

CHURCH DISCIPLINE

by David E. Moss

Christians sin. They sin against their own bodies (I Corinthians 6:18). They sin against each other and they sin against Christ (I Corinthians 8:12).

But it is Christ's desire that the Church be pure. He gave Himself to redeem it from all iniquity, to purify it unto Himself as a peculiar people (Titus 2:14), to sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the Word, and to present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing (Ephesians 5:26-27).

For this reason God gave extensive instruction in the Bible about dealing with Christians who have sinned. His design was to build within the church a self-cleansing mechanism. It is this mechanism that we call "church discipline."

1. Current Problems Regarding Church Discipline

One fault in churches today is the failure to discipline. Sin has been euphemized. Things for which we once held people responsible, now are either consequences of victimization or merely alternative lifestyles. In addition to this, many churches have subscribed to the sensitivity movement of society at large. The rule is that you must not do anything to make another person feel inferior, or discriminated against, or labeled in any adverse way. Furthermore, many churches are desperate for members. As a result, they would rather overlook the "private" lives of their parishioners than risk chasing them away by the disciplinary process.

Another failure in churches is to adopt a "one size fits all" policy regarding the disciplinary process. While all sin is equally serious, not all sins require the same response in order to resolve them. There are many contexts in the New Testament that address these issues. Unfortunately, some insist upon lumping them all into the mold of Matthew 18:15-17 where Jesus outlined a means to deal with a brother that had trespassed. Dealing with all sins identically can be potentially volatile to an entire congregation. It is a toss up as to which is worse: not disciplining sin at all, or disciplining sin irresponsibly.

2. What Does Matthew 18:15-17 Really Teach?

Matthew chapter 18 is only one of numerous places that instruction is given for dealing with those who sin. It is important to understand the specific purpose of this instruction so that it is not utilized for actions that do not apply. Other types of sins are assigned different means of discipline in other places in the Scriptures.

In Matthew 18:15-17, the sin involves a personal trespass. Please note that no Scripture anywhere suggests that this process applies to any other kind of infraction. If any passage parallels this one it is Galatians 6:1-9 where again the situation is specified as one person dealing with a matter involving only one other person.

The initial response in Matthew 18 is a personal confrontation. The offended person is to approach the offender privately. If the matter is resolved, this is as far as it goes. No one else needs to be involved.

Only if the matter is not resolved, does the offended person begin to bring others into the situation. A second confrontation, in this case, includes one or two others. The purpose of these "witnesses" is to observe the conversation between the two parties. They may not necessarily be witnesses of the original infraction. They become, however, witnesses of the attempt to restore fellowship. If the matter is resolved, it stops at this level and no one else needs to know about it.

If the matter is not resolved after the first and second confrontations, it may be taken before the church. Keep in mind that when Jesus gave this instruction, the New Testament Church had not yet been started. The term "church" was still a generic term and had not yet assumed its exalted usage as the designation of the Body of Christ. It is more likely a reference here to the assembly designated in Israel for the administration of justice. The Elders of the Synagogue had the power of excommunication over their local constituents. In Jerusalem, there were two lower Sandhedrin courts, each consisting of 23 members; and there was one high Sandhedrin court consisting of 71 members. The offended person could go before these official assemblies, undoubtedly beginning at the lowest level and present his case including those who witnessed his attempt at reconciliation. Excommunication is not even necessarily implied as the result. Verse 17 merely says that if the offending person neglects to hear the church, he shall be to "thee" (singular - meaning the offended person alone) as an heathen man and a publican. The judging assembly may choose to deal with the individual further regarding his obstinance, but no official action is specified in the text.

The general interpretation of the Matthew 18 prescription is that an unresponsive person when confronted with their sin (any sin) should be dragged before the full assembly of a New Testament local church. He is then publicly embarrassed, admonished and banished from the fellowship. But nothing in the actual text supports such an interpretation.

3. A Survey of Church Disciplinary Actions

I CORINTHIANS 5

In this passage, six things are identified as public sins that need to be dealt with firmly and decisively: fornication, covetousness, idolatry, railing, drunkenness, and extortion (vs. 11). The public nature of these things is indicated in verse one where fornication was "reported commonly."

It is never suggested that this public sin be first dealt with privately as the personal offense was in Matthew 18. Instead, very direct instruction was given that the offending parties were to be removed from the assembly immediately (vs. 2,13), delivered unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh (vs. 5), purged from the lump (vs. 7), and not kept company with (vs. 9,11).

The minimum goal was to preserve the spirit of the offender in the day of the Lord Jesus (vs. 5). In the follow up passage of II Corinthians 2:5-8, it is clarified that the punishment was intended to turn into repentance on the part of the offender, and forgiveness and the confirming of love by the church.

II THESSALONIANS 3

Here is a case of disorderly conduct. Scripturally this means that instruction had been given from the Lord on how to live the Christian life honorably but was disobeyed (vs. 6,12-14). There are two things suggested in this text as a response. Those who walked disorderly by failing to work, becoming busybodies instead, were to be commanded and exhorted (vs. 11-12). Those who were blatantly disobeying the Word of God were to be removed from fellowship (vs. 6, 14).

It appears that this may be a two stage process but this is not specified in the text. Rather, it may be two different types of infraction. Note that personal conflict is not involved, nor is gross public sin. This is the sin of disobeying Scriptural "traditions" (vs. 6) concerning the Christian life.

II TIMOTHY 2:24-26

Another kind of fault described in these verses is the "opposition of self." It involves the rejection of truth and is undoubtedly related to the disorderly conduct described in II Thessalonians 3. However, there is also a clear difference.

The offender is described as being in the snare of the devil. This is, therefore, a rescue effort more than a disciplinary one. All striving is to be eliminated and gentleness is to govern ones approach. The goal is to bring the guilty party to a point of repentance so that they will acknowledge the truth. Herein can be appreciated the teaching of Jesus that the truth can make you free.

GALATIANS 6:1

This is the case of a man who is overtaken in a fault. The verb "overtaken" includes the element of surprise. It is also in the passive voice. These things suggest that the guilty party was not willful in his fault but was drawn into sin by the influence of others.

This verse teaches that assistance to a person in this situation is purely restorative and should be done with a meek and cautious attitude.

I TIMOTHY 5:19-20

The subjects of this particular disciplinary action are Elders. The context begins in verse 17 and runs, at least, to verse 22, all of which is addressing matters concerning Elders.

It is the Elder that sins that is supposed to be rebuked before all. The reason is their visible position. Because of the significance of the office, there are lofty qualifications for those who would serve in it. It follows that accountability corresponds to the scope of the responsibility.

Note that in all the contexts regarding church discipline, this is the only one that specifies rebuke in front of the entire assembly.

TITUS 3:10

Finally, we consider instruction for dealing with heretics. A heretic is one who adopts a different doctrinal viewpoint, thus causing confusion or division.

The heretic is given the benefit of two admonitions before he is rejected, or ejected from fellowship.

4. A Comparison of the Different Types of Discipline

To put this all in perspective, the following is a brief comparison of the different types of faults and the forms of discipline that correspond to them.

Situation	Response
Personal conflict	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Private meeting 2. Second meeting with witnesses 3. Hearing before judicial assembly
Commonly reported gross sin	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. First remove from assembly 2. Have no company 3. Confirm Love
Disorderly conduct by disobeying Scripture	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Command and exhort 2. Withdraw
Opposition of self	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Teach the truth
Overtaken in a fault	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Restore
Elders that sin	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Rebuke before all
Heretics	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Admonish two times 2. Reject

Conclusion

Church discipline is multi-faceted because sin is multi-faceted. God set the precedent in the Old Testament by prescribing different consequences for different violations of the Law. So it is today. It is important that we exercise discipline within the church, but it must be done responsibly.