

# **Church Discipline in the Local Assembly**

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One of the marks of a true New Testament church is the practice of discipline toward its erring members. God is holy and He commands His children to be holy as well. When a member engages in sinful patterns of living, the potential for harm to the cause and name of Christ necessitates that a discipline process be employed. Fortunately, God has not left us to our own devices when it comes to formulating the type of discipline that can bring restoration to the erring one. He gives instruction through His word for the local assembly to follow when the situation warrants. These instructions must be carried out with the intent of bringing about repentance and reconciliation. If any other motive is involved, further harm to the sinner, the church, and the cause of Christ will result.

## **What is Church Discipline?**

The Christian church for centuries has had a clear definition of biblical discipline. However, in the last century, many of those churches that have included this doctrine in their church constitutions have largely ignored its existence. Love and discipline have become mutually exclusive in many assemblies today. It is important that we have a clear and concise definition of church discipline. Jim Orrick has formulated this excellent explanation:

Church discipline entails the members of a church watching over one another in love, for the purpose of encouraging holiness and discouraging disorderly behavior in each member and in the church as a whole. When less drastic measures have failed, those members of the church who refuse to repent of sin and submit to the church must be expelled

from the church and turned over to Satan.”<sup>1</sup>

The ultimate goal of church discipline is to glorify God through obedience to His commands and through the restoration of our erring brothers and sisters. Members need to be aware that discipline is one of the activities rightly practiced by the church for their own good and for God’s glory. Neglecting this command is a violation of biblical doctrine and may invite the stricter judgment of God upon the entire assembly.

## **Benefits to the Assembly**

The church that practices discipline demonstrates to God and to others that it believes holiness is important. A message is clearly sent to all that sin brings reproach to the Body of Christ, and that all members will suffer when any member willfully engages in unholy practices. Therefore, church discipline will serve to preserve the purity of the assembly and to deter others from wickedness. When acted out consistently and prayerfully, the erring brother or sister may be reclaimed after repentance and through forgiveness.

Jonathan Edwards, the Puritan preacher from the 18th century, has much to say about the benefits to other members of following church discipline, and he also warns against the perils of its neglect:

...the church may be kept pure, and the ordinances of God (will) not be defiled... When the ordinances of God are defiled by the toleration of wicked men in the church, God the Father, Jesus Christ the head and founder of the church, the religion of the gospel, and the church itself, are dishonored and exposed to contempt.”<sup>2</sup>

## Offenses That Merit Discipline

The Bible gives several specific examples of people who should receive the most severe form of church discipline, i.e., expulsion and the withholding of fellowship.

### Matthew 18: 15-17

This passage does not give clues as to the kind of sin necessary to call forth that action. But it certainly does picture a person with an unrepentant heart.

*15 "Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother.*

*16 "But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that `by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.'*

*17 "And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.*

### 1 Corinthians 5:1-7

In this second scriptural passage dealing specifically with church discipline, the offender is described as openly and flagrantly practicing an unspeakable sexual sin, the sin of incest.

*1 It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles -- that a man has his father's wife!*

*2 And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you.*

*3 For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged (as though I were present) him who has so done this deed.*

*4 In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ,*

*5 deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.*

*6 Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?*

*7 Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us.*

### 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15:

In these verses, the third passage frequently referred to on the subject, Paul says that people who live unruly or disorderly lives and who refuse to follow the directions of scripture are to be considered for discipline along with those who refuse to be employed but instead act "like busybodies."

*6 But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us....*

*11 For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies.*

*12 Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread.*

*13 But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary in doing good.*

*14 And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed.*

*15 Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.*

John MacArthur explains that:

...the kind of offenses that require confrontation and Biblical discipline are not unintentional transgressions, minor peccadilloes, petty annoyances, or matters of simple preference, but serious violations of clear biblical principles - - sins that hurt other believers, destroy the unity of the flock, or otherwise sully the purity of the church. In such cases, sin *must* be dealt with.”<sup>3</sup>

## **The Motive for Discipline**

In every case, the motive for church discipline must be restoration. Revenge, retribution, “an eye for an eye,” or just to get rid of a troublemaker must never be the goal. God will surely bring those who carry out the discipline under judgment where this occurs. Instead, biblical love must pervade the entire process from the beginning. An unloving spirit toward the errant one cannot be tolerated in the church. Paul admonished the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 2 concerning the “punishment” of an offender:

*5 But if anyone has caused grief, he has not grieved me, but all of you to some extent -- not to be too severe.*

*6 This punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man,*

*7 so that, on the contrary, you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow.*

*8 Therefore I urge you to reaffirm your love to him.*

*9 For to this end I also wrote, that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things.*

*10 Now whom you forgive anything, I also forgive.*

*For if indeed I have forgiven anything, I have forgiven that one for your sakes in the presence of Christ,*

*11 lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices.*

## **Practical Procedures**

When biblical church discipline is necessary, the assembly must follow the biblical procedure as diligently and as practically as it can. The temptation often arises to take shortcuts and to move swiftly to the final stage before the Holy Spirit can effectively do His work on the heart of the offender. As mentioned earlier, this tendency betrays that the wrong motive might be present. Robert Anderson gives the following advice in his excellent book, *The Effective Pastor*:

First, the person who has been offended or the person who is most affected by the offense should approach the offender personally. That requirement is an important one. ...Second, if the offender and the accuser are not able to resolve the situation, then others - preferably officers of the church - should accompany the accuser when he approaches the offender for the second time. If that action does not succeed, the offender should be brought to the church for action. Once again, the desired biblical end product for church

discipline always is full restoration.”<sup>4</sup>

Since Jesus first prescribed this process as a series of steps that proceed from the gentle to the more harsh, we should proceed in like manner. Prudent caution is necessary depending upon the sin as it may become easy for the one confronting to become tempted as well. Paul admonishes us in Galatians 6:1,2:

*1 Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.*

*2 Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.*

Scripture alone must be the rod that is used when confronting an erring one. It is the sword of the spirit, and it must allowed to be the discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Scripture was the power of God unto salvation for the offender, originally. Should it not also be allowed to be the power for change in the heart of the sinning one?

It appears that since Jesus instituted steps for confronting the errant one, some time between these steps must elapse for the Holy Spirit to bring conviction through the Scriptures that have been shared by the accusers. Although no specific time period is given in the Bible, each case must be uniquely considered based upon the situation and complexity of related issues. Additionally, if signs of repentant effort are obvious, and the sinner is seeking wise counsel, this must be taken as “*hearing*” in the spirit of Matthew 18.

In some cases, the errant one may prove himself to be “*a*

*hearer of the word but not a doer.*” This must not be confused with repentance, but is a delusion, according to Scripture. In such cases, the next step in the process of discipline must be sought.

It is important to note that the “telling it to the church” stage is not excommunication. Rather, this is an opportunity for the church to lovingly confront the erring one, to admonish him and seek his repentance and restoration. Sometimes we can confuse this step, resulting in premature expulsion, much to our discredit. Only after the church has had a suitable period of time to confront and determine the condition of the brother or sister, should further judgment be passed. Prayerfully, the collective effort of the church in both prayer and personal contact will result in God-honoring repentance.

## **Repentance**

For certain situations, repentance will be obvious. An adulterous relationship broken off, or a slanderous liar having confessed and sought reconciliation - these can be quite obvious to all. However, other situations may be more subtle. It is incumbent upon the church leadership to use godly wisdom in determining whether or not repentance has occurred.

For sins of attitude such as excessive anger, bitterness, and other life-dominating problems, the process of change may be slower. The church should be ready to work with the sinner and help him in the process of sanctification if he exhibits a sincere change of heart. This may be done while discipline is in progress. As mentioned before, the duration of the third stage of discipline will depend upon the nature

of the sin and the willingness of the sinner to repent.

## **Excommunication**

If the leadership of the assembly determines that sufficient time has elapsed for the sinner to repent and reconcile with the brethren, yet no substantive change can be observed, the final stage of church discipline must be carried out. The Scriptures are clear that we are to *keep no company with him, that he may be ashamed and deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh*. But we must also keep in mind that we must not *count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother*. As stated before, restoration after repentance is the goal.

John MacArthur again shares some wisdom with us here:

“But as far as the treatment extended to him by church members is concerned, this is no license for hostility or contempt. In fact, Christ’s treatment of heathens and tax collectors is notable chiefly because of how He reached out to them in love. A similar kind of evangelistic pursuit should characterize our treatment of those who have been excommunicated in this manner, with one significant difference: as long as the ‘so-called brother’ (1 Cor. 5:9-11) remains unrepentant, believers must not carry on a relationship with that person as if nothing were wrong. In order to send clear signals both to the sinning individual and the watching world, even fellowship in everyday social settings is to be suspended. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 5:9-11:

*9 I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people.*

*10 Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral*

*people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.*

*11 But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner--not even to eat with such a person.<sup>5</sup>*

As harsh as some of this may seem, the goal of church discipline must be kept in view. God’s priority for His Church is for holiness and purity. Unrepentant sin brings such a reproach upon the Church that it must be dealt with consistently and biblically. To this end we submit to His teaching and His leading. And if it sometimes appears too harsh, or even severe, remember that it is ultimately for the purpose of forgiveness, reconciliation, and mutual encouragement within the visible Body of Christ.

The importance of prayer throughout this process cannot be overstated. The prayers of the local assembly on behalf of the sinning brother or sister are powerful tools for bringing conviction and repentance and ultimate reconciliation to fulfillment. The command of James in 5:16 is especially valid for church discipline situations:

*16 Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.*

Lastly, the ultimate result of church discipline is up to God. It may be that after the church does everything within its biblical authority to bring about change, the sinner still refuses to repent. When this happens, God will ultimately bring about judgment in His time. In such cases we are to

move over and leave room for the wrath of God. As Paul admonished the believers in Romans 12:19:

*19 Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord.*

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Jim Orrick, *Southern Baptists Old Paths Fellowship*

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "The Nature and End of Excommunication," *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2, pg.121

<sup>3</sup> John MacArthur, *The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness*, pg. 138

<sup>4</sup> Robert Anderson, *The Effective Pastor*, pg 281

<sup>5</sup> MacArthur, pg. 152, 153