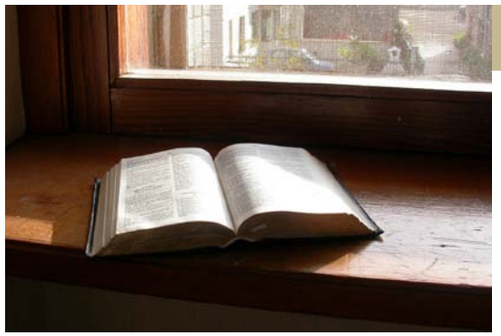


has done wrong. Jesus makes it clear that our first responsibility is to talk to our brother or sister about our concerns (Matt. 18:15-20). Priscilla and Aquila give us a most beautiful example of this very thing in their treatment of Apollos (Acts 18:24-28). I am afraid we often legitimize gossip under the guise of "concern." We take our criticisms to others or even to the elders, yet never actually speak to our brother or sister. If they hear what we have said about them, it may not communicate love and concern but disdain and contempt.

Conclusion

Spiritual weakness is a serious thing. Jesus taught that **"the first and great commandment"** (Matt. 22:38) is **"you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength"** (Mark 12:30). We must never fool ourselves into thinking that half-hearted service to the Lord is acceptable to Him. At the same time, we must never create rules and burdens God never imposed in order to strengthen one another. May God help us to attain the balance as we all strive to **"grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ"** (2 Pet. 3:18).

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Faithful Sayings

BULLETIN OF THE OLSEN PARK CHURCH OF CHRIST

Services
Sunday: 9:00 AM
9:30 AM
10:30 AM
Wednesday: 7:00 PM

Elders:
Patrick Ledbetter
Brady McAlister
Jeff Nunn

Deacons:
Ben Hight
Blake McAlister
Walker McAnear
Sam Nunn
Lance Purcell
Justin Smiley
Trevor Yontz

Evangelist:
Kyle Pope

Dealing with the Weak

By Kyle Pope

Alexander Schmemann, a Russian Orthodox historian, wrote a book entitled *The Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy,* surveying the history of the Eastern Orthodox church and its development from ancient church history. Eastern "Orthodox" churches (as they are called) are denominations dominant in Greece, Eastern Europe, and Asia that formally separated themselves from the Roman Catholic church in AD 1095. In addressing problems that arose in the Second Century, the author made some powerful observations that have application today. He wrote:

> 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 (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 (49).

The result, as Schmemann put it was "an obvious lowering of standards" (ibid.). 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 (ibid.).

From such conflicting 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 can the Lord's people maintain purity in the church and yet at the same time demonstrate patience with the weak? An older preacher in Christ once made 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 time to grow out of bad habits or false notions is often a trying ordeal. It is far easier for strong Christians to simply "hold onto their own," than to be forced to struggle with the weakness of a new convert. A similar problem comes from what could be called *perpetual weakness*. That is, Christians who continue to struggle with the same weakness or sinful conduct never maturing or growing stronger in Christ. The Lord commands us to mature and grow nut what are our fellow-Christians to do with us if we have been a Christian for years and yet remain in continuing spiritual immaturity and 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. Don't 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"** (Matt. 15:9, NKJV). 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 falling, but in our haste we must always be careful that we do not destroy them or others in the process (cf. 2 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 whom 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 (3 John 9-10).

What We Must Do

With these warnings in mind, we must also consider what the Holy Spirit teaches our response to such problems should be:

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"** (Heb. 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 element of maturity as whole). While many 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"** (Heb. 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.

3. We must refute error. Paul taught 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 we think