



“Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened,” I Corinthians 5:7.

Dealing With a Delinquent Brother

Lesson Aim: To guide our relationship with a wayward believer so as to maintain Christian principles and reclaim him for service.

L134. Date: March 1975. **Text:** I Corinthians 5:1-6, 9-11; II Corinthians 2:6-8. **Topic:** Church: Discipline.

“You don't believe in church discipline, do you?”

“Certainly. I do.”

“Why?”

“The Bible teaches it!”

“I've never seen it in the Bible. Where is it taught?”

“You will find it discussed in Matthew 18:15-18; I Corinthians 5:1-11; II Corinthians 2:6-8; Romans 16:17; and other passages.”

“What does the Bible teach about church discipline?”

“That is what today's Sunday School lesson is about.”

The above conversation might have taken place between members of almost any evangelical church. There is a vague realization in the minds of many that the Bible says something about church discipline, but very few are clear as to what the Scripture teaches.

Today's study aims to guide your relationship with a wayward believer so as to maintain Christian principles and to reclaim him for service. The subject of religious discipline is approached from the viewpoint of the church. It is “church discipline” which is under consideration. What should the church do when one of her members falls into beliefs or practices which deny the Lord Jesus or cast reproach upon the cause of Christ? The church must exercise discipline. That exercise of discipline is not personal, but congregational. Pursue the study with a mind to receive instruction that you may be a better child of God.

I. MEANING OF DISCIPLINE

“Discipline” is a good word. It refers to that training which develops self-control and character or orderliness and efficiency. Discipline may be expressed in many areas. There is a self-discipline which one exercises when he places limits upon himself. There is parental discipline by which parents guide and control the conduct and development of children. There is discipline in school. There is discipline which is exercised by law. There is a discipline which God exercises upon His children. Yes, “discipline” is a good word.

Today's study relates to “church discipline.” It is concerned with the responsibility of the church to teach and correct her members. Each church is responsible to God to exercise proper discipline over her members. There are two kinds of church discipline. (1) Formative discipline is all that the church does in study, worship, and service to build a believer toward spiritual maturity and loyalty to the faith. Most people are not aware that such ministry of the church is one form of her exercise of discipline. “Discipline” is related to “disciple.” A disciple is one who follows another as a learner or trainee. Thank God for the blessed work of formative discipline in the church.

(2) Corrective discipline is that action of the church which is intended to deal with a member who has offended the church and/or society to such an extent that he must be called to account for his conduct. It sometimes ends with apology or renewal of commitment by the wayward member. Sometimes it reaches the tragic form of exclusion from the fellowship of the church. Such action is a last resort. Exclusion of a brother or sister from the church is like the amputation of a limb; you do it only when nothing else is possible and to protect the life of the body.

The church has little choice about the exercise of discipline. She will either exercise discipline or disobey her Lord. Her discipline should be exercised in love to the wayward member and in obedience to her Lord. Never should she exercise discipline as an act of vengeance nor in a desire for revenge. She is obligated to discipline her members in the spirit of the Lord, her Head.

II. AREAS OF DISCIPLINE

For what offences should a member be brought before the church for corrective discipline? The Bible answers with specific instruction. For four

designated offences, the church must exercise corrective discipline.

The church must exercise discipline when broken fellowship between brethren cannot be reconciled (Matthew 18:15, 17). When fellowship between two brethren is broken, God requires the following action. (1) Let the two men get together to try to settle their differences. If they can, that ends the matter. If they cannot, the second step must be taken. (2) Let one or two mature Christian brethren (Galatians 6:1) meet with the two brethren to try to work out the problem. If they can, that ends the matter. If they cannot, the third step must be taken. (3) Let the entire church hear the matter to try to work out the differences. If the brethren are reconciled, that ends the matter. If one refuses to be reconciled to his brother in Christ, he is to be excluded from the fellowship of the entire congregation, as if he were not even a Christian. The church is the body of Christ in her community. It is very serious for her to suffer divisions and to let them go unresolved.

The church should exercise discipline when disorderly conduct is practiced by a member. **“Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly . . . And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother,”** II Thessalonians 3:6, 11, 12. What is it to “walk disorderly”? It is simply to live an ill-ordered life, to be undisciplined. The same word (**ataktos**) is translated “unruly” in I Thessalonians 5:14. It means to be neglectful of duty, to deviate from the prescribed order or rule. The term is used to describe soldiers, marching out of order or quitting the ranks. Such sin in the church merits her withdrawing from the guilty brother. Disorderly conduct is a sin which merits discipline.

The church should exercise discipline when a member is guilty of immorality. Such a case of fornication is described in I Corinthians 5:1-13. It is reviewed later in the lesson. Let it suffice here to note the church's action on such a case: **“. . . I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is a brother be a fornicator . . . with such an one no not to eat,”** verse 11. To “keep company” means to share fellowship with another. The church is not to share fellowship with a believer who is immoral. Discipline is required instead. The church should exercise discipline when a member rejects the fundamental doctrines of the faith. **“Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them,”** Romans 16:17. To “avoid them” means to “disassociate yourselves from them.” People who reject the doctrines of Christ are not even to be bidden “God speed,” II John

10, 11. Take care, however, to distinguish between one who rejects the gospel as a heretic (Titus 3:10-11) and one who is simply unlearned and thus weak in the faith (Romans 14:1). Reject the former and cultivate the latter. What one believes is important. Doctrine is so important that a rejection of the faith is reason for discipline by the church.

Those are areas in which the church is specifically commanded to exercise corrective discipline upon her members. Some people may list other offences, such as non-attendance, as a basis for discipline. That may be included as a part of the “disorderly conduct” charge, but the four areas listed above are positively set forth as demanding discipline.

III. AUTHORITY TO DISCIPLINE

Do you question the authority of the church to exercise discipline upon her members? Do you wonder if she has the authority, or from whence the authority comes?

Look back to Jesus’ instructions in Matthew 18:15-18. Private differences should be worked out in private, if possible. If not settled there, they must be brought before the congregation. The church has the authority to settle the difference or even to exclude the rebellious member from her fellowship as if he were “an heathen man,” an unbeliever. Jesus underscored the authority of the church to act in those cases by declaring, **“Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven,”** Matthew 18:18. That is to say, heaven (God Himself!) recognizes the authority of the church to act in matters of discipline when she follows God's rules. There is no authority upon earth higher than that of a congregation of Christians. An aggrieved brother may take his case to the offender, to other Christian brethren, and finally to the church. There is no appeal beyond the church! What she does, in the Spirit of Christ, is accepted by heaven. The authority of God rests upon the church when she exercises formative and corrective discipline upon her members.

Do not be offended when the church acts. She is acting upon the authority of God. Do not make the pastor the “prosecuting attorney” in acts of corrective discipline. The whole church, not just the pastor, exercises discipline. Let the church act. She is the one authorized of God. In some cases, churches have abused their authority to discipline. They sin in so doing. Abuse does not remove the ordinance of God. Let every member view with awe the act of the church when she ministers as God's agent in discipline of the wayward.

IV. EXAMPLE OF DISCIPLINE

An incident in the life of the church in Corinth is recorded in I Corinthians 5:1-13 which affords an opportunity to see a church's acting in corrective discipline. Look for guidelines which your church should follow in like cases.

A. An open sin — A member of the church was guilty of immorality (fornication) which was “reported commonly” so that everybody was talking about it. There seemed to have been no question of his guilt nor of public knowledge of it. He was guilty of incest — living with his father's wife.

B. Response of the church — The church should have been overwhelmed with sorrow and shame at the incident. The man who had done such a thing should have been expelled “taken away from you.” Instead, the carnal believers at Corinth were filled with pride so that they did not care. That might well suggest that the church which is unconcerned about spiritual discipline reveals that she is carnal.

C. Act of authority — The church was commanded to act “in the name (by the authority) of the Lord Jesus Christ” in her response to the sin in her fellowship. What should she have done? “. . . **To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus,**” verse 5. The church, not the Apostle Paul, was to “purge out the old leaven” of sin in her. She should “not keep company” with the immoral member; “with such an one no not to eat.” He was to be excluded from membership in the church.

Observe that no mention is made of sending a person or a committee to talk with him as is suggested in Matthew 18:16. No, the sin was open. The brother was obviously aware of his sin. The church was authorized to act without private consultation with the brother who had sinned. She could send a committee, if she wished; but it was not required of God.

D. Purpose of action — Why discipline? Paul answered in verses 3-5 that one so excluded would know the church's displeasure (and hence God's displeasure, Matthew 18:17-18) at his sin. Experiencing the wages of sin in his flesh, he would be turned to repentance. That is the reason for the command: “**Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person,**” verse 13.

Discipline is never vindictive. It is not merely an act of punishment. It is intended to reveal the seriousness of sin, God's attitude toward it, and to call the offender to repentance and restoration of fellowship.

E. Reclaiming the wayward — The discipline upon the brother

mentioned in I Corinthians 5 had its desired effect. It is evident from II Corinthians 2:1-11 that the brother repented. What should the church do? Paul wrote, **“Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many. So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow. Wherefore I beseech you that ye would confirm your love toward him,”** verses 6-8. The obedience of the church is tested as greatly in her willingness to forgive and receive the repentant as in her willingness to discipline and exclude the rebellious. Discipline is necessary when a member strays. **“Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother,”** II Thessalonians 3:15.

God instructs the church to exercise three relationships toward a repentant brother: (1) Forgive him, verse 7. (2) Comfort him, verse 7. (3) Love him, verse 8. The goal of discipline is to reclaim, not to punish. Keep God's attitude toward the disciplined, and you will exercise discipline aright.

Why should the church exercise discipline? What practical good comes from it? Discipline, when properly exercised, will keep the body pure and her spiritual life vital. It will preserve the honor of religion by showing her intention to “practice what she preaches.” It serves as a warning to keep others from sin (I Timothy 5:20). It aids in reclaiming the wayward and turning him from sin.

What if some of the church do not want to discipline a member? Remember this truth: The command of God is more to be obeyed than the preferences of people. Fear God more than men and formative and corrective disciples will follow. Keep the Spirit of Christ, the Head of the church, and you will not err in the authority of the church to discipline.

Questions

1. What is discipline?
2. What is church discipline?
3. What are the two types of church discipline?
4. For what offences should a church exercise discipline?
5. What are the steps when brethren break fellowship?
6. How far should the church go in discipline of members?
7. What should be your attitude toward a disciplined member?
8. How does Matthew 18:18 teach authority to discipline?
9. What should the church do with a repentant member?
10. What is the ultimate purpose of all church discipline?

