

Church Discipline

by

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Though church discipline is a very difficult area of doctrine and one hard to practice, it nevertheless rests upon the divine authority of Scripture and is vital to the purity, power, progress, and purpose of the church. The responsibility and necessity for discipline is not an option for the church if it obeys the Word of God, but a church must be equally concerned that Scripture is carefully followed in the practice of church discipline. The following summary is suggested for study and as a guide for this very important area of doctrine.

The Principle of Discipline Defined

R.C. Sproul writes, “The church is called not only to a ministry of reconciliation, but a ministry of nurture to those within her gates. Part of that nurture includes church discipline . . .”¹ The idea of church discipline is totally consistent with the basic purposes of the church—evangelism and edification. Evangelism ministers to those without the church who are in bondage to sin to bring them to faith in Christ where the transformation process begins. The edification process is designed to build up believers so they can be conformed to the image and character of Christ. Church discipline as a part of the edification process ministers to those within the body of Christ who are dominated by some area of sin so they can experience liberation from its power through fellowship with Christ.

How then do we define church discipline? Carl Laney states, “Church discipline may be broadly defined as the confrontive and corrective measures taken by an individual, church leaders, or the congregation regarding a matter of sin in the life of a believer.”²

Discipline in the church is not punishment. It is discipline and discipline is designed to train and restore.

The Pattern and Basis for Discipline

- (1) The discipline of the church is first patterned after the fact that *the Lord Himself disciplines His children* (Heb. 12:6) and, as a father delegates part of the discipline of the children to the mother, so the Lord has delegated the discipline of the church family to the church itself (1 Cor. 5:12-13; 2 Cor. 2:6).
- (2) Discipline is further based on *the holy character of God* (1 Pet. 1:16; Heb. 12:11). The pattern of God’s holiness—His desire for the church to be holy, set apart unto Him—is an important reason for the necessity of church discipline. The church is therefore to clean out the leaven of malice and wickedness from its ranks (1 Cor. 5:6-8). A failure to exercise discipline in the church evidences a lack of awareness of and concern for the holiness of God.
- (3) Church discipline is to be patterned after and based on *the divine commands of Scripture* (1 Cor. 4:6). We have numerous passages of Scripture which both command and give us God’s directives on the how, why, when, and where of church discipline. Again, a failure to exercise this responsibility demonstrates a

¹ R. C. Sproul, *In Search of Dignity*, Regal Books, 1983, p. 182.

² Carl Laney, *A Guide to Church Discipline*, Bethany House Publishers, p. 14.

lack of obedience and belief in the authority of the Bible (1 Cor. 5:1-13; Matt. 18:17-18; Titus 3:10; 2 Thess. 3:6-15; 1 Tim. 5:20; Gal. 6:1).

(4) Another basis for the necessity of church discipline is *the testimony of the church in the world* (1 Pet. 4:13-19). The world observes the behavior and life of the church. When the church acts no differently than the world, it loses its credibility and authenticity (1 Pet. 2:11-18; 3:8-16; 4:1-4).

The Purposes of Church Discipline

- (1) To bring glory to God and enhance the testimony of the flock.
- (2) To restore, heal, and build up sinning believers (Matt. 18:15; 2 Thess. 3:14-15; Heb. 12:10-13; Gal. 6:1-2; Jam. 5:20).
- (3) To produce a healthy faith, one sound in doctrine (Tit. 1:13; 1 Tim. 1:19-20).
- (4) To win a soul to Christ, if the sinning person is only a professing Christian (2 Tim. 2:24-26).
- (5) To silence false teachers and their influence in the church (Tit. 1:10-11).
- (6) To set an example for the rest of the body and promote godly fear (1 Tim. 5:20).
- (7) To protect the church against the destructive consequences that occur when churches fail to carry out church discipline. A church that fails to exercise discipline experiences four losses:

- **The Loss of Purity:** Church discipline is vital to the purity of the local body and its protection from moral decay and impure doctrinal influences. Why? Because a little leaven leavens the entire lump (1 Cor. 5:6-7). This is the “rotten apple” problem or the “snowball” effect.

An illustration of this is the Corinthian church which showed a lack of concern for purity. They neglected the responsibility to discipline and suffered as a result. Their insensitivity to one moral issue may have led to their compromise on other issues. Laney writes, “The Corinthians engaged in lawsuits, misused their liberty, profaned the Lord’s Supper, neglected the primacy of love, failed to regulate the use of their gifts, and questioned the resurrection.”³ Failure in church discipline in Corinth could be compared to a snowball tumbling downhill.

- **The Loss of Power:** Sin in the life of the church grieves the person of the Holy Spirit and quenches His power. If sin remains unchecked by the loving application of church discipline in a body of believers, the Holy Spirit must abandon such a church to its own carnal resources. The unavoidable result will be the loss of the Lord’s blessing until the sin is dealt with.

The defeat of Israel because of the sin of Achan in Joshua 7 illustrates the principle. This is just as true for the church today, especially when we know certain things exist but ignore them or simply look the other way because it is difficult to deal with or because it involves one of our friends and we do not want to risk causing problems in the relationship.

- **The Loss of Progress:** A church that refuses to practice church discipline will see its ministry decline. The church may want to grow and reach out and it may try all kinds of stop gap measures, promotional campaigns, and programs in an attempt to turn things around, but if there is sin in the camp, it will all be to no avail. See Revelation 2:5 and 3:16 for illustrations of this principle.
- **The Loss of Purpose:** As His ambassadors to a lost and dying world, God has called the church to be a holy people, a people who, standing out as distinct from the world, proclaim the excellencies of the works of God in Christ (1 Pet. 1:14-16; 2:9-15). If this is to occur, we must be different from the world and church discipline helps us to both remember and maintain that purpose. One of the recurring judgments against the church today as demonstrated in various polls taken across the country is the fact there is little or no difference between the church and the secular world when it comes to attitudes, values, morals, and lifestyle. We have lost our sense of purpose.

³ Ibid., p. 20.

The Practice of Church Discipline

The Manner

The above goals or purposes automatically govern the spirit in which all disciplinary action is to be given. Thus:

- (1) Discipline must be done by those who are spiritual, truly walking by the Holy Spirit and growing in the Lord (Gal. 6:1).
- (2) Discipline must be done in a spirit of humility, gentleness and patience, looking to ourselves lest we too be tempted (Gal. 6:1-2; 2 Tim. 2:24-25).
- (3) Discipline must be done without bias, doing nothing in a spirit of partiality (1 Tim. 5:21).
- (4) Those who walk disorderly are to be admonished, warned, and appealed to in love (1 Thess. 5:14-15; 1 Tim. 5:1-2; Eph. 4:15; 2 Tim. 4:2). This admonishing, is not restricted to church leaders, but may be done by any person in the body with another if that person is Spirit controlled and spiritually minded (cf. 1 Thess. 5:14 with Gal. 6:1).
- (5) If there is no response in repentance and obedience, then the sinning believer is to be rebuked publicly and members of the body are to withhold intimate fellowship through the process and procedure of group disapproval and social ostracism as prescribed in the next section, Procedures for Church Discipline below (2 Thess. 3:6, 14-15; Tit. 3:10; 1 Tim. 5:20). This action has a two-fold objective:
 - It is to indicate to the offender that his/her action has dishonored the Lord and has caused a rupture in the harmony of the body. The goal is always restoration and the person is still to be counted as a brother (2 Thess. 3:14-15).
 - It is to create fear in the rest of the flock as a warning against sin (1 Tim. 5:20).
- (6) If there is still no response in repentance and obedience, the church is to apply the procedures of excommunication as directed in Matthew 18:17.
Several examples of church discipline are found in Scripture. The Corinthian believers were to be “gathered together” in order to take action against the offending brother (1 Cor. 5:4-5; Rom. 16:17; 2 Thess. 3:6-15; Phil. 3:17-19).
This is defined by Paul as “punishment inflicted by the majority” (2 Cor. 2:6). As a protective measure, we also find that the whole church in Rome and in Thessalonica were to take action with regard to the unruly and schismatic, not just a few (2 Thess. 3:6-15; Rom. 16:17).
- (7) Finally, discipline in the name of our Lord always includes a readiness to forgive. The many or majority who discipline must also be ready and eager to forgive, comfort, and reaffirm their love to the sinning person (2 Cor. 2:6-8). (See Procedures for Church Discipline below.)

Reasons for Church Discipline

In church discipline we must exercise extreme care. Scripture does not warrant the exercise of discipline for an individual’s or a church’s taboos or pet peeves—the “dirty dozen” or the “nasty nine.” Scripture, not our opinions or dislikes, must be the guide for what is sin. Further, we must not become hypercritical or “speck inspectors.”

- (1) General Causes: Disorderly conduct, conduct clearly out of line with the prescribed commands of Scripture and which negatively impacts the testimony and unity of the church (2 Thess. 3:6-15).
- (2) Specific Causes:
 - Difficulties between members (Matt. 18:15-17).
 - Divisive or factious people causing divisions in the church (Rom. 16:17-18; Titus 3:9-11).

- Immoral conduct; sins of the type mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5 such as incest, immorality, covetousness, idolatry, abusive speech, drunkenness, swindling, or idle busybodies who refuse to work and run around spreading dissension (1 Cor. 5:1, 11; 2 Thess. 3:10-15).
- False teaching; erroneous teaching and views which concern the fundamentals of the faith and not lesser differences of interpretation (1 Tim. 1:20; 2 Tim. 2:17-18; also implied in Rev. 2:14-16; Phil. 3:2-3, 15-19; Rom. 16:17-18).

The key concerns that guide us in this are: (a) the holy character of God, (b) the testimony of the flock, (c) the effect upon the unity and purity of the flock, and (d) the edification and restoration of the individual.

Procedures for Church Discipline

The scriptural procedure is clear and specific steps are prescribed as follows:

Cautions

If you see the offense or you have accurate knowledge of the sin(s), please note these cautions:

- Be sure it is an offense which calls for discipline and not merely one of our pet peeves. Again, the Word must be our criterion.
- Remember how we too have sinned in the past and heed the warnings of Galatians 6:1.
- Bring the matter before the Lord in prayer before the confrontation takes place (1 Sam. 8:6).
- Don't procrastinate. The longer the delay, the more difficult the condition can become. Remember the consequences listed above.
- Don't gossip or even talk to others about it in the sense of Matthew 18:16 until you have talked to the sinning believer privately. We must guard and protect the person and the flock from rumors and a slanderous tongue (Prov. 6:19b; 10:19; 11:13; 18:8, 21; 20:19).

First Step

First, seek private correction and/or reconciliation with the offender (Matt. 18:15). In Matthew 18:15 many manuscripts have "and if your brother sins *against you*, go and reprove him in private."

There has been no little debate as to whether the words "against you" are part of the original manuscripts. The words "against me" in verse 21 may have led a scribe or copyist to personalize the matter in verse 15. Or, one could argue the omission was deliberate in order to generalize the passage. While some important manuscript tradition lacks the words "against you," many feel there is good evidence for their originality. First, the words, "reprove him in private," and second, the question of Peter in verse 21 about forgiving a brother who sins "against me" suggests their inclusion.

Whether the words "against you" were in the original text or not, Galatians 6:1 teaches that believers have a responsibility to confront sin in general in the life of other believers and not just when it is an offense against one's person. It would seem, then that there is a two-fold application:

- (1) When the problem involves one believer sinning against another, there are two problems that need to be taken care of: reconciliation and restoration (Matt. 5:23-24).
- (2) When the problem involves a believer overcome in or by some sin, as was the case in Galatians 6:1, the need is restoration.

Matthew 18:16-17 should not be limited to the problem of one believer sinning against another in view of Galatians 6:1. So, the one offended or who recognizes the offense or sin is to go privately and try to rectify the problem.

Please note these guidelines:

- (1) Begin by expressing your genuine appreciation for the person and their good qualities to show you are genuinely concerned about their welfare. Then and only then bring up the matter which is of concern.

(2) In some situations the sin is apparent and there is no question, but we must allow for the possibility that we have misjudged or have wrong information. We must listen to the other person's side of the story and seek the facts in the interest of truth and fairness.

(3) If the person fails to respond, warn them that, according to the instructions of Scripture (Matt. 18:16), you will have to get others as witnesses and return with them to deal with the **problem**.

Second Step

If the first step fails, take witnesses to strengthen the effect of the discipline, preferably spiritual leaders, so that if it has to be brought before the whole church it can be firmly proven and established (Matt. 18:16-17; 1 Tim. 5:19). The aid of church leadership should be sought if the problem involves an offense that is against the whole body or if it is a threat to the unity of the body.

These initial contacts, private and with witnesses, provide opportunity for loving admonition, correction, and forgiveness. On the other hand, if these first steps do not produce results, it constitutes a warning that further action will be taken and provides occasion for serious rebuke (2 Tim. 4:2; 1 Thess. 5:12-13; Titus 2:15; 3:10).

Third Step

If the second step fails, seek reconciliation and restoration through the whole body. If further action is necessary, it is to be taken before the whole church (2 Thess. 3:14-15; Matt. 18:17; 1 Tim. 5:20).

This action appears to fall into two stages when we combine 2 Thessalonians 3:14 and 1 Corinthians 5:9-13 with Matthew 18:17.

(1) The body is to exercise group disapproval by way of social ostracism (refusal to have intimate fellowship).

(2) If this doesn't work, the local body of believers is to exercise excommunication: removal from church membership, loss of voting privileges, and continuation of the loss of intimate fellowship. This must be approved of and done by the entire congregation (2 Cor. 2:6).

This is, in essence, the Lord carrying out discipline through the action of the entire body under the leadership of the elders or the spiritually mature (1 Cor. 5:4). Similar heavenly authority is seen in the ratification of this disciplinary action as spelled out in Matthew 18:18-19.

Procedures for Restoration

Forgiveness

In keeping with the goal of restoration, the role of the church must change after there is repentance. This means accepting the person and forgetting the past (2 Cor. 2:7a).

But how do we know when repentance is genuine? What is our responsibility when the sinning party acknowledges their wrong and claims repentance? The following two passages answer this for us.

Luke 3:8, when they “. . . bring forth fruits in keeping with repentance.”

Acts 26:20, “. . . that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance.”

Genuine repentance will make itself evident by its deeds and attitudes. The repentant person will:

(1) Freely acknowledge his sin (1 Jn. 1:9; Prov. 28:13a).

(2) Cease the activity for which he was disciplined or at least seek help if it's a case of life dominating patterns (Prov. 28:13b; Gal. 6:1f; Jam. 5:19-20).

(3) Make restitution and/or ask for forgiveness from those hurt as it is applicable (Phil. 18-19; Matt. 5:23-24).

(4) He/she will demonstrate a genuine change of heart, a real concern and godly sorrow over his actions, not in order to be forgiven, but because of the harm caused to the glory of God and the hurt caused others (2 Cor. 7:8-11; Ps. 51:17).

(5) He/she will begin to manifest the fruit of the Spirit and a concern for the things of Christ (Gal. 5:22f).

Comfort

This means reaching out to them, assuring them of your support, and encouraging, exhorting, and challenging them to move on (2 Cor. 2:7b).

Love

This means including them, drawing them close, doing for them that which will aid their growth and complete recovery (2 Cor. 2:8). This would include encouraging them to get involved in ministry (Luke 22:31-32). For positions of leadership, there should be a time of testing to demonstrate their qualifications after the analogy of 1 Timothy 3:10.

For excellent and more complete studies on this subject, see (1) *A Guide to Church Discipline*, by Carl Laney, Bethany House Publishers, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1985, and (2) *Healing the Wounded, The Costly Love of Church Discipline*, by John White and Ken Blue, Inter-Varsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, 1985.

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