

The Fellowship Files (9) – Church Discipline

It might surprise you to realize how many passages in the New Testament deal with church discipline. Matthew 18, Romans 16, 1 Corinthians 5, 2 Corinthians 2, Galatians 6, 1 Thessalonians 5, 2 Thessalonians 3, 1 Timothy 5, Titus 1 and 3, Hebrews 13, James 5, 2 John, 3 John, and on and on we see that the New Testament has many things to say about church discipline. The local church is to be administering discipline, promoting discipleship, and settling disputes. Discipline is a mark of a true church.

Purpose of Church Discipline – church discipline protects the health of the church, the leaders, and the other members. It is designed to help people live in liberty while practicing submission to authority, and is meant to foster interdependent, accountable relationships as well as hinder members from running too far off into sin. Combined with a legitimate church membership process, it is an effective means of sanctification, and it calls the bluff of those who want a local church to be accountable to them, but who don't want to be accountable to the members of the local church.

Church discipline is primarily for restoration, not condemnation. It is supposed to be preventative of allowing worse to happen, to the individual and the church. When we see it as only negative, all that does is make us avoid our responsibility. Furthermore, it makes us feel negative about the individuals in trouble. We should see it as a positive step in helping someone heal, to right their ship and get back on course, instead of considering it as punishment.

What about not getting involved in other people's business, and letting them sort it all out for themselves? Well, that may be the way of the world, but it is certainly not the way of the Word. When a church practices good discipline and it is involved in true discipleship, it will act as a deterrent in a sense. However, in any event, when people are in trouble, a family steps in to help.

- Would we tell someone in our family who has cancer, “well, that is your own business, I won't get involved”?
- Would we tell someone in our family who is hurt in a car wreck, “well, that is your own business, I won't interfere”?
- Would we tell someone in our family who is about to jump off a cliff, “well, that is your business, I won't interrupt”?

No we wouldn't, because that isn't the way families work, at least ideally. However, if they jumped anyway, and were trying to take you down with them, are you supposed to go? Of course not, and we try and lift other people up who are sinking down, but there does come a time when they are going to take us all down, and we have to let go.

Yes, a church is not a showcase for saints but a hospital for sinners, but the truth is that those who come to a hospital are there to get well, they admit they have a sickness and want to be rid of it. People in a hospital expect to get operated on. We should want and earnestly desire that the church should help us if we are going the wrong way, and wasting our rewards. Think about 1

Corinthians 3:13 (your work will be revealed by fire) and verse 15 (saved but only as through fire). Now think about your own children, or others you warn about danger. When a church uses loving discipline they are in effect telling the people to stop playing with fire.

Procedures for Church Discipline – **Matthew 18:15-20** gives us an outline for the steps of discipline. It starts out one on one, and if the other brother repents, that's the end of it. If not, then you take other witnesses in order that the matter may be established. If there is a response then that ends that matter. However, if there is still no response, then it should be told to the elders. If there is no response to the elders, then it should be made public in the church. Removal from the fellowship would be the ultimate measure of discipline. Taken together, the processes outlined in the New Testament allow for increasing measures intended to help before any such excommunication becomes necessary.

2 Thessalonians 3:14-15 – this gives us a last step before excommunication that in effect is telling the person, “We cannot hang around you when you want to keep firing that loaded gun all the time”, and “I can't let you come over if you bring that torch”, and “Look, if you would just stop setting houses on fire, we can act like friends again; you're still my friend, but I can't let myself go to jail because you won't come to your senses”. If the person continues in this pattern, then the further, final step may need to be taken.

1 Corinthians 5:1-13 – This text deals with unrepentant immortality, and although it is specific, it can be applied to many situations. It is more about the lack of repentance and the open defiance than the specific case of sin. The man carried on his sin publicly, before the church and before the unsaved in Corinth. Even the heathen Corinthians outside the church were shocked by this kind of conduct, and yet the man did not repent. What is even worse, even the saints in the church had apparently not rebuked him. Somehow, instead of grieving over this terrible sin, they were puffed up with pride about it. This is not about a believer who is struggling with sin but is seeking help from the church. This is about those who say they are believers but who will not give up their sin and in a defiant or bragging manner continue to parade it about or refuse to admit it is a problem for the rest of the congregation.

The way Paul administers discipline in 1 Corinthians 5 is different than the steps lined out in Matthew 18:15-20, but it is the specific details that make a difference in how it is approached. Open defiance with no course of action is different than working through a situation where someone is being counseled, who admit they need to do something. The intent is to make them want to repent, and be reunited in fellowship, as in this particular case (2 Corinthians 2:5-11).

Church discipline can and does work, but we have to let it take its biblical course. By putting the person out of the church, if they are determined to live according to the desires of the flesh, we allow them to feel the effects of that. This would prevent the person from a worse verdict at the judgment seat of Christ, if they are truly a Christian in the first place. We are not to give assurance to the rebellious, defiantly wayward soul, especially in the eyes of the church; that is the point of the passage. He may be a believer but for now he is to be handed over to the world, outside the protection and fellowship of the church. He has forfeited his right to fellowship. He may indeed be a Christian, but he cannot be allowed to continue to corrupt the local church.

Problems for Church Discipline – What sins warrant church discipline? Where are the lines to be drawn? Should we be disciplined for getting a speeding ticket, or falling behind on our bills? When would we slow down or speed up the process?

Church discipline may stay private, but may progress into open discipline, which focuses on those things that clearly affect the whole body. That speeding ticket might do just that if the person is a repeat offender who is driving our children around town, and they cannot afford to pay the ticket because they don't work, and the church has to foot the bill, again, and then again, etc. It depends on circumstance and situation, and "cookie cutter" lists are not all we should be concerned with here, but we do have good guidelines that we can apply with wisdom. The sins that lead to discipline are outward, serious, and unrepentant, with willful rebellion and open defiance being the most obvious red flags. It is about submission to authority and the process of discipline more than particular sins.

Here are ten areas where church discipline is to be considered, and where open, public sin might be handled differently than private sin. Not every text given necessarily speaks to how to discipline, but they are provided to show certain behaviors that must be dealt with. Association with a church requires accountability to that church.

- A formal membership will help against the preemptive resignation of those trying to avoid discipline, whereby they ruin any chance for reconciliation.
- This list is somewhat comprehensive but not exhaustive, and of course, maturity and wisdom must be involved here. The severity of the sin and the particular circumstances will provide questions that must be carefully handled.
- The process of discipline is often undertaken very slowly, and can take many forms other than excommunication such as private rebuke, public rebuke, pleading, warning, avoidance, and prohibiting participation in the Lord's Supper.

Divisiveness – Romans 16:17-20 / 1 Timothy 6:3-5 / Titus 3:10-11 – An individual who brings division within the church is to be warned twice and then removed. Divisiveness (causing disunity, being disruptive) can come from many sources, including misuse of the time and continually propagating a pet (or wrong) doctrine in nonessential areas as an essential.

Difficulties – Matthew 18:15-18 / 1 Corinthians 6:5 / Philippians 4:2-3 – When two believers cannot settle a dispute privately and it spills over into the church, the leadership must become involved. The goal must always be to preserve the bond of unity (Ephesians 4:3), but not all will have peace (Romans 12:18), and further action may be required.

Doctrine – Acts 20:28-30 / Galatians 1:6-8 / 1 Timothy 1:3-7, 18-20 / 2 Timothy 2:16-18, 23-26 / Titus 1:10-14 / 2 John 1:10 – If false teaching is not swiftly dealt with the entire body will be adversely affected. It is critical that the church be purged of false teaching; even a little can lead the church to idolatry, and can cause a church split, ruined lives, and lost souls.

Defamation – 1 Timothy 5:19-20 / Titus 3:1-2 / Hebrews 12:14-15 / James 3:13-16 – slander and bitterness cannot continue for long without it spilling over into the wider audience of the church. The public variety (like bad mouthing someone in the paper) must be dealt with publicly if the person will not repent and recant. This of course does not require a non-critical, artificial affability toward false teachers. Leaders in sin are to be disciplined by the other leaders privately first (this is what the phrase “in front of all” means) and the matter brought before the whole church if necessary. Again, a very public sin by a public minister may need public attention.

Desertion – Hebrews 10:23-26 – Persistent and willful non attendance in church. This is not about people who miss once in a while but people who miss more than they are present, etc. A lack of diligence in sanctification, manifested as a careless attitude about the church community, is reason to initiate the discipline process. Unavoidable circumstances such as illness, military service, work related issues, or other extenuating circumstances will of course mediate the situation, and graceful attempts at communication are important. Each situation should be treated as unique, but there really isn’t such a thing as an “inactive member”. Those who could be labeled “non-attenders” make evangelism harder, confuse new believers, discourage regular attenders, and worry their leaders.

Defilement – Ephesians 5:3-7 / Titus 1:15-16 – private prayer for the offending individual must be a priority, and the outline of Matthew 18 should be followed. However, there would be a difference between private sins, and sins that are persistent and are more widely known, and egregious public sin, which is broadcast. Many times God will deal directly in these situations (Acts 4:32-5:11 / 1 Corinthians 11:26-32 / 1 John 5:16-17).

Defiance – Galatians 6:1 / 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 / James 5:16-20 – reconciling the disobedient is about a restoration process, but when a person remains unrepentant, and becomes defiant, then church discipline of a more formal variety is called for.

Divorce – Exodus 21:10-11 / Deuteronomy 24:1 / Matthew 5:28, 31-32, 19:3-12 / Mark 10:2-12 / Luke 16:18 / 1 Corinthians 7 – Matters of adultery, abuse, abandonment and other such issues are to be dealt with in the context of the church community and its leadership.

Disregard – 1 Timothy 5:8 – willful neglect of family, which in some cases can be regarded as abandonment if a spouse is involved. If a person has the ability to care for his immediate family, and/or enough resources to care for their extended family that is local, then it would be wrong to attempt to avoid responsibility by telling them to “go ask the church”. This would be especially egregious if the person was not giving to the church either. Wisdom must be used, because this is no excuse for a lazy child to try and ask the church to discipline their so-called “unloving” mother or father (see next item under “disorder”).

Disorder – 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12, 5:14 / 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12 / 1 Timothy 5:24 / Titus 2:11-15 – Undisciplined living leads to unnecessary consequences for others. God has very little patience for lazy Christians who cause undue stress on the community. We need to have patience for people to get things in order, and the church should help, but should not be an enabler of those who show no desire to change.

Posture of Church Discipline – We should typically forgive some sins without necessarily even mentioning it (Proverbs 10:12, 19:11 / Matthew 7:1-5 / Colossians 3:13 / 1 Peter 4:8). We must be promoting an atmosphere of forbearing and forgiveness, recall chapter 6. We need to foster a community that is a safe place, and we must always be praying for people before we are confronting them. All that having been said, we must insist on loving accountability, for our own good, for the good of others, for the good of the church, and most importantly, for God’s glory.

Paul warns us not to tolerate rebellion (especially defiant rebellion) in the church, and not to associate with those who are guilty. This applies to anyone who has been removed from the fellowship, and to people who may not have come under church discipline, but who would have had they not fled the church. In their minds they might justify their actions and think because they left on their own terms without a formal process that everything is okay, but we cannot justify that behavior. If they left for bad reasons then they were doing badly. To invite them into more intimate fellowship is to do what Paul was saying not to do (i.e., *not even to eat with such a one*). This doesn’t mean that we must leave some social gathering where we show up and they are on the other side of the room, but that we are not to be inviting them into or accepting invitation from them into more intimate fellowship.

Some, instead of responding in the biblical way to persons under discipline, they try to act as if they’re not under discipline. That’s very wrong, according to the teaching of the Bible. The intent may be soft-hearted, but it’s the wrong-hearted thing to do. Unfortunately, there are far too many so-called churches that are all too willing to take in the “wounded” thinking they are nursing and nurturing them, but what they are actually doing is cementing them in their pride. This may seem more loving, but it isn’t, it keeps people from having to deal with facing the truth when their ego gets wounded, and they keep it protected by playing church somewhere else.

What about gossip? In the case of 1 Corinthians 5, we notice Paul does not call the reports, letters, etc. gossiping. In Matthew 18:15-20, we see that all the talking to others about certain problems is not considered gossip. Now, simply “spreading information” is also many times just simply gossip. This must be about a process of restoration, not retaliation. That being said, church discipline is not gossip; problems get to the point you have to say something, first to the individual, then to others when it gets too far, but of course you have to have a case, or the person bringing the accusation is merely slandering. The difference of whether or not it is gossip is intent of the heart, to wound or to heal, both individual and church.

For many in today’s church, not administering church discipline is seen as being more humble, but Paul calls it the exact opposite, and says it is pride (1 Corinthians 5:2). True humility doesn’t say we cannot judge an unrepentant, openly defiant brother or sister, it says we must submit to going through the tough process of trying to reconcile the person through church discipline, perhaps using the Lord’s Table (vs.8, 11) and it may even include excommunication.

Of course, we are not supposed to always be going about “disciplining” everybody; it is not about having a sin police, or enforcing “standards” that are not biblical, it is about dealing with open, ongoing, unrepentant (especially when defiant) sin that is being addressed in proper church discipline. Who are we to judge? We are the church, that’s who (1 Corinthians 5:12). We are

supposed to be discerning, discipling, and applying discipline to those who claim to be of Christ in our midst. Humility is the basis of doing the discipline not the basis of avoiding it.

We must be gracious, with an attitude towards restoration, and avoid hypocrisy (cf. Matthew 7:3-5 / Galatians 6:1-2), but we must also obey the scriptures that God has given us to deal with these situations. When someone refuses to face their sin and refuses to be helped, then the church must help the person to face it and deal with it in the ways the Bible instructs us to.

Church isn't just about gathering together on Sunday mornings to hear a talk to make you feel better; we are all supposed to be involved in each other's lives. The church is a central part of the mission to sanctify believers, and unfortunately, this is why many stay away from church, or move from church to church. They don't want to be dealt with. They want to deal with the church on their own terms, instead of allowing themselves to be dealt with by the church on God's biblical terms. In all of these things, whether church discipline issues or other things that come our way, we have to deal with them rather than avoid them.

Some say that we are not to discipline in the church at all, because they say that we are to let the wheat and the weeds (tares) grow together. However, this is a basic misunderstanding of the parables of Matthew 13 (13:24-30, 36-40). The field is the world not the church. Wheat and weeds together doesn't mean we must let them grow in the church but in the world. When Christ comes again He will separate the wheat and the weeds, the sheep and the goats. God allowing both to grow together means that the weeds, the goats, are not finally judged yet. The wheat and the weeds (tares) live side by side in a composite human society, for now, and God's people live as a subset of that, until Jesus comes again.

In today's church culture, it is harder to bring a sinner to repentance, because they can easily just go to another church and pretend that nothing happened at their old church. Or, it is easy for them to play the victim, and act as if their former church was cruel towards them. While it is true that some churches have been cruel towards their members, it does not mean the church should never practice church discipline.

Ideally, ending one's membership in a church requires the consent of both parties. We join a church by the consent of the church, and we leave a church by the consent of the church, because it's the local church that has the authority to publicly represent Christ on earth, as an embassy does its home government. The person who continues to call himself a Christian and yet attempts to avoid church discipline is guilty of usurping the power Christ gave the church, not the individual Christian. The authority to bind and loose is not about the devil it is about people.

In Matthew 18:18-19 Jesus was teaching that when proper disciplinary procedures are followed in the church, the leaders have the right to deny fellowship. The binding and loosing has to do with the disciplinary decisions being made. The church has the presence, the authority, and the power to carry out the disciplinary action. When the church acts in proper discipline, heaven acts in support of the church, Christ acts right from the midst of that.