

## Sanctuary Churches

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by Al Diestelkamp

A relatively new phenomenon in our nation is the emergence of what are known as “sanctuary cities” in which people who have committed certain federal crimes are immune to deportation. Needless to say, this has created great controversy among the citizens of our nation. Unfortunately, a similar problem exists among our brethren regarding corrective church discipline.

Corrective discipline is neglected in many congregations. We ought to ask ourselves how it happens that churches which are known for going “by the Book” are able to ignore the command to “*withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly*” (2 Thess. 3:6). We might be tempted to blame it on influence from the permissive attitude in our current culture that values “tolerance” over truth. While that may make matters worse, the problem has been around far too long for that to be the real answer. I suspect one of the main deterrents to corrective church discipline is the fact that almost everyone has close family members or friends who have become unfaithful and many are unwilling to obey the apostle’s command to “*not keep company*” with them (i.e., 2 Thess. 12:14-15).

If my suspicion is accurate, we should be reminded of what Jesus said about familial relations taking priority over Him: “*He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me*” (Matt. 10:37).

Another deterrent to church discipline is the unpleasant nature of it. Even the Scriptures testify that “no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but grievous ...” (Heb. 12:11a). This truth is in the context of respecting the discipline of the Lord, illustrated by discipline fathers administer to their children (vv. 5-10). The lack of joy is not only for the one receiving discipline but also for the ones administering it. However, whether it is the Lord’s discipline, a father’s discipline, or a church’s discipline, “*nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it*” (v. 11b).

Even if a congregation is faithful in disciplining one who continues in sin, he is likely to simply seek out another congregation which will accept him with no questions asked. This diminishes the effectiveness of the chastening. Of course, a congregation has an obligation to determine whether any previous withdrawal was justified, but too often no effort is made in this regard. The desire for greater numbers causes many brethren to adopt the “I know nothing” approach. Some express the fear that any inquiry would be a violation of local autonomy while others simply don’t believe in corrective church discipline except in extreme situations.

Though no congregation would likely admit it has become a “sanctuary church,” there is no doubt that there are churches which are known for harboring those from whom other brethren have had to withdraw themselves. Sometimes they are even willing to accept some whom we are commanded to “*deliver unto Satan*” (1 Cor. 5:4-5).

The existence of “sanctuary churches” has made it possible for backsliding members of faithful churches to employ a clever scheme to avoid any effective corrective discipline. What they do is let it be known that they have “placed membership” with another congregation and shortly thereafter just quit attending, knowing the “sanctuary church” will do nothing.

Signs in front of our meeting places often include the inviting words, “Everyone Welcome.” It is true

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