

Recovering Church Discipline Part 1 –

The Motivation & Purposes
Of
Church Discipline

By
D.L. Deckard

During the weeks prior to Christmas, we as a congregation looked at the topic of Biblical Community in an effort to learn just who the church really is, what its purposes are, what community consists of, and how it is best accomplished. This morning we are going to be looking at a closely related topic of how the community of Christ is to deal with a brother or sister who has become entangled in sin. The question is an important one. Think about it for a moment. What should we do when we see or know of a believing member of our body who is living in a way that is contrary to the way of Christ? Or, to put it more concretely, what do we do with a brother or sister who is consistently getting drunk, lying, conducting his or her business unethically, living a promiscuous lifestyle, shacking up with his or her partner, or having an affair with another person's spouse. You and I both know that these kinds of things have and do take place in the church. What, however, are we to do about it? Do we simply look the other way and let them be? Or, are we as brothers and sisters, as a corporate body, responsible to do something about it? Does the Bible give us any guidance on what we are to do? The answer, of course, is "yes, it does". This morning and next week we are going to be looking at what the Bible teaches on how we are to deal with a sinning brother or sister to the end that we might practice it in our congregation.

This teaching of the Bible on how to deal with an erring brother or sister has been labeled "church discipline", and rightly so. Yet, before we proceed on the focus of our study, it would be helpful to understand the concept of discipline in its broad sense and then isolate the aspect of discipline that we will be focusing on.

The concept of discipline in the Bible has a positive and negative side to it. On the positive side, it refers to instruction and training. For example, in Proverbs 19:27 we read, "Cease listening, my son, to discipline, *And you will stray from the words of knowledge.*" Here, discipline is instruction, something that the son listens to. It's positive training. In this positive sense it's a little bit like the discipline of exercise when we go to the gym and pump iron to grow in strength, or to college to strengthen our minds. With regard to the church, this kind of positive discipline is an absolute necessity. It would encompass nearly everything we do as a body individually and corporately to facilitate growth (e.g. teaching, exhortation, training, exercise of gifts etc.)

Yet there is another side of discipline that we could call *corrective discipline*. This is discipline that seeks to correct wrong behavior. It is discipline which attempts to stop a brother from straying down the wrong path. As parents we utilize this kind of corrective discipline to teach our kids not to lie, or talk back or hit baby sister. Sometimes this corrective discipline is carried out through a "time out", "grounding", or spanking (which, by the way is clearly taught in Scripture as an appropriate administration of corrective discipline).¹

When we speak of "church discipline" we are speaking of this second kind of discipline – *corrective discipline*. It is discipline that is aimed at correcting the course of the erring brother or sister's life.

Now I confess, up front, that what the Bible teaches on this subject may bother you. For it goes against, as often the Bible does, our cultural sensitivities to political correctness, radical individuality and unqualified commitment to tolerance. Yet, as you well know, the church must not live according to the ever-changing whims and values of culture but on the unchanging truth of God's word. If we are to be a biblical church that lives in submission to the teachings of the Bible then we must be a disciplining community of believers. For the New Testament teaches us throughout its pages that a healthy church must be a disciplining church. Jesus teaches on it in Matthew 18:15-20. Paul teaches

¹ See Proverbs 13:24; 22:15; 23:13, 14; 29:15.

on it in 1 Corinthians 5, Galatians 6:1, 1 Timothy 5:19-20, Romans 16:17; 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14. And John refers to it in 2 John 1:10.

Yet, as John White notes in his book on church discipline, while corrective discipline in the context of the church is a clear teaching in the New Testament, the practice of it is nearly extinct in churches.² The whole concept of church discipline is notoriously unpopular. Why is this? Why is it that churches are unwilling to exercise a church discipline upon erring members?

For some, the reason for neglecting church discipline is fear – fear of potential abuses (which is a legitimate concern) or fear that it will stunt the numerical growth of the church. Yet, while church discipline is certainly vulnerable to abuse, this does not excuse us from practicing it. Nearly every aspect of Christianity – spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 14), the Lord’s supper (1 Cor. 11) etc. – is vulnerable to abuses. Yet we must never allow the potential for abuse to keep us from obedience to Christ. Further, fear that church discipline will stunt the numerical growth of the church is to place way too much focus on numbers. The focus of the body must be faith and obedience, not how big or small we are. Our focus must be the health of the church not its size. We must obey what the scriptures teach and entrust the numerical growth to God.

For others, the reason for neglecting church discipline is not fear, but a lack of sensitivity to the seriousness and horror of sin. If we saw sin how God saw sin, and its dangers to the soul and the church, we would be compelled to exercise church discipline. However, because we generally think lightly about sin, we think lightly about church discipline. We don’t see the horrid danger of a brother or sister who is engaging in sinful behavior. We don’t see sin as a destructive flame of consuming fire, but an unpleasant or inconvenient mistake. We fail to remember that it was only a seemingly insignificant taste of piece of fruit from a tree that brought death and Hell in Eden. We fail to realize that sin wages all out warfare on the integrity of the soul. We treat sin in the church like a benign tumor that is tolerable yet uncomfortable rather than the invasive, malignant life threatening cancer that it is.

Another reason people avoid church discipline is because it violates our cultural commitment to rugged individualism. This, often unconscious, commitment to extreme individualism expresses itself in sentiments such as “what I do with my life is none of your business” or “mind your own business”. Unfortunately we run into this attitude even in the community of Christ where precisely the opposite should be the case. For in the Christian community we belong to one another and are responsible for one another. We are, in many respects, our brother’s keeper. As a brother or sister in Christ your spiritual well being is my business, and mine yours. To think otherwise is to think as the world thinks.

Whatever the reason may be, the simple truth is that church discipline has fallen by the wayside within the Christian community and has done so at a tremendous cost. For, a church without discipline is a church without distinctiveness. A church without discipline is a church that has ceased to be light in darkness because its members are permitted to engage in all of the immoral delicacies of the culture and yet still remain an active part of the Christian fellowship. As a result, the church loses its witness and ceases to effect change in the world.

John Stott notes this when he says, “The secular world is almost wholly unimpressed by the Church today There is widespread departure from Christian moral standards. So long as the Church tolerates sin in itself and does not judge itself. . . and fails to manifest visibly the power of

² John White, Ken Blue, *church Discipline That Heals*, p. 21

Jesus Christ to save from sin, it will never attract the world to Christ.”³ In essence he is saying that a church without discipline or a church that “does not judge itself” is a church without power.

Thus, the need for discipline within the church is greater than ever – especially in light of the moral decadence of our culture where what was once black is now white and what was once white is now black. The church, our church, if it is to bear the mark of the risen Christ to the world, must be a church that disciplines.

In short, the clear teaching of the Scripture and the present state of the Christian Church demands that the church exercise discipline on its members.

With this in mind, let us turn to the Scripture and look at what it teaches about church discipline. First, lest we misunderstand the spirit of discipline within the community of Christ, we will consider the primary *motivation behind* and *purposes for* exercising church discipline. Then, having laid the foundation of motivation and purpose, next week we will look at the process of discipline as outlined by Jesus in Matthew 18.

First let us consider the issue of motivation. What should be our motivation in trying to correct the sinning brother or sister? What should be the motivation behind our corrective discipline as a body?

I. The Motivation for Church Discipline - Love.

True Christian discipline is discipline that springs from love. This truth is presented throughout Scripture. When God disciplines us it is out of love. We read in Hebrews 12:6, for example, that “the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.” Likewise, when Jesus speaks to the church of Laodicea in Revelation 3:19 he says, “Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline.” When God disciplines his people he clearly does so out of love. He does whatever is necessary for the spiritual and eternal health of his children even if that means using pain, loss or even suffering. His concern is less for our temporal happiness or physical comfort than our eternal joy and spiritual health. God’s discipline is motivated by love.

With regard to parenting, the wisdom of Proverbs teaches the same principle, namely, that discipline is an essential component of true love. We read in Proverbs 13:24 that, “he who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him”.⁴ This is a powerful statement. For in essence it teaches us that a lack of discipline amounts to hatred⁵ and that careful discipline is an absolute requirement of true biblical love.

We know this to be the case as well by common experience. If I allow my son Daniel to continually run into the road where he is imminent danger of being hit by a car you would discern rather quickly that I don’t really care about or love my child and would probably call the authorities. No, as a father who loves my son beyond my own life, I would immediately act to correct this dangerous behavior. My discipline of him would naturally begin with a rather intense talking to and if that didn’t work something more motivating. The point is simply that discipline is clearly a real and necessary manifestation of love. Without discipline love is not love, it’s mere sentimental and self-centered attachment.

³ John Stott, *Confess Your Sins: The Way of Reconciliation*, p. 49.

⁴ See also Proverbs 13:24; 22:15; 23:13, 14; 29:15

⁵ Here the word hatred, as in other places in the Old Testament, does not refer to antagonistic enmity or dislike, but an absence of love. It denotes a sense of indifference.

It follows then that if God's discipline is motivated by love, and parental discipline as taught in Proverbs is an expression of true love, then church discipline likewise must stem from love. It is out of a heart that truly cares about the spiritual well being of the brother that godly discipline arises.

The opposite also holds true. If a community or Christians (i.e. a church) does not discipline its members who are wandering down dangerous paths of sin, then it cannot rightly be called a loving community. Not according to truth laid out in Proverbs 13:24. Failure to discipline is failure to love. What then, does this say about the church at large that has neglected this great exercise of true love? Could it be that the kind of disciplineless love we practice in the church today is a cheap, easy, cowardly love that is not Christian love at all?

Rather, true Christian love sees the brother or sister in sin, recognizes the great dangers involved, and seeks to rescue them from their destructive way. We must have the same attitude toward the sinning brother or sister that we would have if we saw a person walking on the edge of an unstable cliff that could give out at any moment. If we had this attitude we would be compelled by love to act. In this way, to discipline the brother or sister who has settled into a lifestyle of promiscuity, divisiveness or cheating, is to exercise Christ-like love. It is to love with sacrifice, courage and fortitude. It is not easy love, it is what many have termed "tough love" or what I would call simply "true love".

Love must be our motivation for church discipline. Without it, discipline ceases to be discipline and becomes an oppressive form of tyranny and manipulation and will not heal the sinning brother or sister. By the same token we must keep in mind that love without discipline is really not love at all. Discipline and love are twins that must not be separated. One is the necessary manifestation of the other.

If our motivation behind discipline is love for the other, what are the purposes or aims of church discipline? Though we have already alluded to one of the purposes above, it will be helpful to spell them out more precisely in what follows.

II. The Purposes of Church Discipline -

A. To restore the sinning believer

The first purpose or aim of church discipline has to do with the sinning individual. That is, it must be aimed at restoration and reconciliation of the wayward believer. Thus, church discipline is redemptive in its aim. We find this to be the case throughout the New Testament. Consider the following texts:

1 Corinthians 5:5 hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.

Matthew 18:15 "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.

1 Timothy 1:20 Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme.

Galatians 6:1 Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.

Even in the case where church discipline is brought to the final step of excommunication, it is intended ultimately to bring the person to repentance – as in the case of Alexander and Hymenaeus (1 Tim. 1:20). It is intended to restore.

This purpose of restoration, however, has two parts: behavioral and relational. The first has to do with a change in the behavior of the sinning individual. To restore a sinning brother in the first sense is to turn him from his sin. It is to turn him from the path of sin to the path of righteousness. It is the correction of his wrongdoing. This is what Paul has in mind in Galatians 6:1 where he says, “if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently.” The word “restore” in the original⁶ is the same word that describes the mending of fishing nets in Matthew 4:21. Just as a doctor compassionately, though painfully, must set straight a broken bone for it to heal correctly, to we as faithful and loving brothers and sister must attempt to restore the wayward believer to the narrow path of righteousness – to turn him from his sinful way of living.

The second aspect of restoration is *relational*. That is, it seeks to reconcile the person to right fellowship. Not only must we attempt to restore the brother from ungodly behavior, but must restore him to fellowship with God and the community.

John tells us in his first letter that, “If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth.” That is, one cannot maintain a lifestyle of sin and maintain fellowship with God. This is true of the community as well. A member who is living in sin will not be able to enter into true, intimate and spiritual fellowship with the church family. Therefore, part of the restoration process is to return him to fellowship with the father and the community. In this way, we exercise discipline in order to bring the prodigal son back to the loving embrace of the Father and the family who are waiting anxiously for his child’s return.

B. To protect the purity of the church

There is a second purpose of church discipline that relates not to the individual but to the collective community of Christ, the church. And that is, *to protect the purity of the church*. We find this purpose expressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 5:6 where, in the context, he is scolding the church for tolerating a member who was involved in an incestuous relationship with his father’s wife. In addressing the church he says in verse 6, “Don’t you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? 7 Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast . . .” Here Paul draws on a culinary illustration of how yeast affects a lump of dough to show how a “little” bit of sin can affect the entire church. Just as yeast affects the whole lump of dough, so also a sinning member affects the whole church family. So, in effort to protect the church from the invasive effects of sin, he instructs them to do away with the yeast (this, according to Matthew 18:15-17 being the final stage of discipline if the member refuses to repent).

Many of us have either experienced or heard about the destructive effects of one person’s sin on the entire body. I’ve observed church splits which began with one divisive and slanderous person poisoning others with his bitter venom with the result that the entire church family was blown apart by his sin. Why? Because the church allowed the little bit of yeast to infect the whole. To protect the body, sin must be dealt with.

The same is true of other sins. They may not affect the church in precisely the same way, but they do affect it. The sinful behavior, if left unchecked may lead to desensitization to the horrors of

⁶ The Greek word here is “katartizw” which is defined as “mend, restore, set right, make complete” (UBS Greek Dictionary).

sin, increased temptation for others to sin in the same way, or a cooling passion for Christ. Whatever the possible affects, the fact is that “a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough”. Therefore, to protect the congregation from the destructive effects of sin, we must exercise church discipline. Just as aggressive cancer must be caught early and dealt with carefully, so also open sin must be dealt with in the church. We must love the church body enough to exercise this biblical teaching.⁷

C. To protect the honor of Christ

The final purpose of church discipline, which is integrally related to purpose number two, is to protect the honor of Christ.

We are told throughout Scripture that what God is most zealous for is his glory. He says, for example in Isaiah 42:8, “I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols.” God is passionate for his glory and the honor of his name. Through the prophet Malachi, God revealed that dishonoring his name would bring judgment.

Perhaps it goes without saying that when members of the church, who call themselves Christians, live lifestyles that are ungodly, they bring reproach upon the church and ultimately Christ who is its head. When the businessman who calls himself a Christian consistently reneges on his commitments, shortchanges or deceives his clients he brings dishonor not only the church body that he belongs to, but to Christ himself. It causes the unbelievers who witness this lifestyle of compromises by a “Christian” to scoff at the church of Christ and ultimately Jesus himself. The same is true of the believer who lives a life of drunkenness, sexual promiscuity, divisiveness, reckless living, or acts of violence. The consequence is that Jesus’ name is dragged through the mud before the world.

Paul refers to this in Romans 2:23-24 with respect to the Jews saying, “You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you." The same is true of the church. If the church lives in a manner contrary to its confession, then it brings reproach to the name of Christ. People blaspheme his name because of the way we live.

Again, John Stott’s words echo with haunting realism when he says that because the church’s toleration of sin, “The secular world is almost wholly unimpressed by the Church today . . .” And as a result, our King is dishonored. Is it any wonder that evangelical Christianity is at a standstill in our society? The church does not shine forth the character of Christ, but has wholly lost its distinctiveness. The world no longer looks upon our “good works” and glorifies our father who is in heaven (Matthew 5:16). In part, this is due to the fact that the community of Christ no longer disciplines its family members.

If we truly love the honor and the glory of Christ, then we must be a disciplining community of believers.

The need for biblical church discipline is great. As John White and Ken Blue comment in their insightful book on church discipline:

It is no longer possible to deny the need for the healing power of church discipline. An appalling picture is slowly emerging of a church crippled and compromised by every form of sin. Churches of every variety – old, new, traditional, nontraditional, charismatic, non-

⁷ Here I should qualify that church discipline as taught in the Scripture is to be applied to professed believers, not visiting unbelievers who are looking into the things of Christ. That is, it is a practice for the family of God.

charismatic and every form of government – all are scorned by the world and rightly perceived to be morally inadequate. . . . The time has come for all Christians to exercise church discipline that heals, restoring it to the place Christ gave it.⁸

My desire and prayer for Parkway Community Church is that we recover this important teaching and practice it in our church family. To do so is to submit our lives and our church body to the clear teachings of the New Testament.

May we in our exercise of church discipline do so out of a genuine motivation of love, for the purposes of restoring the fallen brother, protecting the church family and protecting the honor of Christ. May God bless the teaching of his word. Amen

Soli Deo Gloria

⁸ John White, Ken Blue, *Church Discipline That Heals*, p. 11.