

***The Church:
Is it Important and What Difference does it Make?
Part Three***

Church Discipline

The focus of this lesson is *church discipline*. The fact that your immediate and instinctive response is probably somewhat (or considerably) negative reflects how far removed we are today from the spirit of the New Testament. As we'll see, a commitment to discipline in the local church is indicative not only of one's love for holiness, as well as those lingering in sin, but most of all for the Lord Jesus who "gave himself up for her [i.e., the Church], that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:25-27). With this in mind, let's read Paul's words of counsel:

"Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure - not to put it too severely - to all of you. For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. What I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs" (2 Cor. 2:5-11).

There is considerable debate among commentators as to the identity of this individual. The older commentaries (especially Philip Hughes) insist that this is the incestuous man of 1 Corinthians 5. More recent commentators argue that this is the person who opposed Paul and worked to undermine his apostolic authority. This man "may have been connected with the sexual aberrations in Corinth that involved a number of people and that appear to have necessitated Paul's recent unscheduled visit (12:21-13:2). It is quite possible that the man also supported the practice of ongoing attendance at temples in the city (6:14-7:1), despite Paul's warnings in the First Letter (1 Cor. 10:14-22). . . . Perhaps this man resisted Paul's admonitions to the Corinthians during his second visit and was himself the major reason that visit was so painful for Paul" (Paul Barnett, 124).

In any case, the church had imposed discipline upon him, most likely by prohibiting his presence at the Lord's Table and withdrawing routine fellowship. The good news is that it worked! "For such a one," says Paul, "this punishment by the majority is *enough*." He had evidently repented and Paul now calls for a reaffirmation of love for him and his restoration into the life of the church.

Paul is concerned lest immoderate severity destroy this man. Thus he encourages the Corinthians "to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow." The tendency of human nature is to hold the offender at arm's length, to forgive but not forget, to say "I receive you back" but to treat the person like a leper. Philip Hughes reminds us that "discipline which is so inflexible as to leave no place for repentance and reconciliation has ceased to be truly Christian; for it is no less a scandal to cut off the penitent sinner from all hope of re-entry into the comfort and security of the fellowship of the redeemed community than it is to permit flagrant wickedness to continue unpunished in the Body of Christ" (66-67).

Perhaps the best way to approach this topic, if only briefly, is to ask and answer a series of five questions.

First, why is church discipline so neglected, if not ignored altogether, in our day? Among the many reasons that could be cited, here are a few.

- Perhaps the principal cause is a pervasive ignorance of biblical teaching on the subject (many believe that it is infrequently mentioned in Scripture and therefore unimportant).
- Others are ignorant of the purpose of discipline and see it only as destroying the person.

- Another factor is calloused, insensitivity toward sin; a failure to take seriously the offense of sin and a tendency toward unsanctified mercy in our treatment of the unrepentant.
- Undoubtedly the spirit of individualism also plays a role. We have lost the sense of community and mutual responsibility one for another. How often has it been said, as a way of justifying our passivity toward sin, “Well, it’s not really any of my business, is it?” Discipline is costly because my brother’s/sister’s business now becomes mine.
- A misapplication of our Lord’s words in Matthew 7:1 (“Judge not, that you be not judged”) has certainly put hesitancy in the hearts of many in regard to dealing with sin in the local church.
- The fear of rejection also comes into play (i.e., the fear of being told by the offending party: “Mind your own business. You have no authority to tell me what I can and can’t do”).
- I strongly suspect that fear of legal reprisal in the form of lawsuits has paralyzed many.
- Many people (even church leaders) simply dislike confrontation. Talking directly about personal sin with an offender is difficult; it makes us feel uneasy and uncomfortable; so why rock the boat?
- Many think that if we simply ignore the problem, in time it will go away. “Time heals all,” or so they contend.
- I’ve known instances where discipline stalled from fear of driving the person away, especially if the offender is a major financial contributor to the church!
- Related to the above is the fear of dividing and ultimately even splitting the church over whether and how and to what extent discipline should be applied (invariably many think the discipline was too severe, while others are convinced it was too lenient).
- Many struggle with a false concept of discipline because of observed abuses. In their minds discipline is associated with heresy hunts, intolerance, oppression, harshness, mean-spiritedness, self-righteousness, legalism, etc. Related to this is the fear of being labeled a cult if we insist on too strict a code of conduct for our members.
- Others resist taking disciplinary steps because it entails change. In other words, the power of tradition is hard to overcome: “We’ve never done it before and we’ve done o.k. Why risk messing things up now?”

Second, why is discipline necessary? To be brief, there are several reasons:

- (1) to maintain (as far as possible) the purity of the church (1 Cor. 3:17; Eph. 5:25-27);
- (2) because Scripture requires it (Mt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5; etc.);
- (3) in order to maintain a proper witness to the world; the church corporately, as with the elder individually, is to have a good reputation with “outsiders” (1 Tim. 3:7);
- (4) to facilitate growth and to preserve unity in the body (Eph. 4:1-16);
- (5) to expose unbelievers (1 John 2:19);
- (6) to restore the erring brother/sister to obedience and fellowship (1 Cor. 5:5; 2 Cor. 2:6,7,10; Gal. 6:1; 2 Thess. 3:14-15);
- (7) to deter others (1 Tim. 5:20);
- (8) to avert corporate discipline (Rev. 2:14-25);
- (9) because sin is rarely if ever an individual issue: it almost always has corporate ramifications (2 Cor. 2:5); the whole of the body (or at least a large segment of it) is adversely affected by the misdeeds of one member; and
- (10) evidently Paul believed that the willingness to embrace the task of discipline was a mark of maturity in a church’s corporate life (2 Cor. 2:9).

Third, how is discipline to be done? What are the procedural steps to be pursued? Matthew 18:15-17 recommends the following steps:

First, *private rebuke* (Matt. 18:15; cf. Luke 17:3) - Do it gently, in love, out of compassion, seeking to encourage; the purpose for private rebuke is to resolve the problem without fueling unnecessary gossip.

Second, if private rebuke is unsuccessful, *plural rebuke* (Matt. 18:16; see also Deut. 17:6; 19:15; Num. 35:30) - Who are these “others”? Church leaders? People who know the person? People who know of the sin?

Third, if plural rebuke is unsuccessful, *public rebuke* (Matt. 18:17) – Who, precisely, is in view in the word “church”? Is this the entire congregation or the Elders who constitute its leadership? If the former, does this

mean the entire church has the responsibility and authority to pass judgment or does this task fall solely to the Elders?

Fourth, if public rebuke is unsuccessful, "*excommunication*" (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:11; Titus 3:10; possibly 2 Thess. 3:14).

Fifth, if repentance occurs, *restoration* to fellowship and reaffirmation of love (2 Cor. 2:6-8; 2 Thess. 3:14-15; Gal. 6:1).

Sixth, Matthew 18:18-20 affirms that whatever decision is made in the matter, whether the offending person is "bound" (binding signifies the refusal to forgive sins) or "loosed" (loosing points to the granting of forgiveness), reflects the will of God in heaven. When a church is united in its application of discipline it can rest confidently in God's promise that he will provide wisdom and guidance for making the correct decision. Thus, the verdict of heaven, so to speak, is consonant with that of the church, before which the matter was adjudicated.

Seventh, please note that vv. 19-20 are not about private prayer or the so-called "law of agreement" that ensures we will always receive what we ask. "The 'any matter' ["anything" – ESV] on which two agree relates here to church discipline and should not be applied haphazardly to individual requests that stem from selfish desires. The reference to 'two' [v. 19] continues the corporate emphasis that permeates the previous verses (vv. 15-17). So what is agreed upon in context likely relates to the binding and loosing described in v. 18" (Schreiner, 111).

Fourth, by whom is discipline to be administered? Certainly the Elders of the church are to take the initiative and provide general oversight for the process (cf. Acts 20:28ff.; 1 Thess. 5:14; Heb. 13:17). But the congregation as a whole must also be involved (2 Cor. 2:6; this latter text raises the question of whether there may have been a minority in Corinth who dissented from the action taken).

In sum, the motivation for discipline is *love* (for the errant believer) and the goal of discipline is *restoration*. If Christ himself is so passionately committed to the purity of the church that he would sacrifice his life on her behalf, in order to present her "to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing" (Eph. 5:27), we can hardly afford to turn a blind eye to repeated and unrepentant sin in our midst. May God grant us the grace and wisdom so essential for this delicate and crucial task.

Fifth, in what instances or for what sins should it be exercised? Unrepentant moral evil, as in the case of the incestuous man of 1 Corinthians 5, would certainly qualify.

We see *the motivation and ultimate goal* of discipline in 1 Cor. 5:5. To be delivered over "to Satan" is to be put out of the church and *into the world*, Satan's domain (1 John 5:19). The "destruction of the flesh" is not physical death but the anticipated mortification of his "fleshly" and sinful ways. Thus "the act of discipline will be the means by which the man is aroused from his sin so that he turns in repentance to the Lord. Thereby he will be saved from God's wrath on the day of the Lord" (Schreiner, 117).]

Divisiveness and serious doctrinal error are also mentioned in the NT (Rom. 16:17-18; Titus 3:9-10). Paul speaks of more general, unspecified transgressions in Galatians 6:1 as calling for disciplinary intervention (see also 2 Thess. 3:6-15), as well as sexual immorality, greed, idolatry, reviling, drunkenness, and swindling (1 Cor. 5:11).

- What should a church do if the person under discipline refuses to heed all warnings and simply leaves? In particular, what responsibility does the church have if the individual then attends another church? Should the church leaders be contacted? How much information should be communicated to the leaders of the church he/she is now attending? See the discussion below by Jonathan Leeman.

- What should be done if the person under discipline genuinely repents but continues to repeat the sinful behavior that called for discipline in the first place? At what point does their repeated failure call into question the legitimacy or sincerity of their professed “repentance”?
- What actually constitutes “excommunication” or the “dis-fellowshipping” of an unrepentant member? Should they be prohibited from taking the Lord’s Supper? What access to the church and its ministries should they be granted? Should they be permitted to attend Sunday services? Small group gatherings? Missional outreach? Prayer meetings? Or should they be forbidden from any presence in and among the people of that particular local church? If so, would you recommend that they attend another church until such time as they are prepared to repent?
- Does Paul’s instruction in 1 Cor. 5:11 forbid, absolutely and without qualification, having a meal with someone under final, corrective discipline? Probably not. He is concerned that the unrepentant person not be treated in the same way he/she was when they were a member in good standing. Schreiner argues that “any interaction with him must have as its motive and intention the repentance of the one who has strayed. If a believer eats with a person in sin and does not solemnly warn him to repent, the message that is conveyed to the person under discipline is that his sin ‘is not a big deal,’ for life goes on as normal. Under no circumstances, Paul warns, must life go on as normal” (125).

The following is taken from an article written by Jonathan Leeman.

“One way to summarize the biblical data is to say that that formal church discipline is required in cases of **outward, serious, and unrepentant sin**. A sin must have an *outward* manifestation. It must be something that can be seen with the eyes or heard with the ears. Churches should not quickly throw the red flag of ejection every time they suspect greed or pride in someone’s heart. It’s not that sins of the heart are not serious. It’s that the Lord knows we cannot see one another’s hearts, and that real heart problems will eventually rise to the surface anyway (1 Sam. 16:7; Matt. 7:17f; Mark 7:21).

Second, a sin must be *serious*. For instance, I might observe a brother exaggerate the details of a story and then privately confront him over the matter. But even if he denies it, I probably wouldn’t draw him in front of the church. Why not? First, something like the sin of embellishing stories is rooted in far more significant and unseen sins like idolatry and self-justification. Those are the sins I want to spend personal time discussing with him. Second, pursuing every tiny sin in a church’s life will probably induce paranoia and propel the congregation toward legalism. Third, there clearly needs to be a place for love to “cover a multitude of sins” in a congregation’s life (1 Peter 4:8). Not every sin should be pursued to the utmost. Thankfully, God has not done so with us.

Finally, formal church discipline is the appropriate course of action when sin is *unrepentant*. The person involved in serious sin has been privately confronted with God’s commands in Scripture, but he or she refuses to let go of the sin. From all appearances, the person prizes the sin more than Jesus.”

Conclusion

A common *misconception* about church discipline is that it is concerned solely with the notion of *excommunication*, the final stage in dealing with an unrepentant sinner in which they are publicly rebuked, set outside the church, and cut off from the fellowship of the Lord’s Supper (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:5, 9-13). The fact is, however, that all Christians are “under discipline,” in the sense that every believer is daily held accountable to biblical standards of behavior and is daily encouraged to pursue holiness and rebuked for sin and lovingly encouraged to walk in holiness of life. As Tom Schreiner points out, this is what is known as “formative” discipline which “takes place in the ongoing ministry of the church, in the regular discipleship and care of every member. All members are disciplined or disciplined through teaching, encouragement, correction, exhortations, and reproof, which are given through the loving care of fellow believers” (“The Biblical Basis for Church Discipline,” in *Those Who Must Give an Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline*, edited by John S. Hammett & Benjamin L. Merkle [Nashville: B & H Academic, 2012], 105-06).

Discussion Questions

- (1) Describe your personal experience of observing church discipline. Was it done well? Was it done poorly? Give an explanation of your answer.
- (2) Why is church discipline necessary? Does it appear that in some cases of discipline Christians are guilty of “shooting their wounded”? Why can’t we simply overlook the sins of others and forgive them?
- (3) Who is responsible for implementing church discipline, the Elders or the congregation as a whole? Or are there stages in the process where one group is involved and the other is not?
- (4) In what instances or for what sins should discipline be pursued? What role in this decision does the repentance or recalcitrance of the person play?
- (5) Talk about the reasons why churches typically avoid or justify ignoring the need for discipline. Do you find any of them persuasive?