

HEALTHY CHURCH 10: CHURCH DISCIPLINE – PARTS 1 & 2

INTRODUCTION

- Shock! Healthy churches... have to deal with sin!!
- Book recommendation: Jonathan Leeman, “Church discipline: how the church protects the name of Jesus.”
- 3 marks of the Reformed churches: preaching, sacraments, and discipline
- Remember: It’s about LOVE...
 - For the individual, that he/she might be warned of sin and brought to repentance;
 - For the church, that weaker sheep might be protected;
 - For the watching world, that it might see Christ’s transforming power in the church’s life;
 - For Christ, that churches might uphold his holy name and obey him.

1. BIBLE BASICS

(a) All disciples need discipline... all the time!

- **formative (through instruction)**
- **corrective (through discipline)**

(b) Mutual care and love

Hebrews 10:24-25, “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

Colossians 1:28, “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.”

1 Thessalonians 5:14, “And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.” What does it mean?

(c) Dealing with sin: sometimes you DON'T confront it ...

1 Peter 4:8, "Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins."

(d) But sometimes you must confront and seek to correct sin

Matthew 18:15-20

Jesus' aims:

- the sinner repents
- the number of people involved remain as small as necessary
- the church look different to the world (to the pagan, tax collector)
- non-repentant: church treats that person as if a non-Christian

Galatians 6:1, "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted."

2 Thessalonians 3:13, "As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. ¹⁴ If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed."

2 John 9-11, "Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. ¹⁰ If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, ¹¹ for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works."

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

We learn:

- vv1-3. *Seems* to be very different to Jesus in Matt. 18 (but see below...)
- vv4-5. Treat this person like someone no longer in the covenant community. The hope? That he may be saved.
- vv6-11. There's danger in failing to remove the man. Because sin is contagious in the church of Jesus.
- Purposes of corrective discipline: present a good witness to the world; expose grievous sin; save this man; protect other Christians.

(e) Why do we find church discipline hard?

Past abuse

Q: "Is church discipline at odds with evangelism?"

Q: "Is church discipline at odds with a gospel of grace?"

2. A GOSPEL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING DISCIPLINE

(a) What is the Gospel?

- Implication: The New covenant promise of the Spirit means that we can expect transformation. Corrective discipline is the Bible's response to bad fruit – because with the Spirit's help we *can* expect good fruit.

(b) What is a Christian?

- Implication: Jesus is Lord as well as Saviour. Corrective discipline is the Biblical response when Christian people fail to represent Jesus and show no desire to do so.

(c) What is a local church, and who is a member of it?

Matthew 16:18-19, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

- The church has a God-given authority, to which Christians submit

(d) The importance of the bigger picture...

... and two encouragements

- It's not wrong to find the Bible hard.
- Corrective discipline is a critical but small part of the church's life. It makes sense ONLY in a church where we're already trying to encourage, love and admonish one another. It is itself a deeply LOVING thing.

3. WHEN IS DISCIPLINE NECESSARY?

(a) Some preliminaries

We ALL need correction from our church!

All sin is sin!

We don't pursue every sin to the utmost (1 Peter 4:8)

We do not have X-ray eyes to see one another's hearts

Often, right response to sin = spend time in 1-2-1 Biblestudy

Most often discipline happens privately and informally

Necessity: opening up our lives to other members of the church

The Bible is clear... but life often isn't... so we need wisdom

(b) When do you address another's sin? Consider the things that matter to God...

The person...

The church...

The outsider...

The reputation of Christ...

(c) When is formal corrective church discipline appropriate:

key criteria = characteristic unrepentance

➔ **Happily abide in known sin... obedience to sin is characteristic... therefore impossible for church to affirm a person's profession of faith as credible**

➔ **This helps explain the seemingly big difference between Jesus in Matthew 18 (process) and Paul in 1 Corinthians 5 (no process):**

WRONG answer:

"Jesus is talking about little sins... Paul is talking about big sins."

Better...

* In 1 Cor 5 there is no evidence of repentance – i.e. here is a person defined by their sin (an “evil person”), just like the habits listed in 6:9-11 *used* to define the Corinthian Christians

“Paul’s assumptions about the man BEGIN just short of where Jesus’ process ENDS.” (Leeman, *Church Discipline*, p60).

Paul begins with an assumption of unyielding unrepentance. Jesus’ process exists to determine whether a person IS or IS NOT unyieldingly unrepentant.

→ **Applications:**

**(i) Christ NEVER says to a repentant sinner, “Your sin was too big!”
Nor should the church**

(ii) Persistent unrepentance means the church cannot allow that person to remain a Member

(d) Another situation: a disqualified profession

“... some sins are so deliberate (like a long pattern of abuse...) or repugnant (like sexually predatory behaviour or extortion) that any quick words of apology would be unbelievable. It’s not that such sins cannot be forgiven, or that a person might not be immediately repentant. But some time needs to pass and the fruit of repentance be displayed before a church can responsibly pronounce forgiveness.” (Leeman, *Church Discipline*, p62).

(e) Summary: Is the church convinced that a member is...

- genuinely repentant → no form of discipline (no exceptions).
- characteristically (not temporarily) unrepentant → discipline.
- guilty of sin that is very deliberate, repugnant or indicative of deep double-mindedness → discipline, wait for trust to be re-earned over time

(f) Need for pastoral and situational sensitivity... and a godly attitude

- E.g. is someone a new Christians? Life situation, family setting?
- Take care... be charitable, don’t rush, be thoughtful and gracious
- Realism and humility... hopefulness

4. HOW SHOULD CHURCH DISCIPLINE WORK IN PRACTICE?

- (a) Formal public discipline works best in a church culture where informal and private discipline is welcomed and practiced**

- (b) Matthew 18 encourages a process**

Individuals and then elders confront a person with Scripture, and encourage repentance and restoration.

Continued un-repentance? → rebuke... encouragement to refrain from Lord's Supper... formal exclusion from the Lord's Table... final and ultimate sanction = being that a person is removed from Church Membership.

Except when issues of public safety are involved that does *not* mean exclusion from the church's public worship. But it does mean the church cannot affirm them as a Christian, and their relationship with the body of Christ has fundamentally changed.

- (c) Church leaders should lead the process**

Galatians 6:1, "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted."

- (d) The process should involve as few people as possible... until the congregation have to be involved**

Matthew 18: few people... though some sins are very public... and serious un-repentance is a whole-church matter

- (e) Length of process depends on how long it takes to establish characteristic unrepentance**

(f) Restoration

What? = the church declaring forgiveness toward the person and reaffirming his/her citizenship in God's kingdom.

When? = when the church is convinced there is real repentance. (Sometimes easy to discern, sometimes not).

e.g. 2 Corinthians 2:5-8, "Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure-- not to put it too severely-- to all of you. ⁶ For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, ⁷ so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. ⁸ So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him."

(g) Church discipline, other churches and denominations

5. LASTLY: A CHURCH FULL OF SINNERS... YET BECOMING INCREASINGLY PURE – SOME THINGS CONSTANTLY TO REMEMBER...

- **God is holy and following Jesus is a life of repentance**
- **The church is not a club that you dip in and out of**
- **Following Jesus means helping others – and being helped by others**
- **Discipline – both from the Lord and from his church – is an act of love**

