

# Discipline: How The Bride Of Christ Keeps Herself Pure

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Reading Time: 5 minutes

One of the greatest acts of love is church discipline. God “disciplines the one He loves” and “chastises every son He receives” (Heb. 12:6) because the aim of discipline is holiness (Heb. 12:10). And just as a parent may say to her child about to be punished, “This is going to hurt me more than it is going to hurt you,” church discipline is painful (Heb. 12:11). But why do we do it? Because, in the image of God, we love one another (1 John 4:7-8).

The Bride of Christ (i.e. the church; cf. Eph. 5:25) disciplines impenitent members and exposes sin because:

**1. She loves souls.** The church loves the individual enough to warn him/her of sin and to bring him/her to repentance. Discipline is compassionate warning of the great judgment to come (1 Cor. 5:5).

**2. She loves her husband.** The church loves Christ, and desires to uphold His holy name and obey Him. Therefore, she keeps herself pure and free of sin (1 Cor. 5:6).

**3. She loves the reputation Christ has in the world.** The church wants to preserve the holy image of the church to the world (1 Cor. 5:1). As strange as this is, church discipline is good for non-Christians because it preserves the distinctiveness and attractiveness of God's people. The church, after all, should be salt and light to the world (Matt. 5:13-16). And salt, if it loses its saltiness, should be "thrown out and trampled by men" (Matt. 5:13).

## What Is Church Membership? (and what does it have to do with discipline?)

To understand discipline, we must first understand the nature of membership to the local church. The local church is a group of Christians who regularly gather in Christ's name (cf. Matt. 18:20). They encourage one another, teach one another, and affirm and oversee one another's fellowship in Christ and His Kingdom.

Is [church membership important? Yes!](#) But Christians do not simply "join" churches like one joins a country club or fitness center. **Christians submit to churches** (Eph. 5:21). Of course, the church does not have absolute authority (only Christ does; Matt. 28:18), and the church occasionally makes mistakes. Yet Christ wants Christians to submit to the oversight of local congregations (Heb. 13:17; Jude 20-23) because of their ultimate citizenship in heaven.

When a Christian identifies with and submits to a church (places membership), the church says (in essence), "*We recognize your obedience to the gospel, and that you are a faithful disciple of Christ (Luke 9:23). Therefore, we extend our oversight and our fellowship (cf. 1 John 1:7). We want to help you in your journey to heaven.*" And, in essence, the Christian says to the local church, "*I recognize you as a sound (2 Tim. 1:13) and faithful church of Jesus Christ (2 Thess. 2:15), and I submit to your love as you watch over my soul.*"

Church membership is about taking responsibility for every Christian, and every Christian taking responsibility for his/her local church.

## When Is Discipline Necessary?

One of the most wonderful immediate benefits of Christianity is Christian community (in the form of the local church). Fellowship with other Christians is a result of first being in

fellowship with God (cf. 1 John 1:7). God wants His children to be in community because we need the comfort and encouragement of one another (Heb. 10:24-25). Yet this fellowship is dependent upon being of the “same mind,” “same love,” and pursuing the same Goal “in full accord” (cf. Phil. 2:2).

**Discipline is necessary when a different mind, love, or pursuit enters the church. When sin, division, or false teaching enters the church, it must be addressed.**

Otherwise, the unity of the church could be jeopardized, the doctrinal fidelity of the church could be compromised, and the zeal of the church could dwindle.

## Principles That Should Guide Congregational Discipline

The Bible does not prescribe a precise process for every case calling for discipline. But it does, however, bless us with an abundant supply of principles that should guide the church in both preventive and corrective discipline. Note a few of them:

### **Matthew 18:15-20**

*The Case:* Someone who has sinned against you.

*The Action:* Go to him privately; if that doesn't work, take two or three with you; if that doesn't work, tell it to the church.

*Why?:* In the hope that you will gain a brother (v. 15).

### **Romans 16:17-20**

*The Case:* Someone who causes divisions and obstacles contrary to the pure New Testament doctrine.

*The Action:* Mark them; avoid them.

*Why?:* In order to protect the body of Christ.

### **1 Corinthians 5:1-13**

*The Case:* An immoral person wants to maintain fellowship with the church while living in sin.

*The Action:* Deliver him to Satan; take out the leaven (v. 6-8).

*Why?:* So he does not think he is still in fellowship with both the brethren and the Lord (cf. v. 4-5)

### **2 Thessalonians 5:14-15**

*The Case:* Those who walk contrary to the teachings of the New Testament.

*The Action:* Withdraw fellowship from them; note them; have no dealings with them.

*Why?:* So that they may be ashamed.

### **Titus 3:10-11**

*The Case:* A divisive man.

*The Action:* Reject him after warning him two times.

*Why?:* In order to protect the unity of the church.

**Notice, in all of the above examples, the person commanded to be disciplined is someone who wants to maintain fellowship while living in sin.** Willful practice, indifference, or approval of sin cannot be allowed among the church. **To tolerate sin is to be guilty of sin.** If we love the church, love Christ, and love souls, we will be proactive in following God's pattern for the church.

**What about someone who has withdrawn themselves?** Obviously, the church cannot withdraw fellowship if fellowship is no longer present (in a practical way, anyway). "If they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us" (1 John 2:19). **But that does not mean the church has no responsibility in relation to her erring members.** Wandering sheep need to know they are wandering, and the flock needs to be aware. We are told to "mark" some, and to "note" some who have not walked according to the pure doctrine and devotion of Christ. While we cannot withdraw from people who have already left our fellowship, that does not mean there is no need for a public rejection of their conduct. Faithful members of the church need to know how to treat erring members by knowing who the erring members are. The world needs to see that the church is not responsible, nor does it condone, the unfaithful conduct of the former members.

## **Conclusion**

Local churches need to stop watering down the gospel. **Discipline has been all but forgotten, and the church is suffering as a result.** Churches that only speak of grace, forgiveness, and unconditional love will not have the strength to deal with division, sin, and doctrinal error. And as a result, sin goes unaddressed, and those churches will begin to look more and more like the world.

However, churches that teach the whole counsel not only talk about grace, forgiveness, and unconditional love, but they teach these topics within the context of sin, repentance, and

salvation. **If we truly want to be a loving people, abounding in grace and truth, we need to revisit the forgotten command of discipline.**

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