



Church Discipline: A Necessary Partner to the Grace Gospel

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Synopsis: Yes, Christians can continue in sin, or the biblical admonitions church for church discipline wouldn't make sense.

When President Clinton admitted immorality in the White House, the head of the Southern Baptist Convention and a seminary president called for Clinton's home church in Arkansas to exercise "biblical church discipline." The Associated Press article that reported this added, "The practice is seldom used in the modern church."

That is unfortunate in the sense that when exercised biblically, church discipline not only upholds God's righteous standard for His people, but also displays God's love and grace towards those who sin. The Bible's teaching on church discipline is also one of the strongest supports for the Free Grace view of the gospel and the Christian life.

Church Discipline Requires Us to Be Realistic About the Presence of Sin in Christians

Recently our country was appalled by more than we wanted to know about our President's immoral behavior. Yet healing for the nation demands the full and honest exposure of such behavior. In the same interest of truth and healing, the Bible pulls no punches in describing the depth of sin of which Christians are capable.

In the OT there are plenty of examples of extremely sinful behavior by saved individuals. Examples include Abraham's cowardly lies about his wife, Judah's fornication with a prostitute, King David's murder and adultery, Solomon's idolatry and adultery, and Jonah's deliberate disobedience. Likewise, the NT has examples of Christians who sin grievously. Peter denied Christ and the gospel; Ananias and Sapphira lied publicly to impress others with their piety, a Corinthian believer committed incest; and a segment of the Corinthian church abused the Lord's Supper with selfish inconsideration and drunkenness.

The simplest way to deal with gross sin in Christians is to say that the sinner is not a Christian to begin with. But the above examples do not allow that conclusion. Even so, the remedy would then be to get the person saved. But that is not the remedy suggested for these sinners. The Bible passages on church discipline are a lesson in theology. Though forgiven and born again, Christians maintain a great capacity for sin (albeit a greater capacity for righteousness through Jesus Christ!). Biblical instructions demand that the church face the reality of sin in certain Christians in the church.

In his concluding remarks about the incestuous man, Paul says in **1 Cor 5:12-13** that we are to judge those in the church, not those outside the church. What are we judging? Sinful behavior of course. For the incestuous man this meant potential excommunication.

Of course, sometimes God doesn't wait for the church to initiate procedures, but takes disciplinary action Himself. This seems to be true in the case of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5) and the abusers of the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11). But there is no indication that God condemned them to hell. These people are presented as part of the church, which is why their sins were so grievous in the first place. In reference to the Corinthians' abuses of the Lord's Supper, Paul says that some of them "sleep," which is a euphemism for a Christian's death (**1 Cor 11:30**). The same is true in the case of the incestuous man. Paul said in **1 Cor 5:5** that God would allow Satan to afflict his body--"the destruction of the flesh"--with the aim that he would be restored to spiritual wellness--"that his spirit may be saved." Paul uses the word *sodzo* here as a play on words contrasting physical illness with spiritual wellness. *Sodzo* is often used in the NT to refer to restoration to wellness (compare **Matt 9:21-22; Mark 5:23, 28, 34; 6:56; 10:52; Luke 7:50; 8:36, 48, 50; 17:19; 18:42; Acts 4:9; 14:9; James 5:15**). The errant believer needed restoration to be properly prepared for the Judgment Seat of the Christ ("the day of the Lord Jesus").

As Christians committed to grace, we can face the reality of believers who sin. God teaches us to deal with it, not deny it or sweep it under the carpet of "false profession." Since discipline has the goal of restoration, it is an extension of God's grace available to fallen believers.

Church Discipline Is a Family Matter

Simply put, I don't discipline my neighbors' kids. I discipline my own children. This echoes God's own practice in **Heb 12:5-11**. God sometimes deals harshly (but lovingly) with His children, but this only confirms that they are indeed His own children. It is no surprise, then, that God sometimes prescribes that the church deal harshly (but lovingly) with its sinning family members, who are also His children, precisely because they are His children.

As we study the descriptions of those who are sinning in the passages on church discipline, we find they are clearly in the Christian family. In **Matt 18:15**, the sinner is a "brother" in the church. Even at the end of the process, it does not say he is to be called an unbeliever, but only treated as one (v 17). In **1 Cor 5:11** Paul refers to those who sin and are "named a brother." This certainly includes the incestuous man whom Paul hoped would be restored to spiritual wellness via chastisement (v 5). The command to "restore" a sinner in **Gal 6:1** assumes salvation because fellowship with God and His people is the goal of that restoration. In **2 Thess 3:6** and **15**, the disorderly man is called a "brother." In each of these cases, no one is ever called an unbeliever, nor is there any implication that they are unsaved. As the evidence shows, it is quite the opposite. Church discipline is God's method of taking care of family business. It is as much a reality of church life as spanking or discipline is a matter of family life when raising children. It may not be pleasant; in fact, it may be quite unpleasant or embarrassing at times. But we are obligated to lovingly and graciously deal with it.

Church Discipline Is a Ministry of Grace

Good parents discipline their children to train them to be good and to do right. Discipline is also a way to restore harmony in relationships in the family. It is the same in the church. Along with these positive goals, the process must also reflect love and grace.

Grace teaches us to be godly (**Titus 2:11-12**). The gracious goal of church discipline is to teach the sinning Christian to be godly and to restore him or her to a harmonious family relationship with God as Father and Christians as brothers and sisters. Punishment in the sense of just retribution is reserved for unbelievers. Discipline is ultimately an exercise of love, albeit tough love, and grace. Punishment is an exercise of justice.

The goal of the Matthew 18 discipline is to restore the sinner to the one sinned against (v 15). In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul's command has a dual purpose: to protect the church family from impure influence (vv 6-7), and to return the sinner to harmony with his church family and with God, which was accomplished (**2 Cor 2:6-10**). The **Gal 6:1** directive seeks the sinner's restoration. Paul's instructions in **2 Thess 3:15** are to bring the sinner to repentance: "that he may be ashamed."

The process of church discipline is also full of grace. **Matthew 18:15-17** tells how to protect confidentiality and insure fairness with plenty of opportunity for the sinner to repent. In **2 Cor 2:7-8** Paul urges the church to forgive, comfort, and assure the repentant man of their love. **Galatians 6:1** commands the confronter(s) to have a spirit of gentleness and humility. Paul's overall tone is suggested in **2 Thess 3:15**: treat the sinning one like a brother.

Church discipline has everyone's best interests in mind, including God's. It reflects God's healing and forgiving grace to those who have sinned. It is a legitimate ministry of any church committed to grace theology and to loving its people.

Conclusion

The reality is that there will always be sin in the church until the Lord returns for her. We must deal with sin in the church, not deny it or dismiss it.

It is a bit too convenient to simply claim that a sinning person loses salvation or was never saved. This short-circuits the goal of restoration and growth through disciplinary training.

My personal experience is that exercising church discipline is the most unpleasant side of church ministry. I abhor doing it. But it is a reality we face, if only rarely. When we do, grace is our greatest ally. It tells us how to view the person--as a Christian who sins. It also tells us how to deal with the person--with tough love and humility. And grace tells us how to restore the person--with full forgiveness.

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