

Biblical Confrontation and Restoration: Part 1

By Keith R. Krell

1. What is Church Discipline? Church discipline is the biblical commitment to confront, correct, and restore a Christian caught in sin (Matt 18:15-17; Gal 6:1-2; Jas 5:19-20).

2. Why is Church Discipline Necessary?

- A. *To uphold the commands of Scripture* (2 Tim 3:16-17; 1 John 2:4). A failure to exercise church discipline demonstrates a lack of obedience and belief in the authority of the Bible.
- B. *To follow the Lord's example* (Heb 12:4-11). The Lord disciplines His children (Heb 12:6). As a father delegates part of the discipline of the children to the mother, so the Lord has delegated the discipline of the church family to the church itself (1 Cor 5:12-13; 2 Cor 2:6).
- C. *To honor God's holy character* (1 Pet 1:16). God is holy and calls believers to be holy as He is holy. The church is therefore to clean out the leaven of malice and wickedness and replace it with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth (1 Cor 5:6-8). A failure to exercise discipline in the church evidences a lack of awareness of, and concern for, the holiness of God.
- D. *To preserve the testimony of the church in the world* (1 Pet 4:13-19). The world observes the behavior and life of the church. When the church acts no differently than the world, it loses its credibility (1 Pet 2:11-18; 3:8-16; 4:1-4).
- E. *To restore and reconcile the sinner* (Matt 18:15; 2 Cor 2:5-8). Reconciliation with the local assembly is not warranted until there is a turning of the heart of the one disciplined. In 2 Thessalonians 3:14, Paul wrote, "And if anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that man and do not associate with him, so that he may be put to shame," or "so that he may be turned." The discipline is not to humiliate or shame the offender but to encourage him to repent and be reconciled.
- F. *To prevent further sin and physical death in the believer* (Jas 5:19-20). Sin carries a high price tag. One such consequence is a premature death. This will result in squandered life opportunities and shame at the judgment seat of Christ.
- G. *To serve as a deterrent from sin* (1 Tim 5:20). Deterrence was the result of the discipline of Ananias and Sapphira, for "great fear came over all who heard of it" (Acts 5:5, 11).
- H. *To silence false teachers and their influence in the church* (Titus 1:10-11). If false teaching is not swiftly dealt with the entire body will be adversely affected.
- I. *To produce a healthy faith, one sound in doctrine* (1 Tim 1:18-20; Titus 1:13). In order to "fight the good fight," persevere over a lifetime, and become mature, every disciple needs another believer "speaking the truth in love" (Eph 4:15).

3. Is Church Discipline Optional?

- A. Matthew 18:15-20 and 1 Corinthians 5:1-5 proclaim the necessity of church discipline. In view of the procedure in Matthew 18:15-20, with the present imperative "go," church discipline is not merely suggested; it is required.
- B. 1 Corinthians 5:1-5 confirms its necessity in addressing a specific situation requiring church discipline. If Paul had been present in Corinth, he would already have disciplined the individual (1 Cor 5:3: "I have judged").
- C. 1 Thessalonians 5:14 requires warning the disobedient.
- D. 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15 suggests warning and, if necessary, withdrawing from a brother.
- E. 1 Timothy 5:20 advises public rebuke of those who persistently sin.
- F. Titus 3:10 commands withdrawing from the one causing division. Given these commands and exhortations, it is indisputable that church discipline is not optional but mandatory.

4. What Sins Warrant Church Discipline?

- A. Sins that have offended others and strained relationships (Matt 18:15-20; 1 Cor 6:1-8).
- B. Teaching false doctrine (1 Tim 1:20; 2 John 9-11; Rev 2:14, 20).
- C. Causing division (Rom 16:17-18; Titus 3:8-11).
- D. Moral sins (1 Cor 5:1-13; Rev 2:14-20).
- E. Compulsive sins: any sin that has “caught” the saint (Gal 6:1).
- F. Dishonesty and hypocrisy (Acts 5:1-10).
- G. Disorderly and undisciplined living (2 Thess 3:6).
- H. Disrespect of the person and work of our Lord (1 Cor 11:17-34).
- I. Various sins such as immorality, covetousness, idolatry, reviling, drunkenness, swindling (1 Cor 5:11; cf. also 6:9-10).
- J. Deeds of the flesh: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these (Gal 5:19-21; cf. 1 Cor 6:9-10; Eph 5:3-5). The last element in the list: “and things like these” indicates that the list is not exhaustive (Gal 5:21). The sins in Paul’s list, though not exhaustive, are activities that have their source in the flesh (5:16). Two other arguments support the view that the sins listed, rather than being exhaustive, are representative of sins demanding discipline. First, in 5:19, the word “which” is qualitative and is best translated “of a kind which” rather than simply “which.” Second, Paul referred to “some, any” trespass in 6:1 to demonstrate that he did not have a particular sin in mind. Paul’s list is simply representative of the multiple deeds of the flesh that plague the believer.

Biblical Confrontation and Restoration: Part 2

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Matthew 18:15-17: “If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

1. What is the Biblical Basis for Church Discipline? (Matthew 18:15-17)

- A. Context: Matthew 18 begins with Christ discussing the issue of greatness and positions in the kingdom. The disciples are told that greatness in the kingdom is dependent upon the degree of one’s humility (18:1-6). Instead of being concerned about their future position, they should be concerned about the present condition of the people to whom they minister. They are to express and demonstrate the need to minister to lost people (18:7-14), to reconcile sinning saints back to God (18:15-21), and to forgive those saints who have sinned against them (18:21-35). Ministry before God and towards man must be done in and with the attitude of humility (cf. Gal 6:1).
- B. Observations: (1) Jesus is speaking to His 12 disciples (cf. 18:1). Although the church was not born until the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), the apostles, along with the prophets, made up the foundation of the church (Eph 2:20), and any instruction given to them about the church generally could be expected to be carried over.
 - (2) Jesus is addressing the issue of a “brother” who sins against another brother (18:15). This is referring to Christian relationships. Church discipline is for believers, not unbelievers.
 - (3) In Matthew 18:15, Jesus uses the word “sin” (*hamartia*) which refers to any unrighteous deed done against God or another person. In this context, the sin is a clear violation of one of God’s standards. It is a single act, or pattern of sin, that is not a matter open for debate, unlike that which should be labeled a non-essential issue (see Rom 14:1-12).
 - (4) The word translated “church” (*ekklesia*) may refer to a generic assembly of people (18:17). However, the principles set forth in Matthew 18:15-17 apply to any assembly of God’s people, including the local church. While it is unlikely that the disciples understood *ekklesia* to refer to a local church when they heard these words, it seems that Jesus was looking ahead to a New Testament assembly. This is the second and last occurrence of the word *ekklesia* in the Gospels. It is used in a different sense here from that in Matthew 16:18. In the earlier occurrence it has reference to the universal body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13). Here it speaks of a local body of believers gathered together as a fellowship. Both times the Lord uses *ekklesia* He is anticipating the future, when the church age would intervene between His first and second comings. Another factor indicates that the Lord is looking ahead to a new age. In Matthew 18:20, He states, “For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.” This clearly implies a time when He will be absent from them, a time in which the church would exist.
 - (5) Jesus is clear that we are to “tell” (an imperative) the church when a sinning saint refuses to listen to two attempts of biblical confrontation (18:17). The text does not indicate that this disclosure should be limited to the leadership of the church; it simply states that the message should be communicated to the church. Since there are no qualifying markers limiting this message, one is forced to conclude that “the church” means the whole body of believers in that setting (cf. 2 Cor 2:6; see also Rom 16:17; 2 Thess 3:6-15).
 - (6) This passage does not elaborate on what it means for the church to treat an unrepentant brother as “a Gentile and a tax-gatherer” (18:17). Yet, in Jesus’ day, Gentiles were considered as outsiders with regard to the divine blessings promised Israel. A Gentile was not permitted to pass beyond the outer court into the sacred confines of the temple. The penalty for doing so was death! We also know that Jewish tax-gatherers, like Zacchaeus (Luke 19:2–10), were regarded as traitors

who served Rome at the expense of their countrymen. They were regarded as apostates, outcasts from Jewish religious life. This indicates that Jesus was saying that the unrepentant saint should be regarded as Gentiles and tax-gatherers—outside the circle of God’s people. It also seems to demand that an unrepentant saint is excluded from church membership, service, fellowship, offering, and communion. No longer is he/she to share in the activities and privileges of being a part of the church fellowship.

(7) Christ calls a decision to exclude someone from the fellowship of the body “binding” and “loosing” (18:18). The idea of binding and loosing has the force of forbidding and permitting. So how do church leaders know what to forbid and what to permit among the brethren? The Scriptures must be the guide. When a brother or sister is excluded from fellowship, it must be on the basis of a sin that he/she is involved in, that violates God’s Word, from which they refuse to repent.

2. What are the Procedures for Church Discipline?

(1) Before confronting another believer, be sure the sin is an offense that calls for confrontation and potential discipline. Proverbs 19:11 says, “A man’s discretion makes him slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook a transgression.”

(2) Remember how you too have sinned in the past. Discipline must be done in a spirit of humility, gentleness, and patience, looking to ourselves so that we will not be tempted (Gal 6:1-2; 2 Tim 2:24-25). Yet, balance this with the realization that any Spirit-filled believer can and must take steps to confront a sinning believer (cf. 1 Thess 5:14 with Gal 6:1).

(3) Bring the matter before the Lord in prayer, before the confrontation takes place (1 Sam 8:6).

(4) Don’t procrastinate. The longer the delay, the more difficult the sin can become (Heb 3:13).

(5) Don’t discuss the situation with others until you have talked to the sinning believer privately. We must guard and protect the person and the flock from rumors and a slanderous tongue (Prov 6:19b; 10:19; 11:13; 18:8, 21; 20:19).

(6) Begin by expressing your genuine appreciation for the person and their good qualities to show you are genuinely concerned about their welfare. Then bring up the matter which is of concern.

(7) In some situations the sin is apparent and there is no question, but we must allow for the possibility that we have misjudged or have wrong information. We must listen to the other person’s side of the story and seek the facts, in the interest of truth and fairness.

(8) If the person fails to respond, he/she must be warned that you will have to involve one or two other believers and return to deal with the problem (Matt 18:16).

(9) If the person still fails to respond, he/she must be warned that you will have to bring it before the church and her leadership (Matt 18:17).

The third step of discipline is often viewed as punishment designed to isolate, ostracize, or shun the unrepentant. But this is not the case. This final step of discipline is a last resort that means you treat the person as a nonbeliever, because he/she is not walking as a believer. It means you love such a person as Jesus loved the tax collectors and sinners. It means you reach out to him/her in witness, but not to relate to him/her as a member of the body of Christ. As strong as this disciplinary step is, it is intended to bring about repentance. This step must be motivated by love and exercised in such a way as to encourage the possibility of genuine repentance and restoration.

Biblical Confrontation and Restoration: Part 3

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1. Who initiates the process of church discipline? Peter calls believers “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (1 Pet 2:9a). Paul says that God gave the church apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor/teachers “for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ” (Eph 4:11-12). These Scriptures reveal that every believer has great worth and great responsibility. Therefore, it is the duty of the local church leadership to encourage and train individual believers in biblical confrontation. A pastor or elder is brought into the confrontation process in step three (Matt 18:17: “tell it to the church”). This means that concerned believers should carry out the first two steps (see Matt 18:15-16).

2. How quickly should the church discipline process be carried out? In progressing through the stages of church discipline, ample time for repentance and change must be allowed at every step. The duration between the various stages depends on the spiritual maturity displayed by the responsiveness of the offender. If the offender is humble, contrite, and responsive, the confronter(s) should seek to work with the individual. If the offender is defiant, rebellious, and unresponsive, the steps should be carried out more quickly. Too much time suggests a lenient attitude. Too little time suggests a punitive approach rather than one striving for repentance. Direction by the Spirit of God is essential in making such decisions (cf. Matt 18:18-20). Note: The church must trust the wisdom of the believers and elders that are intimately involved in the process.

3. What does repentance look like in church discipline? The word translated “repentance” means “a change of mind.” This “change of mind” should result in a change in deeds and attitudes (see Luke 3:8; Acts 26:20). In a case of biblical confrontation and discipline, a biblically repentant person will:

- A. Freely acknowledge his sin (Prov 28:13a; 1 John 1:9);
- B. Cease the activity for which he was disciplined, or at least seek help, if it’s a case of life dominating patterns (Prov 28:13b; Gal 6:1-2; Jas 5:19-20);
- C. Make restitution and/or ask for forgiveness from those hurt, as it is applicable (Matt 5:23-24; Phlm 18-19);
- D. Demonstrate a genuine change of heart, a real concern and godly sorrow over his actions, not in order to be forgiven but because of the harm caused to the glory of God and the hurt caused others (Ps 51:17; 2 Cor 7:8-11); and
- E. Begin to manifest the fruit of the Spirit and a concern for the things of Christ (Gal 5:22-23).

4. What is the church’s responsibility when the “offender” leaves the church in the midst of the discipline process? Is there no more responsibility to continue? The New Testament does not specifically address this scenario. The reason is obvious: When the New Testament was being written, a person undergoing discipline could not flee and join another church. Today, things are quite different. We have countless denominations and churches on every block, so a person can slip away and evade the discipline of the local church. This short-circuits the process that God has expressly laid out. Therefore, logic demands that the disciplining church should still be told of the offender’s refusal to be disciplined. It may also be appropriate to contact the church that the offender has begun to attend to update them on the situation. Sometimes a person will refuse discipline in the church where the offense occurred but accept discipline and help in another church. The main goal is to work toward the recovery of the person while honoring God’s revealed method of administration. In the meantime, Paul’s admonition in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15 to continue to warn the offender, avoid intimate association, and seek reconciliation must be upheld. If we fail to carry out the process, the believer will remain out of fellowship with his/her former local church (hence out of fellowship with God), and the church will not learn to properly “fear God.”

5. What does a relationship look like when the final step of discipline has been exercised? Every case of discipline is unique and must be treated as such. Yet, the Bible provides some helpful principles:

- A. We must love the offender as Jesus loved tax collectors and sinners. This means to reach out for the purpose of turning the sinner from the error of his way (Jas 5:19-20). Whenever you see the offender, greet the person in a spirit of Christian love and concern. Inquire about his/her welfare. Then raise the question, "Have you had a change of mind and heart about your _____?" If the answer is "No," exhort the believer to repent and return to the Lord. This ensures that the sin and discipline are not being avoided or swept under the carpet. As you leave the conversation, let the brother/sister know that you care and are praying for him/her.
- B. We must not relate to the offender as a member of the body of Christ. This means he/she is not to be included for the purpose of Christian fellowship or ministry. The reason is to follow the biblical teaching to reinforce the consequence of his sin.

6. How should the church respond if the offender repents? Three instructions from Paul in 2 Corinthians 2:7-8, highlight believers' responsibilities to a repentant sinner: "forgive," "comfort," and "reaffirm...love." To ensure that spiritual healing results from church discipline, the offender should be publicly told of the church's forgiveness. The church then must reach out to the restored believer with support and comfort. He/she is to be encouraged and challenged to move on. This means including him/her, drawing them close, doing for them that which will aid their growth and complete recovery. This would include encouraging him/her to get involved in ministry (Luke 22:31-32).

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