

August Question and Answer: Church Discipline

Franklin Church of Christ
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PM Worship

Introduction:

The time has come for our monthly night of questions and answers. As is often the case, one of our submitted questions will use up all our time. If you would like to submit a question, feel free to do so by filling out one of the question submission sheets laying on the phone stand by my office and placing it in the proper box, also by my office.

Our question for this month is

—When is church discipline necessary? Why do churches not practice it more?—

To answer these questions, we must first examine the purpose of discipline and the mechanics of discipline. Having noted those two issues, we will then consider when it is necessary and why churches, in general, rarely practice discipline.

Discussion:

- I. The purpose of church discipline.
 - A. As we examine scripture, I believe we find a fivefold purpose for congregational discipline.
 1. The church is to discipline members in order to mark them. In **Romans 16:17**, Paul demonstrates that we must mark (KJV) those who cause divisions or stumbling blocks within the church. **II Thessalonians 3:14** says that the church is to note (NASB) the person who does not walk according to the biblical instruction. The church's discipline informs the congregation of the sinfulness and warns them of the danger of the rebellious sinner. After all, a little leaven, leavens the whole lump (**I Corinthians 5:6**).
 2. The church is to discipline members in order to punish them. According to **II Corinthians 2:6**, the church's discipline on the man committing immorality with his step-mother was done to punish him. The formal act of discipline is a rebuke that needs to be voiced and heard.
 3. The church is to discipline members in order to shame them. According to **II Thessalonians 3:14**, the purpose of the discipline is to put the brother to shame. That is, that the person will consider his/her actions and how truly shameful they are, hopefully prompting change.
 4. The church is to discipline members in order to prompt repentance. When Paul instructed the Corinthians to discipline the immoral man in their midst he said in **I Corinthians 5:5**, that the purpose was so the man's spirit could be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. How could such a sinner be saved? Only if he comes to repentance.
 5. Finally, there is a purpose for discipline beyond the person who is sinning. In **I Timothy 5:20**, the church's discipline is administered in order to cause others to fear sinning. I believe we can see this purpose fulfilled in the one case where God took a direct hand in the church's discipline with Ananias and Sapphira in **Acts 5:1-11**. Note especially **vs. 11**.
 - B. One thing we must keep in mind is that we cannot force anyone to repent and return to the way of God. **Hebrews 6:4-8** demonstrates that it is impossible to renew again to repentance the one who has tasted the good word of God and then abandoned it. This is not teaching that it is impossible for someone to repent. Rather, that there is simply nothing we can do to force anyone to repent. Therefore, a great deal of the argument among brethren about what is the best way to get someone to repent is pointless. There is no best way. We must simply do what God has commanded and pray that the person will choose to come back to the Lord.
- II. The mechanics of discipline.
 - A. According to **Matthew 18:15**, the process begins when one Christian sees the sin of another. What should that individual do? Tell someone else? Talk to the preacher? Go to the elders and ask them to do something about it? No, the individual who witnesses the sin is to go to the sinner and expose the fault. Doing so with gentleness (**Galatians 6:1**). Your desire is to help them repent, not put them in their place. If they listen and repent, you have won your brother.
 - B. But some will not listen. Some will maintain that they may do what they want. Some might even try to use the scriptures to justify their actions. If the sinning brother or sister refuses to listen to the individual, then the individual is to take one or two others with him to talk to the sinner (**Mat-**

threw 18:16). This accomplishes two things. First, it provides a second admonition. Second, it confirms the sinner's rebellion in the presence of two or three witnesses.

- C. If the sinner refuses to repent when admonished by the two or three witnesses, then the witnesses must take the report to the church (**Matthew 18:17**). No doubt, this would include informing the elders. It would also include making a report to the congregation as a whole and demonstrating the testimony upon which the report is made. However, this is not the final step. The rebellion is reported to the church in order to get the church, whether through the specific steps of its leaders or through the general steps of other members, to admonish the sinner.
- D. If the rebelling sinner refuses to repent even after the sin is exposed to the church and the church has opportunity to admonish the brother, then he is to be as a Gentile or a tax-gatherer to us (**Matthew 18:17**). Jesus was speaking to Jews who would not associate with Gentiles and tax-gatherers. Thus, His meaning is quite clear. But this final step is also described in other scriptures. In **Romans 16:17**, Paul said to turn away from them. In **I Corinthians 5:9-11** and **II Thessalonians 3:14**, he said we are not to associate with them, not even to eat with them. **Titus 3:10** says we are to reject the person. We must not participate in any activity or event that says the rebellious sinner is accepted as a saint in good standing with the Lord and His church.
- E. However, once the church has taken this step, Paul provides one supervision in **II Thessalonians 3:15**. Though the church and its individual members have rejected the rebellious sinner and will not associate with him or her, not even to eat with them, we do not view the sinners as enemies, but admonish them as brothers and sisters. That is, we keep in mind that we want them to return to the fold, not stay out in the cold and we speak to them accordingly.

III. When should a church discipline.

- A. This is perhaps the tough part of this whole issue. When should the church take action? Far too often, Christians try to develop lists of sins for which the church should take disciplinary action. Certainly we can see that a Christian who causes division or stumbling blocks is to be disciplined from **Romans 16:17**. From **Titus 3:9-11**, we are to reject a Christian who wants to argue about unprofitable issues. According to **I Corinthians 5:11**, discipline is to be taken if a Christian commits immorality, covetousness, idolatry, reviling, drunkenness or swindling. Then in **II Thessalonians 3:6, 11**, Paul exhorts the church to disassociate themselves from those who lead unruly lives. Finally, in **II Thessalonians 3:14**, Paul makes a general statement that we ought to discipline anyone who does not live according to his instructions.
- B. However, trying to come up with a list from these verses is probably not the proper approach. First, passages such as **Romans 16:17**; **II Thessalonians 3:6, 11**; and **Titus 3:9-11** were not trying to set the limits for all discipline but were dealing with specific issues that end in discipline. Second, **II Corinthians 5:11**, should not be considered an exhaustive list, but a representative list. After all, it does not include divisiveness or an undisciplined life. Finally, **II Thessalonians 3:14**, opens up the teaching to include discipline for all violation of scripture. That corresponds with **Matthew 18:15**, which simply said this process should take place whenever we see a Christian sin.
- C. Further, the issue cannot be confined to just whether or not someone commits a sin. If discipline was to be taken on every Christian who sinned, then who among us would be undisciplined? We would all be subject to discipline and the church would have to be splintered. We still have to ask, when should discipline take place? **Matthew 18** really provides four prerequisites.
 1. When sin has occurred (**Matthew 18:15**).
 2. When the sin can be established by two or three witnesses (**Matthew 18:16**).
 3. When the sinner has been admonished and warned repeatedly (**Matthew 18:15-17**).
 4. When the sinner rebels, refusing to acknowledge his sin and repent (**Matthew 18:17**).

IV. Why don't churches discipline more?

- A. We certainly do not see church discipline administered very often these days. Very few churches practice any church discipline and even fewer still practice it with any consistency or regularity. I cannot speak for every congregation that has let this biblical directive slip by the wayside. However, I believe I can point to some general trends that have led many churches to neglect this important part of a church's work.

- B. *Some neglect discipline because they misunderstand fellowship.* Some believe that the person who has dropped out of church and refuses to return calls has already withdrawn fellowship from us; therefore, we cannot withdraw fellowship from them. However, this does not take into account the real nature of breaking fellowship. Every person who sins rebelliously, whether they drop out of church or not, has broken fellowship with those who continue to walk in the light (**1 John 1:6-7**). Congregational discipline simply formalizes by action what has already happened spiritually. If we refuse to discipline someone simply because they have broken fellowship with us, then we would never discipline anyone and the whole teaching is reduced to absurdity.
- C. *Some neglect discipline because they misunderstand the purpose of discipline.* Some believe the purpose of church discipline is to withdraw fellowship from an individual. Withdrawing fellowship, however, is not the purpose but part of the process of congregational discipline. As stated above, we will often hear that someone has “dropped out” of church. Then someone will say that the person has already withdrawn fellowship from us, so there is no need to withdraw fellowship from them. But making such a claim neglects the aspects of marking, rebuking, punishing and warning others that go along with the formal discipline.
- D. *Some neglect discipline because they misunderstand the purpose of the congregation and its relationship to the individual.* Our culture despises accountability. We seem to rebel against any system which promotes it. That mindset has crept into churches and into individual Christians. As such, being joined to a congregation has become little more than a record keeping device. But that is not what fellowship in a congregation is about. This whole teaching on restoration and discipline of the sinner demonstrates that God holds individual Christians accountable to His will through the work of the local church. Further, the role of elders to shepherd the flock and oversee the brethren adds to this. Consider **1 Peter 5:2-3** and **Acts 20:28**. But the verse that drives this home the strongest is **Hebrews 13:17**. Jesus established local congregations and elders within congregations to hold us accountable to Him. Elders give account for our souls. Do we really think that bond is broken just because a rebellious Christian says, “I don’t want to be a member here anymore.” Some people believe that they can simply elect to quit being a member of a congregation and suddenly no one will give account for them. Too many elders and congregations are also willing to believe that. Then they will claim that a congregation has no right to practice discipline with them. That is simply ludicrous. Until a Christian comes under the oversight and accountability of some other congregation, we must not believe that we, and especially our elders, will not give account for them. We cannot just let them drift off into spiritual space. We are endangering our souls if we take such an approach.
- E. *Some neglect discipline out of fear.* Churches have been badmouthed for practicing discipline. Churches have been falsely accused because they practiced discipline. Churches have been sued for practicing discipline. For many churches, the real reason they do not practice discipline is cowardice. They are so worried about how others will respond they do not follow God’s directive. This is especially the case with family involvement. In most churches, family ties run deep and wide. Many elders fear to practice discipline because the rebellious sinner’s parents, children, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins and whoever else might get upset and leave. In this case, we must remember the stance of the apostles in **Acts 5:29**. We must obey God rather than men. If people badmouth us, so be it. If people falsely accuse us, so be it. If someone sues us, so be it. If family members leave, so be it. We must perform our duty to God, not men.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, we might add one more reason many churches do not practice discipline. Some are afraid they will lose members if they practice discipline. I find it interesting that when the most extreme form of discipline came from the hand of God Himself in **Acts 5:1-11, vs. 14** says the church was continuing to grow. Discipline does not weaken a congregation. No doubt, when we withdraw from a member, we lose their number on our tally board. No doubt, when we start practicing discipline some who do not want to be held accountable will flee to other congregations where they can practice their lack of spirituality with abandon. However, when a congregation properly practices discipline, the members who remain are strengthened to overcome sin and others are drawn in by the strength. If we are going to be a strong congregation, we must not be as other congregations allowing discipline to go by the wayside. Rather, we must discipline properly and consistently.