

THIS WAY TO A HEALTHY CHURCH
Galatians 6:1-18

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A bivocational Mennonite pastor was painting during a renovation project at Meadowbrook Baptist Church, where I formerly pastored. The Monday preceding Easter, I commented to him as he painted, “I guess you’ll be excited about this Sunday—you’ll have a large attendance!” My ignorance caused me great embarrassment. The bivocational Mennonite pastor had a sincerely puzzled look on his face that I remember to this day. He inquired in all innocence, “Why would we have more worshippers on Easter than we have on any other Sunday? Our members are in church every Sunday unless they are deathly ill.” I mumbled, “Well, there shouldn’t be any reason, should there?” I lowered my head, and walked away. In that Mennonite community, it meant something to follow Christ and to be a part of the church. The members had counted the cost, and they were present every single week. They had formed a disciplined community of faith. Chapter 6 begins with Paul’s admonition to the Galatians to form disciplined, caring churches.

Healthy Churches Restore the Right Way (6:1)

As Paul closed chapter 5, he pictured church members living in a manner that exhibits love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control—the fruit of the Spirit. He urged the Galatian Christians not to “bite and devour one another” (5:15). He urged them not to be boastful or envious of one another (5:26). In the passage that follows, chapter 6, Paul described some characteristics of a healthy church family. He began by describing a healthy church as one that seeks to restore wayward church members rather than embarrassing or shunning them.

Unlike the Mennonite community, most churches seldom exercise discipline today. It is unfortunate that modern churches often completely ignore this important aspect of community life. By refusing to exercise appropriate measures to restore wayward believers, many modern churches are bloated with membership rolls containing the names of so-called disciples who make no attempt to walk in the Spirit (5:16). Therefore, modern church membership is often meaningless.

In a missions class at Southwestern Seminary, a Korean student explained that she was perplexed by the fact that it was easier to join Baptist churches in America than it was to get a bus ticket! She remarked that in her country it meant something to be a member of a church. People thought seriously before they promised their allegiance to Christ, to a body of believers.

Both the Korean student and the Mennonite pastor were confused by contemporary Baptist life in America where church membership requires little or no accountability.

In his letter to the believers in Galatia, Paul gave some guiding principles for church discipline. First, it is for those “caught in sin.” Paul is not calling upon the Galatian believers to become fault-finding critics who take joy in bringing petty charges against each other. Second, church discipline

is to be administered by those “who are spiritual.” Those who dare to discipline in the church must be those who exhibit the fruit of the Spirit, those who are gentle and patient.

Third, church discipline is to be undertaken for the purpose of restoring the wayward believer back into full fellowship with his church family. The word employed for restoration is the term used to describe the setting of a broken bone or to describe restoring something back to its original condition, like mending fishing nets (Matthew 4:21; Mark 1:19).

In a spirit of meekness and gentleness, mature Christians must approach a sinning brother for the purpose of bringing him back to his regular position in the church family. No place exists in the church family for those who want to confront fallen brothers and sisters for the purpose of lording over them or humiliating them.

Fourth, after we restore fellow believers, we must realize that we, too, are prone to commit the very same sins. Paul encouraged the restoring believers to examine themselves lest they be tempted. We can be tempted to sin in ways that we never thought possible. We had imagine ourself so far above those who had fallen prey to the very temptations that Satan now places before us. Never look down your long nose and point a finger at the fallen. Rather, restore them with a meek spirit, realizing that your day of temptation will also come.

A healthy church exercises church discipline for the purpose of bringing the fallen back and guiding them on the road of discipleship. Church discipline carried out in the fashion described by the Apostle Paul leads to restored believers and a healthy congregation.

Healthy Churches Bear One Another’s Burdens (6:2-5)

As we bear one another’s burdens, we fulfill Christ’s law to love one another (Galatians 5:14; cf. John 13:34-35). Unlike the Judaizers who were demanding that Galatian believers keep the Old Testament law, including circumcision and dietary restrictions, Paul said that the believers could really fulfill the law—the law of Christ—by helping suffering believers carry their burdensome load.

Within every church there are always members who face challenging days involving death, divorce, unemployment, moral failure, or other disappointments of daily life. Those limping through life because of suffering and hardships should be supported by their brothers and sisters in Christ, their church family. The followers of Christ are to be more absorbed with life as a community than with their lives as independent individuals. We are called into the church family, the community, rather than to live in a spirit of rugged individualism. Living as a disciple is like blending our voice with a great choir, not like belting out an attention grabbing solo.

Years ago, a member of our congregation approached me with a very generous check designated to help those struggling in the role of single parenthood. She explained that when she had previously been a member of the church, her children went to church camp on scholarships, and the church family had embraced her children as she struggled to be both breadwinner and homemaker. She had made a covenant with God that if she was ever in a position to do so, she would help other single parents in turn. She would give even as she had received. She fulfilled her commitment by supporting single parents. As her church had helped her bear her burden, she was

now willing and able to help carry the load of others. Her life was changed because the church was willing to walk hand in hand with her as she faced the difficulties and challenges of a single parent.

Paul concluded this section by asserting that “each man will have to bear his own load” (5:5). He did not contradict his earlier admonition to “bear one another’s burden” (v. 2). Different words are used for “burden” in each verse. While the word in verse 2 depicts a “heavy load,” the word in verse 5 speaks of one’s “own proper burden,” like a traveler’s own pack. We must assist our fellow believers who are struggling under the weight of an unbearable load. At the same time, however, every believer must be willing to carry their own weight.

Healthy Churches Pay the Preacher (6:6)

Lest the Galatian Christians conclude from this that religious teachers should carry their own financial burden (6:5), Paul urged the Galatians to financially support those who give their time to teach the community of faith. Pastors and staff members who spend their time preparing to teach God’s word should share in the fruit of the labors of their listeners.

Paul’s teaching here was in accord with what he had taught elsewhere. Even though Paul, himself, did not always exercise his right (1 Corinthians 9:12b, 15-18), he insisted that the preacher has a right to expect fair pay (1 Corinthians 9:11, 14; 1 Timothy 5:17f.). Perhaps Paul remembered how much more effective he was as a teacher when he didn’t have to support himself in tent making and could totally devote himself to the word.

Congregations expect a great deal from their pastor. As Rev. Canon Geoffrey Gray concluded, “People expect their priest to have the skill in sermon composition of Knox, the oratorical power of Churchill, the personal charm of a film star, the tact of royalty, the hide of a hippo, the administrative ability of Lord Nuffield, the wisdom of Socrates, and the patience of Job. Some people must often be disappointed.”

Despite these lofty qualifications, most pastors are underpaid, according to a seminary official. One pastor vented his disappointment candidly. “It is very frustrating to be a rural pastor,” he said. “Church members are whipped and beaten down by the economy, then they pass that on to the pastor. One member even suggested my salary increases be tied to the hog market!”

The story circulates that years ago, President Woodrow Wilson’s father drove up to a store in Princeton, New Jersey, where some men were making small talk. Pastor Wilson was a Presbyterian preacher. One of the men remarked that Brother Wilson’s buggy was polished and shiny, his horse was well groomed, but he said, “Your suit is threadbare, your shoes well worn. How do you explain the difference in the way you look and the way your horse and buggy look?” Brother Wilson replied, “I take care of the horse and buggy, my people take care of me.”

Church leaders must be deliberate and assertive in their attempts to assure that the church takes good care of her teacher. Numerous publications and services are available to help the church leadership in preparing an adequate and fair compensation package.

A Healthy Church Faces the Facts of Farming (6:7-10)

The facts of farming assert that good deeds exercised within the church family always yield a fruitful return. As the Galatian Christians were growing weary in doing well, Paul called for these disciples to face the facts of farming. First, he said, we reap in the same kind as the seed that we sow (see Job 4:8; Proverbs 22:8; Hosea 8:7; 10:12f.; 2 Corinthians 9:6). Our lives can be summarized by the tasks of sowing and reaping. The fruit at the end of the season of our life will be determined by the seeds we have sown. One cannot sow crabapple seeds and expect to harvest Granny Smith apples. Likewise, we cannot fertilize the flesh and expect to reap from the Spirit.

Stating the second fact of farming, Paul said the Galatians must be patient for the harvest. When I was a child, I would often plant seeds and dig them up the next day to see if they were growing. My impatience led to the destruction of my tender seedlings. Paul reminded the Galatian believers that their good deeds would, indeed, one day bring about the expected harvest. But patience must be exercised (6:9). Third, Paul urged the Galatian believers to take advantage of every opportunity to sow seeds by doing good to everyone, especially to fellow believers.

Healthy Churches Know the Proper Basis for Boasting (6:12-16)

Paul summarized the contents of the entire epistle in verses 12-16. The Judaizers were urging the Galatian Gentiles to be circumcised in order that the Judaizers would not join the ranks of those being persecuted for the cause of Christ. They were promoting a religion that made people look acceptable on the outside, rather than promoting a religion that changed the heart. The Judaizers were more concerned about their own safety than they were about proclaiming the truth about the grace of God in Christ.

The Judaizers (6:13) were also wanting the Galatians to be circumcised in order that they could boast. Like Baptist churches today boasting about baptisms, they sought to brag about the success of their outreach ministry as evidenced by circumcised Gentiles. We, too, as Baptists, must be careful not to be caught up in the “numbers game.” While we certainly should be busy doing all that we can to reach people for the cause of Christ, we must never be tempted to offer a cheap grace or an easy road to discipleship in order to simply raise baptism statistics.

Unlike the Judaizers who were boasting over circumcisions, Paul found his boasting in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. We cannot boast about what we have done for God. Rather, we should be busy boasting about what God has done for us, especially in the cross of Christ Jesus.

Healthy Churches Are Filled With Believers Who Have Been Marked for the Master (6:17-18)

While the Judaizers were seeking safety and security, Paul had endured persecution. He had been marked for the Master, even using a word (stigmata) which refers to the signs of ownership such as those used in the branding of cattle. (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:24-28.) Paul declared openly that he was Christ’s slave, and that his marks showed his allegiance to Jesus. He seemed to be saying something like this: “If you think circumcision is a real sign that you belong to Christ, you’re wrong. I have been marked for the Master; I have been persecuted for the Gospel’s sake.”

According to Paul, church health included: (1) using church discipline to restore wayward believers, (2) bearing one another's burdens, (3) fairly compensating the pastor and staff, (4) not growing weary in well-doing, (5) boasting only in the cross of Christ, and (6) being marked by the master. These could be accomplished only if the Galatians cast aside the Judaizers false requirement of law-keeping (circumcision, dietary restriction, etc.) and focused on the new freedom they had found in the grace of God through their faith in Christ Jesus.