

The Painful Necessity of Church Discipline

Introduction: “Many people fail to make a clear distinction between punishment and discipline, and there is a very significant difference between these two concepts. *Punishment* is designed to exact *retribution* for a wrong done. *Discipline*, on the other hand, is to encourage the *restoration* of the one involved in wrongdoing. Punishment is designed primarily to avenge a wrong and assert justice. Discipline is designed primarily as a corrective for the one who has failed to live according to the standards of the church and/or society.”

Understand the scriptural foundation and importance of corrective church discipline.

I. Biblical Teaching on Church Discipline (see chart on last page):

Introductory thoughts:

- Church discipline is directly commanded not only by the apostles, but by the Lord himself, in one of the few uses by him of the word “church.”
- Discipline is not a matter of taste or sensibility or preference, but of the clear teaching of God.
- God’s holiness is the basis for discipline. “Be holy for I am holy,” the Lord says. We are to be characterized by God’s holiness (1 Pet. 2:9-12).
- The church practices discipline because the Lord disciplines those whom he loves (Heb. 12:6).
- This command was carried out in the early church at the leading of the apostle and Paul rebuked one church for failing to carry it out (1 Cor. 5).

A. Occasions for Church Discipline

1. Reasons given in Scripture:
 - a. Immorality, greed, idolatry, drunkenness, swindling (1 Cor. 5)
 - b. laziness, gossip, being a busybody, rejecting apostolic teaching (2 Thess. 3:6-15)
 - c. blasphemy (1 Tim. 1:20)
 - d. divisiveness and controversial or heretical speculations (Titus 3:9-11)
 - e. In addition, elders/bishops (“overseers”) who sin are to be rebuked publicly as a warning to others.

2. These sins are considered by the Scriptures as heinous enough either to bring a reproach upon the church, or to damage the functioning of the church as Christ's body and the army of his kingdom.
3. Discipline is not for getting even (although preachers are sometimes accused of that) nor is it to be done in accordance with standards that the Scriptures do not endorse.

B. Procedure for Church Discipline

1. The Scriptures give various procedures for church discipline but they follow a similar pattern:
 - a. Private reproof (Matt. 18)
 - b. Public announcement (Matt. 18) and grief (1 Cor. 5)
 - c. At least two warnings (Tit. 3:9-11)
 - d. Admonishment (2 Thess. 3) or rejection (Tit. 3)...
 - e. ...followed by exclusion (Matt. 18; 1 Cor. 5).
2. This discipline is to be followed by each member of the church. One who has been cast out is to be treated as a sinner and a tax collector, that is, as an unbeliever, one who does not know Christ.
3. One who has been admonished for gossiping or laziness or being a busybody may be embraced in a brotherly manner (2 Thess. 3), but those who cause division are to be rejected as warped, sinful, and self-condemned (Tit. 3:9-11).
4. Likewise, church members are admonished not to associate with those who cause division, *even before they are officially admonished* (Romans 16:17-19). Note: the reason for the division is irrelevant.

C. Purposes for Church Discipline

Several distinct purposes are prevalent in Scripture:

1. The ultimate restoration of the offender (Matt. 18:18, "win your brother over"; 1 Cor. 5:5; 2 Cor. 2:7; Gal. 6:1; 2 Thess. 3:6, "he may feel ashamed").
2. The purification of the church (1 Cor. 5:7; 1 Tim. 5:19-20, "so that others may take warning").
3. To protect the church – with regard to some sins that may damage the functioning of the church rather than merely its integrity (2 Cor. 2:11; Tot. 3:9-11, protection against division).

II. The Decline in Church Discipline

Several things contribute to the decline in the practice of biblical church discipline:

1. The relativism of our culture and our unwillingness to be considered judgmental
2. The decline of respect in churches for the authority of leaders
3. Failure to teach clearly and to set clear guidelines
4. Two main fears:
 - a. Loss of revenue if too many people get upset (some will get upset even though this is the clear teaching of God's Word).
 - b. Fear of litigation (this is irrelevant if the church simply decides it won't do it).

Conclusion: Church discipline has long been regarded, especially among Baptists, as one mark of a true church. To abandon it is not only to abandon our heritage; it is to abandon our faithfulness to the Bible.

Church discipline makes a clear distinction between the church and the world. Those who view the church as a social organization don't care about maintaining such a distinction; but those who value the teaching of God's Word see this as an important part of our mandate. The church's integrity is directly related to our faithfulness on this issue.

Essential NT Passages Relating to Church Discipline:

Passage	Problem	Procedure	Purpose
Matt 18:15-18	undefined sin of a "brother"	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Private reproof 2. Private conference 3. Public announcement 4. Public exclusion 	Restoration (to win "your brother over")
1 Cor. 5	Immorality Greed Idolatry Drunkness Swindling	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Corporate grief 2. Removal from midst 3. No association 	Restoration (5:5) Purification (5:7)
2 Cor. 5:5-11	Unnamed	After sincere repentance: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Forgive him 2. Comfort him 3. Love him 	Restoration (2:7) Protection (2:11)
Gal. 6:1	"a sin"	Restore him <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. As spiritual persons 2. With meekness 3. With reflection 	Restoration (6:1)
2 Thes 3:6-15	Laziness, gossip ("busybodies")	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Take note of him 2. Keep separate from him 3. Admonish him (as a brother, not as an enemy) 	Restoration (v. 14 "that he may feel ashamed")
1 Tim 5:19-20	An accusation against an elder entertained without witnesses	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Need two to three witnesses 2. If sin continues, then rebuke before all 	Purification (v. 20 so that "others may take warning")
Titus 3:9-11	Divisiveness	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Give 2 warnings 2. Reject him (as warped, sinful, self-condemned) 	Protection (against division)

Adapted from H. Wayne House, Chart 81 "Church Discipline" in *Charts on Christian Theology and Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 126.