

DISCERNMENT & DISCIPLINE

Key question

What is the role of discipline in the Christian life?

Key text

Hebrews 12:5-6

“and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, ‘My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reproved by him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and he scourges every son whom He receives.’”

Introduction

1. While all believers are called to live exemplary lives it is not easy to do so even with the resources of the Holy Spirit, the Scripture, and the encouragement of others. The question of discipline whether self imposed or dictated by others is and always has been an important issue for Christians.
2. In this section we will look at the various spheres of discipline with special attention given to the official responsibility of the church to shepherd its members.
3. It also will look at the question of when does a person justify parting fellowship with a congregation because of disagreements.

A. Pluralism

1. Pluralism is a term applied to the observation that real differences exist between cultures and people with respect to core values. It is not applied to facts of science but is applied to values.
2. Pluralism is not necessarily.
 - a. Monism’s denial of our differences. It is rather the recognition that differences deserve a certain recognition and respect.
 - b. Relativism’s denial of the importance of scientific truth. It maintains normative truth in physical sciences but tends to be relativistic in social values.
3. Pluralism is the civil engagements of our differences and disagreements about what is most importantly true.
4. Americans are called to be “citizens of the great republic of humanity at large.” George Washington
5. “Benevolence is the cement of support of Families, of Churches, of States, of Kingdoms, and of the Great Community of mankind. It is the single principle that constitutes and

preserves all the peace and harmony, all the beauty and advantage of society.” Samuel Cooper

B. **The importance of tolerance on non-essentials.**

1. “Nietzsche claimed that if men took God seriously, they would still be burning heretics at the stake.” Two types of people agree with this statement.
 - a. Ordinary bigots – “That’s why we should burn heretics.”
 - b. Reactionaries – “That’s why we should suppress the public expression of belief in God.”
2. Tolerance cannot be neutral about what is good, for it’s very purpose is to guard good and avert evils. What is tolerated depends upon what is viewed as the ultimate good or concern.
3. Tolerance is a moral virtue between the two vices of:
 - a. **Soft headedness** – We stand for little and fall for anything. When radical tolerance is the only virtue, we must dignify every form of human expression no matter how weird, as beautiful and noble.
 - b. **Narrow mindedness** - We cannot see beyond our own preferences, which we mistakenly assume are also God’s standards. Modern notions of political tolerance grew out of a reaction to the religious wars in Europe during the 1600s where as many as one third of the population in some areas were lost to bloody conflicts.
4. Tolerance involves right judgment in the protection of ends against mistaken means.

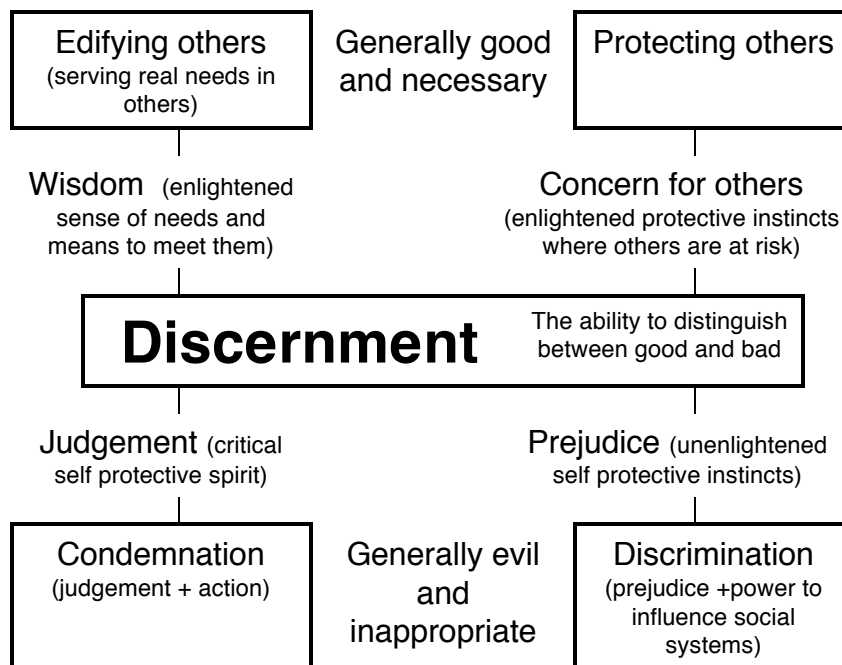
ILLUSTRATION: Political Conservatives and Liberals often share a common core goal (liberty and justice for all). They however have very different ideas as to how that goal is reached and preserved. The danger is that the means of reaching the goal can be so closely identified with the goal itself that to challenge the means is to be understood as a challenge to the goal. Those who do not share our means to reach the goal are assumed to be motivated by something other than reaching the goal. That “something other” is usually pretty ugly, selfish, and un-American.

5. Tolerance needs an ultimate concern as an end.
6. Christians are to be tolerant on a number of issues for four reasons.
 - a. God does not want unwilling worship. We need to give room for people to disagree with us.
 - b. We see in a glass dimly. I Cor.13:12. No one gets the whole picture clearly in view.
 - c. We are in process. We may see things differently as we become more mature or better informed.
 - d. There is a Biblical precedent for tolerance in **Rom.14:5** “One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind.”

C. **Discernment is a virtue that can be used for good or evil.**

1. Discernment is a virtue that should be sought.
 - a. **Prov.16:21** “The wise in heart will be called discerning.”
 - b. **Ps.119:66** “Teach me good discernment and knowledge.”
 - c. **I Kings 3:9** “So give Thy servant an understanding heart to judge Thy people to discern between good and evil.” (Solomon)

- d. **Deut.32:28-29** “For they are a nation lacking in counsel, and there is no understanding in them. Would that they were wise that they understood this, That they would discern their future!
- e. **Phil.1:9-10** “And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment. So that you may approve that things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ.”
2. The following chart shows the relationship between discernment and both good and bad applications. It should be noted that there are legitimate times for proper authority to express condemnation of certain issues.



D. Judgment is reserved for those who have the authority to do so.

- Human government – Rom.13:4** “for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil.”
- Church officials – I Cor.6:2-3** “Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is judged by you, are you not competent to constitute the smallest law courts? Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, matters of this life?”
- Parents in a family – I Tim.3:4** “He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity.”

E. General attitudes toward discipline

- Open rebuke is desirable when it comes from a friend wanting to help us. Prov.27: 5-6, 9**
“Open rebuke is better than secret love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful. Ointment and perfume rejoice the heart: so does the sweetness of a man's friend by hearty counsel.”
- Believers should look at discipline as a part of God’s love for his children. Heb.12:3-13**

“Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds. Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin. And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons. 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? For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but he for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness. Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby. Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees; And make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed. Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled; Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright.”

3. God’s love is displayed in discipline. Rev.3:19-22

“As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent. Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.”

II Cor.7:8-12 The sorrow of discipline

“8 For though I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it-- {for} I see that that letter caused you sorrow, though only for a while-- 9 I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to {the point of} repentance; for you were made sorrowful according to {the will of} God, in order that you might not suffer loss in anything through us. 10 For the sorrow that is according to {the will of} God produces a repentance without regret, {leading} to salvation; but the sorrow of the world produces death. 11 For behold what earnestness this very thing, this godly sorrow, has produced in you: what vindication of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what avenging of wrong! In everything you demonstrated yourselves to be innocent in the matter. 12 So although I wrote to you {it was} not for the sake of the offender, nor for the sake of the one offended, but that your earnestness on our behalf might be made known to you in the sight of God.”

Acts 5:1-11 The direct discipline of God

“¹ But a certain man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, ² and kept back {some} of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet. ³ But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit, and to keep back {some} of the price of the land? ⁴ "While it remained {unsold,} did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men, but to God." ⁵ And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came upon all who heard of it. ⁶ And the young men arose and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him. ⁷ ¶ Now there elapsed an interval of about three hours, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ And Peter responded to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?" And she said, "Yes, that was the price." ⁹ Then Peter {said} to her, "Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they shall carry you out {as well}." ¹⁰ And she fell immediately at his feet, and breathed her last; and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹ And great fear came upon the whole church, and upon all who heard of these things.”

I Tim.5:19-20 The discipline of leaders

“¹⁹ Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses. ²⁰ Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also may be fearful {of sinning.}”

Rom.16:17-18

“¹⁷ Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. ¹⁸ For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting.”

Col.3:16

“¹⁶ Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms {and} hymns {and} spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”

I Tim.5:1-2

“¹ Do not sharply rebuke an older man, but {rather} appeal to {him} as a father, {to} the younger men as brothers, ² the older women as mothers, {and} the younger women as sisters, in all purity.”

Rev.2:20-22

“²⁰ But I have {this} against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray, so that they commit {acts of} immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. ²¹ And I gave her time to repent; and she does not want to repent of her immorality. ²² Behold, I will cast her upon a bed {of sickness}, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds.”

II Jn.9-10

“⁹ Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son ¹⁰ If

anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into {your} house, and do not give him a greeting;"

Titus 1:13

"13 This testimony is true. For this cause reprove them severely that they may be sound in the faith,"

II Tim.2:24-26

"24 And the Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, 25 with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, 26 and they may come to their senses {and escape} from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will."

II Tim.3:16-17

"16 All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; 17 that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work."

F. General principles

1. Self discipline is expected of each believer.

I Cor.11:28-32

"28 but let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. 29 For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself, if he does not judge the body rightly. 30 For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. 31 But if we judged ourselves rightly, we should not be judged. 32 But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord in order that we may not be condemned along with the world."

- a. If we do not judge ourselves with respect to our relationships in the church and then go through the motions of dying to self by taking the Lord's supper, we will be inviting God's judgement on us.
- b. God's judgment can come in the form of physical illness. This does not mean that all illness is a judgment nor does it mean that this is the only way God can discipline us. It does mean that we should not be surprised at a connection between physical suffering and sin.

Rom.12:3

"For through the grace given to me I say to every man among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith."

- a. We are expected to be discerning of the boundaries put on our ministries by the Spirit and faith. If we do not judge ourselves in these matters we will hurt the body of Christ.
- b. The standard of judgement is not another person but our calling.

2. We are all to assist other believers who are in the wrong.

Gal.6:1-5

"1 Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, each one looking to yourself, lest you too be

tempted. 2 Bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ. 3 For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. 4 But let each one examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another. 5 For each one shall bear his own load."

- a. When our brother is struggling with sin we are called to help.
- b. Our posture is to be one of gentleness and self examination.
- c. We are resist the temptation of comparing ourselves with others. We are to compare ourselves with our own calling.

Rom.15:14

"14 And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able also to admonish one another."

- a. A virtuous life is equipped to admonish or correct others. The implication is that to the extent that we are struggling with sin, we are not able to help others.
- b. It is not only goodness but also knowledge that is necessary to admonish others.

3. Individual believers are not to stand in judgment of others but they are to judge themselves.

Matt. 7: 1-5

"1 Do not judge lest you be judged. 2 For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. 3 And 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? 4 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? 5 You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brothers eye."

- a. Judging others is not the responsibility of any and everyone.
- b. When we judge others we open ourselves for judgment or criticism.
- c. The point of the teaching is to not try to correct others until and unless we correct ourselves.
- d. If we wish to correct others we should start by auditing our own lives first.

4. The church does have a responsibility to exercise discipline in certain situations as a part of shepherding responsibility.

I Cor.5:1-13

"1 It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife. 2 And you have become arrogant, and have not mourned instead, in order that the one who had done this deed might be removed from your midst. 3 For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present. 4 In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, 5 {I have decided} to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. 6 Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump {of dough}? 7 Clean out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, just as you are {in fact} unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. 8 Let us therefore celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth."

9 I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people. 10 I {did} not at all {mean} with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters; for then you would have to go out of the world. 11 But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler-- not even to eat with such a one. 12 For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within {the church}? 13 But those who are outside, God judges. Remove the wicked man from among yourselves.”

- a. Paul prescribes excommunication for someone who is living openly in sexual immorality and proud of it.
- b. Paul does not prescribe excommunication for all offences but he does include – covetous, idolaters, revilers, drunkards and swindlers. The assumption is that these individuals are also doing nothing about their condition but persisting in sin.
- c. Paul clearly expects the church to discipline its members not those outside the church.

5. Disputes between believers are to be settled within the Christian community when possible.

I Cor.6:1-8

“1 Does any one of you, when he has a case against his neighbor, dare to go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints? 2 Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is judged by you, are you not competent {to constitute} the smallest law courts? 3 Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, matters of this life? 4 If then you have law courts dealing with matters of this life, do you appoint them as judges who are of no account in the church? 5 I say {this} to your shame. {Is it} so, {that} there is not among you one wise man who will be able to decide between his brethren 6 but brother goes to law with brother, and that before unbelievers? 7 Actually, then, it is already a defeat for you, that you have lawsuits with one another. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded? 8 On the contrary, you yourselves wrong and defraud, and that {your} brethren.”

- a. Paul could not be more emphatic in exhorting the Christian community to take responsibility in passing judgment on disputes between believers.
- b. Paul suggests that it is better to suffer injustice than to seek judgement from those outside the church.

6. The discipline of those who are not self disciplined is a responsibility of the church.

II Thess.3:14-15

“14 And if anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that man and do not associate with him, so that he may be put to shame. 15 And {yet} do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.”

- a. It is clear in this passage that shunning can be an act of love and is not to come with an attitude of disrespect.
- b. The notion of shame is not to be avoided at all costs. It can be a part of the healing process. Shame in this context should be distinguished from Psychological shame (rejection of self). The shame in this text is the shame that comes from conviction and deep sorrow for sin.

7. The discipline of leaders may require some special considerations.

I Tim.5:20-22

“19 Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses. 20 Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also may be fearful {of sinning.} 21 I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of {His} chosen angels, to maintain these {principles} without bias, doing nothing in a {spirit of} partiality. 22 Do not lay hands upon anyone {too} hastily and thus share {responsibility for} the sins of others; keep yourself free from sin.”

- a. Charges against leaders are to be controlled by certain rules to protect their special vulnerability.
- b. There should be multiple witnesses (individuals who independently have the same charge of misconduct).
- c. Public exposure is only appropriate if a leader continues to disregard efforts to change.
- d. Paul also warns us to be careful to treat everyone the same way showing no favoritism.

8. Divisive believers are to be warned and then excluded from fellowship if they persist.

Titus 3:9-11

“But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless. 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.”

- a. After two warnings a divisive person is to be shunned.
- b. A divisive spirit is of special concern to Paul and should be to us.

G. Procedures for Church Discipline

Matt.18:15-20

“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them. Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”

- a. Jesus’ instructions here have been the basis of Christian confrontation for centuries.
- b. The scriptural procedure is clear and specific steps are prescribed as follows:

Cautions

If you see the offense or you have accurate knowledge of the sin(s), please note these cautions:

- * Be sure it is an offense which calls for discipline and not merely one of our pet peeves. Again, the Word must be our criterion.
- * Remember how we too have sinned in the past and heed the warnings of Galatians 6:1.

- * Bring the matter before the Lord in prayer before the confrontation takes place (I Sam.8:6).
- * Don't procrastinate. The longer the delay, the more difficult the condition can become. Remember the consequences listed above.
- * Don't gossip or even talk to others about it in the sense of Matthew 18:16 until you have talked to the sinning believer privately. We must guard and protect the person and the flock from rumors and a slanderous tongue (Prov.6:19b; 10:19; 11:13; 18:8, 21; 20:19).

First Step

First, seek private correction and/or reconciliation with the offender (Matt.18:15). In Matthew 18:15 many manuscripts have "and if your brother sins *against you*, go and reprove him in private."

There has been no little debate as to whether the words "against you" are part of the original manuscripts. The words "against me" in verse 21 may have led a scribe or copyist to personalize the matter in verse 15. Or, one could argue the omission was deliberate in order to generalize the passage. While some important manuscript tradition lacks the words "against you," many feel there is good evidence for their originality. First, the words, "reprove him in private," and second, the question of Peter in verse 21 about forgiving a brother who sins "against me" suggests their inclusion.

Whether the words "against you" were in the original text or not, Galatians 6:1 teaches that believers have a responsibility to confront sin in general in the life of other believers and not just when it is an offense against one's person. It would seem, then that there is a two-fold application:

- (1) When the problem involves one believer sinning against another, there are two problems that need to be taken care of: reconciliation and restoration (Matt.5:23-24).
- (2) When the problem involves a believer overcome in or by some sin, as was the case in Galatians 6:1, the need is restoration.

Matthew 18:16-17 should not be limited to the problem of one believer sinning against another in view of Galatians 6:1. So, the one offended or who recognizes the offense or sin is to go privately and try to rectify the problem.

Please note these guidelines:

- (1) Begin by expressing your genuine appreciation for the person and their good qualities to show you are genuinely concerned about their welfare. Then and only then bring up the matter which is of concern.
- (2) In some situations the sin is apparent and there is no question, but we must allow for the possibility that we have misjudged or have wrong information. We must listen to the other person's side of the story and seek the facts in the interest of truth and fairness.
- (3) If the person fails to respond, warn them that, according to the instructions of Scripture (Matt.18:16), you will have to get others as witnesses and return with them to deal with the problem.

Second Step

If the first step fails, take witnesses to strengthen the effect of the discipline, preferably spiritual leaders, so that if it has to be brought before the whole church it

can be firmly proven and established (Matt.18:16-17; I Tim.5:19). The aid of church leadership should be sought if the problem involves an offense that is against the whole body or if it is a threat to the unity of the body.

These initial contacts, private and with witnesses, provide opportunity for loving admonition, correction, and forgiveness. On the other hand, if these first steps do not produce results, it constitutes a warning that further action will be taken and provides occasion for serious rebuke (II Tim.4:2; I Thess.5:12-13; Titus 2:15; 3:10).

Third Step

If the second step fails, seek reconciliation and restoration through the whole body. If further action is necessary, it is to be taken before the whole church (II Thess.3:14-15; Matt.18:17; I Tim.5:20).

This action appears to fall into two stages when we combine II Thessalonians 3:14 and I Corinthians 5:9-13 with Matthew 18:17.

- (1) The body is to exercise group disapproval by way of social ostracism (refusal to have intimate fellowship).
- (2) If this doesn't work, the local body of believers is to exercise excommunication: removal from church membership, loss of voting privileges, and continuation of the loss of intimate fellowship. This must be approved of and done by the entire congregation (II Cor.2:6).

This is, in essence, the Lord carrying out discipline through the action of the entire body under the leadership of the elders or the spiritually mature (I Cor. 5:4). Similar heavenly authority is seen in the ratification of this disciplinary action as spelled out in Matthew 18:18-19.

H. Occasions for church discipline

1. General Causes: Disorderly conduct, conduct clearly out of line with the prescribed commands of Scripture and which negatively impacts the testimony and unity of the church (II Thess.3:6-15).
2. Specific Causes: It interesting to note that the most commonly mentioned offences are false teaching and disruption of community spirit.
 - a. Difficulties between members (Matt.18:15-17).
 - b. Divisive or factious people causing divisions in the church (Rom.16:17-18; Titus 3:9-11).
 - c. Immoral conduct; sins of the type mentioned in I Corinthians 5 such as incest, immorality, covetousness, idolatry, abusive speech, drunkenness, swindling, (I Cor.5:1, 11)
 - d. Idle busybodies who refuse to work and run around spreading dissension (II Thess.3:10-15). The term "busybody" has the connotation of meddling in the affairs of others while not caring for their own responsibilities. It is translated "troublesome meddler" in I Pet.4:15.
 - e. False teaching; erroneous teaching and views which concern the fundamentals of the faith and not lesser differences of interpretation (I Tim. 1:20; II Tim. 2:17-18; also implied in Rev. 2:14-16; Phil. 3:2-3, 15-19; Rom. 16:17-18).

I. The church should be eager and quick to restore those who repent.

II Cor.2:5-11

“5 But if any has caused sorrow, he has caused sorrow not to me, but in some degree-- in order not to say too much-- to all of you. 6 Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which was {inflicted by} the majority, 7 so that on the contrary you should rather forgive and comfort {him}, lest somehow such a one be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. 8 Wherefore I urge you to reaffirm {your} love for him. 9 For to this end also I wrote that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things. 10 But whom you forgive anything, I {forgive} also; for indeed what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, {I did it} for your sakes in the presence of Christ, 11 in order that no advantage be taken of us by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his schemes.”

Restoration is to be an active part of the church’s posture toward those who repent.

Penitent believers are not to be left to themselves.

Open expressions of both forgiveness and comfort are called for just as open confession and remorse are called for by the sinner.

- a. It is anticipated that Satan (who is the accuser) will keep a person in shame and guilt long after repentance has taken place. For this reason, the church must build up the penitent believer so that confidence is restored. Shame is the Spirit’s tool before repentance and Satan’s tool after.

J. **Procedures for Restoration**

Forgiveness

In keeping with the goal of restoration, the role of the church must change after there is repentance. This means accepting the person and forgetting the past (II Cor.2:7a).

But how do we know when repentance is genuine? What is our responsibility when the sinning party acknowledges their wrong and claims repentance? The following two passages answer this for us.

Luke 3:8, when they “. . . bring forth fruits in keeping with repentance.”

Acts 26:20, “. . . that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance.”

Genuine repentance will make itself evident by its deeds and attitudes. The repentant person will:

- (1) Freely acknowledge his sin (I Jn.1:9; Prov.28:13a).
- (2) Cease the activity for which he was disciplined or at least seek help if it’s a case of life dominating patterns (Prov.28:13b; Gal.6:1f; Jam.5:19-20).
- (3) Make restitution and/or ask for forgiveness from those hurt as it is applicable (Phil.18-19; Matt.5:23-24).
- (4) He/she will demonstrate a genuine change of heart, a real concern and godly sorrow over his actions, not in order to be forgiven, but because of the harm caused to the glory of God and the hurt caused others (II Cor.7:8-11; Ps.51:17).
- (5) He/she will begin to manifest the fruit of the Spirit and a concern for the things of Christ (Gal.5:22f).

Comfort

This means reaching out to them, assuring them of your support, and encouraging, exhorting, and challenging them to move on (II Cor.2:7b).

Love

This means including them, drawing them close, doing for them that which will aid their growth and complete recovery (II Cor.2:8). This would include encouraging them to get involved in ministry (Luke 22:31-32). For positions of leadership, there should be a time of testing to demonstrate their qualifications after the analogy of I Timothy 3:10.

K. **The Imprecatory Psalms.**

1. Examples of Psalms that call down God's wrath on our enemies. (NIV)

- *Psalm 5:10* 10 Declare them guilty, O God! Let their intrigues be their downfall. Banish them for their many sins, for they have rebelled against you.
- *Psalm 6:10* 10 All my enemies will be ashamed and dismayed; they will turn back in sudden disgrace.
- *Psalm 7:6* 6 Arise, O LORD, in your anger; rise up against the rage of my enemies. Awake, my God; decree justice.
- *Psalm 9:19-20* 19 Arise, O LORD, let not man triumph; let the nations be judged in your presence. 20 Strike them with terror, O LORD; let the nations know they are but men. Selah
- *Psalm 10:2* 2 In his arrogance the wicked man hunts down the weak, who are caught in the schemes he devises.
- *Psalm 10:15* 15 Break the arm of the wicked and evil man; call him to account for his wickedness that would not be found out.
- *Psalm 17:13* 13 Rise up, O LORD, confront them, bring them down; rescue me from the wicked by your sword.
- *Psalm 25:19* 19 See how my enemies have increased and how fiercely they hate me!
- *Psalm 28:4* 4 Repay them for their deeds and for their evil work; repay them for what their hands have done and bring back upon them what they deserve.
- *Psalm 31:17-18* 17 Let me not be put to shame, O LORD, for I have cried out to you; but let the wicked be put to shame and lie silent in the grave. 18 Let their lying lips be silenced, for with pride and contempt they speak arrogantly against the righteous.
- *Psalm 35:1* 1 Psalm 35 Of David. Contend, O LORD, with those who contend with me; fight against those who fight against me.
- *Psalm 35:4-8* 4 May those who seek my life be disgraced and put to shame; may those who plot my ruin be turned back in dismay. 5 May they be like chaff before the wind, with the angel of the LORD driving them away; 6 may their path be dark and slippery, with the angel of the LORD pursuing them. 7 Since they hid their net for me without cause and without cause dug a pit for me, 8 may ruin overtake them by surprise -- may the net they hid entangle them, may they fall into the pit, to their ruin.
- *Psalm 35:19* 19 Let not those gloat over me who are my enemies without cause; let not those who hate me without reason maliciously wink the eye.
- *Psalm 35:24-26* 24 Vindicate me in your righteousness, O LORD my God; do not let them gloat over me. 25 Do not let them think, "Aha, just what we wanted!" or say, "We have swallowed him up." 26 May all who gloat over my distress be put to shame and confusion; may all who exalt themselves over me be clothed with shame and disgrace.
- *Psalm 40:14-15* 14 May all who seek to take my life be put to shame and confusion; may all who desire my ruin be turned back in disgrace. 15 May those who say to me, "Aha! Aha!" be appalled at their own shame.

- *Psalm 41:10* 10 But you, O LORD, have mercy on me; raise me up, that I may repay them.
- *Psalm 54:5* 5 Let evil recoil on those who slander me; in your faithfulness destroy them.
- *Psalm 55:9* 9 Confuse the wicked, O Lord, confound their speech, for I see violence and strife in the city.
- *Psalm 55:15* 15 Let death take my enemies by surprise; let them go down alive to the grave, for evil finds lodging among them.
- *Psalm 56:7* 7 On no account let them escape; in your anger, O God, bring down the nations.
- *Psalm 58:6-10* 6 Break the teeth in their mouths, O God; tear out, O LORD, the fangs of the lions! 7 Let them vanish like water that flows away; when they draw the bow, let their arrows be blunted. 8 Like a slug melting away as it moves along, like a stillborn child, may they not see the sun. 9 Before your pots can feel the heat of the thorns -- whether they be green or dry -- the wicked will be swept away. 10 The righteous will be glad when they are avenged, when they bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked.
- *Psalm 59:5* 5 O LORD God Almighty, the God of Israel, rouse yourself to punish all the nations; show no mercy to wicked traitors. Selah
- *Psalm 59:11-14* 11 But do not kill them, O Lord our shield, or my people will forget. In your might make them wander about, and bring them down. 12 For the sins of their mouths, for the words of their lips, let them be caught in their pride. For the curses and lies they utter, 13 consume them in wrath, consume them till they are no more. Then it will be known to the ends of the earth that God rules over Jacob. Selah 14 They return at evening, snarling like dogs, and prowl about the city.
- *Psalm 63:9-10* 9 They who seek my life will be destroyed; they will go down to the depths of the earth. 10 They will be given over to the sword and become food for jackals.
- *Psalm 68:1-2* 1 Psalm 68 For the director of music. Of David. A psalm. A song. May God arise, may his enemies be scattered; may his foes flee before him. 2 As smoke is blown away by the wind, may you blow them away; as wax melts before the fire, may the wicked perish before God.
- *Psalm 68:30* 30 Rebuke the beast among the reeds, the herd of bulls among the calves of the nations. Humbled, may it bring bars of silver. Scatter the nations who delight in war.
- *Psalm 69:22-28* 22 May the table set before them become a snare; may it become retribution and a trap. 23 May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever. 24 Pour out your wrath on them; let your fierce anger overtake them. 25 May their place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in their tents. 26 For they persecute those you wound and talk about the pain of those you hurt. 27 Charge them with crime upon crime; do not let them share in your salvation. 28 May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous.
- *Psalm 70:2-3* 2 May those who seek my life be put to shame and confusion; may all who desire my ruin be turned back in disgrace. 3 May those who say to me, "Aha! Aha!" turn back because of their shame.

- *Psalm 71:13* 13 May my accusers perish in shame; may those who want to harm me be covered with scorn and disgrace.
- *Psalm 74:23* 23 Do not ignore the clamor of your adversaries, the uproar of your enemies, which rises continually.
- *Psalm 79:6* 6 Pour out your wrath on the nations that do not acknowledge you, on the kingdoms that do not call on your name;
- *Psalm 79:10-12* 10 Why should the nations say, "Where is their God?" Before our eyes, make known among the nations that you avenge the outpoured blood of your servants. 11 May the groans of the prisoners come before you; by the strength of your arm preserve those condemned to die. 12 Pay back into the laps of our neighbors seven times the reproach they have hurled at you, O Lord.
- *Psalm 83:9-18* 9 Do to them as you did to Midian, as you did to Sisera and Jabin at the river Kishon, 10 who perished at Endor and became like refuse on the ground. 11 Make their nobles like Oreb and Zeeb, all their princes like Zebah and Zalmunna, 12 who said, "Let us take possession of the pasturelands of God." 13 Make them like tumbleweed, O my God, like chaff before the wind. 14 As fire consumes the forest or a flame sets the mountains ablaze, 15 so pursue them with your tempest and terrify them with your storm. 16 Cover their faces with shame so that men will seek your name, O LORD. 17 May they ever be ashamed and dismayed; may they perish in disgrace. 18 Let them know that you, whose name is the LORD -- that you alone are the Most High over all the earth.
- *Psalm 94:1-4* 1 Psalm 94 O LORD, the God who avenges, O God who avenges, shine forth. 2 Rise up, O Judge of the earth; pay back to the proud what they deserve. 3 How long will the wicked, O LORD, how long will the wicked be jubilant? 4 They pour out arrogant words; all the evildoers are full of boasting.
- *Psalm 97:7* 7 All who worship images are put to shame, those who boast in idols -- worship him, all you gods!
- *Psalm 104:35* 35 But may sinners vanish from the earth and the wicked be no more. Praise the LORD, O my soul. Praise the LORD.
- *Psalm 109:6-19* 6 Appoint an evil man to oppose him; let an accuser stand at his right hand. 7 When he is tried, let him be found guilty, and may his prayers condemn him. 8 May his days be few; may another take his place of leadership. 9 May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow. 10 May his children be wandering beggars; may they be driven from their ruined homes. 11 May a creditor seize all he has; may strangers plunder the fruits of his labor. 12 May no one extend kindness to him or take pity on his fatherless children. 13 May his descendants be cut off, their names blotted out from the next generation. 14 May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the LORD; may the sin of his mother never be blotted out. 15 May their sins always remain before the LORD, that he may cut off the memory of them from the earth. 16 For he never thought of doing a kindness, but hounded to death the poor and the needy and the brokenhearted. 17 He loved to pronounce a curse -- may it come on him; he found no pleasure in blessing -- may it be far from him. 18 He wore cursing as his garment; it entered into his body like water, into his bones like oil. 19 May it be like a cloak wrapped about him, like a belt tied forever around him.
- *Psalm 109:29* 29 My accusers will be clothed with disgrace and wrapped in shame as in a cloak.

- *Psalm 119:84* 84 How long must your servant wait? When will you punish my persecutors?
- *Psalm 129:5-7* 5 May all who hate Zion be turned back in shame. 6 May they be like grass on the roof, which withers before it can grow; 7 with it the reaper cannot fill his hands, nor the one who gathers fill his arms.
- *Psalm 137:7-9* 7 Remember, O LORD, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. "Tear it down," they cried, "tear it down to its foundations!" 8 O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us -- 9 he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.
- *Psalm 139:19-22* 19 If only you would slay the wicked, O God! Away from me, you bloodthirsty men! 20 They speak of you with evil intent; your adversaries misuse your name. 21 Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD, and abhor those who rise up against you? 22 I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies.
- *Psalm 140:8-11* 8 do not grant the wicked their desires, O LORD; do not let their plans succeed, or they will become proud. Selah 9 Let the heads of those who surround me be covered with the trouble their lips have caused. 10 Let burning coals fall upon them; may they be thrown into the fire, into miry pits, never to rise. 11 Let slanderers not be established in the land; may disaster hunt down men of violence.
- *Psalm 141:10* 10 Let the wicked fall into their own nets, while I pass by in safety.
- *Psalm 143:12* 12 In your unfailing love, silence my enemies; destroy all my foes, for I am your servant.
- *Psalm 149:5-9* 5 Let the saints rejoice in this honor and sing for joy on their beds. 6 May the praise of God be in their mouths and a double-edged sword in their hands, 7 to inflict vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples, 8 to bind their kings with fetters, their nobles with shackles of iron, 9 to carry out the sentence written against them. This is the glory of all his saints. Praise the LORD.

2. How are these Psalms to be interpreted?

a. **Carnal Vindictiveness**

This view interprets the imprecatory psalms to be uninspired examples of carnal rage. C. S. Lewis held this view.

b. **Poetic Hyperbole**

This view attempts to reconcile the imprecatory problem by simply attributing the forceful language to poetic hyperbole and exaggeration in order to make a point.

c. **Predictions of Doom**

This interpretation attempts to explain away all the imprecatory psalms as no more than a prophetic prediction of coming doom. This interpretation denies that the psalmist had any desire to personally see justice done in his time.

d. **Law Against Grace**

This interpretation states that the imprecatory psalms were fine examples of living under law instead of grace. But now that we are under grace instead of law, we should not consider these prayers to be valid.

e. **Incomplete Revelation**

This view states that the imprecatory psalms are examples of an incomplete revelation and Old Testament ethics and therefore are not

worthy of imitation by New Testament Christians who have access to the fullness of God's revelation.

f. Spiritual warfare against sin

This view reads the imprecatory psalms as poetic hyperbole describing our struggle against Satan and sin. The objects of our wrath are not flesh and blood but the spiritual forces of darkness and sin. No matter what the original intent of the psalmist may have been, the reader who looks back through the lens of the Kingdom of God in Christ, uses the psalms as examples of spiritual warfare. This is my view.

Church Discipline

by **J. Hampton Keathley III**

Though church discipline is a very difficult area of doctrine and one hard to practice, it nevertheless rests upon the divine authority of Scripture and is vital to the purity, power, progress, and purpose of the church. The responsibility and necessity for discipline is not an option for the church if it obeys the Word of God, but a church must be equally concerned that Scripture is carefully followed in the practice of church discipline. The following summary is suggested for study and as a guide for this very important area of doctrine.

The Principle of Discipline Defined

- a. R.C. Sproul writes, “The church is called not only to a ministry of reconciliation, but a ministry of nurture to those within her gates. Part of that nurture includes church discipline . . .” The idea of church discipline is totally consistent with the basic purposes of the church—evangelism and edification. Evangelism ministers to those without the church who are in bondage to sin to bring them to faith in Christ where the transformation process begins. The edification process is designed to build up believers so they can be conformed to the image and character of Christ. Church discipline as a part of the edification process ministers to those within the body of Christ who are dominated by some area of sin so they can experience liberation from its power through fellowship with Christ.
- b. How then do we define church discipline? Carl Laney states, “Church discipline may be broadly defined as the confrontive and corrective measures taken by an individual, church leaders, or the congregation regarding a matter of sin in the life of a believer.”
- c. Discipline in the church is not punishment. It is discipline and discipline is designed to train and restore.

The Pattern and Basis for Discipline

- (1) The discipline of the church is first patterned after the fact that *the Lord Himself disciplines His children* (Heb. 12:6) and, as a father delegates part of the discipline of the children to the mother, so the Lord has delegated the discipline of the church family to the church itself (I Cor. 5:12-13; II Cor. 2:6).
- (2) Discipline is further based on *the holy character of God* (I Pet. 1:16; Heb. 12:11). The pattern of God’s holiness—His desire for the church to be holy, set apart unto Him—is an important reason for the necessity of church discipline. The church is therefore to clean out

the leaven of malice and wickedness from its ranks (I Cor. 5:6-8). A failure to exercise discipline in the church evidences a lack of awareness of and concern for the holiness of God.

- (3) Church discipline is to be patterned after and based on *the divine commands of Scripture* (I Cor. 4:6). We have numerous passages of Scripture which both command and give us God's directives on the how, why, when, and where of church discipline. Again, a failure to exercise this responsibility demonstrates a lack of obedience and belief in the authority of the Bible (I Cor. 5:1-13; Matt. 18:17-18; Titus 3:10; II Thess. 3:6-15; I Tim. 5:20; Gal. 6:1).
- (4) Another basis for the necessity of church discipline is *the testimony of the church in the world* (I Pet. 4:13-19). The world observes the behavior and life of the church. When the church acts no differently than the world, it loses its credibility and authenticity (I Pet. 2:11-18; 3:8-16; 4:1-4).

The Purposes of Church Discipline

- (1) To bring glory to God and enhance the testimony of the flock.
- (2) To restore, heal, and build up sinning believers (Matt. 18:15; II Thess. 3:14-15; Heb. 12:10-13; Gal. 6:1-2; Jam. 5:20).
- (3) To produce a healthy faith, one sound in doctrine (Tit. 1:13; I Tim. 1:19-20).
- (4) To win a soul to Christ, if the sinning person is only a professing Christian (II Tim. 2:24-26).
- (5) To silence false teachers and their influence in the church (Tit. 1:10-11).
- (6) To set an example for the rest of the body and promote godly fear (I Tim. 5:20).
- (7) To protect the church against the destructive consequences that occur when churches fail to carry out church discipline. A church that fails to exercise discipline experiences four losses:
 - * **The Loss of Purity:** Church discipline is vital to the purity of the local body and its protection from moral decay and impure doctrinal influences. Why? Because a little leaven leavens the entire lump (I Cor. 5:6-7). This is the "rotten apple" problem or the "snowball" effect.

An illustration of this is the Corinthian church which showed a lack of concern for purity. They neglected the responsibility to discipline and suffered as a result. Their insensitivity to one moral issue may have led to their compromise on other issues. Laney writes, "The Corinthians engaged in lawsuits, misused their liberty, profaned the Lord's Supper, neglected the primacy of love, failed to regulate the use of their gifts, and questioned the resurrection." Failure in church discipline in Corinth could be compared to a snowball tumbling downhill.
 - * **The Loss of Power:** Sin in the life of the church grieves the person of the Holy Spirit and quenches His power. If sin remains unchecked by the loving application of church discipline in a body of believers, the Holy Spirit must abandon such a church to its own carnal resources. The unavoidable result will be the loss of the Lord's blessing until the sin is dealt with.

The defeat of Israel because of the sin of Achan in Joshua 7 illustrates the principle. This is just as true for the church today, especially when we know certain things exist but ignore them or simply look the other way because it is difficult to deal with

or because it involves one of our friends and we do not want to risk causing problems in the relationship.

- * **The Loss of Progress:** A church that refuses to practice church discipline will see its ministry decline. The church may want to grow and reach out and it may try all kinds of stop gap measures, promotional campaigns, and programs in an attempt to turn things around, but if there is open sinful rebellion in the camp, it will all be to no avail. See Revelation 2:5 and 3:16 for illustrations of this principle.
- * **The Loss of Purpose:** As His ambassadors to a lost and dying world, God has called the church to be a holy people, a people who, standing out as distinct from the world, proclaim the excellencies of the works of God in Christ (I Pet. 1:14-16; 2:9-15). If this is to occur, we must be different from the world and church discipline helps us to both remember and maintain that purpose. One of the recurring judgments against the church today as demonstrated in various polls taken across the country is the fact there is little or no difference between the church and the secular world when it comes to attitudes, values, morals, and lifestyle. We have lost our sense of purpose.

The Practice of Church Discipline

The Manner

The above goals or purposes automatically govern the spirit in which all disciplinary action is to be given. Thus:

- (1) Discipline must be done by those who are spiritual, truly walking by the Holy Spirit and growing in the Lord (Gal.6:1).
- (2) Discipline must be done in a spirit of humility, gentleness and patience, looking to ourselves lest we too be tempted (Gal.6:1-2; II Tim.2:24-25).
- (3) Discipline must be done without bias, doing nothing in a spirit of partiality (I Tim.5:21).
- (4) Those who walk disorderly are to be admonished, warned, and appealed to in love (I Thess.5:14-15; I Tim.5:1-2; Eph.4:15; II Tim.4:2). This admonishing, is not restricted to church leaders, but may be done by any person in the body with another if that person is Spirit controlled and spiritually minded (cf. I Thess.5:14 with Gal.6:1).
- (5) If there is no response in repentance and obedience, then the sinning believer is to be rebuked publicly and members of the body are to withhold intimate fellowship through the process and procedure of group disapproval and social ostracism as prescribed in the next section, Procedures for Church Discipline below (II Thess.3:6, 14-15; Tit.3:10; I Tim. 5:20). This action has a two-fold objective:
 - * It is to indicate to the offender that his/her action has dishonored the Lord and has caused a rupture in the harmony of the body. The goal is always restoration and the person is still to be counted as a brother (II Thess.3:14-15).
 - * It is to create fear in the rest of the flock as a warning against sin (I Tim.5:20).
- (6) If there is still no response in repentance and obedience, the church is to apply the procedures of excommunication as directed in Matthew 18:17.

Several examples of church discipline are found in Scripture. The Corinthian believers were to be “gathered together” in order to take action against the offending brother (I Cor.5:4-5; Rom.16:17; II Thess.3:6-15; Phil.3:17-19).

This is defined by Paul as “punishment inflicted by the majority” (II Cor.2:6). As a protective measure, we also find that the whole church in Rome and in Thessalonica

were to take action with regard to the unruly and schismatic, not just a few (II Thess.3:6-15; Rom. 16:17).

- (7) Finally, discipline in the name of our Lord always includes a readiness to forgive. The many or majority who discipline must also be ready and eager to forgive, comfort, and reaffirm their love to the sinning person (II Cor.2:6-8). (See Procedures for Church Discipline below.)

Reasons for Church Discipline

In church discipline we must exercise extreme care. Scripture does not warrant the exercise of discipline for an individual's or a church's taboos or pet peeves—the “dirty dozen” or the “nasty nine.” Scripture, not our opinions or dislikes, must be the guide for what is sin. Further, we must not become hypercritical or “speck inspectors.”

- (1) General Causes: Disorderly conduct, conduct clearly out of line with the prescribed commands of Scripture and which negatively impacts the testimony and unity of the church (II Thess.3:6-15).
- (2) Specific Causes:
- * Difficulties between members (Matt.18:15-17).
 - * Divisive or factious people causing divisions in the church (Rom.16:17-18; Titus 3:9-11).
 - * Immoral conduct; sins of the type mentioned in I Corinthians 5 such as incest, immorality, covetousness, idolatry, abusive speech, drunkenness, swindling, or idle busybodies who refuse to work and run around spreading dissension (I Cor.5:1, 11; II Thess.3:10-15).
 - * False teaching; erroneous teaching and views which concern the fundamentals of the faith and not lesser differences of interpretation (Gal.1:8-9; I Tim.1:20; II Tim.2:17-18; also implied in Rev.2:14-16; Phil.3:2-3, 15-19; Rom.16:17-18).

The key concerns that guide us in this are: (a) the holy character of God, (b) the testimony of the flock, (c) the effect upon the unity and purity of the flock, and (d) the edification and restoration of the individual.

Procedures for Church Discipline

The scriptural procedure is clear and specific steps are prescribed as follows:

Cautions

If you see the offense or you have accurate knowledge of the sin(s), please note these cautions:

- * Be sure it is an offense, which calls for discipline and not merely one of our pet peeves. Again, the Word must be our criterion.
- * Remember how we too have sinned in the past and heed the warnings of Galatians 6:1.
- * Bring the matter before the Lord in prayer before the confrontation takes place (I Sam. 8:6).
- * Don't procrastinate. The longer the delay, the more difficult the condition can become. Remember the consequences listed above.

- * Don't gossip or even talk to others about it in the sense of Matthew 18:16 until you have talked to the sinning believer privately. We must guard and protect the person and the flock from rumors and a slanderous tongue (Prov.6:19b; 10:19; 11:13; 18:8, 21; 20:19).

First Step

First, seek private correction and/or reconciliation with the offender (Matt. 18:15). In Matthew 18:15 many manuscripts have "and if your brother sins *against you*, go and reprove him in private."

There has been no little debate as to whether the words "against you" are part of the original manuscripts. The words "against me" in verse 21 may have led a scribe or copyist to personalize the matter in verse 15. Or, one could argue the omission was deliberate in order to generalize the passage. While some important manuscript tradition lacks the words "against you," many feel there is good evidence for their originality. First, the words, "reprove him in private," and second, the question of Peter in verse 21 about forgiving a brother who sins "against me" suggests their inclusion.

Whether the words "against you" were in the original text or not, Galatians 6:1 teaches that believers have a responsibility to confront sin in general in the life of other believers and not just when it is an offense against one's person. It would seem, then that there is a two-fold application:

- (1) When the problem involves one believer sinning against another, there are two problems that need to be taken care of: reconciliation and restoration (Matt.5:23-24).
- (2) When the problem involves a believer overcome in or by some sin, as was the case in Galatians 6:1, the need is restoration.

Matthew 18:16-17 should not be limited to the problem of one believer sinning against another in view of Galatians 6:1. So, the one offended or who recognizes the offense or sin is to go privately and try to rectify the problem.

Please note these guidelines:

- (1) Begin by expressing your genuine appreciation for the person and their good qualities to show you are genuinely concerned about their welfare. Then and only then bring up the matter which is of concern.
- (2) In some situations the sin is apparent and there is no question, but we must allow for the possibility that we have misjudged or have wrong information. We must listen to the other person's side of the story and seek the facts in the interest of truth and fairness.
- (3) If the person fails to respond, warn them that, according to the instructions of Scripture (Matt. 18:16), you will have to get others as witnesses and return with them to deal with the problem.

Second Step

If the first step fails, take witnesses to strengthen the effect of the discipline, preferably spiritual leaders, so that if it has to be brought before the whole church it can be firmly proven and established (Matt.18:16-17; I Tim.5:19). The aid of church leadership should be sought if the problem involves an offense that is against the whole body or if it is a threat to the unity of the body.

These initial contacts, private and with witnesses, provide opportunity for loving admonition, correction, and forgiveness. On the other hand, if these first steps do not

produce results, it constitutes a warning that further action will be taken and provides occasion for serious rebuke (II Tim.4:2; I Thess.5:12-13; Titus 2:15; 3:10).

Third Step

If the second step fails, seek reconciliation and restoration through the whole body. If further action is necessary, it is to be taken before the whole church (II Thess.3:14-15; Matt.18:17; I Tim.5:20).

This action appears to fall into two stages when we combine II Thessalonians 3:14 and I Corinthians 5:9-13 with Matthew 18:17.

- (1) The body is to exercise group disapproval by way of social ostracism (refusal to have intimate fellowship).
- (2) If this doesn't work, the local body of believers is to exercise excommunication: removal from church membership, loss of voting privileges, and continuation of the loss of intimate fellowship. This must be approved of and done by the entire congregation (II Cor.2:6).

This is, in essence, the Lord carrying out discipline through the action of the entire body under the leadership of the elders or the spiritually mature (I Cor.5:4). Similar heavenly authority is seen in the ratification of this disciplinary action as spelled out in Matthew 18:18-19.

Procedures for Restoration

Forgiveness

In keeping with the goal of restoration, the role of the church must change after there is repentance. This means accepting the person and forgetting the past (II Cor.2:7a).

But how do we know when repentance is genuine? What is our responsibility when the sinning party acknowledges their wrong and claims repentance? The following two passages answer this for us.

Luke 3:8, when they “. . . bring forth fruits in keeping with repentance.”

Acts 26:20, “. . . that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance.”

Genuine repentance will make itself evident by its deeds and attitudes. The repentant person will:

- (1) Freely acknowledge his sin (I Jn.1:9; Prov.28:13a).
- (2) Cease the activity for which he was disciplined or at least seek help if it's a case of life dominating patterns (Prov.28:13b; Gal.6:1f; Jam.5:19-20).
- (3) Make restitution and/or ask for forgiveness from those hurt as it is applicable (Phil. 18-19; Matt.5:23-24).
- (4) He/she will demonstrate a genuine change of heart, a real concern and godly sorrow over his actions, not in order to be forgiven, but because of the harm caused to the glory of God and the hurt caused others (II Cor.7:8-11; Ps.51:17).
- (5) He/she will begin to manifest the fruit of the Spirit and a concern for the things of Christ (Gal.5:22f).

Comfort

This means reaching out to them, assuring them of your support, and encouraging, exhorting, and challenging them to move on (II Cor.2:7b).

Love

This means including them, drawing them close, doing for them that which will aid their growth and complete recovery (II Cor.2:8). This would include encouraging them to get involved in ministry (Luke 22:31-32). For positions of leadership, there should be a time of testing to demonstrate their qualifications after the analogy of I Timothy 3:10.

For excellent and more complete studies on this subject, see (1) *A Guide to Church Discipline*, by Carl Laney, Bethany House Publishers, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1985, and (2) *Healing the Wounded, The Costly Love of Church Discipline*, by John White and Ken Blue, Inter-Varsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, 1985.

By Michael Creech

As Christians we should spend time recognizing the sins that we commit in order that we might forsake them and become more conformed to the image of our Savior. Well, not only do we need to be cognizant of sins of commission but also sins of omission: the things that we should do but fail to do. One of these sins of omission that I believe to be very prevalent in this day and age is the failure of the church to practice discipline in a way that is outlined in scripture. So let's pray together and then take a look at what the scripture does say about discipline in the body of Christ.

First we need to look in the Bible to define church discipline and understand what it is. Hebrews Chapter 12, Verses 1-16 reads; "Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds. Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin. And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons. 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? For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but he for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness. Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby. Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees; And make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed. Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled; Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright."

Church discipline is the tool by which the Lord keeps the church unspotted from the world and instructs and corrects its members to become disciples. It is an expression of love. God chastens us because He loves us and we ought to chasten those whom we are commanded to love. Proverbs Chapter 27: 5-6, 9 emphasizes this truth: "Open rebuke is better than secret love.

Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful. Ointment and perfume rejoice the heart: so does the sweetness of a man's friend by hearty counsel."

Failure to rebuke sin in the lives of other believers is simultaneously failure to love them in the way that we are commanded to. I Timothy 5:20-22 commands: "Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear. I charge thee before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the elect angels, that thou observe these things without preferring one before another, doing nothing by partiality. Lay hands suddenly on no man, neither be partaker of other men's sins: keep thyself pure." Laying on of hands has to do with association or identification. We are not do be hasty to be associated or identified with others until we know them to be those who admit and repent of sin and forsake it.

It is the goal of church discipline to purify, but also to restore. Galatians 6:1 says: "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness;" We are to correct that brother so that there is righteousness in the church and so that his relationship with God and his fellow brethren is restored. Matt.5: 23-24 says, "Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift." We are not even supposed to worship our God without restoring our relationships with one another.

Now that we know what church discipline is, how do we administer it? First we start by examining ourselves as commanded in Matt. 7: 1-5 "Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye." You see, if we have some error in our life, it will keep us from seeing clearly in order help to restore our brother. This is yet another example of how sin in our lives can keep us from being useful to God to be able to help to guide others.

I Corinthians 11:31 reiterates' this by saying, "For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged." So we begin church discipline with personal discipline. In fact the reason that church discipline is necessary is because of those who have a lack of personal discipline in some area. Once we have examined ourselves then we can help our brother as outlined in Matt. 18: 15-20. Lets turn there together. The passage reads: "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. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

In order for church discipline to work both the person being confronted and the person doing the confronting must abide by some important guidelines. This is where the problem usually lies with church discipline or where the correct actions are most often omitted, so lets take a close look at some of the most important guidelines. Again the motivation for discipline is love as outlined very familiarly for us in I Cor. 13: 4-7. We can see an example of this by a statement

Paul makes when he is correcting the church in Corinth. He says in II Cor. 13:10; "Therefore I write these things being absent, lest being present I should use sharpness, according to the power which the Lord hath given me to edification, and not to destruction." He did not even want to be there with them when he corrected them lest he should be tempted to do so with the wrong spirit. That is the type of humility that we must have, in order to approach a confrontational situation with love. Christ is our ultimate example of humility in Philippians 2:1-8; "If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross."

So with a motivation of love and an attitude of humility we are able to rebuke a brother for his sin and not to attack him. It is our desire to get him to see his fault: not to provoke him to anger. Proverbs 15:1 tells us "A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger." Ephesians 4:29 goes on to say: "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers." We want the brother to hear us so that we do not have to go back to him and rebuke him in the presence of witnesses.

The listener must also bear the right attitude. We need to have approachable personalities. Some people purposely have a gruff exterior so that others will be afraid to confront them because they do not want to be rebuked for they have no intention of changing. Proverbs 27:7 says "The full soul loatheth an honeycomb; but to the hungry soul every bitter thing is sweet." This means that people who do not believe that they have room for improvement will not hear rebuke, but we should desire with a hungry heart the opportunity to change for the better. As James 1:19-20 indicates; "Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God." If you pay close attention you will notice the most foolish people you will ever meet are those who love to speak but hate to listen. Attitude is so very important when confronting someone about his sin. Shamefully, we usually just observe the sin in a brother or sister and then just turn our noses up to them and sort of give them the cold shoulder and treat them as if they are sinful and inferior to our level of spirituality. I think this is often more preferable and feels better than first examining ourselves, and certainly much easier than confronting them. Attitude is very important when rebuking someone, but so is action for it comes next. In Matthew 18:15; we are told to go to the person that we have something against first and to go to him alone. We are not to go and complain and talk about them to others behind their back, but we are to go to them alone and hope to restore our relationship with them. Phil. 2:14 tells' us to "Do all things without murmurings and disputings."

Now if at that time they do not hear us, then we are to return with witnesses in the attempt again to get the person to see their sin and repent. If they do not, then the matter is to be brought before the church, and if the person absolutely refuses to forsake the sin then they are not to be included in fellowship. This is also an attempt to get the person to forsake the sin while keeping the church pure and free from corruption. And the passage confirms that when we make a decision in this way, whether it be to loose or to bind, that heaven is in agreement with our action and decision. We should notice that forsaking fellowship is the last resort, not the first,

and is done under the hope that the person will return into fellowship with a repentant heart. In verse 20 we can also find the definition of the word church in church discipline. It is the gathering of two or three in the name of Christ. We are the church. The church building is just where we have decided to gather together to worship, and it only takes a few of us to make up the local body.

As a church it is important to understand discipline as outlined in the Bible and to administer it properly. But it is also very important to know when to pursue discipline. First the brother in question must have actually committed some kind of trespass. We should never confront someone about something that is a false rumor or that is merely an assumption that we have made about something. We need to be sure that there is really a problem. Proverbs 18:13 says, "He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him." It also needs to be something that is currently taking place or is unresolved. Do not approach somebody about something that they did wrong just because you just found out about it. If they have overcome the sin and have been reconciled to God then it is no longer a problem. We should also avoid confronting others when they are doing something that conflicts with our personal preferences but does not conflict with the Word of God. We become heretics when we try to pass our personal preferences off as Scriptural absolutes. It is a full time job for me to keep up with examining myself and all of the things that I struggle with. We do not have time to go to everyone, every time they sin and point it out. I should first seek to forgive and overlook the day to day mistakes of others. And when a situation arises where it seems necessary for me to rebuke someone I need to pray about it and seek the Lord's guidance first. Perhaps God is aware that they will repent of the sin tomorrow and wants them to have the opportunity to do it on their own. Proverbs 15:23 says, "A man hath joy by the answer of his mouth: and a word spoken in due season, how good is it!" There is a right time for everything.

Really there are three primary instances in which other members of the church should be rebuked and which could result in punitive discipline. The first is in the case of false teachers. Rom. 16: 17,18 says: "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple." We must point out and rebuke false teaching in the church because as Rom. 6:17 says, "But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you." We desire purity in the church, and we do not wish to return to the sin we knew before we submitted our hearts to the Word of God. Titus 3: 9-11 goes on to say: "But avoid foolish questions, and genealogies, and contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and vain. A man that is an heretic after the first and second admonition reject; Knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself."

The next offense that could result in a break in fellowship is fornication. I Cor. 5 clearly explains' "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. And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you. 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, In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, 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. Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: Therefore let us keep the feast,

not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world. But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat. For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person."

And last of all: any sin that is not being taken care of on a personal level and that is influencing others and is well known in the church. God commands that we rebuke that sin. II Thess. 3: 6, 14-15 says: "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us. And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother." Again here I would like to point out that the brother who is in sin is our brother and we are to treat him with love and seek to restore him as Christ our savior has restored us to a right relationship with our Father by paying for our sins. In Rev. 3: 19-22 Jesus says, "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent. Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches." In order to overcome the world you must open the door of your heart to Christ and let Him restore you to a right relationship with God. And from then on we must be willing to repent of our sin when rebuked to remain in fellowship with the Lord, and have as our goal the desire to motivate others to do the same.

Church Discipline — A Tragic Neglect by Wayne Jackson

It is difficult to imagine what it would be like to live in a society where citizens could flaunt the rules and absolutely no consequences would follow — no fines, no imprisonment, etc.? Can you conceive of a home environment where the children are allowed to do whatever they please with utterly no discipline imposed? Total chaos would reign in either of these instances.

Yet, there are countless congregations belonging to Jesus Christ across our land where little, if any, discipline of the wayward is ever enacted. Is it any wonder that our brotherhood is weaker today than it has been in decades?

Exactly what is church discipline?

In its broadest sense, it involves everything from the most *basic instruction* that the new-born child of God receives — from the time of his conversion onward, all the way to the *radical "surgery"* sometimes required in the withholding of fellowship from impenitent apostates. For the purpose of this study, we are speaking solely of that terminal act — the church's obligation to withdraw its fellowship from those who cannot be reached with more moderate approaches.

New Testament Authority For Discipline

Every serious Bible student knows that there is ample authority for the practice of church discipline. Consider the following samples of New Testament evidence:

1. Jesus taught that one who has wronged his brother, and who cannot be persuaded to repent — either by the offended party, other independent witnesses, or the church in general — should be treated as “the Gentile and the publican” (Mt. 18:17). In the context of a first-century setting, this means that the church was to have no social contact with hardened offender.
2. Paul instructed the saints in Rome to be on the lookout for those “who are causing the divisions and occasions of stumbling contrary to the doctrine.” He declared that the faithful should “turn away from” these self-servers egotists who were deceiving the innocent (Rom. 16:17).
3. The entire 5th chapter of 1st Corinthians deals with the matter of discipline. A fornicating church member had pursued in his immoral lifestyle relentlessly, and the apostle rebuked the Corinthian congregation for not having disfellowshipped the man.

Paul declared that the brother should have “been taken away from among you,” delivered “unto Satan,” and “put away” (vv. 2, 5, 13). Further, with such a one, “company” was not to be kept (v.). The fraternization of a common meal was forbidden (vs. 11). This instruction is quite explicit.

4. The inspired Paul commanded the church in Thessalonica to “withdraw” from every brother who persists in walking disorderly, thus contrary to divinely received traditions (II Thes. 3:6). Such persons, says he, are to be identified, and social company with them is to be severed. Excommunicated brethren, of course, are not to be treated harshly; rather, they are to be admonished in a brotherly fashion (14, 15; cf. Gal. 6:1).
5. In Titus 3:10, inspiration affirms that a factious person, after appropriate admonition, is to be “refused,” i.e., refused further association.

These passages by no means exhaust the New Testament information on the subject of church discipline. They are sufficient, however, to provide ample instruction of the kingdom’s responsibility in this regard.

The Purpose of Church Discipline

What is the purpose in withdrawing fellowship from the disorderly? It certainly is not an act of revenge towards those who have fallen from the faith. And it must never be exercised in a haughty or malevolent manner. The Scriptures do suggest, however, that discipline has both a corrective and a protective function.

1. Obviously, it is designed to save the erring child of God. The Corinthian fornicator was to be disfellowshipped so that he might be motivated to destroy “the flesh,” i.e., his ungodly fleshly passion (see Thayer, 443) in order that his spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus (1 Cor. 5:5). Discipline is designed to “gain” the wayward (Mt. 18:15), to make him “ashamed” (II Thes. 3:14), to the end that he may be restored (Gal. 6:1).

A consideration of certain passages in 2nd Corinthians leads to the conclusion that the church in Corinth finally did withdraw from the sensuous offender, and that such brought him to repentance. The apostle wrote: “This punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man” (II Cor. 2:6, NKJV).

2. But discipline is not merely for the welfare of the rebel. It is for the protection of the church as well.

When Paul admonished the congregation at Corinth to take care of the problem of the immoral brother, he warned: “Don’t you know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?” (1 Cor. 5:6). The apostle elsewhere declared that those who cause divisions and occasions of stumbling “by their smooth and fair speech beguile the hearts of the innocent” (Rom. 16:17).

Two false teachers in the early church, Hymenaeus and Alexander, had made shipwreck of the faith, hence Paul “delivered [them] unto Satan,” i.e., he disfellowshipped them (I Tim. 1:19-20; cf. I Cor. 5:5) for the welfare of the brethren. False teaching, if allowed to go unchecked within the body of Christ, can eat like a cancer, and cause the faith of some to be overthrown (see II Tim. 2:16-18).

3. Discipline is also important in preserving the integrity of the church before the eyes of the world. Society has bias enough against us without having the legitimate complaint that we harbor evil within our fellowship. We should never give occasion to the adversary for reviling (I Tim. 5:14).

It is imperative that the conduct of the church be such that “the name of God and the doctrine be not blasphemed” (I Tim. 6:1), and that the way of truth be not “evil spoken of” (II Pet. 2:2).

Conduct Deserving of Church Discipline

What sort of attitude or conduct warrants the extreme measure of withdrawing fellowship? The Bible addresses this matter in several ways.

1. A brother who has sinned against another, but who refuses to repent of his transgression, could, ultimately, be disfellowshipped (Mt. 18:15-17).
2. Those who cause occasions of stumbling, and who initiate division, are proper subjects for church discipline (Rom. 16:17; Tit. 3:10).
3. Those who are practitioners of such sins as fornication, covetousness, extortion, idolatry, drunkenness, reviling, etc., could certainly be candidates for withdrawal (I Cor. 5:9ff).
4. Advocates of soul-threatening doctrines must not be allowed to continue in open fellowship with the church (I Tim. 1:19-20; II Tim. 2:16-18).
5. Those who walk disorderly are to be refused association by the faithful (II Thes. 3:6). But what is disorderly conduct?

There are those who simply grow weary of the Christian life and decide to “resign” from the church. When approached about their neglect, and warned of possible discipline, they raise a voice of protest, claiming: “What am I doing that is wrong? I am not committing adultery; I am not a drunkard. The church cannot withdraw from me.”

An appropriate response would be: “Are you faithfully serving God? Do you meet with your brethren to sing, pray, observe the Lord’s supper, etc.? What would be the fate of the family of God if every member were at liberty to do as you have done?” Spiritual neglect is disorderly conduct, and a fitting response to such is discipline—of some sort at least.

It would be well to remember, however, that a person's disposition is frequently the determining factor in terms of *when*, or *whether*, withdrawal of fellowship should be administered. No wise church leadership would disfellowship hastily a sincere Christian who, through weakness, had fallen into a sinful situation. As long as there is humility on the part of the offender, and a genuine effort to overcome the problem, long-suffering would be indicated. When, though, a surly, rebellious attitude is evidenced, more drastic measures may be speedily indicated.

Faithful elderships should let it be known that if a person wants to identify with the congregation over which they exercise supervision, he or she will be expected to live right, and to assume a healthy responsibility in the areas of Christian growth and service. If there is remiss in these matters, discipline, in some form or another, could be advisable.

How Should The Final Act Be Administered?

In every congregation where qualified men are serving as elders, it naturally would be the case that the eldership would lead the church in the withdrawal of fellowship from the unfaithful. Let it be stressed, however, that disfellowship is not an "eldership act" behind closed doors. It is an activity on the part of the entire church, and the formalization of the procedure must be enacted in the public assembly.

Paul commands the Corinthian Christians, by the authority of Christ, to deliver the erring brother unto Satan when they are "gathered together" (I Cor. 5:4). Similarly, after the Lord gave instructions regarding the procedures for restoring the brother who had wronged his fellow, he declared: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Mt. 18:20).

Few people seem to recognize that this comforting promise is given within a context of an exhortation regarding church discipline. Lenski has well noted: "Since he [Christ] is thus in the assembly of the church or present when two or three are convicting a brother of sin, it is he himself who acts with his church and its members when they carry out his Word by invoking also his presence and his help" (707).

Objections To Church Discipline - Answered

In spite of the fact that the Bible is quite clear on the obligation of Christ's church to practice discipline upon impenitent members, there are those who cavil against the responsibility — even to the point of asserting that withdrawal of fellowship is a violation of New Testament principles. Some of the more common quibbles offered are:

1. "No one is worthy to disfellowship another."

The allegation is sometimes made that since no one is perfect, no one really has the right to initiate discipline against another. Commonly, John 8:7 will be cited as a proof-text for this idea. "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her." Two points need to be noted.

First, Jesus is challenging the right of these Jews to enforce the law for the purpose of trapping him. They were not interested in the law or the woman but trying to trap Jesus. Jesus was not intending to throw out the law. When those who are qualified to enforce the law (by virtue of their office) are acting in accord with their responsibilities they should be respected

Second, Paul was not “without sin,” and yet, he withdrew himself from evil brethren (I Tim. 1:19, 20). One does not have to be sinless in order to honor the Bible teaching on this vital theme.

2. **“Leave the tares for God.”**

It sometimes is contended that whereas it must be acknowledged that there are “tares” in the kingdom, we are instructed to leave them alone. At the Judgment, the Lord will exercise his own discipline (cf. Mt. 13:24-30; 36-43).

In response we must insist that no parabolic teaching can be arrayed against clear Bible instruction given elsewhere. This argument is like suggesting that simply because the debtor (in the parable of the unmerciful servant) was forgiven by his Lord, with no conditions being stated (Mt. 18:27), one may conclude that salvation is totally unconditional!

The parable of the tares is simply designed to inoculate against a violent and premature attempts to completely purify the church on earth. It has nothing to do with the genuine practice of brotherly discipline. This type of reasoning is “in direct conflict with the teaching both of Jesus and the apostles on the subject of withdrawing from the disorderly” .

3. **“Judge not!”**

Some contend that church discipline would be a form of “judging,” a practice which the Bible condemns. The plain truth is, not all judging is wrong!

Jesus declared: “Judge not according to appearance, but judge ye righteous judgment” (Jn. 7:24). In Paul’s rebuke of the Corinthians, he clearly stated that he had “judged” already the incestuous brother (I Cor. 5:3). He then subsequently asked these brethren: “Do not ye judge them that are within?” (5:12). Church discipline does, therefore, involve a form of judging, but it is not the unjustified, hypocritical judgment that is censured by Christ in Matthew 7:1-5.

4. **“Where is the love?”**

It is sometimes charged that if the church withdraws fellowship from the erring, it is demonstrating a lack of love. The sickening, superficial view that so many have regarding “love” these days is one of the most dramatic commentaries on biblical ignorance.

The fact is, discipline does not repudiate love, it reflects love. “Those whom the Lord loves, he disciplines” (Heb. 12:6, NASB). When ancient Israel went astray, Jehovah withdrew His presence from them for seventy years (the Babylonian Captivity). Was this a indication of an unloving disposition? To even suggest such is blasphemous.

If you are a member of a congregation which practices church discipline, you ought to thank Almighty God that you have the privilege of belonging to such a loving family!

5. **“What about him?”**

Occasionally the claim will be made: “The church cannot withdraw from me, for there are others who are just as bad, or worse, and they haven’t been disciplined.” Several things may be said in rebutting this rationalization.

First, the fact that the church may have been remiss in its duty, or even inconsistent, in the past, does not mean that changes for the better cannot be made. No sane person would argue: We were wrong in the past; let us therefore always be wrong.

Second, the precise determination as to whom, and when, church discipline should be administered will frequently be a matter of leadership judgment. Some brethren may not know all the facts as to why decisions were made to withdraw from some and not from others. There may be extenuating circumstances that are not general information. This type of quibbling cannot be allowed to deter discipline when such is obviously indicated.

Loving discipline was as much a trait of the primitive church as correct worship, organization, etc. This question, then, cannot but haunt many: *Can a church that utterly refuses to practice discipline truly be a New Testament church?*