

A Church Discipline Primer

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What would you think of a coach who instructs his players but never drills them? Or a math teacher who explains the lesson but never corrects her students' mistakes? Or a doctor who talks about health but ignores cancer?

You would probably say that all of them are doing half their job. Athletic training requires instructing *and* drilling. Teaching requires explaining *and* correcting. Doctoring requires encouraging health *and* fighting disease. Right?

Okay, what would you think about a church that teaches and discipulates but doesn't practice church discipline? Does that make sense to you? I assume it makes sense to many churches, because every church teaches and discipulates, but so few practice church discipline. The problem is, making disciples without discipline makes as much sense as a doctor who ignores tumors.

I understand the reluctance to practice church discipline. It's a difficult matter for any number of reasons. Still, this reluctance to practice church discipline, a reluctance that many of us probably feel, may suggest that we believe ourselves to be wiser and more loving than God. God, after all, "disciplines those he loves"; and "he punishes everyone he accepts as a son" (Heb. 12:6). Do we know better than God?

God disciplines his children for the sake of their life, growth, and health: "God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness" (Heb. 12:10). Yes, it's painful, but it pays off: "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Heb. 12:11). A harvest of righteousness and peace! That's a beautiful picture.

Church discipline ultimately leads to church growth, just as pruning a rose bush leads to more roses. Said another way, church discipline is one aspect of Christian discipleship. Notice that the words "disciple" and "discipline" are etymological cousins. Both words are taken from the realm of education, which involves teaching *and* correction. Not surprisingly, there's a centuries-old practice of referring to "formative discipline" and "corrective discipline."

My goal in this primer is to introduce the reader to the basics of corrective church discipline—the "what," the "when," the "how," and a few more words on the "why."

WHAT IS CHURCH DISCIPLINE?

What is corrective church discipline? Church discipline is the process of correcting sin in the life of the congregation and its members. This can mean correcting sin through a private word of

admonition. And it can mean correcting sin by formally removing an individual from membership. Church discipline can be done in any number of ways, but the goal is always to correct transgressions of God's law among God's people.

Not Retributive, but Remedial, Prophetic, and Proleptic

This correction of sin is not a retributive action; it's not enacting God's justice, per se. Rather, it's remedial, prophetic, and proleptic. By *remedial*, I mean it's meant to help the individual Christian and the congregation grow in godliness—in God-like-ness. If a member of the church is given to gossip or slander, another member should correct the sin so that the gossiper will stop gossiping and speak words of love instead. God does not use his words to wrongfully harm; neither should his people.

By saying that church discipline is *prophetic*, I mean it shines the light of God's truth onto error and sin. It exposes cancer in an individual's or the body's life, so that the cancer might be cut out. Sin is a master of disguise. Gossip, for instance, likes to wear the mask of "pious concern." The gossiper might think that his words are reasonable, even caring. Yet church discipline exposes the sin for what it is. It exposes the sin both to the sinner and to everyone involved, so that all may learn and benefit.

By saying the church discipline is *proleptic*, I mean it's a small picture of judgment in the present that warns of an even greater judgment to come (e.g. 1 Cor. 5:5). Such a warning is nothing if not gracious. Suppose a classroom teacher gave passing grades to a student's failing tests throughout the semester for fear of discouraging the student, only to fail her at the end of the semester. That would not be gracious! In the same way, church discipline is a loving way to say to an individual caught in sin, "Careful, an even greater penalty will result if you continue on this path. Please turn back now."

It's not surprising that people don't like discipline. It's hard. But how merciful God is to warn his people of the great judgment to come in comparatively small ways now!

Biblical-Theological Foundations

Behind church discipline is one of the grand projects of redemptive history—the project of restoring God's fallen people to the place where they will once more image God as they extend his benevolent and life-producing rule throughout creation (Gen. 1:26-28; 3:1-6).

Adam and Eve were to image God. So was the kingdom of Israel. Yet Adam and Eve's failure to represent God's rule, prompted by the desire to rule on their own terms, resulted in their exile from God's place, the Garden. Israel's same failure to keep God's law and reflect God's character to the nations also resulted in an exile.

As creatures made in God's image, our actions intrinsically speak about him, like mirrors representing the object which they face. The problem is, fallen humanity distorts the image of God, like wavy carnival mirrors. Since fallen humanity speaks lies, for instance, the world has concluded that God's own words cannot be trusted. He, too, must be a liar. As goes a creature, so must go its creator.

Gratefully, one son of Adam, one son of Israel, did keep God's law perfectly, the same one whom Paul would describe as "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15). Now, those who are united to this one Son are called to bear that same "image," which we learn to do through the life of the church "from one degree of glory to the next" (see 2 Cor. 3:18; Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:49; Col. 3:9-10).

Local churches should be those places on earth where the nations can go to find humans who increasingly image God truly and honestly. As the world beholds the holiness, love, and unity of local churches, they will better know what God is like and will give him praise (e.g. Matt. 5:14-16; John 13:34-35; 1 Peter 2:12). Church discipline, then, is the church's response when one of its own fails to represent God's holiness, love, or unity by being disobedient to God. It's an attempt to correct false images as they rise up within the life of Christ's body, almost like polishing smudges of dirt out of a mirror.

Specific Texts

Jesus grants local congregations the authority to discipline their own in Matthew 16:16-19 and 18:15-20. The power of the keys for binding and loosing on earth, first mentioned in Matthew 16:18, are handed to the local congregation in Matthew 18:15-20, which we'll consider more carefully below.

Paul describes the processes of church discipline in a number of places, including 1 Corinthians 5, 2 Corinthians 2:6, Galatians 6:1, Ephesians 5:11, 1 Thessalonians 5:14, 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15, 1 Timothy 5:19-20, 2 Timothy 3:5, and Titus 3:9-11.

John refers to a kind of discipline in 2 John 10. Jude seems to have it mind in Jude 22 and 23. More examples could be mentioned. Really, church discipline is what Jesus and the biblical authors have in mind every time they tell their listeners to correct sin in their lives together.

WHEN SHOULD A CHURCH PRACTICE DISCIPLINE?

When should a church practice discipline? The short answer is, when someone sins. But the answer might differ depending on whether we're talking about informal or formal church discipline, to use Jay Adams distinction between private confrontations and public church-wide confrontations.

Any sin, whether of a serious or non-serious nature, might elicit a private rebuke between two brothers or sisters in the faith. That's not to say we should rebuke every single sin that a fellow church member commits. It's simply to say that every sin, no matter how small, falls into the realm of what two Christians *may* lovingly raise with one another in a private setting, prudence depending.

When we turn to the question of which sins require formal or church-wide corrective discipline, we need to tread a little more carefully.

Biblical Lists

Some of the older theologies presented lists of when it's appropriate to conduct formal discipline. For instance, the Congregationalist minister John Angell James said that five kinds of offenses should be disciplined: (i) all scandalous vices and immoralities (e.g. 1 Cor. 5:11-13); (ii) the denial of Christian doctrine (e.g. Gal. 1:8; 2 Tim. 2:17-21; 1 Tim. 6:35; 2 John 10f); (iii) the stirring up of division (Titus

3:10); (iv) the failure to provide for one's near relatives when they are in need (e.g. 1 Tim. 5:8); (v) and unreconciled enmity (e.g. Matt. 18:7).^[1]

These types of biblical lists can be helpful to a point. Notice that each of the sins described are both serious and have an outward manifestation. They're not just inward sins of the heart; they can be seen with the eyes or heard with the ears. And in that outward manifestation they mislead both the world and other sheep about Christianity.

Yet what such lists fail to do is account for the vast multitude of sins which the Scriptures never address (what about abortion?). Plus, texts on church discipline may only mention one particular sin, such as 1 Corinthians 5 which discusses the sin of sleeping with a father's wife; but surely Paul doesn't mean for churches to only discipline *that* sin. How should churches extrapolate out from such examples to other sins?

Outward, Serious, and Unrepentant

One way to summarize the biblical data is to say that that formal church discipline is required in cases of outward, serious, and unrepentant sin. A sin must have an *outward* manifestation. It must be something that can be seen with the eyes or heard with the ears. Churches should not quickly throw the red flag of ejection every time they suspect greed or pride in someone's heart. It's not that sins of the heart are not serious. It's that the Lord knows we cannot see one another's hearts, and that real heart problems will eventually rise to the surface anyway (1 Sam. 16:7; Matt. 7:17f; Mark 7:21).

Second, a sin must be *serious*. For instance, I might observe a brother exaggerate the details of a story and then privately confront him over the matter. But even if he denies it, I probably wouldn't draw him in front of the church. Why not? First, something like the sin of embellishing stories is rooted in far more significant and unseen sins like idolatry and self-justification. Those are the sins I want to spend personal time discussing with him. Second, pursuing every tiny sin a church's life will probably induce paranoia and propel the congregation toward legalism. Third, there clearly needs to be a place for love to "cover a multitude of sins" in a congregation's life (1 Peter 4:8). Not every sin should be pursued to the utmost. Thankfully, God has not done so with us.

Finally, formal church discipline is the appropriate course of action when sin is *unrepentant*. The person involved in serious sin has been privately confronted with God's commands in Scripture, but he or she refuses to let go of the sin. From all appearances, the person prizes the sin more than Jesus. There may be one kind of exception to this, which we'll consider below.

All three factors were in play in my first experience with corrective church discipline. The person in question happened to be a good friend and running partner. Yet both I and the church were oblivious to the fact that he was engaged in a lifestyle of sexual sin, at least until he told me one day over lunch. Immediately I asked him whether he knew what the Bible said about such activity, which he did. Yet he said that he had made his peace with God. I urged him to repent. Others eventually did as well. But he said the same thing to all of us: "God is okay with it." After several months of such conversations, the church formally removed him from its fellowship. His sin was serious, unrepentant, and had a clear outward manifestation. It would mislead others both inside and outside

the church about what it means to be a Christian. The church spent several months pursuing this man. We loved him. We wanted him to turn away from his sin and to know that Jesus is more valuable than anything this world affords. Still, it was clear almost immediately that he had no intention of turning away. He was resolute. Given a choice between his sin and the Word of God, he chose sin. So the church formally acted.

HOW SHOULD A CHURCH PRACTICE DISCIPLINE?

How should a church practice church discipline? Jesus provides the basic outline in Matthew 18:15-17. He says to his disciples,

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 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 collector.

Notice here that the offense starts between two brothers, and the response should extend no further than it needs to go in order to produce reconciliation. Jesus describes the process in four steps.

Four Basic Steps

1. If a sin problem can be resolved between the two people by themselves, then the case is closed.
2. If it cannot be resolved, then the offended brother should bring two or three others so “that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses” (Matt. 18:16). Jesus takes this phrase from Deuteronomy 19, which in context is meant to protect people against false accusations. Deuteronomy in fact calls for a “thorough investigation” whenever there’s any doubt about the crime (Deut. 19:18). I take it that Jesus, likewise, means for Christians to be concerned with truth and justice, which may require due diligence. The two or three witnesses need to be able to confirm that, indeed, there is a serious and outward offense and, indeed, the offender is unrepentant. Hopefully, involving other people will either bring the offender to his senses *or* help the offended see that he should not be so offended. Both this step and the prior step may occur over several meetings, whatever the parties think is prudent.
3. If the intervention of the two or three does not admit of a solution, the offended party is then instructed to tell it to the church (Matt. 18:17a). In my own congregation, this is typically done through the elders, since the Lord has given the church elders to provide oversight in all the church’s affairs (1 Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:17; 1 Peter 5:2). The elders will announce the name of the party charged with outward, serious, and unrepentant sin. They will provide a very brief description of the sin, a description adjudged to not cause others to stumble or to bring

undue embarrassment on any family members. And, typically, they will then give the congregation two months to seek out the sinner and call him or her to repentance.

4. The final step of church discipline is exclusion from the fellowship or membership of the church, which essentially means exclusion from the Lord's Table: "And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" (Matt. 18:17b). He is to be treated as someone outside of God's covenant people, someone who should not partake of Christ's covenant meal (though he will probably be encouraged to continue attending the church's gatherings; see discussion below). Our own congregation will take this step once the two months have expired and the individual has refused to let go of the sin. Two months is an arbitrary number, of course; it simply presents a basic timeline to correspond with our church's regularly scheduled members meetings. In any given situation, the church might deem it necessary to speed up that timeline, or slow it down.

Why Slow Down or Speed Up the Process?

Sometimes the processes of discipline should move quite slowly. This is the case, for instance, when a sinner shows at least some interest in fighting against his sin. It's not just the nature of the sin which needs to be considered, it's the nature of the sinner himself. Different sinners, to put it bluntly, require different strategies. As Paul instructs, "admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all" (1 Thess. 5:14). Sometimes it's not immediately apparent whether people are idle or indifferent toward their sin or if they're genuinely weak.

I remember working with one brother involved in one kind of addiction, and for a time I wasn't sure if he was just making excuses for his moral lapses or if his soul was truly weakened and malformed by years of sinning, making it that much harder for him to stop sinning. The answer to those kinds of questions should affect how quickly the processes of discipline move.

Sometimes the processes of discipline need to speed up, which might mean skipping one or two of the steps described by Jesus in Matthew 18. Two clear biblical warrants for speeding up the processes of discipline are (i) division in the church and (ii) public scandal (i.e., sin that will misrepresent Christ in the community beyond the church). Regarding the first category, Paul says, "As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him" (Titus 3:10). It's not entirely clear what kind of process Paul has in mind here. But his words do suggest that the church should respond quickly and decisively to division-makers for the sake of the body.

An even faster process is presented in 1 Corinthians 5, in which Paul calls upon the church to immediately remove an individual known to be engaged in a publicly scandalous sin, that is, a sin of which even the non-Christian community disapproves. In fact, Paul doesn't even tell the church to warn the man in case he might be brought to repentance. He simply tells them to "deliver this man to Satan" (v. 5a).

Why skip over the question of repentance and not give the man a second chance? It's not that Paul is uninterested in repentance or second chances. Rather, he tells the church to remove the man so that

the man's "spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord" (v. 5b). Surely, Paul is open to the man eventually rejoining the church should he indeed prove repentant (see 2 Cor. 2:5-8). But the point is, his sin is publicly known and makes a public statement about Christ. Therefore, the church should respond with an equally public statement before the world: "Not acceptable! Christians don't do this!"

Having said that, it's worth observing in 1 Corinthians 5 that there was no question about whether or not the man was engaged in sin. It was an uncontested fact. However, if there is a question about whether or not a sin has occurred, even if it's a scandalous sin, the church should pause long enough to conduct a thorough investigation, as Jesus requires in Matthew 18. For instance, a church doesn't want to discipline someone for embezzlement (a publicly scandalous sin) based on hearsay, only to have the secular courts throw out the case three months later because of insufficient evidence.

What then are the two considerations that might cause a church to speed up the processes of discipline? A church might deem it wise to move more quickly when (i) there's an immediate threat to the unity of the church body or (ii) there's a sin which could bring great harm to the name of Christ in the community. There is no precise formula for establishing when one of these lines is crossed, and a church does well to appoint a plurality of godly elders to give oversight to such difficult matters.

Attendance and Restoration

Church members often wonder whether a person who has been excluded from membership and the Lord's Table can continue attending the church's weekly gatherings, as well as how they should interact with him or her throughout the week. The New Testament addresses this matter in a number of places (1 Cor. 5:9, 11; 2 Thess. 3:6, 14-15; 2 Tim. 3:5; Titus 3:10; 2 John 10), and different circumstances may well require different responses. But the instruction given by the elders in my own church generally falls under two points:

- Except for situations in which the unrepentant party's presence is a physical threat to the congregation, a church should welcome the person's attendance in the weekly gathering. There's no better place for the person to be than sitting under the preaching of God's Word.
- Though the family members of a disciplined individual should certainly continue to fulfill the biblical obligations of family life (e.g. Eph. 6:1-3; 1 Tim. 5:8; 1 Peter 3:1-2), the tenor of church members' relationships with the disciplined individual should markedly change. Interactions should not be characterized by casualness or friendliness but by deliberate conversations about repentance.

Restoration to the fellowship of the church occurs when there are signs of true repentance. What true repentance looks like depends on the nature of the sin. Sometimes repentance is a black and white matter, as with a man who has abandoned his wife. For him, repenting means returning to her, plain and simple. Yet sometimes repentance doesn't mean conquering a sin completely so much as demonstrating a new diligence in waging war against the sin, as with a person caught in a cycle of addiction.

Clearly, the question of true repentance is a difficult one that requires much wisdom. Caution must be balanced with compassion. Some time may need to pass for repentance to be demonstrated by its fruits, but not too much time (see 2 Cor. 2:5-8). Once a church decides to restore a repenting individual to its fellowship and the Lord's Table, there should be no talk of a probation period or second-class citizenship. Rather the church should publicly pronounce its forgiveness (John 20:23), affirm its love for the repenting individual (2 Cor. 2:8), and celebrate (Luke 15:24).

WHY SHOULD A CHURCH PRACTICE DISCIPLINE?

As a church moves toward practicing church discipline, it will often find itself facing real-life situations that are complex and have no exact "case-study" in Scripture to help it sift through the various layers of circumstances. It will not always be clear whether formal church discipline is required, or how long the processes should take, or whether the guilty party is truly repentant, and so on.

As a congregation and its leaders work through these complex issues, they must remember that the church is called, above all else, to guard the name and glory of Christ. Fundamentally, church discipline is about the reputation of Christ and whether or not the church can continue to affirm the verbal profession of someone whose life egregiously mischaracterizes Christ. The sins and circumstances of sin will vary tremendously, but this one question always needs to be in the forefront of our churches' thoughts: "How will this sinner's sin and our response to it reflect the holy love of Christ?"

After all, to care about the reputation of Christ is to care about the good of non-Christians. When churches fail to practice church discipline, they begin to look like the world. They are like salt that has lost its saltiness, which is only good for being trampled upon (Matt. 5:13). They are no witness at all to a world lost in darkness.

Also, to care about the reputation of Christ is to care about other members of the church. Christians should want to look like Jesus, and church discipline helps to keep his holy picture clear. Members are reminded to take greater care in their own lives whenever a formal act of discipline occurs. The Congregationalist James sums it up well: "The advantages of discipline are obvious. It reclaims backsliders, detects hypocrites, circulates a salutary awe through the church, adds a further incentive to watchfulness and prayer, proves beyond question the fact and consequences of human frailty, and moreover, publicly testifies against unrighteousness."^[2]

Finally, to care about the reputation of Christ is to care about the individual caught in sin. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul knew the most loving course of action was to exclude a man from the congregation "so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord" (1 Cor. 5:5).

Why should a church practice discipline? For the good of the individual, the good of non-Christians, the good of the church, and the glory of Christ.^[3] Keeping these basic goals in mind will help churches and elders move from one difficult case to another, knowing that God's wisdom and love will prevail even as ours fall short.

1. John Angell James, *Church Fellowship or The Church Member's Guide*, excerpted from volume XI of the 10th edition of the *Works of John Angell James*, 53.
2. James, *Christian Fellowship*, 53.
3. See Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Crossway, 2004), 174-78.