

CHURCH DISCIPLINE



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Paul's Epistles III (BIB 320)

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Church Discipline

God has made discipline of church members the responsibility of the church. There are five purposes of church discipline: to glorify God by obedience, to maintain the purity of the church, to serve as a deterrent to members of the church, to restore the erring member's soul, and to maintain a positive influence in the outside community. There are steps of discipline that have been clearly laid out in the Bible: private confrontation, confrontation with two or three witnesses, bring the situation before the church, and removing association with the erring member. When the erring member repents, they should be forgiven and welcomed back into the church.

Purpose of Church Discipline

One purpose of church discipline is to glorify God by obeying his instructions. Discipline is a biblical command (2 Thessalonians 3:6), and serves as a test of whether Christians are "obedient in all things" (2 Corinthians 2:9). Discipline is not always an easy or enjoyable task, but "His commandments are not burdensome."

Another purpose of discipline, is to maintain the purity of the Church. First Corinthians 5:6-8 says,

Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us

therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

If sin is allowed to continue uncontested, it has the ability to spread throughout the entire congregation. Impurity in the church affects our worship.

Church discipline also serves as a deterrent to others in the congregation by showing that impurity will not be allowed in the church, as 1 Timothy 5:20 says “As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.”

Church discipline is also to restore the erring brother’s soul. Discipline is in loving concern for the erring member (Hebrews 12:5-11). Galatians 6:1 says, “if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.” It is intended to create shame and godly sorrow that leads to repentance and restoration (1 Corinthians 5:5, James 5:19-20, 2 Thessalonians 3:14).

The final purpose of Church Discipline is to maintain a positive influence on the outside world. “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden” (Matthew 5:14). If sin is allowed to continue in the church, its influence is destroyed, and ill repute is brought upon the name of the Lord and His church (2 Peter 2:2, 1 Timothy 6:1, Romans 2:24).

The Steps of Church Discipline

Before we start going through these steps, we need to make sure that our motives and methods are correct. This should be done with gentleness (2 Timothy 2:25, Galatians 6:1). It should be done with love, like the love that God showed you in

forgiving you and the love that a father shows to a son in Proverbs 13:24. It should be done without hypocrisy, as Matthew 7:1-5^(NASB) says:

Do not judge so that you will not be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' and behold, the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

And it also needs to be done in patience (1 Thessalonians 5:14).

The first step of discipline is to seek private correction. Galatians 6:1 says "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness." Matthew 18:15 says "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone." This must be done with gentleness and love (Ephesians 4:15, 2 Timothy 2:24-25), as an angry approach may drive the wayward brother further away from the church (Proverbs 15:1). The wayward Christian needs to be warned of his condition, and encouraged to repent (1 Thessalonians 5:14, James 5:19-20).

If the first step is not successful, the next step is to take two or three witnesses with you, to have a larger impact on the erring brother and provide evidence to validate the sin and lack of repentance (Matthew 18:16, 2 Corinthians 13:1, 1 Timothy 5:19).

If taking two or three others with you is not successful, the next step is to bring the matter before the entire congregation. First Timothy 5:20 says "As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear."

Action must not be taken too hurriedly, as the sinner should be given time to repent (2 Peter 3:9).

The next step, if the sinner still has not repented, is to remove the sinner from your midst. First Corinthians 5:15 says, “Purge the evil person from among you.” Expressions used in other locations include: “Turn away from/avoid” (Romans 6:17; 2 Timothy 3:5), “Deliver such a one to Satan” (1 Corinthians 5:5, 1 Timothy 1:20), “Purge Out” (1 Corinthians 5:7), “Do not associate with” (1 Corinthians 5:9, 11, 2 Thessalonians 3:14), “Withdraw from” (2 Thessalonians 3:6), “Reject” (Titus 3:10), and “Do not receive” (2 John 10). The idea is to remove the erring brother’s membership in the congregation, and for the other members not to continue to associate with this brother.

A commonly misused term for this step is ‘disfellowship’. The word fellowship comes from the Greek word *koinōnia*. The English word fellowship has come to mean a term of social activity; however, *koinōnia* entails a spiritual relationship that we share with the Lord if we are faithful, not something we do. The term ‘disfellowship’ or ‘withdraw fellowship’ is not found anywhere in the Bible. *Koinōnia* can be withdrawn by God when a Christian becomes unfaithful, but it is not something we can remove from someone. We should not use these terms, because of the original meaning of the word fellowship as it appears in our Bibles.

While some say that removing the brother from association with the congregation is the final step, there is one more thing that should be done. “If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not

associate with him, so that he will be put to shame. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother” (2 Thessalonians 3:14-15). Withdrawing from a brother does not mean giving up on him. Further admonishing should continue until he repents and comes back to faithfulness.

When the sinner repents, we should forgive them and welcome them back to the church. “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive” (Colossians 3:12-13). “Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (Luke 15:7).

In conclusion, above all, discipline should be carried out with love. “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Corinthians 13:7). When a member of the church is caught in sin, we should be concerned for their soul, and use the guidelines God has given us to warn the erring member of the condition of their soul.

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