

# Church Discipline

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## IX. THE DISCIPLINE OF THE CHURCH

Discipline may be defined as treatment suited to a learner or disciple, or the training of one to act in accordance with established rules.

From the great commission we have seen that the teaching or training of the disciples of Christ has been committed to the church. This teaching or training must needs be suited to the needs of different classes of disciples, and it must needs consist of more than a mere announcement of the truth. We find this to be true according to the epistles to the churches and according to Christ Himself. We note, therefore, —

### 1. THREE KINDS OF DISCIPLINE.

#### (1) Formative Discipline.

This is the primary and simplest form of discipline. It consists in teaching, instructing, and guiding the willing-hearted in the ways of truth and righteousness.

Churches should engage themselves diligently in this form of discipline. It is the best and most satisfactory method. If it is faithfully used, other less desirable forms of discipline will not be so much needed.

#### (2) Corrective Discipline.

But the most diligent formative discipline will not prevent lapses from the straight and narrow path on the part of all believers. Some are sure to be overtaken by sin.

This class is spoken of in Gal. 6:1. These are not the stubbornly and persistently sinful, but such as live righteously in the main but are overcome by some temptation or habit and thus fall into sin. They are to be restored by the spiritually minded in the church. The spiritually minded in the church should go to those who have erred and, in meekness, seek to recover them from their sin. If this plan is followed out, many will be saved from greatly injuring themselves and the church.

Another instance of corrective discipline is found in Matt. 18:17. Here we have the case of one brother offending against another. After the offended one has taken the first two steps and they have been of no avail, he is to bring the matter to the attention of the church. The church is then to judge the case and seek to reconcile the two estranged brethren. This is corrective discipline.

### (3) Excisive Discipline.

By excisive discipline is meant the cutting off or excluding of a member of the church for some wicked offense or for a persistent course of sin. No matter how well a church may acquit herself in the use of both formative and corrective discipline, she will find the necessity, now and then of withdrawing from some person the hand of church fellowship. May we note—

#### A. The purposes of excisive discipline.

(a) The good of the excluded. Whenever the one excluded seems to be a saved person, this should be the uppermost thing. And even when it is clear that the offending person is lost, we should hope that his exclusion will help to bring about his salvation.

Paul recommended the exclusion of the incestuous man at Corinth first of all for "the destruction of the flesh," i.e., the carnal nature. We should pray for the excluded that God will use the discipline for their own good.

In the case of the man at Corinth we see that the discipline accomplished its desired purpose. From 2 Cor. 2:6-8 we see that this man repented. Many a disciple has been awakened and brought to his senses by exclusion from the church.

(b) The good of the church. Paul assigned another reason for the exclusion of the man at Corinth. He tells them to purge out the old leaven because "a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump." Cf. 1 Cor. 5:7, 8. The church must exclude the wicked in order to protect the rest of her membership. The example of the wicked, if they are left in the church, will tend to corrupt the entire church.

(c) The glory of Christ. Even though the church did not need to exclude the wicked for the sake of the wicked themselves and as a protection to the rest of the membership, she would need to do it for the glory of Christ. The church is His body. It represents Him in the world. It dishonors Him for His body to be defiled with wickedness. Paul argues against divisions in the church on the ground that Christ is not divided (1 Cor. 1:13). Likewise we may argue against the permission of wickedness in the church on the ground that there is no wickedness in Him.

#### B. Offenses worthy of excisive discipline.

These offenses may be divided into three kinds; viz.,

(a) Personal offenses. This class of offenses is referred to in Matt. 18:15-18, and the method of dealing with them is indicated. A church should not allow one of its members to bring before it a grievance against another member until the two preceding steps prescribed by Jesus have been taken.

(b) Doctrinal offenses. Cf. Rom. 16:17; 1 Tim. 6:3-5. From each of the foregoing passages

excisive church discipline, in the case of the persistent teachers of error, is a reasonable inference. Those spoken of in Rom. 16:17 evidently were not members of the church. But suppose they had been. Could the membership of the church so avoid them as to prevent them from doing much harm without excluding them from the church? Would it be in good order to retain in the church persons that the membership as a whole would need to avoid? And suppose these false teachers insisted on speaking their errors in the meetings of the church? Answer these questions sensibly, and you will see the clear inference that such characters as referred to in Rom. 16:17, if in the church, must needs be excluded from the church in order that Paul's instructions be carried out in an orderly and effective manner.

And would it be right for Timothy to withdraw himself from members of the church? Would not such a course produce schism in the body, which should never exist in the body of Christ? Thus we have the same inference from this second passage.

But note that in both cases the false teachers are spoken of as propagating their errors and causing division in the church. Such conduct calls for discipline. However, the case is different with those who do not understand the truth as they should, but are teachable and do not conduct themselves so as to cause division in the church. It is of this class that Paul speaks when he says. "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye" (Rom. 14:1).

(c) Moral offenses. Cf. 1 Cor. 5:1-7; 2 Thess. 3:6, 14.

## 2. FURTHER OBSERVATIONS ON DISCIPLINE.

(1) Appointment of committee not obligatory.

Let it be noted that nothing is said in any of the Scriptures referred to, nor is anything said in any other passage, as to the necessity of sending a committee to see an offending member before disciplinary action is instituted.

We do not say that this should never be done. But we do wish to emphasize that the Scripture in no wise binds the church to do this in any case. In fact the Scripture never once mentions the appointment of a committee in cases of discipline. The church is left free under the leadership of the Holy Spirit to decide when a committee is needed.

Some seek to use Matt. 18:15-17 to prove that a committee must always be appointed to see the offending person. But there is here no mention of a committee appointed by the church. In this passage we have directions for personal offenses. This has nothing to do with other offenses.

(2) Personal visitation not obligatory.

It is not said in the Scripture that some one must labor privately with the person guilty of a doctrinal or moral offense before the case is brought before the church for excisive discipline.

Again we do not say this should not be done. In the case of ordinary doctrinal and moral offenses we are not bound to this procedure in all cases. And in the graver and grosser offenses, it should not be followed. In such cases, only immediate exclusion can accomplish the desired results. Notice that Paul recommended immediate exclusion, without any intermediate steps, in the case of the man at Corinth. Cf. 1 Cor. 5:1-7.

(3) Church trials unnecessary and unwise.

Nothing is said anywhere in Scripture about a church trial for an offender.

In the matter of personal offenses, there may come occasions when the accused should be heard in his own defense. And in such cases, he should be heard, unless the facts concerning his guilt are too well known to admit of any doubt. But in such cases it is better that his defense of himself be brought to the church by a committee rather than by the accused person himself. And in other offenses, if the church deems it well, it may permit the accused to defend himself; but then, likewise, it is much better that his defense be made through a committee. Otherwise much evil may be wrought by bitter words being spoken and improper matters being presented to the church.

In any case where a church is sure of the guilt of the accused, she need not permit him any defense. A church should never exclude a member, however, without being sure of the grounds. She should always take the necessary steps to ascertain the facts. But she is not bound to any stereotyped form of procedure. The church is not a court, and cannot be forced to act under the rules of a court.

We call attention to these matters because they are some of the things which the Devil uses to block discipline and injure churches in various ways. In most churches a matter of discipline will always call some traditionalist to his feet to insist that the church follow certain steps that were customary in the backwoods when he was a boy. If the church allows herself to be brought under such tradition, she will seldom ever fulfill her duty in the matter of discipline. Committees to see offending parties seldom function, and are continued from one business meeting to another until the matter wears itself out and is forgotten. If the church will refuse to be made a slave of backwoods tradition and follow the Word and Spirit of God instead, she will find herself much better off.