



Our Position on Church Discipline

When a person reflects upon the church, they often think about the preaching, music, or programs offered for children and families. Or, perhaps, they think about certain outreach opportunities, mission trips, or evangelistic endeavors sponsored by their local congregation. But what rarely comes to mind when thinking of the church is public discipline. Discipline seems outdated and archaic, hardly fit for a loving community in today's tolerant culture.

However, discipline is a part of everyday life. People practice it in their homes with their children. Teachers administer discipline to unruly students. Employers discipline workers who are not fulfilling their responsibilities. Police practice it with citizens who are not abiding by the law. In virtually every relationship we are in, there is an aspect of discipline which undergirds it. It is a built-in set of checks and balances that place healthy parameters on our social structures. This is no different from what we find in the Church today. To be sure, there is confusion about public discipline in the church. Most churches don't practice it, and those which do may not even handle it correctly.

The first question which should be asked is, "Why would a person come under public church discipline?" R. Albert Mohler Jr. has rightly noted that the New Testament reveals three areas of danger requiring the church to take this sort of serious action: 1) Purity of doctrine, 2) Purity of life, and 3) Unity of Fellowship. These categories can undermine the health and safety of any local church and must be confronted. Whether it is heresy, sexual immorality, or gossip, the Bible is clear that when sin goes unchecked, the entire Body will feel the effects. Not confronting such issues would allow unrepentant individuals to cause further spiritual harm to themselves. Looking the other way would also set a morally compromising standard for those who are aware of the sin, yet don't see the leadership addressing it.

When looking at Mt. 18:15-17, we find a step-by-step process that a church must take in bringing discipline against one of her members. The initial stage is where there is a simple confrontation of the individual in sin. It is to be done one-on-one, and instigated by one who has already removed the plank from their own eye so they are able to see the speck in their brother's eye (Mt. 7:3-5). This keeps the circle tight and allows dialogue between two people rather than sharing the situation more broadly. It also allows the offended party to see if they had misperceived or misunderstood something without having rumors flying like sparks throughout the church. If the brother or sister was in sin and is repentant, then the discipline should stop there.

However, if the offending party disregards the Word of God and the admonition of a Christian friend, then the next stage in discipline is enacted and the circle is enlarged. The second level of confrontation is where one or two additional witnesses join the conversation and try to help bring Scriptural clarity to the situation (see also Gal. 6:1). This helps guard against witch-hunts, personal biases, and misconceptions. These individuals ought to be Godly and spiritually mature enough to determine if, in fact, there has been any sin committed.

If the believer caught up in sin repents, then the situation can and should be dropped. There shouldn't be any further need to address the issue in a larger context unless it is important for church leadership to be aware of the situation. However, if there is no repentance, then the circle is opened up, and the entire church is to be involved.

Many people who see this stage fail to take into account the many hours of counsel and admonition that it took to get here. They see a catastrophic event where the church appears to be installing smoke alarms after the fire has been set, but in reality, there has been a long and patient history of dealing with that individual. If the person brought before the church repents, then the church can rejoice along with the forgiven offender. But if the unrepentant believer digs their heels in, the church has no choice but to remove that person from their fellowship.

Once this measure is taken, the disciplined believer shouldn't be coddled, given emotional support, or spiritual approval. If church members do have contact with this individual, it ought to be focused on their repentance and reconciliation. Such accountability isn't meant to be unduly cruel. Each successive stage of discipline upholds God's Word as the standard, preserves purity within the Body, and serves as a warning to others engaging in the same behavior.

Of course, in every stage of discipline it must be remembered that God's heartbeat is for restoration, not retribution. The individual who was put under public church discipline by Paul in I Cor. 5:1-13 is the very one who, when repentant, was brought back into the life of the church (II Cor. 2:5-11). Even if trust isn't immediately restored, repentance ought to cause fellowship to be reinstated without reservation.

It should also be noted that church discipline in Protestant churches is quite different than what is practiced in a Catholic context. When a person is excommunicated from the Catholic Church, they are supposedly removed from the Universal Church. In other words, they are put out from the scope of salvation. But when we as Protestants practice public discipline, we are making no such charge. A Christian can be removed from the protective umbrella of the local church without having lost their salvation. They are excluded from fellowship and from taking communion, but this does not mean they are excluded from Heaven.

Ultimately, all believers require discipline. When we fail to walk by the Spirit or confess our known sins, we may need someone to come alongside us and lovingly remind us of God's standards. If we fail to listen to this counsel repeatedly, then public discipline becomes a final resort to help us grasp the gravity of a life lived contrary to God's Word. May we desire to keep short accounts with God so our discipline doesn't have to affect the larger Body of Christ.