

The Church's Role in Discipline

Part I

Selected Scripture

Introduction

Over the years, I have been asked by many people if they should be baptized again, now that they are living a more dedicated life for Christ. I have answered, "No," simply because baptism is a one time event. In fact, baptism is the ordinance of *identification*.

By God's grace, He also gave us an ordinance of *rededication*, which is communion. Every time we approach the communion table, we are called to purity; to holiness; to confession. According to the word of God, the Lord's table, or communion, is a time of reflection, confession, evaluation, and discipline.

In I Corinthians, chapter 11, verses 26 through 32, Paul wrote,

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord.

But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly.

For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep.

But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged.

But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world.

Earlier, in chapter 5 of I Corinthians, Paul confronted the church for its refusal to deal with a sinning, unrepentant believer whose sin had become public. And, by the way, the more public the awareness of sin, the more publicly the church should

deal with the unrepentant sinner. Look at I Corinthians, chapter 5, verses 1 through 3.

It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife.

You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst.

For I, on my part, though absent in the body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present.

Why would a church refuse to deal with an unrepentant, sinning individual? What kept the church in Corinth from dealing with this issue? What keeps the church from dealing with it today?!

Viewpoints That Inhibit Discipline

Let me give several viewpoints that inhibit church discipline from occurring.

It is not loving to privately or publicly denounce a sinning individual

1. One viewpoint is that it is not loving to privately or publicly denounce a sinning individual.

The opposite of this is true. Hebrews, chapter 12, verse 6a, tells us,

For those whom the Lord loves, He disciplines . . .

The loving thing is to reprove; to warn the sinner. The unloving thing is to ignore their entanglement and act as if nothing is happening.

Let me give as an example, a man who walks past his neighbor's house and observes that it is on fire. The loving thing to do would be to wake the family – bang on the door, jump up and down and shout until they awaken and rush out to safety. The most unloving, self-centered thing to do would be to

walk by without any care for the peril of those in the house.

Discipline is the action of a church that attempts to awaken the believer who is being lulled into the snare of sin. It is loving, firm, and passionate in its attempt to rescue those who are wandering.

The exposure of sinners causes church problems

2. A second viewpoint among churches that gloss over sin and ignore the issue of discipline is that the exposure of sinners causes the church problems.

Most church bodies say, “Why go to all the trouble? Besides, they’ll just get mad at us!”

The truth is, to refuse to deal with sin brings a loss of power to the church and a loss of purity within the church. The phrase, “. . . a little leaven leavens the whole lump . . .,” comes directly from the text in I Corinthians, chapter 5, verse 6!

When the church refuses to honor God’s character and reputation by removing unrepentant sinners from their midst, greater problems are created; serious and grave problems. There is a loss of purpose.

One author commented that the church has become a religion of support, not salvation; help, rather than holiness; a circle of spiritual equals, rather than an authoritative church . . . group affirmation of self is at the top of the church’s agenda, which is why some of the least demanding churches are now in the greatest demand.

It is judgmental to discipline a sinner

3. A third reason believer’s ignore the sin in other people’s lives is because they view confrontation or discipline as judgmental.

Those who hold this viewpoint say, “Besides, didn’t Jesus say, in Matthew, chapter 7, verse 1, ‘judge not, lest you be judged’?”

Turn back to chapter 11 of I Corinthians and notice how often the word, “judge” appears. In the text we read:

- verse 11:29a – “For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself . . .”
- verse 11:29b – “. . . if he does not judge the body rightly.”
- verse 11:31a – “But if we judged ourselves rightly, . . .”

- verse 11:31b – “. . . we would not be judged.”
- verse 11:32a – “But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord . . .”

The truth is, Matthew, chapter 7, is taken out of context. Jesus was condemning the judgmentalism of the Pharisees who, in their arrogance, went around looking for the specks in everyone else’s eye, while ignoring the log protruding from their own eye!

Judgmentalism is wrong. Judging sin is not.

In fact, Paul would write, in I Corinthians, chapter 2, verse 15a (NKJV),

. . . he who is spiritual judges all things . . .

Sin is the business of the person committing the sin alone

4. Another viewpoint states that, “what is done in private is personal . . . the sin is the business of the person doing the sinning, alone.”

That statement is probably one of the most common politically correct statements today. Dear friends, *what is viewed as politically correct is often biblically corrupt.*

Paul publicly stated the sinfulness of one church member who had already left the fold when he wrote, in II Timothy, chapter 4, verse 10a,

. . . Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone . . .

In I Corinthians, chapter 5, Paul stated that the immoral man should be dealt with by the church. Sin affects everyone!

Christ Himself commanded in Matthew, chapter 18, that those who are dealing with an unrepentant person are to eventually reach the point where they inform the church. He said, in verse 17,

If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen to even the church, let him be to you as [an unbeliever].

So Paul commands the church to discipline unrepentant believers.

Benefits of Discipline in the Church

What happens when the church obeys this command and deals with a lack of repentance?

The honor of God's name and cause is preserved

1. The church preserves the honor of God's name and cause.

A holy God is to be introduced to the world by a people pursuing holy living.

The ultimate form of discipline, which is exclusion from the body, is not enacted upon every believer who sins, simply because they sinned, right? In fact, if we disciplined everyone out of the church who sinned, who would be there the next Sunday?

The true church is not made up of believers who have never sinned; it is made up of believers who sin and then repent. Discipline is reserved for those who are unwilling to repent and return to a pursuit of holiness. Their sin becomes public and known. That is the case in I Corinthians, chapter 5, where the sin of immorality had been committed.

When the church confronts sin, it honors and exalts the holy name of God.

The doctrinal integrity of the church is insured

2. When the church obeys, it insures the doctrinal integrity of the church.

Paul wrote in Titus, chapter 1, verses 10 through 13,

For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach for the sake of sordid gain. One of themselves, a prophet of their own, said, "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons." This testimony is true. For this reason reprove them severely so that they may be sound in the faith

In chapter 3 of Titus, Paul writes, in verses 9 and 10,

But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and strife and disputes about the Law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. Reject a factious man after a first and second warning

The original word for "factious" is "hairesitikos," which gives us the transliterated word, "heretical".

Paul says, in verse 10, to "reject" such a man, or literally, to leave him out of the assembly until he repents of his false doctrine.

The apostle John was also strong in his warning in II John, verses 10 and 11,

If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching [truth regarding Jesus Christ], do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting [in other words, do not fellowship with him]; for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds.

The moral purity of the church is encouraged

3. Thirdly, when God's commands are obeyed, discipline actually encourages the moral purity of the church.

Robert Gromacki wrote,

The church in Corinth had swelled heads instead of broken hearts . . . they were so proud of their toleration. They were so preoccupied with themselves that no sin could move them out of their self-complacency.

The church in Corinth was allowing, in the spirit of tolerance, an immoral relationship between two consenting adults. You can almost hear the church in Corinth saying, as one author imagined,

Ours is a broad minded church. As long as this couple stays active in the church and does their part, we don't think it's anyone's business what they do . . . besides, they seem to have a meaningful relationship; what they really need from the church is affirmation, not judgment.

Does that sound familiar? Well, listen to a far different sound as Paul writes to the Corinthians in chapter 5, verses 3 and 5,

For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present. In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

In other words, unrepentant sinners are removed from the protective, nurturing, warning, reproving, correcting assembly. As a result, they run pell mell into the full consequences of their immoral behavior. Such immorality never fulfills, but ultimately, degenerates, destroys, and ruins.

If a believer refuses to repent, he should be removed. The church and the Christian should be

known for their intolerance of sin – first, in their own lives, and secondly, in the life of the church.

About a year and a half ago, I brought to your attention two men who refused to repent and follow the council of the elders of our church. Next Sunday, we will meet in the evening and vote as members, to exclude them from the fellowship of the church.

Why? Because we want to hurt them or defame them? No. Because we are committed to following the scriptures and obeying God and following after His holy standard and His sovereign purposes for the church, even if it requires of us difficult things.

The sinning believer is reclaimed and reconciled

4. One more thing occurs when the church obeys, which is, discipline reclaims and reconciles the sinning believer.

The ultimate purpose of discipline is to warn and reconcile the unrepentant person who is headed for disaster.

In II Corinthians, chapter 2, a man has repented and Paul teaches the church how to reconcile and return this man to the flock.

What is the process? We are given two steps in Matthew, chapter 18:

- Private confrontation.

This is a one-on-one meeting between a spiritual, concerned brother or sister in Christ who sees their friend straying from the truth and engaging in sinful behavior or erroneous doctrine.

- Public confrontation.

First, by a few witnesses, and

Secondly, Jesus said, “tell it to the church”.

Matthew, chapter 18, verse 17, says,

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 . . .

In other words, remove him from your midst; refrain from fellowship; deal with him only in an effort to challenge him and rebuke him and warn him.

I am telling the church today, as Christ commanded, the names of three men who need to be warned and reclaimed and confronted and lovingly pursued.

Galatians, chapter 6, verse 1, says,

. . . if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; . . .

The men in our church who are entangled are refusing the counsel of the elders and are in danger of being dismissed from the fellowship of this table in the future.

You who are spiritual and know them, pursue them, encouraging them to reconcile with the counsel of the elders. You do not need to know the details of their sin, only that steps have been taken in private and with witnesses. Now we are telling it to the church, as Christ commanded in Matthew, chapter 18.

Now you, the church, exhort them to return to fellowship with their flock and their spiritual leaders and to the fellowship of this table that requires repentance and holy pursuit . . . and to the fellowship of Jesus Christ Himself.