

Growth by Attrition

Discipline is a challenge in many churches of Christ. The struggle for a leadership with the faith required to act (Titus 1:9) and a membership whose dedication is solely to Christ (Matthew 10:34-39) is sometimes a scarce commodity in the spiritual economy. It is further complicated when personal loyalties get involved but confrontations are inevitable in problem-solving. Take Joe Snuffy for example (a completely fictitious character... my apologies to any Joe Snuffy out there). Joe is a good guy, basically, he just has this peculiarity in life or doctrine that happens to be, well, unscriptural. And, he publicly practices or promotes this unbiblical habit or doctrine. So, what is a Christian to do?

Too often the standard operating procedure is to ignore the issue. A weak leadership is prone to nurture the delusion that problems are best ignored, and immature Christians faithlessly fear the “harshness” of practicing godly discipline. Couple that with an unrepentant sinner’s belligerence and the stew becomes too bitter for most to swallow. So, concerned semi-Christians sit silently, wagging their heads as though nothing can be done except wait for time – that healing balm for every breach of scripture – to dissipate the consequences of ignoring a problem. Until it becomes embarrassing. Then, actions rich with emotion (anger, frustration, disbelief) finally raise the level of intensity to a nerve-grating unpleasantness.

This is where it gets interesting. There are doctrines and conducts the faithful concede are totally unchristian and not to be tolerated, defended, or promoted. However, dealing with the issue might risk the accusation that someone is unloving. On the other hand, no one can justify Joe. So, the only way to avoid being impaled on the horns of dilemma is to tolerate it and hope that the church will grow in spite of the bruise Joe Snuffy leaves on the body of Christ. This invites *growth by attrition*. It goes something like this. We’re not about to support or approve of Joe but we’re not going to do anything either. So, when new members or new converts ask, “Hey, what about Joe Snuffy,” we stare at the floor and go “Tsk, tsk, tsk.” Everybody eventually comes to understand that, sooner or later, Joe will die and we’ll eulogize him, and then the church will overcome the disruption that was Joe.

God’s version of growth-by-attrition is a bit different. After ten spies brought back an evil report on the Canaan property, for forty years, a faithless generation dropped like flies into hot wilderness sands because a minority couldn’t convince a majority to submit to God (Numbers 14:29). Following faithfully seemed to be just beyond their ability... and they died.

When a church doesn’t deal with Joe Snuffy, the church dies; God’s growth by attrition (Revelation 3:16). When someone teaches false doctrine, discourage it (2 John 9-11). When someone insists on immoral conduct, purge it out (1 Corinthians 5:6-7). When someone creates dissension in the church, mark them (Romans 16:17-18). Let’s not die!