

Church Discipline

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Discipline in the church is important to ensure that the church is distinguishable from the world. Without the exercise of church discipline, there is often no way to bring counseling cases to a satisfactory conclusion. If words that are taught from the pulpit are not enforced by the elders, members learn that the church does not really mean what it says. The exercise of church discipline helps to maintain a climate of peace in the church and causes the members to feel secure and protected from false doctrine.

There are four stages in the process of church discipline as presented by Christ in the passage of scripture found in Matthew 18:15-17:

“Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.

But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.

And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church:

but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.”

The first two stages are informal and do not involve the corporate church. They involve only the individual members acting on their own initiative in obedience to Christ. The last two stages are formal and involve the corporate church. As the process progresses more people are involved, but the hope is that the issue will be resolved in the informal stages 1 and 2.

Never promise confidentiality due to the fact that the disciplinary process may eventually have to involve other people (stages 2-4). However, confidentiality within any given step should be carefully adhered to. In some cases of disciplinary action, not all the stages need to be followed such as in the case in I Cor. 5. With the man who was living with his stepmother, Paul went straight to stage 4. Here the matter was not between two individuals but between the man and the church. Discipline may begin at any stage of the process. The rule of thumb by which to determine where the matter should be handled is this: deal with the problem on the level at which it presents itself, making every effort to involve no one other than those already involved. In other words, a matter should be kept as narrow as the event itself.

Stage 1: One-on-One

In Matt. 18:15 Jesus (1) commands (2) the offended brother to (3) “go” and (4) speak with the brother (5) privately in such a way as (6) to convict him of his sin. If the brother listens (confesses his sin and seeks forgiveness) reconciliation takes place. A non reconciled condition between two believers must not be allowed to exist. If it continues there is no option left: discipline must be pursued. Jesus does not suggest; He requires the use of informal discipline.

The person who has been offended also has responsibility to seek reconciliation and should do so in a spirit of humility; in other words accepting the fact that he/she may share some responsibility for the break in the relationship. He/she should be quick to forgive when forgiveness is sought. People should not feel they must confront every little thing. Let love cover many offences.

Luke 17:3 (KJV) “Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him.”

Reconciliation is not just apologizing. It is also seeking forgiveness from the offended party. This requires a decision from that party. If forgiveness is given, the matter is closed and must stay that way.

Stage 2: One or Two Others

The trigger for moving to stage 2 is the phrase “But if he will not hear thee.” At each stage what moves the process forward is the refusal of the offender to be reconciled. The offended person must exercise patience when confronting the offender. Opportunity must be given for discussion and for differences to be ironed out. Only after all this has taken place with no reconciliation does the process move to the next stage.

The witnesses in stage 2 are not witnesses to the offence committed, but rather one or two others who can be witnesses to the “words” spoken in the discussion between the two parties and between them and the two parties. However, the witnesses are first in the role of counselors who seek to reunite the estranged parties. That is indicated in the words “And if he shall neglect to hear them.” They are pictured as actively participating in the reconciliation process. It is only when the refusal takes place that they become witnesses for the purpose of the next step which involves taking the matter before the church

2 Corinthians 13:1 (KJV) 13 “This is the third time I am coming to you. In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established.”

The “one or two others” should be people who can offer wise counsel and who are people respected by the church. In most cases, this will be the elders of the church.

What the Counselors/Witnesses Do

1. Make an appointment to go with the person who appealed to them to see the one who allegedly refused to listen. They should confine themselves to only the basic information about the offence from the

offended person and the offender prior to the meeting. The details of a negative nature should be discussed when the two parties are present together.

2. If the offender refuses to meet, several additional attempts should be made to persuade him to do so. He should be informed of the serious nature of his willfulness, including the possible removal from the church.

3. If the meeting takes place, one of the counselors should lead the discussion asking both parties to bring their evidence trying to gather all pertinent facts. First listen to the accuser seeking to determine if his facts are true. They should discover if he has a case.

4. If they determine the accuser has a case, they should move on to hear the explanation or defense by the accused. They should be careful to extract all the relevant facts and assess attitudes of the two parties. Make sure parties remain calm and do not use intemperate language.

5. If the counselors discover that an offence has in fact been committed and believe there is no misunderstanding, they should proceed to ascertain all the facts and evaluate them according to biblical standards. Then they should work with the parties to reach reconciliation. Appropriate apologies, requests for forgiveness, and forgiveness should be given and accepted.

6. If one or the other of the parties is dissatisfied with the proposed solution, or one or the other refuses to agree to the restoration of fellowship, the counselors should make every effort to get them to do so. But, if after all attempts have been made, no reconciliation seems possible, they shall warn the recalcitrant brother that the matter must be taken to the next step which involves telling it to the church. They cannot stand by, knowing the situation and knowing that all the resources of Christ have not been exhausted.

Stage 3: Tell It to the Church

In Matthew 18:17a Jesus says,

“And if he shall neglect to hear them (the counselors/witnesses), tell it unto the church.”

In going from stage 2 to stage 3 one goes from the informal to the formal phase of the disciplinary process. It means that the church officially now becomes aware of the problem. It also means that the seriousness of the problem has progressed to the point where it has reached the court of last resort. A brother or sister under official discipline is in a danger zone and should be told so. Stage 3 is the last opportunity for the willful brother or sister to repent and be reconciled under the loving care of members of the church.

Telling the Church

The brief words in Matthew 18:17a lack a clear statement about how to carry out Jesus' instructions; no process for telling the church is even outlined, let alone detailed. Therefore, the process has to be pieced

together from other scriptures and from the application of the principles of decency and good order that are required by God in I Cor. 14.

1 Corinthians 14:33, 40 (KJV) “For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints. Let all things be done decently and in order.”

When the elders are informed of the issue, assuming they were not also the counselors, they should make a strong effort to persuade the offender to repent and be reconciled to his brother before telling the congregation at large. That is why Stage 3 really has 2 parts; the first part being the elders speaking to the offender seeking to get him/her to repent. Part 2 is telling the church at large, assuming the objective of part 1 was unsuccessful (2 Thess. 3:14a):

When the elders tell the church, they must be sure that only the members are informed of the situation. Clear instructions must be given not only about how to treat him/her while under discipline, but about the fact that this is privileged information, belonging to the members of the congregation alone.

The church members (not unbelieving attendees) alone must hear the description of the sinful event and the lack of repentance and reconciliation of the offending person. The meeting should also exclude children. These considerations mean that one must tell the church either in a closed meeting of its membership duly called by the elders in a decent and orderly manner for that purpose, or one does so by telling the elders in their capacity as representatives of the church.

2 Thessalonians 3:14 (KJV) “And if any man obey not our word by this epistle.....”

In stage 3 there are an increased number of people involved in the helping process. The reason why the congregation is told is so that as a whole they may have an opportunity to help the offending, willful brother or sister to come to repentance.

Following is what the congregation should be told:

1. That brother or sister so-and-so is under discipline for a particular problem. This is done to “note” the person as stated in 2 Thess. 3:14:

“And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, **note** that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed.”

“Note” means to “identify.” If the congregation does not know these facts they cannot avoid fellowship with him and /or appropriately counsel with him. **The congregation does not need to know the details of the offence but just the nature of the problem.**

2. The congregation may no longer fellowship with him as though nothing was wrong. They are told “Don’t mix or mingle with him.”

1 Corinthians 5:9, 11 (KJV) “I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators. But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolator, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat.”

“withdraw from him.”

2 Thessalonians 3:6 (KJV) “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us.”

The word “withdraw” means “stand aloof; keep away from”), and “don’t eat” with him (1 Cor. 5:11). The congregation must regard the so-called brother (1 Cor. 5:11) “as a brother” (2 Thess. 3:15), but as one whose status is in question.

2 Thessalonians 3:15 (KJV) “Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.”

A church member must not have normal fellowship with the person under discipline such as eating together, going on social outings together, etc. However, time together could be spent counseling the person regarding his/her lack of submission to authority and reluctance to repent and reconcile with the offended person.

“Not to eat” means two things: (1) that normal fellowship is broken. Eating with another, in biblical times, was the sign of fellowship; (2) that the offender is forbidden to partake of the Lord’s Supper because according to 1 Cor. 10:16-17, partaking is “communion” or fellowship, the very thing prohibited at stage 3

1 Corinthians 10:16-17 (KJV) “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread.”

3. They must “counsel “him. (2 Thess. 3:15; Gal. 6:1-2).

2 Thessalonians 3:15 (KJV) “Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.”

Galatians 6:1-2 (KJV) “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.”

Stage 4: Removal from the Fellowship and Covering of the Church

In stage 4 the unrepentant believer is removed from the fellowship and covering of the church and handed over to Satan and the world, who are used by God in His wise providence to chastise him/her and bring him/her back to Himself. The Book of Judges is a story of God's dealings with rebellious Israel who, sinning against Him, wanders away from Him only to be brought to repentance by being subjected to one or more pagan nations.

The final word of Christ concerning the process of church discipline, found in Matt. 18:17b, is,

“but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.”

The person who is put out of the fellowship and covering of the church, handed over to Satan, and who is no longer considered a believer, is to be treated exactly as one would treat other unbelievers. This means that, while making no final judgment about his actual heart condition, the church is to treat him as if he were an unbeliever. The church does not judge his heart, but it must judge his words and actions. By words and actions he has acted “as a heathen and tax collector” and must be treated as one.

It is possible that the individual whom you remove, being a believer in rebellion, will repent and return. This is what happened with the incestuous man in Corinth who, after he was put out, repented of his sin and was restored to fellowship in the church. The repentant believer too must be restored. However, until and unless he does so, he must be treated exactly as you would treat an unbeliever. It means that when you talk to him you have the obligation to evangelize him.

Stage 4 as described in Scripture (New Testament) is as follows:

1. Remove him from your midst

1 Corinthians 5:2 (NIV) “And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have gone into mourning and have put out of your fellowship the man who has been doing this?”

2. Clean out the leaven

1 Corinthians 5:7 (NIV) ⁷Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.

3. 1 Corinthians 5:13 (NIV 1984)

“God will judge those outside. Expel the wicked person from among you.”

4. Deliver this person to Satan 1 Corinthians 5:5 New International Version (NIV)⁵ hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord.

5. I have handed him over to Satan.

1 Timothy 1:20 New International Version (NIV) “Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme.”

6. Treat him as a heathen and a tax collector (Matt. 18:17).

These are the ways in which the New Testament describes the actions that terminate one’s membership in the visible church. However, the unrepentant person whose membership in the church has been terminated should not be disallowed to attend church services. Heathens are permitted to attend services. Unless he is acting divisively he should be allowed to hear the preaching of the Word and should be witnessed to by the members, treating him like an unbeliever.

As for the interaction of family and church members with the person who has been put out from under the covering of the church, the direction is the same. He/she is to be treated as an unbeliever, but as Christians, we interact with unbelievers all the time. We work with them, attend school with them, have business dealings with them, etc. We show them respect and consideration as children of God. However, we do not share close fellowship with them. We do not socialize with them on a regular basis because it is impossible to have the same intimacy with them as we would with fellow Christians. As Christians, it is our responsibility to evangelize unbelievers. It is impossible to do that if we avoid even polite contact with the unbeliever. Many of the old and perhaps severe practices of avoiding even simple, polite, and respectful interaction with the person who has been put out of the church seem to have no clear basis in Scripture. However, let us be clear. For the person who has been put out from under the covering of the church, God is now free to deal with him/her through Satan and the world to bring about repentance. This is no trivial matter but rather a fearful thing.

Detailed records must be kept of all formal proceedings and actions. Also, one should never be removed from the midst with the “good riddance” attitude. The congregation should mourn as the father of the Prodigal Son mourned. It should be a solemn time of conscience-searching, mourning, and prayer when someone is removed from the midst.

Restoring the Fellowship

The process for restoration is set forth in 2 Cor. 2: 6-8;

“Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many.⁷ So that contrariwise ye ought rather to **forgive him**, and **comfort him**, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow.⁸ Wherefore

I beseech you that ye would **confirm your love** toward him.”

1. The repentant offender must be forgiven;
2. He must be comforted;
3. He must be reinstated in love.

The sternness exhibited in stage 4 of the disciplinary process is now countered with the tenderness of the restoration. Some in Corinth had been inclined to allow the offender too much freedom, not thinking it necessary to remove him from the church. Paul thunders, “You are arrogant! Clean him and his leaven out.” Now to those who desire to keep the pressure on longer, Paul says, “He has had enough; don’t go on with the punishment.” There must be proper balance between discipline and restoration.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is a promise in which one person goes on record as declaring he will never again bring up another’s offence and hold it against him. The past as a debt is discharged. This should be emphasized to the congregation.

Forgiveness should be given just on the word of the offender, “I repent.” (See Luke 17:4). Give time for the fruit of repentance to appear. If it does not, one may then question the person’s true repentance which may lead to further discipline.

When repentance is expressed, the church must make a formal declaration of forgiveness to the repentant sinner and place on the records that it has done so and that the matter is closed. Failure of a member to comply could result in his/her discipline.

Assistance

The word “comfort” means help, assist, urge, persuade, counsel. It refers to giving the brother or sister whatever help and all the help needed to be reestablished properly in the congregation.

If the person has been in Satan’s hands for a good while he/she will have the marks to show it, and may need assistance of many kinds including financial.

Reaffirmation of Love

Church rights and privileges must be restored. Formal reinstatement must be as public as was his/her dismissal.

Note: The brethren acknowledge that significant input to this document was obtained from the book entitled Handbook of Church Discipline by Jay E. Adams copyright 1974, Zondervan. However, the information obtained from the book and incorporated into this document has been carefully and prayerfully reviewed and approved by the brethren and believed to be present truth for this hour.