

The Assembly as Judge

or

What Do We Learn from Deut. 17:8-13?

Do not ye judge them that are within? (1 Cor. 5:12)

The Lord Jesus in Matt. 7:1 enjoins us, "Judge not that ye be not judged." By nature we are prone to judge our neighbor's motives. We form a judgment of him in which he suffers by comparison with us. King Saul thus judged David when he said: ". . . he is not clean; surely he is not clean" (1 Sam.20:26). He did not attribute David's absence to a good motive. Only God can look within and know what is there -- "the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by His actions are weighed" (1 Sam.2:3, also 16:7). We therefore err in judging *motives* as we are not omniscient.

Clearly, Matt. 7:1 applies to individuals judging one another and not to the assembly judging with the Lord's authority in the midst (Matt.18:18-20). The risen Lord said to His disciples *collectively*: "Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained" (John 20:23). Every time the assembly receives persons into it, the sins of such are remitted *administratively*. When the assembly acts to purge itself of evil (doctrinal or practices) it retains (binds) in the same way the sins of those disciplined. At Corinth they first retained (bound) and then remitted (loosed) the sin of the evildoer (1 Cor.5: 9-13 and 2 Cor. 2:1-11).

Divine Provision for Settlement of Difficulties Between Individuals

Furthermore, the Lord has always made provision for difficulties arising between individuals when the assembly as such is not directly involved. In Israel separate judges were appointed to make decisions. As judges they stood alone and judged apart from the witnesses or the accused. God is not the author of confusion (1 Cor.14:40) and never mixes up the witnesses or the accused with the judge in making the decision. The divinely given instructions are as follows:

And I charged your judges at that time, saying, Hear the causes between your brethren, and judge righteously between every man and his brother, the stranger that is with him. Ye shall not respect persons in judgment; but ye shall hear the small as well as the great; ye shall not be afraid of the face of man; for the judgment is God's: and the cause that is too hard I or you, bring it unto me, and I will hear it (Deut. 1:16-17).

There are seven cogent points in this passage:

1. *Hear* the causes -- do not decide without all the facts.
2. *Between* your brethren -- listen carefully to both sides before forming an opinion.
3. *Judge righteously* -- that is, according to established fact.
4. Without *respect of persons* -- not influenced by friendship, relationship, importance bribes or gifts.
5. Hear the *small* as well as the *great* -- all should get an equal hearing.
6. *Not afraid* of man -- courageous judgment.
7. The judgment is *God's* -- divine authority which should be bowed to.

Difficult judgments were to be referred to Moses who was still living (v. 17). Later, provision was made that could be followed after the death of Moses (Deut. 17:8-13). The judges had to act upon adequate witness:

. . . at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be established (Deut.19:15, see also 17:6).

The testimony of the witnesses would help the judge in his decision, but it would be his decision, not that of the witnesses. He alone was the judge before God.

What confusion would result in a human court of law if the witnesses, the counsel or attorney, were to share with the judge the making of the decision! Their testimony and pleas would be considered by the judge, but they would not be part of the judge in determining the issue.

Settlement of Especially Hard Difficulties

We have seen that the difficult cases between *individuals* were referred to Moses; but God in Deut. 17:8-13 makes provision for *individuals* with hard

problems after the death of this honored servant. Peter could bind and loose but upon his death this ceased; but the power continued in the assembly (Matt.18:18-20).

It is clear that Deut.17:8-13 applies to *individuals* with difficulties, not to the people *collectively*. The passage reads:

If there arise a matter too hard for thee in judgment, between blood and blood, between plea and plea, and between stroke and stroke, being matters of controversy within thy gates then shalt thou arise, and get thee up into the place which the Lord thy God shall choose; and thou shalt come unto the priests the Levites, and unto the judge that shall be in those days, and enquire: and they shall shew thee the sentence of judgment. And thou shalt do according to the sentence, which they of that place which the Lord shall choose shall shew thee; and thou shalt observe to do according to all that they inform thee: according to the sentence of the law which they shall teach thee, and according to the judgment which they shall tell thee, thou shalt do: thou shalt not decline from the sentence which they shall shew thee, to the right hand, nor to the left. And the man that will do presumptuously, and will not hearken unto the priest that standeth to minister there before the Lord thy God, or unto the judge, even that man shall die: and thou shalt put away the evil from Israel. And all the people shall hear, and fear, and do no more presumptuously.

Here there are three things mentioned as to judgment:

1. *Blood and blood* -- or quarrels between those closely related (Luke 12:13-14).
2. *Plea and plea* -- a dispute as to the boundary of property, or other possessions. The landmark might have been removed (Deut. 19:14).
3. *Stroke and stroke* -- a question of injury between two persons, or the measure of penalty for the guilty (Ex. 21:18-19 and 26-27, Deut.25:1-3).

None of these pertains to assembly issues as such, but to difficulties between individuals. Judgment is then referred to God's center -- the place in which *He* chose to place His Name (Deut. 12:5). Shiloh was later designated as this center. There was but one such center in all Israel. *Now* every company gathered to the Lord's Name is God's center (Matt. 18:20). There is no one assembly

today that is more God's center than another. Two or three, or two or three hundred, thus gathered have the Lord's authority in the midst. If brothers in a local gathering have problems between them, they do not have to go far for God's center. In Israel it was different -- Shiloh was God's center when they entered the land; later Jerusalem became that center. The individuals involved present their case and the judge hears all on the basis of Deut. 1:16-17 and he (the judge), in this instance aided by the priests the Levites, pronounces final judgment which is binding on all (v. 12). Judgment being thus given at God's center with *His authority* (v. 12), it was a serious matter not to abide by it.

Today this authority is in the assembly as gathered to the Lord's Name, the Lord being in the midst. In Deut. 17 it is not one assembly appealing to another assembly, but rather individuals looking to God's center for judgment.

Responsibility Between Assemblies

The responsibility between assemblies is rather set forth in Deut. 13: 12-18:

If thou shalt hear say in one of thy cities, which the Lord thy God hath given thee to dwell there, saying, Certain men, the children of Belial, are gone out from among you, and have withdrawn the inhabitants of their city, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, which ye have not known; then shalt thou enquire, and make search, and ask diligently; and, behold, if it be truth, and the thing certain, that such abomination is wrought among you; thou shalt surely smite the inhabitants of that city with the edge of the sword, destroying it utterly, and all that is therein, and the cattle thereof, with the edge of the sword. And thou shalt gather all the spoil of it into the midst of the street thereof, and shalt burn with fire the city, and all the spoil thereof every whit, for the Lord thy God: and it shall be an heap for ever; it shall not be built again. And there shall cleave nought of the cursed thing to thine hand: that the Lord may turn from the fierceness of his anger, and shew thee mercy, and have compassion upon thee, and multiply thee, as he hath sworn unto thy fathers; when thou shalt hearken to the voice of the Lord thy God, to keep all his commandments which I command thee this day, to do that which is right in the eyes of the Lord thy God.

Here we have "thy cities" which represent what is

collective instead of what is *individual*. If evil is thought to be harbored in a city (or assembly), other cities (or assemblies) were to make diligent search, and if it be so, judgment was to follow. In Israel any city from Dan to Beersheba could make inquiry and bring the conscience of the whole nation into exercise. This was done with much failure and weakness in Judg. 20:1-48. But if a city, or assembly, did purge itself of the evil in its midst, it would be evil to try to make that city, or assembly, revert to the previous state in which it allowed the evil in its midst.

Similar order we have in the New Testament. First individual matters -- "blood and blood, plea and plea, stroke and stroke." Matt. 18:18-20 makes full provision for this by referring all to God's center where Christ is in the midst. Other instructions are given in 1 Cor.6:1-8. The difference between the Israelite and the Christian is that the former had to go to Shiloh but the latter has immediate recourse to his local gathering. The judgment in Matt.18:18 is as final as that of Deut. 17:9-12 and must be bowed to as the Lord's authority. It is rebellion against this authority to weaken the discipline by consorting with and helping persons put away by the assembly.

Our Present Danger

We are now in danger of giving up these Scriptural principles. It should be clear by what has been seen so far that brethren called in by an assembly to help it *have no authority to judge the matter, as this rests entirely with the assembly*. These brothers form no part of the "judge" and when they have given advice their work is done.

At Corinth the assembly as such was called upon to act as the assembly, although Paul as an apostle had already judged the case. He would be satisfied with nothing less. He calls on them to put away from "among yourselves" (not 'ourselves') that wicked person (1 Cor. 5:13). They were to judge them that are "within." This discipline (not interfered in by other assemblies) wrought repentance, and then restoration was by the Corinthian assembly as such (2 Cor.2:6-10 and 7:11).

Brethren who are called to give advice to an assembly have no permanent status over that gathering but are responsible in the unity of the body (Eph.4:2-4) to accept the decision rendered by that assembly.

Some time ago the writer and another brother were called in to help a gathering in a local matter. At our final meeting with responsible brothers

from that gathering, the brother with me made a statement to this effect: "We can only advise you as brothers and if you feel that our advice should be acted on you must submit it to the assembly for approval, as the authority is there." Wholesome words indeed! The assembly did take our advice and acted on it. When we left our work was finished; we had no more to do with it unless called again. If further exercise led the assembly later to reverse its action, we would have no *scriptural* ground to force them to return to the original decision. This would put "brothers" above the authority of the Lord in the midst. If another assembly tried to reverse it, then the unity is denied! It is rebellion!

Lack of Discernment Is Due to Our Low State

Why is it that we have difficulty in discerning evil doctrine in our midst? Why is it that we do not hold Matt.18:18 as firmly as the gathered saints of yesteryear? Have the Philistines put out our eyes, by worldliness and lack of subjection to the Word, as they did to Samson?

"There is one body." A believer received by one assembly is received everywhere, and if put out he is out everywhere. We do not eat an ordinary meal with such (1 Cor.5:11). The apostle did not need to tell them not to eat the Lord's supper with such, for they were to "put away from among" themselves that wicked person. But Paul did not want the discipline of the assembly weakened by social activities where the person so put out would be treated as though nothing was wrong. ". . . With such an one no not to eat." JND points out that if such were hungry he could in grace feed him, but would not sit down and eat with him. Where is this faithfulness today? We have become as Samson, blinded to what is so clear in the Word. Evil doctrine, because it undermines the Person and work of Christ, is more serious than the heinous crime at Corinth.

There is a mistaken thought that a person can hold "error" and remain at the Lord's table. While an error can be a mistake, it becomes evil if persisted in after the offender has been warned. One meaning of error is "false doctrine, which is not agreeable to the Word of God."

Can anyone hold that the "error of Balaam" was not evil? Did not God's wrath fall on Balaam? (Num. 31:8, Jude 11.) Paul delivered Hymenaeus to Satan because of blasphemy (1 Tim. 1:20). In

2 Tim. 2:17-18 this same man is associated with "error" (gone astray, missed the mark). He did not deny the resurrection; he only held and taught that it was past already. He seemed to have a semblance of Scriptural support for this in Matt. 27:52-53. It is clear to the simple that to say that the resurrection is past already is a subtle denial of resurrection. This error is against the Lord (Isa.32:6).

When erroneous doctrine is set forth it also produces consequences. The Corinthians did not deny *directly* the resurrection of Christ, but the apostle infers or concludes that by denying the resurrection of the dead they are in result denying the resurrection (1 Cor.15:12-13). From this we learn that the consequential inferences of a doctrine demand the same attention as a direct statement of evil. Based on these principles we must recognize as evil the inferential consequences of a doctrine which, although it claims to maintain the a-toning value of the blood of Christ, nevertheless teaches that "all was finished before the soldier pierced His side." Thus the only blood of His cross identified by Scripture as shed for sins is set aside. Another has aptly said:

The teaching of a teacher must be judged by the teaching itself, not by what the teacher says about it.

If the assembly cannot purge itself of "error against the Lord" (Isa.32:6), it is in a pitiful state and position. If one assembly disowns the action of another in so judging evil, it sets aside the authority of the Holy and True One in the midst. How then can it expect others to honor its actions when it has rejected the very authority it claims for itself? The true path is:

If he neglect to hear the church [assembly], let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven . . . and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in [unto] My Name, there am I in the midst of them (Matt.18:17-20).

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