

CHURCH DISCIPLINE

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About the author...

Jim is a graduate of the Northside School of Preaching in Harrison, Arkansas. He began preaching in 1969. In 2000 he made his 11th journey to Europe and his 27th trip to India. His overseas work is under the oversight of the elders at 39th Street. His labors take him regularly to India, Estonia, Latvia, Philippines, Singapore and Costa Rica. His wife Judy is his co-laborer on many of the evangelistic journeys. They are also strongly involved in correspondence course work throughout the world. Jim has authored many tracts in the International Bible Studies series and also many of the lessons in the IBS Correspondence Course series. He is one of the writers for the International Bible Studies publication and involved in all aspects of the IBS work. He is an instructor in the Mid-West School of Biblical Studies. While in the United States he is a frequent speaker on lectureships and gospel meetings.

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us. That's 2 Thessalonians 3:6, and that church discipline! It is a subject that is ignored somewhat in study and ignored extensively in practice. Some even seem to resent the subject, looking upon it as unloving and beneath the character of one who follows Christ. However, this resentment comes from having subjectively judged the word of God, and having ignorantly reached a conclusion that is not only unwarranted, but perhaps even blasphemous.

Love is the very foundation of church discipline. In fact, it cannot and will not be practiced in a loveless atmosphere. If it is loveless, it is punishment, vengeance, or hatefulness, it is not discipline. Biblical church discipline will stem from love for the Lord, love for the Bible, love for the church, and love for individual brethren.

The Purpose for Discipline

If God requires the church to discipline the disorderly, (and he does, Romans 16:17, 1 Corinthians 5:11, 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 1 Timothy 6:5, 2 Timothy 3:5, Titus 3:10), then it becomes very important for us to seek as much understanding of it as we possibly can. I believe a failure to understand church discipline is to fail in the practice of church discipline.

We must not permit ourselves to be influenced by the views and practices of extremists such as the Catholic church practice of burning heretics at the stake, the Boston "Crossroads" practice of "Shunning" or withholding of love, or the liberal denominationalism's rewriting of the law of God to admit the lawless and permit lawlessness. So, we ask, Why does God demand church discipline? What is it's purpose? What is it designed to accomplish?

It is designed to show that **the church is subject to Christ** (Ephesians 5:24). Subjection in only that which is convenient is what creates a denomination. Subjection in ALL things makes a church of Christ. Jesus is the head of the church (Colossians 1:18, Ephesians 1:22). The head seeks a "*glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing: but that it should be holy and without blemish*" (Ephesians 5:27). Church discipline is designed to take care of the "spots" and

“wrinkles”. In the context of discipline of the fornicator, and forgiveness and restoration at his repentance, Paul wrote: *“For to this end did I write, that I might know the proof of you, whether ye be obedient in all things”* (2 Corinthians 2:9).

It is also designed to **save the soul of the offender**. The scriptures inform us that *“God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance”* (2 Peter 3:9). The ALL is inclusive of all who need to repent. In 2 Thessalonians 3:14 the scripture says; *“And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed”*. This is not seeking the humiliation of shame. It is seeking the fruit of shame, humility. Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 5:5, to *“deliver such an one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord”* shows very clearly what God intends to accomplish by church discipline.

Church discipline is also designed to **keep the church pure**. Paul wrote the brethren at Corinth, saying; *“Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened”* (1 Corinthians 5:6-7a). The influence of the ungodly will eat at the church. The church can survive in the world, but she cannot survive with the world in her.

Church discipline will also **deter wrong doing**. Paul told Timothy *“Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear”* (1 Timothy 5:20). Undisciplined sin encourages sin. When God disciplined Ananias and Sapphira the scripture says, *“And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things”*(Acts 5:11). God warned in Ecclesiastes 8:11 *“Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil”*.

Church discipline will **let the world know that the church stands for something**. It is said that “those who don't stand for something will fall for anything”. This is true for groups as well as for individuals. *“The husbandman that laboreth must be first partaker of the fruits”* (2 Timothy 2:2) is simply saying that conviction must be resident in the heart of the teacher if it is to reside in the heart of the taught. The world needs to know that the church does not endorse the sinful conduct of the disorderly.

Church discipline will also **make our message to the world believable**. A holy message will have little effect coming from a group that endorses, or tolerates, unholiness. Evil conduct not dealt with has crippled the evangelism efforts of many congregations.

Recipients of Church Discipline

Since church discipline is God's discipline, we must investigate his word for instruction in WHO should be disciplined as certainly, and as carefully, as we seek the HOW and the WHY. We are not wise enough, pure enough, nor strong enough to set our own standards as rules in this, or any other, area of religion.

Who does the New Testament describe as unworthy of Christian fellowship? Who does the Bible classify as recipients of discipline?

False teachers are to be recipients of church discipline. *“If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which*

is according to godliness; he is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself” (1 Timothy 6:3-5). False teachers should have neither audience nor working companion. “Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed “ (2 John 9-11). Those who will not teach what Christ taught should not have the blessing of those Christ bought.

Those who cause divisions and offences are not worthy of Christian fellowship and are therefore to be recipients of discipline. Paul wrote: “*Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them*” (Romans 16:17). The American Standard translation says “*turn away from them*”. This would certainly include the false teachers mentioned before, but it would also include those who would lead a rebellion over opinion. One of the things are God hates is “*he that soweth discord among brethren*” (Proverbs 6:19).

Included in the list of those worthy of discipline are **those who practice immorality**. Paul wrote to the brethren at Corinth and told them “*.....not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolator, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat*” (1 Corinthians 5:11). The words “*Put away from among yourselves that wicked person*” (1 Corinthians 5:13) are too clear to misunderstand.

Those who will not work are also among those who are to be disciplined. 2 Thessalonians 3:10-14 says of those in this category that we are to “*note that man, and have no company with him*”. This is not referring to the disabled, nor to the unemployed in a high unemployment area, but those who simply will not hold down a job and thus hold up their responsibility to their family. Such a one is “*worse than an infidel*”(1 Timothy 5:8) in God’s sight.

Another recipient of discipline is **those who walk disorderly**. Paul wrote: “*Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us*” (2 Thessalonians 3:6). The word “disorderly” is a military term meaning “not keeping rank, insubordinate”. One who practices rebellion against ANY commandment of the Commander-in-chief of the Christian army is “walking disorderly” and is to be withdrawn from.

Why Don't All Churches of Christ Practice Discipline?

Church discipline is not a suggestion with optional compliance, it is a commandment from God! Yet it is obvious that it is often ignored. Why? Why is it that obedience in this important area of God’s will is the exception and not the rule?

Perhaps some **have seen abuses and don’t wish to be identified with it**. It is certainly true that abuses - terrible abuses - have occurred. One needs only to consider the Catholic practice of burning alive any who apposed their doctrines, or the practice by many religious groups of total social isolation, to realize it. However, people have abused food and medicine too. Are we to also stop their use?

I suspect there are even some who don't practice discipline because, deep down, they're just **not really opposed to sin**. That seems to have been the attitude somewhat in Corinth. Paul wrote: *"It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife. And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you"* (1 Corinthians 5:1-2).

I have actually heard it said that **too many need it, it would hurt the church**. Perhaps this is the attitude warned of in Matthew 24:12, *"And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold"*. How would it hurt the church? Her reputation? What kind of reputation does a church have where "too many need it", or that condones sin? Is it because it would hurt the contribution? When did dollars become more important than souls? Is it because it would hurt the work? What work? If too many need it there probably isn't much work being done. It never hurts the church to do God's will. Deciding that discipline would be bad for the church is deciding either that we are smarter than God, or that God made a mistake, or both. Perhaps a reminder of the words of Romans 11:34 is in order: *"For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counselor?"*.

Some actually justify ignoring church discipline by saying **it won't work here**. It worked at Corinth (1 Corinthians 5:1-2 & 2 Corinthians 2:6-7). Multitudes of current day examples of success could be found across our brotherhood. Deciding that discipline won't work because not all will be restored is no different than deciding the gospel won't work because not all will obey it. Remember that restoration of the erring is not the only purpose for discipline.

Some are perhaps **not really convinced of the truth that church members can be lost eternally**. No person is in worse condition spiritually than the Christian who fails to be faithful. *"For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning"* (2 Peter 2:20).

The Scriptures are clear on the subject of church discipline. The Lord has made it clear that some are not worthy of Christian fellowship. It is our responsibility to see to it that God's design in discipline is implemented.