

## Church Discipline

by Mark Baliles

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Within the pages of Scripture, church discipline is one of the most clearly detailed matters of congregational polity. Yet it remains so completely ignored in most Christian circles that the subject cannot even be discussed without sensing lots of raised eyebrows.

Perhaps past abuses are partly to blame. The mere mention of “shunning,” for some, conjures up visions of Pharisaical responses to the slightest infraction of the “rules.” No doubt pastors and parishes alike have at times been guilty of wielding God’s truths as weapons for intimidation and control. Certainly, any such practice is an abomination before the Lord.

However, consider for a moment this comparison: Would you cease to correct your own children simply because so many parents have dealt with their children out of anger or frustration or even their own insecurity? Just as a lack of godly discipline within the home will ultimately lead to chaos, so it is with the household of God.

What follows is not a new theory for handling church conflicts. It is simply a call back to the clear principles of God’s Word. The biblical data has been gathered and outlined in a format which should prove helpful for both personal and group study, yet the Scriptures essentially speak for themselves. Whatever your assumptions about church discipline, read carefully and prayerfully. The truth may surprise you.

### OUTLINE OF BASIC PRINCIPLES

#### 1. THE WHAT OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Church discipline is a program for *correction*, not a penalty for a crime. The following passages of Scripture get at the root of the meaning of discipline.

a. In the following passage, the Hebrew word translated “discipline” means “to chasten; to instruct.” It is a correction which results in education.

**Deuteronomy 8:5**, “Know then in your heart that as a man **disciplines** his son, so the LORD your God **disciplines** you.”

b. In the following two references, the Greek word translated “discipline” means “to educate, to instruct, to correct by discipline; to develop (as from childhood to adulthood).” The usage ranges from teaching to scourging.

**Hebrews 12:10**, “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.”

**Revelation 3:19**, “Those whom I love I rebuke and **discipline**. So be earnest and repent.”

c. In the two references below, another Greek word means “to admonish; to warn, to instruct; to put into the mind.” It appeals to the will and the emotions.

**1 Thessalonians 5:12, 14**, “Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who **admonish** you ... And we urge you, brothers, **warn** those who are idle...” (Note: The same Greek word appears twice in this passage ... once translated “admonish” and once translated “warn”).

**2 Thessalonians 3:14-15**, “If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him ... warn him as a brother.”

d. In the last two Bible references, the Greek word translated “rebuke” means also ‘to bring to light, to expose, convict, or to set forth.’

**1 Timothy 5:20**, “Those who sin are to be **rebuked** publicly, so that the others may take warning.”

**Titus 2:15**, “These, then, are the things you should teach. Encourage and **rebuke** with all authority.”

## 2. THE WHO OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Throughout the Bible, discipline is consistently set forth as a family matter. The “family” may be parents with their children, a patriarchal tribe, a nation, a local community, or a community of believers. In any case, parents of one family do not have jurisdiction over children of another family. Thus, participation in church discipline is limited by the parameters of the “church” (whether defined locally, denominationally, or universally).

**a.** There are a number of Bible passages which teach that God disciplines His own children.

**Deuteronomy 8:5**, “As a man disciplines his son, so ... God disciplines you.”

**Proverbs 3:11-12**, “The Lord disciplines those he loves.”

See also **Hebrews 12:5-8**.

**b.** Another set of Bible passages teach that the Body of Christ is to exercise discipline. (Members of the Body are to discipline fellow members.)

**Matthew 18:15**, “If a brother sins against you, go and show him his fault.”

**1 Corinthians 5:11**, “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.”

See also **2 Thessalonians 3:6, 15**.

## 3. THE WHY OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Church discipline is to be practiced simply because the Scriptures teach it. However, a deeper reason may be found in recognizing the deserved glory which it brings to God. Rest assured that whatever brings glory to God will ultimately be for our own good as well.

**a.** In relation to the church community, we glorify God by practicing discipline with the good of the church in mind.

*(1) We must seek church purity.*

**1 Corinthians 5:1-11**, “There is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans.”

*(2) We must seek an unblemished testimony.*

**1 Corinthians 6:1-8**, “If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints? ... I say this to shame you ... one brother goes to law against another and this in front of unbelievers!”

**b.** In relation to the individual, we glorify God by practicing discipline with that member’s own good in mind.

*(1) We must seek the individual’s repentance.*

**2 Corinthians 7:8-9**, “Your sorrow led you to repentance.”

*(2) We must seek the individual’s restoration.*

**Galatians 6:1**, “You who are spiritual should restore him gently.”

#### **4. THE HOW OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE**

God disciplines His children through the admonitions and warnings of the Bible and through the circumstances of life. Within the church, a man disciplines his brother through admonition and warning (based on the admonitions of God’s Word), and through the withholding of close fellowship. This addresses the *method* of our discipline. The following principles speak to the *manner* of our discipline.

*a. Discipline with compassion.*

**Hebrews 12:6**, “The Lord disciplines those he loves.”

*b. Discipline with confidence.*

**Titus 3:10-11**, “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.”

*c. Discipline with clarity.*

**Matthew 18:15-16**, “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you ... 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.’**”

*d. Discipline with concern.*

**Matthew 18:15**, “If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.”

*e. Discipline with conviction.*

**1 Corinthians 5:11**, “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.**”

*f. Discipline with consistency.*

**2 Thessalonians 3:6**, “We command you, brothers, to keep away from **every** brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us.”

**2 Thessalonians 3:14**, “if **anyone** does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him.”

*g. Discipline with gentle correction.*

**Galatians 6:1**, “Brothers, if someone is caught in sin ... **restore** him gently.”

*h. Discipline with caution.*

**Galatians 6:1**, “You who are spiritual should restore him gently. But **watch yourself**, or you also may be tempted.”

## 5. THE **WHEN** OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

a. The first step is **admonition** – when the sin becomes known.

b. The second step is **disassociation** – after two warnings.

A question may be asked as to whether or not there are degrees or levels of discipline based on the nature of the offense. From a study of relevant Scripture texts, the answer

would seem to be “No.” A basic premise of biblical church discipline is that the purpose of all discipline is to effect repentance and restoration, not to exact payment or punishment for the sin. Specific consequences of specific sins is a separate matter. In essence, the first step of disciplinary action (admonition) is an appropriate response to any public sin. The second step (disassociation) is not punishment for certain “big” sins, but rather, it is the necessary response of the church to any persistently unrepentant brother or sister. Discipline must never be seen as an “end” (penalty) in response to sin.

Rather, it is a “means” used in the hope of bringing about the desired end (repentance and restoration). The nature of the offense may indeed vary, but refusal to repent places all offenses on the same level.

A second question is in regard to which specific matters require public excommunication from the church. This has actually been answered above. Only one specific matter requires public excommunication—an unrepentant response to repeated admonishing from the church. Matters subject to admonition are many. For example, they include idleness, divisiveness, immorality, slander, heresy, etc.)—and there is good reason to believe that the biblical record is not intended to be exhaustive in this regard (**1 Timothy 5:20**). Again, public excommunication (disassociation) is not a penalty for the most serious sins. Rather, it is a compassionate response to an unrepentant brother or sister.

## THE STEPS OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

### STEP 1 – ADMONITION

#### *The Initial Confrontation*

What? This is a private confrontation and admonition of a brother or sister concerning a public sin, or a private pattern of sin which becomes known.

Who? Admonishing a member may be the responsibility of all believers, but especially of the spiritually mature.

- a. If the sin is a personal offense, then the one who has been sinned against, has the responsibility of first going directly to the offending person.
- b. If the sin is not a personal offense, Scripture seems to place the responsibility upon those who are spiritually mature, though not necessarily restricted to official church leaders.

Why? If there is a question concerning the, actual guilt of the “accused,” a primary purpose of the first confrontation is to verify the sin. An appropriate approach might be, “John, I always want to think only the very best about you, but I have been given reason to believe that you may have been involved in \_\_\_\_\_. Is this true?”

Once the sin has been verified, the guiding purpose of the admonition must be to encourage the sinning brother or sister toward repentance and restoration.

How? Admonition must never be done in a compromising manner. Firmness is necessary, but it must be rooted in compassion and accompanied by gentleness and meekness.

When? As soon as the sin becomes known. If gossip is spreading, it must not go any further. One must go straight to the source.

### *The Second Confrontation*

What? This is a second admonition, given out of concern for both the matter of the sin and the lack of proper response to the first admonition.

Who? The indication of Scripture is that the believer who made the initial confrontation is to approach the sinning member a second time, accompanied by one or two other persons. These individuals should be spiritually mature and should most likely have some authority to represent the church.

Why? The goal of the second confrontation continues to be the repentance and restoration of the sinning member. Others are brought into the process in order to establish every matter by the testimony of two or three witnesses (**Matthew 18:16**), and to include the church, while at the same time retaining a measure of privacy.

How? The second confrontation is to be made with the same attitudes that marked the first confrontation.

When? The second approach is to be made when it becomes clear that the member has refused to repent of his sin in response to the first admonition.

## **STEP 2 – DISASSOCIATION**

What? The terms used in the New Testament suggest a breaking off of all intimate fellowship on both a personal and an ecclesiastical level. Yet, several passages imply

that allowance should be made for continued admonition and a “door” left open for repentance. Compare **2 Thessalonians 3:14-15**.

Who? This step involves the entire church and is necessarily public in nature.

Why? The guiding purpose remains set upon the goal of effecting repentance and restoration. This step is designed to communicate the seriousness with which the church regards an unrepentant heart, and the earnestness with which the church desires restoration.

How? The act of disassociation should be done with firmness but balanced by gentleness and meekness rooted in compassion.

When? After the brother or sister has refused to respond properly to previous admonitions. In essence, this decision of the church serves as one final admonition, giving opportunity for a change of heart before withdrawal of fellowship actually begins.

### **STEP 3 – RESTORATION**

**2 Corinthians 2:5-8**, “Forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.”

While this study has undertaken a difficult subject in the midst of a complex world, the essential truths are remarkably simple. Church discipline, as ordained by God and revealed in His Word, is a program for correction and not a penalty for crime. The ultimate goal for the individual offender is always to be both personal righteousness and public restoration. May God grant each of us the grace, the courage, and the compassion to be faithful in this area of obedience to Him.

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