



Church Discipline and Restoration

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The Process

What Sins Lead to Church Discipline?

Throughout the past centuries of church history, different church leaders came up with different “lists” of sins they believed required both private and public discipline—including the final step of excommunication. The Puritan leader Cotton Mather made a list that included swearing, fighting, cheating, stealing, and idleness, among other more flagrant sins. And Martin Luther, the reformer, once threatened to excommunicate a man who was planning to sell his home for an exorbitant profit. Other sins that early Americans deemed worthy of discipline include bull fighting, tax evasion, slave holding, and smuggling. But a list of sins labeled “sins for church discipline” never appears in the New Testament. Why? Because all sin is sin!

If you keep in mind that the purpose of discipline is restoration and revival, it really doesn't matter what sin a believer commits—for all sin destroys fellowship with the Lord and His church. Obviously the more public a sin becomes, the more public the discipline should be.

General Categories of Sins Requiring Confrontation

1. Sins that destroy Christian unity and relationships (Matthew 5:23, 24; Romans 16:17; Titus 3:9–11).

2. Sins that entangle a person in corrupt or immoral behavior (Galatians 6:1). We already saw last month the disciplinary action taken against the immoral man in 1 Corinthians 5.

3. Sins that involve rebellion or rejection of God's Word (2 Thessalonians 3:6; 1 Timothy 1:19, 20).

4. Sins that harm the testimony of the church (2 Thessalonians 3:11–14; 1 Corinthians 5:1; Revelation 2:5).

What Are the Steps of Church Discipline and Restoration?

The First Step—Personal Consideration. The very first step of discipline is self-discipline. Self-discipline is the open, transparent walk of the believer who refuses to “hide” anything from God. The believer welcomes the convicting work of God's Spirit to speak through Scripture and rebuke any sinful thought or behavior (Psalm 139:23, 24; 51:10).

The Christian who actively exercises this type of honest, open self-discipline before the Lord will never need to fear any additional forms of discipline. However, the believer who refuses to be convicted, reprovved, and changed by God's Word (2 Timothy 3:16) will require the involvement of other believers who will engage in the second step of discipline and restoration.

The Second Step—Private Conversation. “If your brother sins against you,

go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother” (Matthew 18:15).

Galatians 6:1 encourages the believer to approach the wayward Christian with gentleness and humility and to privately urge the wayward one to reconsider the path he or she is choosing.

In view of Paul’s additional encouragement in Galatians 6:1, believers should not limit Matthew 18 to the problem of one believer sinning against another. According to the Galatians text, when believers are aware of the offense or sin of other believers, they should prayerfully and privately approach the wayward believers in hopes of repairing, resolving, and reconciling them to fellowship with Christ, with other believers whom they have wronged, and to the fellowship of the church.

How do you approach a wayward believer who you’ve been praying for, who you’ve been grieving over, and for whom you’ve become deeply concerned?

Here are ten guidelines.

1. *Pray beforehand.* Ask the Lord for a spirit of wisdom, gentleness, love, and genuine concern for godly resolution.

2. *Make an appointment.* If the person asks for specifics, respond by saying that you’d prefer to talk face-to-face.

3. *Begin with affirmation.* When you meet with the wayward believer, begin the conversation by expressing your love and appreciation for the good qualities that you’ve observed in his or her life. Only after words of affirmation should you begin to share that you have, with growing concern, been praying about something for some time—something about his or her behavior, character, or choices.

4. *Ask for permission to share your concern.*

5. *Share your concern.* Limit your words, and refuse the temptation to draw a verdict or conclusion at this point.

6. *Leave time to listen.* Remember that it’s possible to have heard only one side

of any story or to have missed some vital information. It is important to allow the other person to share with you his or her side of the story.

7. *Explain God’s Word.* Since no sin is ultimately excusable, help the person understand what God says about the action, behavior, or choice. If the person responds with an admission of sin, pray together as he or she confesses the sin to Christ. You should pray also, thanking God for your brother or sister’s willingness to admit sin and for God’s promise to forgive our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

8. *Promise to continue praying.* Your commitment to pray for the sinning believer in the future will encourage that person as he or she seeks to reconcile, restore, or make restitution for his or her sin.

9. *Follow up.* Ask the person for a follow-up meeting in the near future with a promise to help him or her reconcile, restore, and resolve any issues related to the confessed sin.

10. *Rejoice.* God has allowed you to rescue a soul from the spiritual danger of forfeiting a full reward (2 John 1:8), as well as from further ruining his or her life with the corrosive effects of sin (James 5:19, 20).

Should the wayward believer refuse to repent and reconcile his or her life to the standard of God’s Word, the next step must be taken. This step will involve more than one person who will assess the accuracy of your evaluation of the sinning believer.

The Third Step—Private Corroboration. “But if he will not hear you, take with you one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established” (Matthew 18:16).

The wayward believer may refuse to admit that his or her actions are indeed sinful, thus refusing to repent and reconcile to God’s Word. In that case, you are to follow up your private conversation with additional conversations in private,

bringing a council of other mature believers into the process.

The unrepentant believer may not allow for such a “meeting,” so several individuals should try to speak to him or her whenever they can. Phone calls, e-mails, and letters are appropriate means to give ample opportunity to corroborate the facts, share concern, and challenge the unrepentant one. These contacts will also provide opportunities for loving admonition, correction, and, we hope, restoration.

On the other hand, if these private steps do not produce godly repentance and a desire to reconcile to God’s Word, warn the person that the church will take further action to win him or her back to the path of fellowship with Christ and His church.

The Fourth Step—Public Confrontation. “If he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church” (Matthew 18:17). Having failed to rescue the wayward believer through private conversation and corroboration, the church must take the next step: public exposure.

Jesus Christ made an unavoidable command: “Tell it to the church”; in other words, the individual’s name is announced in a public worship meeting to inform the church family that the brother or sister is refusing to reconcile to godly counsel.

The church is literally called on to confront the sinner, exhorting him or her to repent and reconcile with Christ, His church, and the council of godly men and women who have approached him or her.

When the Lord said, “Tell it to the church,” what did He have in mind regarding the word “it”? All the facts that led to this fourth step? How all the preceding steps failed? All the sordid details of the individual’s sinful behavior? No. The “it” in “tell it to the church” refers to the person’s lack of repentance.

A mature body of believers will not need to know the details—only that their brother or sister is in danger. They will react immediately with calls, letters, and appointments, urging the sinner to repent and follow the counsel of godly men and women who have already challenged the

person to heed the warning and repent of his or her sin.

Again, the nature of the announcement is not punitive but restorative. It is the heart and hope of the leaders, along with the entire congregation, that the prodigal come to his or her senses and return home—home to the fellowship of the saints and with Christ Himself.

Soon after this public announcement, the wayward one will receive a letter stating that the church has taken the fourth step and will, in the near future, take the fifth and final step: condemnation and exclusion.

The letter will also warn the individual that unless he or she repents and reconciles with the council by a certain date, the church will take the formal step of viewing him or her as out of fellowship with itself and with the universal church. The prodigal will be barred from the fellowship of the assembly.

The Fifth Step—Public Condemnation. “If he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector” (Matthew 18:17). While the fourth step exposes the sinner, the fifth and final step of discipline excludes the sinner.

Paul instructed the church in Corinth to exclude the sinning person from their presence: “You [have become arrogant] and have rather not mourned, that he who had done this deed might be [removed] from among you” (1 Corinthians 5:2, 5).

The unrepentant person has effectively chosen his or her union with sin over union with the assembly. He or she has chosen to keep the sin rather than keep a place among the worshipers of Christ. As a result of the wayward believer’s choice to pursue sin rather than Scripture, the unrepentant sinner is to be removed from the church.

As a result of exclusion, the sinner will be abandoned to discover, like the prodigal, that sin does not permanently satisfy. Sin degenerates and destroys. It ultimately ruins the sinner’s life.

The average church often refuses to take this necessary step of condemning

sin and excluding prodigal sons and daughters. As a result of inclusion rather than exclusion, the church effectively provides the fatted calf, the sandals, and the ring while at the same time welcoming the pigs and the pigpen into the Father’s house.

In referring to a local church that embraced the sinner and tolerated immorality, Paul warned that “a little leaven leavens the whole lump” (1 Corinthians 5:6). Whether or not the church admits it or even recognizes it, the whole church is affected, damaged, discouraged, and, to some degree, corrupted as a result of its tolerance of sin.

Prodigals tend to come to their senses in pigpens. That is where they come to the end of their resources. Oftentimes it is only then that they long for restoration with the Father and His family. But if the church has never withdrawn its support, encouragement, and fellowship from the unrepentant sinner, it has effectively acted as a barrier and hindrance to the discipline of Christ.

The Participants

If the Congregation Excluded All the Sinners, Who Is Worthy of Attending?

Discipline and exclusion from the assembly of believers is not performed on sinning believers. If this were the case, no one would show up the next Sunday morning!

Discipline is enacted on sinning believers who refuse to repent, those who flaunt their immorality without pause or prudence. These unrepentant believers become the leaven—a metaphor for evil influence—and the church is commanded to remove the leaven from the lump (1 Corinthians 5:6, 7).

If the Congregation Avoids Sinners, How Will We Ever Reach the World?

There is a huge difference, reflected in Scripture, between the treatment of a sinning unbeliever and the treatment of

a sinning believer. If you misunderstand this difference in the Biblical instruction regarding treatment of unbelievers and believers, you’ll misunderstand the nature and purpose of church discipline. The sinning unbeliever needs to be exposed to the church; the unrepentant believer needs to be exposed by the church.

The mission of the church is twofold: we are to deliver the gospel of God to the unrepentant unbeliever; and we are to deliver the discipline of God to the unrepentant believer.

Consider this distinction: A sinning unbeliever is welcome in your home, your church, your backyard swimming pool, and at your family picnic. The lost need to hear the gospel and see it lived out in your life. But you are to avoid a sinning believer to illustrate that his or her fellowship with Christ has also been withdrawn (2 Thessalonians 3:6).

Did Jesus Ever Condemn or Shame Anyone in Public?

Absolutely. In fact, a direct parallel could be made between Christ’s treatment of Pharisees and the local church’s treatment of unrepentant believers. Consider three occasions when He pronounced condemnation.

Jesus brought public shame on individuals. Many Pharisees kept the external laws of Moses but harbored sinful deeds in private. Jesus, Who knew the hearts of His audience, openly referred to them as hypocrites. The Greek word for “hypocrite” literally referred to someone who “acted upon a stage; in those days actors held masks in front of their faces. . . . Thus, today a hypocrite is one who appears to be something or someone he is not.”¹¹

Read Matthew 23:27 and 28. Talk about public shame! On another occasion, Jesus actually told Jewish leaders that their father was the Devil (John 8:44). Jesus not only publicly humiliated them, but He also brought them extreme embarrassment by their pride in being related to their “father” Abraham.

Jesus brought public shame on corrupt business. (See Matthew 21:12 and 13.)

Jesus brought public shame on entire cities. (See Matthew 11:20–24.) Imagine telling a city it was on its way to Hell or telling an entire population that they were worse off than the Sodomites in the coming judgment!

Wasn't Jesus a Friend of Sinners?

Didn't He mingle with corrupt people such as tax collectors and harlots? Yes, He did. Someone might say, "Well, now I'm confused. If Jesus was a friend of sinners and ate meals with people like prostitutes and shady businessmen, why did He treat the Pharisees with such anger, contempt, and condemnation?"

Luke's Gospel provides the answer. Luke recorded that Jesus Christ came into the world to seek and save those who were lost (Luke 19:10). That is why He spent time with lost people. You cannot save the lost if you refuse to spend time with them!

If Jesus Spent Time with Sinners, Why Would the Church Exclude Them?

Don't overlook that while Jesus spent time with sinful people, He also exposed and condemned the corrupt religious hypocrites of His day and would not tolerate them in His presence. In fact, He consistently sent the Pharisees packing!

Our Lord's treatment of individuals is consistent with the church's pattern of treatment today. A religious "Christian" who refuses to repent of sin is excluded from the church, while an unbeliever who has yet to come to faith in Christ is encouraged to attend church—he or she needs to hear the gospel!

Does This Mean Genuine Christians Sin?

Even genuine Christians sin. In fact, we all battle our flesh and fail in that battle more than we want to admit (Romans 7:18, 19). Proof of genuine faith is sorrow over sin. Therefore, the mark

of a genuine Christian is eventual and repeated repentance.

Sins such as gluttony, gossip, lust, and covetousness may be a daily battle for the believer. He or she will experience moments of failure and of victory—sometimes all in the same day. However, after a person resigns from the battle and begins to persist in sinning without any apparent desire to repent and acknowledge Christ's authority and standard in his or her life, discipline must be used to reprove, rebuke, and warn the person.

What Should the Church Do If a Leader Is Caught in Sin?

This problem is not new. In 1529 Ulrich Zwingli compromised his earlier practice of discipline and refused to practice it any longer after his church became a member of the Reformed state church in Zurich. He changed his view because, as he warned, the practice of discipline and excommunication toward unrepentant sinners "would cost too many preachers."

In other words, sinful pastors would need to be dismissed, and the church couldn't afford to lose them. God's Word would say otherwise: *The church cannot afford to keep them!*

Paul wrote that even spiritual leaders should be exposed and rebuked—not shuttled away and hidden from judgment; not protected from consequences; not sent to another congregation, parish, or part of the country—but exposed and dealt with.

Paul gave specific instructions that a pastor/elder should be accused of sinful living only after several witnesses have corroborated sinful behavior. If the accusation turns out to be true, public ministry must cease immediately. Because of his sinful behavior and choices, now made public, he has forfeited his right and ability to speak with credibility. He is no longer above reproach; literally, he is "without a handle" (1 Timothy 3:2; 5:19, 20).

God intended His messengers to practice what they preach. Hypocrisy in the pew is not nearly as destructive and discouraging to a church as hypocrisy in the pulpit.

One of Paul's greatest fears was personal hypocrisy—preaching one thing yet being disqualified by not personally applying truth to his own life. He wrote, "But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified" (1 Corinthians 9:27).

Certainly the very nature of public ministry demands a greater benefit of the doubt given to any rumor or accusation. Satan loves to discredit the testimony of choice servants of Christ, and many leaders have been ruined by false testimony and rumor. The very nature of public ministry draws judgment, opinion, and criticism. Therefore, the church should be careful in collaborating the truth, especially when the accusations are leveled against a leader.

In spite of deferential honor and respect (1 Thessalonians 5:12, 13), a pastor is not above God's holy standard. If anything, he is more highly accountable because of his public position; and, as James reminded the church and its leaders, God's own judgment will be stricter because of pastors' public role in teaching the Word (James 3:1).

Notes

¹ Jay Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 70.

Next month Part 3 will deal with these issues: Biblical evidences of repentance, the person who wrongs someone and refuses to apologize and repent, benefits of church discipline, the person who leaves the church and goes elsewhere, what to do if one knows that someone is involved in sin, and what to do when a disciplined individual repents and seeks reconciliation. ■

Adapted from the book *In Pursuit of Prodigals* by Stephen Davey. For more information, e-mail the author at davey@colonial.org.