 23:23

“But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea” – Matt 18:6

“It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife.” - 1 Cor 5:1. Sexual sins, such as fornication, adultery, lying with a beast, and homosexuality, are among the worst of sins. Fornication usually finds its way to the top of several lists of detestable sins in the Bible. One reason for this is explained in I Cor 6:18. *“Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body.”* – I Cor 6:18

"If a man commits adultery with another man's wife—with the wife of his neighbor—both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death" – Lev 20:10 [This chapter lists several sins which were punishable by death in the Old Testament times. If all sins were the same in the eyes of God, then logic would dictate that the punishment for all sins would be to have every sinner, for any cause, put to death. The last man standing would have to commit suicide.]

Rom 1:18-34 – This passage teaches that one can become so sinful, with the heart so hardened against righteousness, that God gives you up to total depravity

I John 5:16-17 – There are many sins, but not all lead to death. *"If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that. All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death."*

Rev 22:18-19 – It is a terrible sin to purposefully misconstrue the Word of God. *"I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book."*

Mark 3:28-29 *"I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin"*

Are there degrees of sin? The answer is yes. Just because your brother or sister in Christ has some sin in their life, does not absolve you of responsibility to deal with your own sins. All sin separates us from God; but some sins are more detestable to him. Additionally, different sins have different consequences. Some sins are minor and may affect primarily the one sinning. Other sins have the potential to split families or divide the church. But any sin which puts ones soul in danger is a viable candidate for loving intervention.

Questions

1. Can you think of other effective arguments that could be used to persuade someone that being "good" is not enough?
2. Who are some "good people" that you know who have never obeyed the gospel? Have you ever discussed this with them? What was the result?
3. Have you ever felt remorse for not discussing the gospel with someone who died? What held you back?
4. If all sin separates us from God, how can one sin be worse than the other?
5. Why does God seem to hold sexual sins as an "especially grave" offense?
6. Are there approaches other than the ones outlined above that have worked for you in similar situations?

Lesson 12: Accusing You of Misunderstanding or Mishandling the Situation

“Leaning on Feelings”

- “Well, I think....”
- “I feel...”
- “I don’t believe I have any problem at all.”

At this juncture, we invite the reader to review the section on “What Are Opinions”, as this may be useful in understanding how opinions work. With this understanding, you can address the difference between opinion and facts.

The obvious problem with statements that begin with “I think” or “I feel” is that thoughts, opinions and beliefs are not viable tools for discerning the will of God. After all, there are many thousands of religious beliefs and practices, many of whom are in contradiction to each other. Yet in each group, you will find people who honestly feel they are right.

The Apostle Paul was zealous, a “Pharisee of Pharisees”, living a passionate life of religious fervor. Yet this fervor drove him to persecute Christians, because what he thought was right was not right. But he believed it with his whole heart; until the Lord made it clear on the road to Damascus that he was actually persecuting God.

Thrusting in feelings even leads some to deny God; *“The fool says in his own heart there is no God”*

When you are counseling someone, be on the lookout for statements starting with “I think”, or “I feel”. When you hear these, you must immediately steer the person to agreement that thoughts, feeling, and intuitions are not acceptable guides to know what God’s will is for us. The only way we can discern the will of God is to look directly to the instructions He has given to us in His word.

Where does this thinking come from? In my opinion, from two places:

1. False teaching. Many in the denominational world are told that faith is this feeling you have inside that you are doing what is right.
1. Man’s desire to be saved on his or her own terms, not God’s terms. Some people, when confronted with the evidence found in the Bible, will reject it, declaring “I know I’m saved. I wouldn’t trade this feeling in my heart for a whole stack of Bibles.”

As part of your defense against this type of thinking, it is necessary to examine what faith is, and where it comes from. Rom 10:17 says, *“...faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.”* It does not start with “feelings” – it starts with listening! Faith is the result of considering the evidence: evidence that God presented in His word.

Heb 11:1 puts it this way, “*Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.*” Faith comes from a foundation of two things, the body of things we hope are true, and the evidence of the things we have not experienced.

In fact, our feelings often run counter to what God requires through faith. Consider a few examples:

1. Abraham.
 - a) Heb 11:8-10. By faith, he left his homeland and went to an unknown land.
 - b) Heb 11:17-19. By faith, he was willing to offer up his son Isaac as a sacrifice.
2. Noah
 - a) Heb 11:7. By faith, Noah prepared an ark.
 - b) Gen 6:22. Noah did according to all that God commanded.
3. Saul
 - a) I Samuel 15 3, 9. Saul and the people felt that it would be best to disobey God and not utterly destroy the Amelekites.
 - b) But God replied through Samuel, “*To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams*” (I Sam 15:22)
4. Uzzah
 - a) 2 Sam 6:6-7. He saw the ark was about to fall. He felt he should reach out his hand to steady it. But he did this in violation of God’s law. Even though he had good intentions, his action showed a lack of faith that God himself would steady the ark if needed.

In the New Testament, there are several examples of people whose feelings led them to worship God incorrectly.

- 1) Paul. (Acts 23:1, 26:9-11). He acted in good conscience in persecuting the church.
- 2) The Pharisees. They created their own set of rules, imparting additional requirements on people which God did not desire. (Matt 15:1-9)
- 3) Many people had a hard time letting go of the Old Testament law, and attempted to impose those restrictions on Christians. Gal 5:1-4.

Proverbs 14:12 says, “*There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.*”

Therefore, we cannot rely on our feelings. There is only one authority which can be trusted – the Word of God. It is only in God’s Word that we can confidently go to determine His will for our lives, and His plan for our salvation. 2 Tim 3:14-17 says, “*But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*”

The Bible is the only authority to which we should look to determine God’s will for us, and to determine what we need to do to be in accordance to His will.

Ps 119:105 says, “*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.*”

Prov 30:5-6 *“Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar.”* If the word of God is flawless, then it is true – and if true, there is no need or place for any other standard, including feelings.

John 14:16-17, 26 *“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever— the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you... But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”*

I Thess 2:13 *“And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.”*

As men, we have a tendency to want to add to or take away from the word of God, to suit our own desires. We are warned against this in Rev 22:18-19, *“I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.”*

2 Peter 1:20-21 discussed the role of inspiration in receiving the word of God: *“Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”*

In John 10:35, Jesus himself said, in regard to the word of God, *“...the Scripture cannot be broken.”* In other words, the scriptures represent truth which cannot be disproved.

Paul wrote in I Cor 2:13 about their speech, which was inspired by the Holy Spirit, and captured in writing to be used in the scriptures, *“This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.”*

The scriptures are true, they are “God breathed”, and they are inspired and flawless. Furthermore, the word is to be at work in those who believe. It is not our feelings that are to be at work in us – it is the word of God.

“Offended”

- “You are offending me by discussing this”
- “I can’t believe you are even bringing this up – you are offending me by asking me to even talk about this.”

These statements are often thrown out in attempt to get you to back down from your confrontation. After all, in our society, with the influence of “political correctness”, nobody wants to be thought of as “offending” anyone else.

In some cases, the person may be legitimately embarrassed to discuss their shortcomings. In other cases, this is just a ruse to attempt to get you to back down, thus allowing them to avoid dealing with their actions. In either case, it is important to not let this argument sway your steadfastness in dealing with the situation at hand. Sin, whether offensive or embarrassing, needs to be addressed.

I would start out by reminding the person that confronting them on this issue is not easy for you either. After all, if you did not love them or care about them, then the easy thing to do would be to let it slide. It is out of deep love and concern that you have gained the inner strength to overcome your own unease - and to approach the subject with them.

Depending upon the circumstances, it may be appropriate to remind them that their sin has caused offense on the part of yourself or others. Gently remind them that in this case, they have the obligation to approach those they have offended to make things right.

More importantly, their sin has offended God. Job 34:31 says, *"Suppose a man says to God, 'I am guilty but will offend no more'."* If sin offends, the natural question is to ask, who does it offend? While some sin may offend another person, other sins may be private. In either case, all sins offend God.

James 2:10 says, *"For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all."* (KJV)

What some people consider “private sins” are often public – and affect others. In many cases, the sins of someone have the potential to affect the entire congregation. Most would look at sexual infidelity as a “private affair” – but when this becomes public, it must be dealt with, as we read in I Cor. 5 and 6.

Image the trepidation Paul must have felt before he had to “*address Peter to his face*” (Galatians Chapter 2) over Peter’s double standard in regard to associating with Gentiles. Peter was known for his hot temper and impulsiveness, and Paul must have dreaded this confrontation. Peter may in fact have been offended that Paul berated him about this in a public manner. Yet Peter was overlooking the fact that he was the one who truly caused offense – to the Gentiles which were snubbed by his behavior.

The Christian is to live his life in a way to try to unnecessarily avoid offending others. This principle is found in Romans 12:18, *“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”* The Christian's desire is to be at peace with all so that God's truth may be taught and Christ seen in his life and this involves avoiding any actions or words that would unnecessarily offend others. Paul wrote, *“We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited.”* (2 Corinthians 6:3)

Take heart; it is impossible to live the life of a Christian and not offend someone by doing that which is right! There is no wholesale prohibition in the scriptures to ever offend anyone regardless of what the circumstance is. In fact, the scriptures presume that many are going to be offended by the teaching and preaching of the gospel.

- Jesus offended people by telling them the truth (Matthew 13:57, 15:12)
- Jesus even offended his own disciples! (John 6:61)
- Yet not once did Jesus apologize for telling the truth.
- In fact, in Matthew 15:12, after his disciples told him that the Pharisees had been offended by him, he said, *"Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit."* (Matthew 15:13-14).
- The Christian ought not to be concerned about offending someone because he is teaching or preaching the truth so long as that truth is being taught in love (Ephesians 4:15).

Cathy and I once had to approach a couple over something that had happened in our local church. There was disagreement over something that was organized; the details are not important, but feelings were hurt and we agreed to meet to sort it out. During this meeting, in which we were attempting reconciliation, the woman kept asking us "were you offended by what was done?" I replied back that we were "disappointed" and that we "disagreed" with what had happened; but I refused to use the word "offended" because this word carries such a negative connotation. I did not want them to believe that we had a problem with them – the problem was with something which they had been involved with.

I am pleased to report that we reconciled, and in fact over the years we have remained good friends with this couple and their family. The point is that we need to be very careful when handling words like "offend" – whether they are thrown our way, or when we have the opportunity to use them to describe the actions of others. Words such as this are powerful, but we cannot let them force us into a corner when tossed our way. The time may come to call something offensive; but this should be a last resort.

According to Kevin Cauley, minister of the Church of Christ in Berryville, AR,

"The Christian ought to be offended at sin. Why? Sin offends God (Psalm 51:4). Sin is the tool of Satan to tempt men to do evil (Matthew 4:1) and evil is offensive. The Christian has the obligation to stand against sin and Satan and fight (Ephesians 6:11, 13). Are we lovers of God or lovers of men (Galatians 1:10)? If we love God, then we will be offended at sin.

The Christian also ought to be offended with those who are not offended at sin. Consider Romans 1:32; *"Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them."* According to that verse, those who consent to sin are just as worthy of the same punishment as those who sin. The problem with many in our society today is that they have stopped being offended at sin. When that happens, they also stop fighting it. And when they stop fighting it, they succumb to it."

Questions

1. Why are thoughts, opinions and beliefs not viable tools for discerning the will of God?
2. Why do people prefer to depend on their own thoughts and feelings?
3. Can our faith or feelings cause us to worship God incorrectly? What are some Biblical examples?
4. How would you address someone who accused you of offending them by confronting them about sin in their life?
5. If we teach the truth, will people necessarily be offended? Did Jesus “offend” people?
6. Should we be offended at sin?
7. Should we be offended by those who are not offended by sin? How would you attempt to reach such a person?
8. Are there approaches other than the ones outlined above that have worked for you in similar situations?

Lesson 13: Accusing You of Misunderstanding or Mishandling the Situation (cont.)

“Interpretation”

- “Well, that’s your interpretation - not mine.”
- “I can’t find anything in the Bible that specifically says that this is wrong”
- “I think I am living righteously, and many other people do also.”

The statement “...that’s your interpretation, not mine...” is as old as “You shall not surely die” from the beginning of time.

Gen 3:1-6 *“Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’” The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’” “You will not surely die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”*

The serpent was crafty in offering his own “interpretation” to what God had said. Since the beginning of time, men have been eager to offer their own interpretations, modifying the word of God to suit their own desires.

Other examples of similar defensive statements are,

- “Do you understand the Bible perfectly?”
- “When you have a perfect understanding of what it says about _____ then you can come talk to me.”

When someone states that they have a “different interpretation or understanding”, that is an attempt to put you back on your heels. The implication is that there are many possible interpretations, and that each is of equal validity. Thus, according to this approach, you can no longer offer any criticism for what they are doing, because your criticism is based upon your interpretation, and they are acting according to their interpretation.

The misunderstanding of Biblical interpretation causes many people to be confused about what is right and wrong. After all, there are literally hundreds of religious groups, each believing something different about the Bible. It is important to ask, “Are there actually many various and valid interpretations of the Bible? If we all have the same Bible, should we not agree?”

There is a lot of discussion in the religious world about "unity". Some people believe that we are all "united" in Christ; that everyone who believes on Him is united together in a way that satisfies the biblical plea for unity. Others argue that we can "agree to disagree" on many issues, while remaining united on others. This is sometimes called "unity through diversity". Still others argue that unless we are united on all essential issues, we are not truly united.

As always, our only inspired source of knowledge on what biblical unity is all about is the Bible. Let's look at several important passages, which discuss unity.

In Chapter 17 of his Gospel, John records a prayer that Jesus made shortly before Judas betrayed him. Look at verses 20-23: *"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."*

The first purpose mentioned is that all who believe in him will be one. The quality of the unity is such that we are to be one, even as God the Father and God the Son are one.

The second purpose of this portion of the prayer is that the world might believe in Christ, and believe that God sent him. Unfortunately, many people are "turned off", confused, and disillusioned about Christ because of the religious division that exists today. Division among those who believe in Christ has always caused others to disbelieve. Only when Christ's believers are all perfectly united will the world come to believe on Him.

Look at I Cor 1:10: *"I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought."*

Paul here is addressing a group of Christians who have allowed themselves to be divided up into several religious "camps". Note the admonitions:

- All agree with one another
- No divisions
- Perfectly united in mind and thought

All who believe in Jesus must be "one" by God's standard of unity, which comes from complete adherence to the word of God. The only way for this to properly occur is to worship God in Spirit and in Truth (John 4:24). If "truth" is open to individual interpretations, then it is impossible for his believers to be one.

In Matthew 16:18, based on the truth that Jesus is Christ, the Son of God, Jesus states that he will build His church and not even the gates of hell would prevent it. The words "My" and "It" are both singular- Jesus promised to build one church, not many. According to I Cor 3:11, the church is built on the foundation of Jesus Christ.

Note Paul's plea in Eph 4:3-6: *"Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. there is one body and one Spirit- just as you were called to one hope when you were called- one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."*

Note that there is one body. The body is the Church (Eph 1:22-23, Col 1:18). Gods original plan

and pattern called for one body, the church (Eph 4:3-6) with one head, Christ (Col 1:18).

It is clear we should not be operating under different interpretations. But it is obvious that men have many different Biblical interpretations. It is the fact there are different interpretations does not mean that these are correct interpretations.

“Why Are There So Many Different Christian Interpretations?”

There is a very good article on the subject, “Why are there so many different Christian interpretations?” on www.gotquestions.org; I am including a summary below, as this is beneficial in outlining why there are so many interpretations:

1. Unbelief. The fact is that many who claim to be Christians have never been born again. They wear the label of “Christian,” but there has been no true change of heart. Many who do not even believe the Bible to be true presume to teach it. They claim to speak for God yet live in a state of unbelief. Most false interpretations of Scripture come from such sources.

It is impossible for an unbeliever to correctly interpret Scripture. “*The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned*” (1 Corinthians 2:14). An unsaved man cannot understand the truth of the Bible. He has no illumination. Further, even being a pastor or theologian does not guarantee one’s salvation.

An example of the chaos created by unbelief is found in John 12:28-29. Jesus prays to the Father, saying, “*Father, glorify your name.*” The Father responds with an audible voice from heaven, which everyone nearby hears. Notice, however, the difference in interpretation: “The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him.” Everyone heard the same thing—an intelligible statement from heaven—yet everyone heard what he wanted to hear.

2. Lack of training. The apostle Peter warns against those who misinterpret the Scriptures. He attributes their spurious teachings in part to the fact that they are “ignorant” (2 Peter 3:16). Timothy is told to “*Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth*” (2 Timothy 2:15). There is no shortcut to proper biblical interpretation; we are constrained to study.

3. Poor hermeneutics. Much error has been promoted because of a simple failure to apply good hermeneutics (the science of interpreting Scripture). Taking a verse out of its immediate context can do great damage to the intent of the verse. Ignoring the wider context of the chapter and book, or failing to understand the historical/cultural context will also lead to problems.

4. Ignorance of the whole Word of God. Apollos was a powerful and eloquent preacher, but he only knew the baptism of John. He was ignorant of Jesus and His provision of salvation, so his message was incomplete. Aquila and Priscilla took him aside and “*explained to him the way of God more adequately*” (Acts 18:24-28). After that, Apollos preached Jesus Christ. Some groups and individuals today have an incomplete message because they concentrate on certain passages

to the exclusion of others. They fail to compare Scripture with Scripture.

5. Selfishness and pride. Sad to say, many interpretations of the Bible are based on an individual's own personal biases and pet doctrines. Some people see an opportunity for personal advancement by promoting a "new perspective" on Scripture. (See the description of false teachers in Jude's epistle.)

6. Failure to mature. When Christians are not maturing as they should, their handling of the Word of God is affected. *"I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly"* (1 Corinthians 3:2-3). An immature Christian is not ready for the "meat" of God's Word. Note that the proof of the Corinthians' carnality is a division in their church (verse 4).

7. Undue emphasis on tradition. Some churches claim to believe the Bible, but their interpretation is always filtered through the established traditions of their church. Where tradition and the teaching of the Bible are in conflict, tradition is given precedence. This effectively negates the authority of the Word and grants supremacy to the church leadership.

When someone tells you that they have a "different interpretation", a "different understanding", this is a good time to invite them to study with you. Ask them to work with you to reconcile these differences – based upon what the Bible actually says.

If they tell you to back off until your own understanding is "perfect", then ask them to help you gain a more perfect understanding. Again, use this opportunity to study together in the Word of God.

"Unfairly Targeted"

- "You are just picking on me because this is a sexual sin. There are others doing bad things that are not being addressed."
- "You are just picking on me because..."
 - We're related
 - I'm a man/woman
 - I am a Bible class teacher / active / not active
 - I'm young / old / in the prime of life
 - You don't like me

In Lesson 11, we dealt with the accusation made by some that "all sins are the same". We also dealt with the comment, "What I am doing is not as bad as what others are doing" in Lesson 5. Therefore, we do not want to cover the same ground here.

Once again, some time will need to be invested to discuss why you are approaching the person in love, in regard to their sin. Do not allow yourself to be sidetracked by this defensive maneuver.

In the church, it often appears that sins of a sexual nature are dealt with publicly on a more frequent basis than other sins. As an elder, I can tell you that this has been a concern that has

been discussed in our eldership meetings on more than one occasion. However, there are reasons for this:

1. Many other sins are less public, and can be dealt with and resolved without escalating to something that has to be dealt with publicly.
2. Sexual sins, once known, often result in a rebellious attitude in which the sinner refuses to make a change.
3. We are given strong examples in the Bible (I Cor 5 and 6) about dealing with sexual sins in a public manner.

Let's take a few minutes to discuss the seriousness of sexual sin.

The apostle Paul bluntly states that those who engage in various sexual sins cannot inherit the kingdom of God. Consider I Corinthians 6:9-10, *"Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God."*

Among the sins listed are sexual immorality, adultery, prostitution, and homosexuality. It is interesting that, when there is a section in the Bible listing serious sins, sins of sexual immorality are usually right at the top of the list.

Paul goes on to explain why sexual sins are so grievous in verses 15-20: *"Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, 'The two will become one flesh.' But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit. Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body."*

The damage of sexual sins is serious, as it keeps us from spiritually bonding with our Lord. Instead, we are uniting our body, the temple of the Holy Spirit, with another person in immorality.

Consider Proverbs 6:32-33: *"Whoever commits adultery with a woman lacks understanding; He who does so destroys his own soul. Wounds and dishonor he will get, and his reproach will not be wiped away."* (NKJV)

Col 3:2-6 says, *"Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming."*

Consider also I Thess 4:3-8; *"It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy*

and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit.”

Eph 5:3-5 says, *“But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.”*

Rom 8:8,13: *“So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God. For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.”*

And Heb 13:4, *“Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge.”*

When we approach someone to confront them about a sexual sin, we are not “picking on them” – rather, we are driven to confront them because of the seriousness of what they are doing. It is out of our love for them and their souls that we take this stand.

This is not a case where they are “unfairly targeted”.

In regard to the other accusations, such as “because we are related”, “I am a man”, etc. – you will need to find some way to convince them that this is not the fact. I suggest a two-fold approach.

First, if possible, prove to them that they are not being singled out. If others have also been approached for similar behavior issues, and this is common knowledge, remind them of this. If you cannot use names, you can still inform them that others have been dealt with privately for the same types of issues.

Second, remind them that whether or not they are being “singled out”, that does not change the basic facts – they have a sin problem in their life, and this needs to be dealt with.

If someone feels they are being “called on the carpet” while others are not, they may bring accusations to the table of others involved in the same types of sins. If this happens, you should take note of it, and tell the person you will look into it – if appropriate (see below). Otherwise, you will not come across as credible.

Then, it is important that you determine if these accusations are true – and if so deal with them as well. You should also get back to the original party, and at least let them know that the issues they brought to your attention are being dealt with.

Be careful – in many cases, these accusations are often of the nature that the person of the second party should first be approached by the person of the first party. People are usually very glad to

skirt their own responsibility to confront and push this off on the minister, elders, or others. It is often appropriate to ask the person, “Have you confronted them about this? Why not? Do you understand your responsibilities as a Christian to first deal with this action which you have seen individually according to Matthew 18?”

This sort of defensive statement calls for you to be diligent in seeing that other issues are addressed – whether by you or the other party – but without letting the person you are confronting skirt their own responsibilities.

Questions

1. Are there actually many various and valid interpretations of the Bible?
2. What problem occurs when “truth” is open to individual interpretations?
3. What are some reasons why there are so many different interpretations of key passages of the Bible?
4. What is a good thing to do when someone tells you that they have a “different interpretation”, a “different understanding”?
5. What are some reasons why sins of a sexual nature are often dealt with publicly on a more frequent basis than other sins?
6. Why are sexual sins especially grievous to God?
7. Are there approaches other than the ones outlined above that have worked for you in similar situations?

Lesson 14: Refusing to Address the Issue, Listen, or Make Changes

In this case, the person being accused simply refuses to address the issue, or flat-out denies that they have any problem at all. The types of statements that you may hear could be like this:

“I Can’t Change”

- “I have always been this way, and I will be this way until the day I die.”
- “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks.”
- “Maybe I’ll change at some point in the future, but I’m just not ready now.”

We refuse to believe that people cannot change. Some of this comes from our “politically correct” society, in which we are taught that certain behaviors are predisposed, and there is nothing you can do about it. The classic example is the sin of homosexuality. If people can be led to believe that this is just “how you are” then that is a powerful tool to cause people to leave you alone and accept you as you are. (It is interesting that the same argument is not used toward those who may be “predisposed” to be pedophiles...)

Let’s face it - change is difficult. You could probably fill a library with the volumes that have been written in order to help people change. After all, change requires risk – and work. It is always much easier to keep doing things the same way than to do things differently. One of our founding fathers, John Paul Jones, said “*It seems to be a law of nature, inflexible and inexorable, that those who will not risk cannot win.*”

When faced with these types of statements, I suggest the following approach:

1. Start off with the assumption that they are being sincere – that they sincerely believe they cannot change, at least at this time.
2. Challenge the assumption that they cannot change – without challenging their sincerity.
3. When you have exhausted your efforts – and they still refuse to change – then the time may come when you have to move on. The time comes to “shake the dust from your feet.” And move your focus to more fertile fields. It is important then to let them know that you are doing just that – that you are open to working with them when they are ready, but that you cannot keep trying to work with them if they openly refuse to do what is right.

It may be helpful to point out that Paul faced this sort of situation when preaching to King Agrippa in Acts 26:27-29 (NASB) “‘King Agrippa, do you believe the Prophets? I know that you do.’ Agrippa replied to Paul, ‘In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian.’ And Paul said, ‘I would wish to God, that whether in a short or long time, not only you, but also all who hear me this day, might become such as I am, except for these chains.’ ”

Agrippa was close to accepting the message of Paul – but he could not get to the point of making this change in his life.

I like the King James translation, “*Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian*”. From this we get the song “Almost Persuaded” that many of us have sung since our youth.

**"Almost persuaded" now to believe;
"Almost persuaded" Christ to receive;
Seems now some soul to say,
"Go, Spirit, go Thy way,
Some more convenient day
On Thee I'll call."**

**"Almost persuaded," come, come today
"Almost persuaded," turn not away;
Jesus invites you here,
Angels are ling'ring near,
Prayers rise from heart so dear,
O wand'rer, come.**

**"Almost persuaded," harvest is past!
"Almost persuaded," doom comes at last!
"Almost" cannot avail;
"Almost" is but to fail!
Sad, sad, that bitter wail -
"Almost - but lost!"**

The song reminds us that to be “almost saved” is the same as being completely lost. Saying that you “cannot change” is making the same mistake that Agrippa made – putting your own stubbornness and the interests of this world above that of your salvation. King Agrippa was “almost” saved – but to our knowledge, he never got to the point of salvation.

What does the Bible say about change? The Bible says that...

- You are created in the image of God (*Genesis 1:26*)
- You are not a helpless creature of your circumstances or prior upbringing (*1 Peter 1:18*)
- You have tremendous potential for good and evil
- You have the freewill (*Eph. 4:28-5:6*) to decide what type of life you will live
- You are not hopeless, neither are you genetically inferior.
- God commands everyone to repent (*Acts 17:30*), and that means you can change too!

Usually, when people say that “can’t change” it really means they “won’t change”. This could be due to reasons of pride, stubbornness, or the unwillingness to separate oneself from the world.

The parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard teaches us that making the change is more important than when we make the change. Whether we are young, or old, we should be doing our best to follow God’s plan for our life. (Matt 20:1-16) The parable does not teach that it is ok to wait – rather, it teaches that we should all heed when the Master calls.

God made all of us with the capacity for change. Ps 34:14 says, “*Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it.*” We also can read in Ps 37:27 “*Depart from evil, and do good; and dwell for evermore.*”

We are all commanded in Rom 12:21 *“Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.”*

Moses was also of the opinion that he was not the right man to speak to Pharaoh. He was hung up on his lack of speaking ability – and did not give proper credit to God to put the right words into his mouth.

Ex 4:10-16 *“Moses said to the LORD, ‘O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.’ The LORD said to him, “Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say.” But Moses said, “O Lord, please send someone else to do it.”*

Because of this, God had to give him Aaron to speak on his behalf. Note that when Moses refused to change, the Lord’s anger burned against him.

Then the LORD's anger burned against Moses and he said, "What about your brother, Aaron the Levite? I know he can speak well. He is already on his way to meet you, and his heart will be glad when he sees you. You shall speak to him and put words in his mouth; I will help both of you speak and will teach you what to do. He will speak to the people for you, and it will be as if he were your mouth and as if you were God to him.”

So God provided help to Moses - but this did not resolve Moses of his obligation. In the same way, God can help those who struggle to perform righteous actions of their own lives, giving them the support of their brothers and sisters in Christ to get them through.

The following passages may be useful in convincing someone that they are indeed capable of change:

Some may believe they are incapable of resisting the temptations that are leading to their sin problems. But we all have the capability of resisting temptation. I Cor 10:12-13 says, *“So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”*

We can change by transforming ourselves – which involves the willpower of the mind. This is the will of God for us, as we read in Romans 12:1-2, *“Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”*

Through the power of God, we know we can change, because He gives us everything we need to escape from worldly corruption and live a life of godliness. 2 Peter 1:3-4 says, *“His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and*

precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.”

We are to put off our “old self” and put on a “new self” that has been created to be like God in true righteousness, as we read in Eph 4:20-24, *“You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”*

Finally, note that every soul is commanded to put earthly things “to death” and to rid themselves of sinful actions, putting on a new self in the image of the creator. We read in Col 3:5-11 *“Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.”*

Christians are often portrayed as being “*born again*” (John 3:5, 1 Corinthians 5:17, Romans 6:4). Each person has a new life, and begins it as a new creation. Saying that you “cannot change” is akin to saying that God has not created you with the capacity to change – which is false.

The bottom line – we are not “old dogs” – we are humans, with God-given capabilities. When we refuse to change, it is because of our own pride, not because of how we are made.

“I Can’t Change” (cont.)

- “There’s no way I can be baptized, because of the type of person I am now”

Once again, this line of thinking comes about due to misunderstandings about the role of baptism. As we stated earlier in this book, baptism does not have the purpose of making you better - it has the express purpose of making you saved. Similarly, we can state that baptism is not for perfect people, nor is it intended to make you perfect; rather it makes you saved.

Again, there is no command that we reach a certain level of spiritual perfection or proficiency before we are baptized. Rather, God asks only that we believe, that we repent of our sins (which involves a genuine intent to move away from sin), we confess Christ as the Son of God, and be baptized to gain salvation.

If you understand the need to change your life, and you desire to do so, then there is no better way to undertake this than as a Christian. Consider the following points:

1. When you become a Christian, God gives you the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, which can help and strengthen you for your new walk in the Lord. (Acts 2:38, 11:16, 13:52, Rom 5:5, Eph 1:13)

2. No-where in the Bible do we see baptism delayed or denied for any person because they are not “ready” or because they are too sinful.
3. Repenting of our sins and being baptized will not remove temptations from your life. But it does give you a clean slate, a fresh start, and strength for the battle.

It is only natural that we should seek the help of the Holy Spirit in working becoming the man or woman that God wants us to be. After all, the Holy Spirit...

- Dwells in us (Rom 8:9)
- Testifies to us (Heb 10:15)
- Renews us (Titus 3:5)
- Guards our faith (2 Tim 1:14)
- Gives us a message of Joy (I Thess 1:6)
- Is the seal by which we are marked by God (Eph 1:13)
- Sanctifies us (Rom 15:16)
- Overflows us with hope (Rom 15:13)
- Confirms our conscience (Rom 9:1)
- Pours love into our hearts (Rom 5:5)
- Encourages us (Acts 9:31)

In the book of Acts, we see many examples of conversions. It is striking that in most of these, the person is immediately baptized upon learning the truth of “what they should do” to be saved.

- Acts 2:38-41... The very first believers were Jews; they were baptized “the same day.”
- Acts 8:26-40... Philip teaches the Ethiopian eunuch - who responds by being baptized immediately.
- Acts 9:18... The conversion of Saul – He was persecuting the church, but was baptized the same day that he learned what God would have him to do.
- Acts 10:47-48... Cornelius and his household – baptized the same day that Peter preached to them.
- Acts 16:16-34... Paul and Silas’ jailer (and his household) responded in faith and were immediately baptized.
- Acts 19:3-5... Those that had not heard yet of Jesus are baptized immediately.

God does not limit you based upon what kind of person you are today – he only cares about the person that you can be and should be. Paul says that he was “the chief of all sinners” in I Tim 1:15, *“This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.”* Yet even Paul, who persecuted the church, and who held the coats of the men who stoned Stephen, was baptized immediately once he learned what was required of him through Ananias, who told him in Acts 22:16, *“And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.”*

Remind the person with whom you are counseling of Mark 2:17, which says, *“On hearing this, Jesus said to them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”*

Paul would later tell the Corinthians in 2 Cor 6:2, *“I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.”*

Being baptized and receiving the Holy Spirit are the beginning of a new life in Christ. We should request baptism as soon as possible after understanding the truth and repenting of our sins.

We are not supposed to live a new life and then be baptized; rather, baptism is the first step we take in that new life. Rom 6:3-4 says, *“Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”*

“Refusing to Change”

- “I don't care what the Bible says. This is how I choose to live my life”
- “Well, if I'm going to hell then I will have a lot of good company with me.”

“Refusing to Face the Issue”

- “I don't want to discuss this with you.”

Unfortunately, statements such as these are normally the “beginning of the end” for any confrontation. Many people refuse to change even when they know that what they are doing is wrong. There are several potential reasons why people sin:

- People sin because, *“There is no fear of God before their eyes”* (Romans 3:18). They have no respect for God.
- Some sin due to a lack of knowledge. God says, *“My people are destroyed for a lack of knowledge”* (Hosea 4:6). But the attitudes addressed above are more common for people who have knowledge – but who do not want to submit to God.
- Some are hardened by sin, as we read in Heb 3:13, *“But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.”*
- Many refuse to change because they do not wish to give up the temporary pleasures of sin. They are not like Moses, who rose above this. We read, *“He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time”* in Heb 3:13.
- 2 Peter 3:17 tells us that some are led away by the error of others, *“Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position.”*
- We are also told that, *“...every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust has conceived, it brings forth sin, and sin when it is finished, brings forth death.”* (James 1:14-15)
- People sin because, *“The soul of the wicked desires evil”* (Proverbs 21:10).
- People keep sinning because they constantly think evil. Jesus asks, *“Why do you think evil in your hearts?”* (Matthew 9:4).

- People sin because *they "love evil more than good, lying rather than speaking righteousness"* (Psalms 52:3), and because of this *they "call evil good and good evil"* (Isaiah 5:20).
- People sin because of the influence of the people with whom they associate. *"Do not be deceived: evil company corrupts good habits"* (1 Corinthians 15:33).
- We also sin when we don't do what we should do. *"Therefore, to him that knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin"* (James 4:17).

Note what is in store for those who continue in sin, when they know better: *"If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God."* (Hebrews 10:26-27).

If we continue willfully in our sin and don't repent, we will die in our sins and be lost (John 8:24). *"I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins."* The wages of sin is spiritual death in Hell forever (Romans 6:23).

When someone says, "I don't want to discuss it with you", then one approach is to ask them who they would discuss it with. It may be there is some "valid" reason why they would prefer to discuss it with someone else. Or, this question will determine if this statement is just a defensive comment thrown out so that they do not have to deal with their sins.

When someone says "I don't care what the Bible says..." then this shows a hardened heart. You should make an effort to break through this shell and try to reach the person. But sadly, in many cases this will not be possible. When you reach this point, it is then necessary to "shake the dust off your feet" and move on to more fertile ground. Your responsibility then becomes to point out the consequences of their sins – where they are headed. And to hope that eventually they will do what is right.

Mark 6:11-12 says, *"And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave, as a testimony against them. They went out and preached that people should repent."*

There comes a time when people are so hardened to sin, that trying to give them "precious truth" is a waste of time. As it states in Matt 7:6 *"Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces."*

When you approach someone to discuss their sin problem, they may take offense. But be heartened – many people even took offense at Jesus himself. Matt 13:54-58 says, *"Coming to his hometown, he began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. 'Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?' they asked. 'Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?' And they*

took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, 'Only in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honor.' And he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith."

Here are some serious parting words for anyone who expresses the callous attitudes in the quotes above: *"If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the Law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."* (Heb 10:26-31)

Questions

1. Why do people want you to believe they are not able to change?
2. Can a person believe he is unable to change, when he really has the capability to change?
3. What does the Bible say about change?
4. How would you counsel a person who felt they were not "worthy" of being baptized?
5. What would you do if someone refused to discuss a sin issue with you?
6. How do you know when it is time to "shake the dust off your feet" and move on?
7. Are there approaches other than the ones outlined above that have worked for you in similar situations?

Lesson 15: Implied Threats

“I Might Leave”

- “I have been attending here because I am comfortable here. If you push on this, I may decide to attend elsewhere.”

We now enter the category of what I call “implied threats”. These are statements that are made to try to get you to “back off” from confrontations due to fear.

In this case, they are hoping to negate criticism of their actions through a fear of them leaving the congregation. Perhaps the person plays an important role in the church, or is a significant financial contributor. Perhaps they have a very friendly personality and are thus influential among other members. Or, they may just be banking on the hope that your desire to see them stay involved in the congregation is greater than your desire to see them correct the problem they have with sin.

When all is said and done, this is just another way of refusing to deal with their problem.

When you hear a statement such as this, consider the following replies:

- “I am sorry to hear you say that you would consider leaving our congregation. But I am convinced that this issue must be dealt with. Going to a different congregation will not resolve your problem with this sin.”
- You are a member of this congregation. Therefore, you should be committed to the work of our church and to fellowship with your brothers and sisters here.”
- “Do you think that going to church somewhere else will change the situation you are in?”
- “By church jumping, you are missing the opportunity to grow in faith that comes from being a stable and long-term part of a congregation.”
- “We would hate to see you leave. But we love you too much to let this slide. We are in agreement that this is a problem which must be dealt with”

In many cases, threats are made to test you, and to see how you will react. A threat is one way to see if you are really “engaged” in the situation, or if you will back down, implying to the person that you do not really care about the situation. Therefore, it is vital that you do not disengage from the situation. You may need to pull others in to support you, or hand the situation off to someone else, but responding to a threat by “disengaging” is a big mistake.

Many psychiatrists use the approach of asking the question “How will that help you?” when a patient makes threats. This forces the one making the threat to think through the situation and to show that their threatened actions will not fix the problem. At best, it may only delay the amount of time until they have to deal with it.

Basically, you must decide, before confronting someone, that the issue is serious enough that you will move forward on it – no matter what deflections, distractions, counter accusations, or implied threats will be thrown your way.

Jonah also ran away from God. *“The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.” But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.”* (Jonah 1:1-3)

But running from God is futile. We know the story of Jonah – that God found him, sent a great storm, and Jonah ended up in the belly of a great fish for 3 days. We cannot run from God. We can run from men – but no matter what we do, we will not outrun God.

“Affecting Others”

1. “My wife/brother/girlfriend/son has been discouraged that this has been mentioned to me, and this is hindering their progress toward (being faithful, or) becoming a Christian.”

This defense is what we sometimes call “hiding behind a human shield” in warfare – when a terrorist or “enemy combatant” attempts to put others in the line of fire, so that you will avoid shooting at them. It should be seen for what it is – an attempt to escape responsibility for one’s actions by using others as an excuse for inaction. It is a thinly veiled threat.

The excuse may be that dealing with the sin problem could cause someone to refrain from becoming a Christian – or that it could discourage someone who is already a Christian.

The problem with this approach is that the person making this statement is usually not being totally honest – because the problem of discouragement would likely go away if they were willing to deal with their problem, and the others involved, in an open and honest manner. Let me give you an example.

As an example, suppose you confront a sister in Christ about living with a man she is engaged to before marriage – a situation involving fornication. She makes the statement, “Well, I am studying with him and trying to convert him – but he is not quite ready. If I move out now he will leave me and be lost forever.”

In other words, she is saying “You should allow me to keep sinning for the sake of someone else.” This sort of argument at its core is not logical – as it could be used to keep us from dealing with just about any sin situation.

But back to the main point – why do we say that here argument is not “totally honest”? This is because it removes from the equation her response to the situation and puts the entire blame on the one pointing out the sin problem. In reality, there are several possible outcomes to her correcting her sin problem – with different results based primarily on her actions.

For example, one approach is to go back to her fiancé, complaining that she has been pressured to leave him, speaking ill against the church. In this situation, her predicted outcome will be a self fulfilling prophecy.

On the other hand, imagine if she went to her fiancé and said, “James, I am so glad that you are studying the Bible with me. There is nothing I want more in this world than for the two of us to both make it to Heaven – and I appreciate that you have a sincere interest in following God’s word. I want to apologize to you – because I have not set the proper example for you, being a Christian. I have been discussing this with others, studying about it and praying about it – it has really torn my heart. But I have come to the realization that by us living together before we are married, we are in violation of God’s will. Because I love you so much, I have decided to move out until we are married. How can I lead you to Christ, when I myself am not living the way he demands? How can I possibly lead you to become a Christian while we are living in a sinful relationship? I want you to understand that this has no bearing on my desire for us to be married – I want that more than ever! But our relationship with God should be the founding rock upon which we build our own relationship.”

Let me now ask a few questions:

First, do you think the outcome would possibly be different based upon the two scenarios played out above?

Second, if after making her passionate plea for spirituality, if James decides to leave her – is it possible that he was not the right kind of man to head up a good Christian home anyway?

Do you see why placing the blame for his reaction on the one pointing out the sin problem is not being totally honest?

In a case such as this, one possible outcome is for the two of them to immediately go to a minister or government official to be married, then having a formal ceremony later. Some object to this, saying “But I want my wedding to be the real thing – not some re-creation.” This objection is also not being totally honest in my opinion – because the two of them are already acting as married in everything but name – sharing the same house, the same bed, and living together as a married couple would. In this situation, what is possibly left to be enjoyed for the first time after a formal ceremony, other than perhaps their last name?

Our first responsibility as Christians, and as humans, is to do the will of God. There are times when this will have a high cost – but this is a cost we must be willing to bear.

Look at the words of Jesus in this regard. As we read in Luke 14:25-27, “*Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”*”

The beginning point for properly understanding this statement is that in Jesus’ ethic there is no room for truly hating anyone. We are to love even our enemies (Luke 6:27). In understanding Jesus’ point, one must keep in mind that in the Hebrew mind-set, to “hate” means to “love less”, or to put the object behind all else. Jesus is making the point that we must put him before family relationships, or even our own life. Therefore, in light of the present thought, it is not valid to

assign more importance to the “reaction” of another person than to following the will of God in trusting faith.

Jesus further illustrated this when he taught in Matt 16:24, *“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”* Following Christ must come before our own desires, wishes, egos, and yes, before others – including fiancés, family, and friends.

Gal 5:17 *“For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.”* This passage points out that following God is tough – there is often a great conflict between what we know is right, and what we want to do. To resolve this conflict, we will often come up with all sorts of excuses and rationales. But this sort of rationalization is contrary to the Spirit. Instead, we should resolve the conflicts by following the Spirit and putting aside those things which are contrary to God’s will.

Mark 10:29-31 *“I tell you the truth,” Jesus replied, “no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”* We have to have faith that the reward will be worth the price. As one sage put it, “The job doesn’t pay much, but the retirement benefits are out of this world!”

Our body – and our mind – often wants to pull us in a direction contrary to the will of God. I Cor 9:27 says, *“I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.”* But this direction leads us to a path where we cannot collect our heavenly prize.

When you are worried that following the will of God will have a negative effect on someone else- try to figure out a way to make the most of the situation. Often, a negative situation can be turned into something positive with the right approach – I have this happen many, many times. We should have the attitude of Paul in Phil 4:6-7, *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*

“Backfire”

- “You are pressuring me. If you continue to pressure me, I will never change. The only way I will change is on my own terms and at my own time.”

First of all – it should be pointed out that any “pressure” being applied is not coming directly from you – but you are just conveying what God wants in their lives. They may disagree, but that is where it is necessary to use the scriptures to allow God to speak directly to them.

We cannot come to God on “our own terms” – we have to come to Him on His terms. This statement, “I will change on my own terms” is a statement of pride. It is not a statement of humility before God.

Jesus himself did not shy away from “pressuring” people to do what was right. For example, in John 8:11, Jesus told the woman caught in adultery, *“Go now and leave your life of sin.”* - could he have been accused of pressuring her?

What about the disciple in Matthew 8:21-22? Was he pressured by Jesus? *“Another disciple said to him, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” But Jesus told him, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.”*

Just above we mentioned the words of Jesus in Matthew 10:37-39; *“Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”* Do you think some would view this as pressure?

In Matt 19:21, Jesus told the rich young ruler, *“If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”* Do you think this young man felt any pressure?

We need to be willing to come to God on His terms – not ours.

- Jesus said in John 14:15, *“If you love me, you will obey what I command.”*
- And in John 14:21, *“Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.”*
- And in John 14:23, *“If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.”*

What great terms He gave us, through His mercy and grace. These are far better than any terms made by man – or by ourselves. Let us all be willing to put aside our own pride and take with willingness the wonderful gift of salvation that God has provided.

“Backfire” (cont.)

- “If you keep pushing me on this, it will just drive me further into sin. It is better that I deal with a little sin in my life than fall totally into sin.”

This sort of statement is made at the same level as a grade school schoolyard taunt or threat. In fact, they are threatening you with their own souls. “If you push me, I’ll just move further away”, they seem to be saying. Another way of looking at this is that they are satisfied to “flirt with their sin”. But this is not the attitude we should have. *“Abstain from all appearance of evil”*, we are told in I Thess 5:22.

I am reminded of our good example in Hebrews 11:24-26, where it says, “By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.”

I John 1:6-8 states, “If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.”

We should be inspired by the words in Joshua 24:14-15, *“Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”*

Matt 6:24 says, *“No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.”*

I once read an article about Samson. The point was that Samson was a good man, a man who served God and took on the vow of a Nazarite. But he “flirted” with sin, and it crept up on him until he was completely overcome by it.

The first point of the article – “Sin Finds You”. Samson had a few weaknesses. One was for beautiful women – leading him to marry someone outside of the Israelite faith. This woman was swayed by her bad companions to trap Samson and turn against him. He also had a weakness of anger – which caused him to make many enemies among the Philistines. Samson no-doubt thought he could “flirt” with this sin without being overcome by it – but the sin came after him.

The second point – “Sin Blinds You”. In Judges 16:21 we read what happened to Samson, *“Then the Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes and took him down to Gaza. Binding him with bronze shackles, they set him to grinding in the prison.”* Samson ignored the advice of those around him, such as his countrymen (who advised him against stirring up the Philistines) and his parents, as we read in Judges 14:3, *“His father and mother replied, “Isn't there an acceptable woman among your relatives or among all our people? Must you go to the uncircumcised Philistines to get a wife?”* Samson “flirted” with sin – and was ultimately overcome by it and blinded – both spiritually, and physically. Like Samson, men and women everywhere are blinded by sin to have affairs, run away from their families, leave the church, and commit all sorts of illicit activities. They get a feeling of euphoria from drugs, sex, or sin, and soon have the urge to dive deeper and deeper into sin. Sin finds you – and it blinds you. But Numbers 32:23 says that when you sin against the Lord, *“...your sin will find you out.”*

Finally, “Sin Grinds You” Ultimately, you will pay a miserable price. Alcohol and drugs lead to addiction. Over eating leads to obesity and poor health. Adultery and fornication lead to broken

homes, unwanted pregnancies, ruined marriages, and even diseases. Your actions hurt those around you – your family, friends, and fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. Reputations are destroyed, jobs are lost, and finances are ruined. Deep wounds are carried for the rest of your life.

Samson was a man of superhuman strength. He thought he could flirt with sin – and it caught up with him. We are certainly in no better position to resist these temptations. Don't be blinded by sin. It will find you. It will blind you. And it will grind you.

Questions

1. Why do people sometimes threaten to leave when confronted about sin? What does this indicate?
2. Suppose someone is confronted with sin, which they refuse to address, and then they start going to a different congregation. Should that congregation be contacted to explain the situation?
3. How would you address a person who says the reason they do not want to change is because of how it will affect someone else?
4. How would you handle someone who says you should not press them to fix their sin problem – because this will drive them away from the church?
5. Are there approaches other than those outlined above which you believe would be effective?

Postscript One: What Prevents Me From Being Baptized?

Adapted from Think Magazine, February 2010.

“I’m Not Ready”

Baptism is a big decision. It is natural that those who are about to undergo this step take stock in their readiness and worthiness. At this time, mindful of their own sinful nature, many will naturally feel that they are not ready for this big step.

Some are too young. The question “how old is old enough” is one that has been debated over and over. We often use the expression “the age of accountability” when discussing this subject. This phrase is not found in the Bible, but it does accurately reflect what is required. The person being baptized must be old enough to be accountable for their actions – to have sinned, to know that they need repentance, and to capably make the decision to be baptized and to dedicate their lives to Christ. It is our responsibility to ensure that this is the case.

Some have not been adequately taught. When you look at examples of baptism in the Bible (most of which are in the book of Acts) it is obvious that the knowledge required to be baptized is very basic; in fact, most examples have people being baptized on the same day that they learn what is required of them for salvation. Yet today, many are baptized for the wrong reasons, or are not properly baptized. Many are not immersed, or are not baptized for the remission of their sins. It is our responsibility to ensure that the person being baptized understands what they are doing, and why they are doing it.

Some are not ready for the commitment, sacrifice, and submission needed to make Jesus Lord. Here are a few thoughts for the person who expresses this hindrance:

- There is no better sacrifice than Jesus.
- One will never have more time to give to the Lord than right now.
- God can never possibly extend more mercy, love or grace.

It is our responsibility to make people ready. The way to do this is to show them that being ready is a matter of the heart – no matter where they are in life, if they believe, are ready to repent, confess their belief in Jesus as the Son of God, and do their best to walk the Christian walk; then they are indeed ready.

“I’m Afraid”

Fear is understandable. It is a god-given emotion. After all, even Jesus apparently experienced fear. We read in Heb 5:7, *“During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.”* We also know that he wrestled with this in prayer; Luke 22:42 records him praying, *“Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.”*

So did Paul, who was afraid he would not be effective in proclaiming his message in Col 4:4, *“Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.”*

Peter certainly grappled with fear. He was so afraid that he denied Christ, as we read in Matt 26:69-74. Later in his ministry, a more mature Peter wrote, *“But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened. But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect”* (1 Peter 3:14-15)

What are people afraid of in regard to baptism?

- The change that follows following conversion
- Failure in your Christian walk
- The reaction or rejection of others

But what should we really be afraid of? Jesus once taught, *“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”* (Matt 10:28)

Your goal as someone who is advising a potential Christian should be to help them evaluate their fears and ask if they are worth risking the more fearful prospect of standing before the Lord without His blood to cover their sins.

“I’m Not Sure”

2 Peter 1:10 says, *“Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall.”* But this is not an excuse to put off obeying Christ. Remember, he is speaking to those who are already purified from their previous sins (1:9) – those already baptized.

One needs to reason through scripture (Isa 1:18) Paul reasoned with individuals about Christ on many occasions. (Acts 17:2, Acts 17:17, Acts 18:4, Acts 18:19, Acts 24:25)

The fact is the Biblical claims about who Jesus is and how one receives the benefits of His grace are most reasonable. Rationalization, hard-headedness and self-will may be seeds that grow into weeds of doubt, but one must not allow doubt to prevent him from submitting to Christ.

It is our responsibility to determine what the weeds of doubt are – and to use the scriptures to reason, mowing down those weeds and opening the way for them to accept salvation.

“I Don’t Believe”

One may or may not say those specific words. Yet, when one sees the truth of Scripture, knows the personal accountability demanded, and does nothing about it, that person essentially does not believe. At least, his faith is insufficient to properly respond to God’s amazing grace. This is a hard truth to confront in ourselves.

“I see it. I know it. But I will not act upon it.”

The Hebrews writer says the Israelites could not enter the promised land because of unbelief (Heb 3:19), and he warns us against imitating them (Heb 3:12-13) Even the demons believe and tremble, but it does them no good (James 2:19) We must believe and be baptized to be saved (Mark 16:16).

Perhaps when teaching others, you will study with someone who just cannot seem to bring themselves to be baptized. What will you say to such a person?

- Cast a long mental glance at the cross of Calvary and comprehend the love and sacrifice evidenced there. It was for you (Gal 2:20)
- God’s love for you is personal. He wants nothing more than for you to live with him eternally, and he has told you how to do that (Acts 2:38)
- What prevents you from being baptized?

Postscript Two: What Are Opinions?

Adapted from the book "America Now", 7th edition, compiled by Robert Atwan.

When dealing with people on the subject of whether a behavior is appropriate, quite often we are accused of expressing opinions. The statement may be given, "Well, that's your opinion not mine". This statement first implies that the topic of discussion is a matter of opinion, not a matter of fact. This is a defensive statement that is used to attempt to reduce the seriousness of an accusation, by relegating it from a factual case to a matter of opinion.

The statement further implies that there is a counter opinion to yours, and that both opinions have an equal validity. Again, this is a defensive approach which attempts to counter criticism by implying that an opposing opinion neutralizes another.

Likewise, the person may express their own opinions as justification for their actions. This is often indicated by sentences starting with "I think", or "I feel".

In most cases, when confronting someone about a sinful action, this is more than just an opinion; it is a factual occurrence that is wrong, and that can be proven wrong through the Scriptures. In this case, you should not allow someone to relegate your concern to a matter of opinion. Rather, you must use logic and the Scriptures to convince them that it is a deeper, factual problem. You may also need to ask the person to reconsider their own opinions, in cases where their opinions are incorrect.

There may, however, be times when it is necessary to enter into a discussion about opinions. To do so, we need to consider opinions in general: What are they? Where do they come from? In order to overcome strongly held opinions, it is helpful to have a working knowledge of what opinions are, and how they are formed.

When we say we have an opinion about something, we usually mean that we have come to a conclusion that something appears true or it appears to be valid. But when we express an opinion about something, we are not claiming that we are 100% certain that something is so. Opinion does not imply certainty and, in fact, it is accompanied by some degree of doubt and skepticism. As a result, opinions are most likely to be found in those areas of thought and discussion where our judgments are uncertain. Since human beings know so few things for certain, much of what we believe, or discuss and debate, falls into various realms of probability or possibility. These we call opinions.

We can make a distinction between fact and opinion. Facts can be confirmed and verified and therefore do not involve opinions. We normally don't have opinions about facts, but we can and often do have opinions about the interpretation of facts. For example, that the Bible considers fornication a sin can be verified as a fact. However, people may have opinions about whether certain actions fall into the realm of fornication. The Bible condemns divisive behavior; this is a verifiable fact. However, people disagree on whether their actions are indeed divisive.

If we do not know whether something is a fact, then that does not necessarily make it a matter of opinion. For example, a person may not know or understand what the Bible teaches about divorce. But that does not mean that they are then free to form opinions about whether a divorce is right or wrong, given a particular situation, outside of the realm of Scripture. There are specific teachings about divorce in the Scripture, and in many cases it can be determined from Scripture whether a divorce is considered lawful in the eyes of God.

In real-life disputes, a fact is not always so readily distinguished from an opinion; people argue all the time about whether something is a fact. It's therefore a good idea at the outset of any discussion or argument to try to arrive at a mutual agreement of the facts that are known or knowable and those that could be called into question.

An opinion almost always exists in the climate of other, conflicting opinions. In discourse, we refer to this overall context of competing opinions as public controversy. Every age has its controversies. At any given time, the public is divided on a great number of topics about which it holds a variety of different opinions. Often the controversy is reduced to two opposing positions; for example, we are asked whether we are pro-life or pro-choice; for or against capital punishment; in favor of or opposed to same-sex marriage, and so on.

But one man's opinion is often another man's fact. To one person, the decision about whether a same-sex marriage is allowable is an opinion. Another person would examine the Scriptures and state that it is a fact that any same-sex marriage is sinful. In cases such as this, it is the duty of one confronting another to establish that their actions are indeed sinful as a matter of fact. This can only be done through careful examination of the Scriptures.

Some opinions are deeply held, so deeply, in fact, that those who hold them refuse to see them as opinions. In cases such as this, people are often reluctant to change their viewpoint, even when shown evidence that their opinions are incorrect. You may end up in a situation where you find that the other side cannot recognize the existence of a different point of view, denying that there can legitimately be another perspective. In this case, discussion and debate become all but impossible. If both parties are not willing to surrender to the validity of Scripture being the standard, then you may end up in a situation where someone simply is not willing to change their mind and subsequently, their actions.

There is nothing wrong with someone possessing a strong conviction, or in believing that their position is a better one, or attempting to convince others of their point of view. What is argumentatively wrong and what prevents open discussion is: (1) the failure to recognize one's belief or position as an opinion that could be mistaken; and (2) the refusal to a knowledge the possibility that another's opinion could be correct, and (3) the refusal to accept God's Word as the standard to determine what is truth and what is opinion.

Is one person's opinion as good as another's? Of course not. Though we may believe that everyone has a right to an opinion, we certainly wouldn't ask our mail carrier to diagnose the cause of persistent heartburn or to determine whether a swollen gland is serious. In such instances, we respect to the opinion of a trained physician. Logically, we also understand that the opinion of a trained physician is based upon the evaluation of symptoms, a study of the history of the effectiveness of different diagnoses which have developed over the years, and factual knowledge of the causes and effects for various human maladies. When our children have a sickness, we understand that it is much better to consult a medical dictionary than to ask an untrained casual bystander how to treat the illness. This seems obvious, and yet people continually are persuaded by those who can claim little expert knowledge on a subject or issue. For example, how valuable or trustworthy is the opinion of a celebrity who is paid to endorse a product?

In the same way, in matters of religion, many people develop opinions based in turn upon the opinions of others rather than consulting the Scriptures to see what they actually say. People often form their opinions about abortion, divorce, same-sex marriage and other issues from the evening news or from friends, family and coworkers.

We live in a democracy that encourages a diversity of perspectives. Every responsible citizen is expected to have informed opinions on practically every public question. Most people, by the time they become adults, have formed numerous opinions about nearly every issue. Where do these opinions come from? What follows is a brief, though realistic, attempt to list some of the practical ways that people come by the opinions they hold.

1. *Inherited opinions.* These are opinions we derive from earliest childhood - transmitted via family, culture, traditions, customs, regions, social institutions, or religion. For example, young people may identify themselves as either Democrats or Republicans because of their family affiliations. Though these opinions may change as we mature, they are often ingrained. Many people retain inherited opinions into their early adulthood and even throughout their entire lives. The more traditional the culture or society, the more likely the opinions that grow out of early childhood will be retained and passed on to the next generation. In the same way, many people identify themselves religiously based upon family affiliations; for example, many people strongly consider themselves Catholic, or Jewish even when they have never practiced their religion in an active way.
2. *Involuntary opinions.* These are opinions that we have not culturally and socially inherited nor consciously adopted but that comes to us through direct or indirect forms of indoctrination. They could be the customs of a cult or the propaganda of an ideology. Brainwashing is an extreme example of how one acquires opinions involuntarily. A more familiar example is the constant reiteration of advertising messages: we come to possess a favorable opinion of a product not because we've ever used it or know anything about it but because we have been "bombarded" by marketing to think positively about it.
3. *Adaptive opinions.* Many opinions grow out of our willingness - or even eagerness - to adapt to the prevailing views of particular groups, subgroups, or

institutions to which we belong or desire to belong. As many learned, it's easier to follow the path of least resistance than to run counter to it. Moreover, people often adapt their opinions to conform to the views of authority figures or leaders, or they prefer to succumb to peer pressure and to oppose it. An employee finds himself accepting an opinion because a job or career depends upon it; a student may adapt her opinions to suit those of a professor in the hope of receiving better grade; the professor in turn may tailor his opinions in conformity with the prevailing beliefs of colleagues. In the same way, many people obtain religious opinions based more upon the beliefs and actions of the group with whom they associate, rather than from the Bible itself. Adaptive opinions are often weakly held and readily changed, depending on circumstances. But over time they can become habitual and turn into convictions.

4. *Concealed opinions.* In some groups were certain opinions dominate, or maybe individuals who don't share the prevailing attitudes but rather than adapt or "rock the boat" they keep their opinions to themselves. They may do this merely to avoid conflict were out of much more serious concerns - such as a fear of ostracism, ridicule, or retaliation. A common example is seen in person who quietly goes along with the opinions of his or her congregation, but when in the presence of friends who are not members of this group (or other members who they know share like-minded opinions) this person freely exchanges "honest" opinions. In situations such as these, care must be taken that these opinions do not escalate into division.
5. *Linked opinions.* Many opinions are closely linked to other opinions. Unlike adaptive opinions, which are usually stimulated by convenience and an incentive to conform, these are opinions we derive from an enthusiastic and dedicated affiliation with certain groups, institutions, or parties. For example, it's not uncommon for someone to agree with every position his or her political party endorses - this phenomenon is usually called "following a party line." Linked opinions may not be well thought out on every issue. Someone may decide to be a Republican or Democrat or libertarian for a few specific reasons and then go along with, even to the point of strenuously defending, all of the other positions the party espouses. In the same way, someone may decide to be a Catholic, Presbyterian or Baptist for a few specific reasons and then go along with all of the other teachings of that group.
6. *Considered opinions.* These are opinions we have formed as a result of firsthand experience, reading, discussion and debate, or independent thinking and reasoning. These opinions are formed from direct knowledge and often from exposure and consideration of other opinions. Wide reading on a subject and exposure to diverse views help to ensure that our opinions are based on solid information and tested against competing opinions. One simple way to judge whether your opinion is carefully thought out is to list your reasons for holding it. Some people who express opinions on a topic are not able to offer a single reason for why they have those opinions. In matters of religion, the best considered opinions are those that are based upon careful study of the Scriptures.

This list is not exhaustive. There are other common sources and types of opinion. Nor are the types of opinions mutually exclusive; the opinions of any individual may represent a mix of several of the above types. For example, a child growing up in a religious group may inherit entrenched opinions on some matter but, as time passes come to test it so thoroughly in the context of Scripture and competing opinions that it reaches the level of a considered opinion. As students learn to express their opinions effectively, they will find it useful to question themselves about the origins and development of those opinions. By tracing the process that led to the formation of our present opinions, we can better understand ourselves - our convictions, are inconsistencies, our biases and our blind spots.

When confronting others in matters of religion, it is often helpful to question them effectively about the origins and development of their opinions.

Thoughts and Acknowledgments

I have drawn heavily from a variety of sources for concepts, approaches, and in some cases have quoted directly from these sources. It is very possible that I have not adequately given appropriate credit to each of these sources; I make no claim that the entire contents of this document are my own thoughts, and if I have neglected to give proper credit for any references, my sincere apologies are extended.

My length of experience as an elder of the Lord's church is relatively short at the time of the writing of this book. However, I have already been amazed many times at the positive outcomes that can result by having the courage to lovingly confront those in error. I have seen cases that looked hopeless resolved more successfully than we dared to dream.

As written in this document, one writer once stated, "If a bill of rights were ever created for the church member, the member's right to loving confrontation and corresponding discipline should be high on the list."

Have faith.