

# Church Discipline

## **1. The Lack of Discipline in our Churches**

We begin this section of our report with the acknowledgment that Biblical discipline is very rarely practiced by late twentieth century (or early twenty-first century) American churches, and we also note with sorrow that this includes our own denomination and our own presbytery.

The reasons for this are clear: the centrality and idolatry of the individual in the nation's life, the unbridled pursuit of a freedom that is defined for oneself, the demand for personal happiness as an absolute right, the sense of need to be true to one's own inner longings and to live out what is perceived as one's own natural (and therefore 'God-given') personality. This cultural context militates against the practice of discipline.

An additional factor in the decline of discipline is the lack of stable community in our churches. Discipline, as we shall see, requires community; that is, for truly Biblical discipline to be in place, there must be a context of loving involvement in one another's lives from day to day. Where 'church' consists of occasional public meetings and has a poor reality of a deeper corporate life the practice of discipline loses its force. The social mobility of our culture increases this problem. If our members have little sense of rootedness in a city, and minimal loyalty to a particular congregation, then again discipline loses its edge with Christians moving from church to church so easily.

## **2. The 'Culture War'**

Along with these problems many believers who are sensitive to the need for their churches to be involved in reaching out to the 'sinners' in our cities are wary of the constant denunciations by notable Christian leaders of various groups involved in the 'culture war' of our times: gays and lesbians, drug addicts, AIDS sufferers, prostitutes, husband-less women, fatherless children, teenagers involved in crime and gang warfare. They feel that these public 'Christian' declarations of hostility to particular sins and sinners do little to serve the cause of the gospel of Christ and the salvation of the very sinners whom Jesus died to save.

Consequently, those churches that welcome sinners of every kind to their services may have an additional factor of reluctance to practice discipline. "How can the gospel be preached?" they ask, "If we start disciplining the people who need the gospel most!"

There is also a widespread feeling that certain sins are 'unacceptable' and will lead to the cry for discipline: sins such as homosexual practice or drug addiction, and that other sins are 'acceptable' and will rarely bring a call for discipline: sins such as dishonest business practice or malicious gossip. Along with this sense of unfair discrimination a further question is asked: "Which of these sins are more widely present in our churches, and therefore more obviously in need of proper discipline?"

## **3. The Calling of the Church**

Jesus calls his church into existence to glorify and enjoy the Father with him, to serve fellow believers in love, and to bring his message of salvation to a wicked and desperately needy world.

This calling of the church to the world means that we are forbidden by Christ to curse, revile and insult sinners. Rather we are commanded to pray for them, to bless them and to love them even if they hate us and make themselves our enemies.

A church, therefore, is not to be a gathering where only the righteous feel welcome, but rather a fellowship of sinners saved by grace, that welcomes other sinners, a gathering of believers who, like Jesus himself, eat and drink with sinners and are servants of sinners. A proper humility before God will always lead to such an attitude and lifestyle. If this humility is not present we will bring on ourselves the denunciation that Jesus spoke to the Pharisee (Luke 18:9-14). This man had prayed congratulating himself that he was not sinful like other men.

A church ought to be a body in which sinners of every kind are welcomed to hear the proclamation of the gospel. It ought to be a community where those seeking God are given time to repent of their sins. It ought to be a fellowship of supplication where there is urgent and persistent prayer for the Spirit to call sinful men and women to the obedience of Christ and to an increasingly righteous life.

This should not mean that the clear teaching of Scripture announcing the holiness of God is to be muted; nor should it mean that the denunciation of sin is to be restrained; nor should it mean that we will back off from impassioned calls to repentance. However, time needs to be given for this message of repentance to take root in a sinner's heart as faith begins to grow there and as the Spirit softens the conscience through the Word.

#### **4. The Purpose of Discipline**

Why should there be church discipline? A simple and sufficient answer is that the Lord of the church demands it. It is however appropriate for us to ask what purposes he has in mind in commanding us.

The first reason for discipline is the honor of Christ and of his name before the watching world. The church is called both in its teaching and in its life to uphold the holiness of God before the world. God dwells in unapproachable light, and our Savior was entirely without sin in his life on earth. It is only fitting therefore that the churches that bear his name dedicate themselves to a life of purity. This is why the Reformers regarded church discipline as one of the marks of the true and apostolic church.

The second reason for discipline is the sanctification and salvation of the sinner. We are to discipline in order to bring a brother or sister in the Lord to repentance; and so that the spirit of the disobedient Christian may be saved on the day of the Lord Jesus.

The third reason for discipline is to prevent the spread of sin in the church if open sin is not dealt with in obedience to God's Word. A little yeast of undisciplined sin will corrupt a whole church by pervading the life of other believers.

#### **5. The Lord's Intervention**

This demand for discipline that is sounded so clearly by Scripture can be ignored only at our peril, for judgment must begin with the household of God.

If we fail to discipline, we can expect that God himself will bring swift judgment on us. He not only demanded the practice of discipline in his teaching, but also gave us the terrible example of the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira to demonstrate that he will not tolerate the covering up of serious sin in the life of his church.

In the church at Corinth the Lord disciplined some in the congregation with sickness and death. These believers had openly destroyed the unity of the body that ought to have been celebrated in the Lord's Supper. Another example comes from the church in Thyatira where sexual immorality was publicly taught and therefore practiced by members of the church. Again, Christ threatened sickness and intense suffering if the church itself would not deal with the sin. We ought to expect sickness, suffering and death in our churches if we teach that it is acceptable to God to practice sin, or if we fail to discipline

flagrant sins. These warnings from God's Word ought to cause trembling, holy fear and a desire for repentance in every church of this presbytery.

## **6. Disputable Matters**

We are commanded by the Lord to allow freedom of conscience in disputable matters. Scripture teaches us that there are areas of difference between believers, where one is right and another wrong, and that such differences ought not to lead to discipline. In Romans 14 and 15, in 1 Corinthians 8 and in Colossians 2, the apostle Paul tells us to be careful not to judge one another (let alone practice discipline) where there are disagreements among believers over issues of conscience.

What are disputable matters? The apostle refers to the observance of one day as special, to the dietary practices of believers, to the eating of meat sacrificed to idols. We are not to develop an evangelical Talmud or Mishnah of rules and regulations for the life of believers. This was one of the reasons for Jesus stringent criticism of the Pharisees. Beyond this, we are to allow freedom of conscience to believers even in some matters where God's Word has been made known. The apostle tells us that he knew what was right in regard to the disputable matters under discussion in Rome and Corinth, and yet, he insists on the withholding of judgment in these matters that do not entail flagrant sin.

First he argues that God alone is Lord of the conscience, and is the one Judge over us all, and that therefore we must give one another freedom to answer to God.

Second, he calls us to humility with regard to what we know, or what we think we know. Knowledge, even right knowledge, can very easily lead us to the more serious sin of pride.

Third, once we understand the need for humility about our opinions, we will pursue love for our fellow believers who differ from us on these less than central issues. Who am I, Paul challenges me, to judge my brother or sister for whom Christ died? Ought I not rather to love them as Christ did and give myself up for them?

Fourth, he urges us not to cause the believer with a weak conscience to stumble, by practicing before them behavior that they regard as sinful even though their conscience may be misinformed. I must not cause others to sin against their own conscience by leading them into actions that they regard as sin.

This is not to be construed as a license for the legalist to control the life of the church. This, once again, falls under Paul's prohibition not to judge and not to make rules for one another.

## **7. The Context of Discipline**

Scripture describes the church as a household and as the family of God. The mark of the true church is therefore love: love for God and love for one another. Within this family of God's people how are we to go about judging one another? Once we discuss discipline we are driven to acknowledge the need to be discerning about the doctrine and life of a church and of its members? So, what framework can we establish for mutual judgment?

First, when we see a fellow believer sinning, we are to ask ourselves if we are doing the same or even worse than the one we want to set straight. Judgment must begin with ourselves.

Second, we are to ask whether this is a sin that we should forbear and forgive rather than confront the person. If we deal with every sin in the life of a family or church we would never be silent. Rather, we would bite, devour and consume each other.

Third, we are to look into our own hearts to discover the motivation behind our judging. Is our motivation spiritual? Do we desire to restore this fellow believer in love, to build up, or to tear down? Do we go in humility as sinner to a fellow sinner, or do we stand on a pedestal of self-righteousness to denounce our brother or sister? Do we pray for them in the longing that the sinner will be turned from their wicked way?

Fourth, we have to ask if we have earned the right to go and talk to someone about that person's sin. Have I indeed been spiritual in my relationship with them up to the present time? Has there been some reality of brotherly love between us? Or would this person be right to say: "You have shown no concern for me before. How come now that you think I am sinning there is this sudden desire to be involved in my life?"

Fifth, is there solid evidence for this sin I want to confront, or are my fears based on gossip, which in itself is a sin that deserves discipline?

Sixth, I must be prepared to go directly to the person myself and rebuke this brother or sister frankly.

Seventh, will I help the sinner to bear the load of their sin? This is the context of Paul's command to bear one another's burdens. Am I interested only in exposing sin, or will I follow the example of Christ and devote myself to helping the sinner overcome their sin? This will mean the giving of my-self in prayer, in time, in hospitality, in energy and in self-sacrifice.

Without doubt, it is this high demand of Scripture for the reality of love in the church, that leads both to the lack of discipline and to the destructive nature of some discipline when it is practiced outside of this context of love.

## **8. Matters which Require Discipline**

There appear to be three areas for discipline in the New Testament church, with an ascending order of seriousness:

- a). There are practical matters of disobedience that bring discredit on the church, like the refusal to work. Paul tells us that we are not to share our food with an idle brother, that we are to command such a one to settle down and work, that we are not to associate with him to shame him, yet that we are to warn him as a brother rather than to regard him as an enemy.
- b). There is the issue of divisiveness in the church, where legalists bring havoc to the unity of the church by seeking to impose their own views on all other believers. Such men, says Paul, are always arguing about the law and raising controversies. If we are plagued by such people in our churches, we are to warn them once, warn them a second time, and then have nothing to do with them. They are to be silenced.
- c). Then, there are flagrant doctrinal and moral issues that call for full discipline. In the doctrinal area we are commanded to discipline those who are false teachers with regard to the central tenets of the faith once delivered to the saints:

The existence, nature and character of God  
The person of Christ, his Messiahship, his divinity and his humanity  
The work of Christ, his substitutionary death and bodily resurrection from the dead  
Justification through faith alone  
The teaching of idolatry, sexual immorality, or the denial of marriage

In the moral area the New Testament appears to follow the second table of the law:

The sanctity of human life and the protection of the physical body (therefore the rejection of drunkenness as well as murder and slave-trading)

The sanctity of the marriage bond (therefore the rejection of sexual immorality: fornication, adultery, incest and homosexual practice)

The protection of property (therefore the rejection of theft, of avarice and of dishonest business practice)

The protection of reputation (therefore the rejection of malicious gossip and perjury)

There is one additional area taken from the first table of the law:

The protection of the glory of God (therefore the rejection of idolatry)

What is meant by homosexual practice in these New Testament passages on discipline? The context of all such statements is the creation ordinance of marriage: that is, the exclusive commitment of one man and one woman for life to each other so that these two become one.

Therefore when Paul makes a summary statement about what sexual behavior must be disciplined in the church he uses the word ' pornos ' 'the sexually immoral person' to stand for all sexual intercourse outside the marriage bond. In other passages Paul expands this summary statement to include (so that there can be no misunderstanding):

Fornication - pre-marital intercourse

Adultery (' moichos ') - intercourse with someone else's wife or husband, or intercourse by a married person with someone other than their own wife or husband

Effeminacy (' malakos ') - a male who allows other men to have sexual intercourse with him)

Homosexual offenders ' arsenokoiteis ' - men who have sexual intercourse with other men

Elsewhere Paul gives a similar rejection of lesbian practice

If it is responded that Paul rejects only homosexual practice by heterosexual men or women, or that Paul rejects only cultic homosexuality, our response is that Paul's words are a straightforward condemnation of all homosexual practice. Any other reading of the texts is just as out of bounds of normal textual understanding and of the whole tradition of the church's understanding of the Scriptures as is the denial of the physical resurrection of Christ.

If it is responded that Paul knew nothing of homosexual nature, our reply must be that all of us have fallen natures, and that we all have to wrestle against what seems natural to us in our brokenness.

## **9. The Steps of Discipline**

The first step is to go to the individual 'one on one', within the guidelines of what was said above about the context of discipline: in humility, out of love, as a caring and already committed brother or sister in the Lord, with clear evidence, in prayer and with a desire to provide personal, practical and pastoral help. The purpose of such a visit is to win the person over, to restore the person to righteousness, to call them from the error of their ways.

This step should be taken by someone who truly has been a 'brother' or 'sister' to the person involves in disciplinable sin. Therefore we would suggest that as this 'visit' be part of an ongoing relationship there should be a second personal visit to see if there is repentance. In other words time must be given for the Word, for the Spirit, for the love demonstrated by the 'visitor' to work in the heart.

If there is no response but rather a refusal to listen, then we have to move to step two. We are to go to our brother or sister who is unrepentant with one or two others. Again, these ought to be members of the church who know the individual well, who have been close to them, who are spiritually mature, and who will go in love, in concern, in prayer. We suggest that again time be given for God to do his work in the heart.

If there is still no sign of repentance, but a stubborn hardening of the heart, then the third step must be taken. The session should give the individual a formal warning that their behavior is unacceptable in one who professes to be a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is precisely because there has been a profession of faith that the church has received as genuine that discipline is to be practiced. We do not discipline unbelievers. Nor do we conclude of an openly professed believer who has strayed into flagrant sin that they are therefore no longer a believer. Rather, for the honor of Christ, for the sake of the church, and for their own spiritual well-being we take their faith and their sin seriously and institute formal discipline. Again, we suggest that time should be given for conviction of sin to come, with perhaps a date set for response.

If there should still be refusal to respond then discipline must proceed to its most serious level. The New Testament expresses this in various ways: "treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector;" "do not associate with such a person ..... do not even eat with them;" "expel the wicked man from among you;" "put him out of your fellowship;" "hand this man over to Satan."

These are hard statements and their practice will cause much grief to the church, but the church ought, says the apostle, to be already grieving because it finds the sin that needs the discipline so distressing. This 'dis-fellowshipping' may include refusal to the unrepentant one to participate in the Lord's Supper; the withdrawal of hospitality by members of the church; the removal of the communal love and life of the local body. God will do what discipline he wills, including perhaps the hiding of his face of love and protection, as the discipline involves the handing of the member over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh.

To institute this kind of discipline will mean involving the whole church in the process. We suggest that the session should, between them, visit every member or family in the congregation personally to talk with them about the discipline and what it is to involve. This must not become a gossip session where the details of sin are to be spelled out or talked through. Rather such conversations must take place in an atmosphere of confidentiality and of trust in the wisdom of the session as they seek to obey the call of Scripture. In most cases, of course, flagrant sin is common knowledge, but even if it is not there should be confidentiality wherever possible.

Our advice would be that for as long as the discipline endures one member of the session (the man with the closest relationship to the person under discipline), and perhaps one other spiritually mature member of the congregation who is close to the person, should be encouraged to keep up regular contact with the individual to urge them to repentance and to assure them that there is a way back and a warm welcome awaiting their restoration.

If at any time a genuinely repentant spirit is shown then every effort must be made to reincorporate the individual into the full life of the congregation. It is very easy for such a person to be overwhelmed with sorrow just as with a child who has been disciplined by loving parents and who has realized the need to apologize and to change their behavior.

This whole process of discipline needs to be surrounded and under-girded by the faithful prayers of the church that the Lord might be pleased to bring his healing quickly to the unrepentant one and to the grieving church.

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