

Church Discipline

By Bill Scheidler

I. What is the foundation for pastoral discipline in the local church?

A. The foundation for discipline in the local church comes from Jesus Himself.

The foundation for discipline in the church comes from two important instructions given to us by Jesus Himself.

1. Jesus gave a commission to the church that involved making followers of Christ into “disciplined ones” (Mt. 28:19-20).
2. Jesus gave instructions to the local church as to how to handle difficulties that arise between members of the church (Mt. 18:15-18).

B. The foundation for pastoral discipline comes from the biblical job description of a pastor (Acts 20:28-32).

1. Pastors are to be watchmen.

This means pastors are on the alert for issues that might have a negative effect on the flock and they warn them of potential danger.

2. Pastors are to guard and protect the flock from threats from within and without.
3. Pastors are to be those that bring the flock to maturity.

C. The foundation for discipline in the local church is the actual need for it.

1. Without church discipline there is no clear standard of right and wrong among the congregation.
2. Without church discipline sinning members go on sinning, destroying their own potential fruitfulness in God.
3. Without church discipline there is the potential for others to do outwardly what they have only been tempted to do inwardly because the un-judged, outward activity is a tacit approval of it.
4. Without church discipline the spiritual life of the body as a whole becomes greatly weakened. Spiritual vitality and life seep out and a progressive spiritual stagnation sets in.
5. Without church discipline confidence and respect for the church leadership is lost. People do not judge a church by the preached standard but by the practiced standard.

II. Why is pastoral discipline often neglected?

A. It is neglected because of fear.

1. Fear of confrontation in general.
2. Fear of being unpopular among the people.
3. Fear of a church split or polarization.
4. Fear of a negative reputation in the community.
5. Fear of a lawsuit.

B. It is neglected because of ignorance.

1. Ignorance of the necessity of it.
2. Ignorance of the practice of it.
3. Ignorance of the true heart of God concerning it.

C. It is neglected because of a lack of true covenantal love for the sheep.

1. Discipline is a demonstration of love.
2. Discipline requires a laying down of one's life.

I know, O LORD, that Your judgments are right, and that in faithfulness You have afflicted me. Psalm 119:75

III. What are the key verses dealing with the subject of church discipline?

A. Matthew 18:15-18

Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that "by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established." And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

1. Notice that this passage puts the matter of conflict resolution in very general terms, “If your brother sins against you.”
2. Notice that Jesus puts responsibility on the offended party to “go and tell him his fault.”
3. Notice the different levels of confrontation where privacy regarding the offense is attempted but, depending upon the response of the offender, can lead to further exposure.

B. I Corinthians 5:1-13

When you read the entire passage you can see the following phrases that all have a bearing on the discipline described:

- “might be taken away from among you” (vs. 2)
- “deliver such a one to Satan” (vs. 5)
- “purge out the old leaven” (vs. 7)
- Do not “keep company with sexually immoral people” in the church (vs. 9)
- “not even to eat with such a person” (vs. 11)
- “judge those who are inside” (vs. 12)
- “put away from yourselves that wicked person” (vs. 13)

C. II Corinthians 2:5-11

When you read the entire passage you can see the following phrases that all have a bearing on the discipline described:

- “The punishment which was inflicted by the majority” (vs. 6)
- “Reaffirm your love to him” (vs. 8)

D. Romans 16:17-18

Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple.

Note the following phrases:

- “Note those who cause divisions” (vs. 17)
- “Avoid them” (vs. 17)

E. II Thessalonians 3:6-15

When you read the entire passage you can see the following phrases that all have a bearing on the discipline described:

“withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly” (vs. 6)

“If anyone does not obey...note that person” (vs. 14)

“Do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed” (vs. 14)

“Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother” (vs. 15)

F. I Timothy 1:20

*...of whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, **whom I delivered to Satan** that they may learn not to blaspheme.*

G. Titus 1:13

*This testimony is true. Therefore **rebuke them sharply**, that they may be sound in the faith...*

H. Titus 3:10-11

Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned.

If anyone is causing divisions among you, give a first and second warning. After that, have nothing more to do with that person. –NLT

V. What are some biblical commands that are used in connection with leadership and discipline?

A. Reprove (*Elenko*)

1. Definition: To convict, to expose, by conviction to bring to light, to admonish, to correct, to call to account, to show one his fault (demanding an explanation), to chasten, to punish

*Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. **Convince**, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. II Timothy 4:2*

*Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; **correct**, rebuke and encourage--with great patience and careful instruction. –NIV*

2. Other references: Mt. 18:15; Luke 3:19; John 3:20; 8:9,46; 16:8; I Cor. 14:24; Eph. 5:11,13; I Tim. 5:20; II Tim. 3:16; Tit. 1:9,13; 2:15; Heb. 12:5; Jam. 2:9; Rev. 3:19

B. Rebuke (*Epitimao*)

1. Definition: To tax with a fault, rate, chide, reprove, censure severely

*Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, **rebuke**, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. II Timothy 4:2*

2. Other references: Mt. 12:16; 16:22; 17:18; Luke 9:55; 17:3; Jude 9

C. Admonish (*Noutheteo*)

1. Definition: To admonish, warn or exhort

And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you... I Thessalonians 5:12

Dear brothers and sisters, honor those who are your leaders in the Lord's work. They work hard among you and warn you against all that is wrong. –NLT

Brothers and sisters, we urge you to warn those who are lazy. Encourage those who are timid. Take tender care of those who are weak. Be patient with everyone. II Thessalonians 5:14, NLT

2. Other references: Acts 20:31; Rom. 15:14; I Cor. 4:14; 10:11; Eph. 6:4; Col. 1:28; 3:16; II Th. 3:15; Tit. 3:10

D. Correct (*Epanorthosis*)

1. Definition: To correct, to restore to an upright or right state, to raise up again, to reform, to restore, to reestablish

2. See: II Timothy 3:16-17

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins. James 5:19-20

E. Judge (*Krino*)

1. Definition: To separate, put asunder, to select, to approve, to determine, decree, to judge, to pronounce an opinion concerning right and wrong, to rule, to govern, to preside over with power of giving judicial decisions

For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged (as though I were present) him who has so done this deed... For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore "put away from yourselves the evil person." I Corinthians 5:3, 12-13

These verses tell us that God takes responsibility to judge those that are outside of the walls of the church, but that we are to take responsibility to judge those that are inside the church. We are not to do God's judging. However, we cannot ask God to do our judging for us.

2. Other references: I Cor. 6:2-31; 14:29

VI. What is the purpose of discipline in the church?

Church discipline has a purpose in regard to three different parties involved—the individual, the local church and God Himself.

A. Discipline has purpose in relation to the individual being disciplined.

1. To keep them from going astray (Ps. 119:67; Hos. 7:11-12; Jer. 10:23-24; Pro. 10:17; I Cor. 5:5).

I used to wander off until you disciplined me; but now I closely follow your word.
Psalm 119:67, NLT

2. To keep them from the calamity of the wicked (Ps. 94:12-13; I Cor. 11:32).

Happy are those whom you discipline, LORD, and those whom you teach from your law. You give them relief from troubled times until a pit is dug for the wicked. Psalm 92:12-13, NLT

3. To bring them closer to God (Is. 26:16).

LORD, in trouble they have visited You, they poured out a prayer when Your chastening was upon them.

4. To make them wise (Pro. 22:15).

Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; the rod of correction will drive it far from him.

5. To bring them to an experience of abundant and eternal life (Heb. 12:9).

Since we respect our earthly fathers who disciplined us, should we not all the more cheerfully submit to the discipline of our heavenly Father and live forever?
–NLT

6. To help them deal with sin and grow in righteousness in areas where they have been personally unsuccessful (Heb. 12:9-12).

For our earthly fathers disciplined us for a few years, doing the best they knew how. But God's discipline is always right and good for us because it means we will share in his holiness. No discipline is enjoyable while it is happening--it is painful! But afterward there will be a quiet harvest of right living for those who are trained in this way. –NLT

7. To teach them the right ways of God (Ps. 119:71).

The suffering you sent was good for me, for it taught me to pay attention to your principles. –NLT

8. To produce greater fruitfulness in their lives (John 15:2).

Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.

9. To restore the repentant believers (Gal. 6:1; II Cor. 2:7-10).

Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.
Galatians 6:1

B. Discipline has purpose in relation to the local church.

1. To bring the local church to maturity (Eph. 4:12-16; I Cor. 3:1).

...that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ... Ephesians 4:14-15

2. To deter others from engaging in similar sins (I Tim. 5:20).

Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear.
I Timothy 5:20

3. To protect the reputation and witness of the local church (Rom. 2:24).

For “the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,” as it is written.

4. To protect the local church from further contamination (I Cor. 5:6-7).

Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us.

5. To prove that local church leaders love and care (II Cor. 7:12).

Therefore, although I wrote to you, I did not do it for the sake of him who had done the wrong, nor for the sake of him who suffered wrong, but that our care for you in the sight of God might appear to you.

6. To affirm each member’s responsibility to be their brother’s keeper (Heb. 3:13).

Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called “Today,” lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.

7. To help believers cut emotional ties with unrepentant Christians (I Cor. 5:11).

But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner--not even to eat with such a person.

C. Discipline has purpose in relation to God.

1. To affirm the authority of God and His Word in our lives (II Cor. 2:9; II Tim. 3:16-17).

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

2. To maintain the honor of God (Rom. 2:24).

For “the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,” as it is written.

3. To maintain the purity of the Scripture (Tit. 1:10-11).

For there are many insubordinate, both idle talkers and deceivers, especially

those of the circumcision, whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole households, teaching things which they ought not, for the sake of dishonest gain.

VII. What areas of sin are to come under discipline in the local church?

(Taken from notes by Bill Gothard)

Notice that the key to all of these issues is the ongoing nature of them.

- A. **Irresolvable** disputes between members (Mt. 18:15; I Cor. 5:11).
- B. **Persistent** teaching of false doctrine (Tit. 1:9-11; 3:10-11; Rom. 16:17).
- C. **Continuing** immorality and disorderliness (II Th. 3:6; I Cor. 5:11).

VIII. What are the levels of discipline in the local church?

Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that "by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established." And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Matthew 18:15-20

Jesus laid out the prescription for discipline in the local church. He indicated that true discipline moves through stages and the acceleration of discipline is totally dependent upon the response of the person being disciplined.

A. Private

The first step of discipline is private, one on one. If more people would take personal responsibility for the first step very little would have to go beyond that point.

B. Semi-Private

The next step is to include others. Who should be included? It should be those who have authority in their lives including parents, church leaders and people of influence in their lives. Remember, you are primarily after the result of repentance and healing not punishment and excommunication.

C. Public

This step is handled by the leadership of the church and should only be done when all

else fails. This involves a removing of the person from the covering of the local church and putting them into the hands of the highest authority—God. He will discipline them personally from this point (Heb. 10:31).

IX. What are the pre-requisites for effective discipline in the local church?

Before any actual discipline can take place in the local church four things must be done. These can be established from the inception of the church, but, if they are not, they must be established before effective discipline can take place.

- A. There must be the establishment of a biblical standard of Christian living in the life of the church.

The sins that are disciplined by the church must be understood by the vast majority of the congregation as being clearly wrong; otherwise the discipline of a member can result in division.

- B. There must be teaching of the membership concerning discipline.
- C. There must be an example given by the church leadership in all areas of living.
- A. There must be a genuine dedication to all the levels of confrontation, especially the first level.
- B. There must be a consistent application of discipline relative to the entire membership.

X. What is excommunication and how does it work?

- A. Excommunication is the public removal of a church member from membership and a severing of fellowship with the believing community.
- B. What happens in excommunication?
 1. The sinning member is placed outside of the spiritual covering of the local church (I Cor. 5:17).
 2. The sinning member is turned over to God for direct discipline (I Cor. 5:12-13).
- C. What is the congregation's part in excommunication?

The power of excommunication is the congregation's support of the process (II Cor. 2:6). Members of the local congregation must:

1. Refuse to fellowship with the sinning member (I Cor. 5:9-11; Rom. 16:17-18; II Th.

3:6, 14; Tit. 3:10).

2. Continually urge and implore the sinning member to repent (Mt. 18:17; II Th. 3:15).
3. Pray for the sinning member that they might be restored.

D. How is the repentant excommunicant to be received back into fellowship?

This punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man, so that, on the contrary, you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow. Therefore I urge you to reaffirm your love to him. II Corinthians 2:6-8

1. He is to be forgiven.
2. He is to be comforted.
3. He is to be affirmed by the congregation.

What the majority of you agreed to as punishment is punishment enough. Now is the time to forgive this man and help him back on his feet. If all you do is pour on the guilt, you could very well drown him in it. My counsel now is to pour on the love. –
Msg

Note: Depending on the nature of the sin involved, it might be appropriate to let some time go by between the initial act of repentance and the restoration back to full fellowship to ensure that the sinful behavior has indeed been broken off. You do not want to restore the person only to have to excommunicate them again for the same problem.

XI. What are some practical steps for pastoral discipline?

Note: The following notes were gleaned from Bill Gothard's Pastors' Seminar

- A. Thoroughly investigate charges (Mt. 18:16; I Tim. 5:19; Deut. 13:14; 19:18; Pro. 25:9; 18:13).
- B. Work with parents and other authority figures whenever possible.
 1. Parents still have much influence (Deut. 4:9; Pro. 23:22).
 2. Parents can give background information.
 3. Parents should be first to get involved (Eph. 6:1; Deut. 21:20).
- C. Prepare the church for public discipline.
 1. In teaching

2. In prayer, fasting and self-examination (II Cor. 7:11)
3. In reminding them of the purpose and place of discipline in the church

D. Inform the church (Mt. 18:17).

1. Read a prepared and approved (lawyer and leadership) statement. Statement should be brief, factual and project no malice.
2. The church should be called to continued prayer for and appeal to the sinning members.
3. The posture of scriptural love, but avoidance should be followed.

E. Restore the offender when repentant (II Cor. 2:7-11).

PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENT

It has come to the attention of the leadership team that a member of our church must be dealt with by church discipline.

The elders have carefully and thoroughly investigated the facts, and have confirmed that discipline is necessary.

The parents and the elders have appealed to the one who has sinned. All attempts have so far been rejected.

Scripture now instructs us to inform the church so that the united prayer and obedience of the members to the scriptural steps of discipline may be used of God to bring this person to repentance and to a life of victory over sin.

During this period of discipline we would ask that you not continue to fellowship with this person as usual but when you see them implore them to adjust their behavior, repent and be restored to God and the local church.

In the meantime we urge you to pray for this person, but also to set aside a time of personal self-examination, confession of sin, and commitment to God's Word as the rule and norm for our lives.

We are doing this so that Satan will be given no opportunity to bring confusion or division on this matter and that God may be free, because of our obedience, to accomplish His purpose in the life of the one who has sinned.

- Name the person
- Identify the category of sin (no specifics)
- Pray for the individual

XII. What must be the attitude of the restorer (person administering discipline)?

- A. The restorer must be motivated by love (Heb.12:6; Rev. 3:19; Eph. 4:15; II Th. 3:15).
- B. The restorer must discipline with gentleness (I Th. 2:1-9; Ps. 141:5).
- C. The restorer must have a spirit of meekness (Gal. 6:1-2). Recognizing that except for the grace of God we would all be in trouble.
- D. The restorer must be ready to extend mercy (II Cor. 2:6-8).
- E. The restorer must have the heart of a father (I Th. 2:10-12; I Cor. 4:14-16).
- F. The restorer must reprove in wisdom (Pro. 25:12).

*“Like an earring of gold and an ornament of fine gold is a **wise reprov**er to a listening ear.” –NAS*

XIII. What are some conclusions we can make about discipline in the local church?

- A. Discipline is a demonstration of faithfulness (Ps. 119:75; Pro. 27:5-6).

I know, O LORD, that Your judgments are right, and that in faithfulness You have afflicted me. Psalm 119:75

Open rebuke is better than love carefully concealed. Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful. Proverbs 27:5-6

- B. Discipline is for the purpose of restoration and salvation (Jam. 5:19-20; II Th. 3:15).

Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins. James 5:19-20

- C. Discipline is a means of instruction (Ps. 94:12).

Blessed is the man you discipline, O LORD, the man you teach from your law... --NIV

- D. Discipline is designed as a means of grace, not of destruction.
- E. Discipline is designed as an evidence of love, not of hate or of fear.
- F. Discipline is gradual and dependent on the attitude and response.