

The Basics of Church Discipline

1 Cor. 5:1-13

Introduction: Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “Nothing can be more cruel than that leniency which abandons others to sin. Nothing can be more compassionate than that severe reprimand which calls another Christian in one’s community back from the path of sin” (*Life Together*, 105). Church discipline is a loving and necessary biblical process of confrontation and correction that is carried out by individual Christians, leaders of the church, and sometimes the whole community. It takes place when a member of the body is in public, continuous, unrepentant and serious sin. The goal is always the reclaiming and restoring of the brother or sister to fellowship with Christians and His Church.

The New Testament has a great deal to say about Church Discipline. Jesus addresses it in Matthew 18:15-20, and Paul does so repeatedly in text like Romans 16:17-18; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13; 2 Corinthians 2:5-11; 13:1-3; Galatians 6:1-2; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12; and Titus 3:9-15. This fact alone makes it all the more remarkable that no aspect of church life in our day is more neglected than this one. And, it is a dangerous neglect. Baptist theologian John Dagg warned, “When discipline leaves a church, Christ goes with it” (*A Treatise on Church Order*, 274).

Carl Laney, adds, “The church that neglects to confront and correct its members lovingly is not being kind, forgiving, or gracious. Such a church is really hindering the Lord’s work and the advance of the gospel. The church without discipline is a church without purity (Eph. 5:25-27) and power (cf. Josh. 7:11-12a). By neglecting church discipline a church endangers not only its spiritual effectiveness but also its very existence. God snuffed out the candle of the church at Thyatira because of moral compromise (Rev. 2:20-24). Churches today are in danger of following this first-century precedent.” (“The Biblical Practice of Church Discipline,” *Bib Sac*: Oct. 1986, p. 354).

First Corinthians 5 reminds us that avoiding and neglecting church discipline is not new. It also provides for us theological and practical guidance for the recovery of this “missing jewel” in the life of too many churches. Alistair Begg is right, “Church discipline brings glory to God as his people obey his word.” (Discipline in the Fellowship: Part Two,” 6-23-85). How then do we move down the road in glorifying God through obedience to his word in the ministry of church discipline, what I like to call “the ministry of loving confrontation”? Seven considerations clearly arise from this text.

I. To neglect church discipline invites the ridicule of the world 5:1

Paul receives a report that has already gone viral in Corinth. Perhaps he received the bad news from Chloe's people (1:11) or from Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus (16:17). It is a case of *porneia*, of "sexual immorality," (twice in 5:1; also 5:9, 10, 11; 6:9, 13, 18 twice; 7:2). Specifically, it is a case of incest: "a man is sleeping with his father's wife," almost certainly his stepmother, not his biological mother. The use of the present tense seems to indicate, "an ongoing, habitual relationship, not a one-time affair." And, "Paul makes no mention about taking action against the woman, indicating that she is not a believer (5:12)" (Taylor, *I Cor.* NAC, 133). It is not surprising to find incest condemned repeatedly in the Old Testament (Lev. 18:8; Deut. 22:30; 27:20). However, even the pagan Romans found such behavior scandalous. The Roman orator Cicero said incest was virtually unheard of in Roman Society (Vaughn and Lea. *I Cor.*, 56). Amazingly, what Hebrews and Romans alike found inconceivable, the Corinthians condoned. The church "out tolerated" the tolerance of a debaucherous Roman culture and in the process invited the criticism and ridicule of the lost world. The gospel changes nothing. If anything, at least in this instance, it appears simply to extend sexual liberation. The pagan Romans did not applaud the church, they mocked it. They did not cheer they jeered.

An impure church will soon be a powerless church. The tolerance of habitual, unrepentant and public sin robs the gospel of its beauty and the church of its witness. Perhaps, for a season, the church's open-mindedness will be celebrated. In time, however, it will be lampooned and scorned. Eventually, the church will be ignored all together. A church that looks and acts like the world is of the world. There is no difference. Why would anybody take notice? Why would anyone care?

Robert Saucy is right: "Church discipline in all its forms was given by the Head of the church for the health and welfare of the body. To avoid its practice when necessary for the sake of reputation or what is really a false unity can only lead to a sick and weak church life." (Saucy, *The Church in God's Program*, pp. 125-26). Sacrifice the church's purity and you will soon forfeit the church's power and the church's witness.

II. Pride instead of sorrow leads us to ignore church discipline 5:2

My friend and colleague at Southeastern Seminary, Chuck Lawless, wrote a fine article entitled, "12 Reasons Churches Don't Practice Church Discipline" (*Christian Post*, 4-29-15). They are:

1. They don't know the Bible's teaching on discipline.
2. They have never seen it done before.
3. They don't want to appear judgmental.

4. The church has a wide-open front door.
5. They have had a bad experience with discipline in the past.
6. The church is afraid to open “Pandora’s box.”
7. They have no guidelines for discipline.
8. They fear losing members (or dollars).
9. Their Christianity is individualistic and privatized.
10. They fear being “legalistic.”
11. They hope transfer growth will fix the problem.
12. Leaders are sometimes dealing with their own sin.

There is merit and truth in each of these observations. Paul adds an additional reason that certainly under girds many of those noted by Lawless: **PRIDE!** The Corinthians were “arrogant” (*NIV*, “proud,” *NKJV*, “puffed up”). The verb is in the perfect tense. They are settled and abiding in their pride. Paul has already and repeatedly confronted the Corinthians about their spiritual pride (1:31; 3:21; 4:6, 18-19). In 4:21 he warned them that their response to his letter would determine whether he would come to them “with a rod, or in love and a spirit of gentleness.” Whether the Corinthians suffered from 1) a false dualism that said “the spiritual” no longer should concern themselves with the issues of the physical (Platonism) or 2) a heretical understanding of Christian liberty that resulted from a misunderstanding of grace, we cannot be

sure. What is certain is they took great pride in their tolerance of “sin in the camp”, when the proper response should have been “grief,” (*ESV*, “mourning;” *NIV*, “filled with grief”). In the spirit of Ezra who mourned over the sins of the nation, the church should mourn over the sins of its members.

A sin sick church will boast, “We are affirming and accepting.” A gospel-intoxicated church will mourn, “We are sinful and undone.” It will readily acknowledge we are a community of repenting sinners. What God calls sin we call sin. What God fights against we fight against. The issue is not one of perfection. It is an issue of purity.

Daniel Wray is correct. We practice church discipline, “to maintain the purity of the church and her worship (1 Cor. 5:6-8), and to avoid profaning the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:27). We shall never be able to keep the visible church in perfect purity since we are but fallible men. Our inability to achieve perfection in this matter, however, is no excuse for giving up the attempt. We must maintain the purity of Christ’s visible church to the full extent of our knowledge and power. This is all the more evident once we recognize that false Doctrine and bad conduct are infectious. If these are tolerated in the church all members will receive hurt.” (*Biblical Church Discipline*, p. 332). Given the seriousness of the situation, Paul’s directive is simple and straightforward at the end of verse 2: “Let him who has done this

be removed from among you.” The details of this action of excommunication are expounded in verses 3-5.

III. Church discipline is to be exercised under the Lordship of Jesus Christ for the good of the whole body. 5:3-5

R.C Sproul notes, “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,” (Sproul, *In Search of Dignity*, p. 182).

The point is plain: Correction is essential to spiritual healthy, growth, and maturity in the Body of Christ. And, John MacArthur adds with a pleading pastoral voice, “The purpose of church discipline is the spiritual restoration of fallen members and the consequent strengthening of the church and glorifying of the Lord. When a sinning believer is rebuked and he turns from his sin and is forgiven, he is won back to fellowship with the body and with its head, Jesus Christ.

The goal of church discipline, then, is not to throw people out of the church or to feed the self-righteous pride of those who administer the discipline. It is not to embarrass people or to exercise authority and power in some unbiblical manner. The purpose is to restore a sinning believer to holiness and bring him

back into a pure relationship within the assembly,” (“Church Discipline, GTY).

Paul’s attitude on this matter of sexual immorality stands in stark contrast to the proud and conceited Corinthians. Invoking his apostolic authority, he stated he is there with them even if he is “absent in body” (v. 3). Further, he has “already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing,” thereby nullifying the Corinthian’s lax moral position on the sexually immoral man who calls himself a brother in the Lord (v.11). Vaughn notes the perfect tense verb “gives an air of finality to the sentence” (p. 57).

Verses 4-5 contain a clear, logical outline for how the church is to adjudicate this matter. I believe the prior steps given by Jesus in Matthew 18:15-20 are assumed to have already been followed, though a situation like this could necessitate moving quickly to the final step of excommunication.

- 1) They are to assemble together “in the name” and under the authority (“with the power”) of the “Lord Jesus” and with apostolic witness (“I am with you in spirit,” v.4). This is clearly congregational. Church discipline is no place for a Long Ranger.

2) “With the power (or authority/name) of our Lord Jesus” they are to “remove” this man from their fellowship (v. 2) and deliver him to the realm of Satan (e.g. the world) (v. 5).

3) The goal of this act of excommunication is to destroy the sinful desires and impulses of his fleshly nature “so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord” (v. 5). Some view this as a pronouncement of a curse leading potentially to physical death, drawing from the story of Ananias and Sapphria in Acts 5:1-11 and the death of some Corinthians for abusing the Lord’s Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:30. Such a position has both merit and weight. Still, correction and restoration seems the better understanding of this text (cf. 1 Tim. 3:19-20 and the situation of Hymenaeus and Alexander).

In a sermon with the fascinating title, “How Satan Saves the Soul,” John Piper tracks with the correction/restoration interpretation, drawing an analogy from the man we know as Job. He writes,

“What seems to be in view is something like what happened in the book of Job. The only other place in the Bible outside Paul’s letters where “handing someone over to Satan” with these very words occurs is Job 2:6, which says, literally, “And the Lord said to the Devil, “Behold I hand him [Job] over to you. Only spare his life.”

The next verse says, “Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head.”

And the result of God’s gracious purpose? Job 42:6-7: “Now my eye sees you [O Lord] and I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”

So Satan became the means under God’s sovereign control of purifying Job’s heart and bringing him closer than ever to God. This is not the only place where God uses Satan to do that. In 2 Corinthians 12 Paul describes his thorn in the flesh as a messenger of Satan which God appoints for Paul’s humility and Christ’s glory. Verse 7: “To keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me—to keep me from exalting myself!”....

Jesus is Satan’s ruler. And he uses Satan, our archenemy, to save and sanctify his people. He brought Job to penitence and prosperity. He brought Paul to the point where he could exult in tribulation and make the power of Christ manifest.

And Paul hopes that the result of handing over this man to Satan will be the salvation of his spirit at the day of Christ. In other words, Paul’s aim—our aim—in handing someone over to Satan is that some striking misery will

come in such a way that the person will say with Job, ‘My eyes have seen the Lord, and I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.’ (9-15-93).

IV. The absence of church discipline can lead to the church being infected with sin 5:6

This verse contains a statement of fact accompanied by a warning. The statement of fact: “Your boasting is not good.” This makes a connection with verse 2. Your arrogance, boasting and tolerance of ongoing sin is something you should be ashamed of, not proud of. Your spiritual value system has been turned upside down. Be careful! Your carnal boasting may soon lead to spiritual blindness with the whole body being infected.

The warning was given through a popular and well known saying among the Hebrews. It is analogous to our modern proverb, “One bad apple can spoil the whole barrel.” Rooted in the event of Passover and the common understanding of leaven as evil, Paul warns the church that “a little leaven leavens the whole batch of dough.” There is a contaminating element to sin. Like cancer, it can spread widely and quickly infecting the whole body. Indeed, “one corrupt member could corrupt an entire church” (Vaughn, 59).

Church discipline recognizes a simple spiritual truth: sin is bad for the church. Left unchecked, it will spread like kudzu through a fellowship. It will grow

wide and deep. The purity of the church will be compromised and the wonder of the gospel quickly lost. Passion for the unreached and underserved will wane. Love for the Word will dissipate. Respect for the ministers of the Word will be crippled. Satan would rather have a little leaven inside the church than a whole batch of dough outside the church. Attitudes and actions are contagious. Personally, I do not want to stand before a holy God and explain why my attitudes and actions, my cowardice and compromise, lead someone to believe living in their sin was okay. In his “Three Changes in Theological Institutions,” delivered at Furman University on July 30, 1856, James Boyce warned, “It is with a single man that error usually commences; and when such a man has influence or position, it is impossible to estimate that evil that will attend it. . .”

(John A. Broadus, *A Gentleman and a Scholar: A Memoir of James Petigru Boyce* (Birmingham: Solid Ground, 2004: from the 1893 ed.), 139).

V. Church discipline is grounded by Paul in the redemptive work of Christ

5:7-8

Paul does what he often does when dealing with a critical issue. He grounds his argument in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Specifically in these verses, he draws from the imagery of the Passover (see Ex. 12). Sin must be cleansed

out like old leaven was before the Passover was observed. The sinning brother who remains unrepentant has to go. After all, by their repentance of sin and faith in Christ, believers “may be a new unleavened batch, as indeed they are.” They are new creations in Christ. The old has passed (v.7; 2 Cor. 5:17). In essence Paul challenges them to be who they already are in Christ, because Christ the true Passover lamb “has been sacrificed” (v. 7). His blood covers our sin and separates us from sin. We are new in Him never to live again in the old ways of slavery to sin.

MacArthur again is spot on in what Paul is saying: “As pictured in the Passover in Egypt, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, God’s perfect Passover Lamb, and the placing of His blood over us, completely separates us from the dominion of sin and the penalty of judgment. We, too, are to remove everything from the old life that would taint and permeate the new. As Israel was set free from Egypt as a result of the Passover and was to make a clean break with that oppressor, so the believer is to be totally separated from his old life, with its sinful attitudes, standards, and habits. Christ died to separate us from bondage to sin and give us a new bondage to righteousness (Rom. 6:19), which is the only true freedom.” (1 Cor., 129).

Verse 8 pictures our life in Christ as a party, a joyful feast that celebrates the “out with the old and in with the new!” Out goes things like malice and evil

(NIV, “wickedness”) and in comes qualities like “sincerity and truth.” Having grasped anew the magnitude of Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf as he stayed the hand of the angel of death by His blood, we gladly pursue those things that honor and glorify Him. Obedience is not a burden. It is a blessing! I delight in who I am and who I am becoming in Him.

David Brainerd, who died at 29 and spent his short adult life as a missionary to the American Indians, wrote in his diary: “I never got away from Jesus, and him crucified, and I found that when my people were gripped by this great evangelical doctrine of Christ and him crucified, I had not need to give them instructions about morality. I found that one followed as the sure and inevitable fruit of the other. . . .I found my Indians begin to put on the garments of holiness and their common life begins to be sanctified even in small matters when they are possessed by the doctrine of Christ and him crucified” (Quoted in MacArthur, 129).

VI. Church discipline is to be exercised in the community of faith not the world 5:9-11

There is an important relationship between the ministries of church discipline and evangelism that Paul helps us see in these verses. In a real sense, church discipline and evangelism are flip sides of the coin of salvation. Church

discipline is a natural component of discipleship that functions as the corollary of evangelism. Laney says, “Evangelism ministers to those outside the church who are in bondage to sin. Congregational discipline ministers to those within the church who are in bondage to sin” (p. 353). This is Paul’s argument in verses 9-11.

In a previous letter now lost to us, and therefore not intended by God to be a part of inspired Scripture, Paul wrote to the Corinthians telling them to “not fellowship or associate with sexually immoral people” who profess to follow Christ and believe the gospel (v. 9). They apparently misunderstood his instructions, either accidentally or intentionally, as verse 10 makes clear. F.F. Bruce believes it was deliberate (*1 and 2 Corinthians*, NCB, p. 51).

Paul quickly and directly corrects them, providing a representative list of the kinds of public, continuous and unrepentant types of sin we must lovingly confront in the life of a professing believer in Jesus (vs. 10-11). There are 6 categories total. David Garland points out each is specially addressed in 1 Corinthians (BECNT, 189). They are:

- 1) sexual immorality (5:1; also 6:9, 13-18; 7:1-6)
- 2) greed (6:1-11)
- 3) swindlers (robbers; 6:1-11)

4) idolaters (chs 8-10)

5) verbally abusive (slanderers; 1:18-4:21)

6) drunkards (11:21)

Though we are not to be of the world (John 17:17-19; Rom 12:1-2), we are to be in the world. Indeed, removing ourselves from sin and sinners would require us exiting the world. This is not God's plan in the present age. Jesus was clear in John 17:18, "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." We are to be in this world doing the work of evangelism, sharing the gospel, bearing witness to Christ. We must spend time with the lost to win the lost. In contrast, the professing brother or sister in Christ living in sin is to be shunned. We do not "associate" with them nor do we "even eat with such a person" (v. 11). This would certainly include the Lord's Supper. And, it may have included more; the breaking of all social ties except those engagements and social interactions that had the specific purpose of restoration and reconciliation. MacArthur once more helps us: "The command not to have fellowship or even social contact with the unrepentant brother does not exclude all contact. When there is an opportunity to admonish him and try to call him back, the opportunity should be taken. In fact, such opportunities should be sought. But the contact should be for the

purpose of admonishment and restoration and no other” (Article: “Church discipline,” *GTU*).

VII. God judges those on the outside while we judge those on the inside

5:12-13

Verses 12-13 bring to a conclusion the argument of chapter 5. Clear lines of demarcation and responsibility are drawn. Bottomline: God judges those outside the church (the lost) and we judge those, as His people, inside the church. Our responsibility to an unrepentant sinning brother: 1) remove him (v.2); 2) deliver him “to Satan for the destruction of the flesh” (v.5); 3)

“Remove (*NIV* “expel”) the evil person from among you” (cf. Deut. 17:7).

Expelling or removing the wicked from among God’s people is a consistent theme in Deuteronomy (Deut. 17:7, 12; 19:19; 21:21; 22:21-22, 24; 24:7). Its repetitive nature makes clear its importance.

Such a serious action must be bathed in Galatians 6:1-2. What we do when taking this final step of church discipline we do with sorrow and a broken heart. There is no joy in the man’s sin but there is joy in our obedience to Christ. And remember, there is no true love of our brother or sister if we do nothing. We love them enough to hurt them, even as it hurts us.

- Overlooking sin in not loving, it is sinful.

- Overlooking sin is not gracious, it is cowardice.
- Overlooking sin is not merciful, it is dangerous.
- Overlooking sin is not kind, it is actually hateful.

I often tell my friends the only way you can truly hurt my feelings is by seeing me do something that dishonors the Lord and hurts his kingdom and then not tell him. It means you did not love me enough to point out my sin. Church discipline loves people enough to point out their sin and then guide them to the place of repentance and then on to restoration (see 2 Cor. 2 for a hopeful resolution of 1 Cor. 5).

Conclusion: Though I am not a fan of much of Charles Finney’s theology, I am in full agreement with his thoughts concerning church discipline, the ministry of loving confrontation: “If you see your neighbor sin, and you pass by and neglect to reprove him, it is as cruel as if you should see his house on fire, and pass by and not warn him.” (*Lectures to Professing Christians*, 45).

Marlin Jeschke summarizes well the heart of the matter: “In discipline, as in the presentation of the good news to the non-Christian, a person is presented the opportunity of being liberated from the power of sin in all its forms by coming under the rule of Christ and walking in His way” (Jeschke, *Discipling the Brother*, pp. 181-82).

Let us be zealous in the presentation of that good news and let us be faithful in the practice of the ministry of loving confrontation. In both, we will be saving souls.