

Church Discipline



The Unity and Purity of the Church

Testimony



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, does not judge itself, and fails to manifest visibly the power of Jesus Christ to save from sin, it will never attract the world to Christ. -John Stott

Has the church progressed beyond discipline?



The Protestant reformers named three “marks by which the true church is known”: the preaching of the pure doctrine of the gospel, the pure administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline to correct faults. Today, church discipline is feared as the mark of a false church, bringing to mind images of witch trials, scarlet letters, public humiliations, and damning excommunications. Does discipline itself need correction and redemption? Is the body of Christ beyond the need for public church discipline?

Definition



“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.”

J. Carl Laney

Purposes for Discipline



1. Remedial – To restore the brother to complete and full fellowship with the family of God (Gal 6:1; Matt 18:15)
2. Purity – To purify the church from any element of sin that would taint its public testimony (1 Cor 5)
3. Unity – To remove those who would seek to divide by sin-filled lifestyles or self-filled teaching (2 Thes 3; Romans 16:17)
4. Proleptic – To illustrate the nature of punishment for sin (1 Cor 5:5)

Foundations for Church Discipline

1. The Holiness of God – individual image bearers
2. The Body of Christ
 - ❧ Bride-like behavior – Eph 5:26-27
 - ❧ Salt-like influence – Matt 5:14-16
 - ❧ Family-like unity – Matt 18; Romans 16:17
 - ❧ Steward-like doctrinal fidelity – 1 Tim 3:15ff

The ultimate motivation is so the members of the Body of God adequately reflect the glory of being the Bride of Christ.

The Spirit of Church Discipline



1. Spirit of Meekness – Gal 6:1
2. Spirit of Spiritual Maturation – Gal 6:1
3. Spirit of Patience – 2 Tim 2:23-25
4. Spirit of Equality – 1 Tim 5:21
5. Spirit of Reconciliation – Matt 18:15
6. Spirit of Purity – 1 Cor 5:7

Key Questions – Who?



The *first* question concerns the spiritual status of those being disciplined. Are they to be viewed by the church as true believers caught up in some sin and, thus, to be corrected and restored? Or, are they to be viewed as those who have made a profession of faith but who are, in fact, not saved and who should be confronted and removed? Or, does the New Testament allow for either of these two options, depending on the nature of the disobedience?

Key Questions – Result?



The *second* question, related to the first, addresses the nature or type of discipline meted out to the disobedient. Does church discipline invariably involve excommunication (the removal of the disobedient from the membership of the local church with a loss of all rights and privileges)? Does the New Testament teach that excommunication is the only option when exercising church discipline of the unrepentant? Or, does the New Testament allow for a step or level of church discipline that stops short of that? And, if the latter be the case, what does this level of church discipline involve?

Key Questions – When?



When should a church practice discipline? The short answer is, when someone sins. But the answer might differ depending on whether we're talking about informal or formal church discipline. Any sin, whether of a serious or non-serious nature, might elicit a private rebuke between two brothers or sisters in the faith. That's not to say we should rebuke every single sin that a fellow church member commits. It's simply to say that every sin, no matter how small, falls into the realm of what two Christians *may* lovingly raise with one another in a private setting, prudence depending. When we turn to the question of which sins require formal or church-wide corrective discipline, we need to tread a little more carefully.

The Causes of Church Discipline



Some of the older theologies presented lists of when it's appropriate to conduct formal discipline. For instance, the Congregationalist minister John Angell James said that five kinds of offenses should be disciplined:

- ❧ all scandalous vices and immoralities (e.g. 1 Cor. 5:11-13);
- ❧ the denial of Christian doctrine (e.g. Gal. 1:8; 2 Tim. 2:17-21; 1 Tim. 6:35; 2 John 10f);
- ❧ the stirring up of division (Titus 3:10);
- ❧ the failure to provide for one's near relatives when they are in need (e.g. 1 Tim. 5:8);
- ❧ unreconciled enmity (e.g. Matt. 18:7).

Scandalous Vices



1. **Sexual immorality** I Cor. 5:11
2. **Covetous** I Cor. 5:11 - apparently excessive materialism and/or advocating and promoting materialism
3. **Idolatry** I Cor. 5:11 - Since idolatry was the major rival religious system of the day, it corresponds to adherence to contemporary false religious systems. Thus, persistent practicing of occult, mystical, or pantheistic systems could eventually result in removal.
4. **Reviling** I Cor. 5:11 - slander. This may be the same as the schismatic. Clear evidence of a trouble-making life style should be evident.
5. **Drunkard** I Cor. 5:11 - includes habitual use of other intoxicating drugs
6. **Swindling** I Cor. 5:11 - business cheaters - borrowing without repayment, or other kinds of stealing or cheating.

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Principles for Sins Demanding Discipline



1. Outward – The sin should have an outward manifestation. The action effects the Body of Christ in a way that is tangible.
2. Serious – The sin should be of a nature that “love” cannot “cover it.” It has an impact on the individual and church life that precludes it from being unheeded.
3. Unrepentant – The sinner is refusing to stop their activity in action or in spirit (2 Cor 7:9-11).

Practical Outworking



The sin lists of Paul are not intended to be exhaustive. They note specific areas that are vital, but the local church has the freedom to discipline in accordance with the spirit of the precept, not merely the letter. Thus, actions that are illegal within a culture can and should be considered as potential causes that would evoke discipline. These would include: abuse, domestic violence, and unjust financial affairs. Also, “legal” sins such as abortion and inappropriate bankruptcy should be considered. (Unbiblical divorce is a subject that needs consideration.)

Matthew 18



Four Step Process:

1. Two brother seeking resolution.
2. Two witnesses as mediators
 - ✧ Deut 19:18 – investigators
 - ✧ *Martus* – one who testifies vs. *Autoptes* – eyewitness
3. Tell it to the church
4. Excommunication
 - ✧ Gentile and tax collector – treat him as an unbeliever restricting him from all privileges of Body life.

Keys



The terms *binding* and *loosing* were familiar terms used by rabbis in the first century to refer to the power of judging matters on the basis of the Bible. The Jewish authorities would determine how (or whether) the Scriptures applied in a specific situation and would render judgment by either binding, which meant to restrict, or loosing, which meant to liberate. The church still bears this responsibility and wields this power.

1 Corinthians 5



Three Step Process

1. Identify the sinner as a public shame.
2. Immediately remove the sinner with no future contact.
3. Deliver over to Satan.
 - ✧ Release to the realm of Satan with a result of physical destruction.
 - ✧ Spiritual salvation is possible, but contingent upon a forthcoming repentance

2 Thessalonians 3



Four Step Process

1. Identify those who walk outside of declared truth.
2. Confront with truth through time.
3. Publically segregate the unruly through disassociation.
4. Continue to admonish as a brother.

Romans 16



Two Step Process

1. Watch for the dividers.
2. Avoid the dividers.

Note that there is no confrontation or call to repentance.
There is merely avoidance or separation.

Church Outworkings



1. Have a written policy in place and review it within the church annually.
2. Identify the openly rebellious prior to membership.
3. Encourage immediate reconciliation between wounded parties. Don't let problems fester.
4. Define the nature of the sin problem. These is the judgment by which all other actions proceed. This is a wisdom issue.

Church Outworkings



5. Strike the balance between time and purity.
 - ✧ Extend time for the Spirit to work for “spiritually oriented people” who are guilty of “lesser” sins.
 - ✧ Abbreviate time for those who are spiritually insensitive or those who commit heinous, public sins.
6. Publically address the issue as necessary.
 - ✧ Protect the privacy of innocent parties and minors
 - ✧ Publically rebuke elders