

# Church Discipline

## Introduction

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The subject of church discipline is a difficult but important one. Many things must be understood regarding church discipline if we are going to faithfully carry out the task that God has given to His Church.

## Is Church Discipline Culturally Acceptable?

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People say that church discipline is not acceptable now, however that is not the question. There are many things that are not acceptable to our culture but that does not make them right or wrong. The cross is not acceptable, it is foolishness! Yet we must never deny it. The question is rather, "Is it biblical?"

## Church Discipline in Matthew 18

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In Matthew 18, we see the fourfold process of church discipline. It has been said that this passage is "severely practical as well as ruthlessly idealistic," and so it is. So, this process, though used in formal church discipline, has practical insight for more common issues within the church as well.

If there is unrepentant sin, we are to first go to the offending party one on one and try to work things out on that level (vv. 15-16). If we have not resolved the problem at that point, second, we are to go with one or two others (v. 16). Third, we see if the person does not listen, we are to tell it to the church (v. 17a) but if he or she is still impenitent then, fourth, he or she is to be treated like those outside of the church, i.e. excluded from communion (v. 17b). The next couple of verses talk about the authority that God has entrusted to the church, His representatives on earth.

## Church Discipline in 1 Corinthians 5

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Paul is adamant that he does not want the "so-called brother" to have community with the church (cf. 1 Cor. 5:5, 11, 13). Perhaps the three other steps of the church discipline process happened or perhaps they did not for whatever reason, that we cannot tell, but we do know that there certainly are times when it is appropriate to exclude people from church fellowship. The case in Corinth was clearly one of those times. Thus we see that the passage is not necessarily prescriptive, unlike the principals laid down in Matthew 18, but descriptive. That is, Paul is writing a letter to tell the Corinthians what to do in that context at that time.

## Putting Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5 Together

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I conclude from the two passages briefly looked at that pastor/shepherds and the church as a whole are to use biblical loving wisdom in each church discipline case. There is in fact no “cookie cutter mold” for each case but simply overarching principals to be applied to each different situation.

For instance, there are many passages that seem to reference church discipline besides Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5 but some of them look quite different (Acts 8:17-24; Gal. 6:1; Eph. 5:11; Titus 3:10; 2 Thess. 3:14-15; 2 Jn. 9-10). Many of Paul’s letters deal with discipline and correction yet they look very different depending on the situation. Paul was always pastoral and wise in the way that he handled each situation (cf. Rom. 15:1; 1 Cor. 13:4-7; 1 Thess. 5:14; 2 Tim. 4:2).

Look, for example, at 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15: “If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter... have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.” Paul says, “Have nothing to do with him” yet “warn him as a brother.” It is unclear what exactly this looked like in practice but it seems to me that it is a different approach to that in 1 Corinthians 5. What I conclude then, is that church discipline is an important and clear teaching from Scripture. However, it is not always as clear exactly how it should look in the local body in each specific case.

So after we boil down all we have seen in these passages what are some overarching principals to keep in mind?

- 1) Keep the matter as private as you can.
- 2) Church discipline is done as an act of love to keep the individual from damning sin.
- 3) Church discipline should always be done with gentleness and love though that is not to say without boldly calling the erring person to repentance.
- 4) If unrepentance continues the person must be removed from the church. (5) Church discipline is ultimately done for the glory of God. We desire that Jesus’ bride be pure and holy (cf. 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:25-27).

I believe we see from the collective passages that reference church discipline that there is no exact formal that most always be followed however there are principals laid down and a clear call to practice church discipline whatever each individual case might entail. Thus in evaluating church discipline cases we do not simply have a list of sins, some warranting discipline and others not. Rather, we look at the witness that the person has before a lost world. We ask, “Are they defacing the name of Jesus?”

Jonathan Leeman talks about “A Gospel Framework for Understanding Discipline.” I think he gives a very helpful approach. The Church, as God representatives on earth, has been given the “keys to the kingdom.” The local church and the leaders within that church have been given the serious task of administering baptism and the Lord’s Supper. These things give credibility to the genuineness of one’s faith. In the same token, church discipline is the church removing that affirmation. It is the church formally denouncing the person’s faith. Thus, as Jonathan Leeman rightly says, church discipline is “driven by a single question: does the church still believe an erring member is really a Christian, such that it’s willing to continue declaring so publicly?”

# The Manner and Motivation of Church Discipline

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How should we approach church discipline? We must do so with much gentleness and humility (1 Thess. 2:6-7; 2 Cor. 10:1; Col. 3:12-14; 2 Tim. 2:24-25; Phil. 4:5). We must remember that we too are sinners, we are not above the very same sin they are being disciplined for. That is why Paul says, "If anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of *gentleness*." And then he says, "Keep watch on *yourself*." Why Paul? (we ask), "Lest you too be tempted" (Gal. 6:1).<sup>\*</sup> We, *you* and *I*, are not above sin, any sin, and we should not act as if we are. As Paul elsewhere says, let he that thinks he stands take heed lest he fall (1 Cor. 10:12).

We must remember that the goal in church discipline is restoration. We want those living in sin to repent and once again join the fellowship. If they do repent then we, as the church, must cheerfully welcome them back (I think of the Prodigal Son here). Notice, that after Jesus teaches on church discipline in Matthew's Gospel he teaches on forgiveness.

## Conclusion

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We may not have an exhaustive how-to-book on church discipline but we are given principals that can and indeed have to be applied in each individual case. We, as the church, are God's representatives on earth and so we must seek to have His church be holy and filled with true followers of God. Therefore, as is warranted by the situation we must practice the steps outlined in Matthew 18, though of course with appropriate Christian sensitivity.

## Suggested Resources

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- Jay E. Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline: A Right and Privilege of Every Church Member* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974).
- Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000), 153-179 (can be accessed free at [http://www.sbts.edu/media/publications/sbjt/sbjt\\_2000winter4.pdf](http://www.sbts.edu/media/publications/sbjt/sbjt_2000winter4.pdf)).
- Jonathan Leeman, *Church Discipline: How the Church Protects the Name of Jesus* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012).
- Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offensive of God's Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010).
- Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 894-900.
- See also: <http://www.9marks.org/answers-for-pastors/discipline>