

THE DEAREST PLACE ON EARTH (9)

Church Discipline – The Need for a Sword and a Trowel!

A. Introduction

1. The Lord Jesus, the head of the church, instructs each local church to appoint a plurality of qualified men to be elders.
2. The elders are to feed, know, lead, protect, care for, and love the flock under their care (the members of the local church) so that as a local church we display God's glory to the world around us.
3. The primary way the elders are to do this is by ensuring that the gospel is preached and the ordinances (baptism and the Lord's Supper) are administered correctly.
4. Correct administration of the ordinances involves carefully tending the front and back door of the church.

Tending the front door by allowing only those with a genuine profession of faith to become a member of the local church.

Tending the back door by removing from membership those who are unrepentant about a particular sin(s). This is the final stage of a process known as church discipline.

B. The Basis for Church Discipline

1. The local church is a display of God's glory.

We are to display God's character to the world around us.

"But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: Be holy, because I am holy." (1 Peter 1:15-16)

We display God's character as we obey everything that Jesus has taught.

"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:19-20)

"Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us." (1 Peter 2:11-12)

2. We all need discipline because none of us perfectly display God's glory.

Discipline can be positive and formative – using a trowel.

Discipline can be negative and corrective – using a sword.

Sometimes this disciplining will be done to us directly by God (e.g. suffering).

"And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son. Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? ... Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." (Hebrews 12:5-7, 10-11)

Sometimes this disciplining we will do ourselves.

"For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say No to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good." (Titus 2:11-14)

Sometimes other people will do this disciplining.

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector." (Matthew 18:15-17)

"Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted." (Galatians 6:1)

3. What is church discipline?

"Church discipline is the process of correcting sin in the life of the congregation and its members." (Jonathan Leeman)

C. The Need for Church Discipline¹

1. For the good of the person.

To help individuals grow in godliness.

To warn them about the danger of sin.

2. For the good of other Christians.

To help them see the serious nature of sin.

To protect them from those who are divisive or false teachers.

3. For the church's witness to the world.

An unrepentant member blurs the distinction between the church and the world.

4. For the glory of God.

A local church glorifies God as its members live holy lives.

D. The Reasons for Church Discipline

1. Discipline is needed whenever someone sins.

We need to distinguish between it requiring self-discipline by the member, a private exhortation by another, or church discipline.

2. The Bible reveals three main areas of danger requiring church discipline.

False doctrine.

"But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody

is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!" (Galatians 1:8-9)

"Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work." (2 John 9-11)

Impure lifestyle.

"It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord. ... But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. Expel the wicked man from among you." (1 Corinthians 5:1-5, 11-13)

Divisive behaviour.

"I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people." (Romans 16:17-18)

"Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned." (Titus 3:10-11)

3. Other reasons for church discipline would include a refusal to fulfil the responsibilities required of members (e.g. nonattendance).

E. The Process of Church Discipline

1. Four basic steps.

Step 1: Private confrontation.

"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over." (Matthew 18:15)

Step 2: Small group confrontation.

"But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'" (Matthew 18:16)

Step 3: Church confrontation.

"If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church." (Matthew 18:17)

This will usually be done in the first instance by speaking to the elders as representatives of the local church.

Step 4: Removing a member (excommunication).

"If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector." (Matthew 18:17)

2. How these steps are applied practically and how quickly they are, will be determined by the situation.
3. If a person shows evidence of repentance they should be restored.

F. The Removal of a Member by Church Discipline

1. There are a number of situations when a member is removed from the roll of a local church without church discipline taking place.

When a member has died.

When a member moves away.

When a member attends a different local church.

When a member no longer professes faith in Christ.

2. Sadly in some situations a member who still professes faith in Christ is removed because they are unrepentant about their sin.

"If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector." (Matthew 18:17)

"But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. Expel the wicked man from among you." (1 Corinthians 5:11-13)

"If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother." (2 Thessalonians 3:14-15)

"Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith. Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme." (1 Timothy 1:19-20)

"Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him." (Titus 3:10)

3. How should we relate to an unrepentant believer?

Removal of membership means that the individual should not participate in the Lord's Supper.

They also no longer have the care and accountability they had as a member (Galatians 6:10).

We should pray for them.

It does not mean that we "shun" or have no interaction with the individual but that our relationship to them has markedly changed.

Our interactions (speech and actions) should let them know that what they are doing is not okay and that they need to repent.

Family members should fulfil family responsibilities (Ephesians 6:1-3; 1 Timothy 5:8; 1 Peter 3:1-2).

G. The Spirit of Church Discipline

1. How should we go about practising church discipline?ⁱⁱ

We need great love – a loving motive to win the person back to Christ and a loving manner.

We need great carefulness – to make sure the offense is serious enough to warrant the next step.

We need great courage – no one looks forward to practicing church discipline.

We need great humility – we need to realise that we ourselves could fall into sin.

We need great wisdom – every situation is different.

We need great prayer – church discipline is context for the promise of Matthew 18:19.

H. Conclusion

"At the end of the twentieth century, the great task of the church is to prove itself to be the genuine church revealed in the New Testament— proving its authenticity by a demonstration of pure faith and authentic community. We must regain the New Testament concern for fidelity of doctrine, purity of life, and unity of fellowship. We must recover the missing mark." (Al Mohler)

ⁱ Taken from Nine Marks of a Healthy Church by Mark Dever

ⁱⁱ Taken from David Murray's blog post: Practice Church Discipline