

Biblical Church Discipline

CGYG Program

June 24, 2005

Cases for Discussion

- In groups of 5-6, discuss what you would do in each of the following cases with respect to church discipline
- Support your position from Scripture

Case #1

- Ken has been an active member of your congregation for years. He's always held some views that seemed a little different from others in the church, but lately, he's been increasingly vocal about his newfound conviction that Jesus is not God after all, just a good man who died as an example for others to follow. You've expressed your concerns to him about these views as have others in your fellowship, sometimes individually, sometimes in larger groups, but he seems convinced that he's right.

Case #2

- Sam is a new member of your church who you've been mentoring. One day, he calls you at work and asks if he can meet up with you. As you meet over lunch, he explains that he stole a couple hundred dollars from work last week, and that it's been bothering him a lot. He wants to know what he should do, so you tell him that he needs to make restitution and ask God and his boss for forgiveness. You pray with him to ask God's forgiveness, and he agrees to tell his boss and return the money right after lunch, even though he's afraid he might lose his job. As he leaves, he asks you not to tell anyone in the church because he's already embarrassed enough as it is...

Case #3

- One of your friends in the fellowship pulls you aside after fellowship one night to tell you that he's seeing someone. After finding out who she is, you ask which church she attends. "Actually, she's not a Christian," is the answer. You express your reservations, but he's ready for them... finally, after a long discussion, he says, "Look, I know it's not right, but I just want to do this anyways. Just don't tell anyone, OK?"

Overview: The Call to Purity

- Life of purity has always been a requirement of God's people
 - Throughout the Bible, people of God were called to a life characterized by distinctive purity, to be a people 'set apart' for God

“I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy.” (Lev 11:44a)
 - OT: God's chosen people were to reflect His holiness by their way of living, worship and beliefs

“For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.” (Deut 7:6)
 - God promised His covenant faithfulness, but expected Israel to obey His Word and follow His Law

“Be sure to keep the commands of the LORD your God and the stipulations and decrees he has given you.” (Deut 6:17)

Overview: The Call to Purity

- The call for purity and holiness is the same for the New Testament church
 - The church is described as the people of God, visible to the world by their purity of life and integrity of testimony

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” – 1 Pet 2:9-10
 - In maintaining an inward reality and outward display of holiness, God would use His church to draw unbelievers to Himself

“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 Pet 2:11-12

Overview: Discipline & Purity

- The Bible is clear that God disciplines His people in order to purify and cleanse them for a life of holiness...
 - So that His glory would be manifested

“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 Pet 2:12)
 - Out of love for His own people

“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.*” (Heb 12:5-6)
 - To demonstrate their legitimacy in being people of God

“Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? *If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons.*” (Heb 12:7-8)

Church Discipline - Historical Practice

- Protestants practiced church discipline from the start, up to around the late 1800s

- Basis of discipline: the ministry of the Keys

Matthew 16:19, with Matthew 18:18

“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (Matt 16:19)

“Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (Matt 18:18)

Church Discipline - Historical Practice

- Protestants historically have understood the Keys of the kingdom to be the preaching of the Gospel and church discipline / excommunication
 - Power of the keys given to the Church (not to the Pope)
- Heidelberg Catechism (1563)
 - Questions 83-85 deal with Church discipline
 - Q83.** What are the keys of the kingdom of heaven? [Matt 16:19].
 - Answer.** The preaching of the holy gospel, and Christian discipline, or excommunication out of the Christian church; by these two, the kingdom of heaven is opened to believers, and shut against unbelievers.

Church Discipline - Historical Practice

- Protestants historically have understood the Keys of the kingdom to be the preaching of the Gospel and church discipline / excommunication

John Calvin (1509-1564):

“But the church binds him whom it excommunicates - not that it casts him into everlasting ruin and despair, but because it condemns his life and morals, and already warns him of his condemnation unless he should repent. It looses him when it receives into communion, for it makes him a sharer of the unity which is in Christ Jesus.” - John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book 4, Chapter 11 (1559)

Church Discipline - Historical Practice

- Protestants historically have understood the Keys of the kingdom to be the preaching of the Gospel and church discipline / excommunication

Martin Luther (1483-1546):

“Both these keys are extremely necessary in Christendom, so we can never thank God enough for them.... For the dear Man, the faithful Bishop of our souls, Jesus Christ, is well aware that his beloved Christians are frail, that the devil, the flesh, and the world would tempt them unceasingly and in many ways, and that at times they would fall into sin. Therefore, he has given us this remedy, the key which binds, so that we might not remain too confident in our sins, arrogant, barbarous, and without God, and the key which looses, that we should not despair in our sins.” - Luther, The Keys (1530)

Church Discipline - Historical Practice

- Historically, Protestants therefore have understood that church discipline is a critical mark of the true Church

Belgic Confession (1561):

“The marks by which the true Church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if she maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin; in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church.”

Church Discipline - Historical Practice

- Protestants have understood that church discipline is a critical mark of the true Church

John Calvin, Institutes, Book 4, Chapter 12:

“But because some persons, in their hatred of discipline, recoil from its very name, let them understand this: if no society, indeed, no house which has even a small family, can be kept in proper condition without discipline, it is much more necessary in the church, whose condition should be as ordered as possible... Therefore, all who desire to remove discipline or to hinder its restoration, whether they do this deliberately or out of ignorance, are surely contributing to the ultimate dissolution of the church.”

Church Discipline - Historical Practice

- As a result, many major Protestant creeds and confessions of faith include instructions about church discipline

For example...

- Westminster Confession of Faith (1646)
 - The ‘mother of all Reformed confessions’
 - Chapter XXX - Of Church Censures
- The Cambridge Platform (1648)
 - New England Congregationalist statement of faith
 - Chapter XIV - Of Excommunication and other censures - detailed statement of church discipline, including reasons, procedures, punishments, restoration process, etc.

Church Discipline - Historical Practice

- In North America, church discipline was also practiced, up to about the late 19th century
 - Some had regular ‘days of discipline’ to deal with the wayward, heal breaches in fellowship, excommunicate the unrepentant, etc.

“Southern Baptists excommunicated nearly 2 percent of their membership every year... To an antebellum Baptist, a church without discipline would hardly have counted as a church.” -G.A. Wills, *Democratic Religion* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1996), p.32-33
 - Yet, churches grew at 2x the population rate - historical demonstration that church discipline is not ‘anti-evangelistic’

Church Discipline - Historical Practice

- Historically, church discipline was applied to a wide range of matters, not just “more serious” ones
 - No sphere of life was considered outside the scope of the congregation’s accountability
 - Example of Capitol Hill Baptist Church
 - M. Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004, Mark Seven: Biblical Church Discipline)
 - Southern Baptist Church, founded 1878
 - Founding documents include explicit instructions on procedures for church discipline, after the pattern of Matthew 18:15-17, up to and including excommunication, at which point the person would be cut off from membership and communion

Church Discipline - Historical Practice

- Capitol Hill Baptist Church: Just causes for church discipline:
 - “For any outward violations of the moral law.
 - For pursuing any course which may, in the judgment of the church, be disreputable to it as a body.
 - For absenting themselves habitually without good reasons, from the church at the seasons set apart for public worship.
 - For holding and advocating doctrines opposed to those set forth [in the statement of faith].
 - For neglecting or refusing to contribute toward defraying the expenses of the church according to their several abilities
 - For treating the acts and doings of the church contemptuously, or pursuing such a course as is calculated to produce discord.
 - For divulging to persons not interested, what is done in the meetings of the church.
 - For pursuing any course of conduct unbecoming good citizens and professing Christians.”

Church Discipline - Historical Practice

■ Example of Capitol Hill Baptist Church:

- Early church records show that 2 (of 80) members excommunicated in 1880, including one of the founding members, for separating from his wife
- Non-attendance was considered one of the most sinister of sins, because it often veiled all the other sins

Church Discipline - Historical Practice

- Up to late 1800s, church discipline was considered a critical mark of the church, and was widely practiced

“...a church without discipline would hardly have counted as a church.” - Wills, Democratic Religion, p.33

The Purpose of Church Discipline

1. *To glorify God* by ensuring obedience to His Word for the maintenance of proper church government

- God intends various types of discipline to be part of church life to conform us to His Word

“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.” (Rom 16:17)

“And we urge you, brothers, *warn those who are idle*, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. (1 Thess 5:14)

“For there are many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision group... *rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith...*” (Titus 1:10, 13b)

The Purpose of Church Discipline

2. *To reclaim offenders* and to restore them to righteousness

- Goal is always the restoration of the offender
- To demonstrate the severity of persistent, unrepented sin, forewarning them of future condemnation, so as to ‘call them back to salvation’

“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)

“...hand this man over to Satan, so that the *sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.*” (1 Cor 5:5)

“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.” (Gal 6:1)

The Purpose of Church Discipline

3. To *maintain the purity of the church*, and of Christian worship
 - To avoid profaning the sacrament of the Lord's Supper

“Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be *guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.*” (1 Cor 11:27)
 - We must maintain purity of Christ's visible church to the full extent of our knowledge and power

“Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are. *For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.* Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.” (1 Cor 5:6-8)

The Purpose of Church Discipline

4. To *vindicate the integrity and honour of Christ*

- By remaining faithful and obedient to His principles

“The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything.” (2 Cor 2:9)

The Purpose of Church Discipline

5. To *deter others from sin*

- By exercising discipline upon a sinner who is unrepentent, the visible consequences are meant to deter others from making the same choice to sin

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

- By the faithful practice of discipline, “vice is expressed and virtue nourished” (The Scots Confession – 1560)

The Purpose of Church Discipline

6. To prevent giving cause for God to ***set Himself against a local church***

To the church at Thyatira:

“Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. I will strike her children dead. *Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.*” (Rev 2:20-23)

The Means of Church Discipline

- God Himself brings about discipline (Heb 12:5-6)
- Also uses the church as a vessel for bringing about His discipline as He deals with believers
 - “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven...”: How church disciplines is foretaste of the judgment that an impenitent sinner will face from God, in heaven
 - Church must act in accordance and obedience to God’s Word without hypocrisy nor favouritism

The Means of Church Discipline

1. Admonition (private or public)

- “To put in mind to do a duty; to charge authoritatively, to exhort, to urge”
- Always with a tacit reference to the danger or penalty of failure
- Scripture itself is a form of admonition (1 Cor 10:11)

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.” (Col 3:16)

“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” (Heb 10:24-25)

The Means of Church Discipline

2. Reprove, rebuke, convince, convict

- Greek word, meaning “...to rebuke another with such effectual wielding of the victorious arms of the truth, as to bring him, if not to a confession, yet at least to a conviction, of his sin...”
- Christ uses this word in Rev 3:19... “Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent.”
- Thus, Biblical rebuke is an act of love

The Means of Church Discipline

- Important that Christians practice loving admonition and rebuke with each other regularly
- Gentle rebuke can prevent the offender from falling into more serious sin
- Proper source is always the Word of God
 - Rebuke must be soundly and clearly Scriptural, not human ideas
 - With great humility and without hypocrisy, believers must 'speak the truth in love' (Eph 4:15)
- If the offender is impenitent, the next severity of Biblical discipline is necessary: excommunication

The Means of Church Discipline

3. Excommunication

- To exclude the offender from the church and all privileges of membership (e.g. partaking of Communion)
- Most severe form of Biblical church discipline
- Not to be excluded from public gatherings where the Word is preached and taught, however

“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.*” (Matt 18:17)

“But now I am writing 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...* “Expel the wicked man from among you.” (1 Cor 5:11,13b)

The Means of Church Discipline

3. Excommunication (continued)

- A person who repents of sin and seeks God's cleansing and pardon is to be fully welcomed back into the fellowship of the church

"The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him." (2 Cor 2:6-8)

- Church's responsibility is to continue praying for those removed from the fellowship that God would bring them to repentance

When is Church Discipline Necessary?

1. When Christian love is violated by serious personal offences

- Christ prescribes the method of discipline in such cases in Matthew 18:15-18

“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. I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

(Matt 18:15-18)

- Though such offences may begin in secret, must ultimately result in public censure if the offender stubbornly refuses to repent

When is Church Discipline Necessary?

1. When Christian love is violated by serious personal offences (continued)

- Matthew 18 refers primarily to one who's sinned personally against you, but the principles of confrontation and escalation can be extrapolated to areas of church discipline
- Impenitence is Biblical cause for going through the steps of discipline...

Step I: "... go and show him his fault, just between the two of you." → Individual

Step II: "... take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'" → Bring several witnesses

Step III: "... tell it to the church..." → Public censure

Step IV: "... treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector." → Excommunication

When is Church Discipline Necessary?

2. When Christian unity is violated by those who form divisive factions which destroy the peace of the church

- Such persons are to be watched, rebuked and, if necessary, removed from the church

“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.*” (Rom 16:17)

“*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)

When is Church Discipline Necessary?

3. When Christian law is violated by those living scandalous lives
 - These are those that “...claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good.” (Titus 1:16)
 - Those who live in habitual violation of Biblical morality, and refuse to repent when admonished and rebuked
 - Sinning vs. ‘living in sin’

When is Church Discipline Necessary?

4. When Christian truth is violated by those who reject the essential doctrines of the faith

“Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction...so that by following them you may fight the good fight, holding on to faith and a good conscience. 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 Tim 1:18-20)

“If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is *conceited and understands nothing*. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been *robbed of the truth* and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain.” (1 Tim 6:3-5)

– Refers more specifically to those who knowingly reject any of those doctrines that the church considers essential and fundamental

Decline of Church Discipline

- The practice of church discipline has undergone widespread decline, at least in North American churches, since the late 1800s
 - Not many churches today are obedient to Scripture where it comes to church discipline today

Decline of Church Discipline

- Why the decline? Many factors, including:
 1. Decreased attention to theological orthodoxy and to God's Word as the infallible guide to Christian living
 - unpopular passages explained away or ignored altogether
 2. Shifts in the culture and within churches towards relativism and moral individualism
 - erosion of the Bible as the absolute standard - "that may be right for you, but it may not be right for me" mentality
 - Church viewed not as the Body of Christ, in which every member is accountable to all the others, but as a voluntary association of autonomous individuals - "Don't condemn me, because I'll leave if you're not nice to me."

Decline of Church Discipline

- Why the decline? Many factors, including:
 3. Increasing focus on pleasing man rather than on glorifying God as the central objective of the church
 - Fear of confronting or offending people, even if they may need confronting
 - Focus on being “seeker-sensitive” - trying to make the church attractive to the world by becoming like the world
 - confronting sin felt to be bad for ‘evangelism & outreach’
 - sin downplayed, in favor of ‘love’
 - more recently, emphasis on ‘felt needs’ --> sin reframed in pop psychological terms - wounds from a bad childhood, poor choices, etc. - sinners become victims in need of affirmation, rather than correction

The Urgency of Purity

- The church needs to return God's imperative to pursue holiness at all costs, to centre our worship and our lives not around our own desires, but around God's Word

“Biblical church discipline is simple obedience to God and a simple confession that we need help. We cannot live the Christian life alone. Our purpose in church discipline is positive for the individual disciplined, for other Christians as they see the real danger of sin, for the health of the church as a whole, and for the corporate witness of the church to those outside. Most of all, our holiness is to reflect the holiness of God. It should mean something to be a member of the church, not for our pride's sake but for God's name's sake. Biblical church discipline is a mark of a healthy church.” – Mark Dever

The Urgency of Purity

“The identity of the church as the People of God is to be evident in its pure confession of Christ, its bold testimony to the Gospel, and its moral holiness before the watching world. Nothing less will mark the church as the true vessel of the Gospel.” - Albert Mohler

Sources

- Wray, D.E. “Biblical Church Discipline”, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1978
- Mohler, A. “The Disappearance of Church Discipline – How can we recover?” (Internet article), www.albertmohler.com
- Dever, M. “Nine Marks of a Healthy Church”