

# Church Discipline

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Part II

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In Part I of this teaching we discussed the biblical concept of church discipline. We defined church discipline and established that the authority and responsibility to discipline rests primarily with the elders of the church. We determined that restoration to fellowship is the desirable goal of discipline. We also identified the various levels of discipline. Now, in this Part II, we will discuss the timing and steps of church discipline as well as the problems encountered in administering it.

## Timing of Discipline

Often when there is a situation that has been elevated to a level requiring church discipline, some individuals in church government have already become angry over the situation. Biblically, anger is not a sin, it is a human emotion, but if left unchecked it can quickly lead one to sin! That's why Paul wrote, "'In your anger do not sin.' Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold." (Eph 4:26,27 NIV)

This is why I believe church leaders shouldn't rush to administer church discipline. There is usually a critical timing involving the administration of church discipline and the Holy Spirit is the only One who knows *when* to act.

I learned this principle when dealing with a person in my church who was involved in sin which was damaging the church. For weeks I anxiously asked the Lord to let me deal with her, but He just told me, "Wait"! So I waited . . . and waited. Finally, one Sunday while I was preaching, the Lord said, "Today is the day." As soon as I finished my sermon I headed straight toward her. But when I approached her I didn't have to say a word of rebuke. The Holy Spirit had done the work! With tears in her eyes she confessed her sin and asked forgiveness.

Remember, restoration is the object of church discipline!

## Steps of Church Discipline

(Note that when I use the term "elders" in this section, I include the pastor as the senior elder of the group.)

### Step One - Pray and Keep Your Heart Right.

Certainly the first and most obvious step in any possible disciplinary action is to pray. We must pray and we must make every effort to keep our own heart right. Indeed, we are commanded by Scripture to guard our hearts. "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life." (Pro 4:23 NIV)

I believe one of the overriding principles in this whole area of church life is that each of us must guard our own hearts

whenever we see flaws in others, whether they be fellow sheep or church leaders. This principle is fundamental and essential. First and foremost, we stand before God responsible for our own heart, our own attitudes, and our own actions. It does us little good in the long run if we are right in our perceptions of other believers but have a wrong or critical heart attitude.

We also must pray that the Holy Spirit intervene in the matter and/or give us guidance as to what we must do, if anything. Certainly the best outcome is if the person is sufficiently tuned in to the Holy Spirit that He can correct the behavior without our having to do anything. Sadly, in my experience this doesn't happen very often. So as you pray, ask the Holy Spirit what you should do in the situation. Wait on the Lord for the answer. Don't just do the first thing that comes into your head. I am convinced that if more prayer and less action were taken by some members of our congregations, our churches would be better off and more of our Lord's work would get done.

**Step Two - Set Up a Meeting.** Meet with the person who needs to be disciplined. This meeting can involve only one or two elders, only the pastor, or the whole group, again depending on the Lord's guidance through prayer. At this stage you want to give instruction. First point out the offense and how it violates Scripture. Then tell the person exactly what you want him or her to do. At a minimum, this usually involves stopping some behavior. It may also involve repentance, going to another and asking forgiveness, or whatever. Finally, make clear to the person the consequences that will follow if he or she does not do as the elders are asking.

In Paul's second letter to Corinth he set a model for restoring a repentant church member.

The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. (2 Co 2:6-8 NIV)

Repentance is the only true path to restoration. We should not, as some churches do, simply let time pass and forget the sin as if it never happened, receiving the brother back without repentance. On the other hand, we should never regard a repentant brother as a second class citizen! If he has repented and been forgiven, it is over. No more punishment or withholding of our love, comfort or fellowship. Paul says the reason we do this is, "in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes." (2 Cor 2:11 NIV)

If we refuse to forgive one who has repented, that in itself is sin! Then Satan has grounds to accuse *us* of sin before

God! (Note here, however, that often there are unavoidable consequences that flow from sin, even after repentance and restoration takes place.)

### **Step Three - Removal from Positions of Leadership.**

If the person refuses to comply with the required actions, or says he will but doesn't follow through, then meet with the offender making sure that at least two or more elders are present. It is at this stage that you take further action. If he has some leadership position in the church, such as a Sunday School teacher, or on the worship team, or some other visible position, remove him from that position, at least temporarily. You simply can't afford to have someone in wilful, unrepentant sin in any position of leadership in the church.

**Step Four - Removal from the Church.** It is also possible that this person must be put out of the church. In his letter to the Corinthian church Paul listed several sins for which he instructed them to break fellowship if there is no repentance.

But now I am writing you that 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. (1 Co 5:11 NIV)

I believe this list should be used as a guide but that it is not necessarily an all inclusive list. For example, I know of a church that withdrew church membership from a group of people in the congregation because they brought a civil lawsuit against the pastor. Of course, in even bring the lawsuit, this group violated several major biblical principles.

Once you have removed the person from church fellowship, are there any other penalties the church can impose on him? According to Jesus' teaching we should, "treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector." In Jesus' day, tax collectors were very much disliked and pagan was the word used to describe non-Jews. To Jesus' listeners, they knew exactly what He meant. Such people were not to be treated with anger or contempt. They were simply to be treated as outsiders and not included in one's life or social settings. In short, they were to be generally ignored, and only addressed when absolutely necessary. Certainly they would not be allowed to attend worship services.

Paul added more insight for us when he wrote, "If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother." (2 Th 3:14,15 NIV)

When this punishment is imposed on a brother, you must also make it clear what the conditions are for fellowship to be restored. Your action should not be considered permanent or irreversible. Make it clear that the door is always open if true repentance occurs at some future date. Remember, repentance and restoration to the fellowship are the goals of all discipline.

**Step Five - Turn the Person Over to Satan.** There are times when the sin committed by a believer is so serious that absent total and full repentance, the most extreme measure must be taken by the church. Paul dealt with one such situation in the Corinthian church. There a man was living with his father's wife and was quite stubbornly unrepentant. Paul wrote,

Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord. (1 Co 5:3-5 NIV)

Here Paul instructs the church to take the drastic step of turning the offender over to Satan. Paul is also making it clear that the church has the authority to turn the offender over to Satan. This is not for his damnation but to use Satan as a disciplinarian. The implication is that even if Satan takes the offender's physical life, his spirit will be preserved on the Day of Judgment. On another occasion Paul turned sinning brothers over to Satan. ". . . holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith. Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme." (1 Ti 1:19,20 NIV)

I counsel all to be very careful in the execution of this principle. The way I interpret that is only in the midst of a consecrated prayer meeting over offense and the offender, after all other steps have proved futile, AND the Lord bears witness to all present, is this to be done. Still, the objective of even this drastic step is reconciliation! We see in 2 Corinthians, 2 that the man did repent and was restored to fellowship.

Finally, be on the lookout for a certain type of person who undergoes discipline, changes his or her behavior, but never really repents. These people are in our churches but are often not really born again. Or they may be there because the devil has sent them and they will never repent! Look at Jesus' teaching on this matter.

But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

"The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?'

"'An enemy did this,' he replied.

"The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?'

"'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At

that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.” (Mat 13:25-30 NIV)

In Matthew 13:37-40, Jesus explained to His disciples that the good seed were sons of the kingdom, (us, the genuine believers) while the bad seed were people planted there by Satan. He said, “the enemy who sows them is the devil.” (v39)

Some of these people may not even know that they aren’t born again. They would be shocked if you told them they were agents of the devil. Then there are those who know full well they are sent by the devil. They become members of a church to sew dissension and destruction. I think these people are few in number but have a lot of power in the spirit realm. Paul wrote of these people, “Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.” (Tit 3:10, 11 NIV) When we encounter such people in our churches, they are to be firmly asked to leave lest they continue to do harm.

But how does asking them to leave the church square with the verses I just quoted about leaving the weeds and wheat to grow together? I think the counter-balancing principle here is that the overseers of the church must protect the sheep from those who would do them harm. It would be an abdication of duty to simply allow such people to continue to remain in the church letting them engage in their harmful conduct.

What are some of the characteristics of these people? Probably the most dominant characteristic is that they have a problem with authority. They challenge everything the pastor and/or church leaders do. They will simply not submit to leadership control. These people often stir up contention within the congregation. Nothing pleases them. They are generally negative and noncompliant. Of course I may just be describing a very immature Christian. Or I may be describing an immature but called prophet who has not yet learned his or her proper role in the five-fold offices within the church. But even a called prophet must submit to proper church leadership. So when you encounter someone like this, watch for growth. If that person is teachable and tries, great. But if not, after a while, he will suck the life out of a church if he is not asked to leave.

## **Problems Involving Discipline**

There are a number of problems associated with church discipline. I will cover four of them.

### **1. Unpleasant Duty**

Not many of us enjoy confrontation. In fact, most of us hate it! Yet the act of confronting a church member who is in sin is one of those unpleasant duties every successful pastor and/or elder must do. However, many leaders, especially pastors, actually refuse to do it! If they decide it must be done, they try to delegate it to a committee, an elder, or someone else, anyone besides themselves! That is an abdication of pastoral responsibility.

We must perform our duty, “in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.” (2 Cor 2:11 NIV) Revelation 12:10 gives Satan a new title, “the accuser of our brother.” Who does he accuse? Anyone he sees sinning including church leaders who abdicate their responsibility to exercise church discipline!

### **2. Offender Goes to Another Church**

Often when an unrepentant person is confronted with his sin and/or is placed under church discipline, he simply quits the disciplining church and finds another church to attend. This is a very common practice in large cities where there are many churches. He can blend into another church without anyone ever knowing that he is under discipline in another church. In small or rural communities it is more difficult for one to do this because everyone in the church community knows what has happened and knows about the discipline. But what can we do about the one who casually casts off the discipline and finds another church?

We cannot stop anyone from going to another church. But both we and the person under discipline needs to understand this principle:

When church discipline is properly, scripturally administered, it makes no difference where one goes. In God’s eyes he is under discipline until he repents. Why? Because God has granted this authority to the local church. He cannot escape God’s discipline. The local church is simply one instrument God uses in His disciplining process. Sadly, if the person leaves the disciplining church, he leaves his spiritual covering and opens himself to the schemes of the devil until he repents.

### **3. Offender Leaves Church All Together**

Sometimes the offender is so angry, hurt, embarrassed, or whatever, that he chooses to just leave the church. He simply stops going to church and withdraws from all Christian activity. Here again, he must understand that no matter what he does, the above principle applies to him. Quitting the church may supply some temporary relief but he still cannot escape God’s discipline!

### **4. Offender Spreads Lies About the Church**

Occasionally an offender will reject the discipline of the church and go to another church, or leave the church all together, but will also begin to spread malicious rumors about the church and its leaders. Again, if the discipline has been properly, scripturally administered, he is still bound by the above principle. But now he is adding new sin to his already unrepentant list, sin for which God will hold him accountable. Oh, it probably won’t happen within the next three months, but it will happen. God keeps very good records!

## Leave It With God

In these difficult situations, I believe the ultimate conclusion we must always come to is that after we have been as obedient as we know how to be, we must leave it with God. He is the ultimate judge. If, or when, the Lord decides to further discipline a believer, then no power on earth can stop it. Conversely, no matter how hard it may be for us to accept, if someone continues in sin and still remains in a church, even in leadership, then at the very minimum, God is allowing it, for the moment at least. It may seem unfair. But remember, it is ultimately God's call, not ours.

Our primary job is to continue to keep our heart right, to pray for the persons involved and for the church, and to wait on the Lord. God *will* have a righteous church. That is not in doubt. There are times we are to be tools of that righteousness within the church and then there are other times when we are to simply, quietly intercede in prayer on behalf of His righteousness.

## Conclusion

Anyone who has ever been involved at all in church discipline knows that this subject embodies a very broad and complex set of biblical principles and Scripture. This article is a result of Carolyn and me giving the entire matter a great deal of thought and intense biblical research as well as our decades of personal experience. We urge you to use the principles contained in this article as a guide. However, no two cases are exactly alike. No two churches are exactly alike. The most important ingredient in any disciplinary action is intense and focused prayer and the leading of the Holy Spirit. May God bless you and your church as you continue in His harvest.

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