

Church Discipline
The Responsibility of Love
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Introduction: The New Testament contains numerous passages that command and illustrate the practice of church discipline. It is not based on obscure and questionable texts. Most notable are:

Matthew 18:15-20
1 Corinthians 5:1-13
2 Thessalonians 3:6-15
Titus 3:10-11
1 Timothy 5:20

While these texts contain features open to some variety in interpretation and application, the broad principles are clear enough. Yet, few churches in America today strive to obey the biblical practice of church discipline. Particularly troubling is the fact that those who *do* obey the Scriptures in this matter often bear the accusation of being unloving or legalistic. However, in reality, church discipline is an inescapable responsibility of a loving church, one that loves God and loves his people. This lesson will outline key issues that pertain to the exercise of this responsibility of love.

I. The importance of discipline: What is the relationship between discipline and the edification of the body?

Many discussions of church discipline focus on the restoration of an erring believer as the point of the action. While we should never ignore the restorative value of the process, corporate implications outweigh individual concerns. The ultimate point is that the practice of church discipline encourages the health and growth of the church. It does this in numerous ways. Here are a few ways that discipline benefits the whole church.

A. The practice of church discipline clarifies our understanding of the true role of the church.

Since the Scriptures are sufficiently clear on the fact that the church *ought* to practice discipline, we might find it profitable to consider factors that have given rise to disobedience. Here are a few preliminary suggestions.

- Some value utility above purity; paying the mortgage is the greatest good.
- Some value the opinion of man rather than God; distasteful confrontation must be avoided at all costs.
- Some value autonomy above authority; the exercise of religion is a private matter.

These suggestions are representative and certainly not exhaustive. But whatever the underlying causes we might find for disobedience regarding church discipline, they are all connected by common threads. They reflect a misunderstanding (to put it charitably) of the role of the church; there is a failure to see the church as a visible representation of Christ on earth. The local church does not exist merely as a preaching station in which proclamation of gospel truth discharges all responsibility. Rather, we are the body of Christ. Above all else, our Head is “purely and undistractedly devoted to loving his own glory.”¹ The church must serve no other purpose. It is precisely because the church’s affections must be shaped by Christ’s doxological devotion that we must take seriously the responsibility to protect the truth and maintain the distinction between those inside and those outside the community of faith.

- B. The practice of church discipline cultivates appropriate fear of the Lord within the church.

Old Testament wisdom literature uses the “fear of the Lord” as a useful descriptive metaphor for spiritual life. It is not an empty metaphor. It appropriately describes the respect and honor directed to the Lord by those in right relationship with him while at the same time it speaks of the terror that ought to grip disobedient rebels.

The concept carried over into the New Testament. Unregenerate humanity, viz., those outside the church, may be described as those who have no fear of the Lord (Romans 3:18). Yet the church in a healthy state may be characterized by fear of the Lord (Acts 9:31).

The account of the discipline of Ananias and Sapphira is instructive (Acts 5:1-11, see especially verse 11). Even though the circumstances were unique, the principle is still clear: When sin is identified and dealt with, the appropriate and natural response of God’s people is the fear of the Lord.

1 Timothy 5:19-20 teaches that church leaders are subject to discipline—there is no double standard. A purpose clause at the end of verse 20 teaches that the fear of the Lord within the congregation is one objective of the discipline process.

- C. The practice of church discipline enhances unity within the church.

Some churches justify their disobedience regarding church discipline with an appeal to unity; discipline, they say, will create divisions. However, a classic passage regarding the practice of separation from ungodliness indicates that the opposite is true, namely, unity requires separation. From 2 Corinthians 6:14-18 we learn two important related principles:

¹ Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline*, (Weaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), p. 100. See the second chapter of this book for an excellent discussion of the relationship between church membership and God’s love for his own glory.

Unity between believers is based on unity with God. 6:16

Unity with God requires separation from evil. 6:17

D. The practice of church discipline maintains purity within the body.

In the gospel of Matthew Jesus laid foundational truths regarding the church. He used the metaphor of “binding and loosing” in two passages, a metaphor which describes authority to include and exclude people in the church. One of the passages emphasizes doctrine as the criteria for inclusion (Peter’s confession; Matthew 16:15-19); the other emphasizes praxis (Matthew 18:15-20). Jesus’ words have implications for both admittance into and continuation in church membership. Discipline has to do with the latter.

1. Discipline maintains purity of doctrine.

Deviation in core doctrine requires a breach in fellowship.

Romans 16:17
Galatians 1:6-7

2. Discipline maintains purity of practice.

The Bible commands and illustrates discipline over issues of practice (behavior).

2 Thessalonians 3:11-15
1 Corinthians 5

Without discipline, impurity spreads and grows, eventually corrupting the whole church.

It is like yeast. 1 Corinthians 5:6
It is like gangrene. 2 Timothy 2:16

II. The practice of discipline: How does church discipline function?

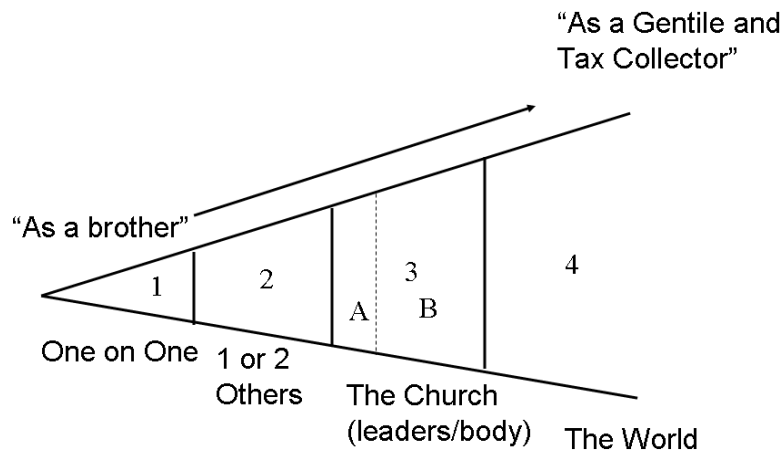
Each member of the church bears responsibility for the maintenance of right doctrine and practice within the assembly. Consequently, the entire congregation needs to be instructed in and reminded of basic principles that govern the process of discipline.

A. Biblical church discipline is a four-step process.

Matthew 18:15-20 outlines the basic process.

1. Private reproof
2. Private conference
3. Public announcement
4. Public exclusion

Jay Adams illustrates the process of church discipline with this helpful diagram (*Handbook of Church Discipline*):



Adams correctly argues that the third step (public announcement) should involve two phases not specified in Matthew 18. The first phase includes the church leadership in the process (3A). After appropriate investigation (cf. “two or three witnesses”), the leadership then takes the official step of informing the congregation (3B).

B. Some general observations and suggestions about the four-step process

1. The role of confidentiality
 - a. The possibility of reconciliation requires that participants initially maintain confidentiality.
 - b. Refusal to repent requires an ever-widening breach of confidentiality within the body.
2. The witnesses introduced in the second step of the process play an active role.

They serve as “witnesses” in a two-fold sense. Primarily they fulfill a role defined by Deuteronomy 19:15-21, which Christ quotes. In the event that

the offending brother will not heed the call to repentance, it is their responsibility to testify before the congregation to establish facts of the case. Secondly, they testify regarding the truth, lending their voices to call the offender to repentance during the private conference. This, of course, is merely an implication of the text.

3. The offender does not plead his case before the congregation-at-large.

Verse 15 begins with the assumption that a true offense has taken place and that evidence for it is incontrovertible. In the third step of the process, the offender must hear the church; there is no indication that the church hears the offender. The church acts on the testimony of the witnesses.

4. The final step in the process places in question the genuineness of the sinning party's Christian profession.
5. The final step requires the excommunication of the offender from the fellowship of the body, whether public or private (cf. 1 Corinthians 5:1-13).
6. The "steps" in the process need not be limited to single moments of confrontation. Depending on the nature of the sin, the first step might require multiple conversations to bring about conviction based on biblical understanding. At other times, the sin is obvious and requires no ongoing discussion (cf. 1 Corinthians 5). The process should proceed as quickly as prudence would dictate.

III. The intent of discipline: What does it mean to "bear one another's burdens?"

The desired outcome of church discipline is restoration, not punitive condemnation. This is what Paul meant by the expression, "Bear one another's burdens."

Galatians 6:1-2

In the event of repentance, the church restores the offending brother.

- A. The goal: restoration sets things in proper order or re-establishes usefulness.

The Greek word *katartivzw*, translated "restore," is a particularly vivid term. Note the following NT illustrations of its use:

Mending a net (Matthew 4:21)

Equipping for a task (Luke 6:40)

B. The process

Belief that a quick and easy apology on the part of the offending sinner satisfies all biblical requirements is a common misconception.

1. Restoration *begins* with confession and repentance of sin.
2. Restoration *also* requires fruit of repentance.

Luke 3:8
Acts 26:20

- A repentant sinner freely acknowledges sin.
- A repentant sinner does not negotiate the consequences of sin.
- A repentant sinner makes restitution for wrong done.
- A repentant sinner exhibits sorrow for sin.
- A repentant sinner submits to training in righteousness.

C. The responsibilities: Both the leadership and the congregation-at-large share responsibility for restoration.

1. Spiritually mature believers take the lead in the restoration process.

The particular responsibilities of the mature are these:

- They must be firm but gentle.

Gentleness does not preclude the necessity of a stern rebuke as a response to obstinate persistence in sin. Remember that the gentle Christ drove the moneychangers from the temple.

- They must be cognizant of personal weakness.

1 Corinthians 10:12

No one lives above the possibility of spiritual failure. Those helping others overcome sin are particularly vulnerable to sins of pride.

2. Every member of the congregation shares some responsibility for the restoration process.

In the event that the church body becomes involved in the restoration process,² it must fulfill several duties. In 2 Corinthians 2:5-9 Paul instructs the congregation as to their duties to a repentant brother.

- The restoring body must demonstrate forgiveness. v. 7
- The restoring body must demonstrate comfort. v. 7
- The restoring body must demonstrate love. v. 8

Note the seriousness of Paul's warning regarding this matter (vv. 9-11).

IV. The reasons for discipline: What are the responsibilities of membership?

The final step of church discipline is such a drastic measure that we must exercise great caution before taking the process beyond private reproof.

- Discipline only follows the violation of clear and substantial biblical teaching.

The Bible provides examples of specific types of sin, but the lists are not exhaustive. Each generation must make fresh application of biblical truth in its own cultural context (Galatians 5:21).

- Discipline occurs only when evidence of the offense is incontrovertible.

This would limit the offenses in question to those with outward and objective evidence.

While we must exercise caution, we must also recognize that the Bible calls for discipline for a much broader range of sins than many churches are willing to acknowledge. The material that follows answers the question, what sins constitute grounds for discipline? The biblical data falls into four categories.³

A. Private and personal offenses that violate Christian love

Failure to reconcile, Philippians 4:2-3

Hatred, Galatians 5:20

Jealousy and envy, Galatians 5:20

² If the discipline process progresses to the point that the congregation knows or acts (third or fourth step), the congregation must also take definite steps of communication and action in the restoration process.

³ These categories are adapted from the article by Ted G. Kitchens, "Perimeters of Corrective Church Discipline," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148 (1991):201-13.

Anger, Galatians 5:20

Lies, Ephesians 4:25

Gossip, 3 John 10

B. Divisiveness and factions that destroy Christian unity

Slander, 1 Corinthians 5:11

Selfish ambition, 3 John 9-10

Factiousness based on individualism, Titus 3:10

C. Moral and ethical deviations that break Christian standards

Drunkenness, 1 Corinthians 5:11

Idolatry, 1 Corinthians 5:11

Greed, 1 Corinthians 5:11

Sexual sin, 1 Corinthians 5:1-5; 11

Idleness, 2 Thessalonians 3:11-15

Thievery, 1 Corinthians 5:11

Unruly lifestyle, 1 Thessalonians 5:14

D. False teaching that undermines the Christian faith

Romans 16:17

2 John 7-11

V. Inter-church discipline: How should churches cooperate in discipline?

There are times when it becomes necessary for the discipline process to transcend the local church level. This happens in two possible scenarios: 1) when an individual under discipline attempts to flee to another congregation and 2) when a conflict that requires discipline arises between individuals who belong to different congregations.

A. Inter-church discipline requires communication.

1. Significant communication must take place during the process of membership transferal.

This is a vital aspect of the relationship between churches of like faith and practice. Communication is the only way churches can put an end to “church hopping” that allows sinning members to move easily from congregation to congregation, taking their sin with them.

2. Significant communication must take place in the event of conflict between members of separate congregations.

Matthew 18 must govern the resolution of inter-church offenses in the same way that it governs conflicts within a congregation. At the point where the Scriptures require the involvement of church leadership, the pastor of the church attended by the believer who initiated the discipline process should work with the pastor of the church attended by the offender.

- B. Inter-church discipline may require the establishment of an advisory counsel.

In the event that the leaders of the two congregations appear to reach an impasse on the matter, it may be prudent to involve the pastors of other congregations of like faith to assist in the matter. They can only serve in an advisory capacity in order to preserve the autonomy of each local church. Acts 15 provides biblical precedent for such collective deliberation.

- C. Inter-church discipline may require a congregation to be “disfellowshipped.”

In the unhappy event that the church of the offender refuses to hear the issues or has heard clear evidence of a serious offense, but refuses to exercise discipline, then that church itself must fall under discipline. In the words of Jay Adams, it must be declared “no church.” This would require other churches to refuse to participate in collaborative ministries with that church as well as refuse to grant and receive membership with it.

For an elaboration of this subject, see chapter ten in Adams’ *Handbook of Church Discipline*.

VI. Legal issues and discipline: How can the church obey God and “honor the king?”

The New Testament undeniably establishes the authority of civil government over believers (Romans 13:1-5; 1 Peter 2:13-14). Occasionally church leaders appeal to 1 Corinthians 6 to assert that government has no right to exercise authority over the church. Such denials are mistaken at best and arrogant at worst. First Corinthians 6 deals with personal disputes, not criminal behavior. The apostle Paul declared to Festus that he

would accept the death penalty if anyone could prove that he was guilty of a crime that warranted death. Since Paul was under arrest for his ministry activities, the clear implication is that Paul's statement validates governmental authority over the church in criminal matters. The only exception would be if legal requirements or prohibitions violated the clear teachings of Scripture.

Fortunately, the careful practice of biblical church discipline need not bring the disciplining body into conflict with civil authorities. Even so, we need to ensure that discipline matters are handled in an orderly fashion. Disorder is symptomatic of careless regard for Scripture and people—a situation that will likely be exposed as unbiblical *and* illegal.

A. Areas of potential legal exposure

Historically, courts have been reluctant to adjudicate matters of church discipline. However, there is no reason to expect that this will not change. Most attempts to sue churches following the exercise of church discipline have been based on one of three legal theories.⁴

1. Invasion of privacy

A successful charge of invasion of privacy must establish that there was a public disclosure of private facts that were highly offensive to a reasonable person and that were of no legitimate concern to the public.⁵

The common interests and qualifications of membership usually provide adequate justification for privileged communication to the congregation. It is wise to think carefully about the times, places, audience, and wording of communication.

2. Outrage (intentional infliction of emotional distress)

“‘Extreme and outrageous conduct’ occurs where conduct has been so outrageous in character, and so extreme in degree, as to go beyond all possible bounds of decency, and to be regarded as atrocious, and utterly intolerable in a civilized community.”⁶

In most cases, the best defense against the charge of outrageous conduct is application of the principles of Galatians 6:1 with great care. Gentle concern for restoration leaves no room for retaliation and will guard against careless humiliation.

⁴ Jay A. Quine, “Court Involvement in Church Discipline, Part 1,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 149 (1992): 67.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

One area of Baptist church life has received too little attention and its neglect leaves churches culpable in relation to this charge. That area of concern is the relationship between membership and discipline as applied to minors. At the very least, church that baptize children into membership need to produce a written explanation of 1) the limits on the privileges and responsibilities of children, 2) the timeframe for those limitations, and 3) procedures for dealing with adolescents who sin.

3. Defamation

Defamation refers to communication intended to harm the reputation of another. The key issues in such cases are questions of truthfulness and malice. So long as the church is careful when it researches charges of sin, making certain the facts are clear, and then speaks the truth in love, the charge of defamation is groundless.

Note: these three areas of concern deal with potential suits resulting from the implementation of church discipline. Another related area of exposure comes from the failure to take discipline seriously. It is an area of growing concern.

4. Failure to report abuse

Most states require reporting of known abuse. Some states specify the organizations that must report; some include churches and others do not. Some states require all individuals to report.

Fear of scandal motivates some church leaders to ignore reporting laws. Instead, they either deal with the tragic situation internally or, worse, try to cover it up. While the latter decision is clearly immoral, the former is also sinful in at least two ways. It is a capitulation to the fear of man and it is a refusal to submit to God-ordained authorities.

While it is true that a few states exclude churches from required reporting, church leaders should insist that law-breakers submit to legal authority. If we fail to do this, the potential scandal that will arise from failure to submit to the spirit of the law, will far outweigh anything previously feared.

B. Essential practices

Attention given to basic ministry practices will help church leaders fulfill biblical responsibilities *and* minimize legal risks related to discipline.

1. Clearly communicate the nature and responsibilities of membership *before* accepting new members.

2. Draft written procedures to govern the process of church discipline. Include a statement regarding minors.
 3. Implement a child protection policy.
- C. Some important suggestions
1. Leaders should protect the church by developing the practice of creating a detailed record situations that have potential for litigation.
 2. Establish a relationship with an attorney who understands both law and Scripture.
 3. Teach, teach, teach

VII. Pastoral consistency in discipline: A personal testimony

Sometimes when we teach on these matters, the congregation finds the information interesting but irrelevant because they assume that the pastor is making pronouncements from the proverbial “ivory tower.” Surely the pastor does not face real-world concerns—does he? The truth is that few pastors’ homes escape the agony of dealing with a rebellious child and often the situation warrants discipline. The question is, what will the pastor and his wife do when faced with the necessity of living out what they have taught? Here is a personal story.

A. When church discipline touches the parsonage

On Sunday evening, June 16, 1996, I led our congregation to disfellowship our daughter, Sarah. It had come to light that she was engaged in an immoral relationship that she refused to give up. At the time, she was living at home and working locally, having returned from Maranatha Baptist Bible College. In view of her refusal to repent, we put her out our home. As she left, I prayed that the Lord would prove to her that the “way of the transgressor is hard.”

For over five years my wife and I strictly applied Paul’s admonitions in 1 Corinthians 5. We limited our contact with Sarah to occasional expressions of love and concern coupled with renewed calls for repentance. We refused to engage in any interaction that would make her comfortable in her sin. We spent no holidays together; we had no social interaction for its own sake. These were the darkest, most painful days of our lives. The way of the transgressor *is* hard and the pain is shared by all concerned.

In the autumn of 2001, the Lord lavished his grace upon our family and our church. Sarah, newly married, called to tell us of her recent repentance and expressed a desire to reconcile with us and the congregation that excommunicated her. She met with the church to seek forgiveness and was received with love.

The Lord saved our son-in-law, Jerry, *whom we love*. Together, they now faithfully serve in our church. The Lord also has blessed them with three lovely children. I recently baptized the two oldest. The reconciliation of the transgressor brings joy—indescribable joy.

B. Some important lessons learned

1. Many Christians will not understand what you do: Expect painful misunderstanding outside the church.
2. Those to whom you minister will respect your consistency: Expect deepened influence inside the church.
3. Travail accomplishes God's good purposes: Expect the greatest spiritual advancement in times of suffering.
4. God is gracious.

Recommended Resources

Adams, Jay. *Handbook of Church Discipline: A Right and Privilege of Every Church Member*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986.

Kitchens, Ted G. "Perimeters of Corrective Church Discipline," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148 (1991):201-13.

Laney, Carl J. *Guide to Church Discipline: God's Loving Plan for Restoring Believers to Fellowship with Himself and with the Body of Christ*. 2nd edition. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010.

Leeman, Jonathon. *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010.

Quine, Jay A. "Court Involvement in Church Discipline, Parts 1 & 2," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 149 (1992).

Mack, Wayne A. and David Swavely. *Life in the Father's House: A Member's Guide to the Local Church*. Phillipsburg,NJ: P&R Publishing, 1996.