

Church Discipline: Expository Insights From Titus 3:9-15
by:
Daniel L. Akin

Introduction:

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 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 here in 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. Indeed the contemporary church's disregard for this clear teaching of Holy Scripture is perhaps its greatest visible act of disobedience to our Lord. This rebellion is not without significant consequences. John L. Dagg cogently noted, "when discipline leaves a church, Christ goes with it."¹

For Baptist this is striking when you consider that we have historically viewed Church Discipline as an essential mark, "the third mark," of the church, right alongside 1) the Word right preached and 2) the Ordinances properly administered. Al Mohler notes that a disciplined church as an essential mark of the church goes back at least to the Belgic Confession of 1561,² and one can also find the roots of this missing jewel of church life in the earliest Anabaptist Confession, *The Schleitheim Confession of 1527* and its Article 2 on "the Ban."³

And yet, none of our most recent Confessions, *The Baptist Faith and Message* 1925, 1963, and 2000, has a statement on this biblical teaching! The reasons no doubt

¹ J.L. Dagg, *A Treatise on Church Order* (Charleston: The Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1858), 274.

² R. Albert Mohler, "Church Discipline: The Missing Mark," *SBJT* 4.4 (Winter 2000): fn. 2, 26-27.

³ Text and commentary can be found in Daniel L. Akin, "An Expository Analysis of the Schleitheim Confession," *CTR* 2.2 (1988): 345-370.

are several, and probably they even seem legitimate. Greg Wills points out that Church discipline began to wane in Southern Baptist Life in the 1870's and rapidly accelerated thereafter, and "by the 1930's it was quite rare – most reported exclusions were merely the cleaning of church rolls of names of members long inactive and forgotten."⁴ Of course today we seldom do even this. Even those who have expired and left this world for the world to come find it difficult, if not impossible, to have their names removed from the church roll.

How did we get here? How did we get to a place where the "people of the Book" exercise such a blatant act of disobedience to a clear command of Christ and a crucial component of Church life? Certainly there have been abuses of the practice, though even the memory of this is so far removed from our own day that I seriously doubt one of us can point to a single example. No, we have been seduced in a far more insidious fashion. Wills again notes factors like "urbanization, faith in moral and social progress, civil religion, activism . . . the search for church efficiency . . . [and] commitment to an expansive individualism" which undermined our "commitment to the authority of the congregation."⁵

I take no issue with this, though I prefer to address the situation in practical and spiritual terms. I believe the genesis of the disease is 4-fold: 1) a loss of theological nerve, 2) a compromised morality, 3) biblical illiteracy and 4) practical expediency. In each of these instances the problem finds its origin at the top, with the leadership, with the pastors.

⁴ Greg Wills, "Southern Baptist and Church Discipline," *SBJT* 4.4 (Winter 2000): 9-10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

First, we have lost our theological nerve, the courage to confront as well as comfort, to admonish as well as exhort. Out of fear of offending, we have slinked away into the false security of silence.

Second, we have been overcome by moral compromise. Our churches look and act so much like the world we would hardly know where to begin if we did restore Church Discipline.

Third, we are simply and sadly biblically illiterate. Lay this deficiency at the feet of preachers who have jettisoned an expository model of preaching that allows us to avoid and neglect the hard doctrines of Scripture like Church Discipline.

Fourth, practical expediency and, I might add, personal ambition, has played an all too important role. A bigger membership means greater bragging rights. It affords a more attractive platform to make the move to a larger and more influential pulpit or denominational post. I wish I did not believe that there was any merit to this particular observation. However, too many conversations with too many ministers makes the case unavoidable. Furthermore, Southern Baptist's fascination and fixation on numbers naturally enslaves us to this kind of mindset. It is all but hardwired into our DNA, embedded in the hard drive of our internal logic. Now, I do not wish to be misunderstood. Numbers and an "accurate accounting (!)" of those numbers is important. It is a matter of accountability and integrity. It is biblical (see Acts 2:41). However, their inflation and exaggeration, and our infatuation with them, dishonor Christ, robs us of our integrity, and calls into question our credibility.

Where then do we turn for an answer, a solution, a cure to this critical condition in which we find Christ's Church? Wanting to model what I believe is the way out and the

way forward, I direct our attention to a text not deemed as one of the major scriptures on Church Discipline, but one that will provide both a foundation for a general treatment of this issue as well as specific counsel for particular situations which demand the practice of this necessary and lost treasure of the Church. The text is Titus 3:9-15. Here Paul provides 5 principles by which the body of Christ is to conduct the practice of church discipline.

I. Avoid the Foolish. 3:9

These are Paul's final words to his son in the ministry, Titus. Like the constant beating of a drum, Paul has challenged those at Crete to maintain sound doctrine and good works.

It is essential that a church protect and value its doctrinal and moral integrity.

Those who would cause compromise in either area must be confronted and, if unrepentant, avoided. To do so is loving. To not do so is to mistake sentimentalism for love. Victor Masters understood this well when he writes, "Sentimentality is an enemy of church discipline. Sentimentality is the love of man divorced from love of truth . . . it cloaks a big lot of hypocrisy and moral decay."⁶

Paul says "avoid" the foolish. The word avoid could be translated "shun." It is a present imperative, a word of command, calling for constant and consistent vigilance. Why must we avoid, shun, turn away from these kind of persons?

Two reasons are given.

1. They are unwise.

⁶ Ibid.

Paul describes these troublemakers first as those who engage in foolish (*moros*) disputes (*NIV*, “controversies”) genealogies, contentions (*NIV*, “arguments”), and strivings (*NIV*, “quarrels”) about the law. In his context the troublemakers were Judiazers who added both to the words of Scripture and the work of our Savior. They debated theological minutiae, created fanciful allegories and mythologies based on biblical genealogies, and added works to the doctrine of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Thinking of themselves as the theological elite, they tore up and would continue to tear up “whole households” (1:11) if left unchecked. These kind of persons are not to be debated, but denounced and dismissed. Dealing with aberrant theology is not the time for dialogue. It is the time for action, action that is quick and swift.

Transition: There is a second reason we must avoid the foolish.

2) They are unprofitable.

Going beyond Scripture, adding to the work of Christ, advocating a “Jesus plus” and a “faith plus” and a “Word plus” theological agenda, Paul says these false teachers are unprofitable and useless. Nothing good comes from their attitude or their teachings. Avoiding them has as its goal bringing to light their error and their sin. It is redemptive and restorative. It is essential and not optional. Even one evangelist of error is one too many. The risks are too great.

James P. Boyce understood this quite well when it came to the founding and building of a seminary. What he applies to a theological institution is of equal value to the local church. In his “Three Changes in Theological Institutions,” delivered at Furman University on July 30, 1856, 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 the evil that will attend it Scarcely a single heresy has ever blighted the Church which has not owed its existence or its development to that one man of power and ability whose name has always been associated with its doctrines.”⁷

Transition: We must avoid the foolish.

II. Reject the Divisive. 3:10-11

Refusing to enter into unnecessary theological wranglings does not mean doing nothing. As the stakes rise, so must the response. Paul in essence summarizes the teachings of Jesus on Church Discipline found in Matthew 18:15-20. Note carefully the sin we confront. It is 1) public, 2) habitual, 3) serious and 4) lacking repentance. We are not called to be spiritual garbage inspectors or theological peeping-toms. When we become aware of a sinning brother or sister we go to them first individually, second with witnesses, and finally with the whole fellowship being involved if there is no repentance. If at any point the evidence of genuine repentance comes forth, the process of discipline stops and the ministry of restoration begins. Let me add

⁷ John A Broadus, *A Gentleman and a Scholar: A Memoir of James Petigru Boyce* (Birmingham: Solid Ground, 2004: from the 1893 ed.), 139.

parenthetically that restoration to fellowship does not entail restoration to leadership. God's standard for the latter is higher than His standard for the former.

The ministry of the Church Discipline is mandatory, if we are to be faithful to our head who is Christ. We do it for the sake of the body and for the sake of the sinning brother. Dietrich Bonhoeffer saw the crucial nature of this when he 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."⁸

Transition: Paul makes three helpful observations concerning the divisive.

1. They must be disciplined. 3:10

Reject is another present imperative. The *NIV* translates it as "warn." *Divisive* is *hairetikos* from which we get our word "heretic". However, its 1st century meaning referred to "a person who is quarrelsome and stirs up factions through erroneous opinions, a man who is determined to go his own way and so forms parties and factions."⁹ This is the man who, as John MacArthur says, "is a law unto himself and has no concern for spiritual truth or unity."¹⁰ Paul's instructions are clear. Admonish him once, admonish him twice. If there is no repentance, then he must be rejected.

Dealing with such an individual in this manner has pastoral benefits. It

⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together – Prayer Book of the Bible in Bonhoeffer Works* vol. 5, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 105.

⁹ D. Edmond Hiebert, *Titus and Philemon*, EBC (Chicago Moody, 1957), 75.

¹⁰ John MacArthur, *Titus* (Chicago: Moody, 1996), 164.

will keep the issue on the level of principle and not personality. Personality battles result when we delay in taking action and are perceived to be showing favoritism. This is always a lose – lose scenario and must be avoided. We must move quickly in the initial stage when the sin is discovered. We may extend the “grace of patience” as we seek the repentance of the one living in sin. However, we must be clear, above board and timely. We cannot go once, and then walk away as if all is forgiven, if there is no change. Vigilance and steadfastness are required, all the while keeping Galatians 6:1-2 before our mind’s eye.

2) They are dangerous. 3:11

Why must habitual, public, serious, unrepentant sinners be disciplined? Because they are dangerous. Paul describes them as warped and sinning. Warped is in the perfect tense and means twisted, turned inside out. Sinning is in the present tense. Here is a man living life upside down and inside out. This is his settled state, heart and mind. It is his continuous habit of life. GOD FORBID THAT WE WHO LOVE THIS PERSON WOULD STAND BY AND DO NOTHING!

And yet our radical individualism and misguided understanding of local church autonomy led to something like this on a national platform in 1998 when Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, Arkansas took no action against then President Bill Clinton and his

illicit sexual relationship with Monica Lewinsky and his lying to the American people. Why, the Pulaski Baptist Association in Little Rock adopted a unanimous resolution saying “no one outside the congregation has the right, nor the privilege, of trying to coerce Immanuel Baptist to do otherwise: (*ABP*, September 20, 1998). I suspect Paul would take issue on this point. He certainly did at Corinth and here at Crete! Again the wisdom of Bonhoeffer comes to center-stage, “When another Christian falls into obvious sin, an admonition is imperative, because God’s Word demands it.”¹¹ We do neither the sinner nor ourselves any favors when we wink at or ignore the sin that is dangerous and destroys.

3) They are destructive. 3:11

Sin is destructive. It destroys. What it can do to a fellowship is serious. What it does to the sinner enslaved by its addiction is tragic. Self-condemned is an interesting word. Being well aware of the etymological fallacy, this is one instance when an etymological investigation proves insightful, and fruitful. The word is *autokatakritos*. Breaking it down it means “to judge down on oneself,” hence to be self-condemned. In action and attitude the sinner is without excuse, passing judgment on himself. Oh, he may not see it, for he is warped, twisted, self-deceived. Why he may attempt to use Scripture to justify his sin. Often he will claim the leading of the Spirit and sometimes even the providence of God. There are times when he

¹¹ Bonhoeffer, 105.

may even say, “my head tells me this is wrong but my heart tells me it was never more right.”

With grief, humility, self-examination and a broken heart we must confront him and if necessary shun him and reject him. Following Paul’s directive in 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 we must turn him over to Satan with a hope and prayer that the discipline of the heavenly Father (Hebrews 12:5-13) will bring him to brokenness and repentance, and that he will give evidence he is indeed God’s child after all. We have our duty. God has His.

III. Follow the Leader. 3:12-13

Verses 12-15 are Paul’s final words to Titus. However, their close proximity to verses 9-11, as well as the instructions we find in them, should give us pause. Do the words we find here amplify Paul’s teaching on church discipline, while at the same providing a farewell message? I think they do and the counsel we discover is pastorally helpful in guiding us through the delicate and difficult waters of Church Discipline.

Good, godly leadership is absolutely a must if a Church is to carry out the ministry of loving confrontation. Such leadership must be in place and evident to the congregation. This leadership will be visible both among the elders as well as the laity. Church Discipline is no place for a Lone Ranger. Going solo in this arena is suicidal. It is also unbiblical. Following the leader means there is a leader. It means establishing credibility and earning trust.

When you have that you can act, act decisively, act courageously. How does God want a church to respond to it leadership?

1) Listen to their advise. 3:12

In the midst of great challenge and controversy Paul steps forward and makes important decisions, decisions that affected numerous lives, but decisions that would ensure that the necessary ministries of the church would continue.

Paul would relieve Titus of his responsibilities on Crete by sending Artemas (of whom we know nothing) or Tychicus (of whom we know quite a bit). Griffin informs us that Tychicus was “Pauls” traveling companion (Acts 20:4), “dear brother and faithful servant in the Lord” (cf Ephesians 6:21; Colossians 4:7), and his personal representative to churches (2 Timothy 4:12).”¹² Both men were capable of fulfilling Paul’s instructions in 3:10-11 or he would not be sending them. This would free Titus to come to Nicopolis (meaning “city of victory; 9 such cities were in existence in New Testament times)¹³ on the western coast of Achaia or the southern province of Greece. Paul would be going there for the winter to rest, strategize and spend time with Titus. Because Paul would be sending Godly, spiritual reinforcements who could handle any troublemakers if more should arise, Titus could set aside this work and move ahead to a new ministry, a ministry that would soon take him to Dalmatia (2 Timothy 4:9).

¹² Thomas D. Lea and Haynes P. Griffin, Jr., *1, 2, Timothy and Titus*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1992), 331.

¹³ MacArthur, 167.

2) Lend your assistance. 3:13

Church Discipline should not be the primary focal point of the Church's ministry. It should not require the neglect of other vital activities because of its necessity and practice. In fact I believe Paul envisioned it as a natural component of the very fabric of what the church is and does, a painful but essential aspect of Christian discipleship.

Paul could instruct Titus on the principles of Church Discipline while at the same time giving attention to other ministries needing to be carried out. In all of this he needed the help of others, and others gladly lent their aid to their trusted leader.

Zenas the lawyer (the only Christian lawyer noted in all of the New Testament; probably a Roman jurist in my judgment) and Apollos (the eloquent Alexandrian who comes on the stage in Acts 18-19 and was highly revered in Corinth [see 1 Cor. 1:11-12]) were apparently with Titus on Crete. No doubt they had lent their assistance to him in the ministry of Church Discipline of 3:10-11. Now their services were needed elsewhere, the discipline matters at Crete under control. Titus should send them on (aorist imperative) quickly making sure "they have everything they need" (*NIV*).

In all of this we see Church Discipline as a natural dimension of the multifaceted ministries of Church life. It is not preeminent. Neither is it an anomaly!

IV. Maintain good works. 3:14

Good works is a reoccurring theme throughout this short 3 chapter, 46 verse letter. The phrase occurs 6 times, driving home the point that though we are not saved by faith plus works (Eph. 2:8-10; Titus 3:5), we are saved by a faith that does work. It is the presence and practice of these good works that provide the context for the healthy practice of Church Discipline. Further, one of those good works we are to be doing is Church Discipline.

Transition: What does Paul say here about good works?

1) Good works must not be neglected.

Learn is a present imperative and is related to our word for discipleship. Maintain speaks of a consistent pattern or lifestyle of good works. Good works, including the good works of 3:9-10, are to be our habit of life. They are the norm and not the exception, for to neglect them is to function in as a sub-standard, below the bar church. Tony Evans is on target when he notes, “A Church that does not practice church discipline of its members is not functioning properly as a church, just as a family that does not discipline is not a fully functioning family.”¹⁴

2) Good works do meet needs.

Good works are a good thing. God foreordained that we would do them as a display of His “work of art” which we are becoming (Ephesians 2:10). Good works serve a positive agenda: “to meet urgent needs.” Good works have a negative function as well: “that we

¹⁴ Tony Evans, *God's Glorious Church* (Chicago: Moody, 2003), 222.

will not be unfruitful, “live unproductive lives” (NIV), “end up with nothing to show for our lives” (Peterson, *The Message*).

The good work of Church Discipline will meet the need and bear the fruit of 1) the glory of God; 2) love for the sinner; 3) restoration of the wayward; 4) the purity of the Church; 5) the protection of the fellowship, and 6) witness to the world. It is a good work of duty. It is a good work of necessity. Avoiding the ever present sins of legalism and judgmentalism, we testify to God, one another and the world that holiness and purity matter. We proclaim through Biblical Discipline that love cares and confronts. It can be tender but it can also be tough. What it cannot do is stand by and do nothing when one of the family is snared by sin. We do not discipline the world and have no intention of doing so. To them we proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is to ourselves we practice the ministry of loving confrontation. As the revivalist Charles Finney wrote, “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.”¹⁵ Good works indeed meet urgent needs.

V. Enlist the Faithful. 3:15

This final verse is a farewell statement from friends to friends. It is all encompassing. The word all is used twice, both at the beginning and the end of the verse. And yet, subtly and just beneath the surface, we find two words

¹⁵ Charles Finney, *Lectures to Professing Christians* (Garland Publishing, Inc. New York & London, 1985), 45.

of wisdom for the life and ministry of confrontation: love and grace. Those whose lives are characterized by these twin towers of the Christian life are the persons qualified for the hard task and difficult assignment of Church Discipline. Paul addresses these Christian companions by means of a greeting and by means of a prayer.

1) Express the love we share.

All that are with Paul express their greeting and love for Titus. Like Paul, they know the challenges he is facing and they want him to know they care, they stand with him, they are on his side. This could only encourage him in the tough task he was facing. As those of the same faith, they were one with him in the battle.

2) Pray for the grace we need.

Bitterness also is an ever present enemy to those in the ministry. This is especially the case when we are called to the ministry of confrontation and discipline. Only God's grace will give us balance, self control, wisdom and endurance. By God's grace and for God's glory we will be equipped and enabled to stand and serve, even when the odds are against us and the battle seems all for nothing. It isn't, it never is, as long as the battle we fight is the Lord's! His grace, His amazing grace is what we need when the fire is hot or the water is deep. Such is often our lot in the ministry of confrontation. At such times only His grace will sustain us. Amazingly we shall discover, it is all we need.

Conclusion:

Let me move to close by raising and answering 2 questions. 1) Why do we practice Church Discipline? My friend Mark Dever provides 5 reasons:

- 1) For the Good of the Person Disciplined.
- 2) For the Good of the Other Christians, as They See the Danger of Sin.
- 3) For the Health of the Church as a Whole.
- 4) For the Corporate Witness of the Church
- 5) For the Glory of God, as We Reflect His Holiness.¹⁶

2) How do we begin to implement Church Discipline? Let me be pastoral and practical in my response. First, we must teach the people in our church what the Bible says about Church Discipline. Second, we must begin to implement Church Discipline lovingly, wisely, gently and slowly. A cram-course and premature action is a certain formula for disaster. Third, we also must apply Church Discipline to areas like absentee membership as well as the specifics we find in the various lists of Scripture. We will do this not to cause hurt, but to bring about healing within the body of Christ.

Bryan Chapell is correct when he writes, “there is a difference between needing to divide and loving to divide. A divisive person loves to fight. The differences are usually observable. A person who loves the peace and purity of the church may be forced into division, but it is not his character. He enters arguments regrettably and infrequently. When forced to argue, he remains fair, truthful, and loving in his responses. He grieves to have to disagree with a brother. Those who are divisive by nature lust for the fray,

¹⁶ Mark Dever, *9 Marks of a Healthy Church*, expanded ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 166.

incite its onset, and delight in being able to conquer another person. For them victory means everything. So in an argument they twist words, call names, threaten, manipulate procedures, and attempt to extend the debate as long as possible and along as many fronts as possible. Divisive person frequent the debates of the church. As a result the same voices and personalities tend to appear over and over again, even though the issues change.”¹⁷

In the final analysis, Church Discipline is a painful but necessary extension of Christian discipleship. We do it not because it is pleasant, but because we must. Why? I conclude with 4 concise observations:

- 1) Overlooking sin is not gracious but dangerous.
- 2) Confronting sin is not optional but essential.
- 3) Dealing with sin is not judgmental but remedial.
- 4) Correcting sin is not carnal but spiritual.

Thomas Oden says, “Only those who take sin seriously take forgiveness seriously.”¹⁸ Our Lord did both, and so must we as we lovingly and faithfully follow the divine directions for Church Discipline.

¹⁷ R. Kent Hughes & Bryan Chapell, *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000), 364.

¹⁸ Thomas C. Oden, *Corrective Love: The Power of Commion Discipline* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1995), 47.