**Isn’t Discipline Unloving?**

**Due to the tremendous misunderstanding, neglect, misuse and abuse of discipline within the church we will look at this subject at length. If discipline is unloving then God is unloving. (Hebrews 12:6-8)**

**My child recently was riding in the van with my wife and me and she was being disobedient. Because of her disobedience there was a consequence of her actions in that she was unable to listen to one of her favorite songs. When we did this she said to us, “I thought you liked me.” We do like her and deeply love her enough to teach her that there are boundaries to follow for her own good and we have to apply discipline if she does not want to follow them. These teachings are made to show her that she cannot do everything she may desire. Some of those desires will have her end up in a bad situation one day if not corrected. Many people try to use the same tactics when it comes to the truth about many things in God’s word. If you confront to try to help, many take offense and say, “I thought you liked me.”**

**Corrective church discipline refers to action taken by an assembly or member of an assembly to maintain the purity and love of that community. In Matthew 18:15-21 Jesus lists the steps for corrective discipline. First one member approaches another brother or sister. Then he brings another witness. Finally, the church excludes an unrepentant brother or sister. Every Step of the above is church discipline. Excluding the member is merely the final step done when the erring brother refuses to repent. It is done for the restoration of the brother and maintains the purity of the body.**

**1. WHY CHURCHES FAIL TO EXERCISE CORRECTIVE DISCIPLINE**

**Many churches throughout the world today fail to carry out their responsibilities regarding church discipline. These churches ignore the clear instructions given in God's Word on this topic. There are many reasons why this is so:**

**A. Some Are Apathetic - They do not shepherd their sheep and therefore are unaware of habitual sin that may enter into the life of one or more of it's members. In fact, some churches are so lax in the area of shepherding, that they do not know who is a member and who is not a member. Sheep wander in and out like a revolving door. The shepherds of these flocks need to be sobered up to the fact that they will give an account before God for their respective flocks. (I Peter 5:1-4; Acts 20:28-31)**

**B. Some Believe It Is "Unloving" - They believe the church is to be "all loving" and therefore never "judge" a brother or a sister. They feel their responsibility is to keep a "loving arm" around the members at all times and eventually God will bring them around. This type of thinking distorts the biblical definition of love. For Godly love does not allow a wayward brother or sister to continue on in their sin. God does not allow for this and neither should the church. (I John 3:6-9; I Cor. 5:12-13; Galatians 6:1)**

**C. Some Believe It Is "Harsh" - It is a cruel thing to confront someone about their sin. After all doesn't the Bible say "He who is without sin, cast the first stone...?" Doesn't this tell us not to confront others about their sin? Even in the above mentioned passage this is not the case. For Jesus himself went on to tell the woman caught in adultery; "Go now and leave your life of sin." Though confronting someone about their sin may be a difficult thing to do, it certainly instructs us to approach our brother when he is caught in a sin for the purpose of helping him, not hurting him. (Matthew 18:15; Matthew 7:3-5; Galatians 6:1)**

**D. Some Fail To Discipline Out Of Fear - What will the other members of the church think of such action? If some don't like this they may leave or divide the church. Why rock the boat? This thinking is erroneous and a compromise to the Scriptures. In fact, failure to discipline will do more harm to the church than good. Christ himself rebukes the church of Thyatira for not disciplining as it should have (Rev. 2:20-21). The apostle Paul also refutes this type of thinking; reminding the Corinthians that a little sin will eventually infect the whole church (I Cor. 5:6-8).**

**E. Some Fail To Discipline Because Of Unbelief - They think they know better than God how to handle the matter. Putting a person out of the assembly and shunning the ones who have sinned is not the answer. They know a better way, a more "loving," "gentle" way to deal with the problem. Yet, Proverbs 3:5-6 clearly teaches us to trust God in everything. His ways are not our ways. His thoughts are not our thoughts. He is the one who knows the best way to deal with His children. It is therefore our responsibility to believe Him and trust Him even in the matters that seem difficult for us.**

**F. Some Discipline Behind Closed Doors - Some churches attempt to discipline wayward members, but not bring it before the church. They feel that the "leaders" need to handle these matters and that the church is not "mature" enough to handle such things. Matters like this will only upset them and confuse them. Unfortunately, a church misses out on many blessings by adhering to this type of thinking. The church at Jerusalem was struck with fear and learned a tremendous lesson through the discipline of Annanias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11). God will use church discipline to not only sanctify the wayward believer, but also to purify the church.**

**2. Discipline Defined and Supported**

**A. Disciplined defined**

**a. Church discipline has been defined as: "The due exercise of that authority and power which the Lord Christ, in and by His Word, hath granted unto the church, for its continuance, increase and preservation in purity, order and holiness according to His appointment." (John Owen)**

**b. By church discipline we are referring to any action taken by an assembly or member of an assembly to maintain the purity and love of that community. Church discipline therefore, takes place constantly in the life of a church. Excluding the member is merely the final step.**

**B. Scriptural Background and Support**

**a. Old Testament Examples**

**i. Exodus 32:19-35 - Israelites were disciplined because of idolatry**

**ii. Leviticus 10:1-3 - Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, slain for offering "unauthorized fire"**

**iii. Numbers 16:1-35 - Korah disciplined for rebellion**

**iv. I Cor. 10:1-13 - These things occurred as examples and warnings for us.**

**b. Christ himself sanctioned church discipline. (Matthew 18:15-20) In fact He became angry with a church for its failure to exercise discipline. (Revelation 2:20-21)**

**c. The Apostle Paul condoned the practice and gave instruction on the topic on numerous occasions. (I Cor. 5:4-5,11; I Tim. 1:19-20; Titus 3:10; Rom. 16:17; I Tim. 5:19-20)**

**3. Purpose Of Church Discipline (1)**

**Biblical discipline is an expression of love. Therefore it can never be contrasted with love (e.g. by asking, "should we show love or should we exercise discipline?") The biblical opposite of discipline is neglect, which is an expression of hatred. Therefore, the most unloving thing a church can do is "nothing." Neglect of a wayward believer will undoubtedly bring about his demise and perhaps the destruction of the church.**

**“For whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives." If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.” Hebrews 12:6-9**

**Biblical discipline does not include harshness, provoking the offending party to anger or acting out of personal irritation. Nor is it to be used by church leadership to suppress opposition or differing viewpoints. (Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:19,21)**

**4. Results of Church Discipline**

**When a church carries out discipline as it ought, it will bring about the following results:**

**A. Safeguards Purity In The Church - Our God is a Holy God who has called a people to Himself to be holy, blameless, without stain or wrinkle (I Cor. 5:6-7; I Peter 1:16; Eph. 5:27). Removing the little bit of leaven ensures that the church will remain pure as God wants her to be. If the church will not take steps to ensure purity, God will take matters into His own hands (I Cor. 11:27-32).**

**B. Sets an Example For The Other Members: When Annanias and Sapphira were struck down by God for their lying, "fear seized all who heard what had happened" (Acts 5:5). Salvation by grace was not a license to sin. (Rom. 6:1-2) In fact, the forgiven sinner has a greater responsibility to live a holy life by the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 6:9-13). When one of the members is disciplined by God, it is a sobering reminder to the others of their responsibility as children of God (I Peter 1:15-16). An Elder who is disciplined also serves as a warning to the rest of the assembly (I Tim. 5:19-20).**

**C. Safeguards The Testimony/Reputation Of The Church - The Church is to be a light in a dark world. It is to be an example and witness of the Lord Jesus Christ to the lost. If we allow sin to enter in and remain, we become ineffective and useless in our efforts. In fact, certain radio and television "ministries" have made a mockery out of the Gospel due to their conduct. Great shame has come upon the church because of such action. Therefore, the church must protect its testimony by dealing with such matters swiftly and completely. (Mt. 5:13-16; I Cor. 5:1,13; I Tim. 4:16)**

**D. Brings The Offending Party To Repentance And Restoration. The goal of church discipline is to bring the wayward member back to a place of fruitfulness for God. When the offending party is removed from the church he loses the protection and care of the body as well as the privilege of fellowship and the Lord's Supper. The hope here is to bring a sense of loss and pain to the person so that he will repent of his ways and be restored. Such a person must repent of the sin(s) that led to his dismissal before restoration can occur. Fruit of a changed heart must be visible. This will call for proper restitution to be made. The congregation must then forgive and receive back the one who confesses and renounces his sin. (Pr. 28:13; Mt. 7:16-20; Lk. 3:8; Lk. 17:3-4; Acts 26:20)**

**5. Reasons for Church Discipline**

**Over the ages there has been much debate over what sins merit church discipline. Certainly, some areas are open to question while others seem quite clear according to the Scriptures. Therefore, the discussion in this paper will be restricted to those passages in the Bible which give clear and specific teaching. The passages list those sins, which when practiced, characterize the unregenerate or unbelievers. There is a stiff warning associated to those who continue in these sins.**

**A.I Cor. 5:11-13:**

**“But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner--not even to eat with such a person. For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore "put away from yourselves the evil person."**

**B. I Cor. 6:9-10**

**“Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.”**

**C. Galatians 5:19-21:**

**“Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.”**

**D. Ephesians 5:3-7:**

**“But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints; Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient: but rather giving of thanks. For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no man deceive you with vain words: for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience. Be not ye therefore partakers with them. For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light: (For the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness and righteousness and truth;) Proving what is acceptable unto the Lord. And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them.”**

**E. Revelations 21:8:**

**“But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.”**

**F. Revelations 22:15:**

**“But outside are dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie.”**

**6. Implementing Church Discipline**

**A. Steps of church discipline**

**a.Scripture**

**Matthew 18: 15-18**

**“Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.”**

**b.b. The steps involve\***

**i. One on One shepherding**

**ii. Take two or three for additional witnesses and to give confirmation and warning**

**iii. Tell it to the church**

**iv. Expulsion and handing the person over to Satan**

**\* - Each step is to be handled carefully and prayerfully. Each case is unique and should be handled on its own merits. The goal is to bring repentance and restoration. The church's responsibility is to call the person back to his savior, then to forgive and receive back the repentant one.**

**B. Response of the Church (2)**

**The response of the church depends on the response of the disciplined individual.**

**a. A person who is disciplined and leaves the assembly - Such a person must be treated as an outsider or an unbeliever (Mt. 18:17). This person should lose all the benefits of being in the body. Such a person does not have true fellowship with God, and therefore should not have the privilege of enjoying fellowship with God's people (I John 1:6-7). The only contact with these individuals should be for the purpose of bringing them to repentance. However, if the person becomes factious and divisive, there should be no contact with them to protect the flock (Rom. 16:17; Titus 3:10-11). The offending**

**party must repent and show evidence of repentance prior to being restored to the body (Luke 3:8).**

**b. A person who is disciplined but who does not want to leave the assembly - This is a "so called brother." A person who does not want to repent of his sin, yet retain the privileges of God's people. Such a person is dangerous, since they represent "yeast." This person can infect the entire assembly if left unchecked. The Bible tells us to remove the "old yeast," that we may be a new batch without yeast (I Cor. 5:6-7). The Lord instructs an assembly to treat very severely someone who maintains their sin and at the same time professes to be a "brother." He is to be expelled from the church. With such a man we are not even to eat (I Cor. 5:11-13). He should be put out for the protection of the purity of the church and to protect the testimony of the church. In fact, Paul instructs the church to hand such a man over to Satan, so that his flesh may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord (I Cor.5:5, I Tim. 1:20). The hope is for God to deal with the offender in such a way so as to bring him back to repentance.**

**c. A person who is under discipline for being unruly in some cases, an assembly may need to censure the behavior of a brother or sister. If such a person is unruly or living a disorderly life, he is not to be associated with. The purpose of this was so that the offending party might feel shame and come to his senses. He was not to be expelled from the church like the sinning brother referred to in I Cor. 5. The offense here is not as flagrant and therefore does not call for expulsion from the church. If this discipline proves ineffective, ultimate church discipline could then follow. (II Thessalonians 3:6-15)**

**d. Discipline of Non-Members - In some cases it is appropriate to discipline non-members. A "so-called brother" who disrupts an assembly by his conduct or teaching may be "marked out" for the protection of the church. Such a person does not have to be an "official" member of the church to be marked out. The discipline here is geared more for the protection of the flock. False teachers and divisive people are to be avoided. (Rom. 16:17-18; Titus 3:10-11)**

**7. Problems That Short Circuit the Effects of Discipline**

**A. A church fails to persevere in discipline - The church "caves in" and allows the offender back prior to their fully repenting and making proper restitution (Acts 26:20). They begin to question whether or not they have done the right thing and fail to allow the discipline to have its full effect on the person's life.**

**B. Churches fail to cooperate with other sister churches - A member who is disciplined from one church is gladly received in another church prior to the person repenting. They fail to look into the background of the new-member and find out why they left their prior assembly. It is recommend that the elders require letters of commendation or at least make a telephone call to the prior church before receiving transferring members.**

**C. Relationships in the body are not strong enough to**

**affect the offending member - Perhaps that person was never fully integrated or shepherded into the life of the assembly. In such cases the discipline will not be as powerful. The person will not sense a great loss of fellowship since they never had such fellowship to begin with.**

**D. Certain members don't stand firm in the discipline**

**Although the church as a whole stands firm, certain members refuse to stand by the discipline. They continue to fellowship with the offending person and therefore do not allow the discipline to take its full affect. In cases like this, the members who rebel against the discipline must also be warned. If they do not cooperate, discipline may also need to be administered against them.The members of the church need to be taught that discipline should always be motivated by love--for their savior and for the erring member. Love and discipline should never appear in opposition. The church will need to learn the "tough love" of our heavenly Father in this area. Churches that do not discipline are more like Christian clubs than living communities. (Barrett)**

**In many of today’s churches, we do the opposite of what the father of the prodigal son did (Luke 15). The prideful son was lost because he did not obey his father. He thought he knew more than the father and went out of the father’s boundaries. He recklessly spent money on the pleasures of the world until he was broke and ended up in the mud with the pigs. He then realized how much he needed to repent and do the things that the father desired for him to do. Jesus finishes the story about the prodigal son who came back home after brokenness of his soul. The father ran to meet him after his son’s repentance and threw a party to celebrate! Some people in today’s churches, in the “name of compassion”, would try to make the prodigal son feel comfortable in his sin by taking more money to him or joining him in the pig pen. They would be upset with the father who represented God and would say that he was “cruel” and “religious” by not helping the boy. The father never validated the sin of the son and did not enable his son’s sinful lifestyle which could result in him being lost forever. This parable of the prodigal son is to illustrate that our heavenly Father reacts to sin and repentance in the same way.**

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