

COMPLICITY

Jezebel was the daughter of Ethbaal, the king of Tyre and Sidon. She was familiar with the ways in which kings in Phoenicia and Canaan used their power in absolute ways for their personal interests. Ahab knew that God had limited royal power in Israel. The Law of Moses had prohibited an Israelite king from accumulating great wealth, and had required him to have his own copy of the Law, read it, and carefully put it into practice (Dt 17:14-20). Naboth had not wanted to sell his land, because Israelites regarded the land as belonging to the Lord. Even when land was sold because of hard times, it had to return to the ancestral family in the fiftieth year (Lv 25:10). Ahab knew that such provisions prevented him from extending his palace grounds in Jezreel by making Naboth's vineyard his vegetable garden. That is why he sulked.

Jezebel knew provisions in the Law of Moses and gave the impression that she was piously following them. A day of fasting was proclaimed if a calamity threatened the people. Calamity might be avoided if the people humbled themselves before the Lord and removed any person whose sin might be bringing God's retribution on all the people. The Israelites had acted in that way when a serious sin had occurred in the tribe of Benjamin, and the tribe had refused to hand its wicked men over to be punished (Jdg 20:26). At the time of Samuel the Israelites had put away their idols and observed a day of fasting when the Philistines threatened them (1 Sm 7:6). Jezebel wanted to create the impression that a period of fasting and the removal of a wicked man among the people of Jezreel would avert a calamity.

Jezebel was careful to observe the requirement of the Law of Moses that two witnesses were required for the punishment of a capital offence (Dt 17:6). She wanted to make it appear that a trial of Naboth followed right procedure. The Law forbade the execution of an innocent man (Ex 23:7). The Law had provided that a person who cursed God should be put to death by stoning (Lv 24:15-16) and that provision is what Jezebel used. She wanted the appearance of strict legality by stipulating that Naboth had to be stoned outside the city (Lv 24:14; Nm 15:35-36). When Achan had taken banned property from Jericho, his family and possessions were destroyed with him (Jos 7:24-25). That provided a precedent for including Naboth's sons. Stoning Naboth's sons also eliminated his heirs. The king's family would then not seem to violate the provisions that property should remain in the family. The fact that the elders and nobles of the city passed judgment on Naboth and his family seemed to free the royal family from any suspicion of improper conduct.

Ahab knew that Naboth was a righteous man. He knew that as king he should have punished the scoundrels who gave false evidence. No matter how convenient it was for him after the event, he should have refused to touch the vineyard of Naboth. He should have rebuked and punished Jezebel for her wickedness. Ahab should have realised that the king's toleration of such injustice would quickly permeate the whole of Israelite society and affect their loyalty to God.

The Word of the LORD to Elijah made it clear that Ahab's willing compliance with Jezebel's scheme made him guilty. Going along with what had been done made him guilty of murder and theft. He was complicit, and co-responsible. "Tell him, 'This is what the LORD has asked, 'Have you committed murder and also seized his property?'" You shall also tell him, 'This is what the LORD has said, 'At the place where the dogs have licked up Naboth's blood, the dogs will also lick your own blood'" (1 Kng 21:19).

In Revelation a person who claimed to be a prophetess was called a "Jezebel." She was encouraging immorality and idolatry at Thyatira under the cloak of religion (Rv 2:20). She was undermining loyalty to God by promoting tolerance of pagan practices.

Complicity is in the news again because some church bishops have been lenient in dealing with clergy who have been guilty of the abuse of children. Our society rightly accepts the principle that people who are in charge cannot avoid responsibility if they have failed to act appropriately. All Christians suffer when church leaders have dealt mildly with child abuse, even when they have not been guilty of such abuse themselves. The whole family of Eli was removed from the Aaronic priesthood because he had tolerated wicked conduct by his sons at the tabernacle. He had the right attitude about what his sons were doing, but he had failed to act appropriately. He had honoured his sons more than the Lord (1 Sm 2:22-36).

The principle of complicity applies both to matters of morality and also to false doctrine and wrong doctrinal practice. All Christians suffer when churches give the impression that the Christian faith is merely a cover for what people selfishly and wickedly want for themselves. All Christians suffer when a church appoints a man who is a practising homosexual as a bishop.

When a person is a member of a church body that teaches or tolerates unscriptural teaching, how can he or she avoid complicity and co-responsibility? Membership in a church body implies that one approves of what that church body says and does. The Lutheran World Federation has an official policy of "reconciled diversity." That means that it tacitly refuses to condemn teaching that is false in other churches. If a Lutheran church associates itself with Lutheran World Federation when it has such a public policy, members of such a church who know the situation are guilty of complicity. When they fail to make an adequate protest by placing themselves in a state of confession when protests are ignored, and when they continue to support that church (Tt 3:10) they have become guilty of complicity. When they continue to commune with people who openly advocate the unscriptural practices such as having women as pastors (1 Cor 14:33-37) how can they avoid complicity with disobedience to a command of the Lord?

Regularly worshipping and communing in a church implies that a person accepts and supports the public confession of that church. By doing that he or she declares openly, "This is what I believe." Without a clear disavowal and protest everyone assumes that the members agree and support their church, its teaching, and its practices.

God's instruction to the church of all ages is that they watch out for those who cause the divisions and the obstacles that are contrary to the teaching that they have learned, and turn away from them (Rm 16:17). Such action is often criticised as an unloving thing to do. In fact it is the loving thing to warn those who are in error, and to protect one's fellow members from the danger of false teaching and practice. God's instructions go a step further than warning and commanding to avoid, by stating that non-avoidance of error and continuing support of what is false makes a person complicit. He is then co-responsible. John, often called "the apostle of love" makes that point clearly. "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into

your house or say a greeting to him. For the person who says a greeting to him shares in his wicked deeds" (2 Jn 10-11).

Early Christians often gave accommodation and food to travelling teachers. The greeting that is forbidden is a greeting appropriate to a fellow-Christian. It had linguistic connections in Greek to the word for "rejoice", and, beyond that, even to the word for "grace." There is no prohibition to giving a fellow citizen the time of the day, or even having a conversation with such a person about secular or spiritual matters. John's warning meant that providing food and shelter would be an investment in the "wicked deeds" of the false teacher and give public approval to his words.

Because church services were regularly conducted in homes the warning of John must at the very least have applied to communion fellowship. That is the position of the New Testament. Werner Elert's *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries* shows that this was also the universal practice of the early church. The mere name of fellow Christian gave no one an unconditional right to the Lord's Supper. Great care was taken with continuity of confession with the church of the apostles. Heterodoxy destroyed confessional unity and put an end to altar fellowship. The churches watched their communicants closely, and church members exercised concern for each other. A local excommunication was recognised by sister churches everywhere. When Christians travelled to other countries, letters of peace were sent with them to sister churches. It was accepted as obvious that, if a church was wounded in doctrine or in practice, such wounds had to be healed there. Fellowship was not the goal of church relations, but the basis for them. There were no grades of church fellowship. It was complete or none at all, and required of all members. Church fellowship was public, and no individual had a free hand in manipulating fellowship. If there was disunity, it had to be removed. Receiving the sacrament in a church meant affirming its confession. This whole area is, tragically, one that many churches of our modern "ecumenical" age have increasingly neglected.