

# Church Discipline: Does It Matter?

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## Introduction

The subject of church discipline is not the most pleasant one to discuss when it comes to considering the ministry of the local church, its pastor, and other leaders, nor is it an easy subject to discuss. Many fundamental churches have in their Church Covenants have a statement that goes something like this, “We believe in the final authority of the Bible in matters of faith and practice.” And yet, the matter of church discipline is far too often either under-emphasized, downplayed or, quite simply, ignored.

It should be remembered that the local church is a family in a very real sense. There has never been, and never will be, a family with children where some type of discipline does not have to be administered at some point. Sadly, we live in a day when so many homes are, in reality, dysfunctional. In many homes today there is no father image. In not a few cases, while there may be several children, none have the same father. Such a background in life makes it doubly hard for one to understand Hebrews 12:9 where we read, “*Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live?*”

It is not easy for a parent to discipline a child, but it is an absolute necessity. There are at least six references in the book of Proverbs that deal explicitly with child discipline, in particular, corporeal punishment.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, it is not easy for local church leaders under the leadership of the pastor, to exercise discipline within the family. But there are times when it is necessary. To fail to do so allows a sinning Christian to continue to live in his (or her) sin without consequences. Such is not Biblical and fails to honor God.

During my tenure as an assistant pastor for eight years, our church went through four instances of church discipline that involved at least fourteen individuals. One instance was between two men who were at odds with each other in a serious and open way (disorderly brethren); one involved immorality and two individuals; a third involved heresy when three couples no longer held to our church’s doctrinal position; and a fourth involved two couples who were in open rebellion against the pastor and the leadership (disorderly). In each case, discipline was exercised after much counseling resulted in a refusal to do the right thing. We did not do it to be mean, but rather in obedience to the Word of God. I am happy to report that two of the cases involving four individuals actually had a happy ending with each of the individuals asking for forgiveness from each other as well as from the church. In both cases, the individuals were restored to the fellowship.

Let us take a brief look at the *Purpose*, the *Procedure*, and the *Primary Reasons* for church discipline.

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<sup>1</sup> Proverbs 13:24; 19:18; 22:15; 23:13; 29:15, 17.

**First then, the *Purpose*.** Before we consider what the purpose of church discipline *is*, we should note what its purpose is *not*. The purpose of church discipline is not a means of getting rid of an unpleasant church member. Nor is to be used to keep the church “perfect” for there are no perfect churches. In fact, the purpose of church discipline is not even the restoration of the one being disciplined! The fact that a problem has gone to the point of needing discipline is the result of the fact that the individual has *refused to make things right and confess sin*. The purpose of this difficult, but necessary, step is to maintain *purity* within the body in so far as it is possible. If, in the course of disciplinary action, the person under discipline gets right with the Lord, he should be accepted back into the membership *and* fellowship of the church. (See II Corinthians 2:4-7 for an example.)

It may be assumed (perhaps assuming too much here) that the steps of Matthew 18 have already been followed. In other words, church discipline is not to be entered into lightly, carelessly, or too hastily. It is an extremely serious matter before God and therefore His Word must be the guide.

**Second, the *Procedure*.** Following the steps of Matthew 18 may take a great deal of time. Moving too quickly can create more problems and potentially make the matter even worse. Here is the procedure as laid out in Matthew 18:15-17: “*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.*”

It will be note that there are *four* specific steps listed here in dealing with a problem within the church. **STEP ONE.** The offended one is to approach the one who has caused the offense in a sincere effort to resolve the problem. The spirit in which this meeting takes place should not be one of anger, etc., but one of heartfelt desire to fix the problem. Now, I realize that there are some people who are more easily “offended” than others. On the other hand, there are those who seem to be just naturally offensive, perhaps due to a rough edge than was never smoothed over by the Holy Spirit. No one has the right to say, knowing that an offense has been caused, “Well, that’s just the way I am! You have to take me for what I am.” No, that is not true. Those who have naturally “offensive” personalities need to work on that and change by God’s grace. II Cor. 5:17 still says that “*if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.*” It is possible, at this point in the procedure, to make several individual personal attempts to find a solution. Only when that attempt(s) fail is the next step to be taken.

May I also state at this point that it is *never* proper, much less biblical, for the person offended to discuss the matter with anyone else except the one who has caused the offense. This cannot be stressed enough. Too often, a person who has been offended starts talking to everyone *but* the person who caused the offense. *At this point no one needs to know about the problem outside of the two individuals involved!* This is one of many ways that church splits begin. If you

find yourself offended, your responsibility is to go the *no one else about the problem*. To talk to other people is wrong, it is gossip, it is ungodly, and it is sin!

*STEP TWO.* This second step is *only* to be taken when the offended party and the offender arrive at an impasse where there is an outright refusal to a) either admit that a wrong was caused, even if only in the mind of the offended party or b) an outright refusal to apologize or do anything to resolve the issue. At that point, the offended party is to find two or three godly Christians in the church to go with him as they make a second major attempt to resolve the problem. Many years ago as an assistant pastor, I had to go through this very process in dealing with an individual in our church who created a problem between the two of us. And, boy, was he a determined one! It was at that point that I took two of the men from our church with me to meet with him in his home.

It is most important when going through this kind of meeting to retain one's composure being careful not to lose one's temper, or even allow any display of "righteous" indignation or anger. The matter needs to be carefully, thoughtfully, and thoroughly discussed in as kind a tone as is possible. It is only when this second step fails that the next step is to be entered into.

*STEP THREE.* It is at this point that the matter is taken before the church. This step is, by far, the most difficult and should be entered into very prayerfully. There are two primary views as bringing a matter like this before the church. Each church will have to determine how the matter will be handled for there seems to be some biblical evidence supporting both views.

The *first view*, and the more common one by far, is that any case of discipline that is brought before the church must be voted on in a duly called congregational meeting (consisting of a quorum of members in good standing) specifically for that purpose. A recommendation that has already been approved by the church leaders (usually the pastor and deacons) is then presented to the congregation which is then asked to vote on the matter. If the congregation votes its approval on the recommendation, the discipline member is then removed from membership and all church activities. Biblical support for this approach may be found in I Corinthians 5:1-7 where Paul states, "*It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife. 2) And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you. 3) For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed, 4) In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, 5) To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. 6) Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? For even Christ, our passover is sacrificed for us: 7a) Purge out therefore the old leaven.*" This passage could seem to indicate that Paul was instructing the congregation to exercise the discipline on the man and put him out of the church.

There are two potential problems with this method that should be carefully considered. 1) In this scenario, the congregation is asked to cast a vote basically on the recommendation without knowing any of the reasons that caused the leadership to arrive at their decision. It seems that if

one is asked to vote on such a matter, it would be well for him to have an idea what he is voting on. Opponents of this would argue that it is not necessary for the people to know all the details, it is enough for them to have enough confidence in the pastor and deacons to simply approve of their recommendation. 2) When this approach is taken, time must be allowed for questions from the floor. People do have a right to ask questions and this time needs to be taken seriously. It is up to the pastor (who, as the shepherd of the flock, should chair this kind of meeting) to maintain a proper spirit in both questions and answers. Answers should be frank and honest. This is where things can get ugly, especially when family members or friends of the one being disciplined come and make a big scene. Sometimes, there are even church “member” who have not been to a service in months (and who, themselves, should have either been removed or placed on an inactive list) who come to take advantage of an opportunity to oppose the pastor and deacons!

The *second* view is not as common. It involves the need for disciplinary action being discussed among the pastor and his deacons. It may even involve a time of questioning the individual in a final attempt to resolve the matter in a Christ-like manner. If no such meeting is possible or if the individual simply remains unmoveable, the pastor and deacons have to make their own decision. Their final decision being made, whatever it is, and whatever it involves, the person being disciplined is informed, by registered letter of the decision to remove them from the membership of the church. The next step is to inform the congregation of the decision made by the pastor and deacons, and to share with them what their biblical response and future actions should be in regard to the disciplined member.

There seem to be a number of scriptures that would lend more support for this method. Permit me to list some of them.

- 1) I Corinthians 5:3-5 “*For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed, 4) In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, 5) To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh.*” In this passage that has often been used for a congregation decision, it is clear that the Paul had *already made his decision* and was informing the congregation what to do.
- 2) I Timothy 1:20 “*Of whom is Hymenaeus and Alexander; whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme.*”
- 3) Titus 3:10 “*A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject.*” The word *heretick* is used only in this verse and it literally means *schismatic* (Strong’s G140). Here again, it is clear that Paul has made his decision and informing the people. It does not have the tone of a recommendation. This verse also validates the steps of Matthew 18.

*STEP FOUR.* According to Matthew 18, the fourth step involves the removal of the person from the membership of the church. At this point the congregation needs to understand that they are not to have normal fellowship with this person (dinners together, outings together, etc.). They

are to be treated with kindness but within an extremely limited fellowship. The one disciplined needs to understand that there are consequences to his actions. It may be that the cutting off from fellowship may be the very thing that will ultimately be used to bring his back to the Lord *and* the church fellowship. That is one reason wrote II Corinthians, to encourage the Corinthian church to receive back into fellowship a man broken over his sin. But it took the church's disciplinary action to bring that about.

**Third, *primary reasons for discipline.*** There are four primary reasons for exercising church discipline. I will simply list them with an accompanying scripture. 1) heresy or false doctrine - Romans 16:17; 2) immorality – I Corinthians 5:1-7; 3) schismatics or those who are divisive – Titus 3:10; 4) those disorderly brethren who continue to live in unrepentant sin – (II Thessalonians 3:6.

*Conclusion.* While church discipline is never easy, it is sometimes necessary. Since it is a Biblical injunction, it should be respected by the people within the local church as well as by the pastors and peoples of other churches. It is a far too common, yet unbiblical, practice for pastors and churches to ignore a sister church's discipline and take into their membership such an individual. In so doing, they are 1) helping to sear the conscience of the one under discipline and 2) bringing a potential problem into their own congregation. *Never* should a pastor receive a fellow pastor's discipline member. It is ungodly and unbiblical to do so. May God help us to practice this matter firmly, yet compassionately, with a sincere prayer that such a member will ultimately be right with the Lord.