

Practical Issues in Church Discipline

Jim Newheiser

I. Introduction.

A. Why is church discipline important? I Cor. 5:1ff Acts 20:28 Rev. 2:14-15,20

B. To what two extremes do churches go in the practice of church discipline? III Jn. 9-10

II. Stage 1: Go to your brother privately. Matthew 18:15

A. Minor offenses should be overlooked. I Peter 4:8 Pr. 10:12 19:11

B. Which sins must be confronted?

1. Sins which endanger the moral purity and reputation of Christ's church.
I Cor. 5:1,5-6,11 15:33
2. Errors which endanger the doctrinal purity of the church. I Jo. 2:22-23 4:1 II Jo. 1:9-11
3. Notorious sins which could damage the reputation of the Lord. 1 Co. 5:1
4. Sins which endanger the doctrinal and moral purity of the Church. I Cor. 5:6b-7 15:33
5. Divisiveness which endangers the unity of the church. Ro. 16:17-18 I Co. 3:3 Titus 3:9-11 Heb. 13:17 III John 9
6. Sins which could ruin your brother. Js. 5:19-20
7. Sins which threaten your relationship with the other person. Luke 17:3 Eph. 4:26f
8. Sins which could hurt others. Mt. 7:12

C. What should you do before you go?

1. Make sure that there are no beams in your eye. Mt. 7:5
2. Be certain that you have a clear cut case. 1 Tim. 5:19 Deut. 19:15
3. Behavior is easier to prove than motives and attitudes. 1 Co. 2:11 Pr. 16:2
4. Strive to assume the best. I Cor. 13:7
5. Test your motives. Gal. 6:1 5:17ff
6. Prepare prayerfully.

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- D. Do not first go to others which can become gossip. Mt. 18:15 Lev. 19:16 Prov. 20:19
What should you do if someone improperly tells you the sin of another?
- E. Why should you confront him? Gal. 6:1
1. Love demands that you confront him. Lev. 19:17 Pr. 27:6 3:5-6 17:5-6
 2. What excuses do people make in order to avoid confrontation? Ro. 15:14 Pr. 27:6
- F. In what manner should you confront him? Gal. 6:1-2 Prov. 25:11
1. Go gently, carefully, and lovingly – spiritually. Gal. 5:22-23
 2. Your purpose is to restore – not vent or judge. Gal. 6:1-2
 3. Remember that his sin is primarily against God. Ps. 51:4
 4. This kind of interaction should be happening regularly in close relationships. Gen. 2:18
- G. What should you do if he repents? Mt. 18:15b 21-22 Js. 5:19-20 Pr. 11:30 Eph. 4:32
1. If he repents, rejoice and forgive. Eph. 4:32
 2. Repentance may involve restitution and seeking the forgiveness of other parties.
- H. Other questions:
1. Do those who are under authority (i.e. a wife or a child) have the right to confront those over them (i.e. a husband or a parent)? 1 Sam. 25:24ff How can you know if someone is really repentant? II Cor. 7:10-11 Mt. 18:21-22
 2. Are there cases in which a person may repent, but the church will still need to be told? I Tim. 5:20
 3. How long should you wait before moving to stage 2?
 4. How well do you receive correction? Prov. 9:8 15:31-32

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III. Stage 2: If he will not listen to you, take two or three witnesses. Mt. 18:16 Dt. 19:15

- A. Personal peacemaking is not always successful. Pr. 12:1 9:8

- B. What is the function of the two or three?
 - 1. They come to bear witness against his sin and to admonish him to repent.
 - 2. Whom should you bring? Gal. 6:1
 - 3. Are there cases in which those you bring may not agree that he is guilty

- C. What should be done in disputes in which counter-charges are being made?
 - 1. Jesus is addressing clear-cut cases of sin in Matthew 18:15-20.
 - 2. Some cases require mediation or arbitration. Phil. 4:2-3 1 Cor. 6:1-8 Prov. 18:17

- D. What should you do if the erring brother repents?

IV. Stage 3: If he still refuses to repent, tell it to the church. Mt. 18:17a

- A. Who tells the church? The leaders of the church must be involved in determining the validity of the charges and the means of dealing with the matter publicly. Heb. 13:17

- B. How should the situation be communicated to the church?
The presentation to the congregation must be open and above-board

- C. Is this a violation of the sinner's right to privacy? I Cor. 1:20 5:1ff Eph. 5:11
What level of confidentiality should you offer in counseling?

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- D. What should the members of the church do when they hear the charges against their brother? The other members join in to pressure the sinner to repent. II Th. 3:14
- E. If the sinner repents, he is to be forgiven and restored.
- F. Other questions:
1. What if someone has charges against the leaders of the church?
 2. Can a person resign his membership in the church to avoid discipline?
- V. Finally, the guilty party is to be removed from the church. Mt. 18:17b-20 I Cor. 5:3f
- A. What are the purposes of removing someone from the church?
1. To protect the church from impurity (leaven). I Cor. 5:6-7 15:33 Dt. 13:11
 2. To restore the fallen brother. v. 20b I Cor. 5:5 II Co. 2:6-8 Gal. 6:1-2 Js. 5:19-20
 3. For the sake of the reputation of Christ.
- B. What is the status of one who has been put out of the church? Mt. 18:17-20 I Jo. 2:19
1. He is to be regarded as an unbeliever and an outsider. Mt. 18:17
 2. Church discipline takes place under the Lord's authority. Mt. 18:18-20 I Co. 5:4-5
 3. Does this mean that he actually is an unbeliever?
- C. How should the people in the church act towards him? I Cor. 5:9-13 II Th. 3:6,14
- D. Should he be allowed to attend worship services or other meetings of the church? No! I Cor 5:13 Deut. 17:7 19:19 21:21 22:24
- E. What are the usual responses of people under discipline?
1. People who deserve discipline often try to get themselves off on technicalities.
 2. People who are under discipline often put their accusers on trial.
- F. Once someone is excommunicated, can Christians take him to court? I Co. 6:1ff 7:12
- G. Other questions:
1. What does it mean to be *delivered to Satan for the destruction of the flesh*? I Cor. 5:5 I Tim. 1:19-20

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2. How should discipline be handled if the person agrees that he is not a Christian?
I Cor. 5:10
3. Who decides that the person should be excommunicated?
4. Is there a court of appeals beyond the local church level?
5. Must family members cease socializing with those who have been disciplined?
6. How should we deal with members who do not attend?
7. What is the status of someone who is removed from membership for non-attendance?
8. What is the difference when someone simply resigns his membership?
9. Do we have any duty/right to discipline professing Christians who regularly attend our churches, but are not members? I Cor. 5:11
10. Are there levels of church discipline which fall short of removal? II Th. 3:14-15
11. Why is it important to keep written records of church discipline cases?
12. Can every sin potentially lead to public discipline?

VI. Restoration after excommunication.

A. Are there cases of restoration after someone has excommunicated? II Cor. 2:6-8

B. How quickly can a person be restored?

C. How can you know his repentance is genuine? II Cor. 7:8-11

1. God-focused, not self-focused. Ps. 51:4a 2 Sam. 12:13
2. Hates the sin, not merely the consequences. Ps. 32:5 Ps. 51:1-3
3. Fully accepts responsibility, not self protective. Ps. 51:3 2 Sam. 24:10
4. Concerned for others rather than blaming them. 2 Sam. 24:17 Phil. 2:3-4 Gen. 3:12
1 Sam. 15:19-24
5. Patiently accepts consequences rather than impatiently demanding trust and restoration. Ps. 51:4 2 Sam. 24:13-14 1 Sam. 15:30
6. Submits to discipline and accountability rather than criticizing the disciplinary process. 1 Co. 10:12 2 Co. 7:8 Gen. 4:13
7. Changed heart that produces fruit. Ps. 51:6-12 Luke 19:1-10 3:7-9

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D. How should a restored person be treated?

E. Is it legitimate to place some restrictions upon a brother who has been restored?

F. How should restoration be communicated to the church?

VII. Other considerations.

A. Are there situations in which sin should be dealt with publicly without having to go through all the steps in Matthew 18:15-20? I Cor. 5:1,9-11 6:9-10 I Tim. 5:19-20 Gal. 2:11ff II John 10 Titus 3:9-11 Rom. 16:17-18 Heb. 13:17 III John 9-10

B. How should churches work together in the area of church discipline?

1. Churches should respect one another's discipline. Prov. 18:15,17
2. Churches should work together when disputes arise among their members.
3. How should you handle a situation in which someone who was disciplined by another church begins attending your church?
4. Are there cases in which a church might rightly receive someone who was under discipline from another local church? III John 10-11
5. How should churches which refuse to cooperate in these matters be regarded?

C. Church discipline requires a biblical church structure. Acts 20:28

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- D. A problem of our day: many refuse to commit themselves to a church.
1. Why do many refuse to commit to membership?
 2. Why is formal membership in a local church necessary? Acts 2:41 Heb. 13:17 I Pe. 5:2-3 I Th. 5:12-13 Jo. 13:34 Mt. 18:15f I Cor. 5:1ff
 3. Those who desire the benefits of membership without taking on the responsibilities are those who want to live together without making the commitment of marriage.
 4. How should we treat those who refuse to join the church?
 5. Can a non-member be disciplined? I Cor. 5:11
 6. What are the responsibilities of church members? Heb. 10:24-25 13:17 I Co. 12:7 I Pe. 4:10f I Th. 5:12
 7. What are the privileges of church membership? Gal. 6:10
 8. What are the conditions of church membership? Rom. 15:7

E. Questions:

1. What is the status of a professing Christian who is the member of no church?
2. What are the risks of being a member of no church?
3. What should be done with professing Christians who refuse to join a church?
4. How long should we wait before receiving a person into church membership?
5. On what grounds may we legitimately refuse church membership to a believer?

VIII. Conclusion.

- A. Preserve the unity and purity of the church through following biblical principles for church discipline. I Tim. 3:15 Mt. 16:18. Rev. 2:5
- B. Recommended reading: Jay Adams, Handbook of Church Discipline