

## Confrontation or Diplomacy

*‘Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him.’*

No other direct commandment of our Lord is more assiduously ignored and avoided than the one found in Luke 17:3 and Matthew 18:15. Nothing has gained me more alienation and hostility from some brethren (?) and endeared me more to others than my poor attempts to obey it. More than one well-intentioned brother has warned me that my pursuit of its injunction was losing me friends and making me most unpopular. How can such a thing be? We can well understand the world’s aversion to principles of Christian conduct, but should we not expect Christians (especially ministers of the gospel) to love the truth put into practice? Personally, I value no one’s friendship and fellowship so highly as those who have been kind and courageous enough to rebuke me in my error. *“Open rebuke is better than secret love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful” (Proverbs 27:5-6).*

But to the bulk of professing Christendom, that command is poison. It seems to be an internal problem: Men have neither the guts to speak the word of rebuke, nor the stomach to receive it from others. These verses do not stand alone. “Reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine” (1 Timothy 5:20). “Rebuke them sharply” (Titus 1:13). “Rebuke with all authority” (Titus 2:15). And in a thousand ways the principle of this precept is established in God’s dealings with His people all over the Bible. Many preachers are very courageous to rebuke with fervent indignation in a general sense for the safety and dignity of their pulpit. But when it comes to facing offenders personally and spelling out their error in no uncertain terms, their white-hot courage cools to the sick yellow of cowardice and compromise.

No little amount of the division, disharmony, hypocrisy, childish immaturity, worldliness and carnality among us can be traced to our wicked unbelief of the wisdom, goodness, and suitability of the personal and corporate Christian rebuke.

If I have stirred an interest in mending our ways in respect to this commandment, perhaps we should make certain we understand what we are talking about in the Christian rebuke. First, let us dismiss from our minds what it is not. To rebuke is not to rail, to scold, to blame, to nag and weary persons with continual criticism. In the common vernacular, it is not to “put someone down”. These tear down and destroy rather than build up and edify. They divide rather than unite. They are works of the flesh that require no grace – only malice, selfishness, pride, strife and envy. We must be vigilant that the Christian rebuke is free from any fleshy taint.

In the New Testament the word is translated from two Greek words. The first one is *epitimaō*, which literally means to “set a weight upon”. It means to charge, to make incumbent, to demand action. It urges response. The other word is *elegcho*, which means to convict, to bring to a guilty verdict. It has the connotation of *convincing* a person of his error.

One other word deserves some close attention. In regard to the Creteans, Paul urges Timothy to “*rebuke them sharply (Titus 1:13) that they may be sound in the faith*”. “Sharply” is translated from the Greek *apotomos*, which literally means cutting, severely. The usual religious mentality thinks of sharp, cutting language that inflicts pain as un-Christian and to be avoided at all cost. But it is clear here that precisely that sort of communication is what is needed to ground some people in the faith. Having made that point we should take care that such severe tones are not the normal and common way of rebuke. Paul writes to the recalcitrant Corinthians, pleading their repentance lest he should be compelled to use *sharpness* when he comes (2 Corinthians 13:10). At the same time he points out that this is a God-given power to be used carefully to edification and not destruction.

To rebuke, then, is to confront a brother with his offence or his error. It is to spell it out to him in no uncertain terms, letting him know precisely what it is. It will not do to simply tell him that he is being offensive or that his attitude is bad, or that he has fallen into error, that what he is doing is not right, without pointing out precisely what the trouble is. That offense or error must be made clear to be so in light of the Scriptures. It will not do to say *we* do not like what he is saying or doing, or that in our opinion he is wrong about something, or that he has hurt our “feelings” about something. The genuine Christian will bow to the authority of the word of God. He may not be so quick to consider the validity of your complaint if it is only a matter of your personal tastes and opinions.

The rebuke, to be profitable, must be more than a registered complaint: It must be constructive, must urge strongly toward corrective action. If what he is doing is wrong, then he should be told what is right and given such Biblical injunction so as to provoke him to correct his ways, and, if necessary, make apologies, confessions and restitution.

If the person being rebuked is sluggish, obstinate, not easily moved, then sharpness and severity is in order. Some sensitive souls may respond with the slightest suggestion; others move only with a cry of alarm and naked warnings. Such measures as are necessary to provoke a response should be taken.

When should such rebuke and reproof be made? Generally speaking, when any brother errs or goes astray and we have opportunity of helping him. Luke 17:3 and Matthew 18:15 speak of a personal offense. The offended brother is to take the initiative and tell the offender. If the offender repents, reconciliation is made and the matter is settled without anyone else being involved. If he does not, then the church is brought into it until he either repents or is excluded from fellowship.

But suppose the brother has not offended me. He has only hurt another person. Am I meddling in something not by business by rebuking him about that? If so, then so was Nathan when he rebuked David for his sin against Uriah and Bathsheba. And Paul, when he withstood Peter for his offense against Gentile Christians. The Bible abounds with such accounts.

General sin is to be rebuked. A brother overtaken in a fault is to be “restored in the spirit of meekness”. He who persists in sin is to be “rebuked before all that others may fear”. This ought to be done, not only in preaching to a general congregation, but if necessary, in personal confrontation.

If a brother is teaching doctrinal error, if he is misusing and misinterpreting the Scripture, then there is double urgency that he be reproved and corrected, for his false teaching will corrupt and harm others.

Sorrowfully, this is not the course that we usually take. Rather than do what the Bible says and confront men with their error and undertake direct corrective measures, we take the world’s way. The Biblical way is confrontation; the world’s way is diplomacy. Confrontation is the way of truth, honesty, exposure, light, hurt, cleansing, correction. It is pursued in tears, sorrow, heartache, and at the risk of being rejected. Diplomacy is the way of smiles, lies, cover-up, hypocrisy, deceit, external show and false peace.

We take the world’s way because we pay more attention to the politicians, businessmen and humanitarians than we do the prophets of the Lord. We have watched worldly men smile, flatter and embrace those whom they hate while they were secretly sliding a knife between their ribs until we have learned to do it quite well ourselves. Our minds have been seduced by the educational institutions of this world into swallowing its philosophy. We read the world’s literature and feed on its philosophy more than we read the word of God and feed on its truth. The underlying philosophy of the world is that men are basically good, want to do what is right, do not need drastic change and should not be hurt. The truth according to the word of God is that men are basically bad, self-centered, wrong, need radical transformation (even born-again Christians are in a transformation process), must be wounded that they may be healed.

We take the way of diplomacy because we shrink from the prospect of being disliked, unloved, or worse, being thought unloving. Our fellowship is small enough. We do not want to lose any of the few friends we have. So we simply ignore a person’s sin or error if it isn’t hurting us too badly. If he hurts us enough, however, we will grumble to others about him and hope they will correct him. This will usually fester and grow into outright railing and slander, and there will ultimately be a loss of fellowship anyway. But not before it has infected and diseased a greater part of the whole church.

There is another reason this scriptural practice has been avoided. Christians are not gracious and wise enough to receive a correcting reproof. Spiritual standards of church members today have sunk so low that Biblical discipline backfires. My advisors were right. An attempt to practice Biblical restoration of erring brothers loses you friends. This is true even of preachers. I traveled 400 miles once in an attempt to help a brother pastor who was about to lose some good people over an unscriptural stand he had taken. He has resented me ever since. Another young preacher once asked me to let him know if I ever saw or heard him doing or saying anything in which he needed correction. When the time came, however, he was so filled with “spiritual” pride and in love with his error that he has never forgiven me for my doing what he requested in a more humble state.

Men will not be corrected, because they will not bow to the word of God. Faced with the Bible, they will twist its clear meaning in order to sanction their error. Or they will claim special direct revelation as their authority. It is impossible to correct such as these. They have become their own law, and their own prejudiced minds are their sole rule of faith and practice.

In others, the culprit is more ignorance and pre-taught error, a lack of knowledge of principles of Biblical interpretation. One particular missionary, who is manifestly a man of deep love and faith in God, a highly principled and hard-working servant of the Lord, was preaching in a Bible Conference. Although he was sincere and earnest in what he said, his preaching revealed a gross ignorance of Bible hermeneutics. As a consequence, he was making a horrible misuse of the word of God. I offered my help in directing him into a better understanding of the use of the Holy Scriptures. His answer was this: “When I got saved God gave me the Holy Spirit as my teacher, and I have not needed any man to teach me since then.” Well, the Bible says if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant. This one, though sincere, still is.

We have known many such precious brothers, however, who first became angry and rejected correction, but later, upon learning sound principles of Biblical interpretation, and upon being delivered from their delusions, have joyfully received the truth and abandoned their error. These “lost” friends have been restored, dearer than ever.

But we ought to practice this corrective reproof regardless of the cost. The cost for not practicing it is far too high. Consider them.

The erring and offending brother continues in his sin. He is denied spiritual growth. Being unreprieved, he has no cause to not consider his ways approved. He not only continues, but grows worse. He hurts and misleads more people.

Unity in the church is disrupted. Offenses, unhealed, fester into resentment and bitterness. Whisperings and backbitings begin, factions form, hatreds well up, mountains grow from molehills and the church splits.

The general spiritual standards of the church are dragged down. A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump. A spirit of hypocrisy and shallowness prevails. The word of God becomes hated instead of loved, for it is constantly uncovering what men are trying to cover. Trust is lost. Delusion sets in. The church apostatizes and dies. It may continue to grow. Sometimes growth is even accelerated because of its worldliness. It becomes an impressive and respected institution in the community. But it is a hollow shell. That is why a big-shot preacher in a bit church will never allow a scandal to be brought to light if he can help it. He is sitting on a dozen of them at any particular moment. Obedience to this command of the Lord would bring the whole corrupt mess tumbling down.

Five years ago I was speaker at a seminar sponsored by a friend who is a well-known Bible teacher and author. Alarmed about the direction he was taking in a particular area of spiritual warfare, I wrote him a letter warning him that he was being drawn into the occult and would destroy his family and ministry. He paid no heed. This week his daughter called, asking prayer for him. He is a spiritual and physical wreck, and he has misled untold hundreds.

Consider, on the other hand, the great benefits to be reaped from obeying this unpopular injunction. *“Let him know that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins” (James 5:20).*

*“Rebuke a wise man and he will love thee) (Proverbs 9:8). “If he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.” “If he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.”*

One of two things will happen when the erring person is openly confronted with his offense. He will hear it and repent, or he will reject it and become hardened in his own way. If the first occurs, he has learned something. The experience may have been costly, painful and embarrassing, but it has abounded to his experiential sanctification and spiritual growth. The breach between brethren has been healed and ties are stronger than ever. Love has triumphed over error and pettiness. Truth has shed light on error, and one will not be likely to fall in that type of deception again. If the second occurs and the person fails to receive even the church, then he is put out of its fellowship until and unless he mends his ways and attitude. The purity and unity of the church is thereby preserved. We grieve over the loss of a member, but are no worse for the purging out of that which will ultimately destroy us all.

There are, to be sure, limitations, cautions and considerations in the carrying out of the Christian rebuke. We must be certain our attitude is one of love and consideration, and our objective is a sincere desire for our brother’s spiritual welfare. It must never be undertaken in a spirit of superiority, intolerance, self-righteousness or in anger and vindictiveness. On the other hand, if I am rebuked by a person with a bad attitude and for a wrong motive, I should *not* use that as an excuse to ignore his complaint. God sometimes uses unpleasant means to correct us. If I am wrong, I am wrong, regardless of how I find it out.

The offending brother ought to be considered also. If he is a babe in Christ, we should not try to load him up with more than he can bear. Give him time to grow. Everything that is wrong does not need correcting right now. Tolerance and forbearance on things that are not especially harmful are nothing less than Christian wisdom. But he ought to be brought along as soon as he can be. Children need time to grow up, but they do need to grow up.

If the brother is gentle, pliable and sensitive, then gentle rebukes and intreaties are forthcoming. If he is hard and obstinate, then stronger, more dogmatic assertions are called for. His anger and rebellion must not cause us to be mealy-mouthed. Sharp rebuke should be employed.

Then we are told that an elder should not be rebuked, but entreated as a father. But the elder’s offense and error needs correction as much or more so than anyone else. We do not approach him with demands and lectures, but with reasonable entreaties. The true man of God will respond in a positive way.

This is the stuff of which New Testament life is composed. It is members of the body of Christ becoming intimately involved with one another. If the priesthood of believers means anything, it means that we shall get into one another’s personal lives, digging out their spiritual needs, exposing what hurts to uncover, cleansing and healing. To this day’s shallow, superficial, worldly-minded pretense of a church, this practice will be as welcome as a rattlesnake, popular as a skunk, and as tasty as gall. Indeed, it will explode most “old wine skins”. But it is utter foolishness to speak of body ministry and a functioning priesthood of believers if we ignore this basic principle. May God give us grace to mend our ways in respect to this crucial mandate from our Lord.

- C. M.