

Church Discipline

I. Introduction:

While the word discipline often brings to mind the idea of judgment and punishment, the actual idea is closer to that of training. There are 5 Greek words translated "discipline" in the NT which are: Gymnazo – used in 1 Tim. 4:7-8; where we get our word gymnasium. Literally it means "to exercise naked" and signifies the training of body and mind. There is also Taxis – used in Col. 2:5; which means to arrange, to set in order. There is Hupopiazō, used in 1 Cor. 9:27, which means "to strike under the eye; beat black and blue". There is Sophronismos – used in 2 Tim. 1:7, which means self-control. And lastly there is Paideia, which signifies the rearing of a child, training and discipline. It is used in Eph. 6:4, Rev. 3:19, and in Heb. 12:7-11. It summarizes the entire process where a parent equips a child for adulthood.

There are several areas of discipline referred to in the New Testament. When we think of church discipline, we usually think of the formal discipline process carried out by the leadership of the church that may lead to the excommunication of a member. While this principle of discipline is taught in the Scriptures there are other, equally important, elements of discipline that are critical to a healthy church body.

There is, first, personal discipline. This is this training that takes place in the daily life of the Christian. We are told to discipline ourselves for the purpose of godliness (1 Tim. 4:7) and we see that Paul commended the church in Colossae for their "good discipline and the stability of their faith" (Col. 2:5). Furthermore, we are told that we should endure when we are disciplined by the Lord (Heb. 12:7) remembering that He disciplines us "for our good so that we may share in His holiness" (Heb. 12:10).

This discipline is of a personal and private nature that continues on throughout our life in our relationship with the Lord as we grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

There is also the ongoing communal Church discipline that takes place through the normal process of teaching the Word and is evidenced in healthy body life. Through this preaching and teaching, believers in the church are brought to a place of repentance before the Lord (2 Cor. 7:8-11) and the believer may be given cause to examine himself before the Lord (2 Cor. 13:1-5). In addition, the church is admonished to reprove the rebellious (Titus 1:13) and those not living sensibly or godly (Titus 2:15). They are also to warn the unruly (1 Thess. 5:14). This type of discipline that occurs during the normal, ongoing "body life" leads to the general admonishing of one another to please our neighbor (Rom. 15:14) and to stimulate one another to love and to good deeds (Heb. 10:24).

There is also the process of informal and formal church discipline. (Outlined below in III. The Process of Church Discipline).

II. The Motivation for Church Discipline

The motivation behind church discipline is obedience to the Lord and love for His people with the goal of restoration. Jesus' parable of the Lost Sheep is a reminder of the love Christ has even for one that has gone astray. The purpose and driving force behind church discipline is the restoration of a brother or sister back to fellowship with the body and to the Lord. In the process of discipline, there is also the opportunity to provide teaching and with it an element of healthy fear produced in the rest of the body that they may be kept from sin (1 Tim. 5:20). Upon restoration, the repentant believer is to be forgiven and even comforted (2 Cor. 2:5-11). This restoration is generally to be done in a spirit of meekness (Gal. 6:1) but may also require

more severe application when the church leadership is dealing with an issue such as false teaching. (Rom. 16:17, Titus 3:10-11, 2 John 10-11).

III. The Process of Church Discipline

Jesus provides four steps in Matthew 18 that are necessary to adequately provide the discipline required in a healthy church setting. While the idea of church discipline may seem repugnant to some as unfair or judgmental, it has been ordained by the Lord Himself for the purpose of maintaining purity and order in the church. It would appear that when the church of Corinth failed to discipline one who was publicly in sin, Paul had harsh words for not only the sinner but also for the church which had failed to carry out its responsibilities (1 Cor. 5:1-13).

The method provided by the Lord may require more than one attempt at the first two steps outlined in Matthew 18. Also, it appears that discipline initiated by the church leadership does not necessarily move through the four step process provided (e.g. gross sin, 1Cor. 5:1-7). As the process begins, the knowledge of the issue is kept as confined and private as possible. If the sinning party refuses to acknowledge and repent of his sin, as each step progresses, more people become involved and have knowledge of the situation. In an instance such as false teaching, because the sin is already evident, there is no need to keep the matter confined, but rather the decisive, public response to such sin is required in order to affect the desired outcome.

It happens sometimes, when the areas of personal and ongoing discipline is neglected or disregarded, that a believer may sin and require the healthy discipline of the body of Christ. What we normally refer to as church discipline is the four step process Jesus sets forth in Matthew 18:15-17 in treating a brother who has sinned.

This process is:

- 1) Go and reprove him in private
- 2) Go with witnesses
- 3) Tell it to the Church
- 4) Treat him as an outsider

Step 1 (Matt. 18:15)

When a brother sins and one becomes aware of it, the responsibility of the believer is to go to that brother in private and confront him with his sin in a gentle and humble manner. The goal is to have the one sinning understand their sin and to help them come to a place of repentance and restoration. If the sinning brother repents, the brother is forgiven and this is as far as the matter needs to go. The steps in the process of discipline are determined by the response of the sinning believer.

Step 2 (Matt 18:16)

If after step one, the brother does not repent of his sin and refused to hear your admonition, the next step is to bring one or two witnesses. These are not people who were witnesses of the sin, but rather people who will serve as witnesses to listen to the response of the sinning brother when confronted with his sin. These can be any in the church but should be those who would be respected in the congregation and would be able to offer wisdom and counsel as the need arises. The purpose of witnesses is also to protect both parties by being able to substantiate the conversation so that in the mouth of two or three witnesses, every fact may be confirmed. The witnesses may also be required to provide testimony to the church should the sinning brother not respond at this level. If

after the sinning brother is confronted in the presence of these witnesses he repents and seeks forgiveness, again, this is the extent to which discipline needs to progress. If however, the sinning brother refuses to listen, the next step is to tell the matter to the church.

Step 3 (Matt. 18:17a)

If the sinning brother refuses to listen to the confrontation of the witnesses, after a period of time, the matter is to be brought to the church. It may be that the second step is repeated several times over the course of some time. If the sinning brother seems to be responding, these steps may be repeated as seems prudent. It may be appropriate to take the matter to the pastor and elders. This intermediary step in one sense is "taking it to the church" as the elders in Old Testament times were often representatives of the nation of Israel as a whole, but at Grace we hold that taking it to the church is taking to the assembly meaning the church body. Bringing it to the pastor and/or elders is a furtherance of step 2.

If, however, there is insufficient response to these confrontations, the matter then needs to go to the next level. If the sinning brother has not responded appropriately, the elders of the church will then get involved in the process of communicating with the sinning brother and overseeing the communication of the issue with the church (Greek – ekklesia – the gathered body; God's people viewed together as a new and whole community).

The elders routinely will meet with the sinning brother and relate the issue as stated by those witnesses involved in the confrontation in step 2. If there is still no repentance, the sinning brother will be advised that this behavior and refusal to listen will result in the matter being told to the church and possibly the fourth and final step of the disciplinary action. This will be typically done by the elders meeting with the brother and reading a prepared statement outlining the sin issues involved, the steps taken to date and the expected response. The elders will state that unless there is repentance with the requisite fruit that the matter will be told to the church at the earliest reasonable time. The statement that will be presented to the church will be provided to the sinning brother with the request that they not be present on the day that this is told to the church.

The practice of GCO is to tell the church recognized as the local assembly of the believers during a regular Sunday service. On the rare occasion that church discipline reaches this phase, it will be told to the congregation at the end of the church service. An announcement will be made prior that church family business must be attended to and that those who are not members or who don't normally attend or are guest and those under the age of 15 are asked to excuse themselves. At this time, the statement will be read outlining the person involved, their offense and the willful refusal to repent of the sin. The church body will be called upon, as they have relationship with the sinning brother, to bear their influence upon them to aggressively plead with the brother to repent and be restored to the body.

Step 4 (Matt. 18:17b)

The fourth and last step of church discipline, when the sinning brother refuses to listen to the church is to treat him as a "Gentile and a tax gatherer". The term "Gentile" was primarily used of non-Jews who held to their traditional paganism and had no part in the covenant, worship, or social life of the Jews. On the other hand, a "tax gatherer" was an outcast from the Jews by choice, having become a traitor to his own people. Jesus' use of these terms doesn't mean that the church is to treat these people badly. It simply means

that when a professing believer refuses to repent, the church is to treat him as if he were outside of the fellowship. They are not to let him associate and participate in the blessing and benefits of the Christian assembly.”¹

The reason for this serious act of putting a brother outside the church is for the purpose outlined earlier of obeying the commands of scripture. That is, to protect the purity of the church fellowship, to provide an example to the flock and a testimony to the world and for the welfare of the sinning brother that he may be put to shame and perhaps to awaken the brother that he might come to a place of repentance and restoration.

“When a church has done everything it can to bring a sinning brother back to purity of life but is unsuccessful, that individual is to be left to his sin and his shame. If he is truly a Christian, God will not cast him away, but He may allow him to sink still deeper before he becomes desperate enough to turn from his sin.

The command not to have fellowship or even social contact with the unrepentant brother does not exclude all contact. "When there is an opportunity to admonish him and try to call him back, the opportunity should be taken. In fact, such opportunities should be sought. But the contact should be for the purpose of admonishment and restoration and no other”.²

¹ Grace Community Church. A Grace Community Church Distinctive. Church Discipline

² Ibid.

Note: Besides outlining the position of GCO on the matter of church discipline from a Biblical perspective, this document also incorporates some of the actual action that may be taken to lend practical relevance to its position.