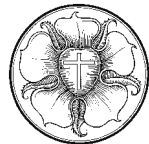


reputation of the great apostle Peter had to be tarnished a little in order to preserve the honor of God's Word and the needs of others.

[For further study: Luther's Works, Vol. 51, pp. 158-160]

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## ***“Secret and Public Sins”***

### **The LC-MS: Are We Still Following Jesus?**

*“My sheep hear My voice ... and they follow Me.”* (John 10:27, NKJ)

#### **3A — MANY TODAY SUGGEST**

*That before bringing charges against anyone or publicly criticizing them one must follow the steps of Matthew 18 and go privately to a brother, even in cases of public sin.*

#### **THE BIBLE TEACHES**

It is clear from the Scriptures that Paul publicly rebuked Peter without first going to him in private. In Galatians 2:14, Paul boasts *“when I saw that they [Peter, Barnabas, and other Jewish Christians] were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all ...”* Likewise in Matthew 23:1, 13 we are told that Jesus publicly rebuked the scribes and Pharisees, when speaking *“to the crowds and His disciples”* He said, *“Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!”*

#### **WHY DOES THIS MATTER?**

Those who suggest that Matthew 18 must be understood as commanding that private admonition is to be followed in all cases of sin, make Jesus and the Scriptures contradict themselves. Indeed, if Matthew 18 applies in every instance, then our Lord would be guilty of ignoring His own command. But we know this cannot be so.

## THUS HISTORIC LUTHERANISM TEACHES

There is no contradiction between Jesus' actions and His words. Rather historic Lutheranism teaches, with Luther in the Large Catechism, that Matthew 18 "*refers to secret sins*" (Large Catechism, 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment, 284). On the other hand, both Paul and our Lord's actions involved rebuking public sins. The "secret sins" of our neighbors are those sins of theirs that we may know about personally, but others do not. Here Leviticus 19:16a, 17 applies, "*Do not go about spreading slander among your people ... Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt.*" In Matthew 18, Jesus is explaining how to carry out Leviticus 19 in the case of secret sins, in line with the Eighth Commandment's concern to protect our neighbor's reputation.

Public sin is different. Historic Lutheranism teaches that "*where the sin is so public that the judge and the whole world are aware of it, you can without sin shun and avoid the person ... For example, we [Lutherans] now censure the pope and his teaching, which is publicly set forth in books and shouted throughout the world*" (Large Catechism, 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment, 284). In other words, Luther did not have to follow Matthew 18 and go to Rome to speak privately to the pope before criticizing him. Thus, neither Paul nor our Lord followed the directives of Matthew 18 in the case of public sin.

Why are public and secret sins treated differently by our Lord? There are several reasons. One is that the Eighth Commandment was given to protect our neighbor's reputation from false witness. However, there can be no possibility of false witness where the sin is out in the open, before everyone's eyes, "*for when an affair is manifest to everybody*

*there can be no question of slander or injustice or false witness*" (Large Catechism, 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment, 284).

Another reason is that secret sin does not endanger the whole communion of saints in the same way as public sin does. Private sin endangers the individual performing it and others who directly suffer the consequences of the sinner's actions. Public sin, however, must be rebuked publicly so "*that everyone may learn to guard against it*" (Large Catechism, 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment, 284). If public sin is not rebuked publicly, others will get the impression that we approve of the sin or at least do not consider it a serious matter and they may be emboldened to do likewise. Thus, Paul tells Timothy, "*Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that others may take warning*" (1 Timothy 5:20). If we fail to publicly rebuke public sin we, "*share in his guilt*" (Leviticus 19:17) and this against the clear warning of God, "*Do not share in the sins of others*" (1 Timothy 5:22). Indeed, even private sin ultimately has to be rebuked publicly where there is no repentance. In Matthew 18, if the brother does not repent, he is to be treated as "*you would treat a tax collector and a pagan.*" Here we also see that the needs of the Church outweigh the concern for one person's reputation.

Finally, God's honor is tarnished by public sins as Luther explains in his Small Catechism – "*anyone who teaches or lives contrary to God's Word **profanes** the name of God **among us***" (Small Catechism, Lord's Prayer, 1<sup>st</sup> Petition). Retaining **our** honor is important, protecting **our neighbor's** honor is even more important, but **our greatest concern** must be for God's honor. Even within Leviticus 19 and Matthew 18, we see that as important as preserving our neighbor's reputation is, **the greater concern is God's honor and our neighbor's salvation**. Thus in the case of Paul's rebuke of Peter, even the