

November 29, 2016

The Importance Of Church Discipline (Part 7)

Matthew 18:17, **“And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”**

One of my favorite TV shows is The Andy Griffith Show with its small town humor and rock solid sense of right and wrong. One episode that stands out in my mind is the one in which a new boy moves to Mayberry and Opie befriends him. This little boy is a very spoiled child. In the opening scene of the show he rides his bike over to Opie’s house where Opie is busy with chores. The young boy, who I think was named Arnold, had a nice brand new bike and of course Opie admires it. Opie asks him how he was able to save up enough money and the boy tells him, “My dad bought it for me.” The child then proceeds to explain to Opie that he has it all wrong; that he shouldn’t have to do chores and that if he wants a new bike he should get one from his dad. Opie of course tries this out on his dad, Andy, with very different results. The episode ends when the child who continually broke traffic laws with his bike, thus getting his bike impounded by Sheriff Taylor, throws a fit on the Sheriff’s office floor hoping that his dad will give in. His dad does not and in fact the episode concludes with Andy inviting the father of the disobedient boy to use a good ol wood shed out behind the office.

What does this have to do with the issue of church discipline? Just as Arnolds behavior went from bad to worse because it was never addressed by his parents, so it is in the church when there is unwillingness on the part of leadership and the church as a whole, to take on the difficult and unpleasant task of church discipline.

The reality is that since we live in a sinful and fallen world church discipline is pretty much unavoidable. It is highly unlikely that if a church has a high view of Scripture that they will escape the need to respond to flagrant sin within the flock. Church discipline, then, as it is laid out for us in Matthew 18:15-20, is the only Biblical response to a sinning brother or sister whose sins cannot be safely overlooked without harm to the offender or to the Body of Christ. As outlined in Matthew 18, it starts with a one on one confrontation. If the sinning brother or sister refuses to repent of their sin, then you are to confront them again but this time with one or two witnesses. If they continue in unrepentance then the entire congregation must be brought in on the situation at that time.

If the sinning brother or sister continues in their sin and they are unrepentant and it is at this point that the final step must be taken in the discipline process – excommunication. Matthew 18:17 says, **“And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”** This does not mean that the church then is to heap scorn on the brother or sister. This is not an invitation to treat the person poorly. This simply means that the brother or sister is at this point to be regarded as a non-believer. The repeated hardening of their heart calls

the reality of their faith into question. So from that point forward they are to be regarded as a prospect for evangelism rather than as a brother or sister in Christ.

At this point their membership in the local body is to be revoked. They are no longer to be considered a believer but rather a non-believer which means that they should not be permitted to participate in the blessings and the benefits of being a part of the local body. In particular, they are not to be welcomed in the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

What is to characterize the behavior of the church towards this individual at this point?

Compassionate evangelistic pursuit is what should characterize the treatment of the brother or sister who has been excommunicated. There is however one big difference: As long as the offending party remains unrepentant and they continue to identify with Christ, we believers are not supposed to continue on in a relationship with that person as if everything was just fine. There must be very clear signals sent both to the sinner and also to the outside world which is indeed watching, even fellowship in everyday social settings is to be suspended.

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 5:9-11, **“I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people – not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler – not even to eat with such a one.”**

Because of the mixed messages that are sent by someone who professes faith in Christ and yet continues to live a disobedient life, the line must be drawn very clearly. We are supposed to have as little association as possible with such people.

Remember the point is not to be antagonistic toward the sinning party, but it is rather to make clear to them that willful sin is completely incompatible with Christian fellowship. This person you see has identified themselves with Christ and they call themselves a brother or a sister. It is because of this that it is vitally important to the church as a whole to demonstrate that this man or woman's rebellion against God is incompatible with a profession of faith in Christ.

But again, even at this point, the fundamental goal is to win him or her back into the fellowship. 2 Thessalonians 3:15 says, **“Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.”** In a sense we are to never really let go of them; even though we have put them out of the church and out of the realm of our social fellowship, we keep calling them back. Which means that if the man or woman at anytime shows genuine repentance, they are to be welcomed back into the fellowship of believers. But until that is demonstrated they are to be regarded as a non-believer, an outsider.

In 2 Corinthians 5:1-2 Paul gave instructions to the church at Corinth to excommunicate the man who was involved in incest: **“It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife.**

And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.”

We do not know if anything had been done to pursue this man’s repentance up to this point, but it is apparent that very little had been done indeed. Apparently the sin was widely known to all in the church, and he was blatantly continuing in that sin. The time for him being removed from fellowship had long since passed. This is why Paul exercised his apostolic authority and ordered that the man be removed from fellowship.

1 Corinthians 5:3-5, “For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.”

To our modern sensibilities, Paul’s words here seem harsh, but they do give us some insight into what excommunication is supposed to be about. Paul writes that the sinning man is to be delivered **“to Satan for the destruction of the flesh.”**

In other words, he is given over to the Devil-controlled system of sin and the downward spiral that he has chosen, in which he will reap the consequences of his sin. The person who the church excommunicates may go deeper and deeper into sin before they ever repent. The church then is handing this person over to the natural result of their sin.

Paul describes the potential consequences as **“the destruction of the flesh.”** Sin often times takes a physical toll on the sinner. The consequences may include illness, or even death. If this person is really and truly saved, then this should be a very real motivation for them to repent, and thus that person will ultimately be saved. As always the objective is repentance and restoration.

The secondary objective of church discipline at this point in the process is the purity of the church. Sin that is willful and not repented of is like leaven in a lump of dough. If it is allowed to stay there and be tolerated it will eventually take over the entire body of Christ. 1 Corinthians 5:6-7 says, **“Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.”**

If more self-proclaiming Bible believing churches would practice church discipline then the church would be radically altered and the landscape of the church would be drastically changed here in the United States and overseas as well. Churches would become much safer places for people to be discipled and to grow and the world would be more able to distinguish between the world and the church.

This is an extremely difficult process for elders to go through and to deliver the final judgment of excommunication, because elders and leaders are fallen human beings. Can we then be confident that God will approve of the removal of members from the church? We will discover the answer to that question the next time we are together.