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"If Your Brother Sins"

- Mt 18:15

The term "church discipline" often conjures up memories of heretics being tortured on the rack, beheaded, or burned at the stake. In the Massachusetts Bay Colony, "witches" were hung, drunks were locked in pillories, and adulteresses had to wear the letter "A" on their breasts to mark them for life. Furthermore, the topic of church discipline is rarely discussed and even more rarely practiced in the modern church. Where church discipline is discussed, one often hears cries of, "Judge not, lest ye be judged" or "Let he who has not sinned cast the first stone." In those few churches where it is practiced, oftentimes it is left up to "the" pastor, a board of elders, or a diaconate to dismiss the offending church member. This is not the NT pattern.

Why is it that church discipline is rarely, if ever, practiced in our local churches today? Why are Christian marriages being ripped apart in record numbers? Why are Christians allowed to continue indefinitely in unreconciled relationships?

The apostle Paul, aware of the hazardous effects of unrepentant sin, admonishes the Corinthians, "Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast-as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed" (1 Co 5:6-7). If we are to expect the blessing of God, we must with great zeal honor God in our congregations by faithfully disciplining unrepentant sinners (Nu 25). God is honored by properly administered church discipline and is greatly dishonored by its absence.

The size of most churches of the modern era often makes the practice of church discipline difficult. The best place for a tree to hide is in the forest. It is difficult, if not impossible, to be intimate with a crowd of people and to know what issues are pressing in their lives. However, in the smaller house church, it is hard to hide. Sooner or later our sins will reveal themselves, and correction will be administered. The close community of the small home church lends itself to this practice of church discipline. It is not only easier to detect sin in a house church, but it can be easier for the offender to accept rebuke from people who know and love him.

In this chapter we will first examine the procedures for church discipline spoken by Jesus in Mt 18:15-20. Then, we will attempt to determine who the proper candidates for church discipline are and also how the church is to treat those individuals undergoing church discipline. Lastly, we will look at some common objections given for not practicing church discipline.

Because of the misconceptions of church discipline that many people have, it is essential that we examine what the Bible says concerning church discipline procedures. In the OT, discipline was often carried out by execution, banishment, or monetary restitution. It must be remembered, however, that Israel was a theocracy; i.e., governed by God. The Christian church slipped into a corruption of this pattern around the time of Constantine, after Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire. Many horrible practices occurred as a result of this unholy marriage between

church and state. Athanasius of Alexandria was exiled from his home no less than six times because he defended the deity of Christ. Many died on the rack and at the stake under the Spanish Inquisition. John Bunyan was jailed twelve years in England for preaching without a license. This is not the NT pattern. The procedure that should be carried out is as follows:

- 1) The offended brother should confront the offending brother alone.
- 2) If the offending brother does not repent, then the brother first offended confronts him again, this time with one or two more witnesses.
- 3) If the offending brother still does not repent, the offense is reported to the church.
- 4) If the offending brother does not repent after being confronted by the church, then the church does not associate with him. This is the fullest extent of the punishment, and never is the state to enforce this decision.
- 5) If the offending brother repents at any stage of this process, the church forgives him and the church discipline process stops at that point.

Matthew 18:15 states that the first step in church discipline is for the offended brother to go and confront the offending brother alone, and if he repents he has won his brother. Note that a "brother" committed the offense. The Greek word here is *adelphos*, meaning a member of the Christian community. It must be left up to God to judge those outside the church (1 Co 5:13). That the offense represents a violation of the law of Christ is indicated by the Greek word *hamartano*, translated "trespasses" or "sins." This is not referring to disagreement over something such as how he cuts his hair, but to a real transgression of Scripture. The offended brother is to "show him his fault." A one word synonym for this phrase would be "rebuke." The offended brother is to rebuke the offending brother privately. The first confrontation is to be a private matter. Then, Jesus says, if he hears you, you have gained or won your brother. This is the goal of any and all church discipline. If this happens, the process stops. It goes no further. Some of you may say, "Well, this goes on in my church all the time; we admonish each other frequently." Great! You are practicing the first step in church discipline.

In the event that your brother ignores you the first time, then you take witnesses with you, which is the second step in church discipline. This is a parallel to OT law. An Israeli could not be convicted of a capital crime unless there was more than one witness. The purpose of the witness is to corroborate every word spoken by the offending brother. This step prevents the "my word against yours" situation.

If the offending brother ignores both the offended brother and the witnesses, then the case is taken to the church (the church being defined as the local assembly). If this brother ignores even the whole church, then he is not to be associated with, which is the meaning of the phrase, "let him be to you as a heathen and a tax collector." Tax collectors and the Gentiles were seen as enemies. There are two points to note here: the corporate church carries out the final step of church discipline, and the local church is the final "court" where this case can be heard. To give to a pastor, board of elders or deacons the power to exercise this final step of church discipline is to give to one man or board too much power. Jesus gives that power to the local Christian assembly alone.

Who are the proper candidates for church discipline? While most Christians would agree that some

form of church discipline is necessary for maintaining order and decency in the church, there is disagreement regarding when to apply the four steps of church discipline taught in Mt 18:15-20. In other words, what type(s) of "sin" did Jesus have in mind when he spoke in Mt 18? Verse 15 says, "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over." Notice that Jesus does not elaborate as to the nature of the sin in 18:15. He simply says, "If your brother has sinned against you, go and show him his fault." Paul, in 1 Co 5, mentions several sins that would warrant the implementation of church discipline. Paul says in 5:11, "you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat." Paul is not advocating that only the sinless can be members of the church; rather he is concerned about those who persist in the very activities from which they have been freed through the sacrifice of the Passover lamb (v 7). Are we to see Paul's lists of sins in 1 Co 5 as an exhaustive list? Could we not add to Paul's list many more sins? What about husbands who beat their wives, or wives who are rebellious toward their husbands? Are marriages out of the jurisdiction of church discipline?

Jay Adams, who has written numerous books on counseling and church discipline, says, "Strangely, some never think of using church discipline, even informal discipline, when the two parties are husband and wife. Why not? A Christian husband and wife are not merely married persons, they are also brother and sister in Christ's church. Most marital problems could be resolved early by active, informal disciplinary action" (*Handbook of Church Discipline*, 36).

In no place does Scripture delineate between those sins that warrant church discipline and those that don't. All sin is serious, and, if left unchecked in a believer, could result in the Christian's spiritual demise. Christians confronting one another, one-on-one, in love and humility, is a normal part of a healthy, growing church. At this point someone might ask the question, "Do I have to go to my brother about every little offense?" The answer is no. Pr 10:12 says that love covers a multitude of sins. Pr 19:11 says that to overlook an offense is a glorious thing. If we had to bring up every annoyance between us we would probably spend all our time doing so.

Any offense that does not come between us and the one who committed the offense does not need to be raised. However, if the offense creates an unreconciled state between us and another the offense must be brought up and dealt with. Any matter what makes you feel different toward that person or hinders your ability to cover over the offense with love must be dealt with. Of course, there are a few who take advantage of the discipline process and spend an unnecessary amount of time confronting others. These individuals need to be taught the virtue of overlooking an offense, and if they refuse to learn, they themselves may become divisive and may need to be confronted by others.

Most church discipline cases will be settled in steps one or two without advancing any further. However, there are times when the offender refuses to listen and thus forces the matter to steps three and four (where the entire church enters the discipline process). By moving from step two to step three the offender has displayed willful disobedience and is now treading on serious ground. Now that the matter has come before the church, what is the church's responsibility toward the offender? According to the Scriptures, the following requirements must be adhered to if biblical church discipline is to be properly administered:

- a) "Special note" must be made of the offender (2 Th 3:14). What Paul means is that the offender is to be identified to the whole church.
- b) "Do not associate with him" (2 Th 3:14; 1 Co 5:11).

c) "Keep away" from him (2 Th 3:6). Thayer's *Greek-English Lexicon* says, "to abstain from familiar intercourse with one."

d) "With such a man do not even eat." (1 Co 5:11). Eating with someone is a sign of fellowship.

It should be noted that these requirements given by the Apostle Paul are not just advice, but commands (2 Th 3:6). During the third step of the discipline process, if the offender continues in willful disobedience, the church is to withdraw from him. That is, to disassociate from him in order that he may feel ashamed (2 Th 3:14) and as a consequence come to repentance. The church is still to regard the offender "as a brother" (2 Th 3:15), but as one whose status is in question. For fear that the offender may find justification for his rebellious actions, it is essential that every church member avoid normal fellowship with him. Any contact with the offender should consist of encouraging him to repent and obey the instructions of the church. Refusing fellowship is the very thing Paul is commanding in step three. This is not to be confused with step four, which is "removing from the midst," or "handing over to Satan." If the offender fails to heed the warning of the church he is to be removed from the church and handed over to Satan, "so that the flesh may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord" (1 Co 5:5). The offender is no longer considered to be a believer, but must be treated "as a pagan and a tax collector" (Mt 18:17). While the church makes no final judgment as to the heart condition of the offender, it must judge his words and actions (1 Co 5:12-13).

Church discipline is a blessing and a privilege provided by the Lord to aid in the restoration of sinning members. Sadly, in the church today, there are those who object to its practice. The following are some common objections that are often given in defense of not practicing church discipline.

1) "Church discipline is not loving." God, who is Love, is the very One who commands that discipline be practiced in the church (Mt 18). Jesus, speaking to the church in Laodicea, says "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent" (Re 3:19). If we are to imitate the love of Jesus we must care enough about our brothers to reprove them whenever they are caught in a sin (Ga 6:1-2).

2) "To implement church discipline on someone would be judging them." Mt 7:1-5 is often cited for support of this objection. That Mt 7:1-5 is not an absolute statement forbidding all forms of judging is seen in 7:6. Jesus says, "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs." In order for Christians to obey Jesus' command, they must make a decision (or a judgment) as to who qualifies as dogs and pigs. What Jesus does forbid in Mt 7:1-5 is hypocritical judging. There is a world of difference between the sinful act of hypocritical judging (Mt 7:1-5) and the restorative act of judging of which Paul speaks (1 Co 5:3-5, 12-13).

3) "Church discipline could cause divisions." Unity is of supreme value within the church. But unity at the expense of obedience is artificial unity at best. Today's church has become more concerned about not offending its tithing members than it has about obeying Christ's commands. Church discipline, properly administered, will strengthen the church and bring about biblical unity (Eph 4:13).

Church discipline is not only a biblical commandment but also a right and privilege of every member of the church, and therefore should not be withheld. Churches that refuse to follow God's program for church discipline can, in the end, expect to find themselves disciplined by God Himself (1 Co 11:31-32).

- B.G. and D.J.

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