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The Practical Application of Matthew 18:15-18*

By WALTER H. BOUMAN

The Lord Jesus Christ has wonderfully endowed His Church upon earth. To His Church, to the Christians, He has given the power to open and to close heaven, to bind and to loose sinners. And this is no empty gesture on the part of the Lord of the Church, for the Lord Jesus very specifically says: "Verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Matt. 18:18. And just as our congregations in their constitutions provide that all things are to be done decently and in order, so they very properly insert the paragraph reading: "If after the fruitless application of the several grades of admonition in Matt. 18:15-18 a member becomes evident or manifest as an impenitent sinner and is excluded from the congregation," etc. . . . Accordingly, our Christian congregations and their pastors are well aware of the rights and privileges which the Lord of the Church has accorded them.

But Christians are to exercise such rights and privileges only according to the will and pleasure of God. It is not left to their own personal discretion and will whom they would exclude from the Christian congregation. God has limited their power, and He has done that in the familiar words of Matt. 18:15-18.

But in spite of the very carefully outlined rules and regulations of God as laid down in St. Matthew's Gospel, mistakes are sometimes made in their application. At times church discipline is not exercised at all. Then, again, there are wrong motives for instituting disciplinary action against a brother. And sometimes entirely wrong courses are followed. Hence it certainly will not be amiss, not time wasted, if we once again remind ourselves of the manner in which a congregation is to proceed in cases demanding disciplinary action. In our

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discussion we shall emphasize two points especially, namely: Whom may and should a congregation put under church discipline and eventually excommunicate? and: What mode of procedure must a congregation follow according to the Word of God?

I

In order to learn what disciplinary action really implies, whom a congregation may discipline and how a congregation ought to proceed in this matter, we do not consult our human reason, nor human prudence and wisdom, nor our own personal experiences. We do not sit and look about for some subject for disciplinary action, nor do we speculate on the mode of procedure should the occasion for action arise, so that everything in our congregation might be above reproach. Nor do we look for guidance and advice in these matters from the organizations and societies and courts of this world. By so doing we should certainly be led astray. Nay, rather, we study the Word of God, which is the Light upon our way. And the Word of God does not leave us in the lurch. A Christian congregation, first of all, is not a humanly instituted, but rather a divinely instituted organization, founded by God Himself. Hence God tells us who the members of this organization are to be, who may or may not be received into membership, who may or may not be excluded from its membership, and how we are to proceed in these matters. In a number of places Holy Writ speaks clearly of exclusion from the congregation and of the mode of procedure which must precede such exclusion. Plainly the Word of God tells us how a congregation and its members should deal with a brother who has trespassed. The first passage that comes to mind is the familiar words recorded in Matt. 18:15-18. Our first question, therefore, is: What does the Word of God, specifically Matthew 18, teach concerning the persons with whom a congregation may and must deal in disciplinary proceedings?

Introducing the subject, the Lord says: "If thy brother shall trespass against thee." V.15. The words speak of a brother, a fellow Christian, a fellow believer. Only one, therefore, who still would be recognized as a brother, "any man," as St. Paul says, "that is called a brother," 1 Cor. 5:11, who still is and desires to be known as a member, may be summoned by the congregation to be dealt with for disciplinary purposes.

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Whoever declares that he no longer wants to be known as a brother, whoever would have no further dealings with the congregation, can no longer be admonished by the congregation and cannot be formally excluded from membership in the congregation, but rather excludes himself. If, as is frequently the case, people refuse to appear before the congregation; if they refuse to submit to its admonition; if they refuse to have any further dealings with it, the congregation in a way is helpless; strictly speaking, it cannot excommunicate them, but must simply declare them people who have severed their connection with the congregation; and must regard them as persons that are without. (1 Cor. 5:12.)

But what does the word "brother" mean? Who is that "brother" with whom a Christian congregation may deal? According to the opinion of a surprisingly large number of people a congregation may deal only with such as have joined the congregation as voting members. Such are looked upon as the real, the actual, members of a congregation. All others, that is, all who take no part in the government of the congregation; all young people, the women, and the children very frequently are not considered subject to disciplinary action on the part of the congregation. Occasionally one will perhaps even meet people who for that reason hesitate to become voting members, thinking that by remaining in a more or less loose relation to the congregation, the latter could not discipline them and they would be at liberty to live more or less as they pleased. Nothing could be farther removed from the truth. And we must resolutely oppose such erroneous opinions. Our brethren are all those who together with us, together with the congregation, stand on the same confessional basis, who confess the same Lord and together with the congregation partake of Holy Communion. Even little children are members of the congregation, our brethren, having become members of the Church, of the congregation, by the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. Self-evidently a congregation will not undertake disciplinary action against little children and minors. For the time being they are as yet under the immediate care and supervision of their parents, who have been commanded in Scripture to bring up their children "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." (Eph. 6:4.) However, as these children advance in years; after they have been instructed at

home, in school, and in church in the chief parts of the Christian doctrine; after the congregation itself by the solemn rite of confirmation has declared them able to examine themselves and sufficiently instructed to be admitted to the Lord's Table, they come more and more under the immediate care and supervision of the congregation. Now they may also come in for disciplinary action, if there be reason for it. Of course, it is impossible to determine the exact time at which young people definitely can be subjected to disciplinary measures. The time will vary with different persons and under different circumstances. In every case Christian wisdom and prudence must decide. But we must staunchly defend the principle that the right to vote is under no circumstances the deciding factor in church membership. From the foregoing it is clear that all those who together with the congregation attend the blessed Sacrament may become subject to disciplinary proceedings; hence, all those who in a local congregation are united in confessional and altar fellowship. Be they men or women, young men or young women, voting or non-voting, they are all members of the congregation. Nor should a congregation ever hesitate to discipline wealthy, influential, respected members, should the necessity to do so arise.

When does this necessity confront a church? The Lord answers: "If thy brother shall trespass," i. e., if he sins. The sinning, trespassing brother is to be dealt with in disciplinary proceedings. What is sin? In describing sin the Evangelist uses a word (*ἀμαρτάνω*) which means to miss, to miss the mark, to err, to wander from the path of uprightness and honesty. Even pagan writers in the period of classical Greek have employed this word in a moral sense. In the New Testament it is used to designate erring from the divine Law, from the will of God. St. John writes: "Sin is lawlessness," or: "Sin is the transgression of the Law," 1 John 3:4, namely, sin is that which deviates from the Law, from the will of God. Disciplinary proceedings, then, can be begun only when a sin, a transgression of a clear commandment of God is involved. Offenses against man-made laws and ordinances do not warrant the institution of disciplinary action against a brother. Therefore, a congregation cannot excommunicate one of its members merely because he or she is guilty of transgressing a paragraph of the congregation's constitution, however whole-

some in itself such paragraph may be. And herein a Christian congregation is to be sharply distinguished from all human organizations and societies. These may justifiably exclude from membership all those who do not subscribe or submit to the rules and regulations of a given society. Such organizations can determine their membership at will. Not so a Christian congregation. A Christian congregation may receive into its membership only such as God would have it receive; a congregation may exclude from its membership only such as God has already excluded from membership in His flock. According to God's will a congregation is a communion of saints. Therefore a Christian congregation may receive into membership only such as together with the congregation confess the same faith and do not deny their faith by a godless, wicked life. Conversely, a Christian congregation may excommunicate such only as, according to the verdict of God's Word, are no longer Christians and concerning whom the Christian congregation has established the fact that they are to be looked upon as heathen men and publicans. But that may be done only if the offense in question is a transgression of God's Word, willful, wanton, persistent wrongdoing against God's clearly revealed will.

It is of utmost importance that a Christian congregation be entirely clear on this point and act accordingly. There are congregations and, even more so, individual members in our congregations who look with far greater diligence to the strict observance of their human rules and regulations than to the maintenance and observance of divine statutes; who are ever ready to excommunicate someone guilty of offending against the congregation's constitution, but who, on the other hand, are slow to act when a willful transgression of a clear word of God is submitted to them for final judgment and action. However, if a congregation cannot lay its finger definitely upon a clear word of God which the brother or the sister in question has transgressed, it is wrong and sinful from the very outset to start disciplinary procedure.

Certainly it is true—let us note it in passing—that a transgression of a human, or church, ordinance may at times involve a sin against the word and will of God. There, too, a brother is to be subjected to disciplinary action, not because of his transgression of a human ordinance, but rather because

of his sin against the Word of God. To illustrate, our congregations institute and maintain Christian day schools in order to enable parents in their midst to follow God's will, namely, to bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. If, however, a member does not send his children to the Christian day school, which in itself is a church institution, it may develop, upon investigation, that he does not rear his children as Christians at all, but permits them to go to ruin spiritually. Such a member is to be subjected to disciplinary proceedings because of the sinful neglect of the spiritual life of his children, not because of his failure to comply with a congregational ordinance, not because of his failure to send his children to the Christian day school. A similar case in point is the dealing of a Christian congregation with a member who has affiliated with a lodge or any other society built on and fostering un-Christian principles. In the first place, the Word of God nowhere says anything about secret societies, or lodges. But the Word of God does say, and says it very plainly: "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers." 2 Cor. 6:14 f. In dealing with such a member, the congregation must convince the erring brother that he is transgressing, trespassing this and similar clear passages of Scripture, and because of such transgression of the Word of God the congregation must, if he refuses to hear, eventually excommunicate him. We repeat, only because of a sin, a transgression of a word of God, may disciplinary action be begun against a brother.

"If thy brother shall trespass," says the Lord. He does not say, if you think, or if you believe, that your brother is sinning. The Lord simply presents the fact: "If thy brother shall trespass." From this we learn that the brother must actually have committed the sin for which he is to be disciplined. And the congregation must be in a position to prove, aye, actually must prove, that the brother has committed the sin. It does not suffice that a congregation thinks, or believes, that a brother has committed the sin of which he is accused, but the proof that he has actually committed it must be clearly established before all the members of the congregation. If, e. g., a brother is accused of the sin of dishonesty and untruthfulness, the proof has not as yet been brought by merely showing that here and there he has spoken gross untruths.

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Nor must it only be supposed and taken for granted that he did it knowingly and willfully, against his better knowledge and conscience, out of a false heart. Rather, this accusation must be proved. It is not easy in every case to bring such proof, but unless such proof is brought, we cannot institute disciplinary action, much less excommunication. Again the requisite is not only a clear proof that a brother has committed that particular sin, but that the sin is of such a nature that, as long as he does not repent of it, he cannot be a Christian. It happens repeatedly that congregation members are influenced by their personal convictions, especially during periods of great excitement, or when persons are involved who already have caused a congregation much distress, grief, and worry, and of whom the congregation would like to rid itself. In addition, the difference between a clear proof and a personal conviction of the guilt of the brother is not entirely and immediately clear to some members. There are many dear, faithful Christians who have suffered themselves to be carried away to use all sorts of ill-considered measures by their mistaken zeal for the Word of God. It is very necessary, therefore, that the pastor carefully take heed that the charges against the brother are proved beyond the shadow of a doubt.

"If thy brother shall trespass," says our Lord. If, then, church-discipline action is to be taken against a brother, he must be guilty of a sin, of a transgression of a divine commandment. An aspect, already adverted to, must be emphasized. Not every sin committed by a Christian necessarily warrants the institution of disciplinary action against him. If that were the case, a congregation would have to discipline all of its members without exception constantly and keep them under disciplinary proceedings all the time. We Christians daily and hourly sin much in thought, word, and deed. Often before a Christian even suspects it, he has fallen into sin, either because of the weakness of his flesh or because of ignorance. Aside from all other considerations, it simply would be impossible to proceed against such sins of weakness and ignorance in disciplinary actions. In His directions for church discipline the Lord, therefore, clearly indicates that He does not refer to all sins, and every sin. After He had directed His Christians that they alone, as individuals first of all, deal

with and rebuke the sinning brother because of his sins, He adds: "If he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother." The point in church discipline is to *gain the brother*. If he is to be gained, he either must have been lost or stand in danger of being lost. Disciplinary action, then, is not concerned with the daily sins of weakness and thoughtlessness of the Christians. For such a Christian makes amends before God by daily contrition and repentance. Such sins a Christian daily confesses before his God, and he pleads for mercy and forgiveness for Jesus' sake. Very correctly *Der Lutheraner* says: "Perhaps your neighbor has a peculiarity, a temperamental defect, things which indeed proceed from a sinful nature and are interwoven with sin, yet pertain to those weaknesses only which adhere even to the most pious Christians, because he has not as yet entirely put off the flesh. On account of such defects you may certainly admonish him in a brotherly fashion, but they are not cases for disciplinary action. If one would accurately weigh and judge every word, every facial expression, there would be no end of punctiliousness, of hairsplitting, of scruples. Away with that! The more sincere you are with yourself, the more easily will you find the right measure for dealing with others." Vol. 12, p. 154. Whatever is to be done with the brethren in such cases is covered by the words of the Apostle, saying: "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." Gal. 6:1-2. In disciplinary action against a brother we are to deal with him because he is guilty of such sins as destroy faith, as threaten him with eternal perdition unless he penitently confesses them and ceases from his sinning. The Apostle mentions a list of such sins on account of which he who is called a brother must be put out of the congregation unless he repents. He writes: "If any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat. . . . Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person." 1 Cor. 5:11, 13. Those sins in no wise exhaust the list on account of which disciplinary action might be instituted against a brother. We might also mention indifferent and negligent use of the means of grace; stubborn

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retention and defense of soul-destroying errors, enmity, persistent implacability, etc. It is impossible to mention every individual mortal sin. Every brother is to be admonished who is guilty of a willful, wanton sin which destroys his faith and deprives him of his state of grace. Whatever his sin may be, the point is to gain the brother.

II

Next we ask: What procedure must a congregation follow in disciplinary measures against one of its members? This, too, is a very important question. Much depends on whether or not a congregation follows the right procedure. In His Word God did not only tell us that we should practice church discipline, but also how we are to practice it. *How* to practice church discipline is therefore altogether essential. In this matter the Lord is more explicit than in many other things. For instance, God has revealed His will to Christians that they are to bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. But He did not give any detailed instructions as to what means are to be employed for the attainment of this end. Such details He has left to their Christian prudence and wisdom. The most common and most adaptable means under our circumstances for the Christian training and instruction of the children in God's Word and Luther's doctrine pure is the Christian day school. But one may think of other means as well and apply them as circumstances demand and dictate. If only the children are really taught God's Word, are really reared in the fear of the Lord, God's will has been fulfilled, and no one has the right to prescribe the ways and means, the *how*, to Christian parents. Or, to cite another example, God has commanded us to use His Word diligently. We are to read it privately as well as preach and hear it publicly. How this is to be done God did not state specifically. Hence, the Christian Church, using her liberty, has set aside Sunday as the special day on which Christians gather to hear and to consider the Word of God. Other ways, too, may be possible. In the realm of church discipline, on the other hand, God did not only state that we are to practice church discipline and who is to be placed under disciplinary action and, eventually, to be excluded from the Christian congregation, and then left it to our wisdom

to devise the best ways and means of instituting and carrying out disciplinary proceedings. No, here God has done more. In His Word He very definitely defines the course to be followed. Hence a congregation is held to follow this course and not to substitute another. If someone questions the correctness of the procedure in a given case of disciplinary action, the congregation has no right to retort that that person certainly had to be disciplined; he deserved to be excluded; hence, it is no one's concern whether or not the proper course was followed exactly. If the disciplinary action is not carried out in the order prescribed by Christ, the whole procedure falls to the ground. The course, the manner according to which the erring brother is to be dealt with according to our Lord's prescription certainly belongs to the essence of church discipline.

Before we proceed to study the several stages in the course of church discipline, let us consider the proper attitude and spirit in which such disciplinary action is to be conducted. Without the proper attitude and spirit the whole procedure becomes a mere empty form or gesture, even though externally the letter of Christ's directions is observed. What is the proper attitude and spirit in which disciplinary proceedings are to be conducted? Briefly stated, it is this, that disciplinary proceedings must never be conducted in a legalistic, but always in an evangelical manner. What this implies our Lord indicates in Matthew 18. To him who is to admonish his brother "between thee and him alone" the Lord Christ says: "If he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother." This is the point, the end, that should be, and ever must remain, the end of all disciplinary action, to gain the brother, to gain him who is walking the way to perdition, who stands in danger of being eternally lost. What does it mean to gain the brother? Scripture uses the word "gain" several times in the same sense as it is used here. E. g., Peter admonishes wives "to be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the Word, they may also without the word be *won* by the conversation of the wives." 1 Pet. 3:1. And St. Paul writes thus: "For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might *gain* the more." He explains this further, saying, "I am made all things to all men that I might by all means *save* some,"

that is, to save from eternal perdition. 1 Cor. 9:19, 22. That is the sense of "to gain" here, namely, to save the brother from perdition, to gain him, not merely as a friend or boon companion, but to gain him for Christ and His Church, for eternal salvation.

That such gaining of the brother is intended by our Lord to be the purpose and end of the whole disciplinary proceedings is evident, too, from the context of our passage. The Lord says: "The Son of Man is come to save that which was lost." Chap. 18:11. And then He relates the parable of the man who had an hundred sheep and who, if one is lost, leaves the ninety and nine and "goeth into the mountains and seeketh that which is gone astray. And if so be that he find it . . . he rejoiceth more of that sheep than of the ninety and nine which went not astray." Vv. 12-13. According to the Lord's description, His merciful, redeeming, saving, searching love diligently goes out after every sinner to save him from his evil way, to bring him back into the fold. To accomplish this the Lord shuns no labor, no toil. Tirelessly He goes out after every lost sheep, seeking it till it be found. And what joy when it is found! There is joy in heaven before the angels of God over every sinner that repenteth. And the Lord adds: "Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish." V. 14. Peter explains these words, saying: "But is long-suffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." 2 Pet. 3:9. It is the gracious will of God that none of these little ones, none of the sheep of His fold, be lost. He would graciously preserve them all and bring them into heaven. Therefore our gracious Lord goes out after every soul that has gone astray, or would stray from the right, narrow way, goes out after it with a shepherd's faithfulness. His Savior's heart bursts with redeeming mercy for poor sinners who are going to their perdition. And then the Lord continues: "Moreover, if thy brother shall trespass against thee," etc. The disciples of the Lord are to be His co-workers in this glorious task. As their Lord and Savior did, so they, too, should go out after the erring one, follow after every individual with all love and faithfulness that they might find him again and bring the lost sheep into the fold. Through His Christians, through their faithful labors upon the souls of

men by means of the Word of God, the Lord, the great Shepherd of the sheep, would perform His work in the individual sheep of His fold. For this reason He has commanded His Church to institute disciplinary action against the erring, sinning brother.

One of the purposes of such disciplinary action, indeed, is the exclusion of manifest and impenitent sinners from the Christian congregation. Such as will not hearken but will continue in their sins the congregation should not suffer to remain in its midst, but exclude them. "Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person," says the Apostle. 1 Cor. 5:13. The congregation of the Lord, as far as it is possible in this life, should present itself as an holy church which simply cannot endure persistent, wanton sinners in its midst. It should exclude the wicked in order to curb the offense and to preserve the remaining Christians from it. It should not countenance manifest wickedness, so that Christians the more fear and guard against evil-doing. If a congregation tolerates manifest, impenitent sinners in its midst, ungodly, worldly ways will soon penetrate into its life more and more. But this purpose of the disciplinary action is of secondary importance only; it enters in only after it has become evident that all love and friendliness, all compassionate seeking of the erring brother is in vain; after it has become clearly evident that such a one is no longer a brother, but an ungodly, wicked person who refuses to desist from his sins and stubbornly, willfully continues in them. As long as the congregation still deals with the sinner, the motive and spirit of the merciful, compassionate love of Jesus to the sinner must rule, must imbue the whole procedure from beginning to end, aye, must seal the entire proceedings. Never, never must the end and purpose be to get rid of the person concerned, even though outwardly the form of the procedure is exactly observed. The goal must invariably remain this, to save sinners, to preserve an immortal, blood-bought soul from eternal perdition. When the final and saddest step is taken, namely, the exclusion of the sinner, the congregation of course does this to separate these wanton sinners from their fellowship according to God's command. Yet here, too, the congregation is imbued with the spirit of Jesus' love for the sinners. The congregation looks even upon excommunication as a means, the means of

last resort, to bring the sinner to a knowledge of his deplorable state. The congregation still has the intention, even in this last stage, even in the pronouncement of an excommunication, to bring the sinner to repentance, God granting grace. Such a one should become terrified at his sins, as he realizes that his brethren, that the Church of the Lord, is excluding him from its fellowship, and thereby from heaven itself.

Let the pastor, who must guide the disciplinary proceedings of the congregation, be diligently and anxiously concerned that the spirit of merciful, compassionate love to the sinner is never denied. It certainly is commendable that the pastor at the institution of disciplinary action against a brother earnestly and emphatically remind the congregation of the aim and purpose of such disciplinary action, namely, to gain the brother if at all possible. If the congregation is fully aware of this purpose, namely, to gain the brother, if every member is imbued with the merciful, compassionate love of Christ, which seeks the lost sinner, the procedure as a rule will be right, and the congregation will be forearmed against many a blunder. Above all things, the members will also guard themselves against impetuous rashness, against the passionate desire to conclude the matter as speedily as possible. They will spare no pains, they will exercise patience at every stage, as long as there is a spark of hope to save the sinner; they will even take note of the faintest symptoms of repentance and conversion, and rejoice.

The desire to gain the brother also tends to safeguard the congregation against being satisfied with half measures, with a mere lip confession by the sinner without the corresponding change in life. The congregation's object is not mere compliance with outward formality, but the saving of a sinner. With compassionate love to the sinner alive in the heart, one becomes stern, at times very stern, perhaps even speaks harshly and sharply, preaches the Law in all its terrifying severity to the sinner, and yet he who has been reprimanded thus will, nevertheless, note that the brother truly hates sin, because it is an abomination to God and brings men into eternal perdition; but that he loves the person of the sinner and seeks to save him through such gravity and earnestness. Where this purpose is lacking entirely, or where it has been crowded into the background, disciplinary action

is more or less a mere empty form and may do more harm than good. Incidentally, such a spirit of the love of Christ dwells in the hearts of those only who have experienced something of the power of sin and of the far greater power of grace in themselves. And the more vividly a Christian realizes his own sinfulness, the more vividly he is conscious of his own lost and damnable condition, the more vividly he realizes that he is saved, as was the malefactor upon the cross, by free, pure grace, that he lives daily through the grace of God in Christ Jesus, the more readily will his heart throb with earnest, sincere love for the sinner, the better able will he be to admonish and to rebuke the sinner with holy gravity and yet with winsome friendliness. May God ever grant our congregations such people as take part in disciplinary proceedings with the spirit and attitude of Christ. A Pharisaical, self-righteous spirit has no business whatsoever in matters of church discipline, for it is always joined with lovelessness and arrogance toward the brother, especially toward the fallen brother.

But who are the persons, or what sort of organization is it that is to exercise church discipline? The Lord Christ says: "Tell it unto the church." According to this direction Jesus designates the congregation as that organization which is to deal with the sinner in the final instance and which is to carry the procedure to its end. The Lord has vested this final judgment in the hands of the congregation. The Lord did not place another organization over and above the congregation, to whom an excommunicated person could appeal and to whose decision the congregation would have to bow. And when our Lord Christ says: "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there I am in the midst of them" (v. 20), He actually says that He, the Lord Himself, would always be with His congregation; even then when it rebukes and admonishes a brother and finally excludes him from its midst; that it is He Himself who through the congregation deals with, admonishes, and rebukes the sinner, and finally, when all other efforts have failed, pronounces him a heathen man and a publican.

But who is that congregation of which the Lord speaks here? By the term congregation, church, the Lord here does not mean the Church in its entirety, not the Church universal,

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not the whole body of believers from every clime and nation. Under the designation "church" used here the Lord rather means the local congregation, those Christians who in a given locality confess the Lord and who have established the ministry, the Office of the Keys, in their midst. The Lord, then, has the local congregation in mind, in which, according to its outward form, one will usually find some unbelievers, hypocrites. Yet in spite of this admixture of tares it is, nevertheless, for the sake of the believers found in it and for the sake of the preaching of the pure Word of God, the true Church and the congregation of the Lord. In the local congregation, therefore, even if it consist of only two or three members (v. 20), the Lord has vested the highest, final judgment. To the local congregation the sin of the brother is finally to be told. The local congregation is to deal with the brother, and finally, if he neglects to hear the church, pronounce him a heathen man and a publican. Not the pastor, nor yet a special group in the congregation, but the congregation itself has received from the Lord the power to exclude manifest and impenitent sinners. Therefore St. Paul also wrote with reference to the fornicator at Corinth: "For I verily, as absent in the body, but present in the spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and in my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such an one unto Satan, for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." 1 Cor. 5:3-5.

But what is our actual practice? We do not "tell" a brother's fault to the entire congregation, but to a representative gathering of the congregation only, to the so-called voters' assembly, namely, to those members who have been granted the right of suffrage in the congregation; in other words, to those who have obtained the privilege to participate directly in the government and guidance and administration of the congregation. Indeed, it is true, the voters' assembly is not the entire congregation. But it does represent the entire congregation and forms just the kind of organization which is eminently suited to undertake and exercise church discipline. From the very outset it is obvious that children and minors are not capable of participating in this procedure. Proper

church discipline requires a certain amount of Christian knowledge and intelligence, a certain amount of maturity of character. Furthermore, the Lord Himself has excluded women from publicly participating in the discussions in the congregation. Accordingly, the custom has developed among us to grant suffrage to such male members of the congregation only as have come of age and to vest these voters with the administration of the affairs of the congregation as well as with the exercise of church discipline. Indeed, it may happen that the carrying out of admonition in the third stage may be restricted to even a smaller group. This is done especially when a woman is involved who would be averse to appearing before a larger assembly of men. The end of Church discipline, namely, to gain the sister, is usually more easily attained in a smaller assembly.

But regardless of whether a smaller or a larger group deals with the erring brother, the matter still concerns the entire congregation. Every member of the congregation, therefore, should be given an opportunity to voice possible scruples concerning an excommunication, if not in person, then through others. Hence, when the congregation has finally resolved to excommunicate the impenitent sinner, we observe the custom of deferring the announcement of an excommunication until the resolution has been ratified in a subsequent meeting of the congregation. Thus opportunity is given to make the verdict known to the entire congregation so that every member may register his or her misgivings with the pastor, should he or she so desire. After all, therefore, the congregation does the admonishing, rebuking, and eventual excommunicating of the sinner.

Nothing prevents a congregation, however, from following the practice of consulting with other experienced and approved men of God, especially in difficult cases in which pastor and congregation themselves are not entirely clear as to how to proceed. It is entirely permissible to consult with pastors of neighboring congregations, or with the Visitor of one's circuit, or with the President of the District, and to ask their opinion and advice. This is not only permissible, but also wholesome and particularly commendable if the congregation is young and its pastor inexperienced. How many a congregation would have been prevented from enter-

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ing upon a wrong course of church discipline, which it later had to retrace, had it previously sought and heeded the counsel of approved Christians and pastors! And in so doing a congregation does in no wise cede any of its rights, vested in her by God. She hears the mature counsel of these men, perhaps will follow it; yet it is the congregation which finally decides the matter and eventually renders the verdict. It is especially advisable to seek the counsel and help of others when strife and factions have arisen in a congregation because of a case of church discipline. If the congregation is rent by factions, highly excited by strife, it is hardly in a position to carry out brotherly discipline in the spirit of Christ and with the determination to gain the brother. At such times human passions and prejudices will usually becloud and thwart clear thinking and mature deliberation. For man's wrath and passions never do what is right in the sight of God. Indeed, in that event it may even become necessary for the congregation to table the case and wait until the minds have calmed down and peace and harmony have been restored. There are periods in the life of the congregation during which it is utterly unable to consider a case of church discipline.

The organization of our Synod is a voluntary human, ecclesiastical order, organized among other things for the purpose of having its pastors and congregations supervise each other so that by the grace of God every member of the Synod remain pure in doctrine and practice. And our Synod has adopted the wholesome regulation that men, especially elected, such as the President and the Visitors, visit the several congregations at stated intervals in order to learn by personal observation how the several congregations uphold purity of doctrine and practice in their midst. The principle that the congregation is the highest and last tribunal in the Church is not at all violated by Synod's direction to its Visitors: "The Visitor shall also inquire whether there have been excommunications, and if there have been such, he shall read the minutes referring to them." *Synodical Handbook*, 1937, p. 42. Synod did not adopt such a rule with the idea that the action and verdict of the congregation is valid only after it has been reviewed and confirmed by Synod, as though Synod were a tribunal above the congregation.

Synod merely wants to carry out the principle for which it was organized, namely, the mutual supervision of congregations and pastors with regard to doctrine, life, and practice. And an upright congregation will gladly permit its Visitor to examine the records which refer to cases of church discipline. Aye, a congregation will, and finally must, open its books on matters of church discipline procedure to any Christian brother who is interested. It must justify its procedure before other Christians if and when the correctness and validity of the procedure is questioned. Indeed, a congregation will rejoice if an experienced man, such as the Visitor is and ought to be, reviews its proceedings. A congregation is aware of the fact that in spite of its very best intentions, mistakes, sometimes grave mistakes, are likely to be made. Therefore, the practice of having Synod, either through its President or the Visitor, pass an opinion on the case tends to ease the mind, and congregations should gladly stand ready to correct any mistakes or errors that are pointed out to them as being at variance with the Word of God. In so doing, the congregation, nevertheless, knows all along that it must deal and judge in the matter, and finally does deal, judge, and pronounce the verdict.

What procedure must a congregation follow in order to institute disciplinary action and carry it through in a God-directed and God-pleasing manner? When a congregation takes up a case of church discipline, it must undoubtedly first of all become clearly convinced that the case in question really belongs before its forum. Our Lord has prescribed a very definite order according to which we are to deal with a brother overtaken by a fault. He does not say: "If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell it unto the church." But He says: "If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone; if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established." Vv. 15-16. Only after a sinner has neglected to hear this group is his fault to be told to the church. So the congregation must carefully guard against transgressing or violating the order of Christ. Hence the sainted Dr. Walther writes in his *Pastoraltheologie*: "The essential

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basis of correct church discipline is this, that the order of brotherly admonition, prescribed by Christ in Matt. 18:15-17, be not violated in any manner whatsoever, either by the individual members of the congregation, or by the congregation as a whole, or by the pastor." P. 320. This, however, in no wise means that a congregation under no circumstances could ever deal with a sinning brother without previous brotherly admonition. Clearly the Lord speaks in Matthew 18 of sins still hidden. He does not merely say: "If thy brother shall trespass," but adds very significantly: "against thee." (We believe that the words "against thee" have a sound textual basis.) Obviously, the Lord does not wish to say that we are to admonish the brother only in the event that his sin is directed against us, and that the matter doesn't concern us at all if his sin is directed against our neighbor, or other people, or against God. That brother trespasses against us, too, when we become witnesses of his trespassing. Whosoever sees his brother trespassing, whosoever knows that he has turned from the way of life to the road of perdition, should intervene at once and admonish him with the Word of God. But as long as it is he only who sees the trespassing of the neighbor, as long as the latter's sin is still unknown to others, he first should see him privately, and then in the presence of several witnesses, in order that the fault of the brother be not unduly publicized.

Therefore, in all cases of private sins private brotherly admonition must be practiced. And unless the first and second grade of admonition have been duly observed, we cannot speak properly of actual church discipline. This is not the place to enter into a detailed discussion of the method and manner of brotherly admonition, since every pastor certainly will be in a position to instruct his members properly on this matter. We pastors, however, continually must remind our Christians that the object of brotherly admonition always is and must be not merely an outward conformity to the letter, but the gaining of the sinner. Christian love and prudence must, therefore, arrange everything in such a way that by the grace of God this end be attained and not hindered by any fault of ours. Above all, everything must be avoided which might be personally distasteful or even perhaps grievous and offensive to the sinner. A single ad-

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monition at every stage is hardly ever sufficient, but according to the circumstances in the individual case such admonition is to be continued and repeated as long as there is hope that the fallen brother will listen. We should actually rebuke him, actually seek to convince him of his wrongdoing. We must really in all love, patience, and solicitude work to gain him.

There are cases — and these are the rule rather than the exception in actual practice — where private brotherly admonition need not precede actual church discipline. Such is the case when public sins are involved, sins that are known to the whole congregation, or at least to a large portion of the congregation. For if the sin of the brother is public, then all to whom it is known have the solemn duty to admonish him, then the congregation is, as it were, the body against whom the sin was perpetrated. In such a case, therefore, private brotherly admonition is not absolutely necessary. Yet even in such cases it will prove wholesome to postpone summoning of the sinner before the forum of the congregation and to deal privately with him, because he quite likely is more approachable when this course is followed. If the sinner is first dealt with privately and then rebuked and admonished before several carefully selected witnesses, prospects for gaining the brother are frequently brighter than if he were admonished publicly at once. According to Christ's direction, no means of saving a soul from perdition is to be left untried. Christian wisdom and love demand in such cases, too, that private admonition precede the disciplinary action. Only in special cases of grave public offense, where delay is dangerous, it will become mandatory to resort at once to public disciplinary action.

Since Christ's prescribed method of brotherly admonition is not to be violated, the congregation must first of all be certain that the case in question properly belongs before its forum; that the several grades of admonition have been observed according to the spirit of Christ; that the sinner actually has been rebuked in a brotherly manner, and rebuked in vain. It is common practice among us for the pastor to present the case to the congregation, stating what has been done with respect to the sinning brother, so that the congregation from the outset is aware that the essential steps have

been taken. In our midst cases of church discipline are usually brought to the attention of the pastor and the board of elders before they are presented to the congregation. By and large, this is a good, wholesome custom. Pastor and elders are thereby placed in a position once more to review the case, perhaps once more to deal with the sinner. Many a case of church discipline was brought to a God-pleasing conclusion in this manner, and the sinner was saved through the admonishings of the church council without burdening the entire congregation. One thing must not be overlooked, however: such action of the pastor and elders is not the first or second grade of admonition; it actually belongs to the third stage of the entire proceedings. Here pastor and elders deal as officers of the congregation, in the name and in behalf of the church. If one who has first privately, then before witnesses, but in vain, dealt with an erring brother, he may, for reasons of Christian prudence, bring the matter, ready for the congregation, first to the attention of the board of elders, so that they, too, may consult on the case and seek to gain the erring brother. But if their efforts also prove futile, the case is ready to be presented to the entire congregation. Naturally no member is absolutely bound to present the matter through the agency of the board of elders. According to God's Word, he could come at once before the congregation with his witnesses. Yet in most instances it is advisable to approach the congregation by way of the board of elders. Never should the pastor or the board of elders take up matters which have not as yet passed through the first and second grades of admonition, unless indeed a public sin, a public offense is involved. Otherwise, the doors would be opened to all manner of gossip. The pastor himself would stand in danger of being involved in such gossip, and confidence in him would be undermined.

If the elders have reviewed the case and, after mature deliberation, have arrived at the conclusion that the matter properly belongs before the forum of the congregation; if they have tried repeatedly, but, alas, in vain to convince and gain the sinning brother, it is best that the pastor present the case to the congregation. And he should state at the very outset that everything demanded by Christ has

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been done so far as the brother is concerned; that, unfortunately, all efforts have proved futile; and that now the congregation would have to concern itself with the case.

Here a question has been raised which in some instances has caused some difficulty. According to Christ's direction every word is to be established in the mouth of two or three witnesses. Particularly in cases of church discipline all accusations must be proved by witnesses. What if the sinner denies the first grade of admonition, denies ever having been admonished face to face? Must such admonition also be established by witnesses, and how is this possible? We answer, according to the very nature of the first grade of admonition the presence of witnesses is impossible. The Lord Christ Himself has excluded all witnesses in His directions. A Christian is to rebuke his brother between "thee and him alone." If the matter is handled and conducted properly, it hardly ever becomes necessary to furnish such proof before the congregation. If a sin that is known to many is involved, private brotherly admonition, as we have seen, is not absolutely necessary; hence no proof for such admonition is needed either. If secret sins are involved, the first grade of admonition is followed by the second, that is, in the presence of witnesses; and at this stage the question actually ought to be decided. If the brother at the time of the second grade denies having committed the sin and if witnesses and proofs are lacking, the case is dropped, the *no* of the one party being as valid as the *yes* of the other. The whole matter should be committed to God, who in due time, according to His will, can reveal the secret sin. If the accused brother does not deny his guilt, but denies the first admonition — an infrequent occurrence — it is perhaps better to drop the matter for the time being and to continue with private admonition. If, on the other hand, the sinning brother submits to admonition in the presence of witnesses, that is, in the second stage, then these men are also witnesses to the congregation that everything has been done according to Christ's directions.

When the special case has been presented to the congregation and the congregation has become convinced that by public disciplinary action the divinely ordained procedure of private brotherly admonition is in no wise being violated,

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the actual public hearing can begin, provided the accused brother is present. If he is not present, he is to be invited to appear at the next meeting of the congregation. This invitation should clearly state why his presence before the congregation is desired and why the congregation must institute disciplinary action against him. A brief remark also ought to refer definitely to the sin of which the brother is accused and on account of which church discipline proceedings are being instituted against him. For obvious reasons it is best to transmit this invitation in writing rather than by word of mouth. Such an invitation can be written by the secretary of the congregation. If he does not feel equal to the task, the pastor himself had better assume the responsibility. Let us note in passing that the tenor of the letter should be one of friendliness. Everything that could possibly offend the brother must be scrupulously excluded. One does not wish to repel the brother, but to gain him.

It is of utmost importance that this letter of invitation actually reaches the person involved and that this can be proved, should such proof be demanded. Therefore, it is not advisable simply to send such a letter by mail. It smacks too much of ordinary business routine and makes it difficult to prove that the invitation did actually reach the accused person. If one, however, must insist on using the mails the letter at least ought to be registered. A postal card, which can be read by all, is self-evidently never to be used. The best manner of delivering this invitation undoubtedly is this: Let two or more members of the congregation deliver this invitation in person to the accused brother. Thereby these brethren are placed in a position to discuss the matter with the brother and to hear from him at once whether or not he intends to be present at the next meeting.

What is to be done if the sinning brother does not heed the invitation, if he does not appear at the next meeting of the congregation? Let no one rashly conclude that the brother does not intend to come and that he will not hear the congregation. Possibly he intended to come and to deal with the congregation but was prevented by matters that could not be postponed, or something else intervened. The congregation will repeat the invitation. This should be done even when it is evident that the sinning brother had no in-

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tion of coming, that he even declared to the representatives of the congregation that he refuses to appear before the congregation, that the congregation might as well delete his name from the roster of members. Even then a congregation will not at once cease all efforts. Following the example of Christ, the congregation should go out after the sinners, the lost sheep, with all patience and faithfulness. The immortal soul of a sinner is in jeopardy. Hence, the congregation will repeat its invitation, making it more urgent, insistent, and earnest. Such members as are close to him, above all the pastor, should visit him and try to awaken his conscience by pointing out to him the danger in which his poor soul is and reminding him of the love of the brethren who are trying to save his soul from perdition by their pleading and admonition. Sometimes instruction also is in order. Perhaps the brother involved does not know what this ordinance of Christ implies. Therefore, it is well to show him that Christ has commanded His Church to deal in this manner with a brother, that his soul's welfare and salvation is thereby sought. In many instances such efforts have had the result that the brother became willing to appear before the congregation.

If it finally becomes evident that the sinning brother will not attend the meeting nor hear the congregation, but refuses to be dealt with as a brother, in short, that all pleadings and admonitions are futile, he is to be considered as one who is "without." 1 Cor. 5:12. The congregation cannot actually excommunicate him, but it will declare him to be one who has excluded himself, with whom the congregation has no further dealings, who is a Christian brother no longer. However, the accused should be notified before such a declaration is made or such action is taken by the congregation. The final invitation which is sent to him ought to be worded so as to convey clearly the understanding that the congregation must regard him as one who has excluded himself from the congregation unless he appears in the next meeting. Here again the greatest care ought to be exercised by the congregation that this final letter of invitation actually reaches the person involved.

What is to be done if and when the brother does appear and shows a willingness to deal with the congregation? We

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have noted above that the letter of invitation ought to contain a short reference to the purpose of his citation to appear before the congregation as well as to the sin of which he has been accused. Once again his offense is mentioned before the members of the congregation. Obviously the brother ought to be shown that he has been overtaken in a fault which jeopardizes his eternal salvation unless it is repented of. He must be told in all friendliness yet with all earnestness and determination that on account of such a mortal sin he has forfeited his right to membership in a Christian congregation. The congregation with all earnestness must plead with him to turn from his wicked way and live. Such rebuking, admonishing, pleading, ought to be done without prejudice, objectively and impersonally, in a manner that certainly reflects the love and spirit of Christ. It must become clearly evident to the sinning brother: "My brethren in faith surely abhor sin but love the person of the sinner." Luther says: "There" (in the congregation) "it should be stated: this is the sin which has been committed, and he also refuses to hear any one. And here now every one ought to condemn this wickedness and pronounce the verdict, namely, it was not right of him to do so, so that such a manifest sinner be not deceived by the thought that he is still a Christian, and thus remains in sin." Stoeckhardt, *Bibl. Gesch. N. T.*, p. 155.

"But if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican." V. 17. When even the rebuking, pleading, and admonishing of the congregation are refused, when it finally becomes evident that in spite of all efforts the sinning brother stubbornly persists in his sin, he is to be excluded from the Christian congregation as a manifest and impenitent sinner. But before this final action can be taken, before excommunication can be resolved upon, every single member of the congregation must be convinced that the brother in question is a stubbornly impenitent sinner. And this can become manifest only by repeated, intensified admonition on the part of the individual members as well as of the congregation as a whole. Note the words: "If he shall not hear thee"; "If he neglect to hear them"; "If he neglect to hear the church." Accordingly, not the sin for which he is rebuked, but rather his stubborn refusal to hear

finally reveals him as an impenitent and manifest sinner. By committing a sin a brother may and often does fall from grace, but whether he is stubbornly impenitent will become manifest only after he refuses to hear the repeated admonitions as they are prescribed by Jesus. Therefore if one deals carefully, circumspectly, and patiently according to Christ's direction, finally even the weakest Christian will realize that the brother in question is a heathen man and a publican. The final step, excommunication, requires unanimous consent on the part of the congregation. And to reach such unanimity instruction is at times required, instruction to the point where it is clear even to the weakest Christian that the brother under discipline is to be regarded a heathen man and a publican. Note the change toward the end of this text. We begin to deal with a brother. But if all of our efforts prove futile, he who was formerly a brother is now to be unto us as a heathen man and a publican, i. e., an impenitent, unbelieving person, whose sins are unforgiven, who is estranged from God, who now lives without God and without hope in this world. Everyone in the congregation is to look upon him as such a one and treat him accordingly. All brotherly associations with him are to cease.

Let us repeat that even this final step, this conclusion of a case of church discipline, this drastic and far-reaching action of the congregation, the excommunication of the manifest and impenitent sinner from the Christian congregation, the breaking off of all brotherly relationship with him, has only one end and purpose, namely, to gain the brother. This is evident from St. Paul's instruction concerning the incestuous person in Corinth, namely: "To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus Christ." 1 Cor. 5:5. And that such is the purpose of excommunication is evident further from St. Paul's instruction to the members of the congregation at Corinth regarding the treatment of him who had repented. They are to "forgive him and comfort him and confirm their love toward him." 2 Cor. 2:7-8. For if one is filled with the desire to gain the brother, then, in turn, there is also great joy if such earnest admonition, such solemn pronouncement of excommunication has had the desired result. And a person who desires to gain the brother will certainly

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gladly stand ready to forgive the sorrowing, shamefaced sinner everything. Filled with joy and gratitude, he will say: "This our brother was dead, but by the grace of God he liveth again; he was lost, but God has so blessed our rebuking of him that he was found again." Not to be rid of him, rather to gain him; not to ruin him, rather to save him, such is the purpose of excommunication. This is the will of our blessed Savior, and this is also taught by His Apostles. The congregation will, therefore, joyfully again acknowledge such penitent sinners as members and fully restore to them their rights, in no wise paying heed to the blasphemies of a sneering world. And the entire procedure, conducted according to the directions of Jesus and carried out in His spirit, and with the end in view of gaining the brother, hence marked by love, sympathy, and commiseration, has the approval of the exalted Head of the Church. He Himself says: "Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth, shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." V. 18. In following this course we shall have the conviction, as Luther says, "that this is as valid and certain, in heaven also, as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us Himself."

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