

The Church's Role in Discipline

Part II

Selected Scripture

Introduction

I have been deluged with comments, calls, e-mails, and letters as a result of last Sunday. We called the church to prayer and the loving pursuit of three men who were refusing the counsel of the elders to reconcile with their families, their church, us, the believers, and their Lord. If you missed last Sunday, my manuscript is on our web page at www.colonial.org.

I have not been able to answer all the e-mails or calls, but because of the interest and questions, I want to take one more opportunity to show you from God's word, what we do and why we do what we do in this area of church discipline. This is a critical and defining issue for the church today.

Church Discipline – A Critical Issue For the Church

A survey was taken recently of four hundred thirty nine pastors. They were questioned on the subject of church discipline. Fifty percent of them admitted that they never intervened or got involved with church members or attendees who needed confronting, rebuking, or any other form of discipline. Now that did not mean that the other fifty percent actually carried out some form of church discipline, it simply recorded the astounding statistic that half of the shepherds never did anything about sinning believers.

These pastors gave one of three reasons why they did not intervene in the lives of people given to their care and charge by Christ. Their reasons were:

- a fear of the outcome;
- a desire to avoid disruptive problems;
- an ignorance of what it meant.

So, how critical is this issue for the church today?

Al Mohler, an evangelical leader, writes,

The result of the loss of discipline is the loss of the biblical pattern for the church, and the impending collapse of authentic Christianity in this generation. The church today is

suffering from an infection which has been allowed to fester . . . as any infection weakens the body by destroying its defense mechanisms, so the church has been weakened . . . it has lost its power and effectiveness in serving as a vehicle for social, moral and spiritual change. This illness is due; at least in part, to a neglect of church discipline.¹

Another author put it this way,

Christianity has simply lost it; it no longer articulates the ideal out of fear of hindering personal fulfillment – Christ's command to the woman caught in adultery to "go and sin no more" has been replaced [in every instance] with "judge not lest you be judged."

The church has, in effect, abandoned untold numbers of wayward believers to wander into the clutches of sin without any warning; without any reproving; without any rebuking or challenging. For nineteen hundred years, the church has consistently practiced church discipline. In the last fifty years, it has been abandoned.

John Calvin, the reformer, once wrote that a pastor who dispenses communion to an unrepentant sinner whom he should instead repel, is as guilty of sacrilege as if he had cast the body of Christ to the dogs.

Listen to one confession, drawn up in the mid-1500's; a statement of practice drawn from a number of scriptures that defined a biblical church – a church that could expect God's anointing, God's blessing, and God's pleasure. The confession drew up three characteristics of this kind of church:

- the preaching of pure doctrine;
- the administration of the ordinances of baptism and communion;
- the exercising of church discipline.

The average church today would only claim to adhere to one of these – the administration of the ordinances. And even that is only half taught, as millions of believers in America have never had the

meaning of baptism explained to them. They do not understand immersion as the meaning of the Greek word “baptizomai,” or the meaning of the symbol of this ordinance as having been buried with Christ and resurrected with Christ (Romans 6:4). Furthermore, the preaching of pure doctrine has all but disappeared in favor of self-help techniques, quick fix sermons, and topical studies on relevant issues.

So, of these three statements in the Belgic Confession, dated 1561, the typical church today practices one half of one of them.

Much of this abandonment, in this country, has digressed to a dangerous point in our generation. So, how did it happen?

One liberal Baptist pastor in nearby Chapel Hill, gave the reason with perfect clarity in the local *News and Observer* last week. He wrote, “When the culture [around the church] changes, the church will also change.”

He was proud of that fact! He felt that was a good thing. When the culture changes, the church changes.

The church is like the world, only a few years behind. This pastor said he longed for the day when the church would catch up to its culture as it related to homosexuality. He stated, “our culture seems to be far ahead of the church in coming to terms with both an understanding and acceptance of gays and lesbians . . . the church should be leading the way.”

He went on to say that he looks forward to the day that kind of church repents of its attitude.

“When the culture . . . changes, the church will also change.”

That is not a mark of pride, for me, but a mark of degeneration. It is not a badge of honor, but dishonor!

It has indeed happened that the church today has bought into the moral individualism of our culture. This morality is that a person can do whatever they want and no one should call them wrong, much less, a sinner.

The church has become a collection of loosely associated individuals who have no sense of accountability to one another, either morally or doctrinally. A church attendee can do whatever he wants and people tend to believe that unconditional love means not saying anything – and certainly not holding them accountable.

Discipling and discipline come from the same Greek root. They are different activities of the same process.

There was a time, when the church body accepted the responsibility to disciple one another. An unrepentant believer was then the responsibility of the entire church body.

Do you remember the days when even an unruly child was considered the project of the entire assembly – and public correction was accepted? That was back in the dark ages when my parents actually believed that my teacher had the right to paddle me. I remember those long stairways up into the elementary library where I was corrected.

I can still remember as a eleven or twelve year old, sitting on the back row of my rather formal church. We had wooden theater seats that sat about a thousand people. I do not know how I got back there, because I was supposed to be sitting with my parents and three brothers. We sat all lined up, so that if we got out of line, my mother could reach over and snap her fingers – and four boys would sit at attention. Somehow, I was in the back with several other boys, talking and passing notes. Suddenly, the pastor stopped his sermon, pointed back in our direction, and said, “Sonny boy,” and then went back to his sermon. After church, my parents wanted to know if my name was “Sonny boy”.

Do you know what church discipline is? It is nothing more than an individual or church body at large, caring enough to stop a brother or sister who is persistently, openly practicing sin. It is pointing their finger and saying, “Sonny boy.”

Reasons churches will not practice discipline

In our last discussion, I gave several reasons why churches will not practice discipline. Let us review them.

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

1. Some say it is not loving to privately or publicly denounce a sinning individual.

The opposite of that statement is true, however. I will give several passages today that deal with the public exposure of sin.

Paul wrote, in Galatians, chapter 6, verse 1,

Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one . . .

He did not say, “. . . you who don’t like him . . . you who don’t care about him . . . you who like pointing your finger in other people’s faces and sticking your nose into other people’s business . . .”. No! He said, “. . . you who are spiritual . . .”.

The exposure of sinners causes church problems

2. Secondly, some say the exposure of sinners causes church problems.

The sin is the business of the sinner

3. Another viewpoint states, “what’s done in private is personal . . . the sin is the business of the sinner.”

Discipline is too judgmental

4. Some say that discipline is too judgmental.

When judging is judgmental

The Bible does in fact, tell us that there are at least three occasions when judging is simply being judgmental and is therefore sinful. Let me give them to you.

When judging occurs before you know all the facts

1. Number one is when judging occurs before you know all the facts.

John, chapter 7, verse 51, states,

Our Law does not judge a man unless it first hears from him and knows what he is doing .

..

That, by the way, is why the second step in the process of discipline, as outlined in Matthew, chapter 18, involves taking some witnesses along to make sure the facts are correct.

When judging attacks another person’s motives

2. Number two is when judging attacks another person’s motives.

In I Corinthians, chapter 4, verse 5, Paul writes,

Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord

comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men’s hearts . . .

In other words, if you are passing judgment based solely on the motives of the heart, you had better stop, simply because only the Lord, who will reveal the hearts of men, can judge motives.

When judging becomes a display of self-righteousness

3. The third occasion that we are told not to judge others is when judging becomes a display of self-righteousness.

Jesus said in Matthew, chapter 7, verse 1,

Do not judge so that you will not be judged.

Now, He cannot be talking about discernment and the other forms of judgment we have seen validated in scripture. He is referring to the judgment typical of the religious leaders of that time – censorious, pietistic, always exposing sin without ever proposing a solution!

Verse 2a of Matthew, chapter 7, reads,

For in the way you judge, you will be judged .

..

In other words, self-righteous condemning judgment builds its own gallows.

In ancient Persia, a certain corrupt judge often accepted bribes to render a false verdict. Finally, the King, Cambyses, discovered this corrupt judge’s practice and had him executed. He then ordered that the judge be skinned, that the skin be treated as a cow’s hide and turned into leather. The high court judge’s chair was then covered with that skin, and subsequent judges who rendered their judgments while sitting on that chair, were reminded every day of the consequences of perverting justice.

So, who is a perfectly honest judge, besides God alone?

When judging another is right

With that in mind, is it ever right for frail, inconsistent human beings to judge someone else? Left to our own opinion, we would say, “No! Who are we to judge?!”

Yet, the Bible not only says we are to judge, under certain circumstances, such as church discipline, but the Bible actually commands us to judge. Let me give several instances where we are commanded to judge.

When someone lives openly in sin

1. First, it is right to judge when someone lives openly in sin.

In I Corinthians, chapter 5, verses 1 through 3, Paul wrote,

It is actually reported that there is immorality among you . . . 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 body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present.

Paul wrote, "I've already judged him!"

I find it interesting that Paul calls attention to this man before the public assembly. Furthermore, he renders his verdict without ever talking to the man; Paul has only heard about the sin from a distance.

If anything, we move far more slowly than Paul did. I personally believe that the church is far too hesitant to deal with trapped sinning believers than it should be.

I must confess to you that I have dragged my feet in some instances, rather than hastening to use the shepherd's rod and confront and challenge and seek to restore.

Paul knew the danger facing Corinth. They were compromising with immorality and refusing to deal with it.

When someone denies the doctrines of scripture

2. Secondly, it is right to judge someone who denies the doctrines of scripture.

When we compare our culture to the Bible

3. Thirdly, it is right to judge our culture as we compare it to the Bible.

Listen to I Corinthians, chapter 2, verse 15a (NKJV), as Paul writes,

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

Someone might say, "Paul just has a problem. Jesus didn't judge the sinner, He hung around sinners."

There is a world of difference between the treatment of sinning unbelievers and sinning believers. And, if you do not understand the

difference in the Bible's treatment of unbelievers and believers, you will misunderstand the nature and purpose of church discipline of a sinning believer. If you do not understand that Jesus hung around the sinners to seek and to save those who were lost, and at the same time, judged those who felt they were spiritually justified, even though they were sinning, you will be confused by the record of scripture.

I received a few e-mails that had difficulty with what I quoted from the epistles, saying, ". . . but look at what Jesus did in the gospels."

"Jesus never condemned anybody," one note stated, "Jesus never publicly shamed anyone."

Is that true? No. Jesus shamed and embarrassed and condemned and pointed His finger at many people. His public preaching and personal conversations were often sharp and filled with judgment.

For example, as recorded in Matthew, chapter 23, Jesus publicly called the Pharisees "serpents" and "whitewashed tombs;" that is, they were painted white so they looked clean, but they simply represented death.

You need to understand that the Pharisee in Christ's day is comparable to the unrepentant believer in our day. The Pharisee would be the person who went to church and followed all the rules, but lived a life of sin, hypocrisy, greed, and pride.

Did Jesus ever shame them? Do you remember the day when He looked at one group of religious people and said to them, as recorded in John, chapter 8, verse 44a,

You are of your father the devil . . .

That was embarrassing! Jesus exposed them publicly; He shamed them publicly.

Matthew records, in chapter 23, that Jesus said to the Pharisees and scribes, "Woe to you . . . hypocrites . . . false teachers . . . blind guides."

Jesus also shamed entire cities, calling them by name. In Matthew, chapter 11, verse 20, we read,

Then He [Jesus] began to denounce the cities in which most of His miracles were done, because they did not repent.

He publicly, in verse 23 of chapter 11, told His audience that the city of Capernaum was not going to heaven, but was headed for hell. He continued in verses 23 and 24, saying to that city,

. . . if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have

remained to this day. Nevertheless . . . it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for you.

In a similar fashion, Paul expected to shame people who denied true doctrine when he wrote in II Thessalonians, chapter 3, verse 14,

If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame.

One e-mail said, “Jesus never humiliated or robbed anybody of dignity.”

Nothing could be further from the truth. Was it not humiliating when He went into the temple, as we are told in Matthew, chapter 21, and turned tables over and drove those religious merchants out of the temple with a whip? He not only robbed them of their dignity, He robbed them of their profit!

Some would ask, “But wasn’t Jesus the friend of sinners? He hung around tax collectors and harlots. I don’t understand why Jesus would treat others with anger, violence, and judgement. And why would Paul tell the church to judge those who are sinning as well?”

Listen to a very important distinction:

- A sinning unbeliever needs to be exposed to the church. The sinning believer needs to be exposed by the church.
- A sinning unbeliever needs to hear the declaration of the gospel. A sinning unrepentant believer needs to hear the discipline of God.

Jesus and Paul treated people along those two lines.

The truth is, we do not know and cannot know everyone in the church who is leading an unrepentant life; a life of sin and at the same time, a life of religiosity.

I have been accused in the past and present for wanting to know all about the sins of the people. If the truth were known, there are days when the news of someone else’s sin crushes me and weighs me down with great sorrow and a sense of failure and despair. There are times when I do not want to answer the phone, for fear it is another tale of secret sin that is now public.

I believe that when we do learn of sin, God enables us so that we can be redemptive in our mission to rescue the falling. And I personally

believe that when a body of believers and its leaders want to rescue people through discipline and restoration, God will make known the sins among us that He wants us to pursue and restore.

I received one letter with the complaint, “How can you deal with these other men when you have drug dealers and adulterers sitting on the front row of your church?”

You will probably never sit there again!

Listen! If there are unbelievers and they have come in here to inspect our faith and hear our message – let them come in! They will not damage the reputation of this church – just as the unbelievers never tarnished the reputation of Christ. In fact, they are why God has left us on planet earth – to deliver to them the saving, forgiving, cleansing, gospel of Christ’s crucifixion and blood shed on the cross so they can be saved!

However, for those who claim to know Christ and yet, live in sin, they may very well be exposed. And if they refuse to repent, they may very well be publicly exposed and sent away as an act of judgment.

Paul wrote that even spiritual leaders should be exposed and rebuked. They should not be shuttled away, hidden from judgment, and protected from consequences; they should not be sent to another part of the country, but should be exposed and dealt with.

Paul wrote in I Timothy, chapter 5, verse 20,

Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning.

In other words, those who claim to know Christ and are part of the assembly, but refuse to repent of their sin and their sin becomes known to those in the church who have sought to warn them and challenge them to repent, if they refuse to repent, then rebuke them in the presence of everyone. The implication is that “everyone” represents the local assembly. Then, guess what happens. Those who are tempted to sin, perhaps in the same way, will be afraid to follow through. They will be warned and saved from a similar judgment.

One perceptive question in one of the e-mails that was sent to me this past week asked, “What sins do you go after? How do you choose?”

If you study church history, you find a number of different lists. Cotton Mather, the Puritan leader in the early American church, made a list that included:

swearing, fighting, cheating, stealing, and idleness, among other more obvious and flagrant sins.

Martin Luther, the reformer, once threatened to excommunicate a man who was planning to sell his home for four hundred guilders when he had earlier purchased it for thirty guilders. Luther suggested one hundred fifty guilders and labeled the offender as one in need of discipline because of his unbridled greed.

Today, this man would be considered a great businessman or a sharp negotiator. Luther considered him greedy and worthy of dismissal from the church.

Other lists I uncovered from earlier church history required discipline for slave holding, smuggling, tax evasion, and bull fighting.

I say all that to reveal that it is difficult to determine ironclad categories of sinful behavior.

If you remember that the purpose of discipline is restoration and revival, it really does not matter what the sin is, as all sin destroys fellowship with the Lord and His church.

Guidelines to determine which sins to discipline

Let me give you several guidelines that we try follow.

Sins that destroy Christian unity and relationships

1. Sins that destroy Christian unity and relationships should be confronted.

Our Lord stated in Matthew, chapter 5, verses 23 and 24,

Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there . . . and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.

In Luke, chapter 17, verse 3, the Lord said something that is often overlooked in our generation of confused sentimentality. He said,

Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.

Much of the church is running around forgiving everyone; trying to show, what has become, a distorted definition of unconditional love; that is, forgiving when the sinning believer has not yet repented; has not asked for forgiveness. You can forgive someone before God, so that your own heart

is not filled with bitterness and resentment, but you cannot release someone from the consequences of their sin unless they repent!

People today say, "Well, let's just forgive him and not worry about it."

So they coddle the prodigal son (Luke 15); they allow him to bring the pigs home to the Father's house. As a result, he has both the ring and the shoes and the fatted calf, along with his sin.

Jesus said, ". . . if he repents, forgive him."

Sins that entangle a person in corrupt or immoral behavior

2. Another category of sin that should not be ignored are sins that entangle a person in corrupt or immoral behavior.

Galatians, chapter 6, verse 1, says,

Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass [tangled up in sin], you who are spiritual, restore such a one . . .

In I Corinthians, chapter 5, we have already observed Paul's public judgment of an immoral man who refused to repent. Paul explains in this passage that the purity of the church is preserved when leaven is removed from the lump. Leaven is an illustration of sinful influence. It is removed so that others will not be tempted to follow or imitate the rebelling believer.

The church in Corinth probably wondered, "If we send away all the sinners who do not repent, how will we ever reach the world?"

That is a great question. However, remember the distinction. A sinning unbeliever is welcome in your home; your church; your back yard swimming pool – they need to hear the gospel. A sinning believer is to be avoided as an illustration that their fellowship with God has been withdrawn.

Listen to Paul as he goes on in I Corinthians, chapter 5, to answer this very question. In verses 9 through 11, he says,

I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not . . . mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater,

or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler – not even to eat with such a one.

In other words, deliver the gospel to the unbeliever, but deliver the judgment of God to the sinning believer.

Doctrinal error

3. Another category of sin that should be confronted is doctrinal error.

Paul writes in II Thessalonians, chapter 3, verse 6,

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us.

In I Timothy, chapter 1, verse 19, Paul writes, *keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith. Among these are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan, so that they will be taught not to blaspheme.*

Sins that harm the testimony of the church

4. Another category of sins to deal directly and openly with are sins that harm the testimony of the church.

Paul wrote to the Ephesians, in chapter 5, verse 11,

Do not participate [believers] in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them

The word “expose,” or “elegcho,” has the idea of bringing these sins to light; bringing them out of hiding for the purpose of disciplining the sinning brother or sister and rescuing them.

The apostle John exposed the sin of pride in Diotrephes, a leader in the church, as he wrote, in III John, chapter 1, verse 9,

. . . but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say. For this reason, if I come, I will call attention to his deeds.

In Matthew, chapter 18, this public exposure is the direct command of Christ. He said, in verse 17,

If he refuses to listen . . . tell it to the church;
...

That brings shame and embarrassment, does it not?! He went on to say,

. . . and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

In other words, let him be considered a traitor to the people of God; let him have no fellowship as a sinning believer who chose to sin without repentance. By virtue of his own choice, he is now put to open shame!

I spent four hours with one of the men I named last Sunday. He said, “You have embarrassed me before my family and the church by naming me. You have brought pain into my life.”

I said, “We can fix it all right now! You can be welcomed back with open arms and tears of joy and restored fellowship. You will be applauded for your return to the fellowship of Christ. We can remove all the shame, right now!”

However, he chose to remain unrepentant.

He chose! My friends, the unrepentant man or woman chooses their union with sin over their union with the assembly. They choose to keep their sin rather than keep their place among the worshippers of Christ.

A couple came to Colonial a few years ago, and the man had been a pastor on the staff of a church in this county. He had left his wife for one of the secretaries and they had married. After a few years, they repented of their sin, began attending church, and chose to come to this church. One day, he invited me to lunch and told me his story. I asked if he had ever gone back and restored his testimony in that church through public repentance. He said he had not even thought about it and, in fact, had never seen it done. I encouraged him and his wife to go back to that pastor and church staff and confess to them their sin and ask forgiveness of their former colleagues. I also told him that the pastor ought to bring him up before the congregation and announce his repentance and publicly restore him to fellowship. They did that and the pastor, during a worship service, brought them up. There was not a dry eye in that auditorium. In fact, this couple was so well received and loved that they returned there to worship and serve as members of the congregation.

Was it humiliating? Yes. Was it embarrassing and fearful? Without a doubt. But it was right! God was honored; sinning, excluded believers were restored to fellowship with Christ and His church.

Conclusion

I want to close today, by reading from two letters I received this week.

One letter was from a man in our church who is a successful attorney and a committed believer. He wrote in response to a criticism that was copied to a number of people about our announcement last Sunday of the three men and their unrepentant lives. He wrote these words, that I am abbreviating,

I was a teenager when my parents divorced. My brothers and sisters and I were the same age as some of the kids in these homes you've mentioned. I wish someone had cared enough to try to put our family back together again. I suspect that these children want more than anything to be a family again. They need affirmation [from the church] that their family is worth fighting for. If I ever stray, I pray that you and the church will pursue me and my family with the same vigor and devotion.

Another man wrote,

Today I thanked God for you as you delivered this message – I thanked Him for a church where the fear of appearing before Him is greater than the fear of any man. I thanked God for His timing. Lately I have been fighting a particular temptation, and I've been praying for help. Your words cut to my heart and God answered my prayer today.

ⁱ John Armstrong, The Compromised Church, p. 175.