

Policy on Church Discipline

1. Purposes of Church Discipline.

A. Reconciliation/Restoration. This is a major purpose for church discipline (Matt 18:15, Gal. 6:1). Sin brings a breakage in the relationship between people and with God. Reconciliation refers to the exchange of enmity for friendship. If a person is sinned against or sins against someone else, Scripture directs that person to seek to reconcile the relationships affected by that sin (Matt 5:23,24; Matt 18:15). If we find our brother overcome by sin, Scripture directs us to try and restore that person - i.e. to bring him back to the place he was before he was caught in sin (Gal. 6:1). This purpose should be the driving force behind our pursuit of church discipline - and it should temper our attitudes and actions. However, there are other purposes.

A-1. Conviction of Sin. This is the first step needed to reach reconciliation. The idea of “reprove” {ελεγξσον} in Mt 18:15 carries the idea of “convict,” “expose,” “lay bare” that persons’s sin.

A-2. Cause Repentance. This is also necessary for reconciliation and restoration. 2 Thess. 3:14 indicates discipline is used to “put to shame” the person in sin. “Shame” {εντροπο} also carries the idea of “to turn about.” James 5:19-20 talks about correcting error and turning “a sinner from the error of his ways.” A person may “learn” something they do is against God’s commands, but they also have to be convicted of their own sin and then turn from it - i.e. repent. Paul’s discipline against some that were in the Corinthian church led to godly repentance (2 Cor. 7:8-13).

B. Teaching. Discipline is part of the teaching process that God uses to bring us to spiritual maturity (see Heb. 12:5-13). The rebuke, admonishment and exhortation given to the individual is for the purpose of teaching him/her about God and His commands of how He wants us to live (See 2 Timothy 3:16,17; 4:2, 1 Thess. 5:14, etc.). Titus 1:13 says that this is so that they may be “sound in the faith.”

C. To keep the Church from sin. Part of Paul’s exhortations against what was going on in the Corinthian church was their complacency with sin. The Corinthians association with those that claimed to be “brothers” but were not living as true Christians was leavening that church. The warning is against sin entering into the lives of the Christians because of their continual association with those who were “so-called” brothers.”

D. Identify those who are disobedient. In 2 Thessalonians 3:14 Paul says to “mark” or “take special note of” those who are disobedient to his instructions.

E. Removal of the unrepentant. Several passages mention the removal of those unwilling to turn from their sins.

Matt. 18:17 “let him be to you as a Gentile and tax-gatherer.” This means that he is to no longer be treated as a Christian brother, but as a resistant non-Christian who needs to be evangelized. The concept of “Gentile and tax-gatherer” should not lead us to ostracize or shun the person (as some churches do), for that would not fit the context of the passage or the teachings of Christ concerning the gentiles. However, it is a separation in which “fellowship” ceases because the common ground of obedience to God has ended. Gentiles and tax-gatherers were considered outsiders to the Jewish community, and they were also treated in a manner that reminded them of this.

1 Cor. 5. Paul said the immoral man should be removed from their midst (v. 2) and that he had already delivered up the immoral man to Satan (v. 5), and he finishes by commanding “Remove the wicked man from among you” (v. 13).

2 Thess. 3:6,14. Paul commands in verse 6 that they “keep aloof from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you have received from us.” “Keep aloof”

{stellesthai) means to “remove one’s self from,” “to abstain from familiar intercourse with one.” In verse 14 Paul says not only to mark the individual who is disobedient, but also to “not associate with him, so that he may be put to shame.” This is not done out of cruelty, but out of love, for Paul adds in verse 15, “do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.” Love the person enough to admonish him and convict him of his sin.

Titus 3:10,11: “Reject a factious man after a first and second warning, knowing that such a man is perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned.”

F. Promote proper fear of God. The case of Annanias and Saphira can be used as an example to show that when God disciplines the result is a proper fear of Him. It should be understood that the Church is an instrument used by God in disciplining His people.

2. The Steps of Church Discipline.

The steps of church discipline are outlined in Matthew 18:15-17. Galatians 6:1-4 can be considered a more detailed outline of the first step (Matt. 18:15). These steps simply described are:

1. Individual in sin is confronted by a Christian brother/sister with goal of reconciliation/restoration. If individual does not listen, then step two.
2. Individual in sin is confronted by two or three Christian brothers/sisters with goal of A). reconciliation/restoration, B). Establishing the facts. If the individual does not listen, then step three.
3. The Church is told of the individual and the church seeks after him/her to try to reconcile/restore. If the individual still does not listen, then step four.
4. The individual is disfellowshipped. He/she is to be treated as a Gentile and tax-gatherer. He/she can no longer participate in the fellowship of the Christian community. There is still hope of reconciliation/restoration (See 1 Cor. 5 & 2 Cor 2), but other purposes of church discipline such as identification of disobedience, keeping the church from sin and removal of the individual become important.

It should be noted that church discipline that goes beyond step one does so because of the refusal of the one in sin to repent. True repentance brings about reconciliation/restoration. An appropriate amount of time is given to allow the individual to come to repentance (i.e. These steps are not proceeded through in a week, but neither is it allowed to drag on for months). The issue becomes the individual’s willingness to repent and seriously deal with their sin.

From a practical standpoint of proceeding through these steps in an orderly manner, Step Two should include church leaders, preferably an elder. It may be wise that in Step Three, that the Elders of the church are informed first in order to let them try to bring the individual to repentance. The manner of telling the church should be cautious. It is a time for the church to mourn that one of their members is caught in sin and then with pure hearts to seek after that one. Step Four is also done with mourning, but also with a firmness of being true to Scripture. Careful instructions should be given to the congregation on what their relationship to the unrepentant individual should now be.

It should also be pointed out that when sin is already public knowledge, it must be dealt with publicly - cf. 1 Cor. 5

3. Sins and situations warranting church discipline.

Matthew 18:15 and Galatians 6:1 make it clear that any sin could result in the steps of church discipline. However some caution needs to be made. The nature of Christian love covers a multitude of sins (Proverbs 10:12; 19:11; James 5:20; 1 Peter 4:8; 1 Corinthians 13). Church discipline seeks to make sure that sin is seriously dealt with when it becomes an obstruction in interpersonal relationships (Matt. 5:23,24 & Matt 18:15) or when sin overcomes a brother (Gal. 6:1).

4. Time given for repentance.

The real issue is the person's willingness or unwillingness to repent. Simple wisdom cautions against rushing through the steps of discipline too fast, at the same time it will not be allowed to continue for months.

5. Church Discipline and Church leaders.

Church leaders are subject to church discipline. Accusations against an elder are not received except on the basis of two or three witnesses. If the church leader continues in sin, then he is to be rebuked publically (1 Timothy 5:19,20; Galatians 2:11-15).

6. Church Discipline and "regular attenders."

The church is responsible before God for both members and those who have entered into the fellowship of the church by their regular attendance. In view of this, church discipline will be practiced toward regular attenders as well as church members.

7. Church Discipline and people who have already left the church.

If a person who is in sin leaves the church without the church responding to that sin, then it is because the church has failed in its shepherding role. Nevertheless, the steps of church discipline will be followed once the sin is known because of the various purposes for church discipline.

8. Informing other churches of our disciplinary action.

1. Churches that inquire of us concerning an individual who left under church discipline will be informed.
2. Caution will be exercised in informing a church where an individual under church discipline is now attending.
3. A broadcast announcement to other churches of individuals under church discipline will not be made.

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