Dealing with Sin in the Church
Scripture: Matthew 18
Code: BQ041612

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. And 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-gatherer. (18:16–17)

The process of discipline begins with an individual believer going privately to a sinning brother and rebuking him (v. 15). The three subsequent steps are mentioned in verses 16–17.

If the second stage of the discipline process fails to bring repentance, **if he does not listen to the two or three**, then they are to **tell it to the church**. The first rebuke is to be completely private and the second semi-private, but the third is to be public, before the church. The brother or sister is to be brought before the whole congregation to be further rebuked and encouraged to repent. The whole church is responsible to call that person back to holiness.

It has been the custom in our church, upon enacting this third step, to clearly indicate to the congregation that they are to pursue the person aggressively and plead with him to repent before the fourth step becomes necessary. That crucial and potent procedure often draws the sinner to repentance and obedience.

This great passage also indicates that the place for discipline is *within* **the church**. *Ekklsia* (**church**) is here used in its basic, nontechnical meaning of a congregation or assembly. In secular Greek literature it was used of town meetings, local gatherings of citizens called together by their rulers to hear official announcements or witness government ceremonies. In the context of Jesus' teaching at this point in His ministry, **church** refers to any group of redeemed people who assemble in His name (v. 20).

Some commentators maintain that Jesus was referring to the Jewish synagogue, which also has the root meaning of assembly or congregation. But Jesus always used another term (sunagg) when referring to a synagogue, which, in any case, would never have gathered in His name. And although He frequently taught in synagogues and called the worshipers there to believe in Him, His purpose

was not to revise or reform the synagogue but to establish His own *ekklsia*, the **church**.

No organizational structure is mentioned or intimated here. The reference is not to a committee, board, or other group of leaders, but to the entire body. There is no higher court beyond the local congregation in which discipline is to be administered. No bishop, cardinal, synod, conference, or council has the responsibility for discipline. To delegate discipline to an individual or group beyond the local church is to go beyond the Word of God. Whether a local church is composed of a handful of believers or of several thousand members, whether it is a highly organized urban congregation or an informal group of five or six believers on a remote mission field, that is where, and only where, discipline is to be administered.

Even less justified is taking church discipline or grievances to a secular court for resolution. Paul strongly indicted Corinthian Christians who did that. “Does any one of you,” he wrote, “when he has a case against his neighbor, dare to go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is judged by you, are you not competent to constitute the smallest law courts? Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, matters of this life?” (1 Cor. 6:1–3).

The fourth and final step in church discipline is ostracism. If a sinning believer **refuses to listen even to the church**, he is to be ostracized from the fellowship. Let him be to you, Jesus said, as a **Gentile and a tax-gatherer**. Both were seen as despised outcasts.

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