

Church Censures

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

Stuart W. Bryan

I. Apostasy and Church Censures

Not all those who profess faith in Christ actually believe in Him. The visible church is a _____ *multitude*.

After charging Timothy to beware false teachers who lead the church astray and upset the faith of some, Paul reminds Timothy of the “*solid foundation*” upon which the visible church is built (2 Tim 2:19):

Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: “The Lord knows those who are His,” and, “Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity.”

When someone names the name of Christ and refuses to depart from iniquity then the church is to censure that person.

II. The Duty of Church Censures

Note this in our text today. The Corinthian congregation had a man in the flock who was sleeping with his step-mother. So what ought the Corinthians have done? They ought to have censured this man. What did they do instead? They countenanced him and his deeds.

III. The Subjects of Church Censures

Our responsibility is not to judge those outside the Church – God takes care of that (13a). Our responsibility is to judge / censure those _____ the Church. Remember Paul’s adage: “*Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity.*”

The fundamental idea behind church censures is severing _____, ending the *koinonia* that exists between brothers and sisters in Christ. Church censures are the process by which a professing Christian is progressively removed from the fellowship of the church.

IV. The Rationale for Church Censures

Why practice church discipline? Why not just get along or ignore the sin?

- A. Reclaiming our sinning brother (5:5 cf. 2 Cor 2:6-8)
- B. Preserving the purity of the Church (5:6 cf. Mal 1:6; 2 Tim 2:17)
- C. Ensuring the health of the Church (5:8)

The WCF helpfully summarizes these and other purposes of church censures:

30.3 – Church censures are necessary, for the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren, for deterring of others from the like offences, for purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump, for vindicating the honor of Christ, and the holy profession of the Gospel, and for preventing the wrath of God, which might justly fall upon the Church, if they should suffer His covenant, and the seals thereof, to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders.

V. The Process of Church Censures

The Westminster Confession of Faith helpfully explains the basic process as follows:

30.4 – For the better attaining of these ends [of church censures], the officers of the Church are to proceed by admonition, suspension from the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper for a season, and by excommunication from the Church, according to the nature of the crime, and demerit of the person.

A. Private Admonition (cf. 1 Thes 5:12; Heb 13:17)

The first level is admonition - private counsel, exhortation, and rebuke delivered by the elders to a specific individual. “*And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you*” (1 Thes 5:12).

B. Suspension from the Lord’s Supper (cf. 2 Thes 3:13-15)

If individuals fail to respond to private admonishment, then the next level is “*suspension from the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper for a season.*” Here at suspension, the elders make the censure publicly known to the congregation.

We observe this principle in Paul’s 2nd letter to the Thessalonians:

But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary in doing good. And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother. (3:13-15)

C. Excommunication (5:4-5 cf. Mt 18:17)

If the brother fails to repent, then the elders are to proceed to excommunication. Excommunication is the final severing of connection between the so-called brother and the church. In Jesus’ words in Matthew 18, at this point he is to be to us “*like a heathen and a tax collector.*” In other words, he is no longer to be reckoned a Christian in need of discipleship but an unbeliever in need of evangelism.

Excommunication is the sober process by which a group of elders ultimately declares to an individual, “So far as we can determine by your behavior, you do not truly believe in Jesus Christ.”

VI. Conclusion