

Church Discipline – the Real Reason Why it is not Practiced

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While cases involving the exercise of discipline in the church may vary greatly and may depend on many factors, I believe our failure to practice appropriate discipline may almost invariably be traced to a lack of love for the souls in need of the discipline. This is illustrated at every stage of the disciplinary process.

Church Discipline is not a New Testament term. But, while it is non-scriptural, it is certainly not unscriptural. It connotes a New Testament doctrine that is taught with unabashed plainness in numerous Scriptures: (Mat.18:15-17; Rom.16:17-18; 1 Cor. 5:4-5, 9-13; Gal. 2:11-14, 5:1; 1 The. 5:14; 2 The. 3:6-15; 1 Tim. 1:19-20; 2 Tim. 2:14-15; 2 John 9-11.)

Our conception of "church discipline" should embrace more than the process of fellowship withdrawal. Discipline involves positive activities of adequate teaching and useful involvement of the individual, as well as "reproof, rebuke and exhortation" and finally, withdrawal where all other efforts fail. The arrangements for all phases of church discipline are the responsibility of local bishops, as surely inferred from Acts. 20:28, Hebrews 13:17, and 1 Peter 5:1-3.

In order to exercise "church discipline" in its fullest sense, it is imperative that the shepherds know the sheep in their flock well enough to know the type of discipline needed (teaching, counseling, reproof, more responsibility, withdrawal, et al.) and when it is needed. An eldership cannot know the needs of a person when it does not know the person. Some think that this knowledge of the members is too hard for everybody but the preacher. If elders do not know their people and are not working to learn them, **they do not love them enough**. One may call it "carelessness," excuse himself with a "bad memory for names," or even say he is "too busy," but every one of these excuses and a hundred just like them would not stand a moment if shepherds really loved their sheep. If elders do not love a man enough to make it their business to know him, they cannot properly feed him. Moreover, they will not love him enough to withdraw from him if that becomes necessary, either.

How many congregations have a teaching curriculum that has been "tailor made" for its members? It is beyond debate that the churches which are experiencing sound and lasting growth are those that have a teaching program that meets the needs of their members in a superior way. When elders have the love that they should have for the souls in their care they will either personally or through delegates try to arrive at the needs of these souls and meet them through a planned teaching process. If church discipline were given more attention at the teaching level, I am persuaded that it would not need to be exercised as much as it currently does at the withdrawal level. Again, love for souls is the key to overcoming failure at this point.

A third level of church discipline is seen in the work that attempts restoration of one who has fallen:

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).

Paul here mentioned a member who either has not had his needs met, or who has failed in some way to apply what was provided for his needs. In either case, he has sinned and needs restoring. Perhaps it was a moral lapse. He could have been victimized by false teaching. Maybe materialism overtook him and he "dropped out." How can a person continue in sin and there be no attempts made to restore him for months or years without its indicating a lack of love for his soul in those responsible for his spiritual welfare?

If elders say they do not know of the sin when it is called to their attention, this is a worse indictment. They should in most cases be the first to know. How do you know when people begin to "drop out" where you worship, or do you? Unless there is some systematic approach to the matter (e g., counting heads, assigning certain families to each deacon, registering every person, et al.), an eldership cannot know, even in a small church. Some think it is "none of their business" to know, others that it is "too much trouble," and others that "too many people will not like it." Hundreds of churches that have from 25–50% of the members who are not regular worshippers and whose behavior is either unknown, ignored, or accepted, are proof enough that such excuses are intolerable. When no attempts are made to preserve one from sin or to restore him

from it when he falls, so that he dies a languishing spiritual death and is finally left out of the new church directory (about the sternest measure invoked in most churches), to what can it be attributed but a lack of love for his soul?

Where there is open, impenitent sin in a Christian, whether moral (1 Cor. 5:11) or doctrinal (Rom. 16:17-18; 2 The. 3:6, 14), the course of action taught in the New Testament is crystal clear: He must be brought to shame and his spirit saved, if possible, by withdrawal of fellowship. Personally, I doubt that there are five out of a hundred churches among us that practice this part of the Gospel. Satan has furnished us with most ingenious rationalizations for our failures at this point and it might be that the brethren have thought of one or two that did not occur to him. Why do we let such conditions continue till the church loses even its own self-respect? I doubt that there is a single excuse that will stand a half-second when love prevails. There are some who claim they "love" the person too much to withdraw from him or to lead the church in doing so. Who are they kidding? Doesn't the Lord love them more? Yet He commanded the withdrawal. The statement of Hebrews 12:6 ("For whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth"), has practical and forceful application to this matter. When necessary, because all milder efforts have failed, withdrawal will be executed because of love for the soul in sin, not in spite of it.

While it admittedly takes courage, dedication to Truth and righteousness, faith in the Lord, and wisdom for an eldership to acceptably implement the whole gamut of church discipline, it remains my settled conviction that the crux of the whole matter is a genuine, heartfelt love for the souls in their charge. If they have this love, the sheep "shall not want." And they will thank God for their shepherds who care. And the church that is led by such bishops will behave and grow as the Lord intended.

[**Note:** The date and place of publication of this article is unknown. I wrote it in the early 1970s.]

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