

# Church Discipline<sup>1</sup>

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Part I

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Some years ago I pastored a church in which something happened that didn't please one of our members. She began to complain and offer her opinion to anyone who would listen. Soon her dissatisfaction turned into malicious gossip. I just wanted the problem to go away so I wouldn't have to get involved. But I was the pastor and it was my job to confront her about her gossip. When I did deal with her I knew I was on solid ground. Why? Because the Bible sets specific standards of acceptable conduct for church members. Her conduct was not measuring up to those standards so I knew my approach to her was correct because it was based on relevant Scriptures.

## God's Objective for His Church

Let me review some basic truths to help frame this discussion on church discipline. All of us were going our own way in life lost and without Christ. Each of us had our own load of personal sin and a life-style that was focused on pleasing our own selfishness. God was not in the picture, we lived only for ourselves.

Then one day God revealed Himself to us as Savior and we became born again. We became what the Bible calls a "new creation" in Christ. (See 2 Co 5:17. ) Yet even as we came to love Jesus, our goals and aim in life were and still are self-centered. But God wants to change that. He wants us to become Christ-centered. In fact, Paul tells us that God's goal is that every member of His body grow spiritually,

"... until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."  
"Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is Christ. (Eph. 4:15,13 NIV)

But how does God strip away our sins and grow us up into the whole measure of the fullness of Christ? Through a process we call sanctification and sanctification usually involves discipline!

## "Discipline" Defined

The dictionary defines discipline as, "A branch of knowledge or learning; training that develops self-control, character or orderliness and efficiency, strict control to enforce obedience."<sup>2</sup>

## The Lord's Discipline

<sup>1</sup> In 2002 we wrote a three part article, *Submitting to God's Ordained Authority*, which should be considered a companion teaching to this article and can be found and downloaded from our web site at [hundredfold.org](http://hundredfold.org).

<sup>2</sup> *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*, David B. Guralnik, Editor, William Collins Publishers, Inc., page 401.

The writer of Hebrews tells us that all of us will undergo the Lord's discipline.

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. (Heb 12:7-11 NIV)

The real question is will we allow the Holy Spirit to teach us what we need to know or will we be like the man in Proverbs 12:1?

"Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates correction is stupid." (NIV)

I think the discipline spoken of in Hebrews is primarily of a personal or private nature orchestrated by the Holy Spirit. But there are times when the governing members of the church must get involved in discipline.

## Church Discipline Defined

So let's move on from personal discipline to an analysis of church discipline. I would define church discipline as, "corrective action taken by the church against a sinful member for the purpose of bringing him or her into line with scriptural patterns of behavior."

Jesus, in His teaching on how to deal with sin in the church, said of a brother who refused to listen to other Christians who confronted him, "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector." (Mat 18:17 NIV) So Jesus Himself set out the general principle of the church as a proper instrument for dealing with sin.

Church discipline is a very powerful tool given to the church by our Lord. Unfortunately I think it is being neglected in most of our churches today to the great detriment of all those involved.

## Authority to Discipline

Theologian J. C. Lambert, speaking of the church's authority to discipline, wrote, "She laid down laws for her own members because He had conferred upon her authority to bind and loose. But in every exercise of her authority she relied upon Him from whom she derived it. She believed that Christ was with her alway[s], even unto the end of the world (Mt 28 20),

and that the power with which she was endowed was power from on high (Lk 24 49).”<sup>3</sup>

## Responsibility to Discipline

Since it is obvious from Matthew 18:17 that the Lord gave disciplining authority to the church, the responsibility to discipline is not an option, it is required. Think of it this way. When a policeman sees a crime being committed he *is required* to take necessary action to stop the crime. It's his responsibility. He must act. He has no choice in the matter because that's his job. Likewise, those who have governing authority in a local church have a responsibility before God the same way the policeman does before his superiors. It's their responsibility. They must take action. Frankly, if a church member doesn't want to take on this responsibility, then he or she shouldn't be in church leadership.

One of the most important reasons why this disciplining is so crucial is that those charged with overseeing a church become the spiritual covering for those under their charge against the evil spirit world. To be lax in this responsibility is to open individual sheep as well as the whole church to unnecessary and harmful attacks from the enemy. When elders make every effort to have those under their protective covering live up to biblical standards of conduct, it's really for the protection of all the members of the church, not just the one in sin.

## Two Kinds of Offenses

I believe there are two general kinds of offenses. There are those offenses that are personal in nature, that is, someone does something that is directed at you personally. Then there are what I call observed offenses. These offenses are ones that do not involve you personally but you become aware of them and know that the actions involved are sin. For example, suppose you are going home late one night from work and you see a church elder coming out of a bar. He has done nothing personally to you but you know that there could possibly be sin involved. What do you do? That's a tough question and one which we hope this teaching will help answer.

## Objective of Church Discipline

Unfortunately today when someone mentions church discipline, most who hear the term immediately associate church discipline with, “kicking someone out of the church”! According to Scripture that is the *least* desired goal. In fact, Paul makes it clear that the desired goal is the very opposite.

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should *restore* him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. (Gal. 6:1 NIV, emphasis added.)

So *restoration to Christian fellowship* is God's primary goal in the use of church discipline.

## Restore Gently

So with the goal of restoration in mind, *how* are we to approach the offender? We can look again to Galatians 6:1 for Paul's answer. “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him *gently*. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.” (Gal 6:1 NIV, emphasis added.) Paul makes it clear that the disciplining process is to be as gentle as possible. I have witnessed church discipline being administered that was anything but gentle! The only Christ-centered way to obtain scriptural results – restoration – is to administer discipline scripturally. That means prayerfully, under the leading of the Holy Spirit, and gently.

## Who is to Discipline?

The theologian Lambert is quite right when he speaks of the church's authority to discipline. Does that mean each and every time a member needs disciplining we are to call the whole church together, go over the details of whatever sin is involved, and administer discipline? The short answer is, “No.” Involving the entire church in the process is rarely, if ever, either edifying or proper.

So the question remains, “Who does the disciplining?” One thing which will help you discern your role in whatever is amiss within the church is to firmly understand what position you hold in your home church. (See Figure 1 below.) There are different responsibilities which accompany those in different positions within the church. If you are part of the leadership team of the church, frankly, you have more personal responsibility to intervene in situations which are sinful. For example, as a deacon or elder, or a member of the pastoral staff, it may well be that the Lord is letting you see something which needs to be corrected, or at least challenged, and that He has put you in a position so that you can be part of what He is trying to correct. Of course, being on the leadership team implies that you are mature enough to conduct yourself in love and respect for the other offices and gifts within the church as you undertake your action. If there is a lot of flesh still in you and you are quick to speak your personal opinion, and you don't have much Holy Spirit wisdom and discernment, that will quickly be seen by others and will reduce your effectiveness, as it should!

If, on the other hand, your position in the church is one of simply being a member of the congregation with no recognized position of leadership, your ability to challenge something or someone, or to be part of the disciplining process, is considerably reduced.

I believe the primary authority to discipline should be entrusted to the elders overseeing a church. However, each church has its own government and is free to determine who in the church administers discipline. The nature of the group that administers the discipline isn't as important as the fact that it is actually done correctly. Lambert stated the key when he wrote that in every exercise of the church's authority she relied upon Him from whom she derived it. (See above.) In other words, the disciplining body must rely on the Lord because it is only from Him that the church has any right to discipline at all.

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<sup>3</sup> *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, Wm B. Eerdmans, Vol 1, page 653.

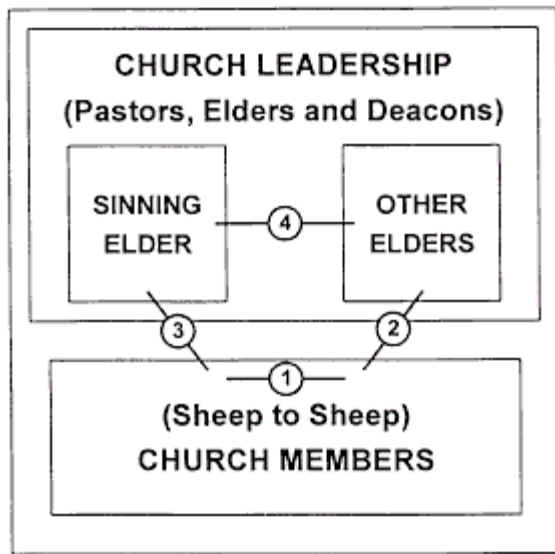


Figure 1

**Different Levels of Sanctification** - When dealing with a person in church discipline, his or her state of Christian growth should be considered. Yes, sin is sin, but a new Christian shouldn't be held to the same standards as one who is seasoned and has good Bible knowledge.

Because of this difference in Christian growth or maturity, I want to make a distinction between those who are trying to live good Christian lives but who are simply not very sanctified, or have a major flaw to be worked on, and those who are in wilful, blatant, unrepentant sin.

-- **Unsanctified Christian** - This term would apply most to the newly born-again believer. He or she is saved but the old worldly habits and ways of thinking still cling to and dominate his or her behavior and thinking. We need to give these people more slack than someone who has been a believer for years and should know better.

-- **Becoming Sanctified but with Significant Flaws** - I believe many or even most Christians fall into this category. We try to live by biblical principles. We generally know right from wrong and what is sin from what's not sin. Yet we fail in one or more categories of behavior or thought processes. For example, suppose a man is generally good to his family, active in his church, and a good employee, but has a problem with anger. Or, to put it bluntly, his anger leads him to manipulate the situation when something he cares about doesn't go his way. This behavior is wrong and it reflects an underlying wilfulness which may need to be addressed by the elders.

-- **Wilful, Unrepentant Sin** - This person is a believer but is engaged in wilful, ongoing, and unrepentant sin. The sin may be greed, it may be of a sexual nature, it may be horrible pride leading to wrong and harmful opinions and actions, or whatever.

### Levels of Discipline

**Self-Discipline** - I also believe that there are levels of discipline. The first level of discipline is self-discipline which all of us practice with varying degrees of success. Self-discipline is when we, by our own will, decide to change

something about ourselves and strive to achieve that change. However, none of us have enough self-discipline to lead us to perfection in Christ.

**Holy Spirit Discipline** - The next level of discipline is that done by the Holy Spirit. It is His work to convict us of sin. It is His work to lead us into a holiness that pleases the Lord. It is His work to lead us in paths of righteousness. The Holy Spirit uses any and every means to purge us of sin. Sometimes this involves an inner conviction of sin which brings about repentance. Sometimes He uses outside circumstances to bring about external pressure that produces repentance. "Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?" (Heb 12:7 NIV) Here Scripture is telling us that often the pressures encountered in life are used as tools by the Holy Spirit to discipline us.

**Sheep to Sheep Discipline** - The third level of discipline is what I call sheep to sheep discipline. (See ?, Figure 1.) This process is when one Christian corrects another. That is what Paul was referring to when he wrote to the Roman church. "And I myself also am persuaded of you, my brethren, that ye also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another." (15:14 KJV) So we have the right and responsibility under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to admonish one another.

I have just applied this principle to church members, sheep to sheep. However, the same principle applies equally to those in leadership when the offense is of a personal nature. For example, an elder says something derogatory or hurtful about a church member. In that case the member should approach the offending leader on a sheep to sheep level according to Matthew 18 as shown in ? of Figure 1.

**Church Elders Discipline** - Then we have discipline by the elders.

"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. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector." (Mat 18:15-17 NIV)

It is in these verses that Jesus elevates discipline to the fourth stage, that of church or elder discipline. It has gone from sin against a brother to sin against the church. Church leaders now become involved. (See ? of Figure 1.) Paul reinforced this authority of the church leadership when he wrote, "Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you." (1 Th 5:12 NIV) We also note that Paul's instruction regarding church discipline in 1 Corinthians 5 was to the elders.

**Elder to Elder Discipline** - We now come to one of the most difficult situations in church life. That is when an elder falls into sin. I believe the Apostle Paul purposefully made it difficult to bring charges against an elder because of their leadership position in the church. So it should be. Paul's

instructions to Timothy in First Timothy 5, verses 17 – 20, apply only to elders.

The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, “Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain.” and “the worker deserves his wages.” Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning. (1Ti 5:17-20 NIV)

In verse 19 he made it clear that one person alone could not effectively bring discipline on an elder. But if two or more people come, all saying the same thing, then there are grounds for confronting the elder. Such confrontation is to be among the elders only and in private. In these cases the only involvement sheep are to have, if any, is to bring the accusation to the elders. (See ?, Figure 1.) They are not to be involved in the elders’ discussions. Of course, if other elders are the ones who observe the sin, then it is strictly an elder to elder discipline matter. (See ?, Figure 1.) It doesn’t matter which elder is the accused. It can even be the senior pastor since all pastors are elders.

It is extremely important to properly evaluate the accusation. For example, one’s mannerisms, personality, friendliness (or lack of), speaking skills, lack of graciousness, etc., are *not* grounds for discipline. *These things are not sin!*

On the other hand, greed, sexual immorality, idolatry, slander, drunkenness, or swindling are serious sins and grounds for discipline. (See 1 Co 5:11.) All of us know pastors/elders who have been caught up in these sins. I personally would include in my list of reasons to discipline an elder that of holding heretical views concerning any of the essential doctrines of the faith.<sup>4</sup>

If the accusations prove to be true and there is no repentance, Paul tells us that we are to publicly rebuke the sinning elder. (See 1 Ti 5:20.) Note that we must *never* apply this public rebuke to sinning sheep who are disciplined. In the context of Paul’s instructions, such rebuke is only for sinning elders. Public rebukes today are usually in the form of a written statement by the elders to be read aloud in one or two

church meetings following the final determination of the matter.

### When No Action is Taken Against Sin

Unfortunately, in many of today’s churches, there are those in pastor/elder positions who blatantly sin and are never confronted! Why? Maybe the other elders are afraid to confront them. Or maybe they’re related to the sinning elder. Or maybe they’re people who have merely been appointed as elders but in reality are not. Or they may just be the pastor’s favorites or people the pastor knows won’t cause trouble. Whatever the reason, by their failure to act, they are in sin themselves.

Paul specifically addressed this problem, “I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favoritism.” (1 Ti 5:21 NIV) This is the very next verse following his instructions on disciplining elders who sin! In other words, he is emphasizing the severity and importance of the governing body disciplining elders who sin.

But what are you to do when you see blatant sin in elders or a pastor and no effective action is taken? What are your options? If you are a sheep, you may either stay and quietly pray for God’s intervention, or you can leave and go to another church. If you are an elder, perhaps you should resign your position rather than stay and be part of an ineffective governing body. The safest course is to seek the Lord’s guidance and do as He tells you.

In Part II of this teaching we will discuss the timing and steps of church discipline as well as the problems encountered in administering church discipline.

<sup>4</sup> Carolyn and I have written an article entitled *Essential Doctrines*. Briefly, essential doctrines are those major doctrines of the Bible upon which Christianity rests. Conversely non-essential doctrines are those upon which reasonable minds can differ based upon differing but reasonable interpretations of Scripture. The article is located on our web site, [hundredfold.org](http://hundredfold.org) and may be downloaded and printed free of charge. The same article is also one of the chapters in our book, *An International Minister’s Manual*

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Rev. Jim Murphy and his wife, Carolyn, of Blue Jay, California, United States, head Hundredfold Ministries, International. They write Christian teaching literature and travel to the Developing Nations of the world teaching Christian leaders. Hundredfold Ministries, Int’l is a cross-denominational Christian ministry dedicated to strengthening the church in the Developing Nations of the world.

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