A Community Forgives

Read 2 Corinthians 1:23-2:11

Key verse: “If you forgive anyone for anything, I do too. And whatever I’ve forgiven (if I’ve forgiven anything), I did it for you in the presence of Christ” (2 Corinthians 2:10).

“Your children need thirty ‘atta-boys’ for every one ‘gotcha!’” That’s good advice for parenting. Give your children much more love, encouragement, and grace than correction, while not neglecting the correction.

That parenting advice might work pretty well for church life, too. Church ought to be a place where people are loved, encouraged, and offered heaping quantities of grace. But sometimes we need correction, too.

Many churches today never practice correction, never exercise church discipline, and rarely even offer sermons that convict people of sin or call for repentance. Such was not the case in the early church.

For example, in this passage of Scripture (2 Corinthians 1:23-2:11), the Apostle Paul deals with a situation in the church at Corinth. Paul speaks of a particular person who has been the cause of a serious offense in Corinth and upon whom church discipline has been imposed. We do not know the details of the offense or the punishment. But Paul now writes to the church in Corinth, urging its members to forgive the offending person and restore him or her to the active fellowship of the church. (See 2:5-11.)

The Wesley Study Bible offers the following comment on these verses: “Being able to forgive one another should make the great difference between life in the church and in other communities. It may happen in church as elsewhere that people offend or hurt one another. But this cannot remain unresolved; it must be settled through loving forgiveness. That is not easy. The pain of offense is real and not easily overcome. Paul’s reaction shows the right direction: forgiveness does not mean to take things lightly. Sometimes others have to intervene to make it clear: this is serious. But then the door can open for forgiveness and reconciliation.”
The idea of church discipline is uncomfortable, if not completely foreign, for many church members today. Yet, without correction and accountability, lives can be wrecked by sin and whole churches can be irreparably damaged and divided. Always, in Scripture, the ultimate goal of church discipline is to bring repentance and reconciliation as well as to protect the church from damage and division.

In this passage of Scripture (2 Cor. 1:23-2:11), Paul tells the church at Corinth that because the offender has shown genuine repentance, he should now be lovingly forgiven and restored to their fellowship. Such is always to be the goal of correction and accountability in the church.

What might church discipline or correction look like in our churches today? Believers should take responsibility to humbly and lovingly confront one another about repeated, unrepentant sin, “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). This is especially necessary when the offense is doing great damage to the church and/or its leaders. Matthew 18:15-17 offers a pattern that starts with one-on-one correction, then increases the involvement of others only if needed.

This is tricky business for sure. There is no place here for “witch hunts” or power trips. And such confrontation might best be seen as a tactic of last resort. (Remember, thirty “atta-boys” for every one “gotcha.”) But the fact remains: a church without some ways of exercising correction and mutual accountability will not stand.

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