

Church Discipline, Restoration and Forgiveness

By Dennis Cornish

Let us be clear from the outset, the goal of church discipline is not to punish a failing brother or sister in Christ. Its purpose is to bring the sinning person to a point of Godly sorrow and repentance, so that he or she turns away from their sin, and for them to experience a fully restored relationship with God and other believers. For the individual involved, the intent is healing and restoration, and corporately the purpose of church discipline is to build up, edify and strengthen the entire body of Christ. We are to be salt and light, and if we as a church act and look like the rest of the world we lose our testimony. When a believer is put under church discipline, it serves notice to the world that the church will not accommodate sin. When the process of church discipline brings about the desired result — repentance — then the church must extend love, comfort, forgiveness, and restoration to the individual (2 Corinthians 2:5-8).

Church leadership must ensure that it engages in discipline with a proper attitude, and that can only come through prayer and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The appropriate tone with which we must approach those to be disciplined can be found in Galatians 6:1 where Scripture admonishes us to exercise discipline in the following manner:

"Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently.

But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted." God desires His people to be pure. He calls us to live holy lives, set apart for His glory. 1 Peter 1:16 echoes Leviticus 11 :44 in the following command: *"Be holy, because I am holy."* One of the marks of a believer is their moral purity. A person who has submitted to the Lordship of Jesus Christ is one who endeavors to walk with integrity and in holiness. It has been said that holiness is the premium virtue for those who follow Christ. It is also a reality that not all who profess Christ are following within the preeminence of holiness. Therefore, if the church ignores blatant, unrepentant sin within the body of Christ, then we fail to honor the Lord's call to be holy and live for His glory. The church needs to be involved in discipline because the Lord disciplines His children. Hebrews 12:6 states: *"For the Lord disciplines the one He loves and chastises every son whom he receives."* In 1 Corinthians 5:12-13, we see

from Paul's writings that God passes the responsibility to judge their own to the church family: *"It isn't my responsibility to judge outsiders, but it certainly is your responsibility to judge those inside the church who are sinning. God will judge those on the outside;"* but as the passage goes on to say; *"You must remove the evil person from among you."*

Church discipline is the biblical process of confrontation and correction carried out by individual Christians, church leaders, or the entire church when a member of Christ's body is involved in a matter of open sin. It is meant specifically for believers involved in overt sin. The biblical process for confronting and correcting a wayward believer is clearly outlined in Matthew 18:15-17. First, the believer that has been offended must meet one on one with the person who committed the offense. This is to be a private meeting that's purpose is to reconcile the matter and to win over his brother, bringing him to a place of unity and restoration. If this is unsuccessful, the offended believer will attempt to meet again, but this time taking with him one or two other members of the church (Elders?). This allows the rebuke of sin and resulting correction to be confirmed by two or three witnesses. Once this occurs, and yet the issue remains unresolved, the matter is to be taken before the entire congregation, especially if it is a sin that is commonly known within the church. The entire church body will now publicly confront the believer and encourage him to repent. Finally, and after sufficient time has passed and all attempts to discipline the sinning believer fail to bring change and repentance, the person will be removed from the fellowship of the church. This is a last, but sometimes necessary step. It is an action that is painful to both the church and the one being disciplined, but one that must be taken for the health of the body. A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough. The purity of the church must be foremost when dealing with unrepentant sin. We must keep in mind; it is the unrepentant sinner that has brought us to this action. At some point after having been removed from the body of the church, the sinner may very well repent of their sin and wish to be reinstated into the church. At this time, the repentant sinner would meet with the Elders and seek to be evaluated once again, allowing the Elders to examine him for the existence of evidence that he has truly repented and come again into the saving grace of Jesus Christ. If there is sufficient evidence of his unconditional repentance, at the discretion of the Elders, he may be

fully restored to all the rights, duties, privileges, and responsibilities of fellowship. Just as we are to be obedient to the process of discipline, we are also to be obedient to the process of restoration and forgiveness. We must remember that every sin (except blasphemy committed against the Holy Spirit) is forgivable and must be forgiven when the offender turns from evil and seeks God's face in sincere, humble repentance.

We are to conduct church discipline in the name and in the power of the Lord because the church is acting on behalf of the Lord in carrying out discipline. Paul promises in 1 Corinthians 5:4 that the Lord will be with us when we engage in church discipline: *"When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present..."* When the church acts on God's behalf in this process, God acts as well.

One source I read made the following statement: "In our arrogance, we can sometimes convince ourselves that, given enough time, we can turn someone from their sin. There is a great deal of emphasis on counseling in our culture, and even in the church. There is a place for counsel, but we often give ourselves and our system of counseling too much credit. We don't want to admit failure, and so we refuse to take that final step of "removing the wicked person from ourselves." He goes on to say that: "Church discipline is based upon the recognition that we have done what we can in the context of the church, and furthermore, God can turn the wayward person to repentance apart from us and apart from our ministry, whether that be teaching, or helps, or exhortation."

The author goes on to speak of the therapeutic movement within Christianity, and their frequently employed use of the term "unconditional love" or "unconditional acceptance," Neither of these are biblical concepts and in reality, they are adverse or opposed to the duty of exercising church discipline. The exercise of church discipline on a wayward brother or sister is to love that person and to seek their higher good.

Matthew 18:15-20 tells us that the entire church, as represented by their Elders, has all Biblical authority to bind members from various church functions, such as partaking in the sacraments, and up to and including forbidding them to remain in

fellowship within the church. The Elders also have the Biblical authority, after prayerful determination of true repentance, to forgive them, (loose them), and return them to the fold. It is the duty of the Elders to prevent the leaven of unrepentant sin from taking root in the church. Professing Christians caught in sin are to be disciplined and be expelled if they remain impenitent. All the while we must keep in mind that the ultimate goal of Church discipline is always the restoration of sinners who must be received with open arms when they show true repentance.

In Isaiah 43:11 and John 14:6 God tells us that He alone provides redemption, besides Him there is no savior; but the Lord saves His people through the preaching of the gospel and the incorporation of believers into the body, His Church (Ephesians 2). Faithful Pastors and Elders preach this gospel as well as guard the purity of the church and are therefore among the means through which God works to save His people. As such, insofar as they follow Scripture, Pastors and Elders have the authority to confirm the spiritual state of those under their care — to declare, as far as they are able, that their congregants are resting in Jesus and thus have been forgiven their sins. When this authority is wielded with Scriptural wisdom, church decisions have divine authority, but only so long as they are faithful to the Apostolic and prophetic revelation of Scripture.

Again, the Lord does not transfer the right to forgive as that is His by virtue that He alone is God. He does, however, give church leaders authority to discern the life of a professing believer and proclaim, insofar as they can tell, that such a person is in a state of salvation. They can do this when they hear a credible profession of faith and see Christian fruit in a person's life, they can then, with confidence, confirm that a person has been forgiven by God. This can be seen in Acts 13:38-39; *"Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses."*

In the case of impenitence, church leaders have the authority to discipline the offender, to let the professing believer know that he is actually proclaiming himself an unbeliever by his lifestyle. They can tell the sinner that Christ has not forgiven

his sins because there is no evidence of repentance. John Calvin said: "those under discipline must take it seriously indeed, for discipline that is faithful to Scripture is God's way of warning us that we may not be truly converted".

If church discipline is meted out with Scriptural integrity and within the proper role of church leadership, then it will glorify God because it is done so in obedience to His instructions. It proves to God, and a watching world, that we desire to glorify Him. If the goal of discipline is restoration and forgiveness, it maintains the purity of the church and honors God by exhibiting fidelity to His principles. Daniel Wray, in his book (Biblical Church Discipline), says: "The goal in every type of discipline, whether it be gentle correction, admonition, rebuke, or excommunication, is always the restoration of the offender." Discipline, as seen from within the body of the church as it is happening, also deters others from sinning. Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 5:20: *"As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear."* This has a purifying effect on the congregation, calling them to be on guard lest they drift from the holiness that God demands from each of us.

Church discipline is mandated in Scripture and if we as a church are disobedient God will judge us for it. In Revelation 3:15-16 God says to the church: *"I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth."* Are we as a church going to settle for less than God would have of us, are we going to be lukewarm because church discipline is too hard, unpopular or might turn some away? Or will we walk in obedience to what has been so clearly outlined in Scripture? The choice is clear; we must maintain the purity of the church, in all the perfection that God intended for His church. Matthew 5:48 says: *"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."* In Ephesians 5:25-27 God outlines the purity He expects from us: *"...just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to Himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless."* Without discipline how are we to meet these expectations, how are we to honor the sacrifice that was made on the cross?

Our role as Elders is to discipline sin in our church, there is no question of this; our charge is to do it in love and in a manner that is truly Scriptural.