Dealing with Sin and Error

By Michael McCleeary

One unfortunate truth that we all know and understand is that within the religious world, people who claim to be Christians often practice sin and teach error. We encourage and caution each other regarding outside influences, making sure that we are guarding the truth according to the Scriptures. In fact, so much attention is given to the religious world-at-large that we may not realize when sin and error creep in among our own brethren. It is an even more unfortunate truth that sin and error can sometimes be named among our own brethren, members of the church that belongs to Christ. Yet, this is a reality that we must come to accept and be prepared to face. As much as we caution each other against the destructive influences of the religious world, we must caution more so regarding possible sinful and erroneous influences among our brethren. It is, therefore, prudent and necessary to consider that the writers of the New Testament were not slack in issuing warnings of false doctrines and of sinful individuals that could creep in among innocent brethren. Numerous times we read of Paul's warnings concerning certain doctrines or individuals that could creep in and cause brethren to fall away from the faith. We must equip ourselves to be prepared to stand for the truth, whether attacks against the truth come from the religious world, or from our own brethren.

How to deal with error or sin? This concept is not debated with much zeal among the religious of the world; they mainly seek to pursue peace, even at the cost of "old fashioned" or "open-to-interpretation" Scriptures that speak of truth being the most important aspect of Christianity, even more important than peace. Ironically, the question of how to deal with error and sin is one of the most hotly debated questions that tests brethren of the churches of Christ. There have been numerous answers to this question, either in word or by deed. One such answer is "Ignore it (sin or error) and continue to show signs of spiritual fellowship." How any member of the church of Christ could suggest such a thing might be mind-boggling to some, but this is where influences of the world tend to creep in. Comments involving phrases such as "open-to-interpretation", and even "out-dated", have been used by some as a way of dismissing sin or error and still being able to show signs of fellowship. Some seek to simply "throw" the sin or

error "in" **Rom. 14** or **Phil 2:12** as a way to secure peace among brethren. Still, others are open to discussing the sin or error with the one in question, but if resistance is encountered some simply back off by "agreeing to disagree". In the end, we must ask "What do the Scriptures say?" and allow the Scriptures to be the final authority.

What do the Scriptures say? 1) Point out and warn regarding sinful or erring brethren! This can be made no clearer than the multiple examples of Paul calling out the names of specific people who had either turned to sinful practices or had fallen to false teachings. There are times when naming a name of one who is teaching error, or has given themselves to sin, may be necessary for the safety of the brethren. Many brethren are extremely uncomfortable with "naming names" (when appropriate), yet Paul was not uncomfortable in the least. Yet, even if/when it is not appropriate to name a name, Paul is clear that sinful practices and false teachings themselves should be made known for the safety of the saints. This was crucially important 2,000 years ago, and it is just as important today. **2)** Nip sin and error in the bud! Paul makes himself crystal clear in **II Tim. 4:2-5** that Timothy was to "*convince, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and teaching*". These terms are specifically used in the context of brethren following false doctrines and are expressly negative. Paul wanted no doubt in Timothy's mind that he was to use the doctrine of Christ in any way necessary, by whatever tact necessary, to ensure the brethren understood the danger of sin and error.

Ultimately, the only way to root out sin and error (and even those who would compromise truth in order to secure peace) is for each congregation of the Lord's body to devote itself to what the Scriptures say and to allow the Scriptures to dictate courses of action against sin and error. This is the example the Scriptures expressly authorizes. Every congregation of the Lord's body must be on guard and prepared to deal with sin or error in any of the various forms it may take.