Accountable One To Another

By Lalith Mendis

Two common responses to sin are (1) hiding from it and its consequences, that is, behaving as if all is in order and (2) accusation of the other. A third response is less easy to understand, and that is euphemism in the face of sin, to downgrade it and excuse it. This often happens when the culprit is someone close to you whom you feel you ought to defend.

Those who gloss over the sins of others would easily excuse themselves too. In fact, "broad-minded" people leave a wide margin for their own sins and unbiblical attitudes.

How should a Biblical community, a Christian fellowship, heal sin in her members? The Scripture places great value in mutual fellowship of one another as the Lord's way of building up His people.

We need to be both optimistic and realistic. We must see with faith and with hope for the better because Christ transforms, while critically and honestly facing up to the sin of the member of the Biblical community, be it my father, mother, brother, sister or wife.

To do this it is mandatory to comprehend the importance of a community, which is a friendship group who exercises "loving-kindness, judgment and righteousness" (Jer. 9:24). Love that does not correct is not Biblical love.

Why are we silent and accommodating toward the sins of those who love us? The answer is that we are in need of the culprit's love. When I am needy of love, I do not correct. I fear to "upset" the person or persons. To a pastor this may be his flock; to a parent it will be the children; to members of a family it will be the others in the family. Can we be sanctified enough, Scripture-based enough to exercise the righteousness of Christ in all our relationships?

We are called to be *disciplers* to one another. Iron must sharpen iron. That is what friendship means (Proverbs 27:17). We are never to be a "yes" person or community, never flatterers. Never the "you scratch my back; I scratch yours" mentality.

I must have a clear vision and comprehension of the image of God which God hopes to restore in me. There is so much jargon on being accepted and such pampering on rejection that there is hardly ever any Biblical discipline in churches today. The "rejected" person claims that such is his case and takes no responsibility for many sins. When I reduce God's standard for me, I am prone to compromise with others.

Our Christian discipleship is governed and fashioned by the Holy Spirit, the Word of God and Christian fellowship. Many believers desire fellowship for carnal happiness. Christian fellowship is a sacred institution ordained by Christ for His people's correction and improvement. Sword-edge personalities are not easy to bear, but are much needed.

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Intimate Fellowship

Then we move on to those believers who are "ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 3:7). Such are in fact not learning. They easily unlearn. They are looking-in-the-mirror type (James 1:23-24). They look at many mirrors--sermons, conferences, books, cassettes, videos, but remain the same. What should be the pastor's strategy with people who are not being made by God's word?

The strength of John Wesley's work lay in his class meetings and bands, where Biblical life was persistently urged in the believer. Wesley rightly understood the need for the small group. Are present-day cell groups providing the correcting, sanctifying, iron-sharpens-iron community?

John Wesley wrote about some earnest Christians, "These, therefore wanted some means of closer union; they wanted to pour out their hearts without reserve, particularly with regard to the sin which did still easily beset them, and the temptations which were most apt to prevail over them. And they were the more desirous of this when they observed it was the express advice of an inspired writer: 'Confess your faults one to another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed' (James 5:16).

"In compliance with their desire, I divided them into smaller companies, putting the married or single men, and married or single women together.

"It can scarce be conceived what advantages have been reaped from this little prudential regulation. Many now happily experienced that Christian fellowship of which they had not so much as an idea before. They began to 'bear one another's burdens' (Galatians 6:2), and naturally to 'care' for each other (Philippians 2:20). As they had daily a more intimate acquaintance with one another, so they had a more endeared affection for each other. And 'speaking the truth in love,' they grew up 'into Him in all things, who is the Head, even Christ' (Ephesians 4:15).

"Without this intimate form of community, believers were not, in fact, bearing one another's burdens; encouraging and exhorting one another; really coming to know each other; speaking the truth in love."

Does the global drive for church growth miss out on the New Testament teaching and experience of the sanctification of the believer, about which Wesley, Booth and Pentecostal pioneers were much concerned?

The Lord Jesus shepherded one hundred and twenty within three and a half years of ministry. The little flock and a little pastor is the Biblical community. In it the pastor needs to check whether his people are growing in the word of God, which is our foundation and plumb line.

Is there any purpose in people who do not learn Christ (Ephesians 4:20) continuing in the flock? Does not a little leaven leaven the whole lump? (1 Corinthians 5:6). Is this why Paul said to excommunicate that brother who is a fornicator, slanderer, etc.? (1 Corinthians 5:11,13). Is any and are all free to come to church meetings on their own terms?

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Wesley had the practice of pruning and weeding the membership in his societies. From one society he expelled sixty-four persons, for such matters as cursing, habitual Sabbath breaking, drunkenness, selling liquor, quarreling, wife beating, habitual lying, evil speaking, idleness, and "lightness and carelessness."

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