

CORRECTIVE CHURCH DISCIPLINE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

By Dub McClish

Introduction

The requirement of corrective discipline is present in every area of our lives. If the state does not exercise it there, will be anarchy in the land. If it is not exercised in the school system, the result will be confusion instead of education. If it is not practiced in the home, there will be sore and sad delinquency to follow. If individuals do not exercise concerning themselves, wasted lives will be the outcome. The church cannot be what it should be, maintaining its moral and doctrinal purity, its Christ-pleasing unity, and fulfilling its God-given work, without the Scripture-mandated practice of corrective discipline. Likely no Scriptural injunction has been more neglected in the church of Christ over the years than this directive. Indeed, so many of the grievous problems that beset the church of God can be directly traced to negligence toward or rejection of what the New Testament teaches on this subject. Some saints have lived to their mature years without ever seeing the congregation(s) of which they have been members withdraw fellowship from anyone. In some cases, their parents never did either.

The concept of spiritual discipline in the New Testament is two-fold. It includes the preventive and positive measures of teaching, exhortation and encouragement—every influence that will ennoble the character of God's people. Thus Paul included “teaching” and “instruction which is in righteousness” in those elements of the Word of God that will furnish one completely unto every good work (2 Tim. 3:16–17). This would include Bible classes, Gospel sermons, reading sound Gospel papers, attending Gospel meetings and faithful lectureships, and daily feasting upon God's Word. Such dedication to self-edification will prevent most spiritual lapses and failures in God's people before they occur.

Spiritual discipline also includes the negative, corrective measures of rebuke, reproof, correction, and even expulsion from the fellowship of the church as a last resort when one persists in sin. God's Word contains the elements of “reproof” and “correction” (2 Tim. 3: 16–17) and enjoins their use by God's faithful ones who must not only “preach the word” and “exhort,” but “reprove” and “rebuke” as the case may demand (2 Tim. 4:2). The aim of this manuscript is to deal with the sorely neglected practice of corrective discipline in the church and to issue a challenge to Christians everywhere to obey what Scripture teaches concerning it.

Some New Testament Passages That Enjoin Corrective Discipline

There are hundreds of passages that relate to discipline. In a certain sense practically the entire New Testament is connected with this purpose. There are at least 68 verses, however, that pertain directly to this subject, specifying a wide range of impenitent sins with which we are thus to deal. Space will allow us to call attention to only a few of these verses at this point. We will call attention to most of the others in the course of our study, however.

One of the most significant passages in the New Testament on corrective church discipline is found in 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15:

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which they received of us. For yourselves know how ye ought to imitate us: for we behaved not ourselves disorderly among you; neither did we eat bread for nought at any man's hand, but in labor and travail, working night and day, that we might not burden any of you; not because we have not the right, but to make ourselves an ensample unto you, that ye should imitate us. For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, If any will not work, neither let him eat. For we hear of some that walk among you disorderly, that work not at all, but are busybodies. Now them that are such we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread. But ye, brethren, be not weary in well-doing. And if any man obeyeth not our word by this epistle, note that man, that ye have no company with him, to the end that he may be ashamed. And yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.

The Son of God Himself taught:

And if thy brother sin against thee, go, show him his fault between thee and him alone: if he hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he hear thee not, take with thee one or two more, that at the mouth of two witnesses or three every word may be established. And if he refuse to hear them, tell it unto the church: and if he refuse to hear the church also, let him be unto thee as the Gentile and the publican (Mat. 18:15–17).

Additionally, Paul wrote:

Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them that are causing the divisions and occasions of stumbling, contrary to the doctrine which ye learned: and turn away from them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Christ, but their own belly; and by their smooth and fair speech they beguile the hearts of the innocent (Rom. 16:17–18).

John admonished:

Whosoever goeth onward and abideth not in the teaching of Christ, hath not God: he that abideth in the teaching, the same hath both the Father and the Son. If any one cometh unto you, and bringeth not this teaching, receive him not into your house, and give him no greeting: for he that giveth him greeting partaketh in his evil works (2 John 9–11).

Many other passages forcefully and clearly set before us the responsibility for corrective discipline (e.g., 1 Tim. 1:3–4; 19–20; 6:20–21; 2 Tim. 3:8–9; Tit. 1:9–11; 3:10–11). The entire fifth chapter of 1 Corinthians is devoted to this subject.

The teaching is so clear that no reasonably intelligent person can fail to grasp it. No excuse warrants our neglect of this responsibility when circumstances demand it. In a day when carnal-minded disciples who have been publicly disciplined are bringing lawsuits against the church (and are winning them in some cases), God's faithful people will not be deterred from this unpleasant, but necessary responsibility. If human laws are enacted against it, we must serve the higher law of God. If judges and/or juries rule against it, we must submit to the Judge of all men. With the apostles we are obligated to take our stand: "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

Specific Sins to Which Corrective Discipline Applies

Doctrinal Error

Numerous passages not only warn of doctrinal errors, but they also specify the exercise of discipline upon those who teach them. Timothy was to "...charge certain men not to teach a different doctrine" (1 Tim. 1:3). Those who continued to hold to and teach a different doctrine (specifically Hymenaeus and Alexander) made "shipwreck of the faith" and had to be "delivered unto Satan" (i.e., expelled from the fellowship of the saints) (1 Tim. 1:19–20). Some in Ephesus had to be turned away from because they "erred concerning the faith," professing in its stead "profane babblings and oppositions of the knowledge which is falsely so called" (1 Tim. 6:20–21).

Those first-century preterists who erred concerning the Truth, teaching that the resurrection was already past (particularly Hymenaeus and Philetus) were overthrowing the faith of others and were therefore to be shunned (2 Tim. 2:16–18). Gainsayers, vain talkers, deceivers, teachers of the fables and commandments of men, those who turn away from the Truth, are to have their mouths stopped and are to be reprov'd sharply (Tit. 1:9–14). As earlier noticed, those who promote teaching contrary to that of the apostles and who beguile the hearts of the innocent by their smooth and fair speech are to be marked and turned away from (Rom. 16:17–18). Also, as mentioned above, those who do not abide in the things which Christ taught—and inspired others to teach—are not to receive our hospitality or be greeted in such a way as to imply encouragement of their false teaching; to do such causes us to share in their guilt (2 John 9–11). Clearly, those who teach false doctrine and cannot be turned from it are to be the recipients of corrective discipline.

Ungodly Division

I say *ungodly division* because division is approved of God in some cases. In fact, when a brother or sister must be withdrawn from, a division between that person and the church occurs, but it is one that God not only approves, but that He demands. The one who commits a personal offense against his brother (Mat. 18:15–17) is a case in point. He has done that which has

caused division between himself and a brother and if he will not repent of it he is to be treated as an outsider. The one who causes “divisions and occasions of stumbling” by his false doctrine is to be first marked, then avoided (Rom. 16:17–18). God's elders are warned that from among themselves men will arise speaking perverse things to draw disciples away to themselves, thus causing division and not sparing the flock; elders are to watch for such to the end that they might deal with it when it occurred (Acts 20:29–31).

Those who “overthrow whole households” by their false teachings create ungodly divisions and factions; their mouths must be stopped and they must be sharply reprovved (Tit. 1:11–13). The “factious man” is to be avoided or refused after a first or second attempt to correct him (Tit. 3:10). *Factious* is from *hairetikon*, meaning one who is a schismatic or who causes unnecessary and ungodly divisions.¹ It is the word from which our English word, *heretic*, is derived and it is thus translated by the KJV in the foregoing passage. It is therefore unmistakably clear that those who would disturb by their evil deeds or doctrines the precious “unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:2) are to be the recipients of corrective church discipline.

Miscellaneous Causes

The New Testament's lengthiest treatment of corrective discipline (1 Cor. 5) is aimed primarily at the sin of fornication in a brother (vv. 1-9). However, the same disciplinary treatment is to be administered to those who are covetous, idolaters, revilers (*loidoros*: an abusive person, especially referring to verbal abuse²), drunkards, or extortioners (v. 11).

A text to which I earlier referred commands us to withdraw from those who walk “disorderly” (2 The. 3:6). *Disorderly* translates a word (*ataktos*) which especially relates to military behavior, “denoting not keeping rank, insubordinate”.³ The term particularly refers to those “that work not at all, but are busybodies” in the context (v. 11), but it is a broad term capable of referring to any conduct that expresses insubordination to and refusal to live in harmony with the Word of God. In the same context, Paul ordered the Thessalonians to note (“mark, take special notice of”⁴) and “have no company with” any who would not obey his word in the letter he was writing to them (v. 14).

The term *unruly* is used to describe those who were to be disciplined in the congregations of Crete (Tit. 1:10). This term (*anupotaktoi*) is related to the word for “disorderly,” and refers to one who is not in subjection, hence, “undisciplined, disobedient, rebellious.”⁵ The church must discipline the brother who will not so discipline himself as to abide in the doctrine of Christ. Again, we have here a term that is broad enough in its scope to include any sort of departure from Truth and righteousness.

By way of summary, the sins of teaching false doctrine, causing division unnecessarily (whether by false doctrine, a factious spirit, or by personal offenses), committing fornication, being covetous, idolatrous, revilers, drunkards, or indolent are all specifically named as worthy of corrective discipline if persisted in. Additionally, those who are disorderly and unruly and will not subject their own wills to the will of God in any other respect are also to be withdrawn from by the church. In the final analysis, it may be said that the scope of sins thus included is so broad as to include almost every sort of sin thus outwardly committed.

The Timing and Procedure of Applying Corrective Discipline

The New Testament does not give specific instructions for determining the precise moment at which to withdraw fellowship from an impenitent brother or sister. Various factors will differ from case to case that may affect the swiftness or slowness with which we should take this action. God has left this matter to be determined by men of faith and soberness who lead His people. When a church has elders, they must lead the church in this, as in all other matters. While specific instructions are not given there are some passages that furnish some guidelines.

Matthew 18:15-17 sets before us certain steps that with gradual intensity lead to withdrawal of fellowship. These include: (1) visiting the offender to discuss his sin and plead for his repentance by one brother, (2) visiting the offender to discuss his sin and plead for his repentance by the same brother, with one or two others, (3) if he still does not repent, telling it to the church so that the persuasion of all of the brethren may be used to affect his repentance, and finally, (4) if he yet refuses to repent, counting him as a Gentile and a publican (i.e., withdrawing fellowship from him). While it is true that this procedure relates to a personal sin by one brother against another, we fail to see why it would not serve as a model for other kinds of sins as well.

Titus 3:10 gives a similar, albeit abbreviated, course of action for dealing with a “factious” man: (1) admonish him once, (2) admonish him a second time, and (3) if no repentance is forthcoming, refuse or avoid him. It should be pointed out that a case of sin can be so flagrant, destructive, and abhorrent in its nature that action must be taken immediately, as in the case of the fornicator in Corinth (1 Cor. 5:1–6). There was no time for hesitation; Paul ordered the church to assemble and purge out the brother at once (vv. 4–5).

Generally, it would seem to be the course of both prudence and longsuffering to say that more than one visit (at least two or three) should be made to the persistent sinner with the aim of bringing him/her to repentance. If this does not produce repentance, then surely the whole church should become involved in prayer for and persuasion upon the sinner. If, after a reasonable time, repentance is not forthcoming, the sad task of withdrawing fellowship should take place.

How the Church Should Behave Toward a Disciplined Member

The New Testament uses explicit terms to indicate the appropriate behavior of members of the church toward the one from whom fellowship is withdrawn. No less than eight of these are found in 1 Corinthians 5, alone, including: “he...might be taken away from among you” (v. 2); “deliver such a one unto Satan” (v. 5, cf. 1 Tim. 1:20); “purge out” (v. 7); “have no company with” (v. 9, cf. 2 The. 3:14); “not to keep company” (v. 11); “with such a one no, not to eat” (v. 11); “judge him” (v. 12); “put away...from among yourselves” (v. 13). Two additional phrases describing the behavior of the church toward one who must be disciplined are found in 2 Thessalonians 3: “withdraw yourselves” (v. 6) and “note (i.e., mark, take special notice of) that man” (v. 14). Romans 16:17 instructs us to “mark” (i.e., observe, fix one's eyes upon, so as to identify) and “turn away from them.”

The order to “refuse” (avoid or reject) such persons is found in Titus 3:10. John commanded: “receive him not into your house” and “give him no greeting” (that would imply encouragement or endorsement of his evil or error) (2 John 10). Jesus taught: “let him be unto thee as the Gentile and the publican” (Mat. 18:17). All of this severe treatment of persistent spiritual offenders is to be balanced by the instruction of Paul: “And yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother” (2 The. 3:15).

To summarize these instructions, the one being disciplined is to be so marked and identified before the whole church that he is clearly recognized. The church's sweet fellowship and cordial attitude is to be withheld from him, both on a spiritual and social level. The faithful are not to do or say anything to him that would lend encouragement to him in his sin, but are rather to admonish him as an erring brother to repent each time they see him.

The Purposes of Corrective Church Discipline

Preservative

The primary purpose of corrective church discipline is to cause the sinful saint to correct the sin for which it was necessary to discipline him so that he might be saved. Paul ordered the Corinthians to deliver the fornicating brother to Satan “...that [his] spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor. 5:5). Likely this is at least partly what Paul had in mind in 2 The. 3:14: “...have no company with him, to the end that he may be ashamed.”

Purgative

A second important purpose of such action is to cleanse and protect the church from the destructive influence of evil and error. Concerning the fornicator in Corinth Paul wrote, “Know ye

not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?” (1 Cor. 5:6). If a brother in blatant sin is allowed to retain respectability it will have a corrupting effect upon the remainder of the church. The offender and his sin are to be “purged out” (v. 7).

Punitive

Paul delivered Hymenaeus and Alexander unto Satan “that they might be taught not to blaspheme” (1 Tim. 1:20). The punitive work of corrective discipline may also be part of what Paul had in mind when he ordered the Thessalonians not to keep company with the erring brother “to the end that he may be ashamed” (2 The. 3:14). To say the least, the shame of being treated like a “Gentile” or a “publican” instead of like a faithful brother would indeed be a form of punishment to be borne by anyone who had any concern for the Lord, His Word, His church, and his own soul.

Proscriptive

Faithful brethren are to so impose restraint and restriction toward the one disciplined that they give no hint of endorsement of his sin or encouragement of him personally as long as he remains impenitent. Thus, one is to “give him no greeting” in the sense of endorsement or encouragement (2 John 10). To do so will not only discourage his repentance, but will also make his encourager a partaker in his evil works (2 John 11).

By Whom Is Corrective Discipline To Be Administered?

The entire church is to participate in the disciplinary action when it is necessary. When the offender will not repent after visits from brethren, they are to “tell it unto the church,” after which, if he still will not repent, he is to be treated by the church as an outsider (Mat. 18:17). Disciplinary action was to be taken against the brother guilty of living with his father’s wife in Corinth when the church was “gathered together” (1 Cor. 5:4). Thus, every description of the action that was to be taken against that brother was to be done by the whole church, the final injunction being, “Put away the wicked man **from among yourselves**” (v. 13, emph. DM). By implication all of the other instructions concerning the action to be taken in such cases applied to the respective entire congregations involved, for they were addressed either to congregations or to Gospel preachers who were to deliver them to the congregations (e.g., Timothy, Titus).

It is obvious from the foregoing material that the administration of corrective discipline is not merely the responsibility of elders in a congregation. However, when a congregation has elders, it is their responsibility to **lead the church** in taking such action. This is implied by the fact that they are the overseers and superintendents of the congregation in which they serve (Acts 20:28). Likewise, they are the ones primarily charged with stopping the mouths of and reproving

unruly gainsayers and deceivers (Tit. 1:9–13). Further, elders are to exercise watchful concern over the souls under their care (Heb. 13:17).

When godly, faithful elders have exhausted every reasonable avenue of appeal to an impenitent brother or sister and such a one remains adamant in sin, they must then call upon the church to withdraw fellowship from and not keep company with that one until repentance and restoration are forthcoming. What is the responsibility of the church in such circumstances? Every member is to “obey them that have the rule over you, and submit to them” (Heb. 13:17). The maximum effect of such corrective discipline will be achieved only when every member recognizes and participates in the withdrawal.

Lamentably, some weak and unstable souls who operate more on the emotional than the rational and Scriptural level, may actually give comfort and encouragement to the sinner in his sin, all the while criticizing the elders and the remainder of the church for being so “self-righteous” and “judgmental.” The very day the withdrawal of the erring brother is announced, such fickle and shallow souls may take him out for lunch in direct defiance of Scriptural mandate (1 Cor. 5:11). Perhaps they think they are helping him, but they are really only encouraging him to remain in his sin, thus increasing the jeopardy of his soul. Such misguided sympathizers should be made to understand that their action makes them partakers in the sins of the fallen brother (2 John 11), which may require the church to withdraw from them, also.

Questions and Answers Relating to Corrective Discipline

How are family members to treat the withdrawn-from loved one?

When a brother has been withdrawn from, how does this affect his family relationships? Assuming that his wife and children are Christians, how are they to treat him? Are they to have no company with him and not even eat with him until he repents (1 Cor. 5:11)? I know of no Scriptural example or explicit teaching that deals with this question. We must therefore approach it from the standpoint of some general principles that may be applied to such cases.

Withdrawal of fellowship from the husband/father does not remove or cancel the normal obligations of family members toward him. For example, Paul instructed wives not to withhold themselves from their husbands (1 Cor. 7:3–5), even if they are unbelievers (v. 13). It would be neither right nor conducive to the repentance of her disciplined husband for a Christian wife to withhold her body from her husband because of his being withdrawn from. In fact, it might encourage him to further and worse sin (v. 5b).

Should a wife/husband (and other family members) eat with the one who has been disciplined? My judgment is that the family and home relationship would again take precedence over

the general actions that are appropriate toward the disciplined brother or sister. As earlier indicated, the responsibilities of the family relationship do not cease with the action of withdrawal. Even members in general are not to count such a one as an enemy (2 The. 3:15); how much less should those of his own household!

However, family members of the one disciplined do have responsibilities toward him to try to affect his repentance, just as all of the other church members do. If the family members are genuinely interested in his soul they will do nothing to encourage him in his sin by misplaced sympathy. They will let him know that, while family relationships will continue, they are concerned and distressed for his soul and desire his repentance. They will convey to him that their spiritual fellowship has been severed and must be withheld until he repents. They must take part in admonishing this erring brother (2 The. 3:15) even if he is their husband or father.

In response to a question concerning whether a wife was to eat or otherwise keep company with a husband who has been withdrawn from in light of 1 Corinthians 5:11, Guy N. Woods responded as follows:

It seems clear that Paul was not alluding to a relationship involving husband and wife in the passage cited. The laws of God are never in conflict; all truth is harmonious with itself, and the principles under which God ordains we are to live are never contradictory. Wives have duties to their husbands—whether they are Christians or not—and these duties harmonize with their obligations as Christians, as well. Marriage relationships were designed of God to take precedence over all other relationships; any situation later arising must be understood in light of this fact. The Christian wife should therefore continue to live with her husband and use her influence to bring him to repentance.⁶

I fully concur with his remarks.

Is forsaking the assembly sufficient grounds for withdrawing fellowship?

Some strongly insist that it is not for at least two reasons: (1) There is no specific example or command in the New Testament relating to the practice of discipline of one who habitually forsakes the assembly. (2) One who habitually forsakes the assembly has already “withdrawn fellowship” from the church, and there is no longer any fellowship with him to be withdrawn by the church. The last-mentioned contention will be discussed in the section below, so I will deal only with the first of these contentions here.

I freely admit the absence both of any explicit statement or any example in which the Scriptures indicate that forsaking the assembly is worthy of the final stage of corrective discipline. However, the general descriptions of the offenses against which we are ordered by the inspired writers to exercise discipline are certainly broad enough to include it. Paul's imperative to the Thessalonian church is sufficient to prove this: “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly,

and not after the tradition which they received of us.” As indicated earlier, the term translated “disorderly,” is one that has its basis in military behavior. It means to be insubordinate, to not keep rank, and thus to be out of step with those who are following orders from their superiors. Arndt and Gingrich go so far as to say that the term is used “literally, of irregular religious services.”⁷

Surely, none will argue that it is in harmony with the will of Christ that His followers forsake the assemblies of His church. Hebrews 10:25 specifically forbids us to do so. In principle, many other passages do likewise (see Mat. 6:33; 1 Cor. 15:58, et al.). If the Scriptures enjoin loyal and consistent assembling with the saints (as they do), then it constitutes “disorderly conduct” when one choose not to assemble faithfully. The “disorderly” (including the assembly-forsakers) are to be withdrawn from. Commenting on Hebrews 10:25 and its implications concerning corrective discipline, Guy N. Woods astutely observed:

It is often assumed that the meetings some were forsaking in that day were Lord's day meetings of the church only; but, there is nothing in the text or context that justifies such an assumption. The admonition of the apostle was and is applicable to any assembly of the disciples for religious purposes; and, those who abandon (such is the significance of the Greek word translated “forsaking” in the foregoing text) any such assembly, are in disobedience to the apostle's injunction. Thus, people who flagrantly disregard their duty and refuse to attend any of the meetings of the church are subjects of discipline. Obviously, the level of disinterest would determine the extent and degree of apostasy and consequently the measure of discipline exercised; those who attend regularly on Lord's days, but no other meetings of the church, are not as far along the road to apostasy as are those who never attend; but all members who are remiss in duty and who are not faithful in attendance at all services, are subjects of the church's discipline.⁸

If forsaking the assembly is not a sin (and one of the most obvious and public sins imaginable), then it would be difficult to define what sin is. To assemble with the saints is a part of the law of Christ and transgression of Christ's law is sin (1 John 3:4). Willful absence from the spiritual assemblies of the church shows contempt for the Lord, His Word, and His church in a most flagrant way. Saul of Tarsus persecuted Christ by persecuting the church (Acts 9:4). It follows that when we despise and neglect the church by forsaking the assembly we likewise despise and neglect the Lord. Hundreds of congregations are exceedingly weak spiritually because they have winked at this grievous sin rather than dealing with it as inspiration has directed.

Can/may the church withdraw fellowship from one who has already “withdrawn fellowship” from the church by forsaking the assembly?

As indicated earlier, some argue that the church cannot withdraw fellowship from one who has already ceased assembling with the saints on the grounds that such an one has already withdrawn his fellowship from the church. Therefore, they aver, there is no “fellowship” left to

withdraw. This is a strange doctrine indeed! Those who hold this view evince an unscriptural concept of fellowship, limiting it only to the assemblies of the saints. Granted, one of the most visible demonstrations of fellowship occurs when God's people assemble, but it extends beyond the assemblies. Fellowship between brethren is a constant—it exists and operates 24 hours a day and is not limited to our assemblies. *Fellowship* means sharing and jointly participating in all of the spiritual blessings and responsibilities that belong to those who have become one in Christ through their obedience to the Gospel. One does not cease to be a member of the church or a part of God's family just because he starts forsaking the meetings of the church (which is only one aspect of our fellowship together). The “unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” which characterizes the “one body” (Eph. 4:3–4) applies to far more than merely the church assembled!

Don Tarbet has written some sage words on this subject:

Strange as it may seem, some actually deny the right of the church [members] to withdraw their fellowship from those who refuse to walk in the light. Others agree that such must be done, but that it cannot be done if some have already “withdrawn from the church.”...Those who forsake the Lord in worship have usually already forsaken Him in living. Does this mean the church can do nothing to discipline wayward members if they have already ceased to worship with the saints? Just where do people get the idea that fellowship is limited to the worship service? They must think so, if they think they are to withdraw only from those who attend worship. Actually, we do not forbid anyone to attend worship when they are disciplined, but we encourage them to attend so as to be exhorted to Christian living.⁹

If the wayward Christian may exempt himself from corrective discipline by simply announcing that he has “withdrawn his membership/fellowship,” then corrective discipline on the part of the church is voided altogether. If one brother or sister can do this and escape discipline, then, in principle, every straying saint can do so. This would make all of the Scriptural imperatives concerning this activity superfluous (and therefore ridiculous) at best. Obviously, any doctrine that results in such a circumvention of the law of Christ is a false doctrine. Bill Jackson has exposed the errors of this contention in a fine way:

The offender [some argue], in announcing a leaving of the congregation, is beyond discipline. That would be something, wouldn't it? This view has it that discipline, and whether it is to be taken, is in the hands of the very one to be disciplined! [If the sinful brother could prevent disciplinary action against himself by departing]...there never would be any church discipline, for immediately when an offender saw his situation, just before the axe fell, he would announce that he was leaving, and then could taunt the church, “Yeh, yeh, you can't touch me!”¹⁰

“But hasn't the man who has quit the church withdrawn himself?” Yes, indeed, he has withdrawn himself from assembling with the saints, but his action, in absenting himself, is not the withdrawing laid upon the saints as a matter of duty. We dare not accept the ridiculous position that places all initiative with the sinful person...and [that says that] no action can be taken unless he consents to remain faithful in attendance until we can get through disciplining him! Paul did not, in 1 Corinthians 5, urge withdrawal in the case of the fornicator, “provided he

is still faithfully attending services.” He [an impenitent brother] is a member of the church, whether regular in attendance or not, and he, by being visited and warned, will be reminded of his duty and the action that will be taken unless he repents and returns, if he has ceased being faithful. Let’s all remember that “withdrawal of fellowship” does not mean only “withdrawal at the services.” I, personally, am most distressed when I hear the view that one can cease worshipping regularly, and then he can sit back and mock the church by saying, “They can’t withdraw [from me] because I beat them to it and withdrew myself!”¹¹

May one congregation withdraw fellowship from another?

Some, while strongly contending for what the Scriptures teach on a congregation’s withdrawing fellowship from its own members who apostatize, just as strongly deny that an entire congregation may mark and withdraw from another entire congregation that apostatizes. Those who hold this position argue that there is no Scriptural authority for a local congregation to mark, identify, or withdraw from even one Christian who is not one of its members. Certainly, it should not be done if there is no Scriptural basis for it. However, I believe that such authority exists and that we not only may, but we must mark and withdraw from sister congregations when they apostatize.

John wrote his first epistle to Christians “in general” rather than to a specific individual or church. He instructed them to “prove the spirits [prophets], whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1). The message of preachers was (and is) to be put on trial to determine if it was (is) from God. It was not merely the preacher in one’s local congregation that was to be thus proved by its members, but any and every preacher that might come to them or that they might go to hear. The whole purpose of the proving would be to believe or disbelieve him, to accept him or reject him, to extend fellowship to or to withhold or withdraw fellowship from him.

John wrote his second letter to an “elect lady and her children” (2 John 1). He warned about the many deceivers who were abroad (v. 7) and strictly instructed her not to extend either hospitality or greeting (equivalents of fellowship) to them, thereby partaking in their evil deeds (vv. 10–11). Again, this reaches beyond a false teacher who might be part of the local congregation, as indicated by the use of such expressions as *gone forth into the world* (v. 7), *whosoever* (v. 9) and *any one* (v.10) in reference to him. In fact, this warning very likely refers to traveling preachers from remote congregations, rather than to members of the congregation where this dear Christian lady lived.

There is no justification for limiting the instructions of Paul to the Romans concerning rejection of apostate brethren to those who were members of the Roman congregation. Were they to “mark them that are causing the divisions and occasions of stumbling, contrary to the doctrine which ye learned: and turn away from them” (Rom. 16:17) only if they were members of

the church in Rome? More specifically, were they to embrace the Judaizing teachers who might come from Jerusalem or false teachers from some other congregation, in warm fellowship? If a church may not withdraw or withhold fellowship from any but its own local members, then this conclusion must follow.

If members of one congregation may refuse to extend fellowship to and may warn others about the apostasy of one person who is part of another congregation (as demonstrated above), may a congregation do the same concerning two or three apostate members from elsewhere? If so, may they do so concerning two or three dozen? Why does it become wrong if it is done concerning two or three hundred or an entire congregation? How can it be right for a faithful congregation of God's people to leave the impression that an unfaithful congregation nearby has its endorsement and approval? Does Paul's command, "And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, rather even reprove them" (Eph. 5:11), apply to individuals alone or does it apply to congregations as well?

When a church so compromises the Truth that it loses its identity as a church of Christ, how can faithful sister congregations fail to mark it and refuse to have any fellowship with it and still be faithful to God? The elders with which I work have written more than one congregation in our area concerning their numerous apostasies, pleading with them to repent, but also pleading with them to remove the designation, *Church of Christ*, from their buildings if they will not. It was made clear that there could be no fellowship between them and us until repentance was forthcoming. We believe that such action is eminently Scriptural. To insist that one congregation cannot identify another congregation as apostate and refuse to extend fellowship to it is to forbid following the example of the Lord Himself. He warned the Ephesian church that He would no longer extend fellowship to her if she did not repent (Rev. 2:5).

Conclusion

Congregations should not undertake the work of corrective church discipline hastily. In fact, it is an extreme measure to be taken only when all other attempts to call a brother or sister (or congregation) to repentance have failed. It is action that must never be taken for either personal or congregational revenge or spite. It is not to be done in self-righteousness, but in gentleness and humility: "Brethren, even if a man be overtaken in any trespass, ye who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; looking to thyself, lest thou also be tempted" (Gal. 6:1).

The work of corrective church discipline is not a work opposed to love (as the spiritually weak often aver), but one that is motivated and demanded by love. It is an expression of love for the unfaithful brother (or congregation), even as Paul argued that the love of God for His children

and the love of parents for their children are expressed through discipline and chastening (Heb. 12:5–7). Truly, the church that refuses to withdraw fellowship from an apostate brother or congregation with the excuse that it would be “unloving,” uses the same failed logic as the parents who refuse to discipline little Johnny because they “love him too much.”

Withdrawal of fellowship from those who become corrupt is also an expression of love for the church, which the Lord desires to remain a “glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:27). Elders and other brethren do not love the body of Christ very much when they are too cowardly to “purge out the old leaven,” refusing to realize that “a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump” (1 Cor. 5:6–7). Christ loves His church far more than any of us mortals can (Acts 20:28; Eph. 5:25) and He is the author of this oft-repeated command.

A failure or refusal to practice corrective church discipline is an advertisement that an eldership or church does not love the Son of God as it should. Jesus (both personally and through His inspired apostles) did not merely **suggest** that we should withdraw fellowship when the situation demanded it—he **commanded** that we do so, as illustrated profusely above. Perhaps we need to be reminded of the connection He made between love, obedience, and disobedience in John 14: “If ye love me, ye will keep my commandments.... He that loveth me not keepeth not my words” (vv. 15, 24).

When such action becomes necessary, we must not be ruled by mere sentimentalism and emotionalism toward the one in error of life or teaching. We must not go on giving him cordial fellowship, friendship, and hospitality as if there were no change in our relationship to him. Such will but encourage him in his sin—and will identify us as partakers in his sin. We must rather be ruled by the solemn and sad duty that is laid upon us by God's Word to consider him as the Gentile and the publican (Mat. 18:17), yet not forgetting to “admonish him as a brother” who needs to repent (2 The. 3:15).

Endnotes

1. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 23.
2. Arndt and Gingrich, p. 480.
3. W.E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1966), p. 320.
4. Arndt and Gingrich, p. 756.
5. Arndt and Gingrich, p. 76.
6. Guy N. Woods, *Questions and Answers* (Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate Co., 1986) v. 2, pp. 33–34.
7. Arndt and Gingrich, p. 119.
8. Woods, *Questions and Answers* (Henderson, TN: Freed-Hardeman College, 1976), pp. 135–136.
9. Don W. Tarbet, “Withdrawing from the Withdrawers” (church bulletin article from author's files, n.d.).

10. Bill Jackson, "On Discipline," *The Southwesterner* (Jan. 30, 1985).
11. Jackson, "On Withdrawing from Absentees," *The Southwesterner* (May 25, 1988).

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