

## **Church Discipline Misconceived**

Scripture: Matthew 18:15–20; 1 Corinthians 5:6

Code: B140818

Few aspects of church life offend modern sensibilities more than the practice of church discipline. The contemporary dogmas of civility and tolerance keep it outside the doors of many congregations, fostering a culture of unrestrained carnality, unrepentant sin, and false professions of faith.

Regardless of how liberal a church may be, there is always a threshold where escalating sin can no longer be ignored. It is unavoidable that there will be times when sin has to be dealt with through confrontation. And if the guilty party refuses to repent, the ultimate result may mean excommunication from the church. This is true chiefly when the offender's sin has a potential to harm others, or when the offense brings a public reproach on the name of Christ.

“Church discipline” is the theological term used to describe the process Scripture outlines for dealing with sin in the flock. It's a fitting term because, as with parental discipline, the main goal of church discipline is correction. It is successful when it brings about repentance and reconciliation. When it is unsuccessful, it ends in excommunication. But restoration of the sinner is always the desired goal.

Some time ago we dealt with the subject on our radio broadcast. I was amazed at the letters we received from people who strongly felt that all forms of church discipline are inherently unloving. One listener, who admitted she heard only part of a broadcast, wrote:

The whole process of church discipline sounds incredibly controlling and uncharitable. I cannot believe that any church would ever threaten to excommunicate its own members for what they do in their private lives. And I cannot imagine a church making a public pronouncement about someone's sin! What people do on their own time is their business, not the whole church's. And the church is supposed to be where people can come to learn how to overcome sin. How can they do that if they have been excommunicated? If we shun our own members, we're no better than the cults. I cannot imagine that Christ would ever excommunicate someone from His church. Didn't he seek out sinners and avoid those who were holier-than-thou? After all, it's not the people who are whole that need a physician. I'm glad my church does not excommunicate members who sin. There'd be none of us left! I thought the gospel was all about forgiveness!

Those comments reflect several common and widespread misunderstandings about the subject.

First of all, church discipline is not antithetical to forgiveness. In fact, Jesus outlines exactly *how* forgiveness should work when a believer's sin affects the whole flock.

Second, biblical discipline is not about micromanaging people's lives. The kind of offenses that require confrontation and biblical discipline are not unintentional transgressions, petty annoyances, or matters of simple preference. They are serious violations of clear biblical principles—sins that hurt other believers, destroy the unity of the flock, and sully the purity of the church. In such cases, sin *must* be dealt with. Such sins cannot be covered up. They are like leaven, and left alone their evil

effects will eventually permeate the whole church (1 Corinthians 5:6).

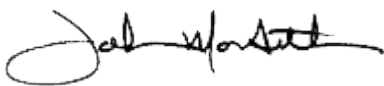
Third, proper discipline is not out of harmony with the Spirit of Christ. Christ Himself prescribed this method of dealing with sin in the flock (Matthew 18:15–20). If your opinion of Jesus is that He would never participate in or even affirm the denunciation of a rebellious and unrepentant sinner who professed to be a Christian, you have a distorted understanding of Christ (Matthew 7:21-23; Revelation 2:5; 2:22-23; 3:16).

Fourth, correctly applied discipline is not incompatible with love. In fact, just the opposite is true—God lovingly disciplines believers who sin (Hebrews 12:7–11). The Matthew 18 process recognizes the legitimate role of the church as an instrument of both loving exhortation and, on occasion, divine chastening. Properly applied church discipline therefore pictures God’s love for His children.

Fifth, the public aspect of discipline is a final resort, not the first step. The point of reporting a person’s offense to the church is not to get church members to “shun” the sinning individual, but precisely the opposite: to encourage them to pursue that person in love, with the aim of restoration.

The permissiveness that results when discipline is neglected inevitably leads to chaos. This is as true in the church as it is in a family. No adult enjoys being around children who are never disciplined. In the same way, a church that is lax on dealing with sin in the body ultimately becomes intolerable to all but the most immature believers. Failing to practice church discipline therefore ensures that the flock will be spiritually stunted. It is also a sure way to incur God’s displeasure (Revelation 2:14, 20).

Jesus’ instructions about church discipline in Matthew 18 are clear and unequivocal. This issue is therefore a good test of whether a church is serious about obedience to Christ. People often ask me what to look for in a church. Consistent, proper discipline is near the top of my list. One thing is certain: A church that does not discipline sinning members is going to have perpetual and serious problems.



(Adapted from [\*The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness\*](#))

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