

## Editorial

# Remembering The First Time

By Art Azurdia



*"I would rather go to hell than obey God on this!"*

Red-faced and white-knuckled, she stood to her feet and proclaimed these words with a frightening vehemence – words that have forever been etched upon my memory.

For eighteen months her family had consistently attended our congregation: her husband occasionally contributing to the worship team, her daughters participating in the children's ministry, and she herself serving in the nursery. Increasingly, however, the family would arrive at church without her – obviously uncomfortable with her absence, yet avoiding the mention of anything suspicious. Finally, the story leaked: she was leaving her husband and children for the purpose of establishing an intimate relationship with another woman.

For us, it was now the moment of truth. We were barely two years old as a congregation, and yet from our inception we articulated an unflinching commitment to the Scriptures as a non-negotiable value of our ministry – even including, when necessary, the application of the hard words of Jesus related to the recovery of wayward Christians. But convictions prove cheap when the ugly reality of destructive sin forces a congregation to consider an unpopular position. Did we have *confidence* in the promises of Jesus? Did we have the *courage* to take a stand that, at best, would surely make us the target of hostile accusations?

I began to carefully walk our elders through the various biblical texts that address this issue. While there is no "one-size-fits-all" discipline garment, the situation at hand seemed to require the careful application of the four-fold process set forth in Matthew 18:15-20. With all the elders in agreement, we then brought the matter to the congregation, working through the same passages we had examined as elders. Finally, by virtue of her unwillingness to repent, we exercised each of the four steps and removed this woman from the fellowship of our congregation. From the time this issue was first brought to the elders' attention until the final application of discipline, the process lasted for the better part of four months.

Now, years later, I can still recall three distinct sensations that characterized our congregation's initial experience of church discipline . . .

It was terrifying. Not one of our members had ever witnessed the process of church discipline, *including me* – though many of us had attended churches of various denominations for several years. What an irony, it seemed: my first experience of church discipline was one in which I found myself *leading* a congregation through the process!

The unknown haunted me: "What challenges should I expect from this woman?" "How will her husband and children react over time?" "What criticisms may come my way from the congregation?" I had no experience upon which to draw. Moreover, I was fearful of making a mistake (e.g., moving too quickly or too slowly from one step to the next, sharing too much or too little information). I had trouble sleeping. My stomach was unsettled.

Two reasons propelled us forward despite our fear: 1) the practical (and devastating) consequences for the congregation of knowingly neglecting the clear words of Jesus; and, 2) the powerful encouragement for discipline supplied by three of the most significant promises ever given by Jesus (Ma 18:18-20).

It was sobering. So far from promoting anything smacking of self-righteousness, this public expression of discipline fostered: 1) a heartfelt self-examination in each of us; 2) a heightened sense of humility as we realized that we ourselves could easily fall prey to such sinful ensnarement; and, 3) a profound appreciation for the grace of God grounded in the gospel. Since we followed the final step of discipline with the Lord's Supper, we all partook of the bread and wine with a gripping realization of the significance of Christ's sacrifice. It reminded us that, for all the anxiety and heartbreak associated with this process, it is – finally and ultimately – a *redemptive* work. In keeping with the words of Jesus, it truly was our burden to “win” our sister.

It was awe-inspiring. I am not referring to its contemporary meaning. Rather, I have in mind the older sense of the word “awe” – a feeling of reverential respect, mixed with fear and dread. Amidst the tears and muffled sobs of that unforgettable evening, it was Christ's *sensible presence* that permeated our fellowship when we exercised the final step of discipline; a presence, however, not marked by levity, but gravity – a gravity too uncomfortable to experience for any extended period of time. For many, it was the first time the oft-quoted words of Jesus were understood in their original context: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them.”

Dear brother, have you embraced the hard work of church discipline? Of course, in one sense you cannot escape it: *all* Christians are under discipline by virtue of being *disciples* of Jesus Christ – Matthew 18 merely serving as the most graphic expression of it. And yet, as a shepherd serving a portion of *the* flock under the leadership of the Senior Pastor, Jesus Christ, have you assumed responsibility for the work of discipline He has mediated to you? Have you taught your congregation the purposes and procedures of this ministry, along with the mutual responsibility we all share as one another's keeper? Have you convinced your people that discipline is always remedial, never punitive, and that it is a necessary expression of Christ's love for us (Rev 3:19)? I wonder: *Can we, with any integrity, pray and work for reformation if we disregard this ministry so clearly designed to purify the congregation and reclaim erring believers?*

It is no easy thing to be a conscientious pastor. It is my prayer, then, that this issue of ***The Spurgeon Fellowship Journal*** will incite you to renewed faithfulness as you disciple your congregation after the manner of Jesus Himself.

May the articles instruct you, the interview inform you, and the quotes inspire you.