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PRESBYTERIAN

## MINISTRY OF THE WORD

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### Church Membership, Part 2

A manifesto is another word for a creed or a doctrinal statement. We have before us a description of how God's people were to live together in the exile. Accordingly, I have titled our study, "A Manifesto on the Responsibility of Church Membership."

When God's people were brought into exile in 586 BC, no doubt many thought that their religion and their way of life was destroyed. What a surprise it would have been for them to be greeted with the words of their conquering king recorded for us in<sup>1</sup> Daniel. Nebuchadnezzar sent this proclamation throughout Babylon in reference to Yahweh:

Daniel 4:34b-35, "[God's] dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom *endures* from generation to generation. And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as

nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and *among* the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, 'What hast Thou done?'"

Truly the toppling of Judah and the destruction of the temple was NOT the end of God's Kingdom. All it did was change the way God's people related to one another and the world. No longer were they a theocracy and so a nation. Rather, they were what they had become at the time of Abraham: a distinct people through which the Lord deigned to bring His salvation to the world!

Now God knew His pilgrim people would NOT last in exile if they looked only after themselves and their immediate family. Accordingly, the Lord inundated His people with exhortation after exhortation telling them that faithfulness to the Lord meant being faithful to each other and so taking responsibility for each other's walks. Recall the prophecy God gave Caiaphas, how it was Christ's will to "...gather together into one, the children of God who are scattered abroad." Just as Christ's redemption was retroactive to those in the Old Testament, so also was His plan of preservation. This is how God deigned to preserve His people in exile... calling upon them to watch out for one another!

That is why the aliens and strangers scattered abroad in the NT era received essentially the same exhortation from God over 30 different times- to...

- Mark 9:50: "...be at peace with one another."
- John 13:14: "...wash one another's feet."
- John 13:34: "...love one another..."
- Romans 12:10a: "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love..."
- Romans 12:10b: "...give preference to one another in honor..."
- Romans 12:16: "Be of the same mind toward one another..."
- Romans 14:13: "...do not judge one another..."
- Romans 14:19: "...build up one another."
- Romans 15:5: "...be of the same mind with one another..."
- Romans 15:7: "...accept one another..."
- Romans 15:14: "...admonish one another."
- Romans 16:16: "Greet one another..."
- 1 Corinthians 11:33: "...wait for one another."
- 1 Corinthians 12:25: "...care for one another."
- Galatians 5:13: "...serve one another."
- Galatians 6:2: "Bear one another's burdens..."
- Ephesians 4:2: "...show forbearance to one another..."
- Ephesians 4:32: "...be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other..."
- Ephesians 5:21: "...be subject to one another..."

I could go on and on; there are many more such verses.<sup>2</sup> Yet get it: God's plan to secure the

health and welfare of the body of Christ scattered abroad is that each of us watch out and care for each other.

We see this reflected in the Ezekiel 33-17. Ezekiel 33-37 was written at the time of the fall of Jerusalem (~586 BC). Accordingly, what God says here about Ezekiel was intended to be a model for the newly arriving exiles from Jerusalem. What was the first message God gave to Ezekiel?

Ezekiel 33:7a: “Now as for you, son of man, I have appointed you a watchman for the house of Israel...”

This wasn't just Ezekiel's calling, but the example and so the pace God set for His pilgrim people living as exiles in a foreign land. We find this in the commission of the watchman.

Ezekiel 33:7b, “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.”

From this Ezekiel 33 we conclude that the calling of a “watchman” is to participate in the sanctification process of the individual members of the body of Christ. How do we do this? By “speaking up” and “warning” one another when it comes to the deceitfulness of sin, its poison, and how it can take over a soul; the importance of fidelity to the Lord, the love of Christ, and the glorious news of the gospel! In this regard, notice the primary object referenced in Ezekiel 33 when it comes to being a watchman in the Kingdom of God... “the wicked” (v. 8a)!

By way of note, I want to mention that in Ezekiel 3:20-21- which parallels our passage- the object of Ezekiel's ministry as a watchman included both “the wicked” AND “the righteous” (that is, those who were faithful to the covenant). Let us never forget the righteous when it comes to our calling to the body of Christ; “the righteous” need our ministry too! In this regard, our ministry is to encourage them to continue in their fidelity, love, service, and devotion to the Lord!

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.”

Yet the focus in our text is on “the wicked,” as they were the ones- as a class- that were being brought into Babylon in this final exile! They largely were the “*rotten fruit*” that was the cause of the exile in the first place. So let's talk about them.

The term *wicked*: רָשָׁע (*rasha*); as we have discussed before, the English is rather misleading when it comes to this word. When we think of a “wicked” man or woman, we tend to think in extremes like Stalin, Hitler, and anyone else whose name denotes evil. Yet the word in the

Hebrew does NOT denote this! The word is a Covenantal Designation describing the breakdown of social relationships in a covenant community due to the actions or attitude of an individual. Accordingly, it references people in the body who do NOT struggle with sin, BUT ones who have given up their struggle against sin! G. Herbert Livingston put it this way:

“In the Old Testament the root *rāšaʿ* appears as the most important antonym of *ṣedeq* ‘righteousness’... In contrast to *ṣdq* it denotes the negative behavior of evil thoughts, words and deeds, a behavior not only contrary to God’s character, but also hostile to the community and which at the same time betrays the inner disharmony and unrest of a man.” (*Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, p. 863)

And so while the word can and does refer to the harmful activity of the non-believer toward the child of God (Genesis 6:5; Psalms 94; Habakkuk 1:13), nevertheless it MOST OFTEN is used in Scripture of the rebellious child of God struggling with sin. Speaking of the worship of God’s people Solomon wrote, “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination...” (Proverbs 21:27a). Non-Christians were NOT allowed to sacrifice in the tabernacle or temple... only God’s people were permitted. Accordingly, the designation of “wicked” must here be in reference to them! When a Christian devotes themselves to sin all week and then enters into the presence of the Lord on Sunday, that is an abomination to the Lord. That does NOT mean the wicked ought not come to worship. But it does mean that they ought to come in brokenness and repentance.

Jeremiah in a lamentation to the Lord for the difficulty he was experiencing at the hands of his own countrymen, Jeremiah prayed,

Jeremiah 12:1-2, “Righteous art Thou, O Lord, that I would plead *my* case with Thee; indeed I would discuss matters of justice with Thee: Why has the way of the wicked prospered? *Why* are all those who deal in treachery at ease? [So who are these?] Thou hast planted them, they have also taken root; they grow, they have even produced fruit. Thou art near to their lips but far from their mind.”

Clearly Jeremiah is speaking in reference to his countrymen who hypocritically worshipped God with their lips, but then during the week gave themselves to treachery and sin!

In fact, that is how Ezekiel uses the term in the context of our passage,

Ezekiel 33:11, “Say to them, ‘As I live!’ declares the Lord God, ‘I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways! Why then will you die, O house of Israel?’”

Accordingly, when the Bible speaks of the “wicked” as it does in our text, it primarily speaks of the rebellious child of God who has forsaken their faithfulness to the Lord and His people, and so has given themselves to a life of self-service and so self-gratification.

From this we note that the primary commission of a “Watchman” in the body of Christ is NOT that of evangelism (so often this text is used to guilt people into sharing the gospel). RATHER we are talking here about overseeing and so caring for brothers and sisters who are struggling in their walk! As children of God our commission is to speak up and so endeavor to encourage them unto godliness, trust, hope, and righteous living.

In this regard, notice THE TOOL that God has given us when it comes to the Ministry of the Watchman (and so the servant in God’s Kingdom):

Ezekiel 33:7b, “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.”

The “Tool” when it comes to cajoling sinning Christians from their wickedness is NOT intimidation, shunning, ignoring them in hopes that in time they will repent, hinting, or fattening them with friendship. RATHER, it is holding them accountable to the word of God!

This is why we say the nature of ecclesiastical power is “ministerial and declarative.” All that we can do when it comes to the sinning Christian is to declare God’s word and will to them and then hold them accountable to it! That is it!

Yet don’t misunderstand, this is no small thing! Christ’s entire ministry revolved around “speaking a word” (that is, the word of God). By quoting and proclaiming the word of God, Christ:

- Set His people apart in truth (John 17:17).
- Shut the mouths of His accusers (cf. John 8:58; Matthew 22:28).
- Stopped Satan in His tracks (cf. Matthew 4:1-11).
- Established His Kingdom (Matthew 16:18).
- Delivered the dead and dying, opened the eyes of the blind, and encouraged the hurting and downtrodden (Matthew 11:5).

This is NOT to say or intimate that there somehow is intrinsic power in the word of God (it is not magic). HOWEVER, it is to say that God’s Kingdom was built, is being built, and in the future will be based on the authority of Almighty God which is housed in His Word!

Accordingly we read in Scripture this:

Joshua 1:8, “This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success.”

The key to all Kingdom success is living according to God’s word. As that is true, notice its role

in any effective ministry.

Isaiah 50:4, “The Lord God has given Me the tongue of disciples, that I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word...”

If there is going to be any fruit in your ministry, it will be in the proportion you encourage, bind up, or rebuke with the word of God! You say, “*But there are some hard hearts out there. Certainly we need more than just a quoting of the word of God?*” Listen to how God describes His word:

Jeremiah 23:29, “‘Is not My word like fire?’ declares the Lord, ‘and like a hammer which shatters a rock?’”

While the word of God is not magic, nevertheless when it is accompanied by and with the working of the Spirit of God (Zechariah 4:6b), Kingdoms can topple, the hurting can be comforted, the blind can receive back their sight, and the dead can be raised from the grave!<sup>3</sup> And so we minister in confidence knowing.

Isaiah 55:11, “So shall My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.”

This no doubt is why the final message Paul gave to the Ephesian elders in person was...

Acts 20:32: “And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build *you* up and to give *you* the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”

With all of this we are not surprised to read that Ezekiel’s primary tool and ministry was proclaiming the word of God to the wicked of his day, “So you will hear a message from My mouth, and give them [‘the wicked’] warning from Me.”

Truly, the calling and duty of a watchman is the oversight and care of the people of God. This is how God deigned to preserve His church in the diaspora! And how is this done? By holding our brothers and sisters accountable to God’s word! This brings us to the “*controversial*” part of the exhortation God gave to Ezekiel, the culpability of the watchman.

Ezekiel 33:8-9, “When I say to the wicked, ‘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.”

What does this mean? Does this apply to us? This is where Bible study and application must NOT be blurred.

We recognize that this passage was directed exclusively at Ezekiel. So, what is said here related to his call as a prophet and so leader of God's people (and for that matter, all the other prophets who are frequently identified as "watchman" in Scripture<sup>4</sup>)! In this regard, it is notable/shocking that the form of the sentencing here is typical of verdicts declared by a JUDICIAL AUTHORITY to a criminal guilty of a capital offense.<sup>5</sup> In other words, if Ezekiel shrunk back in fear of man or laziness, and so did not proclaim the word of God to the wicked, he would be guilty of murder! Lamar Cooper wrote this:

Indifference that fails to save a life is comparable to negligent homicide. The prophet would be guilty of murder by his failure to fulfill his calling. According to the law of retribution, he was liable for the loss of life payable by the forfeit of his own (Gen 9:5–7). (*Ezekiel*, NAC, p. 86)

In this regard, we are in error if we apply this judicial sentence to ourselves in the case of irresponsibility! Nowhere else in Scripture is such a verdict given to the child of God who fails to encourage his brethren!

Yet that does NOT mean that this passage is NOT relevant when it comes to our ministry. We understand that in the context of Bible study EVERY passage is applicable to us in some way. In fact, THE model for all Bible study is set for us in Ezra.

Ezra 7:10, "For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to practice *it*, and to teach *His* statutes and ordinances in Israel."

Effective Bible study always involves personal application of the text!

So how do we apply a passage like this which includes the description of a threat against a specific office? First we see how serious God is when it comes to wickedness in the body of Christ. While we ourselves may NOT be culpable for murder in the case of neglect in ministry, we ought NOT conclude that neglect of the body is no big deal. It is a big deal. The Hebrew writer exhorted the Christians.

Hebrews 10:24-25, "And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near."

The focus of this exhortation is "...not forsaking our own assembling together..." How do we do this? By NOT "...stimulating one another to love and good deeds..." by NOT "...encouraging one another... as you see the day drawing near." So it is a serious thing to ignore a Christian struggling in their walk.

And yet, we can go a little further than that. Because of His call, Ezekiel would be culpable to a death sentence if he did NOT "speak to warn a wicked man from his way." And in a way, if

we neglect the rebellious in our midst, we likewise will reap a death sentence. In this regard, follow with me:

- What if, out of fear, laziness, or indifference, we ourselves do NOT endeavor to encourage or cajole a struggling saint to grow in grace?
- If you've been in ministry long you will have seen it many times... that individual will flounder AND the body of Christ will suffer as a result! Think of it, if you are part of a sport's team and it loses, all lose! While not all have the responsibility to throw the ball or tackle the opponent... responsibility for the win or loss in a competition rests on everyone's shoulder! Paul himself appealed to this in Ephesians. In his exhortation to the men in marriage, Paul said this:

Ephesians 5:28, "So husbands ought also to love their own wives *as their own bodies*. He who loves his own wife loves himself."

Do you see how Paul masterfully exhorts married men unto faithfulness? In marriage there is a corporateness which means any rebellion on the part of your spouse will ultimately come back to harm you! Accordingly we take the threat issued toward Ezekiel quite seriously. While it does NOT speak to us of a judicial consequence in the case of our neglect<sup>6</sup>, nevertheless it DOES speak of accountability and so responsibility when it comes to the sins and struggles of others in the body!

- IF the rebellion of a Christian is met with rebellion from us- meaning we do NOT act to encourage, help, rebuke, or protect them...
- IF the rebellion of a Christian compromises the ministry of which we are apart...

THEN we too will suffer much of the same consequences as a body as the rebel- which in Scripture includes but is not limited to:

- Leanness of soul.
- Coldness in our lives toward the Lord.
- Empty worship.
- Powerless ministry.
- And so much more!

And so in our application of this text we acknowledge the corporate responsibility and consequences that will impact both the church and ourselves when brothers and sister are allowed to live in compromise!<sup>7</sup>

I hope you see how serious is the responsibility that rests upon us as members of a Church. Being part of the body of Christ involves an implicit obligation toward each other, the work and calling of the Watchman! This calling is to be carried out as we hold each other accountable to the word of God. That is our focus and calling.



May we all take seriously the calling and duty of a Watchman when it comes to our brothers and sisters in this body!

## End Note(s)

<sup>1</sup> Nebuchadnezzar intended that this message be spread throughout his entire kingdom (cf. Daniel 4:1).

This means the newly arriving exiles would have been greeted with this proclamation!!!

<sup>2</sup> cf. Philippians 2:3; Colossians 3:9, 13, 16; 1 Thesalonians 4:18; 5:13, 15; Hebrews 3:13; 10:24; James 5:9, 16a, 16b; 1 Peter 4:9, 10; 5:5.

<sup>3</sup> I am speaking here of regeneration.

<sup>4</sup> "Watchman" was a common one for the true prophets of Yahweh (cf. Isa. 56:10; Jeremiah 6:17; Hos. 9:8). Of all people at the time, God called them to specially care and so protect the body of Christ from itself!

<sup>5</sup> By a king: 1 Samuel 14:44; 22:16; 1 Kings 2:37, 42; by the leaders of the people: Jeremiah 26:8; by God: Genesis 2:17; 20:7; 2 Kings 1:4, 6, 16.

<sup>6</sup> Although, it could result in a judicial sentence! On account of the unchallenged sin of some in Corinth, many Christians were sick, weak, and some even died (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:30)!!! So it could refer in our lives to a judicial sentencing. Having said this, just because a person stood liable to death, that doesn't mean they actually would be killed. That Ezekiel here would be liable to death if he failed to warn the wicked does NOT mean that God would kill him. It most certainly does indicate how serious a thing it is to fail to fulfill the call God has placed on our lives in caring for the body of Christ!!!

<sup>7</sup> Paul said speaking of the church, wrote, "And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if *one* member is honored, all the members rejoice with it" (1 Corinthians 12:26). This may sound like a broken record, but do you see that there is a corporateness to Christianity which precludes Island living?! As this church is as much your family as it is mine, if compromise or worldliness is allowed to fester, we all will suffer! And so, Paul warned the churches in Galatia, "A little leaven leavens the whole lump *of* dough" (Galatians 5:9). Furthermore, Paul told Timothy speaking of the consequence of unchecked sin, "Remind *them* of these things, and solemnly charge *them* in the presence of God not to wrangle about words which is useless, *and leads* to the ruin of the hearers... But avoid worldly *and* empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene." (2 Timothy 2:14a, 16-17)