

Biblical Discipline In the Local Church

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Introductory Thoughts:

The word discipline is used in many ways not the least of which is the aspects of instruction. Discipline in this sense means to train, to drill, to exercise, to cultivate, and to prepare. No local church procedure of discipline is complete without instruction first. (II Tim. 3:16,17)

Remember we live in an undisciplined age when any discipline by a church is rejected by many. No wonder local churches have little influence on our culture and society and little respect on the part of the masses. We ought never be afraid of biblical, godly discipline carried out correctly by a local church in accordance to the Word of God.

Here Is A New Release from April 8, 2004

Decline of church discipline cited as most visible failure of contemporary church!

LOUISVILLE, Ky.--Evangelical author and theologian Albert Mohler says the decline of church discipline is perhaps the most visible failure of the contemporary church, according to CBN News.

"If we tolerate sin within our own body," Mohler said, "within our own congregations, then what right do we have to talk to the world about sin that is there?"

Mohler said the church has become far too consumer-oriented, afraid of offending anyone. And he said it has allowed the American secular ideal of private space to become far too influential in the church: "You know, the Bible doesn't give us a whole list of rights of privacy. As a matter of fact, the Bible is very intrusive. And the early church lived together, accountable to each other, for the way they maintained their marriages and the way they raised their children."

The latest research indicates that it is sometimes hard to tell the difference between Christians and the rest of the world. For example, the divorce rate among Christians is just as high as it is among non-Christians. The same can be said for abortion.

Some leading evangelicals say the church could be doing much more to reverse that trend. They say the body of Christ has all but ignored its biblical mandate to discipline members for sinful behavior.

For many it seems like a harsh, outdated approach to have the church elders confront people in their sinful behavior. It conjures up visions of the Salem Witch Trials. But, along with the faithful preaching of the word and proper administration of the sacraments, the Protestant reformers considered the right exercise of church discipline one of the marks of the church.

Pastor Bill Harrell said he laid out the sins one woman in his congregation had admitted committing, and in front of the church members, admonished her. He

concluded by saying, "We, the church (elders), in the name and by the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, do now declare you suspended from the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, until you give satisfactory evidence of repentance."

Harrell said, "Which, again sounds like we're being harsh. But we're told in the Bible, if you eat and drink of the supper in an unworthy manner, you eat and drink judgment to yourself." And Harrell says all of this is never done with an iron fist. "It's not a "holier than thou" sort of thing. It's not an imperious, high-handed sort of thing. It is a humble, loving appeal to a brother or sister to come to themselves, and come back to the Lord and back to the Lord's church," said Harrell.

Church members never gave up praying that the woman, Melodi Ausderau, would renew her commitment to God. After three and a half years, their prayers were answered. She returned to her family, repented to them, and to God.

Today, seven years later, Ausderau is the happily married mother of two children, and she credits the elders of her church with her very survival.

"I am very thankful, yes, that these men were strong enough [to] look past everything that I was to them on a worldly level, and see who I should be spiritually," Ausderau said.

Harrell, the woman's pastor and one of her church elders is also her father.

Harrell said, "There's an old puritan, it may have been Matthew Henry, who said, 'the bandage is always larger than the wound.' And the Lord bandaged us well, and covered with us with blessing beyond what we could have thought or imagined."

This story had a happy ending. But what about those cases in which the church member is unrepentant, and ultimately excommunicated from the church? Harrell, Mohler and others say church discipline still works. And it is necessary because the peace and purity of the church is maintained.

Blessed is the church that applies the Word of God, blessed is the individual believer who will apply the Word of God to his own good. Note the Scriptures on chastening and self-judgment. (Heb. 12:5-11; I Cor. 11:31-33) There is much in the Word of God about personal discipline and personal self-judgment.

The duties of religion are many and various, but church discipline holds an important place among them. It is of utmost importance to the person who desires to see the local church march ahead with Christ, its leader. (Col. 1:18)

A church is a *family of Christ* in which subordination, regularity, instruction, love, order, watchful kindness, reproof and correction should be blended in. It is a *school of Christ* in which every member is in a process of education and is bound to make the utmost improvement in manners, knowledge, and holiness. It is an *army of Christ* in which every officer, soldier is at his post, armor bright, each faithfully cooperating in a well disciplined manner.

The object of discipline is to 1) glorify the Redeemer by increasing the holiness of His people, 2) train the soul in goodness, 3) bring about the exercise of obedience and

Christlikeness, 4) increase the tender care of our brethren, 5) and build love in its highest and purest form directed by the highest wisdom, the Word of God.

A church without discipline is like a garden without walls, a city without magistrates and law -- however excellent its creed or its covenant it will soon sink into confusion and disharmony. Therefore the tendencies to laxity in discipline should be promptly corrected. While discipline seems to be harsh (even the thought of it) upon first consideration, but in truth the lack of it is still more devastating because by condoning sin the person is wronged, the church is wronged, and the true love is not evident. (See Galatians 6:1; I John 5:21; James 5:19-20; Hebrews 3:12-13) Also it is important because 1) Christ instituted it, the 2) early church practiced it, and 3) without it we cannot be true to God's Word. The Scriptures more than hint but straightforwardly command it.

The Principle Elements of Discipline:

1. The leading element is love to the Savior. The Church is His body; what should be dearer to every member than its health, vigor, beauty? (Consider Ephesians 5:25-27; 2:19-20; 3:21; 4:11-16)

2. Profound reverence for the Word of God is essential to the proper exercise of church discipline. Not public opinion, our views, or feelings, etc., is what is expedient but what "*saith the Scriptures.*"

3. Tenderness and love toward all the brethren that is united with a humble conviction of our weakness and unworthiness. While the church is appointed to "*judge those that are within*" yet it is only in accordance with the will of Christ, the Word of God and the spiritual concern to seek healing. (Galatians 6:1; Hebrews 12:11-15)

4. As the power of an army is increased by its discipline, as the small body of well drilled and thoroughly disciplined troops is able to conquer a much larger body of undisciplined troops... so it is with the church of God. It is according to godliness that the efficiency of the church militant will triumph.

Limits of Church Disciplinary Duties

1. Such can extend to its own members and no farther. The watch care of each disciple is provided for among those who know him best while the rights of each church, and each individual member are secured inviolate. (I Corinthians 5:12,13)

2. The duty of maintaining church discipline belongs to the members of the church -- individually, collectively, faithfully, affectionately, and in accordance to church leadership.

3. Just as numerous medicines are distasteful to the sick, yet often necessary to remove dangerous disease and to preserve life-- so the administration of corrective discipline though painful, is often essential to the health and even the existence of the church.

The Chief Goals of Discipline

1. The increase of piety. (Eph. 4:15-17) One of the plainest duties involved in church fellowship is the increase of the holiness of the church. (Jam. 5:16; Phil. 1:27)

2. To increase brotherly love. (John 13:34-35; I Cor. 12:26; I Pet. 3:8) Such is the best prevention of strife and division. (See Gal. 5:15-17)
3. To illustrate the excellence of Christianity before the world. (I Thess. 1:6-8; Acts 2:41-47; II Cor. 3:2)
4. To increase the efficiency of the church by calling into useful activity every member into the service best adapted to his or her God-given ability and gifts. (I Cor. 12:12-27; Rom. 12:6-9)
5. To preserve the truth for the church is the pillar and ground of the truth. (I Tim. 3:15)
6. To preserve order for we are to withdraw from every brother that walketh disorderly (II Thess. 3:6) and we are to mark them that cause divisions. (Rom. 16:17)

Major Objectives of Corrective Church Discipline

Thus far the influence of church discipline we have considered has been preventive but there are other basic things which call for corrective discipline, as...

1. To reclaim those who fall into sin. (Gal. 6:1; James 5:19-20)
2. To produce purity and honor and to bring about the usefulness of the church. The church is as important to us (or should be) as it was to Christ, who died for it. Also when you note the messages to the Churches in Revelation chapters two and three, one sees the concern of Christ over the nature, honor and purity of the church. (See Rev. 3:2-4; 2:2-7; I Cor. 5:6)
3. To prevent sin in others. *"Them that sin rebuke before all, that others may also fear."* (I Tim. 5:20; 6:3-5; II Tim. 4:1-2; 2:24-26)
4. To uphold the sacredness of the church covenant -- to bring it before the minds of God's people; to consider our relationship to it -- thus to watch, admonish, pray, instruct, reprove to the end of our seeking to live in accordance to the Word of God. He who neglects to do his part in maintaining discipline violates the most sacred covenant obligations, helps bring disorders, strife, divisions, and heresies and thus brings upon himself and others the corrective discipline of God.
5. To enter into fraternal duties for we are *members of the household of God* (Eph. 2:19) If we see another who is saved but exposed to the loss of spiritual peace, falling into the poison of sin, and facing the danger of falling away -- then what should we do? It is clear from the Word of God. (Prov. 27:5-6; Heb. 3:12-13) While a distrustful, meddling and faultfinding spirit must be carefully guarded against, yet the needs of another in spiritual fault must be faced. (James 5:16)
6. To face the disciplines of doing good. (Tit. 2:14-15; 3:8, 14) If we will be busy doing the right Satan will have little opportunity to bring us into sin. Most of the problems and offenses in churches may be traced to one source -- the members are doing little for the Lord, or nearly nothing. They don't tithe, witness, etc., or live in self-denial. Often selfishness and worldliness reigns.

7. To remove or purge out that which causes unfruitfulness. (John 15:1-8; I Cor. 5:6-7; II Pet. 1:4-10)

Offenses Requiring Church Action (Study Matthew 18:7-10, 15-17)

As it is impossible but that offenses will come even to the purest and best regulated church, it is of great importance that every member clearly understood the Scriptural rules treating them. Even one of the purest churches, the one at Philippi, had its problems. (See Phil. 2:3-4; 2:19-21; 3:1-3)

An offense could be a wrong act, purposefully done or unwittingly done -- either privately against the rights of an individual, or publicly against one or more. These are acts which are against Christianity in general, and possibly against a local church and against morality. They are under two headings: private and public offenses. A private offense is a wrong, sinful act of one member against or in injury of another. A public offense is any sinful or wicked conduct of a church member, any neglect of duty as spoken of in the Word of God, or manifestation of unholy temper, etc., which has an impact on many in a local church. And if persevered in would prove him destitute of the Christian spirit. (James 1:26-27)

We will look at this in more detail:

Private Offenses:

1. The Law of Christ: (Matt. 18:15-17; Luke 17:1-5)
 - a. *"Between thee and him alone.:"* "Tell him his fault" for the purpose "to gain thy brother." To convince by calm reasoning with an affectionate appeal.
 - b. *Has three possible results:* 1) to gain thy brother, or 2) he might deny the act as charged and is proven innocent or possibly is lying and adding sin to sin. 3) or if proof (or witness) is available then he may use the last two steps of taking the offender before witnesses and then to the church if necessary.

2. The Law of Evidence: "in the mouth of two or three witnesses ..." if no evidence then the charge can become a false witness and thus false charges. There must be proof -- it is always necessary in serious charges. (II Cor. 13:1; I Tim. 5:19; Heb. 10:28; Prov. 25:8-10)

3. The three parts of private discipline: Christ has given to us the means to privately, personally restore, to win back, to correct the problems between two people, if possible.
 - a. *Part one*: It must be strictly private, confidential. It is a case of personal injury known to the injured party. The injured party is then commanded to move to tell his grievance to him alone. The first duty is a private one to go in a spirit of love to gain thy brother.
 - b. *Second part*: This introduces mediators, counselors, and if necessary witnesses. This step is taken only if the first fails. These two or three are to go to give advice, to counsel, to bring reconciliation as mediators if such is possible. This must be unbiased research. Care must be made that the injury is not overrated, charges not greater than proof, that the brethren select people of integrity, candor, love and sound judgment to bring such counsel.

No carelessness, indifference, or desire to avoid trouble should prevent frankness

and plain dealing. Here surface healing is useless ... if reconciliation prevails then there should be complete forgiveness and forgetfulness should reign. (Eph. 4:30-32)

- c. Third part: This makes it a public affair, places it on the same footing as public offenses. (It must be established that if the complaint goes this far it must be handled by another -- carefully, lovingly, discreetly, and fairly.)
 - 1) Someone in behalf of the grieved brother should present the case.
 - 2) All other steps must first (as above) be taken or it is all out of order.
 - 3) The original charge must be proven and the refusal of the accused to get right is proven. The church then renders the judgment, calls upon the offender to *hear the church*. (Note the duty of the church.)

Public Offenses:

These are against morality, and Christianity, and they hurt the church collectively and the unsaved outside are possibly scandalized or injured by the life style of the offender (s).

1. Immorality -- (I Cor. 5:1-13; note not to eat with, etc., II Cor. 7:11) The Corinthian church had anger, indignation and took action in the case. (See also I Cor. 6:9-10, 13-20; Jude 4-13; Heb 12:15-17)
2. Denial of essentials of the Gospel: -- (Gal. 1:8-9; II Jh 7-11; Rev. 2:14-20) This would be denial of any doctrines clearly taught in God's Word.
3. Making divisions, disturbances in the church: -- (Tit. 3:10-11) A heretic is a party man, a factious person, determined to have his own way, forcing his opinions, breaking up the peace of the church and undermining confidence in its leaders. (See also Romans 16:17-18 and note its clear admonition.)
4. Covetousness, stealing and fraud: (I Tim. 5:8; I Tim. 6:6-12; Eph. 5:5-6)
 - a. To longer steal is a mark of the saved. (Eph. 4:28)
 - b. Here is a clear command. (Exod. 20:17)
 - c. James 5:4 clearly presents one form of fraud (underpaying, or not paying) owing wages and contracting debts when likely such can't be paid for, living beyond ones means and thus bringing condemnation upon the church by the unsaved for bad debts, hence losing ones Christian testimony. (See Acts 6:3; II Cor. 8:21; Rom. 12:17; 13:13; I Pet 2:12; I Thess. 4:12)
 - d. Unwillingness to support the church, covetous. (I Tim. 6:10-14; Eph. 5:5)
5. Disregard of authority: (Matt. 18:17) Here is a failure to listen to the church, and refusing to respect the authority of those in leadership. (Heb. 13:17)
 - a. Refusing the leadership of the pastor -- (I Thess. 5: 12-13; Heb. 13:17, 17)
 - b. Refusing leadership of deacons who are laborers (as spiritual leaders) with the pastor. They are to labor with the pastor in the oversight of the spiritual needs of the brethren. Therefore the important qualifications as given in I Tim. 3:8-13 and Acts. 6:3.
6. Disorderly walk: An indolent, useless, disorderly life (II Thess. 3:6-12; I Tim. 5:13) Such are busybodies, walking *out of rank for it is a military term which means to break rank*. They are to be admonished and to be withdrawn from. (I Thess. 5:14) If they continue they are to be excluded from the church.
7. Arrogant deportment: (III John 9, 10) Note what the Word says about Diotrephes, who was seeking to have the preeminence among them.

8. *Forsaking church attendance.* A protracted, unnecessary neglect of the meetings and ordinances of the church (such as Lord's Supper). (Heb. 10:25; example of the early church is seen in Acts 2:46, 47.)
9. *Irreconcilable spirit:* Unwilling to be reconciled, to face needs, to repent, or to be reestablished in fellowship with other Christians.

While these are not all the possible circumstances they cover by far the most likely reasons of public disciplinary needs or problems. Contention and strife are the most widespread problems of all. (Gal. 5:15) Such divisions weaken the work of the local church, and may even bring about the destruction of a church, and is doubtless satan's work. Any persons known ahead of time as being contentious ought to be barred from a local church membership. And if any who join promote division and strife they ought to be made subject to discipline immediately lest the spark of such sin become a blaze of iniquity. (Note Romans 16:17.) God is jealous over His church for which Christ died. It is the "*pillar and the ground of the truth,*" and it is the living organism God uses to spread the gospel throughout the world. It is therefore a very serious thing when the church is hurt, the labor of reaching the lost is curtailed and time is spent trying to care for internal strife, bickering, division and party spirits. (I Cor. 3: 1-6; I Tim. 3:15-17)

Dealing with public offenses:

1. If any one person or a few know of the error or the need, they must seek to win that person in accordance with Matthew 18.
2. In the case of notorious, scandalous sin (where the church is brought into such there must be immediate excommunication. (I Corinthians chapter five) the safeguarding of the purity of the church demands such or he or she may be allowed to come forward and cancel it all by a confession when there is no alternative for him or her but disgrace. This will only serve to harden the offenders heart when it is done for the wrong reason. This also will corrupt the church and bring into contempt of the church in the eyes of others. No wonder local churches have little respect from communities at large today. After conclusion of the matter then the erring one can be reclaimed for if at all possible the goal is restoration and reconciliation, always.
3. In a pending problem the one knowing about the need should seek to apply Matthew 18, or if unwilling to go to the erring one he should go to the Pastor and deacons and make the offense known to them. These leaders should seek to restore if such is possible unless there is unwillingness to make amends. Then, if and when the church takes action in an official manner the offender must appear before the church and be allowed to hear the witnesses bring the charges and he may then defend himself.
4. If proven innocent, or confesses sin -- there must be a creditable evidence of genuine repentance and a time to prove oneself before leadership.
5. If after careful, loving proceedings the church is not able to win back its brother the painful but necessary task of dealing with the erring must take place. The Word of God calls for that.

The True Spirit of Discipline

1. The spirit of obedience and love to the Savior should be supreme in all the proceedings. No class of duties requires a high exercise of all the Christians graces than working through difficult disciplinary problems. When you study the message to the churches in Revelation chapters two and three, Christ both commends and rebukes the seven churches according to their faithfulness or neglect of duty. (Consider John 15:14, "*Ye are my friends if you do whatsoever I command you.*")

2. The need of the church is also paramount. (See II Cor. 7:11-12) *I did it not solely for his cause, or the one who suffered, but the proof of the church, for their need.* This is the meaning therein. We need as great a concern for the vindication, the purity, the power, and the respect of the church as the Lord has. Paul was deeply burdened for the Church at Corinth to clear itself by their godly sorrow.

3. To cherish the right feeling toward an erring or fallen brother is always an important duty. *To have humbleness, tenderness, watchfulness and total concern as Christ would have us exhibit is very important.* Never should one in need be approached in an assuming, censorious, dictatorial manner.

4. There must of necessity be a difference made in the degree also of censure when one is proven in error and this degree is based upon the type of sin, etc.

The Warning of Shortsightedness

1. If we lived when Lot did, we would say that he was lost, and would have been prone to judge him as a lost person, and to condemn him. (II Pet. 2:7-8) That does not mean that a local church would not have had to deal with the problem, but we truly can misjudge another person's heart condition.

2. We would have passed swift, critical, hard judgment upon David and his sin, (and God hates sin) and we would probably have considered him to be unsaved to have committed both murder and adultery. We only have to read Psalm 51 to know the true case. But then, God did bring judgment, he did suffer much from his failures and God had to send the prophet to face him about the sin he did not judge personally. (Consider Psalm 32:1-5; I Cor. 11:28-32; Prov. 28:13)

3. We also would have harshly judged Peter who denied, and Noah who greatly sinned -- but only God knows the heart. (Gen. 9:21; I Sam 16:7; Matt. 26:69-75)

4. We can presume, judge harshly, and condemn as if everything in our lives was all that it ought to be, but God knows. (Cf John 8:1-11, vs 7; Matt. 7:1; Luke 6:37; I Cor. 10:12; Gal. 6:1)

5. On the other hand we need to understand that we have the complete revelation of Scripture, we have the indwelling Holy Spirit and a new nature imparted unto us. (II Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:9-10) We ought to be different, and fail far less than Old Testament believers who did not have all we have in Christ. (Rom. 8:32)

6. In judging others we may be presumptuous and draw conclusions out of inaccuracies and ignorance. We must be concerned if we lack brotherly love, we must beware. (I Cor. 13:5; John 13:34-35) To judge others may be the sin of a Pharisee ignoring, hiding, and making an alibi for one's own weaknesses. We better not be drawing the worse conclusions about the frailties of others. All must be done in the spirit of Christ, in mercy, humility, love and quick forgiveness. We must have His compassion even though at times biblical, local church discipline must take place.

We Need Discipline On the Highest Plane

Before we go further and consider more about this important subject -- we need to consider other potential failures in the process of carrying out biblical discipline. More people sin with the tongue than any other way and more oft than any other. With the heart of man being what it is, it would be a normal thing for Christians to easily sin in the applying discipline to those about them, even their own children.

We must watch ourselves -- our attitudes, lives, words, actions and insinuations because God has not called any of us to be "*self-appointed watchdogs*," but to fear our own failure in pleasing the Lord. We should fear failing others and desire their restitution, desiring to exhibit God's divine love. (I Cor. 13:1-8)

1. We are prone to be judges, or to --
 - a. speak evil of another, (James 4:11)
 - b. to set in judgment often based on hearsay or rumor, (Matt. 7:1-5)
 - c. to easily become busybodies in others matters, (Cf I Pet. 4:15)
 - d. to set in judgment over pastors and churches, (I Tim. 5:19; Psa. 105:15)
 - e. to condemn others, judging motives, heart and life. (Rom. 14:4; Jh 8:1-11; Gal. 6:1; I Pet. 2:23)

2. There is a great harm in evil criticism. (James 4:11)
 - a. It often ruins the lives of the one criticized.
 - b. It often causes young Christians to stumble by hearing the carping, critical words of older Christians.
 - c. It brings a bad name to Christianity before the outside world. (Eph. 4:26) May we should ask, "*Is it I*"? (Jh. 13:25)
 - d. It brings further division and strife. (Prov. 26:20) Evil speaking leads to misjudging of one another, to exaggerations and misrepresentations of others sins. We MUST be careful we don't sin when needing to consider another's failure that must be addressed.

3. Remember what to do when a brother sins.
 - a. Matthew 18:15-17 tells us to go to the offender directly, kindly to GAIN that one -- not to criticize, judge, but to gain.
 - b. If the sin is not against you, but the sin must be removed or there will be great danger from the fallout from the problem -- then maybe you should go and seek to be a blessing.
 - c. You can always pray if nothing else (I Sam 12:23; Luke 6:37) and not judge.
 - d. You can look to the Lord to judge that person, to bring the problem to light before others so it can't continue to be hidden, ignored, or neglected. (II Tim. 4:14) Follow through on all the previous points or the following.

4. When Christians have a right to judge (make discernment) and must do so.
 - a. (I Cor. 6:1-5) When Christians can make judgment or discernment about a matter as they are not to go to law before secular courts.
 - b. (I Cor. 5:1-12) When wicked, open sin that brings great reproach upon the church has been committed by a member. They must pass judgment even to the extent of publicly withdrawing fellowship from the church, excluding the person from the church and not keeping company with the person. He is left in God's hands.
 - c. When there is a continual course of disgraceful sin, contamination of others

and bringing shame on the cause of Christ. Then Christians are to withdraw from the fellowship of such a member, thus bringing shame and the desire to forsake, confess, and correct the sin failure. Effort ought to go forward to bring the person to repentance and restoration.

- d. The first object of discipline is to vindicate the honor of Christianity, of Christ Jesus, and to bring glory to God. Secondly it is to bring the person to repentance. If the person had to be excluded and is truly saved he will be more apt to be in an unhappy state and more likely to correct his sin. They need our prayers and maybe they are not truly saved.
- e. If they (or he or she) are not willing to obey the Word of God and its authority as it applies to their lives -- we are to note that person (s) and have no company with him. (See II Thess. 3:11-15)

One is to abstain from intimacy with them (Rom. 16:17) What do we do if another is a cause of divisions and strife? We are to avoid them. Ongoing fellowship and conversation with an excluded person renders null and void the effect that exclusion will cause the person to face his sin and to resolve his problems. Spending time with them is highly improper (unless they want to deal with their sin, etc.) and brings the danger of further failure. All our deportment toward the offender should be consistent with Scripture. The problem today is so few churches, if any, are willing to deal with problems Scripturally. This opens the door for the guilty to just seek a new church.

Restoration to Fellowship

If there is a forsaking of sins, renouncing of errors that truly comes from the heart then things ought to progress toward restoration. Time should be given to be sure there is proper confession and a determination to do right. There also ought to be an exhibiting of Christian character and a desire to have restored fellowship with the Lord and a desire for growth.

There must be a desire for application for readmission to the local church, but the church body must be satisfied that there has been true repentance and a desire for thorough reformation of life.

If there has been true repentance then the person will be a blessing to the church, an honor once again to the Lord and have the joy of a renewed walk with the Lord.

Sources considered: *"A Baptist Primer on Church Discipline"* by Dr. Wm. Crowell, 1850.

"Discipline in the Local Church" by Roger Peterson, Conservative Baptist Press, 1960
