

## **Who's In Charge Here?**

Matthew 18:15-20

September 7, 2008

If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one of two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

I have a colleague who is the pastor of a church that is about 9,000 miles from Shreveport in Blantyre, Malawi. His name is Luckson, and he is the “solo pastor” of St. James Presbyterian Church. St. James is a congregation of about 7,000 members; a medium sized church by African standards.

Understandably, you can see why – upon learning this – my questions to Luckson came fast and furious. “How can you possibly do all of that work? How many meetings do you attend? How do you provide pastoral care for that many people? How do you have any time at all for your family?”

Well, the answer is that St. James Presbyterian Church has 500 elders. Now, how about that for a job of the nominating committee? 500 elders – whose responsibilities include praying and keeping in contact with members, assisting in worship, leading efforts in mission and education, and maintaining the finances of the church.

You can guess my next question to Luckson: “With 500 elders, how long are your session meetings?”

What I discovered is that the agenda of St. James’ session meetings are noticeably different than any session meeting I have attended or moderated. Instead of talking about the budget or the color of the carpet or the latest denominational controversy, the session of St. James spends most of their time focused on the discipline of church members.

That’s right. Discipline. Elders are responsible for keeping in touch with members of the church. Keeping in touch means tending to spiritual needs and also providing accountability to living a faithful, responsible life. If there are events or behaviors that violate what is considered faithful – in other words, if a sin is committed – it is the elder’s job to bring the member before the body so that appropriate action can be taken.

St. James’ session meetings take place in the sanctuary of the church and they go on for as long as is needed. Members of the church are disciplined for public drunkenness, infidelity, failing to tithe, and a host of other offenses.

I told Luckson that I sure was glad God had called him to serve in Africa and me to serve in America.

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One of the confessions of our church, the Scots Confession, describes the three marks of the True Church (or Kirk). They are, (1) true preaching, (2) right administration of the sacraments, and (3) church discipline.<sup>1</sup> The fact that church discipline sounds arcane, offensive, or quaint to us is really irrelevant. Both scripture and our confessions point us to the fact that one aspect of what it means to be the church – a Christian community – is that we take that membership seriously enough to maintain discipline within our communion.<sup>2</sup>

Looking again at Matthew: “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone...if you are not listened to, take one or two members along with you...if the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church...and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

It is easy to get lost in the details of this passage. What distracts me is considering what, exactly, constitutes a sin. Who gets to define it? What if the person who is accused of sinning doesn't consider the act in question to be sinful, where do you go from there?

These kinds of questions are not Matthew's point. What is assumed in this passage is that the church has authority. Put a little bit differently, this passage assumes that those who are gathered into a church community place their individual selves under the authority of that community. Put even more plainly, as a member of the Church of Jesus Christ – the community is more important than any one individual in that community.

If you are like me, the offense of these assumptions is that it feels like a violation of individual rights. A violation of individual conscience. We might say: “that is between me and my God.” Or, “that is none of the church's business.”

If your reaction is like mine – then consider yourself a good Protestant. Indeed, a principal of the Protestant Reformation was the fundamental

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<sup>1</sup> Scots Confession (Book Of Confessions, 3.19)

<sup>2</sup> With gratitude to the Rev. Dan Lewis, member of The Portable Snack whose paper on this text proved to be quite helpful.

critique of the authority of the leadership of the Church – an authority that had been abused and used to oppress individualism and individual rights.

Now, nearly 500 years later, it is appropriate to ask the question: have we gone too far? Has the value we have given to our individual authority not far outpaced the authority of the faith community of which we are a part? And as a result, what does that mean for the place of the church when stacked up against the needs and wants of those make up the church?

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I was thinking about today's passage from Matthew this week while shopping at Target. Preachers do that, you know. Sermon preparation doesn't just happen in the study – it happens in the car, mowing the lawn, in the shower – and this week, it happened in Target.

As I paced through aisles lined with unlimited choices from everything to orange juice to toilet paper to spaghetti sauce – all choices designed to cater to my individual needs and wants – I wondered if the authority of the church even matters anymore.

Matthew assumes that it does. Today's text assumes that individuals who face the discipline of church – and, put quite simply, the threat of being kicked out of the church – will be motivated enough to reform or repent of their actions.

In a world of individual choices, however, if you are dissatisfied with one church – you can go find another that meets your needs. If you face the discipline of one congregation – you can go find another so as to avoid the issue. Many people do – preachers included.

The result is that churches grow overly concerned about membership and drift away from their guiding principals. Folks who are paid to help churches grow often advise congregations to make it as easy as possible for someone to be a member. Don't ask too much, don't expect too much.

I don't buy it.

One of the many things that has impressed me about this congregation in the past eight months is the seriousness with which many of you take

your membership. It is my feeling that while the church must respond to the needs of its members – we would be better served as the body of Christ by expecting more of our members – not less. We would be a stronger witness for Jesus Christ in the world if membership in the community of faith were more rigorous instead of easy. The only way the faith community we call the church will matter in a world full of choices and a culture steeped in individualism is if we think we matter – and if we are clear about where our authority resides.

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In the face of a culture that comes dangerously close to worshipping at the altar of individualism, the ancient church catechism asks: “What is your only comfort, in life and in death?” The answer: “That I belong – body and soul, in life and in death – not to myself but to my faithful savior Jesus Christ.”<sup>3</sup>

Where does the authority of the church come from? Start at the end of Matthew’s passage: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” In reading today’s text from back to front it becomes clear that the basic expression of the church is not an institution or a building or a hierarchy – the basic expression of the church is found in the gathered community of those who claim Jesus as Lord. And it becomes clear that the authority of the church derives not from committees or clergypersons or church decrees, but from the presence of Jesus Christ – his will, his mind, his vision.

Matthew suggests that the way the church uncover the mind of Jesus is not through exercising our individual consciousness and going it alone – but through the collective prayers of the gathered community that humbly seeks the will of God. “Wherever two or three are gathered, I am there among them.”

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Today marks the beginning of a new program year at First Presbyterian. There is a lot going on – so much so that the staff and I had to cut the number of announcements so that everything would fit into that new tri-fold bulletin you are holding on your laps. This fall, Christian Education ministry is focusing us on “Just Living” – as we spend our Wednesday

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<sup>3</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Q 1 (Book of Confessions, 4.0001)

evenings sharing a meal and thinking about the discipleship practice of simplifying our lives; in a couple of weeks the Fuller Center for Housing will kick off their blitz build in our gym and there will be opportunities for you to swing a hammer, or bring a work team some lunch, or meet the families that will live in the new affordable housing; Taize worship services have started back on the first Friday's of the month – two days ago we had an almost full chapel from all over the city centered in song and prayer; there are Bible studies, fellowship groups, choirs, Sunday School classes, all starting back up; Congregational Life is planning a marriage retreat for early next year; Stewardship is inviting us to find ways to give – of our resources, our talents – and to become stewards of the world in which we live; you have already heard from the Capital Campaign Steering Committee about ways we will all be asked to help shape the vision for the kind of church God is calling us to become in the future while we honor the proud history of who we have been in the past.

I share all of this with you because I want you to see that in each instance, the church expects something from you. Being a member of this congregation comes with responsibilities – we, together – as a community of (last count about 950) – comprise a witness to Jesus Christ. The church needs you to take that witness seriously – and the church takes you seriously enough to not simply offer you choices, but to expect your participation in our mission.

As your (not very) senior pastor – neither I, nor the rest of the staff or leadership – can make you become involved. We don't have that kind of authority. But I can tell you that there is great joy and deep gladness in being gathered as the body of Christ and sent out to work for the Kingdom of God; and we welcome the chance to work along side you as we undertake that mission together.

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All thanks and praise be to the one triune God – now and forever. Amen.