

CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Michael Wyatt

Introduction

Those of us who call ourselves Christians, members of the church of Christ, have always sought to champion the cause of “speaking where the Bible speaks, and being silent where the Bible is silent.” This principle finds its roots in the Scriptures. “If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God; if any man minister, let him do it as of the ability which God giveth: that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever. Amen” (1 Peter 4:11). “But speak thou the things which become sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1). The great prophet, Micaiah, of the Old Testament, said, “As the LORD liveth, what the LORD saith unto me, that will I speak” (1 Kings 22:14). As with any Bible subject, we must question, “For what saith the scripture?” (Romans 4:3), and ring the words of Paul in Galatians 4:16, “Am I therefore become your enemy, because I tell you the truth?”

Our lesson for this study is: “CHURCH DISCIPLINE.” We will concentrate our efforts in answering a number of questions concerning this important subject. It is an important subject because it is a Bible subject, and therefore deserves our best effort to give it a thorough and complete study.

Sometimes the best way to study any subject is by asking and answering questions on that subject. Please consider some questions about church discipline and the Bible answer to those questions. Remember, it is not my position that is right, nor yours, but the Bible’s!

Discussion

I. What Is Church Discipline?

In order to give a “thus saith the Lord,” we should turn our attention to Paul’s epistles to the Corinthians. Several other passages discuss the topic under consideration, and we will draw from all of them. However, the Corinthian letters contain the most information on this subject.

1 Corinthians 5 contains the answer to the question, “What is Church Discipline?” Paul speaks of it in these terms: “be taken away from among you” (5:2); “to deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh” (5:5); “purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump” (5:7); “not to company with” (5:9, 11); “put away from yourselves that wicked person” (5:13). And in 2 Corinthians, after they apparently had followed Paul’s command in this regard and the man was ready to repent and return, he said, “Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many” (2:6).

In other passages Paul had written to other churches, we find that church discipline involves “marking” and “avoiding” those who “cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned” (Romans 16:17). He commanded the Thessalonians “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves...” (2 Thessalonians 3:6); and “note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed” (2 Thessalonians 3:14). Paul is referring to an erring brother in Titus when he said, “A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject” (Titus 3:10). I take this to mean “erring” brother because of the reference to the first and second admonition.

Church discipline involves instructive and corrective discipline. It simply involves the correction of an erring brother or sister in order to keep the church pure and to save the wayward soul involved. Through the action of church discipline, members are called to give an account of their actions, or lack thereof. Church discipline helps the church maintain checks and balances as far as its members go. Every member has the responsibility to keep himself pure (James 1:27); and to help the church to remain “a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing” (Ephesians 5:27). This is a means to help us to maintain faithfulness to the Lord and help us realize our accountability to the Lord and His bride. Since every member has the responsibility to keep himself pure and the church, as a whole, pure, discipline is demanded! Otherwise, there would be no checks and balances, no accountability, and no responsibility. We are taught to go to and warn, or admonish, the one who is wayward (1 Thessalonians 5:14). We are to seek to restore the one who has left the fellowship of God (Galatians 6:1,2). We are to seek to convert the one who has left the fold of God, the church (James 5:19-20).

We practice church discipline only in connection with those who are our brethren, and not in connection with those who are in the world. Paul wrote, “I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world. But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat” (1 Corinthians 5:9-11). A word of caution: Even in our associations with those in the world we should never do anything that might leave the impression we endorse anything that is out of harmony with the will of God. We need to remember also the words of First Corinthians 15:33: “Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners.” While it may be necessary for a Christian to stop associating with certain of his former friends in the world for various reasons, what we are discussing here is church discipline that may include withdrawing from brothers and sisters in Christ who have ceased to be faithful.

II. Is All Church Discipline Withdrawing Fellowship?

All church discipline does not necessarily involve withdrawing fellowship, but all withdrawing of fellowship is church discipline. Withdrawing fellowship is the climactic act of church discipline. It

is going the distance to try to save the soul involved. Church discipline involves a great deal more than just withdrawing fellowship.

To *withdraw* something is to take it away, or take it back, or remove it. *Fellowship* is companionship. But it is a spiritual kind of companionship. To withdraw fellowship is to withdraw that companionship. As far as the specific procedures that are to be followed, the frequency with which those procedures are to be handled, and the time it takes to do them and hopefully receive a response, is left in the realm of judgment.

III. What Is the Purpose of Church Discipline?

The purpose of church discipline is three-fold. It involves the individual to be disciplined, the church members who are to perform the discipline, and protects the good name of the church.

As far as the individual is concerned it is an attempt to bring to repentance the brother or sister who has become unfaithful. Church discipline is a soul-saving act. "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (1 Corinthians 5:4-5).

Some get the impression that church discipline is an act of vengeance, or is cruel. But it is for the purpose of saving the soul, just like baptism is to save the soul. The parent who exercises proper discipline is not being cruel or taking vengeance. In the case of the man in Corinth who had taken his father's wife, it worked. "Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many. So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow" (2 Corinthians 2:6-7).

A second purpose for church discipline is to keep sin from permeating the church. Notice what Paul wrote to the church at Corinth as they were tolerating the sinful man in their fellowship instead of withdrawing from him: "Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?" (1 Corinthians 5:6). What do we say about one rotten apple in a barrel? When sin is tolerated, it encourages others to sin. Church discipline, that may go the distance to save the unfaithful by withdrawing from them, will encourage faithfulness.

A third purpose for church discipline is to protect the good name of the church in the community. "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" (1 Corinthians 5:1). The term Gentile is here used to designate those who have no thought of pleasing God, that is, the people of the world. The idea is not literally that such people never are guilty of such sins, but that even they do not approve of it. "That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world" (Philippians 2:15). "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good

works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). The only way the church can maintain its good name in the community is for it to exclude from its fellowship those who persist in sin and will not repent.

Church discipline is for the purpose of salvation, saving the individual, and saving the church!

IV. Where Do We Get Our Authority for Church Discipline?

The Corinthian letter instructed the church, “In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...” (1 Corinthians 5:4). When something is done in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, it means that it is done by His authority. The same instruction is seen by Paul to the Thessalonians, “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...” (2 Thessalonians 3:6). Church discipline is a command, and God never gave a non-essential command!

Does the New Testament demand church discipline? Yes! There are more than a half-dozen passages that point this out as a command. For God’s people to not consistently practice church discipline, though the Bible commands it, and then say that we speak where the Bible speaks is hypocritical! How could we say that? Can a congregation of the Lord’s people not even attempt to practice church discipline and strive to keep the church pure, and then claim to be the New Testament Church? No! It isn’t fair for gospel preachers to preach the truth on this subject and not be backed up with action. One reason we have so much rebellion and liberalism in the church today is because brethren have grown up with the idea, “it doesn’t matter what you do or don’t do, teach or don’t teach, they won’t do anything to you.” And when you have a rebellious society, they just thrive on that, and pretty soon you have rebellion in the body of Christ. People will then say, “the elders don’t have any authority or oversight.” And on and on it goes! But you show me a congregation whose elders stand up and practice church discipline, by the authority of Christ, and do it lovingly and consistently, and I’ll show you a clean church. Not a perfect church, but a church which is attempting to be the New Testament church by following the commands of Christ, by practicing “In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ....”

V. Is There a Time Frame for Church Discipline?

The Corinthians, perhaps, wanted to delay Paul’s instruction for disciplining the immoral man in their midst. Either they did not understand what they were commanded to do, or they were waiting for Paul personally to lead them in this action. In either or both instances they were wrong. They are told to carry out this necessary act immediately, not waiting for Paul, or anything else! 1 Corinthians 5:2, 4, 5.

Why the urgency? Since church discipline is designed to **save the individual**, what if the person dies in their sins, and we did not go the distance in trying to save their soul? What if they are involved in a terrible accident which renders them incapable mentally of returning to the Lord?

What if they became hardened through the deceitfulness of sin and it becomes impossible to renew them to repentance (Hebrews 3:13; 6:6)? There is urgency in this action!

Why the urgency? Since church discipline is also designed by God to **save the church** from a contaminating influence, what if the false teaching, or immoral living, influences those in the church to follow that ungodly way? What if the Lord should return and find His church stained with sin and ungodliness? There is urgency in this action!

VI. Who Is to Take the Lead in Withdrawing Fellowship?

The answer to this, of course, is the elders of the church, who have the responsibility to lead the congregation in every phase of its activities. "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you" (Hebrews 13:17). No congregation which has elders can successfully perform church discipline from anyone if the elders do not take the lead in this action.

VII. Whose Responsibility Is it to Carry out the Action of Discipline?

The responsibility of church discipline belongs to every member of the congregation. There is not one verse in the Bible dealing with the subject of church discipline that was addressed only to elders, but to all of us who are Christians. It can never accomplish any of its purposes unless all members of the church cooperate. When one fails to cooperate in the action of church discipline, it is usually the very one whose cooperation would have been most effective in bringing about repentance. For example, suppose an announcement of discipline should be made from the pulpit, or however elders choose to announce it, and the only ones who cooperate in the discipline are those who do not even know the person to be disciplined? Those who are friends and close to the person refuse to cooperate. That discipline would not make much difference to the person involved. In such a case they have not lost any fellowship at all. But suppose the closest friends to that person cooperate in the action, and stop associating with them in a social way? That would make a difference, and might bring about the person's repentance. Be sure you do not help your friend to remain in impenitent by refusing to cooperate in a disciplinary action. Remember, it is to save them from hell!

VIII. WHAT KIND OF SINS WOULD CALL FOR CHURCH DISCIPLINE?

Sins of immorality that refuse to be repented of would call for discipline. The man Paul discusses in 1 Corinthians 5 is an example.

Sins of causing division and offenses by the teaching of error, and is not repented of, would call for discipline. “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 sin of non-attendance would call for discipline. “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). Some falsely reason that one who quits attending has already withdrawn himself, and therefore, we cannot withdraw from him. But remember what withdrawing is, as we have pointed out in this lesson. “Disorderly” is translated from a form of a Greek verb which is used of soldiers’ quitting the ranks. I do not know of anything a child of God could do which would more nearly be described by that word than simply stopping his/her attendance. The word “disorderly” will take in all sins that should be disciplined.

Conclusion

If we take to heart this very serious action, recognizing it as an act of obedience to God’s word, for the purpose of saving the individual and the church, we will cease all objections to this soul-saving act.

This lesson should also serve as a matter of soul-searching. May each of us, as members of the Lord’s church, ask ourselves the question: “Am I involved in anything that would make me a subject of such disciplinary action?” May we be faithful to the Lord in all things and never live in such a way as to need such discipline. And may we also recognize the seriousness of this command of God.