



IMPRESSIONS

Thoughts from EFCA leaders

The Blessings of Excommunication

Painful moments in the church body *Author's name withheld*

"PASTOR, COULD YOU COME BY OUR HOUSE later today?" she asked. Of course I went; this couple was very dear to me and my wife. Over coffee and tea, and after flattering comments on my recent message, the woman eventually came out with the reason for requesting my visit: a confession of ongoing adultery. She showed no remorse, and exhortations and compassion made no impact. Her husband was devastated, but he later claimed he came to true salvation that day.

The storyline is amazingly complex, as is often the case. The immediate intervention of friends to support, encourage and exhort was more than anyone could hope for—a most gracious supply of God's grace. Yet this woman had made up her mind. She wanted out, and she rebuffed all efforts by her church and other Christian friends. Sadly, we as a church ultimately found ourselves faced with the biblical commands of excommunication.

Church discipline is an integral part of the body of Christ—an indicator of a true church. And while it is time-consuming, emotionally draining and spiritually painful—with opposition from demons, Christians, unbelievers and other churches—it is still worth it. And God is pleased as He sees His body pursuing holiness. Church discipline seeks to restore and reconcile the sinner, to keep sin from spreading throughout the church body, to further purify the church itself, and to protect the honor of Christ's Name.

There is no one right way to pursue church discipline and excommunication. The famous passage from Matthew 18 is intended as a general outline. Each situation and context requires special care.

As a church, we did all the things we knew from Scripture to do (relying prayerfully on such passages as Matthew 7:21-23; 18:15-20; John 20:22,23; Galatians 6:1,2; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13; 2 Corinthians 2:5-11; 2 Thessalonians 3:14,15; 2 Timothy 2:25,26; Hebrews 3:12-19; 6:1-8; 10:26-31; James 5:19,20).

But it was our first excommunication, so we also garnered much advice from other pastors and leaders. One resource that was to us a treasure of pastoral advice and procedural prudence, and a source of counsel for wise moderation, was John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (4.12.1-13).

In the three months that followed the initial revelation of infidelity, we walked through many episodes of false repentance with this woman. In the process, she became more hardened and more committed to her pattern of behavior. We were not interested in forcing the process of excommunication; instead we let her failure in

repentance dictate each next step.

When we as elders realized that we must move to excommunication, we felt a heavy burden—of love for her, and of responsibility toward God and the congregation. The same weight was upon the congregation when we met to announce the possible excommunication. It was a holy moment of God's presence as we taught from the Word of God what this meant and what their role would be in the final restorative efforts before the actual excommunication, if it were necessary.

Our fear of God and sin was very real that day. We were all humbled by our own sinfulness and forced to radical self-assessment. We prayed for power and wisdom in appealing to our sister, and we prayed fervently *for* her. We had never before known such intense love for God and His church, and we were convicted that this love must include holiness in our lives.

In the two weeks that followed, the elders further taught, instructed, counseled and prayed with the congregation.

The congregation did exactly what they were supposed to do without hesitation, and with wounded souls of love. The stories of personal meetings, phone calls, letters and gifts are many and varied—but, sadly, they were all rebuffed. It was clear to everyone that there was no true repentance. Then came the fateful day when we formally excommunicated our sister.

Perhaps the greatest surprise of that day was the peace we received from God, having fulfilled our responsibility before Him and before one another. We were now free of obligation to pursue her and could rest in God, knowing that He would confirm His will through His church. We continue to pray that God will grant her repentance unto life and that she will come to a knowledge of the truth.

Of course there was initially some confusion as people ran into this woman in town. But it was a

good confusion, wanting to do what is right and best. We had instructed them that they were not to have a friendship with her. They were to continue to pray for her, yes; they were to encourage her to repent and be restored. Yet they could (and must) rest from pursuing her.

We gave a lot of grace to our congregation and a lot of practical advice one-to-one that met their specific questions and situations. Many people seem to have a lot of strange ideas about church discipline from past experiences in churches. We were sensitive to this and sought to help people through it.

Fallout took place in the community, as she told her friends in other churches and in the community all about it, from her perspective. We had prepared ourselves for this and did our best to patiently meet people's concerns and be clear and compassionate with the truth. Yet we didn't lose anyone from our church over the situation, not even her estranged husband.

Our first priority as leaders was to help the congregation see that the whole situation was about Christ and His Church, and not ultimately about any one of us. This helped prevent us from becoming more concerned with legalities than with God Himself.

Legal liability never played a major role in our handling of this matter. She was a member and so was subject by her own agreement to our governing documents, which clearly describe the process of church discipline and excommunication. However, as a result of this experience, we will be strengthening our documents to disallow requests for dropping membership while in the process of church discipline.

Even after excommunication, it was important to keep the discussion only among our congregation, for the sake of Christ's reputation and for reason of simple propriety—let alone to keep from unnecessarily impeding a true repentance. We also chose not to chase her down as she moved from church to church, but simply to deal with issues when they arose, pastor to pastor.

Truly, from our perspective, we stumbled along the path we were pursuing, but we knew we were on the right path. We have learned to discern warning signs in people in advance and have committed ourselves to disciple people more seriously. Then, when a serious sin situation arises, we can quickly address it and clarify what is expected.

If situations do not turn around, we have learned that such individuals must repent for themselves; we dare not make false repentance attractive by being too helpful and setting up simple hoops through which they can just jump. And even after excommunication, we must consistently remind ourselves that the burden to repent and return is entirely upon the excommunicated at this point. We are no longer required to pursue; and in reality it is foolish and wrong to do so.

Yes, church discipline will always be tainted with our imperfections. People will do and say things they shouldn't. But this does not relieve us of the obligation nor invalidate the discipline. Christ supports the power and authority of His churches. Some argue that, too often, church discipline is self-righteous and arrogant. Perhaps that's sometimes true. Yet we have found the opposite to be true: The whole process has been used by God to establish true righteousness and accountability within our church; it has produced greater humility in all of us. ■

The author is a senior pastor in the EFCA.

» BOOK REVIEW

Where Did My Anger Come From?

Review by Rev. Matt Mitchell

I DIDN'T KNOW I WAS AN ANGRY MAN until the autumn when my 2-year-old decided to stop sleeping at night and my wife contracted mono-nucleosis and had to sleep a lot. At the time, I thought my surprising rages came from groggy days and sleepless nights.

But Bob Jones contends that my sinful anger came from the residue of corruption in my new but still imperfect heart. In *Uprooting Anger*, Jones insightfully teaches what the Bible says about anger's true cause and gospel cure.

The greatest strength of this incisive little book is the careful, nuanced thought the author has dedicated to the biblical data, combined with field-tested practical application. Jones was an EFCA pastor for 18 years, and it shows. His extensive counseling experience provides a wealth of true-to-life illustrations.

Uprooting Anger covers a lot of ground. Not only does Jones provide a biblical definition of anger, a diagnostic for gauging the righteousness of anger and a detailed roadmap to change, but he also delves into specific problems with anger: anger against God and anger directed at yourself, as well as helping others deal with their anger. This is a body-life book, practical theology at its best.

Along the way, Jones dispels some of the psychological fog that floats through our culture. For example, he claims that the Bible nowhere teaches that we should "forgive ourselves."

If I were writing the book, I might have put the last chapter first: "Why You Must Deal With Your Sinful Anger," but it also makes a fitting close. This is Jones' first time out of the harbor as an author, so his prose wobbles a bit in places and shows some unnecessary repetition, but the content is pure gold.

I recommend this book for both hotheads who bite people's heads off and those who kill others with a cold look. Why not form a "12 Angry Men" discipleship group and go through the study questions and application assignments together? I want to. Now I know where my anger comes from and what to do about it, but I still need the body of Christ to help me actually uproot it. ■

Order *Uprooting Anger* from NextStep Resources at www.nsresources.com or (800) 444-2665.

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