

How to Handle Sin in the Church?

The decline of church discipline is perhaps the greatest failure of the contemporary church. No longer concerned with maintaining purity of confession or lifestyle, the modern church sees itself as a voluntary association of autonomous members with minimal moral accountability to God, much less to each other. The absence of church discipline is no longer remarkable; it is generally not even missed. The present generation of pastors and church members is virtually without the benefit of restorative and loving church discipline.

The result of the loss of discipline as a pattern for the church has led to a collapse of authentic Christianity in this generation. The church has lost its power and effectiveness in serving as a vehicle for social, moral and spiritual change. The great spiritual deficiency in many local assemblies today, which threatens churches that are not in good spiritual health, is the result of impurity that is tolerated.

What exactly is church discipline?

It can be broadly defined as a loving, confrontational, and corrective measure taken by an individual, church leaders, or congregation regarding the sin in a believer's life. The words "discipline" and "disciple" provide different nuances of the same Greek word. They are different expressions with the same goal, the growth and maturity of the believer.

Without question, the discipline and restoration of sinning, unrepentant believers is a difficult, time-consuming and uncomfortable process. Although it has almost disappeared from our churches, the Bible commands it (1 Corinthians 5:1-13); the Lord modeled it (Hebrews 12:6); the church loses credibility and effective witness without it (1 Peter 2:11-12); and the Lord explained how to exercise it (Matthew 18:15-20).

What is the objective of church discipline?

While chastisement may be a consequence of church discipline according to 2 Corinthians 2:5-7, it is never the motive or objective for exercising discipline. When being disciplined by their parents, children might be convinced that their parents do not love them or that they are being too hard on them. Parents, on the other hand, deliver discomfort, out of love, as a consequence for wrongdoing; thus motivating their children toward the safe, productive path of wise living which, in the end, protects them from a life of unnecessary pain and anguish.

In a similar way, the main objective of church discipline is to restore an unrepentant believer to a safe, productive lifestyle of godly obedience and intimacy with Jesus Christ. Matthew 18:15 tells us, "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother." Galatians 6:1 tells us, "even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted." James instructs us in 5:19-20, "My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins."

To clear up a common misconception, the goal of church discipline is not to throw people out, embarrass them, be self-righteous, play God, or exercise authority and power in some unbiblical, unrestrained way. The purpose is to discipline to "gain" a lost brother who is a valuable treasure (Matthew 18:15) and "restore" or repair a broken believer back to his or her original condition of fellowship (Galatians 6:1).

Does the church have the authority to judge?

A popular question hurled in the face of the church is “Who gives you the right to judge someone else?” Did not Jesus say, “Judge not, that you be not judged?” (Matthew 7:1). However this text does not command that all types of judging are wrong. It is warning against a revengeful, hypocritical, self-righteous kind of judgment. There is, however, a righteous kind of judgment we are to exercise with careful discernment; “Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment,” (John 7:24).

In Matthew 18 our Lord explained that the church is to respond when a fellow believer falls into sin. Twice in verse 17 Jesus mentioned “the church.” He said, “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” Jesus wanted us to know that discipline is to take place in the assembly of God’s redeemed people.

Consider Matthew 18:18, “Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.” This is one of the most misused portions of all the New Testament. In this passage the Lord Jesus gave the church His authority to act in matters of discipline and gave executive power to the local assembly to “bind” and “loose” issues within the church. To say it another way, the Lord has given the church the authority to “forbid” or to “allow” what has already been forbidden and allowed by God’s Word. If people refuse to repent of their sins, we can say with absolute authority and assurance that their sins are bound on them. On the other hand, if they repent, we can say that their sins are loosed or unshackled, and they are, therefore, restored to fellowship. We are merely doing on earth what has already been decided in heaven.

In verse 19 Jesus said, “Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven.” This is usually interpreted as prayer, however, the “two of you” means the two witnesses mentioned in verse 16 as those who confirm the facts of the situation. The Greek word “agree” (sumphoneo) literally means “to produce a sound together.” When all are in agreement with regard to the person who is being confronted, the Father also will be in agreement with you. It also means that Jesus is present in the agreement according to verse 19: “For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.” We actively carry on God’s work when we purge and purify the church of God.

What is the process of Church discipline?

Step one - Go personally and tell him his sin. The first step is to lovingly confront him with what you believe to be a sin as shown in Matthew 18:15: “If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private.” The Greek word for “show” (elengcho) means to expose to the light. This is a command in the Greek, not an option. We are obligated to go to a sinning brother and lovingly expose his trespass. He is to be made aware of his wrong and come to grips with the sin he has committed. Galatians 6:1 helps us see the attitude we should have in confronting a sinning believer; “Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.” In other words, you should go in humility, realizing that it could have been you who was tempted. Verse 2 says, “Bear one another’s burdens and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.” And what is the law of Christ? It is the law of love (John 15:12).

Also notice that you should go alone so that there are just the two of you. We are not to gossip to others about a person’s sin; we are to go alone. This creates a bond between two people as it did between Peter and Paul. After Peter had cut himself off from the assembly of God’s people to fel-

lowship with some legalizers, Paul reproved Peter personally when he said, “I stood him to the face because he was to be blamed,” (Galatians 2:11). This is evidenced later when Peter wrote about Paul “even as our beloved brother Paul.” Often after you confront a person on a one-on-one basis, your hearts will be knit together.

Step Two – Take two witnesses. “But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed,” (Matthew 18:16). God had established that law in Deuteronomy 19:15 to prevent a malicious witness from bringing charges to one who is innocent of a crime. Therefore in the second step of discipline, you must take one or two more believers with you. These witnesses have a two-fold purpose in church discipline. First, they act on behalf of both parties to ensure objectivity by confirming the testimonies of both parties. These are not the people who saw the sin or originally knew about it, but act as arbitrators. Their presence is as much a protection for the one being approached as it is for the one approaching, eliminating bias or inaccurate conclusions (2 Corinthians 13:1-2). Second, it applies greater spiritual pressure on the one who has sinned.

Step Three – Tell the church. “And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church,” (Matthew 18:17a). We are to tell the whole assembly when a sinning believer fails to repent. Once again the purpose is not to embarrass or shame but to RESTORE. We tell the church in order to solicit their help. When the first and second confrontations fail, then the whole assembly pursues this person’s restoration.

This solicitation of the whole church has another benefit. It ensures that only a few persons are not calling all the shots. Again, it ensures that none have a motive of personal revenge. In other words, at this stage of the process the initiators of the restoration process are calling on the aid of “a multitude of counselors.” 2 Corinthians 2:5-8 is a case where the whole church knew about a man’s sinfulness, “sufficient for such a one is the punishment which was inflicted by the majority.” How long should the church keep encouraging someone to repent? It most likely is a shorter time than we think because God wants a response.

Step Four – Treat him as an unbeliever. Matthew 18:17b says, “and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer.” Jesus’ use of the terms “Gentile” and “tax-gatherer” does not mean that we should treat these people badly. The gospels show us that Jesus treated all people in love. It simply means that when professing brothers or sisters refuse to repent, we should treat them as though they were outside the kingdom of God. At this point, there is good cause to believe they might not be saved. Therefore, we are not to let them associate or participate in the blessings and benefits of the Christian assembly.

Paul told of an unrepentant man who was having an incestuous relationship with his father’s wife. He said, “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.... In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, 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,” (1 Corinthians 5:2, 4-5). Professing Christians who refuse to repent need to be put out of the church and turned over to the Satan-controlled worldly system so that their fleshy desire to sin may be destroyed. They may have to go down to the very depths of sin before they repent. This is not only good for them but also for the entire church. As verses 6 and 7 say, “Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? Clean out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened.” The unrepentant believer must be put out of the assembly to protect it and the glory of God.

The danger is not in associating with those in the world, but with believers who “profess” Christ but will not surrender to His Lordship. Paul added in vv. 9-10 “I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; 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.” Paul told Timothy, “Among these are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have delivered over to Satan, so that they may be taught not to blaspheme” (1 Timothy 1:20). This taught them the consequences of their sin. When you put people outside, the sanctifying graces of God’s assembly are no longer available. It forced them to see the heinousness of their sin. 2 Thessalonians 3:6, instructs us, “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep aloof from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us.” Also Paul told the Romans, “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. 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,” (Romans 16:17-18). There is a sense in which you never really let the sinner go; you keep calling him back. “And yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother (2 Thessalonians 3:15).