

Christian Servanthood 2

Week 1 - Principles of Church Discipline

Introduction

Most American churches do not practice church discipline—either informal admonition or formal discipline. There are many reasons for this failure: lack of involvement between the members, acceptance of autonomous individualism and moral relativism, over-reaction to abuse of church discipline, fear of society's disfavor, etc. Regardless of the reasons, this is a grave error that will greatly weaken a local church (see below).

Christian workers should strive to build home churches that understand the biblical principles of church discipline, and practice those principles (when necessary) with the proper attitude.

Biblical Principles of Church Discipline

1. Church discipline is doctrinally based upon divine discipline, and is therefore an act of caring love (see Hebrews 12:5-12). The discipline that God directs toward all Christians should therefore serve as a theological and attitudinal guideline for all forms of church discipline. Most importantly in this regard, discipline is redemptive rather than retributive in intent (see Matthew 18:11-14; Galatians 6:1).

Notice that the preceding context of Jesus' teaching on church discipline (Matthew 18:11-4) is about the shepherd who leaves the 99 to find the 1 lost sheep. "and" in vs. 15 makes it clear that the steps of church discipline describe the lengths to which we should be willing to go to win erring brethren. In the same way, the following context (Matthew. 18:21ff.) emphasizes the importance of forgiveness when implementing church discipline. Notice how Paul reminds the Corinthians of this in 2 Corinthians 2:5-8.

Paul's concern in Galatians 6:1 is that the spiritual ones "restore" those caught in sin. They should do this both with gentleness and humility, rather than harshly or self-righteously.

2. There are, however, important distinctions between God's discipline and church discipline:
 - o God's discipline is directed toward all Christians (Hebrews 12:6-8), while formal church discipline is only for those who are unrepentant in a lifestyle of severe sin (Matthew 18:16,17 - "if he does not listen;" 1 Corinthians 5:11). Therefore, while God's discipline is normative, formal church discipline is certainly not normative for all Christians.
 - o God's discipline also includes proactive spiritual training (Hebrews 12:3,4,10; John 15:2), while formal church discipline is always administered in response to sin(s).
 - o God never errs in the discipline his children, but Christians can and sometimes do err in their discipline of other Christians. When this is the case, we should have the humility to apologize for any mistakes we have made in this area.

3. Failure to practice church discipline when needed is a direct violation of God's will (1 Corinthians 5:2) and will be destructive to the local church.
 - Failure to discipline victoriously and righteously can result in deterioration in the attitude of the church toward willful sin. (This is the "little leaven leavening the whole lump" in 1 Corinthians 5:6.)

Supply examples. See also 1 Timothy 5:20, which indicates that making an example of someone often has a salutary effect on others who learn vicariously about the seriousness of chronic sin.

- It can also result in a build-up of frustration and anger within the group when members see their friends being exploited by sinners. Such built-up anger can result in destructive outbursts when people lose self-control.
- It may also weaken the church's witness to the world (see 1 Corinthians 5:1,2). Evangelistically effective churches love one another as Jesus loves us (John 13:34,35)—and this love includes discipline.

Sometimes this is direct—non-Christians are impressed that you are willing to intervene and do the difficult thing to help others. More often it is indirect—non-Christians are drawn by the quality of community, not realizing that part of the reason for this is that we are willing to discipline one another when needed.

4. Formal church discipline should be limited to serious sins like those named by the New Testament in this connection: sexual immorality, covetous/swindling, idolatry, reviling/factiousness, substance abuse/dependence, false doctrine, unwillingness to work, etc. (1 Corinthians 5:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:6,14,15; 1 Timothy 1:20; 2 Timothy 2:17,18; Titus 3:10).

Supply examples of these.

It would also include sins not explicitly mentioned by these passages, like physical violence, chronic disruption of meetings, etc.

It does not include sins of omission and character fine-tuning issues.

5. Normally, church discipline for serious sins should proceed in a series of increasing measures ranging from private reproof through corporate confrontation to excommunication if necessary—to persuade the person to repent (Matthew 18:15-17).

Realize that the steps given by Jesus in this passage are not to be enacted in a legalistic way. Depending on the situation (see below), you may take more or fewer steps before you would excommunicate someone. In general, though, we would see these steps as the minimal measures we should be willing to take with someone before dis-fellowshipping him/her. Also, if someone underwent formal church discipline and then repented, if they relapsed into that sin at a later time we would not "pick up where we left off last time." Rather, we would start at the beginning again. If we are going to error, better to error on the side of mercy.

- Since the goal of church discipline is to win the person, it should end when there is repentance and the church should re-establish the repentant one (2 Corinthians 2:6-8).
- Christians should not relate to excommunicants as enemies to be rejected, nor as walking Christians to enjoy fellowship with—but as brothers to be admonished in the hope that they may repent (2 Thessalonians 3:15).

If we are willing to confront people in a timely way over serious sin issues, it is rarely necessary to actually excommunicate. This is because when the sinner realizes that you will discipline this issue, they usually either repent or leave of their own accord. However, when we are soft on serious issues (ignoring them and hoping they'll go away), we are more likely to find ourselves in situations where formal church discipline is necessary and the sinner is surprised and miffed because we're suddenly acting on this issue.

6. Although not commanded by the New Testament, we strongly recommend seeking counsel with other mature Christians before enacting serious church discipline.

In Xenos, home church leaders are required to get approval by the elders before bringing someone before the church or excommunicating him/her. We prefer that leaders talk with their home group overseer even earlier in the process. This is an important check on leaders who may be over-reacting because of immaturity or being too close to the situation.

Even in lesser church discipline measures, it is wise (when possible) to talk with other Christian workers who have had experience with similar issues. If they know you, they may help you lean against your own tendency toward softness or harshness.

7. There are many variables to be prayerfully considered and discussed when contemplating formal church discipline. Consider the following questions:
 - Does the person claim to be a Christian, or not? Church discipline is normally for those who claim to have received Christ.

For example, we wouldn't call on an interested non-Christian attending our home group to quit having sex with his girlfriend. Christian ethics are for the regenerate, who agree that the bible is authoritative and who are indwelt by the spirit who convicts them in moral matters (see 1 Thessalonians 4:8).

What might be exceptions to this? One who is threatening or violent at a meeting, one who is chronically trying to seduce members, false teachers, etc.

- Is the person ignorant of the sinfulness of this issue, or does he know better? If uninstructed, this should be the first step.

"Reprove" connotes mere correction; "rebuke" is stronger and include censure because the person knows better.

For example, we would deal with a new Christian's sexual immorality or drug abuse very differently than we would a long-time Christian. With the former, we would ask them if they know what god teaches in this area, take them to the word, and challenge them to pray to god about this. With the latter, we would normally presume a level of willfulness that calls for stronger correction.

- Was the sin a "fall from grace," or part of a pattern of sin in this area?

A "fall from grace" refers to one who existentially succumbs to temptation in an area in which he has gained moral freedom. A "pattern" refers to chronic failure in an area. The pattern normally calls for stronger discipline because it suggests willful disregard of god's conviction.

- Is the person open about his sin and receptive to correction, or does he hide/defend/excuse his sin?

Those who are repentant often confess their sin, or when confronted they agree without excuses that it is wrong and express a desire to overcome it. Normally, we should rejoice at their good attitude and encourage and help them move forward. It is a bad sign, though, when people respond with denials, defensiveness, rationalizations, anger that you have confronted them, etc. Such an attitude warrants a stronger response on our part.

- Is this an isolated problem in a person who is growing spiritually, or is it part of an overall way of life that disregards God's will?

For example, a young brother may drink too much—but we see clear signs of spiritual growth (e.g., openness with others, hunger for the word, sharing his faith, breaking from a sexually immoral lifestyle, etc.). In this case, we may decide to leave this alone for now because god may not yet be calling for this issue. On the other hand, if a brother drinks too much and we see a general disinterest in the things of God—we may surmise that this issue is blocking the spirit's work, and therefore call for change in this area.

- Is progress in the problem area merely disappointing to you, or is it actually worsening?

For example, we may wish that the person had made more progress by now with their financial irresponsibility. But the fact is that he is now working steadily, no longer tries to borrow money from others, and is slowly paying off the debt he owes for back rent. Is he where you want him to be? No. Is he making progress in the right direction? Yes. In such cases, encouragement may speed growth more than confrontation.

- Does the person have the ability to change, or does this problem require additional help? In the latter case, we should first call on the person to receive the help he needs.

For example, those with mental illness often act very disruptively. We should offer to get such people access to professional help and medication. If they refuse to avail themselves to this help, we may need to withhold privileges until they are willing to do this.

- Does the unrepentant sinner insist on staying in fellowship, or has he left the church? Church discipline is for those who want to live in sin and also enjoy Christian fellowship.

We should not say to one who is leaving, "you are excommunicated." Neither should we continue to confront the person on the issue. Rather, (if the issue is serious) we should tell him that he will need to talk to our leadership should he decide later that he wants to return to fellowship.

Concluding Comments

Have any of you benefited from serious/formal church discipline?

Have any of you benefited from admonition, correction, or rebuke?

Have any of you benefited vicariously from others being disciplined?

Have any of you been in home groups or churches that are lax in this area?

Assignment Due Next Week

Read the Nee excerpt (Spiritual Authority, pp. 67-74, 107-110, 115-122) and Stedman article.

Briefly record where you agree or disagree with their teaching about church leaders' authority. Be prepared to defend your conclusions in class.

Memory Verses

Matthew 18:15-17**

1 Corinthians 5**

Key Points to Know for Exam

Be familiar with the first six “Biblical Principles of Church Discipline.”

Be able to explain three of the ten variables to be prayerfully considered and discussed when contemplating formal church discipline