

Discipline Isn't A Four Letter Word

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Reading Time: 4 minutes

The world has infiltrated our churches.

In our homes and in our school systems, “discipline” has been replaced with “positive reinforcement,” “verbal affirmation,” and “therapeutic rotten ninny making” (Okay, I made that last one up). Within our society, “discipline” evokes other words like “cold,” “outdated,” “uncaring,” and “heartless.” It is the new four-letter word in our ‘tolerant’ culture.

When it comes to life in the church, we treat “discipline” the same way - as a dirty word. We hold our nose, look away, and attempt to change the subject as soon as possible.

But why? Why have we allowed the world to influence our thinking more than God’s Word? Discipline is a Biblical concept, simply meaning to train, teach, and to instruct the student or disciple (“disciple” comes from the same root as “discipline”). **Discipline is the practical side of teaching, much like doctrine relates to the theoretical or abstract side.**

There are two broad kinds of discipline: *instructional/preventive* discipline and

corrective discipline. *Preventative discipline* is teaching that is intended to instruct, warn, and encourage. The church regularly engages in preventative discipline every time she meets, through Bible classes and preaching, or through personal conversations meant to encourage and edify. *Corrective discipline* is teaching that is intended to convict, correct, restore, and straighten. It is designed to expose sin or error for what it is, and attempts to guard Christians from falling back into a lifestyle of rebellion. Paul charged Timothy with the responsibility of corrective discipline by telling him to “correct” and “rebuke” (2 Tim. 4:2).

I won't pretend that corrective discipline isn't uncomfortable or painful. But we shouldn't treat it as a four-letter word, especially when the Bible so clearly commands it.

Corrective discipline often begins - and [praise & glory to God!] often ends - with one church member privately confronting the sin of another member. Jesus Himself commanded this in Matthew 18:15-20. He also provided further instruction about what to do if the brother/sister fails to repent, ultimately resulting, if necessary, in excluding him/her from the fellowship of the congregation (cf. Rom. 16:17-20). After all if one is not in fellowship with God, he/she cannot be in fellowship with God's children (cf. 1 John 1:7).

But do you remember what comes right before this passage? It is our Lord's much-cherished parable of the lost sheep:

¹² What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? ¹³ And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. ¹⁴ So it is not the will of My Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish. (Matthew 18:12-14, ESV)

When someone sins against us (as Matt. 18:15 anticipates), we need to imitate the shepherd in Matthew 18:12-14) and go after the sheep that went astray. Jesus came to “seek and save the lost” (Luke 19:11), and so should we. **Church discipline shouldn't be shunned like a dirty word - it should be embraced because of our Lord's determined pursuit of us. To avoid discipline is to avoid the gospel. Corrective discipline is the gospel in action.**

Whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death

and will cover a multitude of sins. (James 5:20, ESV)

The Father did not leave us in our sin, but came to us in the form of the Son. He rebukes those whom he loves (cf. Rev. 3:19), and offers us forgiveness. Likewise, we can't passively allow others to perish in sin. We must seek them out and do everything in our power to bring them back to the Lord.If we fail to practice discipline, we've failed to restore New Testament Christianity[Tweet](#)

Discipline can never be mean-spirited or cold (otherwise, it wouldn't be discipline). We must lovingly confront our brother, not only with a rebuke, but with a blank check of forgiveness. If our brother repents, we eagerly hand him the check and we've gained both (Matt. 18:15).

Without discipline, sin wins. "Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?" (1 Cor. 5:6). It produces bitterness and division. It fosters an atmosphere of indifference and apathy. It kills churches.

But sin doesn't have to win. God, in His immeasurable grace, has offered forgiveness and restoration. **To rebuke sin and freely offer forgiveness is to remove the strangling hands of Satan from the Bride of Christ.**

Peter says "love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Pet. 4:8). **Show me a church that practices Biblical church discipline, and I'll show you a church that loves. Love deals with sin.** It refuses to let sin rip brethren apart. It keeps sin from spreading and causing more harm to the church. Just as God doesn't leave us in our sin but comes to us with rebuking grace, so we extend His grace to others.

It is time we get serious about Restoration Christianity. We need to restore all of it, not just the parts that are easy. If we fail to practice discipline, we've failed to restore New Testament Christianity.

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