

1 Corinthians 5:16, **“Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?”**

The Importance of Practicing Church Discipline (Part 1)

There are a few things in church life that make folks more uncomfortable than the Biblical admonition for the church to practice church discipline. In our modern culture that values tolerance and acceptance above everything else, the concept of confronting sin is anathema to most congregations. Most congregations want nothing to do with the confrontation of sin, this attitude then fosters an environment of carnality, unrepentant sin, and false conversions.

The reality though is that no matter how theologically liberal a church might be, there comes a point where someone's continuing sin can no longer just be ignored. It is a harsh reality that at some point in the life of a church sin will have to be confronted and dealt with. If the guilty party refuses to repent, the unfortunate outcome will be that the guilty party will have to be excommunicated from the local fellowship of believers. This is especially true when the sin has the potential to harm others, or if it brings reproach upon the name of Christ.

The phrase “church discipline” does not actually appear in Scripture. It is a theological term that we use to describe the very Scriptural process by which the church deals with sin in the flock. The main goal, or the hoped for result in all church discipline is correction. Church discipline is successful when it causes the sinner to repent and to seek reconciliation with the congregation. It is unsuccessful when the sinner does not repent and does not seek reconciliation and the church has no choice but to excommunicate them. Restoration of the sinner is always, *always* the goal of church discipline.

As I was doing some research for this article, I came across a letter that was written to a prominent radio ministry after they had done a series on the issue of Church Discipline. Here is part of what the letter said:

“The whole process of church discipline sounds incredibly controlling and uncharitable. I cannot believe that any church would ever threaten to excommunicate its own members for what they do in their private lives. And I cannot imagine a church making a public pronouncement about someone's sin! What people do on their own time is their business, not the whole church's. And the church is supposed to be where people can come and learn how to overcome sin. How can they do that if they have been excommunicated? If we shun our own members, we're no better than the cults. I cannot imagine that Christ would ever excommunicate someone from His church. Didn't He seek out sinners and avoid those who were holier-than-thou? After all, it's not the people who are whole that need a physician. I'm glad my church does not excommunicate members who sin. There'd be none of us left! I thought the gospel was all about forgiveness!”

Unfortunately I fear that those comments are not outside of the norm in terms of what most Christians think about the subject of church discipline, if they think about it at all.

There are five things that are important for us to understand about church discipline.

The first thing we need to understand is that church discipline is not inconsistent with forgiveness. In fact, our Lord Jesus Christ outlines for us exactly how forgiveness is supposed to work when a believer's sin harms the entire congregation.

The second thing that we must understand about church discipline is that it is not concerned with micromanaging people's lives. John MacArthur says in *The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness* that *"The kind of offenses that require confrontation and biblical discipline are not unintentional transgressions, petty annoyances, or matters of simple preferences. They are serious violations of clear biblical principles – sins that hurt other believers, destroy the unity of the flock, and sully the purity of the church. In such cases, sin must be dealt with."* It is human nature to let things slide in the naïve hope that things will somehow get better. I know from personal and very frustrating experience that things do not improve on their own. God expects us to faithfully follow His Word and when we try and cover up or ignore sin, that sin becomes like leaven and if it is left alone its evil effects will eventually infect and poison the entire church. 1 Corinthians 5:6 says, **"Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?"**

The third thing that we must understand about Church discipline is it is not our of harmony with the Holy Spirit. That is why it is rather ironic that the woman who wrote the above mentioned letter said that Jesus would never excommunicate anyone. Really? She evidently had never read Matthew 18:15-20! If you hold this same opinion that Jesus would never ever participate in or even agree with the excommunication of a rebellious and unrepentant sinner who at the same time claimed to be a Christian, then you have a very uninformed and distorted understanding of God's Word and of Jesus Christ. The Christ you worship then is not the Christ of Scripture. After all it was Jesus who said in Matthew 7:21-23, **"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to Me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and 'cast out demons in Your name, and do many mighty works in Your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness.'"**

The fourth thing that we must understand is that church discipline is not incompatible with love. In fact, the opposite is true – God lovingly disciplines His children (believers) who sin. Hebrews 12:7-11 says, **"It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom His father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it."** The process which is

outlined in Matthew 18 explains the very legitimate and important role that the church has as an instrument of both loving encouragement and exhortation and, on occasion, divine chastening. When church discipline is lovingly and properly applied the church becomes a portrait of God's love for His children.

That fifth and final thing that we need to understand about church discipline is that the public aspect of discipline is always to be a final resort; it must never be the first resort. The entire point of making the sinner's transgression known to the entire congregation is not so members will turn their backs on them, but just the opposite: so that they will be encouraged to pursue that person in love, with the aim of restoring them to fellowship.

So what happens when discipline is neglected or ignored altogether? It usually leads to instability and chaos. This is as true in the church as it is in our homes and really in any other organization which we belong to. I don't know very many people who truly enjoy being around a person who has never been disciplined. It is the same in the church, a church that has a very relaxed attitude towards dealing with sin in the Body of Christ inevitably becomes intolerable to all but the most immature believers. When we as a church fail to practice church discipline we run the risk of stunting the spiritual growth of the flock. Not only that, but this also greatly displeases the Lord. Revelation 2:20 says, **"But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing My servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols."**

Our Lord Jesus' instructions concerning the issue of church discipline in Matthew 18 are very clear and really leave no room for argument. The issue then of church discipline is an excellent barometer of whether or not a church is serious about obeying Christ.

I close with this from John MacArthur, *"People often ask me what to look for in a church. Consistent, proper discipline is near the top of my list. One thing is certain: A church that does not discipline sinning members is going to have perpetual, ongoing, and serious problems."*