

Gresham Bible Church Position Paper: Church Discipline

Introduction

Church discipline is often viewed as very negative and unloving act. Many have never seen it practiced and don't even like the thought of it. The goal of this paper is to show that church discipline is a means of grace from God that accomplishes many things. Church discipline is, in simple terms, confronting an unrepentant sinner in the church with the hope of reconciliation and restoration. We hope this paper will give clarity as to what the purpose of discipline is, what the Bible teaches about discipline, how the church can both be prepared for it and avoid it, and some dangers to avoid when practicing it. At the end we hope that people will see that church discipline done biblically is actually the most loving thing to do.

Four Purposes of Church Discipline

Protecting the Name of Jesus

The highest aim is to protect the name of Jesus. The church is the witness of Jesus on earth. We are his ambassadors (2 Cor 5:20). If the United States had an overseas ambassador who was consistently making the USA look like garbage, he wouldn't last long in his position. In the same way, the church should not be content to let members of the body live as if Jesus means nothing to them, while claiming to be transformed by Jesus. If we stand by, and do nothing, as our fellow members tarnish the name of Christ by the way they live, how much do we really love Jesus? Would a godly man avoid confrontation if someone were unjustly harming his wife's reputation? How much more should we seek to protect the reputation of Jesus?

Protecting Members

Another purpose of discipline is to protect members. Sin spreads. If we look the other way when there is obvious sin in a person's life, the chances are it will become an acceptable sin that will begin to invade the body. If one member gossips, and no one calls it out, soon gossip will begin to spread through the body. Galatians 6:1 reminds us that when we are seeking to restore someone caught in sin, we must be careful lest we also be tempted. A little leaven leavens the whole lump as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 5:6, so we must not let any bad leaven in.

Discipline brings sin into the light, allowing all to see its ugliness and remove it from their midst.

Saving the Sinner

A third purpose is to save the sinner. The goal of church discipline is reconciliation and restoration. If your child is going down a destructive path, wouldn't the most loving thing be to warn them and beg them to turn from their foolish ways? Discipline is not retributive. This isn't about being the sin police who delight in exposing sin in others. 2 Thessalonians 3:15 reminds us that even when we are having nothing to do with someone because of their disobedience,

we are not to think of them as an enemy, but rather as a brother. The hope is always to bring the sinner to repentance.

Warning of Coming Judgment

Discipline also warns the body of a greater judgment to come. No sin will be swept under the rug. A final judgment is coming where we will all have to give account for the way we have lived. Church discipline reminds us of this coming judgment. It is a small picture of what is to come. Discipline is a gracious warning to the body. Do not follow this path because the Lord's judgment is what awaits you at the end.

Matthew 18

There are many biblical passages that deal with discipline. Some have already been referenced such as 1 Corinthians 5, Galatians 6, and 2 Thessalonians 3. Probably the most famous passage on the subject is Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18. In verses 15-17 Jesus says this:

15 "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

Here we see Jesus' teaching aims to bring repentance and to keep things as small and private as necessary. The hope here is to gain your brother. If that can happen with a one on one meeting all the better. If the one on one efforts and small group efforts fail to bring repentance, then the church is made aware of the sin. Underlying all of this we see Jesus' desire that his church live a certain way. Our lives should not look like Gentiles or tax collectors who don't know Jesus. The church is people who have been transformed by Jesus and have his Spirit indwelling them. In commenting on this passage, Jonathan Leeman says, "Church members should live differently than the world. And if, after a series of gracious warnings, they don't, a church should exclude them from its fellowship." If sin has so hardened a member of the body that the church can no longer accept their testimony of faith, then that church has a responsibility to exclude that member. It is both for the good of the name of Jesus, the good of the body, and the even the good of the excommunicated member. Even after excommunication, the hope is repentance and restoration (1 Cor 5:5).

It is important to note that just before this section of Mt 18, Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep. The imagery is of the Father graciously seeking out those that are lost. This sets the tone when Jesus discusses confronting sin. Our attitude in church discipline should be the same as the Father's. We should be looking to graciously restore those in sin.

How to Be Prepared for, and Avoid Discipline

A church can be both prepared for discipline, and avoid discipline if it practices membership and discipleship. Membership is crucial to the life of a church. Being a member is affirming that you want to follow Jesus and live in obedience to him. Being a member is showing

commitment and welcoming accountability. If we don't know who is committed to following Christ, how can we help keep them accountable? To protect the name of Jesus, we have to know who is "in" and who is "out" (1 Cor 5:12). The idea of removing someone from fellowship when there is no actual membership is ridiculous. We practice membership to identify with Jesus and a specific local outpost of his church, and as members we affirm the testimony of others who want to join.

At GBC being a member means being committed to growing in your walk with God, growing in your understanding of the Scriptures and growing close to God in prayer. It means growing in the grace of cheerful giving, and it means serving in the body and using your gifts to edify others. But even more than that it means you are committed to seeing those same things grow in your fellow members. This culture of discipleship can help make cases of church discipline rare. Sin can run rampant in a church with no accountability. In a place where members truly care about one another to the point of being willing to ask hard questions of one another, very few sin issues will grow to the point of a hard heart. Hebrews 3:13 reminds us to, "exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today", that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." We need each other if we are going to avoid falling prey to the lies sin tells us. If sin is handled through the loving care and confrontation of fellow members, we can stop it before it is too late. In a sense, at a good church, we are all under church discipline all the time in order to avoid ever having to reach the end of church discipline which is excommunication.

Dangers To Avoid When Practicing Church Discipline

There are some dangers to avoid if we desire to practice church discipline biblically. One danger lies in our motives. We must be sure we have a heart of love and grace that truly desires the repentance of our brother caught in sin. Discipline must be done with a spirit of restoration rather than retribution. Our hearts should break each time we must practice church discipline. Another pitfall to avoid is making it public to fast. Jesus is clearly concerned with keeping it as small as possible in Matthew 18. Our first step is not telling the sins of another to the church. If there is a problem, we must deal with it directly between only those involved directly. Telling people who have no business knowing will often lead to gossip and division.

Jonathan Leeman provides some helpful guidelines when practicing church discipline. He says the sin should be *outward, serious, and unrepentant*. Sensing pride in someone's heart is not reason to begin a discipline process. All of us sin and will continue to do so. A sin that needs discipline needs to be serious. We must leave room for "love to cover a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8). And finally, to start a discipline process we must be dealing with an unrepentant person. No matter how outward or serious the sin is, if we trust the confession and repentance of the sinner, then we are to keep them in the fellowship. To move toward excommunication it should be apparent to the church that this person prizes their sin more than Jesus.

Conclusion

The Lord disciplines those he loves (Prov 3:12) and disciplines us for our good (Heb 12:10). By avoiding discipline we are saying we love better than God does. Church discipline is a way of

maintaining a strong and accurate witness for Jesus on earth. It keeps His name from being muddied by unrepentant sin. It protects the body by exposing and removing sin. It warns all those who see, of a greater judgment to come. And by the grace of God, church discipline will help us gain back our brother from the clutches of sin and restore him back to fellowship with both the body, and his Savior.