

Church Discipline

Introduction

The subject of church discipline is a difficult but important one. Many things must be understood regarding church discipline if we are going to faithfully carry out the task God has given us. We will look at the texts from which the practice arises however; first, it is helpful to understand what “church discipline” means.

Jonathan Leeman says it this way:

*Corrective church discipline occurs any time sin is corrected within the church body, and it occurs most fully when the church body announces that the covenant between church member is already broken because the member has proven to be unsubmitive in his or her discipleship to Christ. By this token, the church withdraws its affirmation of the individual's faith, announces that it will cease giving oversight, and releases the individual back into the world.*¹

He goes on to point out that “Every church disciplines its members formatively. That is, every church, even the unhealthy ones, teaches its members something. However, most churches fail to discipline their members correctively, either personally and informally or as an act of formal church discipline.”² Simply teaching and never correcting, he points out, is like always giving an A+ grade, even for failing work. That is not helpful and is not truly teaching, and is certainly not going to make a lasting impact.

Church Discipline is not Culturally Acceptable or Loving

From the beginning, we must address “the elephant in the room.” That is the fact that church discipline is not acceptable now in this “cultured” day.³ We have risen above that. Have we? I think not! And from what follows I hope to prove why not.

¹ *The Church and the Surprising Offensive of God's Love*, 220 (italics his).

² *Ibid.*, 221.

³ One commentator rightly points out the fact that we are ministering in a different context.

It would be a mistake to think that in similar circumstances this procedure can be applied today, primarily because excommunication or ostracism today has nowhere near the same effect at it did in the first century. That is, in Matthew's day to be cast out left one with no other options for Christian community. Today a person may simply walk down the street to the next church or next denomination. This is not to say that the church must give up on the possibility of church discipline but simply to say that the process will take on its own character appropriate to the present-day situation (Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28* in vol. 33b of *Word Biblical Commentary* ed by Ralph P. Martin [Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1995] 4.

People say that church discipline is not acceptable now, however that is not the question. There are many things that are not acceptable but that does not make them wrong or right. The cross is not acceptable, it is foolishness! Yet we must never deny it.

When we talk about church discipline, we can

Imagine the howls of anger at such a suggestion in today's church ('unloving!' 'Intolerant!' 'Judgmental!'). Paul may well have answered: is the doctor unloving or judgmental when he or she tells you that you must have the operation right away? Do we want a doctor who 'tolerates' viruses, bacteria, cancer cells? And if we say that the moral... are not like diseases, are we so sure? Do these things build up a community, or destroy it?⁴

People say church discipline is judgmental, unloving. However, they are sadly and grossly mistaken. As Thomas R. Schreiner has said, "Love is the final goal, even in the case of discipline; but love is sometimes tough and even severe, like surgery that cuts out an invading cancer."⁵

Dietrich Bonhoeffer has rightly said,

Nothing can be more compassionate than the severe rebuke that calls a brother back from the path of sin. It is a ministry of mercy, an ultimate offer of genuine fellowship, when we allow nothing but God's Word to stand between us, judging and succoring. Then it is not we who are judging; God alone judges, and God's judgment is helpful and healing. Ultimately, we have no charge but to serve our brother, never to set ourselves above him, and we serve him even when we must speak the judging and dividing Word of God to him, even when, in obedience to God, we must break off fellowship with him.⁶

One of the saddest things I have heard people say is, "it won't work." It would be good to respond with Job if that is our thought, "I put my hand over my mouth" (Job 40:4). Who are we to question God and His plans? If He has told us what to do, all we have is to do it; when our pragmatic ideologies replace the revealed will of all-mighty God that is a grievous sin. "But," some may say, "if I kick Tom out of the church then I will have to kick Sarah out, and John, and..."⁷ Or, they may simply say it will not go over well with the church, they won't like it." I would ask in both these cases, whom are we seeking to please? Whose church do we, as pastors, with this grave task shepherd, whose bride is the church, and what kind of bride is desired? Though, of course, I am not saying that we should be insensitive, that would be wrong. Yes, we

However, as is said, that does not mean that the practice of church discipline should be disbanded but that we must be thoughtful and appropriate in dealing with the differences between our own day and the time of the early church.

⁴ Tom (N. T.) Wright, *Paul for Everyone 1 Corinthians* (London: SPCK, 2004), 62.

⁵ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology*, 397. See also D. A. Carson's book *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* and Jonathan Leeman's book *The Church and the Surprising Offensive of God's Love*.

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (Harper & Row, 1954), 107.

⁷ "Beware of an ambition for mere numbers: a small body of well-instructed, earnest disciples is worth far more to the cause of Christ than a heterogeneous multitude undistinguished in spirit and life from the world" (H. Harvey, *The Pastor: His Duties and Qualifications* [Philadelphia: America Baptist Publication Society, 1879] 66) as quoted in Mark Dever's book *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* [Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2012], 68n20).

must use pastoral wisdom and that may require moving slow and delicately.⁸ Nevertheless, it does not allow an excuse for carrying out what the Lord has called *His* church to do.

Further, church discipline *is* pragmatic, that is, it is practical, and it works. It takes care of the problem and seeks to keep Christ's bride pure. "A church and its leaders must remember this one fact: the church is called, above all else, to guard the name and glory of Christ."⁹ Richard Baxter has pointed out that "to be against discipline, is near to being against the ministry; and to be against the ministry is near to being absolutely against the church; and to be against the church, is near to being absolutely against Christ."¹⁰ In the same way, to be for church discipline is to be for Christ.

Yet, as Jay E. Adams says, "Discipline is not easy to do correctly or even to do at all." He goes on:

It involves courage and fortitude. It requires care and precision. It must be done in neither a sloppy nor a careless manner. Therefore the process must be carried on with the knowledge and assurance that what is being done is right in God's sight. But even though discipline is difficult and runs many risks, churches dare not run the greater risk of withholding a privilege and blessing provided by Christ, thus depriving sinning members of all the help He has provided for them. Nor dare they disobey Him in refusing to follow His program for church discipline lest, in the end, they find themselves disciplined by Him (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:31-32).¹¹

A Look at Matthew 18

In Matthew 18, we see the fourfold process of church discipline. It has been said that this passage is "severely practical as well as ruthlessly idealistic,"¹² and so it is. So, this process, though used in formal church discipline, has practical insight for more common issues within the church as well. As Craig L. Blomberg has pointed out, "How often personal confrontation is the last stage rather than the first in Christian complaints! It frequently seems as if the whole world knows of someone's grievances against us before we are personally approached." Thus we see the practical nature of this passage.

If there is unrepentant sin, we are to *first* go to the offending party one on one and try to work things out on that level (vv. 15-16).¹³ If we have not resolved the problem at that point,

⁸See:<http://www.9marks.org/answers/how-can-pastor-know-when-his-congregation-ready-practice-church-discipline>

⁹ Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offensive of God's Love*, 320.

¹⁰ Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2007), 111. That is why it has been said, "that when discipline leaves a church, Christ leaves with it" (J. L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology, A Treatise on Church Order* (Harrisonburg, VA: Gano books, 1990), 274.

¹¹ Jay E. Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline: A Right and Privilege of Every Church Member* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974).

¹² Tom (N. T.) Wright, *Matthew for Everyone Part 2* (London: SPCK, 2004), 34. Ken Sande has a most practical book on this subject. See his book *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004).

¹³ Craig L. Blomberg says, "The offended believer has the responsibly to *convict* or *convince* (from Greek *elenchō*—'show him his fault') the other person privately" (*Matthew*, 278). The offended believer is supposed to explain to him or her how they have sinned.

second, we are to go with one or two others (v. 16).¹⁴ *Third*, we see if the person does not listen, we are to tell it to the church (v. 17a) but if he or she is still impenitent then, *fourth*, he or she is to be treated like those outside of the church, i.e. excluded from communion (v. 17b). The next couple of verses talk about the authority that God has entrusted to the church, His representatives on earth.¹⁵

A Look at 1 Corinthians 5

Some believe that the fourfold process of church discipline is not practiced in this case in Corinth;¹⁶ however, I am not sure that is clear from the context. We know that Paul had written a previous letter (known as the “severe letter”) and here he says, “I have *already* pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing” (v. 3 italics mine). Perhaps then, in the previous letter, Paul told the church to move forward in the process of discipline and they misunderstood him. Of course, here the context does make it seem as though he is saying I am there in the Spirit and thus I have *already* pronounced judgment. It is almost as if he is saying, I am amongst you and I have cast my vote.

What we do know for sure, however, is that Paul is adamant that he does not want the “so-called brother” to have community with the church (cf. 1 Cor. 5:5, 11, 13). Perhaps the three other steps of the church discipline process happened or perhaps they did not for whatever reason, that we cannot tell, but we do know that there certainly are times when it is appropriate to exclude people from church fellowship. The case in Corinth was clearly one of those times. Thus we see that the passage is not necessarily *prescriptive*, unlike the principals laid down in Matthew, but *descriptive*. That is, Paul is writing a letter to tell the Corinthians what to do in *that* context at *that* time. No, I am not saying Scripture does not apply, it does! I am saying we need to clearly understand how it does apply. We see from Paul, then, that there are times when a somewhat radical break is to be made between the so-called brother and the true family of God.

Simon J. Kistemaker, commenting on verses 9 through 11, has said,

The Corinthians understood Paul’s initial letter to tell them not to associate with sexually immoral people of the world... However, Paul did not mean to say that the Corinthians should completely separate themselves from sexually immoral people. He meant to say: don’t get involved with such people! (compare II Thess. 3:14). He intended that the Corinthian Christians not associate with a fellow church member who practices sexually immoral acts. He told them to expel such a person from their midst.¹⁷

He goes on to say on verse 11, “In a reversal of the established norms, Jesus often ate with tax collectors and sinners and was called their friend (Matt. 11:19; Luke 15:2)—and

¹⁴ Leon Morris says that “*one or two* does not specify the number, but clearly a small number is meant; the matter is to be kept as quiet as possible” (*The Gospel According to Matthew*, 467).

¹⁵ These verses are interpreted differently and have been widely misunderstood. However, we do not have the space to look at them here.

¹⁶ See for instance Jonathan Leeman, *Church Discipline*.

¹⁷ Simon J. Kistemaker, *1 Corinthians*, 168-69.

scandalized the religious leaders.”¹⁸ So he observes that there is “a reversal of the established norms.” He also says, “Jesus instructed his followers that his prescribed procedure for excommunication might result in a complete separation of the Christian community and the offending sinner (Matt.18:17). The sinner is a blot on the integrity of the church (compare II Peter 2:13; Jude 12).”¹⁹ However, this in my mind in no way explains the difference between the two passages. Why is there “a reversal of the established norms”? The motif of Jesus eating with and reaching out to Gentiles and tax collectors is a very strong and radical one. Yet here it is reversed and we are to no longer eat with them? That seems odd to me. It seems like Matthew could have used a different description if he did not want us to eat with such people. For instance, he could have said what Paul said, do not eat with such people. So perhaps we could conclude that different cases require different responses by the church.

Putting Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5 Together

My question is this: How do we understand the differences between Matthew and Paul on church discipline. The question I have here may seem quite obscure but it can sadly become practical very fast. If we are trying to be true to what the Bible tells us this question will need answered and applied. I know of a church where this was a most practical and important matter. How can this be resolved? Do we eat with the person or not? What about attending a wedding where there will be a so-called brother getting married to an unbeliever? What if they are in our own family? We cannot answer all these questions in this paper but we see that these are difficult questions and questions that must be answered when ministering in the real world.

In my reading, which admittedly is very limited, I have not seen very many helpful explanations on what I see as a difference between the Matthean and Pauline exhortation to church discipline.²⁰ The difference I see is that in Matthew we are to treat them as a pagan or a tax collector but in 1 Corinthians 5 we are not even to eat with them. Where is the discrepancy here? Well, first, how do we treat pagans and tax collectors, i.e. those outside the church? Do we scoff at them and not accept their company? Do we not interact with them? Not if we are to act like our Lord Jesus. He was ostracized by the religious elite for doing just that, eating with pagans and tax collectors (Matt. 9:9-13; 11:19; 21:31-32; Lk. 5:29-32; 15; cf. Mk. 2:15-17; Lk. 3:12-14; 7:36-50; 19:1-10 for example).

¹⁸ Ibid., 170.

¹⁹ Ibid., 170.

²⁰ However, I have found what Blomberg says on Matthew 18:17 helpful:

As a last resort Jesus commands the entire community to dissociate itself from the individual. Yet even this drastic action remains rehabilitative rather than retributive in design. This dissociation has come to be called ‘excommunication’ or disfellowship,’ though usually these terms imply a much more institutionalized procedure than can be derived from Jesus’ brief comments here.

To treat a person as a ‘pagan or a tax collector’ means to treat him or her as unredeemed and outside the Christian community... But Christian disfellowship must have two components to it. Primarily, it means not allowing someone to participate in public, corporate fellowship with the church, even as the orthodox Jew shunned the ‘traitorous’ tax collectors or ‘unclean’ Gentiles. But in light of Jesus consistent compassion for pagans and tax collectors, surely he must also want Christians, individually, to continue to reach out to these people and call them to repentance. (*Matthew*, 279).

Therefore, I would conclude from Matthew that we are to treat the unrepentant as an outsider, as a lost non-Christian. Thus, we should still reach out to them and even eat with them trying to evangelize them so that they will be saved. However, this is not at all what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5, why? Paul says that we should have nothing to do with the unrepentant, not even eat with them. This *seems* like a contradiction.²¹ How can we resolve this and what does it mean for our practice of church discipline? Let us look at the context in Paul's letter again.

I think the key lays in verse eleven and twelve: Paul says do “not to associate with anyone who *bears the name of brother* if he is guilty [of any number of things]... not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?” (italics mine). Perhaps the problem is resolved if we understand Paul referring to a church discipline case where the unrepentant person “bears the name of brother,”²² that is, he still publically *claims to be a believer* while continuing in sin. We should therefore “not eat with such a one” because it could communicate to those outside the church that we condone sin. Someone might see a church member eating with a person living in open sin, the *so-called* brother, and think, oh, there John is and he has sex with his mother-in-law but he says he goes to church and he is eating with Bob from the church so I guess his sex life is ok. If that were to happen, it would be to deface the holy bride of Jesus, the church. This is what Paul wants to avoid. Purge that person from among you (v. 13). What person? The one that is among you that is clearly not living as a believer and is claiming to be a brother.

The above question (how can we resolve the tension between the texts) may also be answered by saying that purging the person from among you and not even eating with him could refer to barring the Lord's Supper.²³ Maybe Paul is saying exclude them from the Lord's Supper so that they see the seriousness of their sin. We are to examine ourselves before we take of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11) to make sure we are not in sin. We also see in this passage that they would have a meal together to celebrate the Lord's Supper. Perhaps then, this is the eating together that the so-called brother is to have nothing to do with.

However, in either case, if someone in the Matthew 18 case continues in sin, he should indeed still be removed from the church but because he does not claim to be a believer, we can still eat with him (though, of course not the Lord's Supper). There would, therefore, be times when some form of “shunning” is appropriate in church discipline and other times when it is not. However, it is hard to know to what degree “shunning” should go. Is it merely talking about

²¹ Remember, as we have seen in the context of Matthew, and indeed all the Gospels, pagans are people you *do* eat with (Matt. 9:9-13; 11:19; 21:31-32; Lk. 5:29-32; 15; cf. Mk. 2:15-17; Lk. 3:12-14; 7:36-50; 19:1-10 for example) so treating them like a Gentile or tax collector would lead us to think eating with them is ok. It is modeled by Jesus Himself.

²² The Greek word *onomazó* means, “give a name to,” “designated,” “mention.” You can see the meaning by exploring some of the ways it is translated: “calls himself a brother” (NIV), “so-called brother” (NASB), “claims to be a brother Christian” (*The Living Bible*). Simon J. Kistemaker explains it by saying “The present middle participle denotes concession: ‘although he calls himself’” (*1 Corinthians*, 171).

²³ Jay E. Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline: A Right and Privilege of Every Church Member* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 73-74.

eating the Lord's Supper or is it talking about eating in general?²⁴

It could also be that pastor/shepherds and the church as a whole are to use biblical loving wisdom in each church discipline case. Maybe there is in fact no "cookie cutter mold" for each case but simply overarching principals to be applied to each different situation. For instance, there are many passages that seem to reference church discipline besides Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5 but some of them look quite different (Acts 8:17-24; Gal. 6:1; Eph. 5:11; Titus 3:10; 2 Thess. 3:14-15; 2 Jn. 9-10). Thomas R. Schreiner points out that "Discipline and correction permeate the Pauline letters"²⁵ yet his discipline and correction can look very different depending on the situation. Paul was always pastoral and wise in the way that he handled each situation (cf. 1 Thess. 5:14).

Look, for example, at 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15: "If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter... have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother." Paul says, "Have nothing to do with him" yet "warn him as a brother." It is unclear what exactly this looked like in practice but it seems to me that it is a different approach to that in 1 Corinthians 5.

What I conclude then, is that church discipline is an important and clear teaching from Scripture. However, it is not always as clear exactly how it should look in the local body in each specific case. So after we boil down all we have seen in these passages what are the overarching principals to keep in mind? (1) Keep the matter as private as you can. (2) Church discipline is done as an act of love to keep the individual from damning sin. (3) Church discipline should always be done with gentleness and love though that is not to say without boldly calling the erring person to repentance. (4) If unrepentance continues the person must be removed from the church. (5) Church discipline is ultimately done for the glory of God. We desire that Jesus' bride be pure and holy (cf. 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:25-27).

I believe we see from the collective passages that reference church discipline that there is no exact formal that most always be followed however there are principals and laid down and a clear call to practice church discipline whatever all each individual case might entail. Thus in evaluating church discipline cases we do not simply have a list of sins, some warranting discipline and others not. Rather, we look at the witness that the person has before a lost world. We ask, Are the defacing the name of Jesus?

Jonathan Leeman talks about "A Gospel Framework for Understanding Discipline."²⁶ I

²⁴ John Piper says of the Matthew passage:

Treating an unrepentant 'brother' like a 'Gentile and tax collector' did not mean treating him with hostility. Jesus had said plainly that such people are to be loved...What it means to 'let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector' is to not longer share the unique fellowship of Jesus with him—not to relate with him as if there is no barrier in the fellowship. This would include sharing, for example, in the Lord's Supper together (*What Jesus Demands from the World*, 344).

Ken Sande also says, "Treating others as unbelievers also means that we look for every opportunity to evangelize them" (*The Peacemaker*, 194).

²⁵ Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 738.

²⁶ Jonathan Leeman says,

think he gives a very helpful approach. The Church, as God representatives on earth, has been given the “keys to the kingdom.” The local church and the leaders within that church have been given the serious task of administering baptism and the Lord’s Supper. These things give credibility to the genuineness of one’s faith. In the same token, church discipline is the church removing that affirmation. It is the church formally denouncing the person’s faith. Thus, as Jonathan Leeman rightly says, church discipline is “driven by a single question: does the church still believe an erring member is really a Christian, such that it’s willing to continue declaring so publicly?” He goes on, “In short, church discipline is all about the reputation of Jesus on earth. The stakes are high indeed.”²⁷

The Manner and Motivation of Church Discipline

Most people fall on one side of the ditch or the other. One side is the danger of being to gung-ho about kicking someone out of the church for any little thing, and sometimes even without properly confronting them. The other side of the ditch is not wanting to correct anyone for anything. These are both dangerous and can crash a church in no time. Further, they are not biblical, as we will see. Looking at the manner and motivation of church discipline will help us avoid both perilous ditches.

First, let us look at the manner of church discipline. How should we approach it? We must do so with much gentleness and humility (1 Thess. 2:6-7; 2 Cor. 10:1; Col. 3:12-14; 2 Tim. 2:24-25; Phil. 4:5). We must remember that we too are sinners, we are not above the very same sin they are being disciplined for. That is why Paul says, “If anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of *gentleness*.” And then he says, “Keep watch on *yourself*.” Why Paul? (we ask), “Lest you too be tempted” (Gal. 6:1). We, *you* or *I*, are not above sin, any sin, and we should not act as if we are. As Paul elsewhere says, let he that thinks he stands take heed lest he fall (1 Cor. 10:12).

We must remember that the goal in church discipline is restoration. We want those living in sin to repent and once again join the fellowship. If they do repent then we, as the church, must cheerfully welcome them back (I think of the Prodigal Son here). Notice, that after Jesus teaches on church discipline in Matthew’s Gospel he teaches on forgiveness.

Jay E. Adams, the experienced and (re)pioneer²⁸ of biblical (*nouthetic*) counseling, wisely says,

Discipline being what it is—a fearful action in which one is handed over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh—should cause the church to ‘mourn’ for the one who is

Viewing church discipline through this gospel framework—a framework driven not by lists of sins but by the question of whether the church can continue to affirm a profession of faith—allows for greater pastoral sensitivity in moving from situation to situation. Scripture is always our guide for what counts as sin, but pastoral care is needed to determine which sins require discipline, and to what extent (*Church Discipline*, 51).

²⁷ Ibid., 45.

²⁸ I say “(re)pioneer” because he was not the first but he in many ways repaved the path that was laid by the Puritans as Health Lambert shows in his book *The Biblical Counseling Movement after Adams* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012).

removed from the midst, even as it removes him (1 Corinthians 5:2a). The mourning should also cause the church to search its own conscience to see whether part of the fault for the (as in Corinth) may lay at its own feet. Did it fail to discipline properly at earlier stages? Was there lack of care all along? Was the instruction of the church adequate?²⁹

Pastors are called to maintain regenerate membership. This is not easy, there will always be “weeds among the wheat” (Matt. 13:25). Yet Jesus’ desires a pure bride and this too is our desire. However, there are a few cautions for church leaders that I would give. 1) Do not assume someone is guilty. 2) Do not be a heresy hunter, sniffing in every direction just waiting for someone to say the wrong thing. 3) Do not forget grace yet remember that church discipline is a grace when correctly administered. 4) Do not forget that the church is not infallible and does not speak *ex cathedra*, it can make a mistake and should admit it when it happens.

We have seen just a little bit of what are manner should be, but second, what is our motivation? Alister E. McGrath shows that the Polish Racovian Catechism lists five reasons for maintaining rigorous discipline: (1) So that the fallen church member may be healed, and brought back into fellowship with the church, (2) to deter others from committing the same offense, (3) to eliminate scandal and disorder from the church, (4) to prevent the word of the Lord falling into the disrepute outside the congregation, (5) to prevent the glory of the Lord being profaned.³⁰ Jonathan Leeman also points out several reasons to practice church discipline: love for the individual,³¹ love for the church, love for the watching world, and love for Christ. He also points out that it biblical, it is an implication of the gospel, it promotes the health of the church, the clarifies the churches witness before the world, it warns sinners of a greater judgment to come, and it protects the name and reputation of Jesus Christ on earth.³²

How do we know what Sins Warrant Church Discipline?

What overarching principles do we have in Scripture to help us know what is worthy of discipline and what is not? Wayne Grudem has observed that, “There does not seem to be any explicit limitation specified for the kinds of sin that should be subject to church discipline.”³³ It

²⁹ Jay E. Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline: A Right and Privilege of Every Church Member* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 88.

³⁰ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 402.

³¹ Of course, as we have seen, many would object that church discipline is not loving but Jonathan Leeman shows that it is in fact the loving thing to do (See his book *The Church and the Surprising Offensive of God’s Love* also see Heb. 12:6; Rev. 3:19). Though, as John M. Frame has pointed out, it is a shame that we have made church discipline a mark of the true church but we have not made love a mark of the true church (*The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 434). Yet look at the testimony of Scripture (cf. Jn. 13:34-35). I think a good note here however is that the mark of love and church discipline should indeed go together. As Thomas R. Schreiner has said, “Love is the final goal, even in the case of discipline; but love is sometimes tough and even severe, like surgery that cuts out an invading cancer” (*Paul, Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology*, 397). See also D. A. Carson’s book *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* and Jonathan Leeman’s book *The Church and the Surprising Offensive of God’s Love*).

³² Jonathan Leeman, *Church Discipline*, 23-24. Later he says church discipline aims to expose, warn, save, protect, and present a good witness for Jesus (Ibid., 33).

³³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 896.

seems that any unrepentant sin is eligible for the process of church discipline as outlined in Matthew 18. Through, I am not talking about little petty things. Remember, “Love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8 cf. 1 Cor. 13:5-6).

A huge thing to consider is if the person is repentant or not. I believe that is the whole point of church discipline. However, there may be other times when church discipline is still warranted under certain circumstances. For instance, if a church member commits a terrible crime such as murdering someone they may indeed be repentant but will likely still need to be formally removed from church membership. There are at least two reasons for this. First, the church must be sure that the individual has godly sorrow and not worldly sorrow. Second, the unbelieving world is looking on and the church must make it clear that they do not condone such acts.

We must also note that there are many preferences that people have that do not constitute biblical commands. Preferences are not worthy of church discipline. In fact, that is legalism and a gross sin against God that desires unity in His church.³⁴ John M. Frame points out that “Not every difference of opinion in the church, of course, is a cause for formal discipline. Paul does not recommend discipline for the minority parties discussed in Rom. 14 and 1 Cor. 8-10.”³⁵ We must consider whether the “error is a ‘destructive heresy’ (2 Peter 2:1), a ‘quarrel over opinions’ (Rom. 14:1), a ‘vain discussion’ (1 Tim. 1:6), or, perhaps, not an error at all.”³⁶

Helpful Principles to Apply to Common Cases

There are many common sins in the church so would it be helpful to systemize some of the response we give to certain sins within the life of the church? Well, I do not think that something like an automatized program should be in place to take away pastoral wisdom and interaction. However, it may be helpful to have principals laid out in advance that will guide the decision for the length of time that the church discipline will *likely* take.³⁷ This may partly be helpful so that the church members understand this principle upon membership. This may be especially helpful when disciplining a member for not being connected to the life of the church.

³⁴ On an aside, I, personally, do not think that churches should exclude those from fellowship that have a different view than them in regards to Calvinism or Armenianism. I agree with Richard Baxter here,

“I would... recommend to all my brethren, as the most necessary thing to the Church’s peace, that they unite in necessary truths, and bear with one another in things that may be borne with; and do not make a larger creed, and more necessities, than God hath done. To this end, let me entreat you to attend to the following things: (1) Lay not too great a stress upon controverted opinions, which have godly men, and, especially, whole churches, on both sides. (2) Lay not too great a stress on those controversies that are ultimately resolvable into philosophical uncertainties, as are some unprofitable controversies about freewill, the manner of the Spirit’s operations and the Divine decrees. (3) Lay not too great a stress on those controversies that are merely verbal, and which if they were anatomized, would appear to be no more” (he gives three additional things here, *The Reformed Pastor*, 162-63).

³⁵ *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 433n25.

³⁶ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 435.

³⁷ Though, Wayne Grudem’s caution is well taken. He says, “It is unwise to set any timetable in advance, telling people how long the discipline process is expected to last” (*Systematic Theology*, 900). He says this because we cannot predict how long it will take for someone to have true repentance. Thus, here we lay out a flexible principal as a guide.

So what then, under normal circumstances, should be the allowed absences from church service and what governs this? This is not a clear-cut thing. If a church member misses one week they should be contacted, preferably by one of the deacons or elders. Of course, it is not because they are in trouble but because we as the church care about them. (1) However, after missing three weeks of church without a legitimate reason³⁸ then they should be met with, beginning the first step in church discipline (cf. Matt. 18:15). (2) If after three more weeks they still have not been involved in the life of the church without a legitimate reason then the next step in church discipline should take place (cf. v. 16).³⁹ (3) If the person still refuses to listen and attend then the church body should be informed so that they can talk to the person (cf. 17a). (4) If the person refuses to listen even to the church then they should be formally removed from church membership and treated as they have acted, as an unbeliever (v. 17b).

What governs this? Well, in Scripture we see that fellowship with believers inside the church is vital and is a fruit of belief.⁴⁰ There are several reasons to be connected to a local church body: worshiping together (Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:19-21), equipping (Col. 1:28; Eph. 4:12-13), exhortation and teaching (1 Tim. 4:13), exercising spiritual gifts (Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12:4-7; 1 Pet. 4:10-11), church discipline (Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5), sharing the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:17-20; Matt. 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24), celebrating baptism (Matt. 28:19), giving (Matt. 23:23; 1 Tim. 6:17-19), encouragement (Heb. 10:24-25), as well as, having faithful leaders to care for and help you (1 Tim. 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9).

What is it that Jesus promises the gates of hell will not overcome? Social justice? Good works? Love? No, but the church. The gates of hell shall not prevail against the church. The church, Christ's bride, will be victorious! However, everyone not within the church will gravely not meet the same fate. Be in the church! Notice, however, that we are not merely commanded to gather together. We are motivated by the gospel. "Therefore [*because*] we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus... Let us... not [*neglect*] meeting together" (cf. Heb. 10:19-25).

Thus we see, as R. H. Strachan has rightly said, "In the New Testament it is assumed that no disciple of Christ can make adequate profession of his faith apart from membership in the Christian community."⁴¹ So, we see that yes, not attending church gatherings can warrant church discipline. A Christian is in the church family, which implies being with them. A Christian is part of the body of Christ which obviously implies being part of that body (cf. Eph. 5:22-33; Rev. 21:9). A Christian is part of the bride of Christ yet what does it mean if they love not the

³⁸ A "legitimate reason" could be many things and the elders will have to use pastoral wisdom to determine this. Richard Baxter says, "The ancient discipline of the Church was stricter, when the Sixth General Council at Trull ordained, that 'Whosoever was three days together from church, without urgent necessity, was to be excommunicated'" (*The Reformed Pastor* [Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2007], 165).

³⁹ Step two as we see from Matthew 18 is to take one or so people along to admonish the person.

⁴⁰ See for example Jonathan Leeman's book, *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012) and Donald S. Whitney's book, *Spiritual Disciplines within the Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996) pages 147-62.

⁴¹ "The Gospel in the New Testament" in vol. 7 of *The Interpreter's Bible* ed by Harmon, Nolan B. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon-Cokesburn Press, 1951), 4.

Christ's bride (1 Cor. 12:12-27; Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:18; 2:19)?

Look at what John says, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us" (1 Jn. 2:19). Later he says, "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers." (3:14). Christian community and thus church gathering attendance is a very real implication of the gospel and thus a fruit of salvation (cf. 1 Jn. 1:6-7; 2:3-6; 4:7-12). If it is not there then the church has the right, indeed the God given task to judge them, and judge them as not truly being part of the body and bride of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 5:12-13; 6:2-3; 1 Jn. 2:19).

Conclusion

We may not have an exhaustive how-to-book on church discipline but we are given principals that can and indeed have to be applied in each individual case. We, as the church, are God's representatives on earth and so we must seek to have *His* church be holy and filled with true followers of God. Therefore, as is warranted by the situation we must practice the steps outlined in Matthew 18, though of course with appropriate pastoral sensitivity.

Suggested Resources

- Jay E. Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline: A Right and Privilege of Every Church Member* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974).
- Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000), 153-179 (can be accessed free at http://www.sbts.edu/media/publications/sbjt/sbjt_2000winter4.pdf).
- Jonathan Leeman, *Church Discipline: How the Church Protects the Name of Jesus* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012).
- Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offensive of God's Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010).
- Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 894-900.
- See also: <http://www.9marks.org/answers-for-pastors/discipline>

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