

Church Discipline

Discipline is probably the most sensitive issue the Church has to deal with. It is an issue where we are prone to act out of emotion, and thereby allow the possibility of not thinking spiritually or scripturally. There are many misunderstandings about the responsibilities the Church has when it comes to discipline. If there is any area that can seem to be ‘gray’ at times, we might be tempted to say that Church discipline is that area. But as complicated as it might get and as much as it might play on our emotions, the Bible does give us some instructions to follow in certain cases. Where specific cases are not found in Scripture, or where we have acted in ways that greatly complicate the matter, or when more than two or three people are involved in a situation, the Bible still provides sufficient wisdom for us to apply. In every situation the Church faces, it must do so prayerfully and patiently; desiring to do that which is right in God’s sight, to act in harmony with His word, to honor Him, and to demonstrate His love.

Volumes could be written on this subject, but hopefully this short writing will provide some foundational principles to help us understand in a general sense the necessity of, the reasoning for, and our approach concerning Church discipline. It must also be understood that each local assembly handles the matter of discipline within its own body and is accountable to her Head, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Accountability and Discipline

Here are some very important principles. The Church has no responsibility or authority of sitting in judgment over those out in the world. A person out in the world, before coming to the Church, is not accountable to the Church, although we all are accountable to God. When a person, out of the conviction of his heart, repents and turns to the Lord in faith, submits to baptism, and joins himself to the local Church, then and only then does he become accountable to the Church. The discipline that the Church must maintain is clearly spelled out in Scripture. But it is just as clear that accountability to the Church does not begin until a person comes into the Church. In other words, a person’s past is exactly that – the past. Once a person becomes a member of the Church, then that person is expected to live a manner of life in harmony with God’s word. The pastor should have some knowledge about a person’s past so that he can more effectively minister to that person, but the members of the body should be more concerned about one other’s present and future walk with Christ while here in the world.

This principle, I believe, becomes evident through a study of the Gospels and the Book of Acts. The woman who was caught in adultery (John 8) and brought before Jesus received mercy from the Lord but was told to go and cease from that sin; “go and sin no more”. Jesus had a purpose in going to Jacob’s well in Samaria (John 4). As he talked to the Samaritan woman who was living an adulterous lifestyle, her eyes were opened and she came to confess Jesus to be the Christ. Her testimony to others in the city led to the conversion of many. In the Book of Acts, those who were convicted in their heart because of their sins turned to the Lord in repentance, confession, and faith. In the Apostle Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2) the promise was given to all that were afar off, “even as many as the Lord our God shall call.” This promise was one of hope and assurance. The only way a person can lay hold of this promise and receive the gift of the Holy Ghost, that holy Spirit of promise, which is the earnest of our inheritance, is through repentance, faith, and obedience. And the promise was and still is to all those

Church Discipline

whom the Lord calls. Throughout the Book of Acts, the only requirement of those who desired to be baptized was repentance and faith. There were no background checks, credit checks, examination of courthouse records, or character witnesses required. The past is indeed the past. But, afterwards, in the present and in the future, a Church member must realize that his actions can be edifying to the Church, or they can be a detriment to the Church, and he, along with every other member, is accountable to the Church.

Seeing that none of us are perfect, how does the Church deal with different situations when a person is overtaken in a sin? The broad answer to this is that the Church must consider every case according to the specific issues surrounding that situation. Some situations are obvious, but no blanket statement covers every case. The Church must make prayerful decisions concerning the discipline of her members in consideration of other applicable passages of Scripture. If at all possible, any type of counseling as well as Church discipline should always be carried out with the hopes of bringing that person back to a life of following Christ and back into the fold (Gal.6:1). One misgiving that has developed over time is the idea that a church member guilty of some sin must immediately be excluded, and only then can they be labored with and counselled. Actually, this approach is not entirely Biblical in every situation; and, in fact, it might be the exact opposite approach needed in many situations. God's word is designed to be profitable "for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness." The elders and deacons of a church should have the wisdom to know when time is needed in order for God's word to have its desired effect, especially as it is used to counsel an individual. And the Church body should have enough confidence in their elders and deacons to allow them to exercise that wisdom. In many situations, excluding an individual should be the last option, not the first.

For example, someone guilty of drunkenness must be labored with in some way. That labor would include counseling and perhaps whatever help and assistance the Church could provide. The person who is guilty of this sin one time may repent immediately and never fall to that temptation again. On the other hand, the man who is repeatedly guilty of drunkenness would have to be excluded if he refused to heed the counsel and continued in that sinful path. After a time, if he ceased from that drunken lifestyle and the Church could see his sincere repentance, he could then be restored. The same could be said concerning any number of different sins, including sexual sins. A church member who falls to that temptation once, for example, could be counselled with using the word of God and soon be brought to repentance. However, a person who continues to live a sexually immoral manner of life in violation of God's word cannot remain a member of the Church. If he or she forsakes that lifestyle, then upon repentance, they can be restored.

Where there is backbiting, gossip, strife, or other offenses between members, the Church should labor to correct those offenses. The pastor should instruct the offenders to cease from their strivings, help them to make reconciliation, and teach them in such a way to bring them to a greater maturity in Christ. Most offenses between members can be dealt with without ever bringing the case before the Church, and without reaching the point of casting them out of the Church. This is where the principles Jesus taught in Matthew 18 apply specifically. Whatever judgment or decisions a Church must make should be seen as the judgments of Christ, who is the Head of the Church, being carried out within His body; not the judgments of men. A Church doesn't take judgment upon

Church Discipline

itself but makes decisions based on judgments already made by God's word. Christ through His word declares His judgments and then calls upon the Church to adhere to them.

One other thing must never be overlooked in all of this. One of the consequences of our sins is the damage sin does to our witness in the world. We should seek to follow Christ out of love and a deep desire to honor him and be more like him. But we should also never forget the long list of consequences our actions might bring upon us. If we were to make a list of all the people we would hurt, and then consider what that would mean to our witness to others, we might be encouraged all the more to remain faithful. As a child of God, as a member of the Church, we are to be an influence on others through example and instruction. What becomes of our light in this world of darkness if we fall prey to Satan's temptations? Our light then becomes dim, and perhaps completely darkened altogether, with very little, if any, influence, and thus, face an almost impossible task in helping others honor Christ.

1Corinthians 5

In this chapter, we have an actual example where a Church was admonished in carrying out its responsibility to exercise discipline. The Apostle Paul addresses an issue that had not been properly dealt with in the Church at Corinth. One of her members was guilty of fornication. Specifically, a man had been with his father's wife, probably the man's step-mother, not his own mother. We don't know how long this had been going on or how many times these two had committed the act of fornication. Paul charged the Church with being "puffed up", that is, they had lifted themselves up in false pride over the fact that they had not dealt with this man, supposedly showing their great tolerance, or liberty, or perhaps in their mind, as an act of mercy. However, Paul said that they should have mourned over this grievous sin, and in their mourning, taken this man away from among them. This act of putting away was described by Paul as a responsibility laid upon the Church to carry out. Paul didn't treat this issue lightly. He actually referred to it as an act of judgment on the part of the Church – not as though the people sat in judgment over the man with a high-minded, holier-than-thou attitude, but as an act of discernment, the Church was required to make the decision to put the man out from among them. Paul had evidently told the Church previously that they were not to keep company with fornicators out in the world, but this time he emphasized not keeping company with a brother or sister guilty of such sins. Their judgment was to be only upon those within the church, not those out in the world. He explains this 'keeping company' like this – 'not to eat with such an one', indicating that he was probably speaking of the Lord's table. This is the privilege given to baptized believers in the Church – communion at the Lord's table. Paul was saying that this privilege should not be afforded this individual. Finally, Paul said that God will concern Himself with those outside of the Church; the Church had the obligation of judgment concerning only those in the Church.

Obviously, this was a very grievous situation, but even in the most grievous situations, space for repentance should be allowed. Jesus called out by name the woman Jezebel in the Church at Thyatira (Rev.2:20-22) for causing His servants to commit fornication. Evidently, this woman had been shown her sinful ways, and she had been given time to repent, but that time was up according to Jesus. The Church must have

Church Discipline

recognized this ‘space of repentance’, but they had suffered this woman too long. Jesus, it seems, was giving one final warning to the Church before He Himself took action. Space for repentance should be granted, but just like Thyatira, the Church at Corinth had become too lenient. Perhaps, had the elders of the church labored and counselled with this man as soon as the sin was first made known, the situation would have been very different before Paul wrote to Corinth. If God’s word had been utilized to reprove, correct, and instruct the man personally and individually, it might not have been necessary for the church to take such action, as long as they were satisfied with the evidence of repentance. Obviously, repentance eventually came about, according to Paul’s words in his second letter to them. How much better it is to correct and restore such a one to godly paths before having to take action against a member collectively.

Divorce and Remarriage

This is a subject much debated. Sadly, the disagreements on this subject have caused splits within churches and a cessation of fellowship between churches. Perhaps if we were more committed to the principle stated earlier - that each church handles matters of discipline only within its own body (not others), and each body is accountable to its Head - maybe Satan would not as easily use this subject as one of his weapons, as it seems he does now. As with any subject, one verse doesn’t establish a complete understanding, and Scripture must be laid upon Scripture to properly apply wisdom.

Jesus gives us some principles concerning marriage, adultery, and divorce. In these verses, Jesus tells us that fornication in marriage, which is called adultery, is Scriptural grounds for divorce.

Matt.5:31-32 “It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement: But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.” (Mark 10:11-12)

Matt.19:9 “And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.” (Luke 16:18)

Paul, with the authority given him as an Apostle, gave us these instructions.

Romans 7:2-3 “For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress: but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man.”

I Cor.7:39 “The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord.”

Church Discipline

Paul devoted the entire 7th chapter of 1Corinthians to various issues regarding marriage, divorce, adultery, fornication, and remarriage. Is the act of adultery dealt with differently than with other sins? What about reconciliation? What if the situation was a “one time” affair? Perhaps one spouse was “caught up in the moment”, or failed to resist the temptation under the influence of alcohol, or one of many other scenarios that could be given. Many hurtful consequences would result, but can the remaining spouse forgive the unfaithful spouse? What if the unfaithful spouse demonstrates a deep sense of conviction and guilt? He or she confesses and shows by their actions genuine repentance and a sincere desire to be reconciled back to his or her spouse and keep the family together. As difficult as it would be, forgiveness could be found through continual prayer and given enough time. There would be much rejoicing over the repentant spouse and a divorce could be avoided. A great example of repentance, mercy, forgiveness, love and grace would be seen. This would be the desirable end. What if an affair had been taking place for a period of time and there had been several planned adulterous meetings? Should the situation be looked at differently? How should the Church react? How should the spouse or other family members react? Forgiveness by the remaining spouse would certainly be more difficult to find. Situations like this, where conscious decisions were being made to carry out the affair, would also indicate there had been deceit taking place, lying, and an on-going willful pursuit to fulfill the desires of the flesh. Trust would be shattered, and the hurt and pain would make any sincere attempt to reconcile difficult at best. It is much more likely that divorce would be the end result. The remaining spouse would have scriptural grounds for divorce and to re-marry if that was his or her desire. The Church would do no violation to Scripture by allowing the remaining spouse to continue as a member. As stated earlier, every situation is different and must be considered individually, but ultimately weighed against the principles of God’s word. In the midst of these various issues there is another principle taught in the Scriptures that should be considered as follows.

Ignorance vs Knowledge

Throughout the Scriptures, there is a consistent principle taught concerning the consequences we face as a result of sins committed in ignorance (lack of knowledge) and willful sins. In God’s sight, sin is sin. Anything that is not of faith is sin, and without faith we cannot please God. God is holy, righteous, and perfect in all His ways. Anything short of perfection is sin. In God’s sight, as far as offending Him, there is no ‘big’ sin or ‘little’ sin. We should always dread and even fear the consequences of our sins. The worst thing we could do is downplay any consequence of any sin. However, the severity of the consequences we suffer because of sin may be and are sometimes different. The principle taught in this regard is seen in the following verses.

Luke 12:47-48 “And that servant, which knew his lord’s will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more.”

Church Discipline

I Tim.1:12-13 “And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry; Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief.”

Hebrews 10:26-27 “For if we sin willfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, But a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries.”

These verses from the O.T. show that under the law, even though there were consequences still to be dealt with, there was also an acceptable offering to be made for sin committed in ignorance. We also see that the sin committed willfully (with knowledge) brought about a more severe consequence.

Numbers 15

v.24) “Then it shall be, if aught be committed by ignorance...”

v.27) “And if any soul sin through ignorance...”

v.30) “But the soul that doeth aught presumptuously...”

Leviticus 4

v.2) “If a soul shall sin through ignorance against any of the commandments of the Lord concerning things which ought not to be done...”

v.13) “And if the whole congregation of Israel sin through ignorance...”

v.22) “When a ruler hath sinned, and done somewhat through ignorance...”

v.27) “And if any one of the common people sin through ignorance...”

Deuteronomy 17

v.12) “And the man that will do presumptuously, and will not hearken...”

In conclusion, it is obvious that discipline in the Church is not always cut and dry, and certainly not an easy matter. But it is also just as obvious that discipline is a responsibility laid upon the Church, which must be carried out at times. When it must be carried out, it should be a very sorrowful thing in the hearts of the members of the Church, and should always be done in love. Each individual Church should respect the decisions of other local assemblies in these matters. The local body is accountable solely to Christ and should recognize the necessity of maintaining His house according to His word. Reconciliation and restoration should be the goal, but even where this is not possible, kindness and humility should still be manifest. It should be our desire and hope that God’s children will take heed to themselves and to His word, seeking to commit themselves to godly living with such zeal that there would be very few occasions in the Church when the body must exercise discipline.

In Hope,

Matt Jordan