

# Church Discipline and Restoration

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## Introduction

The Belgic Confession of Faith, drawn up by reformation leaders in 1561, proclaimed that a true church would be identified by three distinctives:

- Distinctive #1 – the preaching of pure doctrine
- Distinctive #2 – the administration of the ordinances
- Distinctive #3 – the exercise of church discipline

Imagine that!

Once upon a time, long ago, the kind of church that was viewed as true to Scripture was revealed by its determination to preach the doctrines of Scripture, practice the ordinances of baptism and communion, and exercise this practice called church discipline.

The average church today can only lay claim to one of these practices!

First of all, the preaching of doctrine has all but disappeared from contemporary pulpits. In its place are train loads of self-help techniques, quick-fix sermons and topical studies that begin with church goes 'felt needs' in mind. Happiness, not holiness, is in demand today as this first distinctive has been ushered out the front door.

Furthermore, since the primary meaning of the Greek word for baptism is, to immerse,<sup>1</sup> any church which sprinkles infants or adults fails to biblically fulfill the second distinctive. The Greek words for pour or sprinkle are never used in passages referring to a person's baptism. In addition, our Lord clearly commanded that disciples, not infants, were to be immersed as a sign of their devotion to Christ and His teaching (Matthew 28:19,20). The truth is, the average church today, in their efforts to attempt to avoid any form of controversy, only practice one of the ordinances – communion.

In addition, churches today have strayed far from the example and courage of our spiritual forefathers. The average church has never once practiced the third distinctive – the exercising of church discipline and the restoration of an unrepentant believer. Most believers have never even seen it carried out.

The unfortunate conclusion? The average church in America only practices one half of one of the distinctives from the Belgic Confession – distinctives once held as significant indicators of authentic, God-pleasing, biblical churches.

A survey was taken recently where 439 pastors and church leaders were questioned on the subject of church discipline. Fifty percent of them admitted that they never intervened or got involved with church members or attendees who needed confronting, rebuking or any other form of discipline.

Mind you, this didn't mean that the other 50 percent actually carried out some form of church discipline – it simply recorded the astonishing statistic that half of the shepherds, never took any action in regard to unrepentant believers.

These leaders, who evidently forgot they had been given God's charge to care for the flock (1 Peter 5:3), gave one of three reasons why they did not intervene:

1. a fear of the outcome;
2. a desire to avoid disruptive problems; or
3. an ignorance of what it means to discipline.

The church has, in effect, abandoned untold numbers of wayward believers to wander into the clutches of sin without any warning; without any reproving; without any rebuking or challenging.

For 1900 years, the church has consistently practiced church discipline. In the last 50 years, it has been abandoned.

Al Mohler, an evangelical leader writes, "The result of the loss of discipline is the loss of the biblical pattern for the church, and the impending collapse of authentic Christianity in this generation. The church today is suffering from an infection which has been allowed to fester ... as any infection weakens the body by destroying its defense mechanisms, so the church has been weakened ... it has lost its power and effectiveness in serving as a vehicle for social, moral and spiritual change. This illness is due, at least in part, to a neglect of church discipline."<sup>2</sup>

How did something, once held as critically important, nearly vanish from the religious landscape of our country? Better yet, how do we go about restoring this critical distinctive back into the fabric and function of the New Testament church?

## The Principle

- *What Exactly Is Church Discipline?*

Church discipline can be broadly defined as the confrontive and corrective measures taken by an individual, church leaders or the congregation regarding a matter of sin in the life of a believer.<sup>3</sup>

The words discipling and discipline provide different nuances of the same Greek word – different expressions with the very same goal – the growth and maturity of the believer.

Discipling – activity geared toward the growth of those who are walking in obedience.

Discipline – activity geared toward the restoration of those who are walking in disobedience.

Without a doubt, the discipline and restoration of sinning, unrepentant believers is a difficult, time-consuming, awkward task. No wonder rebuking and correcting wayward believers is usually short of volunteers.

Even though ...

- the Bible commands it (1 Corinthians 5:1-13);
- our Lord models it (Hebrews 12:6);
- the church loses credibility and effective witness without it (Revelation 2, 3; 1 Peter 2:11-12); and
- the Lord explains how to exercise it (Matthew 18:15-20).

#### • *What Is The Main Objective Of Church Discipline?*

Contrary to the common notion, the objective of discipline is not punitive, but restorative.

While punishment may be observed as one of the consequences of church discipline (2 Corinthians 2:6), it is never the motive nor the objective for exercising discipline.

When parents discipline their children, the mind of their child might be convinced that "my parents don't love me ... they're being too hard on me ... this hurts!"

The mind of the parent, on the other hand, is focused on delivering the consequences of discomfort and pain in order to motivate their child back toward the safe, productive path of wise living – which, in the end, protects them from a life filled with far greater pain and suffering.

Similarly, the main objective of church discipline is the restoration of the unrepentant believer to the safe, productive lifestyle of godly obedience and intimacy with Jesus Christ.

#### • *What Gives The Church, Or Individual Believers, The Right To Judge Someone Else?*

A popular question hurled in the face of the biblical church is, "Who gave the church the right to call somebody a sinner in the first place?" Didn't Jesus say, Judge not, lest you be judged?

Yes, He did say that (Matthew 7:1). Does this mean that the church should never call a sinner a sinner? Is the church never to point a finger and call sin, a sin?

This verse is perhaps one of the most misunderstood and misquoted verses in our contemporary culture. It is often quoted as the primary justification for wearing moral blinders toward someone who is blatantly, openly sinning.

The question remains, is it ever right to judge? Yes! In fact, the New Testament gives several examples for when it is actually right to judge.

#### • *When Is It Right To Judge?*

##### 1. **It is right to judge someone who is openly living in sin.**

The Apostle Paul instructed the church in Corinth, "It is actually reported that there is immorality among you ... you have become arrogant, and have not mourned instead, in order that the one who had done this deed might be removed from your midst. For I, on my part, though absent in body, but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this." (1 Corinthians 5:1-3)

Paul announced, "I have already judged him!" It is important to note that Paul called attention to this man's sin (sexual relations with his stepmother) in the presence of the congregation.

It is also ironic, in respect to our own culture today within mainline denominationalism, that Paul considered the church to be arrogant for refusing to condemn sin. He did not applaud them for being 'tolerant' of other views regarding sexual activity. Instead, he publicly judged the church in Corinth by calling them what they truly had become arrogant – above God's Word, smarter than God's design for relationships and more sophisticated than God's old-fashioned plan for sexual relations!

However, Paul judged the church as defiantly arrogant in their tolerance of sinful, immoral behavior. He then challenged them to deal with the sinning man by removing him from their fellowship.

##### 2. **It is right to judge someone who denies biblical doctrine.**

Increasingly, our culture and the church is resisting more and more the idea of doctrinal or theological absolutes. Doctrine is considered too dogmatic ... too black and white ... too divisive! Today, the siren song to the church is, lay aside doctrine and unite in love.

But ... popular mantras are often unbiblical messages. Politically correct may be biblically corrupt.

The Bible actually delivers a far different message:

Now I urge you brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissension and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. (Romans 16:17)

If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting; for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds. (2 John 1:10)

Sounds pretty dogmatic, doesn't it? In fact, Paul and John don't sound very loving. We can only wonder how popular these original church leaders would be today with the average church and denomination who mindlessly repeat, "Let's abandon doctrinal differences for the sake of unity."

Paul further warned the Galatians,

"But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you contrary to the gospel which we have preached to you, let him be accursed." (Galatians 1:9)

Imagine the implications of this text! The minister who preaches that Jesus Christ didn't literally resurrect from the grave is accursed.

The religious leaders who deny the sufficiency of Christ's atonement are accursed.

Those who deny the divine inspiration of Scripture are accursed.

Those church leaders who preach a gospel of salvation by grace plus something else — penance, church membership, baptism or any other form of good works — stand in judgment as accursed!

By the way, Paul does not call for open dialogue with these false teachers — he judges them according to their false doctrine. He actually endorses division on the grounds of doctrine.

### **3. It is right to judge ourselves as we evaluate our own walk with God.**

First Corinthians 11 carries the repeated exhortation for judging ourselves as we approach the Lord's table. Five times in three verses, Paul encourages a form of self-discipline as he commands, "But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink the cup." (1 Corinthians 11:28)

This is nothing less than holding ourselves accountable to the standard of God's Word for holy living and confessing our sins prior to partaking of communion. Thus, the ordinance of communion becomes a regular event that includes self-discipline in the life of the believer.

Tragically, within our own Christian culture, self-discipline involving evaluation, repentance and confession of sinful behavior is considered too depressing.

Yet, the pursuit of holiness on the part of the true believer will consistently bring about conviction of sin and an attitude of judgment upon that sin, with resulting confession and repentance before Christ. (1 John 1:9)

### **4. It is right to judge our culture in light of Scripture.**

Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers, "He who is spiritual judges all things." (1 Corinthians 2:15)

What's he talking about? Paul is referring to critical thinking and critical judging performed by alert, discerning Christians. This kind of Christian judges all things — that is, he examines, investigates, inquires into, questions and discerns all things. He doesn't mindlessly follow the crowd — pagan or Christian.

However, this doesn't mean he is a critical person who complains about everything. There is a difference between being critical and thinking critically! The is the same difference between being judgmental, which is not acceptable, and wisely judging all things, which is commanded.

Today, believers are being confronted and challenged by a barrage of conflicting advice, differing religious perspectives and a vast array of pseudo-spiritual leaders.

We are living in a day when spiritual discernment is of paramount importance. This church must be capable of

judging experiences, trends and beliefs in light of Scripture.

We desperately need people in the church who think critically and judge the current opinions of their day in light of biblical truth.

History is replete with courageous people who did this very thing. William Tyndale, in 1526, judged the religious sentiment of his day as wrong. The church had declared the Bible as a book only to be owned, read and interpreted by the priests. Tyndale rejected this politically correct notion of his day and gave his countrymen an English translation of the Scriptures. He paid for his judgment on the church with his own life.

Clearly, there are reasons and times when it is right to judge! But someone might ask, "But aren't there times when it is wrong to judge someone?" The answer to that is also absolutely.

#### *• When Is It Wrong To Judge*

##### **1. It is wrong to judge someone before you know all the facts in the case.**

The Apostle John wrote, "Our law does not judge a man unless it first hears from him and knows what he is doing." (John 7:51)

In other words, the believer should never judge on a whim — an impression — or a rumor. The facts are necessary, and the believer should be quick to hear and slow to speak.

##### **2. It is wrong to judge when judging is based on another persons personal convictions.**

Romans 14 makes it clear that personal convictions often dictate activity in areas where the Scriptures are silent.

The Bible doesn't specifically forbid playing cards, swimming pools, makeup, playing sports on Sunday, dating practices, plastic surgery, watching television or using electric guitars in church.

If our judgment on another believer is based on differences of opinion regarding these issues, to name a few, where the Bible is virtually silent, our judgment becomes nothing less than judgmentalism.

And don't ignore the fact that this kind of judgmentalism can travel in both directions. Those who condemn others who allow certain things in their lives, are not right; nor are those who scoff at other believers, who choose stricter guidelines by which to govern their choices.

Judging wrongly oftentimes has nothing to do with a biblical violation, but differing opinions, convictions and personal preferences. And in these matters of preference and personal conviction, we must not be judgmental.

What a difficult lesson it is to learn that God often blesses people we disagree with!

### 3. It is wrong to judge someone by attacking their motives.

Paul wrote, “But do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men’s hearts.” (1 Corinthians 4:5)

This text certainly instructs us to leave off judgment that relates to motives. It implies that only the Lord is capable of judging motives and intentions, since He alone can see the heart. Therefore, we should confine our judgment to observable actions and leave hidden motives for the Lord to judge at the coming judgment.

In the meantime, we must be careful to give people the benefit of the doubt! If all we have to go on is our perception of another person’s motives, our judgments will be skewed.

One of the reasons the Bible requires two or more witnesses to agree on charges brought against another believer is because one person can too easily misread or misinterpret the motives of someone else. One person alone can fail to give the benefit of the doubt and jump to judgment. Thus, taking the time to gather additional counsel will often slow the process down enough to carefully arrive at the truth.

In the meantime, we would do well to remember some thing that Jewish rabbis taught centuries ago; they taught what they considered to be the six greatest works a person could do:

- study the Scriptures,
- visit the sick,
- show kindness to strangers,
- pray,
- teach children the Scriptures and
- think the best of people.

Giving someone the benefit of the doubt is often the first step to avoiding the pitfall of enacting wrong judgment.

### 4. It is wrong to judge when the act of judging becomes a display of self-righteousness.

Jesus said in Matthew 7:1, “Do not judge lest you be judged.”

Now He can’t be talking about all the other forms of judgment we have just seen validated in Scripture. Instead, the Lord is referring to a type of judgmentalism typical of the religious leaders.

The Lord was speaking to Pharisees (Jewish leaders) who were well known for their censorious, pietistic, critical attitudes of judgmentalism which loved to expose and embarrass the sinner.

They enjoyed pouncing on the sinner without ever proposing a solution! To them, and anyone with this kind of attitude, our Lord warned, “For in the way you judge, you will be judged.” (Matthew 7:2)

In other words, self-righteous condemning judgment builds its own gallows — especially when self-righteous individuals refuse to deal with their own sinful behavior.

Jesus illustrated this principle when men brought before Him a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery.

These proud judges, with private sinful lives, had come not only to condemn the adulterer, but corner the Savior.

After seemingly ignoring these men and their captured prey, our Lord stooped down and began to write in the dirt. Then, John records, “But when they persisted in asking Him, He straightened up and said to them, ‘He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.’” (John 8:7)

Then, back down He went again to write in the dirt. Twice, we read that the Lord wrote on the ground. There are some who believe Jesus was scribbling in the sand because he was embarrassed to be stuck in such a dilemma. Others have speculated that Jesus stooped down and wrote in the sand because he didn’t know what to say!

The actual answer to this ‘strange’ behavior from our Lord is found in the text itself. This is the only time in the New Testament that Jesus is shown to be writing. What’s even more revealing is that the usual Greek verb for writing isn’t used. Instead, the word that appears is a word that means “to write down a record against — a register” (*katagraphen*).<sup>4</sup>

The same word appears in Job 13:26, “Thou writest (*katagraphen*) bitter things against me.”

In the stillness of that temple court, Jesus is revealing the hypocrisy of judging others while at the same time harboring an unrepentant heart.

What was Jesus recording in the sand? He was writing ‘a record against’ these men ... the list of sins that they had hidden in the dark shadows of their private lives.

Peter Marshall once imagined that “Jesus Christ saw into their very hearts, and that moving finger wrote: idolater, liar, drunkard, murderer, adulterer. The thud of stone after stone falling on the pavement as one by one, they crept away, slinking into the shadows, shuffling off into the crowded streets to lose themselves in the multitude.”

John records that very thing, “And when they heard it, they began to go out one by one, beginning with the older ones, and He was left alone, and the woman where she was, in the midst.” (John 8:9)

What happened next has often been misinterpreted as tolerance over sin. John writes, “And straightening up, Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?’ And she said, ‘No one, Lord.’ And Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you; go your way. From now on sin no more.’” (John 8:10-11)

Imagine this scene — the temple courtyard is now even more quiet with the disappearance of her accusers. Jesus alone had the right to cast the first stone, but He looked at her and said, “Neither do I condemn you.”

Isn’t this the opposite action of discipline? Did Jesus overlook her sin? Wouldn’t His inaction be proof enough that we should never judge or condemn someone in sin? Not really! There are two very important things you should understand about Christ’s response:



## 1. First of all, Jesus Christ did not dismiss her sin, He told her to stop sinning.

The human judges wanted one thing. They yearned to condemn. Jesus, the righteous judge yearns to forgive.

Any true church involved in rebuking, challenging and judging sinful behavior would do the same thing – forgive – if that person turned from their sin.

## 2. Second, Jesus Christ does not only forgive her past, He challenged her future.

Our Lord said to her, “Go your way. From now on sin no more.” (John 8:11)

Jesus confronted this woman’s lifestyle of immorality. He did not say, “Oh, it’s all right, don’t worry, just go on back to that man you were with ... keep on doing what you were doing and choosing to live the way you think is best.”

Oh no. He said, “Go and stop sinning!” In other words, the Lord said to her, “Your actions are wrong! Stop living the sinful life of an adulterous woman!” This was no easy forgiveness. This wasn’t tolerance of sinful immorality. Jesus confronted the woman with a choice that day – either to go back to her old ways or to live in the light of God’s mercy and grace – as a forgiven woman. A woman challenged to live an entirely new way of life!

We have every reason to believe that this woman would leave her life of adultery. She would probably never forget the combination of mercy, coupled with a challenge.

## The Process

### • *What Are The Sins That Lead To Church Discipline?*

Throughout the past centuries of church history, different church leaders came up with different ‘lists’ of sins they believed required both private and public discipline – including the final step of excommunication.

Cotton Mather, the Puritan leader in the early American church made a list that included, swearing, fighting, cheating, stealing and idleness, among other more obvious and flagrant sins.

Martin Luther, the reformer, once threatened to excommunicate a man who was planning to sell his home for an exorbitant profit. Since the man was attempting to sell his home for 10 times the amount he originally purchased the house, Luther labeled the offender as one in need of discipline because of his unbridled greed and even threatened the man if he did not cut the selling price in half, he would be excommunicated.

Ironic, isn’t it? Today, that man would be considered a great businessman or a sharp negotiator. Luther, on the other hand, considered him greedy and worthy of dismissal from the church!

Other lists of sins deemed worthy of discipline that have been recorded in early American church history include, bull fighting, tax evasion, slave holding and smuggling.

Unfortunately, a list of sins labeled, “sins for church discipline” never appears in the New Testament. Which happens to be consistent with the biblical view of sin. Why? Because all sin is ... well ... sin!

And if you keep in mind that the purpose of discipline is restoration and revival, it really doesn’t matter what sin it is – for all sin destroys fellowship with the Lord and His church.

Obviously, the more public a sin becomes, the more public the action of discipline should be.

Here are some guidelines that we try to follow as it relates to categories of sin which require diligent and serious action.

### *General Categories Of Sins Requiring Confrontation:*

#### 1. Sins that destroy Christian unity and relationships.

Several passages indicate the serious nature of division and the corresponding serious nature of the church’s response.

Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. (Matthew 5:23-24)

Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. (Romans 16:17)

But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and strife and disputes about the Law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. Reject a factious man after a first and second warning, knowing that such a man is perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned. (Titus 3:9-11)

#### 2. Sins that entangle a person in corrupt or immoral behavior.

Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. (Galatians 6:1)

We have already seen the disciplinary action taken against the immoral man in 1 Corinthians 5.

#### 3. Sins that involve rebellion or rejection of God’s Word.

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. (2 Thessalonians 3:6)

Keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith. Among these are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan, so that they will be taught not to blaspheme. (1 Timothy 1:19-20)

#### 4. Sins that harm the testimony of the church.

For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. Now such persons we command and exhort

in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread. But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good. If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame. (2 Thessalonians 3:11-14)

To the Corinthian believers, Paul referred to the scandal of the immorality, specifically mentioning that his sin, does not even exist among the Gentiles. (1 Corinthians 5:1)

In other words, someone in the church was acting more sinfully brazen than someone outside the church while the church was closing its eyes and ears to the sin.

The church in Ephesus was told to either repent or have their lamp stand taken away. The lamp stand was a reference to the light of their testimony and effective witness. (Revelation 2:5)

Therefore, when an unrepentant sinner is not confronted, rebuked and removed from the fellowship of the church, the church ultimately loses its credibility, testimony and Spirit-empowered ministry in the community.

- *What Are The Steps Of Church Discipline And Restoration?*

#### **The First Step – Personal Consideration**

Most often, we forget that the very first step of discipline is a step we all must regularly engage in as we grow in Christ. In fact, if we regularly follow this first step, we will be kept from ever having to take further steps. So make sure you do not forget the first step of discipline – self-discipline!

Self-discipline is that open and transparent walk of the believer who refuses to 'hide' anything from God. The believer welcomes the convicting work of God's Spirit to speak through Scripture and rebuke any sinful thought or behavior.

This is the exercise that issues forth from the believer an invitation for the Lord to, "Search me, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way." (Psalm 139:23-24)

Self-discipline is this private judgment which takes place between the believer and his Lord as he acknowledges sinful thoughts and actions, confesses to the Lord a spirit of brokenness and humility and asks that God would create in him a clean heart and a right spirit. (Psalm 51:10)

The Christian who actively exercises this type of honest and open self-discipline before the Lord will never need to fear any additional forms of discipline. However, the believer who refuses to be convicted, reprov'd and changed by God's Word (2 Timothy 3:16) will require the involvement of other believers who engage in the second step of discipline and restoration.

#### **The Second Step – Private Conversation**

With the attitude of gentleness and humility (Galatians 6:1), the believer is encouraged to approach the wayward Christian and privately urge them to reconsider the path they are choosing.

If your brother sins [against you], go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. (Matthew 18:15)

Matthew 18 cannot be limited to the problem of one believer sinning against another in view of Paul's additional encouragement to the Galatian believers.

Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. (Galatians 6:1)

According to this text, any believer who is aware of the offense or sin of another believer is to prayerfully, privately approach their wayward brother or sister in hopes of repairing, resolving and reconciling them to fellowship with Christ, with other believers they've wronged, and to the fellowship of the church.

How do you approach a wayward believer that you've been praying for, grieving over and for whom you've become deeply concerned?

#### **Guidelines For This Private Conversation:**

- **Pray beforehand:** before you meet with the wayward brother or sister, seek the Lord for wisdom. Ask for a spirit of wisdom, gentleness, love and genuine concern for godly resolution.
- **Make an appointment:** call and ask them for an opportunity to talk with them about some very important issues that have been on your mind and heart. If they ask for specifics, respond by saying that you'd prefer to talk face to face.
- **Begin with affirmation:** when you meet with the wayward believer, begin the conversation by telling them how much you love and appreciate them for the good qualities that you've observed in their life. Only after words of affirmation, begin to share with them that there is something you have been praying about for some time – something about which you have grown concerned regarding their behavior, character, choices, etc.
- **Ask for permission to share your concern.**
- **Share your concern:** limiting your words and refusing at this point, the temptation to draw a verdict or conclusion.
- **Leave time to listen:** remember that it's possible to have heard only one side of any story, or to have missed some important information. It is important to allow them to share with you their side of the story.
- **Explain God's Word:** since no sin is ultimately excusable, help this person understand what God says about their action, behavior, choice, etc. If the person responds with an admission of sin, pray together as they confess their sin to Christ. You should pray also, thanking God for your brother or sister's willingness to admit sin and the promise of God to forgive us our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

- Promise to continue praying: your commitment to pray for them in the future will encourage them as they seek to reconcile, restore or make restitution for their sin.
- Follow up: ask them for a follow-up meeting in the near future with a promise to help them reconcile, restore and resolve any issues related to their confessed sin.
- Rejoice: God has allowed you to rescue a soul from the spiritual danger of forfeiting their full reward (2 John 1:8) as well as further ruining their lives with the corrosive effects of sin.

My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth, and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins. (James 5:19-20)

Should the wayward believer refuse to repent and reconcile their lives to the standard of God's Word, the next step must be taken. This step will involve more than one person who will make sure your evaluation and assessment of the sinning believer is accurate.

### **The Third Step – Private Corroboration**

But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. (Matthew 18:16)

The wayward believer may refuse to admit that what they doing is indeed sinful, thus refusing to repent and reconcile to God's Word. In that case, you are to follow up your private conversation with additional conversations in private, bringing other mature believers into the process.

The unrepentant believer may not allow for such a 'meeting'; thus several individuals should try and speak to him whenever they can.

Phone calls, emails, letters are appropriate means to give ample opportunity to corroborate the facts, share concern and challenge the unrepentant one. These contacts will also provide opportunities for loving admonition, correction and, hopefully, restoration.

On the other hand, if these private steps do not produce godly repentance and a desire to reconcile to God's Word, a warning should be provided that there will be further action made in an attempt to win them back to the path of fellowship with Christ and His church.

### **The Fourth Step – Public Confrontation**

If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. (Matthew 18:17) Having failed to rescue the wayward believer through private conversation and corroboration, the next step is public exposure.

Jesus Christ made an unavoidable command, "tell it to the church." The name of the individual is announced in a public worship meeting. The purpose for this step is to allow the church family to become aware that a brother or sister is refusing to reconcile to godly council.

The church is literally called on to confront the sinner, exhorting them to repent and reconcile with Christ, His church and the council of godly men and women who have, and will, approach them.

When the Lord said, "tell it to the church" – what was it that He had in mind? Was it all the facts which led up to this fourth step? Was it information about how all the preceding steps failed? Was it all the sordid details of the individual's sinful behavior?

We believe the answer is found in the key issue regarding sin and its destruction of fellowship. The key issue is a lack of repentance. Every member sitting in the congregation sins! Does every member receive public notice that they have sinned? No.

The issue that leads us to this fourth step of discipline is a refusal to repent. Thus, we tell that to the church. We inform the church of the individual's name and that he or she is refusing to repent and reconcile to the council of the elders.

A mature body of believers will not need to know the details – only that their brother or sister is in danger. They will react immediately with calls, letters and appointments, urging the sinner to repent and follow the council of godly men and women who have already challenged them to heed the warning and repent of their sin.

At this stage of discipline, the elders of the church have become involved. Any public announcement of an unrepentant life, along with the name of the unrepentant believer will have been preceded by prayer, discussion and a unanimous vote of the elders to make this public announcement, thus obeying Christ's command regarding this fourth step, "tell it to the church."

Again, the nature of the announcement is not punitive, but restorative. It is the heart and hope of the elders, along with the entire congregation, that the prodigal come to his senses and return home – home to the fellowship of the saints and with Christ Himself.

Sometime soon after this public announcement, a letter will be sent to the wayward one. The letter will inform the individual that the fourth step has been taken and that the fifth and final step of condemnation/ excommunication will be taken in the near future.

The letter will also warn the individual that unless there is repentance and reconciliation to the council of the elders by such and such a date (as noted in the letter), a formal step will be taken by the elders to view the person as out of fellowship with the local and universal church, barred from the fellowship of the assembly. An announcement of his excommunication will be made to the congregation that the fifth step has been taken.

### **The Fifth Step – Public Condemnation**

In the fourth step, the sinner is exposed. In this fifth and final step of discipline, the sinner is excluded.

Christ instructed, "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church,

let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” (Matthew 18:17)

Paul likewise instructed the church in Corinth to exclude the sinning man from their presence, “You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst.” (1 Corinthians 5:2)

The unrepentant person has effectively chosen his union with sin over union with the assembly. He has chosen to keep his sin rather than keep his place among the worshippers of Christ.

As a result of the wayward believer’s choice to pursue sin rather than Scripture, the unrepentant sinner is to be removed from the church. In other words, the sinner is removed from the protective, nurturing, encouraging, reproving, correcting assembly.

This is Paul’s idea when he writes, “I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” (1 Corinthians 5:5)

In other words, as a result of exclusion, the sinner is handed over to Satan – that is, he is delivered over to experience the full consequences of his immoral or rebellious behavior. He will be abandoned to discover, like the prodigal, that sin does not permanently satisfy. It ultimately degenerates, destroys and ruins the sinner’s life.

The average church often refuses to take this necessary step of condemning sin and excluding prodigal sons and daughters. As a result of inclusion rather than exclusion, the church effectively provides the fatted calf, the sandals and ring while at the same time welcoming the pigs and the pig pen into the Father’s house.

In referring to a local church that embraced the sinner and tolerated immorality, Paul warned them that “a little leaven will leaven the whole lump.” (1 Corinthians 5:6) Whether or not the church admits it, or even recognizes it, the whole church is affected, damaged, discouraged and, to some degree, corrupted as a result of its tolerance of sin.

The church should never subsidize sinners. It is not to be a place that coddles the prodigals – emotionally, spiritually or physically. God has uniquely designed discipline to be a time of warning and awakening.

Prodigals tend to come to their senses in the pig pen. That is where they come to the end of their resources. Oftentimes, it is only then where they long for restoration with the Father and His family. But if the church has never withdrawn its support, encouragement and fellowship from the unrepentant sinner, it has effectively acted as a barrier and hindrance to the discipline of Christ.

## The Participants

### • *What Role Do Elders Play In This Process?*

Exclusion from the body involves action on the part of the church as a whole. It may involve an official vote of the membership to exclude the unrepentant believer, or it may

be an official vote of the elders and the body informed that all attempts to reconcile the sinner to their godly and biblical counsel have been refused.

It is advisable, once a believer in the body has become aware of sin and followed the first few steps, to approach an elder for counsel and support. In the example of 1 Corinthians 5, someone told the Apostle Paul what was going on so that Paul could lend a wise hand to the proceedings. He also exercised significant authority in representing the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ.

There is clear evidence that the leadership of the church [is involved in attempting] to help the offender before turning him over to the entire congregation of admonishing.<sup>5</sup> Paul wrote, “If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame.” (2 Thessalonians 3:14)

God has designed the role of the elder/shepherd to include warning and protecting the church. (Acts 20:28-31) True shepherds of God’s flock love to be involved in search and rescue operations!

### • *How Is The Congregation To Treat Someone Under Discipline?*

The congregation is instructed to respond in a number of ways to an unrepentant person who has been excluded from the assembly:

#### 1. **Treat the excluded person as an unbeliever.**

If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. (Matthew 18:17)

Gentiles and tax collectors are synonymous terms with unbeliever. In other words, treat the individual as if he is unsaved. Your relationship is no longer close and intimate, but guarded.

#### 2. **Withhold social fellowship from the wayward one.**

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. (2 Thessalonians 3:6)

Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. (Romans 16:17)

These texts make it clear that fellowship is withheld. Civil, yet unattached. Once a disciplined person has been excluded from the fellowship of the assembly, the primary reason you would be around them would be for the specific purpose of encouraging and challenging them to repent.

#### 3. **Warn and make loving appeals for them to repent and reconcile with the church, whenever contact is made.**

The Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to



the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will. (2 Timothy 2:24-25)

If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame. Yet, do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother. (2 Thessalonians 3:14-15)

#### 4. Reveal true love and care for the wayward believer when in their presence.

Although your friendship is thwarted and stymied because of their sin, you may still find contact with them unavoidable. They may be a coworker or even a family member. The path of communication can remain open, for the purpose of reminding them of what they've walked away from ... what they've forfeited.

Someone may object and say that discipline isn't a very loving thing to do!

Well, suppose a man is walking past his neighbor's house around midnight. He sees flames of fire and smells smoke coming from his neighbor's house. He rushes up to the window and looks in. Sure enough, there is a huge fire that has engulfed the living room and is working its way to the back bedrooms where the family is sleeping.

Should he awaken them? Surely, they are comfortably asleep, not wanting to be disturbed.

Waking them to the news of this fire is really going to turn their lives upside down. Imagine the difficulty ... the headache ... the trouble you will cause them.

Wouldn't they rather be left alone? Besides it would be embarrassing for them to have to run outside in their pajamas!

Would this be the loving response to a situation that threatens the lives of sleeping neighbors? No. The loving thing to do would be to disturb them! To bang on the door, jump up and down, shout and holler until they awaken to their danger and rush to safety. The most unloving, self-centered thing to do would be to walk on by without any care for the peril of friends who are inside the house.

Likewise, the most unloving thing for the church to do with a wayward believer is ignore the fire ... to refuse to pound on the door and warn them ... to complacently watch the fire burn without an attempt to awaken them to their peril.

Discipline is the action of a loving church that attempts to awaken the sinning believer who is being deceived by the pleasure of sin. It is the loving, firm, caring and passionate attempt to rescue those who are in great peril.

#### • *If The Congregation Excluded All The Sinners, Who Is Worthy Of Attending?*

Discipline and exclusion from the assembly of believers is not performed on sinning believers. If this were the case, no one would show up next Sunday morning!

Discipline is enacted on sinning believers who refuse to repent. Those who flaunt their immorality without pause or prudence. These unrepentant believers become the leaven – a metaphor for evil influence – and the church is commanded to remove the leaven from the lump. (1 Corinthians 5:6-7)

Paul commanded the church to preserve its purity by removing the leaven. In so doing, the church was removing an evil influence so that others would not be tempted to follow or imitate the rebelling believer who seemed to be getting away with his sin.

#### • *If The Congregation Avoids Sinners, How Will We Ever Reach The World?*

There is a huge difference, reflected in the Scripture, between the treatment of a sinning unbeliever and a sinning believer. If you misunderstand this difference in the biblical instruction regarding treatment of unbelievers and believers, you'll misunderstand the nature and purpose of church discipline.

Paul continues beyond his instruction regarding the exclusion of the immoral man (1 Corinthians 5) to clarify this important distinction: "I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler; not even to eat with such a one." (1 Corinthians 5:9-11)

The Apostle clearly distinguishes between the unbeliever – whom we are to introduce to the name of Christ, with the sinning believer – whom we discipline in the name of Christ.

In other words, the sinning unbeliever needs to be exposed to the church; the unrepentant believer needs to be exposed by the church.

The mission of the church is two-fold:

- we are to deliver the gospel of God to the unrepentant unbeliever; and
- we are to deliver the discipline of God to the unrepentant believer.

Consider this distinction: A sinning unbeliever is welcome in your home, your church, your back yard swimming pool and your family picnic. They need to hear the gospel and see it lived out in your life. But a sinning believer is to be avoided as an illustration to them that their fellowship with Christ has also been withdrawn.

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life. (2 Thessalonians 3:6)

- *Did Jesus Ever Condemn Or Shame Anyone In Public?*

Absolutely. In fact, a direct parallel could be made between Christ's treatment of Pharisees and the church's treatment of unrepentant believers.

- **Jesus brought public shame on individuals.**

Many Pharisees kept the external laws of Moses but harbored sinful deeds in private. Jesus, who knew the hearts of his audience, openly referred to them as hypocrites. The Greek word for hypocrite literally referred to someone who, "acted upon a stage; in those days actors held masks in front of their faces ... thus, today a hypocrite is one who appears to be something or someone he is not."<sup>6</sup>

The Lord had this in mind when he said, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like white-washed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness." (Matthew 23:27-28)

Talk about public shame!

On another occasion, Jesus actually told Jewish leaders that their father was the devil. (John 8:44) That was not only public humiliation but extremely embarrassing to the Jewish sense of pride in being related to their 'father' Abraham.

- **Jesus brought public shame on corrupt business.**

Another illustration of public shame occurred when Christ condemned the entire temple system of money exchanging as corrupt business – a violation of God's purpose for the temple. The Lord drove these merchants out of the temple with a whip, overturning their tables and scattering their coins in the process. He then called the lot of them a bunch of thieves! (Matthew 21:12-13) This was certainly public condemnation and shame!

As in the case of contemporary church discipline, our Lord's ultimate purpose for saying and doing these things was not really to embarrass anybody – though it was embarrassing and shaming – but to awaken them to their sinful practice.

- **Jesus brought public shame on entire cities.**

The Lord publicly shamed entire cities, calling them by name. Matthew records, "Then He began to denounce the cities in which most of His miracles were done, because they did not repent. Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes." (Matthew 11:20-21)

Was it embarrassing to the chamber of commerce in Bethsaida? You bet. How did the mayor feel? He probably considered not running for re-election!

But the Lord wasn't finished yet. Jesus continued on in his sermon that afternoon to publicly bring shame on the city of Capernaum with a stinging rebuke, "And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day. Nevertheless I say to you that it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for you." (Matthew 11:23-24)

Imagine telling a city it was on its way to hell or telling an entire population that they were worse off than the Sodomites in the coming judgment.

While church discipline will not call us today to condemn entire cities to hell, it does include the element of shame. Public shame and exposure, as described in the New Testament letters, has a way of getting the attention of the defiant believer toward the seriousness of their condition.

Paul commanded this kind of public exposure when he taught, "If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame." (2 Thessalonians 3:14)

- *But I Thought Jesus Was A Friend Of Sinners?*

Didn't He hang around corrupt people like tax-collectors and harlots? Yes, He did.

Someone might say, "Well, now I'm confused. If Jesus was a friend of sinners and ate meals with people like prostitutes and shady business men, why did He treat the Pharisees with such anger, contempt and condemnation?"

Luke's gospel provides the answer. He recorded that Jesus Christ came into the world to seek and save those who were lost. (Luke 19:20) That is why He hung around lost people. You cannot save the lost if you refuse to spend time with them!

- *If Jesus Spent Time With Sinners, Why Would The Church Exclude Them?*

Don't overlook the fact that, at the same time Jesus spent time with sinful people, He also exposed and condemned the corrupt religious hypocrites of His day and would not tolerate them in His presence. In fact, He consistently sent the Pharisees packing!

Our Lord's treatment of individuals is consistent with the church's pattern of treatment today. A religious 'Christian' who refuses to repent of sin is excluded from the church while an unbeliever who has yet to come to faith in Christ is encouraged to attend church – he needs to hear the gospel!

The Apostle Paul had the same treatment in mind when he wrote, "I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, ... I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person." (1 Corinthians 5:9-11)

We must keep in mind this important distinction between the treatment of unbelievers and believers:

*Exposed:* A sinning unbeliever needs to be exposed to Christ and the gospel through the influence of individual believers and a Bible-believing church.

*Excluded:* A sinning believer needs to be challenged, warned, rebuked and ultimately excluded from the assembly if they ignore the reconciling efforts of the church.

The Lord Jesus and Paul both treated these two categories of people the same way and they instructed us to do the same.

#### • *Do Genuine Christians Sin?*

Even genuine Christian sins. In fact, we all battle our flesh and fail in that battle more than we want to admit. (Romans 7:18-19)

Proof of genuine faith is sorrow over sin. Therefore, the mark of a genuine Christian is eventual and repeated repentance.

Sins such as gluttony, gossip, lust and covetousness may be a daily battle for the believer. There will be moments of failure and victory — sometimes all in the same day. However, once a person resigns from the battle and begins to persist in sinning without any apparent desire to repent and acknowledge Christ's authority and standard in their life, discipline must be used to reprove, rebuke and warn them.

#### • *What Should The Church Do If A Leader Is Caught In Sin?*

This problem is not a new one. In 1529, Ulrich Zwingli compromised his earlier practice of discipline and refused to practice it any longer after his church became a member of the reformed state church in Zurich. He changed his view because, as he warned, the practice of discipline and excommunication toward unrepentant sinners "would cost too many preachers." In other words, sinful pastors would need to be dismissed and the church couldn't afford to lose them.

God's Word would say otherwise — the church cannot afford to keep them! Paul wrote that even spiritual leaders should be exposed and rebuked; not shuttled away and hidden from judgment; not protected from consequences; not sent to another congregation, parish or part of the country — but exposed and dealt with.

Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses. Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning. (1 Timothy 5:19-20)

Paul gave specific instructions that an elder should be accused of sinful living only after several witness have corroborated sinful behavior. If the accusation turns out to be true, public ministry must cease immediately. Because of his sinful behavior and choices, now made public, he has forfeited his right and ability to speak with credibility. He

is no longer above reproach; literally, 'without a handle.' (1 Timothy 3:2)

God intended His messengers to practice what they preach. Hypocrisy in the pew is nowhere near as destructive and discouraging to a church as hypocrisy in the pulpit.

One of Paul's greatest fears was personal hypocrisy — preaching one thing and yet being disqualified by not personally applying truth to his own life. He wrote, "But I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified." (1 Corinthians 9:27)

Certainly, the very nature of public ministry demands a greater benefit of the doubt given to any rumor or accusation. Satan loves to discredit the testimony of choice servants of Christ, and many a leader has been ruined by false testimony and rumor. The very nature of public ministry draws judgment, opinion and criticism. Therefore, the church should be careful in collaborating the truth, especially when the accusations are leveled against a leader.

In spite of deferential honor and respect (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13), an elder is not above the holy standard of God. If anything, he is more highly accountable because of his public position and, as James reminded the church and its leaders, God's own judgment will be stricter because of their public role in teaching the Word. (James 3:1)

### **The Product**

#### • *What Are The Biblical Evidences Of Repentance?*

Should the discipline of a wayward believer accomplish its divine goals, the prodigal will exhibit true repentance.

Repentance is a change of direction — a confession of sin followed by the desire to make restitution, rebuild relationships and, in general, make everything right.

#### **The evidences of true repentance will be:**

- honestly acknowledging their sin; (Psalm 51:2-3; 1 John 1:9)
- discontinuing the sinful behavior which initiated discipline; (James 5:19-20)
- seeking after biblical counsel, if needed, to gain victory over sinful patterns of behavior; (Acts 26:20)
- making financial restitution if necessary; (Luke 19:8)
- initiating confession and asking forgiveness from all parties involved; (Matthew 5:23-24)
- exhibiting a spirit of humility and brokenness, revealing a true work of God's Spirit. (Psalm 51:17)

- *What Is The Difference Between Temporary Remorse And Genuine Repentance?*

| <u>Remorse</u>  | <u>Repentance</u>   |
|---|---|
| Short lived   | Long term   |
| Involves emotions   | Involves emotion and will   |
| Distressed by sins' consequences                                      | Distraught by their sinful actions  |
| Makes vague resolutions   | Makes specific restitution  |
| Wants public attention  | Humbly accepts obscurity  |
| Desires immediate return to positions of ministry/authority           | Recognizes need to rebuild trust over time                                    |
| Makes external displays of contrition                                 | Reveals internal development and change                                       |
| Finds fault in how they are treated in the process                    | Exhibits submission to the humbling process of discipline                     |
| Hesitates to follow counsel in relation to reconciliation/restitution | Initiates action toward restoring broken relationships and making restitution |

With the Holy Spirit's guidance, these characteristics will enable a discerning church to recognize, over time, whether or not the individual is truly repentant or merely remorseful.

- *Shouldn't We Just Forgive Everybody Anyway, Regardless of True Repentance?*

Oftentimes, the following conversation between Peter and Christ is misunderstood and misapplied.

"Then Peter came and said to Him, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.'" (Matthew 18:21-22)

People take this passage and create a form of subjective sentimentality. As a result, many Christians today are running around forgiving everybody. They are misguided in their effort to reveal a [distorted] definition of unconditional love and forgiveness toward a defiant believer who hasn't even repented yet! Much less asked for forgiveness.

They overlook another statement by the Lord, "Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him." (Luke 17:3)

The average church today says, "Well, let's just forgive him and not worry about it – let's certainly not exclude him from coming to church!" So they end up overlooking the sin and refusing to confront the sinner. They erringly believe that unconditional love means you never deal with judgment and accountability to holy and honest behavior.

Jesus Christ clearly stated, "If he repents ... forgive him."

In other words, forgiveness comes only after repentance. Without repentance, we are not to forgive the sinning brother.

When Peter asked the Lord that question, he would have been referring to a brother who sinned, then repented and asked forgiveness. His question could be amplified to read, "How many times do I forgive someone who sins against me and then repents, asking forgiveness?" And the Lord's answer was simple – forgive him as many times as he repents and asks for forgiveness ... even if it's 490 times!

- *What Are The Benefits Of Church Discipline?*

### 1. The integrity of the church is preserved.

An interesting discovery is found in the attitude of the world toward the church. The church that confronts sin is a church that is respected by the world. Though unloved and perhaps ridiculed, the true church is respected.

On the other hand, the church that ignores sin and refuses to stand for truth will ultimately lose credibility in the world's eyes which intuitively knows already what is truly right from wrong. (Romans 2:14)

Modern church growth movements seek to make people comfortable with sin. In fact, they choose never to use words in the assembly like 'sin,' 'hell' and 'judgment.' The end result is a spiritually neutered church without any power to reproduce since it has abandoned the very nature of the gospel – mankind is sinful and needs redemption from its depraved condition. (Romans 3)

The accompanying loss of respect by the world is obvious. The American culture today views the church as simply one more club to join; one more place to be seen; one more location to pass out business cards. The church has simply lost its reputation as a holy community of people, viewed by the world with a mixture of fear and awe as a holy people who represent a righteous God.

The reputation of the church in Acts is no longer experienced in America. "But none of the rest dared to associate with them; however, the people held them in high esteem." (Acts 5:13) This text followed an act of discipline upon sinful believers.

It would be good for any church to remember the vast difference between drawing a crowd, and building a Christ-honoring church.

### 2. The honor of God's name is promoted.

A holy God is to be introduced to the world by a people pursuing holy living. (1 Peter 2:9) The true church is not made up of believers who have never sinned; it is made up of believers who sin and then repent. Discipline is reserved for those who are unwilling to repent and return to a united effort to represent a holy God. Their sin becomes public, thus discrediting the holy reputation of God's own name.

When the church confronts sin, obeying God's standard for the treatment of unrepentant sinners, it literally protects and promotes the reputation of God!



“As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, You shall be holy, for I am holy.” (1 Peter 1:14-16)

### 3. Pure doctrine is protected.

For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach for the sake of sordid gain. (Titus 1:10-12) Paul went on to instruct the church on how to deal with a false teacher that threatened the doctrinal purity of the church.

But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and strife and disputes about the Law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. Reject a factious man after a first and second warning, knowing that such a man is perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned. (Titus 3:9-10)

The original word translated factious is the Greek word *hairetikos* which gives us the transliterated English word – heretic. This word refers to a “self-chosen teaching” as opposed to God’s revelation.<sup>7</sup>

Paul clearly tells the church to reject – to leave out of the assembly – someone who rejects the doctrine of Scripture, choosing instead their own form of teaching over God’s revealed truth.

### 4. A rescue of wayward believers is performed.

A believer who persists in unrepentant sin is in danger of at least two things:

– *forfeiting his full reward*

The Apostle John warned the believers to watch themselves, keeping out of the way of false teachers who encouraged disobedience. He indicated that those who stayed faithful to Christ would receive, “a full reward.” (2 John 1:8)

This text implies that believers who failed to walk faithfully would, in fact, forfeit their full reward – rewards dispensed by Christ to the believer who is called to give an account of his lifestyle.

Paul wrote of this coming day of reckoning for the believer. The Bema seat (judgment seat of Christ) will be that final judgment for believers only; a time of determining what was profitable and unprofitable in the life and walk of the true Christian. The judgment will not be made to determine acceptance into heaven, but authenticity on earth. Paul gives us a picture of that scene, “Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work. If any man’s work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.” (1 Corinthians 3:12-15)

We believe the “loss” Paul is referring to is the loss of a full reward.

– *losing his full life*

Paul referred to believers in Corinth who had died prematurely because they approached the Lord’s table with unrepentant sin. He wrote, “For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep.” (1 Corinthians 11:29-30)

The reference to “sleeping” did not teach some sort of limbo, but referred to the actual physical death of those who were unrepentant.

The person who practices sin without any evidence of discipline from the Lord is actually the one who should fear most. As the writer of Hebrews suggested, an unrepentant sinner who never seems to face any sort of discipline may not actually belong to God’s family. “But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.” (Hebrews 12:8)

We have every reason to assume that Ananias and Sapphira were believers who had fallen into the sin of lying. Why? Because God dealt swiftly with them, taking their lives, as a way of warning the new institution of the church that He would not tolerate sin. (Acts 5:1-11) That act of severe discipline may very well have meant they were Christians and that God took their lives prematurely because of the danger their hypocrisy posed to themselves and to the church.

Discipline then may not be proof of unbelief, but belief! The opposite is also true – the absence of discipline is not proof that God is pleased, but that He may not love the individual as one of His own children, “for whom the Lord loves, He disciplines.” (Hebrews 12:6)

### 5. A warning to the assembly is pronounced.

When an unrepentant believer is held accountable through church discipline, those in the assembly are given a clear warning of their own sin – or temptation they may be encountering.

It is not unusual for leaders to receive testimonies from individuals, testifying that they were rescued from sin by observing discipline taking place in the assembly.

This is precisely the result Paul had in mind when he wrote, “Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning.” (1 Timothy 5:20)

- *What About The Person Who Wrongs Us And Refuses To Apologize And Repent?*

While you cannot fully restore your relationship and express forgiveness before them, you can forgive them before God. In other words, with the help of the Holy Spirit, you can adopt the attitude of Stephen who prayed for those who literally took his life. (Acts 7:60)

This attitude of ‘forgiveness before God’ will keep your own heart from becoming filled with bitterness and

resentment toward those who wrong you and refuse to ask forgiveness. You will cast this burden on the Lord, understanding that He, more than anyone else, can feel the pain and sorrow of your mistreatment.

As you humbly accept the disappointment of these situations, keeping your eyes on Christ, you grow more deeply in Him and truly come to know the fellowship of His sufferings. (Philippians 3:10)

- *Are Unrepentant People Who Are Disciplined Genuine Christians?*

It is impossible to determine true salvation. Furthermore, it is unnecessary. We discipline individuals as if they are believers, leaving to God the final verdict.

It is possible to sin unto death – to sin and refuse to repent to the point that Christ takes that person home early. This truth is clearly taught by the Apostle John who wrote, “If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death. There is a sin leading to death.” (1 John 5:16)

But who would want to risk it? Who among us would want to say, “I will refuse to repent, but I am sure of heaven.”

One text in particular should give terrifying pause to any unrepentant person who believes they will go to heaven, even if they leave the church.

They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us. (1 John 2:19)

- *What If A Person Leaves Our Church And Goes Somewhere Else?*

We believe in the local and universal church of Jesus Christ. In other words, a person cannot leave our church under discipline and expect fellowship in another church.

Can you imagine the individual in Corinth being excluded from the assembly and saying, “This isn’t a problem ... I’ll just ride my donkey over to the church in Ephesus ... they’ll let me in over there.” Not hardly.

To be out of fellowship with one church is to be out of fellowship with the church. In other words, to be out of fellowship with any one church is to be out of fellowship with every church!

Therefore, we will not recommend an individual to another church, should they leave and try to attend another. We also will not accept an individual who has been involved in unresolved conflict in another assembly.

Furthermore, while an individual currently under the disciplinary process may resign their membership, we will remain committed to obeying the Scriptures by completing the process of discipline.

Should the person not have been a member of our church, following the third step – private corroboration

– the board of elders will communicate to the unrepentant individual that they are forbidden from any further participation or attendance. No further, public steps will be taken regarding this individual, except that of reconciliation should the individual repent. Upon repentance and an agreement to follow the council of the elders, in accord with the doctrine and practice of our church, an invitation to return will be extended. If the individual has membership at our church, we believe there is a special sense of accountability to the flock from which this wayward member has wandered. Thus, both private and public steps will be taken.

- *What Should You Do If You Know About Someone Involved In Sin?*

Several principles could be followed as guidelines:

- Be sure it is an offense that calls for discipline and not a personal difference of opinion.
- Remember how we too have sinned and are capable of committing the same offense.
- Bring the matter before the Lord in prayer.
- Don’t gossip about this person to others.
- Don’t procrastinate in planning to meet with the wayward believer.
- Talk to an elder about the situation and follow godly counsel.

- *What Do You Do When Disciplined Individuals Repent And Seek Reconciliation?*

– **Rejoice!**

God’s plan of warning, rebuking and convicting through His church has brought forth the fruit of repentance.

– **Reconcile!**

Don’t hesitate to re-establish your relationship with the returning prodigal with open arms. This will reinforce and strengthen their commitment to follow Christ and reconcile fully with the church.

– **Reaffirm!**

You are experiencing the ‘end of the story’ found in 2 Corinthians 2. What a happy day! Evidently, from what Paul wrote in this text, the immoral man repented of his sin and made his desire known to rejoin the fellowship of believers. Discipline worked!

Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which was inflicted by the majority (action taken in 1 Corinthians 5:2-5), so that on the contrary you should rather forgive and comfort him, otherwise such a one might be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. Wherefore I urge you to reaffirm your love for him. (2 Corinthians 2:6-8)

Once this man responded to his discipline and confessed his sin, the church was instructed to receive him back with loving forgiveness and affirmation. What a thrill it must have been in Corinth to receive back into fellowship the one who strayed.

Likewise, depending on the public nature and the exposure of the one who was disciplined, restore him with equal publicity, forgiveness and affirmation. The repentant believer will only be helped as the news is broadcast to as many people as possible. Publicly, before the assembly, re-introduce him back into the body with the thrilling news of his repentance and reconciliation.

While you're at it, dinner on the grounds in honor of the reconciled brother might be a great way to end the day of celebration ... the prodigal has come home!

#### Resources

- 1 Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary Of The New Testament*; (Eerdmans Publishing), 1985, p. 92.
- 2 Carl Laney, *A Guide To Church Discipline*; (Bethany House Publishers), p. 14.
- 3 Fritz Rienecker/Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key To The Greek New Testament*; (Regency), 1976, p. 237.
- 4 John Armstrong, *The Compromised Church*; (Crossway Books), 1998, p. 175.
- 5 Jay Adams, *Handbook Of Church Discipline*; (Zondervan), 1986, p. 70.
- 6 Ralph Earle, *Word Meanings In The New Testament*; (Baker Book House), 1974, p. 5.
- 7 Fritz Rienecker/Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key To The Greek New Testament*; (Regency), 1976, p. 657.

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