

“Church Discipline and the Ramifications”

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Dr. Dave Jaspers, President
Maranatha Baptist Bible College

The matter of church discipline is a controversial and often neglected doctrine in our churches today. I am convinced that this is one of the key reasons why so many of our churches are spiritually ineffective. If we cannot handle problems within our church family, how can we expect the world to heed our direction when it comes to matters of cultural importance? The world looks at us as hypocritical when we claim to be concerned about matters of holiness and yet do not deal with sin in our own camp.

I. God has given authority and responsibility to the church to exercise discipline.

1Cor. 5:1-13 “It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father’s wife.

And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you.

For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed,

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ,

To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us:

Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators:

Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world.

But now I have written unto any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat.

for what have I to do to judge them also that are without? Do not ye judge them that are within?

But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.”

- A. In chapters 5 and 6 of 1 Corinthians, Paul dealt with three problems that were brought to his attention. All three of these problems were of a very serious nature and called for strong censure from the apostle.
- B. The first and most egregious problem was the case of incest reported within the Corinthian church. Paul insisted on church discipline for the offender. He made seven important points regarding the necessity of church discipline.
 - 1. (5:4) When the church gathers in the name of Jesus Christ, His power is present with them. Christ committed the keys to the apostles (Matt. 16:19) and this authority is present in the church. The church acts in Christ’s name and through His power.

2. (5:5) Excommunication is the handing over of a disobedient brother to Satan, in other words, into Satan's realm. When one is expelled from the church, he is driven into the world.
3. (5:5) The purpose of excommunication is to bring God's judgment into the sinner's life. It is expressed as the "destruction of his flesh." This could mean the destruction of his sinful behavior or the punishment of his physical body. The contrast with "spirit" favors the view of punishment of the body.
4. (5:5) The desired result is the salvation of the spirit. If the sinner is a believer, the punishment would be remedial and would result ultimately in restoration.
5. (5:6) Church discipline protects the assembly from the corruption of sin. Paul likened the presence of the sinner to leaven that infiltrates and defiles an entire lump of bread dough. We often call this the Achan principle.
6. (5:7-8) The church must reflect on its conduct and its true character. Christ was sacrificed as our Passover Lamb. We are to live in view of His finished work on the cross of Calvary.
7. (5:9-13) If the incestuous man was to be ejected from the church, what should be our dealings with him and others in the world like him? Paul corrected a misinterpretation of something he had apparently written in a previous letter. Paul's clarification will be studied further in this outline.

II. God has given instruction to the church regarding the exercise of church discipline.

Matt. 18:15-20 "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.

verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven.

For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them,"

Rom. 16:17 "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them."

Gal. 6:1-2 "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."

2 Thess. 3:10-16 “For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat.

For we hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies.

Now them that are such we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread.

but ye, brethren, be not weary in well doing.

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.

Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.

Now the Lord of peace himself give you peace always by all means. The Lord be with you all.”

1 Tim. 5:19-21 “Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses.

Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear.

I charge thee before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the elect angels, that thou observe these things without preferring one before another, doing nothing by partiality.”

Titus 3:10-11 “A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject;

Knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself.”

A. When should church discipline be exercised?

1. Paul’s list is instructive, but should not be considered exhaustive. It would include sexual immorality, greedy covetousness, idolatry, slander, drunkenness and thievery (1 Cor. 5:11).
2. Other passages add the following:
 - a. Laziness (2 Thess. 3:6, 10-12, 14, 15)
 - b. Teaching false doctrine (Gal. 1:8-9, Titus 3:10-11, Rom. 16:17)
 - c. Unresolved personal sin (Matt. 18:15-19)
 - d. Divisiveness (1 Thess. 5:14, Rom. 16:17)

B. How should church discipline be exercised?

1. Step 1: Private confrontation
2. Step 2: Confrontation by two or three individuals from the church
3. Step 3: Church announcement
4. Step 4: Excommunication

Remember that throughout this entire process, whenever repentance is demonstrated, the process can end and restoration can be announced. Generally, in order to bring closure to the process, there should be public repentance, public forgiveness, public restoration, and public loving acceptance demonstrated by the church membership.

All church discipline should be exercised in a spirit of great humility. As we would all agree, “but by the grace of God, there go I.” We do not sit as self-righteous judges. We instead seek for restoration of a fallen brother.

C. Why should church discipline be exercised?

1. The restoration of the individual to fellowship and usefulness in the body of Christ
2. The protection of God’s reputation in the community
3. The protection of the sinning believer from discipline or judgment
4. The protection of the purity of the church

Although church discipline is always painful, it is absolutely necessary. If we fail to deal with sin within the body, we will wind up losing our best people. We certainly do not want to set any kind of example that would allow weak Christians to think that they can sin without incurring the judgment of God.

D. Important misrepresentations regarding church discipline corrected by the Apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 5:9-14

1. Christians are not to avoid contact with unbelievers (v. 10).
2. Christians are to shun contact with sinning believers (v. 11).
3. Christians are responsible for judgment of fellow believers (v. 12).
4. Christians are not to render judgment on unbelievers. God will take care of that (v. 13).

III. Dealing with common excuses for failing to exercise church discipline

Our Excuse	Our Response
A. Church discipline is not loving.	God (Who is love) is the One Who has ordered us to exercise church discipline. It is actually more unloving to fail to exercise church discipline.
B. Church discipline doesn’t work.	What do we mean when we say it doesn’t work? What results are we really looking for? If we take God’s long-term view, we may well see the hand of the Lord working in ways and at times which we would otherwise not notice.
C. Church discipline will scare people away from our church.	Yes, those who do not care about doing right will not feel comfortable within our church. Is that such a terrible loss?

D. Church discipline has been abused.	That is true; however, we could make the case that in every aspect of ministry, there have been abuses and failures, and yet this does not change the legitimacy of the ministry.
E. We choose to use an inactive list, rather than exercise discipline.	Man's attempt to improve on clear New Testament instruction will always fail.
F. We do not have time to exercise church discipline.	How can we fail to take time for what God has ordered?
G. We just endeavor to "preach" them out of the church.	The Apostle Paul who was perhaps the greatest doctrinal preacher is the one who taught that we must exercise church discipline.
H. Our church is too big to exercise church discipline.	No church is ever too big to obey God's Word.
I. We may be sued if we exercise church discipline.	That may be true; however, there are lots of activities carried on in all of our churches, which leave us vulnerable to law suit and other legal issues. That fact should not deter us from doing what God has commanded.