



Northside Proclaimer

Proclaiming The Word Of The Lord

1 Thessalonians 1:8

Northside Church Of Christ Welcomes You!

June 7, 2015

“Church Discipline – A Tragic Neglect”

Wayne Jackson

It is difficult to imagine what it would be like to live in a society where citizens could flaunt the rules and absolutely no consequences would follow—no fines, no imprisonment, etc. Can you conceive of a home environment where the children are allowed to do whatever they please with utterly no discipline imposed? Total chaos would reign in either of these instances. Yet, there are countless congregations belonging to Jesus Christ across our land where little, if any, discipline of the wayward is ever enacted. Is it any wonder that our brotherhood is weaker today than it has been in decades?

Exactly what is church discipline? In its broadest sense, it involves everything from the most basic instruction that the new-born child of God receives—from the time of his conversion onward, all the way to the radical “surgery” sometimes required in the withholding of fellowship from impenitent apostates. For the purpose of this study, we are speaking solely of that terminal act—the church’s obligation to withdraw its fellowship from those who cannot be reached with more moderate approaches.

New Testament Authority for Discipline

Every serious Bible student knows that there is ample authority for the practice of church discipline. Consider the following samples of New Testament evidence:

Jesus taught that one who has wronged his brother, and who cannot be persuaded to repent—either by the offended party, other independent witnesses, or the church in general—should be treated as “the Gentile and the publican” (Matthew 18:17). In the context of a first-century setting, this means that the church was to have no social contact with hardened offenders.

Paul instructed the saints in Rome to be on the lookout for those “who are causing the divisions and occasions of stumbling contrary to the doctrine.” He declared that the faithful should “turn away from” these self-serving egotists who were deceiving the innocent (Romans 16:17).

The entire fifth chapter of 1 Corinthians deals with the matter of discipline. A fornicating church member had pursued in his immoral lifestyle relentlessly, and the apostle rebuked the Corinthian congregation for not having disfellowshipped the man. Paul declared that the brother should have “been taken away from among you,” delivered “unto Satan,” and “put away” (vv. 2, 5, 13). Further, with such a one, “company” was not to be kept. The fraternization of a common meal was forbidden (v. 11). This instruction is quite explicit.

Northside
church Of Christ

25 Greenfield Pike
Hillsboro, OH 45133

churchofchristatnorthside.com

Visit Us On Facebook!
Facebook.com/northsidehillsboro

Bryan Garlock

Office: 937.393.3634

Cell: 478.256.0325

preacher@churchofchristatnorthside.com

Announcements

- Remember the shut in's.
- Pray for the church and one another.
- Men's Bible June 14th @ 3:30 PM
- Kid's drill canceled
- Remember the spiritual sick among us
- Call or email me to add announcements, thanks.

Chronological Bible Reading Plan

Jun 7 Prov 13-15

Jun 8 Prov 16-18

Jun 9 Prov 19-21

Jun 10 Prov 22-24

Jun 11 1 Kgs 5-6, 2 Chr 2-3

Jun 12 1 Kgs 7, 2 Chr 4

Jun 13 1 Kgs 8, 2 Chr 5

The inspired Paul commanded the church in Thessalonica to “withdraw” from every brother who persists in walking disorderly, thus contrary to divinely received traditions (2 Thessalonians 3:6). Such persons, says he, are to be identified and social company with them is to be severed. Excommunicated brethren, of course, are not to be treated harshly; rather, they are to be admonished in a brotherly fashion (vv. 14, 15; cf. Galatians 6:1). In Titus 3:10, inspiration affirms that a factious person, after appropriate admonition, is to be “refused,” i.e., refused further association.

These passages by no means exhaust the New Testament information on the subject of church discipline. They are sufficient, however, to provide ample instruction of the kingdom's responsibility in this regard.

The Purpose of Church Discipline

What is the purpose in withdrawing fellowship from the disorderly? It certainly is not an act of revenge toward those who have fallen from the faith. And it must never be exercised in a haughty or malevolent manner. The Scriptures do suggest, however, that discipline has both a corrective and a protective function.

Obviously, it is designed to save the erring child of God. The Corinthian fornicator was to be disfellowshipped so that he might be motivated to destroy “the flesh,” i.e., his ungodly fleshly passion (see Thayer 1958, 443) in order that his spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus (1 Corinthians 5:5). Discipline is designed to “gain” the wayward (Matthew 18:15), to make him “ashamed” (2 Thessalonians 3:14), to the end that he may be restored (Galatians 6:1).

A consideration of certain passages in 2 Corinthians leads to the conclusion that the church in Corinth finally did withdraw from the sensuous offender, and that such brought him to repentance. The apostle wrote: “This punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man” (2:6, NKJV).

But discipline is not merely for the welfare of the rebel. It is for the protection of the church as well.

When Paul admonished the congregation at Corinth to take care of the problem of the immoral brother, he warned: “Don't you know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?” (1 Corinthians 5:6). The apostle elsewhere declared that those who cause divisions and occasions of stumbling “by their smooth and fair speech beguile the hearts of the innocent” (Romans 16:17).

Two false teachers in the early church, Hymenaeus and Alexander, had made shipwreck of the faith, hence Paul “delivered [them] unto Satan,” i.e., he disfellowshipped them (1 Timothy 1:19-20; cf. 1 Corinthians 5:5) for the welfare of the brethren. False teaching, if allowed to go unchecked within the body of Christ, can eat like a cancer and cause the faith of some to be overthrown (see 2 Timothy 2:16-18).

Discipline is also important in preserving the integrity of the church before the eyes of the world. Society has bias enough against us without having the legitimate complaint that we harbor evil within our fellowship. We should never give occasion to the adversary for reviling (1 Timothy 5:14).

It is imperative that the conduct of the church be such that “the name of God and the doctrine be not blasphemed” (1 Timothy 6:1), and that the way of truth be not “evil spoken of” (2 Peter 2:2).

Conduct Deserving of Church Discipline

What sort of attitude or conduct warrants the extreme measure of withdrawing fellowship? The Bible addresses this matter in several ways:

- A brother who has sinned against another, but who refuses to repent of his transgression, could ultimately be disfellowshipped (Matthew 18:15-17).
- Those who cause occasions of stumbling and who initiate division are proper subjects for church discipline (Romans 16:17; Titus 3:10).
- Those who are practitioners of such sins as fornication, covetousness, extortion, idolatry, drunkenness, reviling, etc., could certainly be candidates for withdrawal (1 Corinthians 5:9ff).
- Advocates of soul-threatening doctrines must not be allowed to continue in open fellowship with the church (1 Timothy 1:19-20; 2 Timothy 2:16-18).
- Those who walk disorderly are to be refused association by the faithful (2 Thessalonians 3:6). But what is disorderly conduct? There are those who simply grow weary of the Christian life and decide to “resign” from the church. When approached about their neglect, and warned of possible discipline, they raise a voice of protest, claiming: “What am I doing that is wrong? I am not committing adultery; I am not a drunkard. The church cannot withdraw from me.” An appropriate response would be: “Are you faithfully serving God? Do you meet with your brethren to sing, pray, observe the Lord’s supper, etc.? What would be the fate of the family of God if every member were at liberty to do as you have done?” Spiritual neglect is disorderly conduct, and a fitting response to such is discipline—of some sort at least.

It would be well to remember, however, that a person’s disposition is frequently the determining factor in terms of when, or whether, withdrawal of fellowship should be administered. No wise church leadership would disfellowship hastily a sincere Christian who, through weakness, had fallen into a sinful situation. As long as there is humility on the part of the offender, and a genuine effort to overcome the problem, long-suffering would be indicated. When, though, a surly, rebellious attitude is evidenced, more drastic measures may be speedily indicated.

Faithful elderships should let it be known that if a person wants to identify with the congregation over which they exercise supervision, he or she will be expected to live right, and to assume a healthy responsibility in the areas of Christian growth and service. If there is remiss in these matters, discipline, in some form or another, could be advisable.

How Should the Final Act Be Administered?

In every congregation where qualified men are serving as elders, it naturally would be the case that the eldership would lead the church in the withdrawal of fellowship from the unfaithful. Let it be stressed, however, that disfellowship is not an “eldership act” behind closed doors. It is an activity on the part of the entire church, and the formalization of the procedure must be enacted in the public assembly.

Paul commands the Corinthian Christians, by the authority of Christ, to deliver the erring brother unto Satan when they are “gathered together” (1 Corinthians 5:4). Similarly, after the Lord gave instructions regarding the procedures for restoring the brother who had wronged his fellow, he declared: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20).

Few people seem to recognize that this comforting promise is given within a context of an exhortation regarding church discipline. Lenski has well noted: Since he [Christ] is thus in the assembly of the church or present when two or three are convicting a brother of sin, it is he himself who acts with his church and its members when they carry out his Word by invoking also his presence and his help (1961, 707).

Objections to Church Discipline – Answered

In spite of the fact that the Bible is quite clear on the obligation of Christ's church to practice discipline upon impenitent members, there are those who cavil against the responsibility—even to the point of asserting that withdrawal of fellowship is a violation of New Testament principles. Some of the more common quibbles offered are:

“No one is worthy to disfellowship another.”

The allegation is sometimes made that since no one is perfect, no one really has the right to initiate discipline against another. Commonly, John 8:7 will be cited as a proof-text for this idea: “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.” Such is a woeful misuse of this passage. Two points need to be noted.

First, the Jews had brought a woman to Christ whom they claimed to have taken in the very act of adultery. They wanted the Lord to sanction her death (thus involving him in difficulty with the Roman authorities). However, though the Old Testament law had clearly stated that both parties in an adulterous union must be executed, these Jews had brought only the woman. Hence, they had ignored the very law they pretended to honor.

Christ's statement, therefore, as quoted above, was designed to highlight this inconsistency. It cannot be employed to militate against plain commands obligating the church to discipline the wayward.

Second, Paul was not “without sin,” and yet, he withdrew himself from evil brethren (1 Timothy 1:19, 20). One does not have to be sinless in order to honor the Bible teaching on this vital theme.

“Leave the tares for God.”

It sometimes is contended that whereas it must be acknowledged that there are “tares” in the kingdom, we are instructed to leave them alone. At the judgment, the Lord will exercise his own discipline (cf. Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43).

In response, we must insist that no parabolic teaching can be arrayed against clear Bible instruction given elsewhere. This argument is like suggesting that simply because the debtor (in the parable of the unmerciful servant) was forgiven by his Lord, with no conditions being stated (Matthew 18:27), one may conclude that salvation is totally unconditional!

The parable of the tares is simply designed to inoculate against violent and premature attempts to completely purify the church on earth. It has nothing to do with the genuine practice of brotherly discipline. J. W. McGarvey noted that this type of reasoning is “in direct conflict with the teaching both of Jesus and the apostles on the subject of withdrawing from the disorderly” (n.d., 124).

“Judge not!”

Some contend that church discipline would be a form of judging, a practice which the Bible condemns. The plain truth is, not all judging is wrong!

Jesus declared: “Judge not according to appearance, but judge ye righteous judgment” (John 7:24). In Paul's rebuke of the Corinthians, he clearly stated that he had “judged” already the incestuous brother (1 Corinthians 5:3). He then subsequently asked these brethren, “Do not ye judge them that are within?” (5:12). Church discipline does, therefore, involve a form of judging, but it is not the unjustified, hypocritical judgment that is censured by Christ in Matthew 7:1-5.

“Where is the love?”

It is sometimes charged that if the church withdraws fellowship from the erring, it is demonstrating a lack of love. The sickening, superficial view that so many have regarding love these days is one of the most dramatic commentaries on biblical ignorance.

The fact is, discipline does not repudiate love, it reflects love: “Those whom the Lord loves, he disciplines” (Hebrews 12:6, NASB). When ancient Israel went astray, Jehovah withdrew his presence from them for seventy years (the Babylonian captivity). Was this an indication of an unloving disposition? To even suggest such is blasphemous.

If you are a member of a congregation which practices church discipline, you ought to thank Almighty God that you have the privilege of belonging to such a loving family!

“What about him?”

Occasionally the claim will be made: “The church cannot withdraw from me, for there are others who are just as bad, or worse, and they haven’t been disciplined.” Several things may be said in rebutting this rationalization.

First, the fact that the church may have been remiss in its duty, or even inconsistent, in the past, does not mean that changes for the better cannot be made. No sane person would argue: “We were wrong in the past; let us therefore always be wrong.”

Second, the precise determination as to whom, and when, church discipline should be administered will frequently be a matter of leadership judgment. Some brethren may not know all the facts as to why decisions were made to withdraw from some and not from others. There may be extenuating circumstances that are not general information. This type of quibbling cannot be allowed to deter discipline when such is obviously indicated.

Loving discipline was as much a trait of the primitive church as correct worship, organization, etc. This question, then, cannot but haunt many: can a church that utterly refuses to practice discipline truly be a New Testament church?

References

- Lenski, R. C. H. 1961. *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg.
- McGarvey, J.W. n.d. *Commentary on Matthew and Mark*. Des Moines, IA: Eugene Smith.
- Thayer, J. H. 1958. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark.