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### A Biblical Perspective on Church Relationships, Part 6

Cancer. A disease which is ravishing mankind. In 2016, 595,690 people will die from it... that is one person every 53 seconds!! In your lifetime you have a 39.6 chance of being a victim of the disease. (National Cancer Institute, 2016) Starting from the age of 30, the likelihood that you will be a victim of this disease doubles every ten years. In fact if you live to be 90 years old, there is almost a 99% chance you will be a victim of this disease. (Clayman, 1989) (Taber's Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary (book 16, 1989)

A couple of weeks ago I suggested that the church today at times struggles with allergies- which occur when the body's defense system identifies a harmless allergen as a threat.

Well, Cancer is the exact opposite of an allergy. Every cell in your body has what are called *oncogenes*. These are genes which control the growth and multiplication of cells. When foreign agents called *carcinogens* come in contact with your body's cells, the *oncogenes* can be affected, with the result that these agents transform the healthy cell into a tumor-forming cell. The result is a super-cell which can exist in environments which would kill many normal cells. Now on the one hand this might seem like a good thing (having super-cells in your body)... the only problem is that these cells don't fulfill the function of their original cell. They are rogues, doing what they want.

Now get this, cancer would be no problem at all if it weren't for the fact that your body's defense system usually does NOT recognize it as a threat. In fact, in most cases, these cells are recognized as normal! As such, when cancer is in your body, it is free to multiply, all the while your body minimizes the threat of its presence! The result is deadly!

And so it is in the church as well. Cancer in the church takes the form of Christians living in compromise; actively participating in gossip, slander, or rebellion and neglecting their call as parents, husbands, wives, or children. People do these things and never see them as harmful as a result, they are rarely addressed or taken seriously!

Yet the results are horrible! Once strong churches are eroding away. Our "salt is becoming saltless," our "light" is being covered under the sin, and Christ's glory is fading quickly! If the Church is going to be all God has called her to be, we must stop ignoring "cancerous" brethren! Yet how are we to address these inappropriate responses on our part to the body of Christ? We need to re-think what constitutes healthy relationships between the people of the Church.

This is what Paul does for us in 1 Thessalonians 5. Here he gives us six commands regarding how the church ought to relate to one another! The fifth one is that God's people must hold one another accountable.

1 Thessalonians 5:15a, "see that no one repays another with evil for evil."

On the surface this seems like a simple exhortation. Yet the implications of what Paul says here are huge. First notice the words Paul uses.

- See: *ὁράω* (*horaō*) means to see with a discerning mind, and so references perception. Now as a second person *plural* this exhortation is directed to the entire body! In other words, Paul is talking about the responsibility of the entire church body, NOT just the leadership!
- See that no one repays. Paul uses a third person which furthers the idea of corporate responsibility when it comes to the well-being of every individual in the body of Christ.

From this we conclude rather strongly that the health and well-being of any in the body of Christ resides with every member. As God in the days of Abraham gathered His people into a Covenant Community, the “Community” of the body of Christ therefore must take precedence in our lives! Recall, the failure of God’s people at this point played a large part of the Lord giving the Old Testament people of God over to exile. The Psalmist lived at a time of gross hypocrisy when faith had fallen on hard times. Notice his plea:

Psalm 94:3-6, “How long shall the wicked, O Lord, how long shall the wicked exult? They pour forth *words*, they speak arrogantly; all who do wickedness vaunt themselves. [How do they “vaunt themselves”? What particular realm of theology was compromised on account of their pride? Notice v. 5...] They crush Thy people, O Lord, and afflict Thy heritage. They slay the widow and the stranger, and murder the orphans.”

Where does arrogance and the seed of ungodliness first manifest itself? Arrogance and ungodliness are first manifest when the body of Christ fails to respond to the weak, hurting, needy, and rebellious! Listen to the call of God when it came to His compromised people:

Isaiah 1:16-17, “Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil, learn to do good [By the sound of this exhortation, obviously God’s people had completely abandoned the Lord and were running headlong into paganism! Right? No... notice the particulars of the call...]; seek justice, reprove the ruthless; defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”

I remember years ago coming across verses like this in my study and thinking: *That’s the evil that angered God? That’s why God’s people went into exile?* In light of all the theological battles of the day, these verses seemed laughable. I thought, *“If our greatest problem as a people is that we are not caring for the weak or rebuking the proud, we really don’t have a problem!”*

But then I came to understand the Covenant will of God and the place that mutual love and care holds in the Covenant Community. When love fades between the people of God, when church members only care about themselves, when a member of a body can look at someone in rebellion and turn a blind eye to it; the church is in crises; apostasy already has set in! In fact, look at any religion and you can judge the true nature of it by how its adherents treat their weak, wounded, hurting, poor, and rebellious! When is Christianity at its best?

James 1:27, “This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of *our* God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress...”

Jeremiah 22:16, ““He pled the cause of the afflicted and needy; then it was well. Is not that what it means to know Me?’ declares the Lord.”

From all of this we see that there is a “corporateness” when it comes to the Kingdom of God! Making it to heaven is fantastic. But how many in the body of Christ will you have helped and brought along with you?

Recently the Summer Olympic games were held and if you are a sports fan, you were privileged to watch some of the greatest athletes in the world compete against each other. However, many find more satisfaction watching the Special Olympics where handicapped athletes compete in many of the same events as in the Olympics. Yet what a difference! The focus of so many of the competitors in the Special Olympics is the “corporateness” of the event. It is NOT a rare moment to watch a competitor help another compete in a race, holding their hand while they run, helping another get up after they fell down, giving hugs to the other competitors at the finish line!

In a way, the Special Olympics give us a glimpse of how God intended His body to function! Whether it be the weak, struggling, needy, or rebellious, we must see that we have a corporate responsibility to ensure the health, welfare, and godliness of one another! Because of this Paul exhorted the Thessalonians:

1 Thessalonians 5:15, “see that no one repays another with evil for evil.”

This is the principle of *Lex Talionis*, literally, “The Law of Retaliation.” In the Old Testament, God gave this law NOT to prescribe punishment, BUT to limit the extent to which a person could seek justice when wronged. With *Lex Talionis*, any and all *public* retaliation was *limited* to the severity of the original offense!

Leviticus 24:19-22, ““And if a man injures his neighbor, just as he has done, so it shall be done to him: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; just as he has injured a man, so it shall be inflicted on him. ‘Thus the one who kills an animal shall make it good, but the one who kills a man shall be put to death. There shall be one standard for you; it shall be for the stranger as well as the native, for I am the Lord your God.’”

This was an important command because in the ancient world, a small offense could mean the destruction of your property, the enslavement of your family, and your death! It was crazy. So God instructed the Judiciary, “*While an individual does NOT need to exact vengeance (cf. Proverbs 20:22; 24:29; 25:21-22; 28:1-2), if vengeance is demanded, you cannot go beyond the original offense!*”

God’s people in the Old Testament took passages like Leviticus 24:19-22 and Exodus 21:24-25 and misused them to justify *personal* vengeance! If someone spoke ill of you, you were obligated to speak ill of them. If someone ignored you, you were obligated to ignore them! If someone hit you, you were obligated to hit them back!<sup>1</sup> *The result was that in the community, each man became his own judge, jury, and executioner with the belief that God*

*was fully behind him!* R. L. Thomas wrote,

An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth' was originally intended to restrain people from going beyond equal retaliation in punishment for social wrongs against the community. The scribes had distorted the commandment's purpose by using it to justify personal revenge. What had been given as restrictive law had through human traditions been transformed into a permissive rule. (Thomas, 1996, p. 290)

When we come to the New Testament, we note that God addressed this misinterpretation on multiple occasions.

Matthew 5:38-39, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also."

You must see that Christ here is NOT contradicting Scripture. RATHER He is correcting the Jewish misunderstanding of it! Peter addressed this issue:

1 Peter 3:8-9a, "To sum up, let all be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil, or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead..."-

Clearly "an eye for an eye" was never intended to be the penalty, but the limit to which a judicial system could go in the sentencing of a guilty individual. And to derive from the Old Testament teaching a *doctrine of personal vengeance* was a gross misinterpretation of the command of God! In fact, we are never justified in personal vengeance; we are NOT free to "repay another evil for evil!" That is Paul's teaching! As a covenant community, we must ensure that no one in the body exacts personal vengeance on another; which in Thessalonica was an important exhortation.

We know from 1 Thessalonians 4:6, there were some in the body who were defrauding and so hurting the weak amongst them. Furthermore, we also know from 1 Thessalonians 2:14 that this church was filled with Christians who had been betrayed by their very own countrymen, some of whom no doubt had become Christians. Accordingly, there were some who were offended and hurt by others in the body! And because of their religious background, they believed that divine justice meant their getting even! Dr. John MacArthur wrote:

For Christians, the severest, most painful disappointments come not from the wickedness of the unbelieving world but from other sheep within the church. Sheep are definitely capable of harming other sheep, sinning against them in a variety of ways, such as attacking them with wicked words (cf. Proverbs 13:2-3; 15:1, 4; 18:13, 21; 24:28; Matthew 5:22; James 3:1-12) that include gossip and slander (cf. Exodus

20:16; Proverbs 11:13; 20:19; 24:28), ostracizing them from fellowship and ministry opportunities, or harming them more overtly by helping break up a marriage (cf. Exodus 20:14; 1 Thessalonians 4:6) or influencing someone toward sinful behavior (Matthew 18:6–10). (Dr. John MacArthur, 2002, p. 180)

There would have been a very real temptation to get even with those who had hurt you! As such, Paul called on the rest of the body to make sure that no in the body “repaid evil for evil.” Now step back from this exhortation and consider an important implication behind this command? It is NOT enough to care for the weak and needy in the body, we must ALSO ensure that each individual in the body maintains their devotion to the Lord.

1 Corinthians 5:1-2, “It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father’s wife. [If that wasn’t shocking enough, what Paul says next should blow our minds away...] And you have become arrogant, and have NOT mourned instead, in order that the one who had done this deed might be removed from your midst.”

It is shocking and sad when a brother or sister lapses into sin. But what truly is tragic is when the rest of the body does nothing about it! If that occurs, we rightly diagnose the church as being cancerous! Therefore, Christ gave this teaching to any and all individuals in the body of Christ:

Matthew 18:15-17b, “And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private [don’t write a text or email; don’t tell your neighbor; but you yourself go and speak to him in person and reprove him...]; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen *to you*, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church [leadership]...”

Again when any one here is in sin, who is responsible for correcting him? First, the one who first notices it! Then the one who goes with the confronter! And then finally, the church leadership! Listen to the exhortation God gave to the prophet Ezekiel which most certainly applies to us generally:

Ezekiel 33:7-9, “Now as for you, son of man, I have appointed you a watchman for the house of Israel; so you will hear a message from My mouth, and give them warning from Me. When I say to the wicked [which in Scripture, primarily refers to a child of God in rebellion against the Lord], ‘O wicked man, you shall surely die,’ and you do not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require from your hand. But if you on your part warn a wicked man to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, he will die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your life.”

From all of this we come to understand Paul's fifth exhortation: when it comes to healthy church relationships, each of us must take responsibility for the spiritual health and welfare of the individual members of this body! If the relationships in a church are to be healthy, every member of that church must exercise their God-given calling to hold each other accountable. How we need to hear this!

The Book of Revelation contains seven letters to seven churches that were in existence at the time John wrote the book. Now we recognize that these seven churches were far more than just seven individual congregations, they represent seven types of churches that exist throughout this final age! In this regard, the church I want you to notice the Church in Thyatira. It had so much going for it.

Revelation 2:19, "I know your deeds, and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first."

Somehow this church managed to avoid the pitfalls of the Ephesians who had lost their first love and the Laodiceans who had compromised their faithfulness. Instead, the church of Thyatira was characterized by zeal, perseverance, and a passion for the Lord which resulted in a growing devotion to Christ. We would do well to be described like this! Yet NOT everything was fine, this church- and churches like it- had its struggles.

Revelation 2:20, "But I have *this* against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray..."

That God deigned to include this exhortation to this church ought to sober us! One of the seven types of churches and so Christians that exist today is the church that tolerates sin when it comes to the body of Christ.

Now I know this is challenging because one of the inclinations of our hearts today is NOT to involve ourselves in the "business" of other people. What do you call the child in school who frequently tells the teacher about the ill-conduct of their school mates? We call them a tattle-tale and tell them to mind their own business.

The tattle-tale mentality has permeated our lives such that today we don't want to be the heavy, the busy-body, the tattle-tale, and so the one who takes it upon themselves to be the conscience of everybody else. Yet you must see that that is NOT what Paul is arguing for here. He is NOT saying that you ought to take it upon yourself to be the corporate conscience of a church.

What Paul is teaching is that in the Jerusalem where we live, it is our responsibility to love Christ enough that we hold each other accountable to God's standard of holiness, devotion, and love! This is not prying into other people's lives, BUT a God-given calling to admonish

and/or encourage each other unto the love and service of the Lord! In truth, it all revolves around The Core-Principle which Paul gave in this passage, and we would do well to keep this in our minds.

1 Thessalonians 5:13b, “Live in peace with one another.”

Recall, this exhortation was one and the same as what Paul gave the Ephesians.

Ephesians 4:3, “[Be] diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

The fundamental calling, we have as a church body, is the preservation of the peace Christ died to create! Accordingly, if you love Christ, you will labor at maintaining that peace no matter the cost!

In light of this we must see that when a brother or sister falls into sin, the peace of Christ has been compromised! Accordingly, the most peaceful thing we could do is confront the brother or sister living in sin with a view to the restoration of the sinner and so the restoration of the peace of Christ! Toward this end, let us heed the calling given to us.

Hebrews 3:12-13, “Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is *still* called ‘Today,’ lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”

Galatians 6:1, “Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual [which refers to one is not in rebellion against God], restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; *each one* looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted.”

Jude 21-23, “Keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life. And have mercy on some, who are doubting; save others, snatching them out of the fire; and on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh.”

1 Thessalonians 5:15a, “See that no one repays another with evil for evil...”

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## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Recently a Daily Mail report out of Syria that the ISIS controlled territories have outlawed FIFA soccer referees because they do not rule according to sharia law. The new rules would include like-for-like retribution for any offense on the pitch. If a player broke the arm of another player, the offended player is now obligated to break the arm of the offending player!