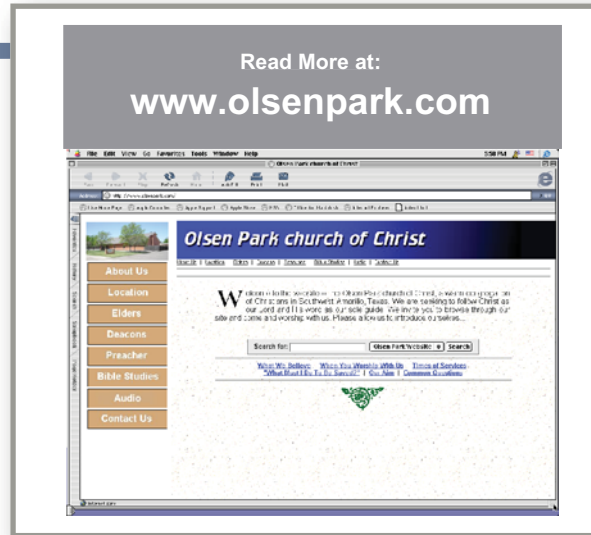


3. We must refute error. Paul teaches us in Galatians 6:1 – “**Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.**” These were not mere words to Paul. In the same epistle he described having to do this very thing to Peter, one who “seemed to be” a pillar, but stumbled into error (Gal. 2:9-21).

4. We must have the courage to talk to a brother or sister when we think they have done wrong. Jesus makes it clear that our first responsibility is to talk to our brother or sister about our concerns. (Matthew 18:15-20). Priscilla and Aquila give us the most beautiful example of this very thing in their treatment of Apollos. (Acts 18:24-28). I am afraid

that often we legitimize gossip under the guise of “concern.” We take our criticisms to others or even to the elders, yet never actually speak to our brother or sister. They often may hear about what we said about them, but when they do it communicates disdain and not love for them.

By Kyle Pope



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Faithful Sayings

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Services

Sunday: 9:30 a.m.
10:20 a.m.
6:00 p.m.
Wednesday: 7:00 p.m.

Elders:

Ken Ford
Charles Kelley
Pat Ledbetter

Deacons:

Dean Bowers
Eddie Cook
Bill Davis
Pat Goguen
Neil Ledbetter
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Dealing With the Weak

Some time ago I did some reading in a book entitled *The Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy*, which deals with the history of the Eastern Orthodox church.* As the author, Alexander Schmemmann, a Russian Orthodox, addressed problems that arose in Church History in the Second Century, he makes some powerful observations which have application to us today. He writes:

“...This period... was... marked by a decline in the spiritual level of the Christian community, a dimming of the flame rightly associated with the church’s first decades. (pg. 47) ...While in the

joy of the first decades the Christians felt more forcibly the wondrous newness of the gift [of forgiveness of sins], as time passed they could not help but become aware of the dimensions of the struggle to which it committed them. There is no room in the Church for sin; yet it exists for sinners” (pg. 49).

The result, as Schmemmann puts it was “an obvious lowering of standards.” In reaction to which, he claims:

“Many could not accept... the increasingly obvious way in which it [i.e. the apostate church] was growing into the very stuff of human history; to them it seemed a betrayal.” (pg. 49).

From such conflicting

* Eastern “Orthodox” churches (as they are called) are the denominations which exist in Greece, parts of Eastern Europe and Asia which formally separated themselves from the Roman Catholic church in 1095 AD.

dynamics, men either allowed their churches to become tolerant of sin, or they went to another extreme and created their own methods of testing and guaranteeing purity. Among the latter were things such as prescribed acts of penance, required training in order to qualify for baptism and even the refusal of baptism until sufficient evidence of repentance was demonstrated.

Within congregations of New Testament Christians in our day the problems mentioned above are not foreign to us. *How do the Lord's people maintain purity in the church and yet at the same time demonstrate patience with the weak?* I heard an older preacher in Christ make the observation years ago that if a church wants to grow it had "better get ready for some problems." He went on to explain that a willingness to wade through the instability of dealing with new Christians who may need some time to grow out of bad habits or false notions is often a trying ordeal. It is much easier for strong Christians to simply "hold their own," than to be forced to struggle with the weakness of a new convert. A similar problem may come from what could be called "perpetual weakness." The Lord com-

mands us to mature and grow in Christ, yet—*What are our brethren to do with us if we have been a Christian for years and yet remain in continuing weakness?*

What We Dare Not Do!

As difficult as such matters are to resolve here are a few things we must resolve not to do when faced with such challenges:

- 1. Do not make laws where God has not.** Jesus was very firm in His condemnation of this, speaking of those – "**teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.**" (Matthew 15:9). It was wrong for the religious leaders of the past to bind upon people required acts of penance, and human prerequisites for baptism. It would be equally wrong for us today to create man-made tests of strength, loyalty and faithfulness.
- 2. Don't allow a desire for purity to lead us to act rashly.** Caesar Augustus had a saying in Latin *festina lente*. It literally meant "make haste slowly." It is important that we act with haste in rebuking a sin or catching a brother or sister who is fall-

ing, but in our haste we must always be careful that we do not destroy them or others in the process (cf. II Cor. 2:7).

3. Guard our motives and attitudes.

Sadly, church history has revealed that some who have spoken so forcefully for purity may not have always had the purest motives. Out of veiled attempts to exalt themselves or with carnal attitudes men have stood with arrogant pride on the spiritual corpses of those they have rolled over! Such was the nature of Diotrophes, whom the apostle John rebuked for his "**putting out of the church**" the sound brethren John had sent. (III John 9,10).

What We Must Do!

With that said let us now balance the equation by considering what the Holy Spirit tells us must be our response to such problems:

- 1. Stress the need for personal growth in Christ.** When the Hebrew writer penned his letter through the direction of the Holy Spirit, he could not have been speaking to people who had been Christians very long. Yet notice the boldness of his

charge—"**For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need *someone* to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food.**" (Hebrews 5:12). Out of fear that we might offend someone, we may become afraid to urge people to be faithful in assembling with the brethren (one small element of Christian maturity as whole). While many do find it easier to look for congregations with low expectations and little accountability, our brethren are not doing us "any favors" by letting us think we are "just fine with the Lord" in such a state of weakness.

2. We are to strengthen the weak.

In the same epistle the writer claims a bit latter—"**Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed.**" (Hebrews 12:12, 13). Clearly there will always be those who remain perpetually weak, but the responsibility of brethren who see us this way is to challenge us to grow stronger. Silence communicates acceptance and tolerance.