

Church Discipline

Two extremes in church discipline

There are two extremes in church discipline. There is the *dictatorial self-righteous legalistic* type. This occurs when church leaders want everyone to submit to them more than to God and start imposing extra-Biblical rules on the church members. Such leaders warn churchgoers that they will be removed from membership if they do not submit to various unbiblical teachings and practices. For example, I have known of churches in which the leaders have wrongly taught that they have the God-ordained right to tell their members what individuals to marry, where specifically to live and so on.

In 3 John 9-10, John wrote about a type of dictatorial church discipline in his time: ***“I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us. Therefore, if I come, I will call to mind his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words. And not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, putting them out of the church.”*** Legalistic discipliners do not realise how loving, gracious and slow to anger God is. Psalm 145:8 emphasises: ***“The Lord is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and great in mercy.”***

The other extreme is *liberal compromising* church discipline. This type of discipline involves never correcting believers of their specific sins through preaching, teaching or personal conversation and never removing believers from church membership for continually refusing to repent of serious known sin. A form of this slack type of church discipline occurred in the Corinthians Church (see 1 Corinthians 5:1-13).

In 1 Corinthians 5:9-13, Paul strongly rebuked the Corinthian Church for its lack of church discipline in relation to a member living in a de-facto relationship with his step-mother: ***“I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named brother, who is a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner – not even to eat with such a person. For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore ‘put away from yourselves that wicked person.’”***

Also, note God was exceptionally displeased with and punished Eli for not using his authority as High Priest to discipline his sons who were practicing sexual immorality and treating God’s offerings with no respect (see 1 Samuel 2:12-17, 22-36 and 3:12-14). Eli rebuked them but did not discipline them (see 1 Samuel 2:23-25 and 3:13).

Many forget that even though God is a God of *abounding grace* (see Ephesians 2:7 and 1 Peter 5:10), He is also a God of *order* (see 1 Corinthians 14:33 and 40) and a God of *discipline* (see Hebrews 12:7-11).

In 1 Corinthians 5:6-7, Paul shows that churches who do not lovingly discipline serious known sin will find such sin will end up spreading in different ways throughout their local church: ***“Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole***

lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened.”

I have heard some churchgoers who really agree more with humanism than the Bible, say it is wrong for church leaders to discipline believers who refuse to repent of serious known sin such as adultery. They say leaders should not judge. But note in 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15, Paul teaches: ***“And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.”***

Too much discipline in churches results in *tyranny*. Too much freedom and lack of discipline in churches leads to destructive *anarchy*.

Comments about church discipline by a Pentecostal leader

The following are some interesting comments about church discipline by Rev. B. E. Underwood, General Superintendent of the Pentecostal Holiness Church, one of the largest Pentecostal denominations in the United States:

“While the New Testament Church did not simply copy this system, she did use excommunication as an instrument of discipline. There is little reason to believe that the Twentieth Century Church can improve on the scriptural teachings with regard to this vital matter.

Two dangers are immediately apparent. There is, first of all, the danger of laxity and false tolerance. This leads the congregation of believers to tolerate evil in their ranks. It is comparable to a nation’s providing security and protection for a known traitor. The second danger is that of overacting in the matter of discipline. Many churches have been virtually destroyed by ‘witch hunters’ who felt called of God to purge the church of all error and ‘worldliness’.

The permissiveness and false tolerance of our day, however, are deadly enemies of the Church. They endanger the purity and peace of the Church. The individual who persistently, and in spite of the loving instruction of the Church, continues in sin, must not be allowed to use the fellowship of the Church as a cloak for his sin.

*In this matter, as in all others, the Bible is our guide. The scriptures reveal the answers to three important questions regarding excommunication. First, **why** do we excommunicate members? Second, **when** do we excommunicate members? And, third, **how** do we excommunicate members?*

*First, **why excommunicate**? There are three aims in view when the Church exercises this drastic discipline: the restoration of the offender, the purity of the Church, and the glory of God. Paul exhorts the church at Corinth to excommunicate an immoral member ‘that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus’ (1 Corinthians 5:5). The ultimate aim is thus redemptive. The purpose of excommunication is to bring the offender to repentance. Failure to exercise discipline may give the offender a false security.*

The redemptive aim of this disciplinary action is clearly seen in Matthew 18:17. After outlining the steps to be taken in excommunication, Jesus urges His disciples to let him (the excommunicated member) be unto them ‘as an heathen man (a Gentile) and a publican.’ Jesus came to seek and to save the heathen and publican. The church is deeply involved in reaching the heathen and the sinner with the gospel. So when one is banished from the fellowship of the Church, he is not to be despised and deserted by the Church. It should be the task and passion of the Church to go after him in love until he is restored to full fellowship.

The second aim is to maintain the purity of the Church. Paul asks the Corinthians, ‘Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?’ (1 Corinthians 5:6). Leaven spreads quickly. It will soon corrupt the whole Church. Leaven, a type of sin, must be purged out of the fellowship of the saints. A little leaven – one member persistent in sin and permitted to remain within the fellowship of the Church – will soon corrupt that fellowship.

The third aim is the glory of God. It is the purpose of the Church to glorify God in this world. But if the Church tolerates evil, she compromises with the enemy of God...A careful adherence to this scriptural plan for dealing with sinning church members would have saved the Church many crippling blows from the devil. If compassion for the sinner had always been mixed with the passion for purity, the results would have been much more effective. Both of these ingredients are needed in the Church today.

The Church is now operating in a world opposed to restrictions and discipline. Americans are opposed to restrictions on anything, even speeding, according to the public opinion polls. There is a mighty tide of lawlessness rushing through our society. A permissive, libertarian temper guides our course. Many seem to feel that every man should be allowed to do what is right in his own eyes. But it is the duty of the Church to exercise discipline over her members in spite of this temper, else she will perish in the permissiveness of this lawless age. She must, however, never allow this discipline to become harsh and hard. It must be exercised for the right reasons and in the right way or it will do more harm than good. This we can do by returning to the plain teaching of the scriptures in the vital matter of excommunication.”¹

Disciplining church leaders

In 1 Timothy 5:19-21, Paul commanded Timothy, the main leader at the church at Ephesus: ***“Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses. Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear. I charge you before God and the Lord Jesus Christ and the elect angels that you observe these things without prejudice, doing nothing with partiality.”*** Note Paul here taught:

1. Senior leaders of a local church should not accept accusations against the behaviour of other local church leaders unless it is proven by two or three witnesses.
2. Church leaders who continually or repeatedly sin without true repentance should be rebuked. In Greek, the phrase ***“are sinning”*** is in the *present tense*. In 99% of cases, the present tense in Greek refers to an ongoing continual or repeated action. So Paul is not here teaching that if a church leader sins once or twice in a matter and then sincerely repents, he still must be rebuked in the presence of all. Paul is referring to elders who are continually or repeatedly committing a sin and not repenting of it.
3. The meaning of the phrase ***“in the presence of all”*** is debatable. It may mean before the whole local church or before the other leaders and possibly witnesses.
4. The senior leader has to do this without prejudging the accusations and without partiality to the accused or accusers.

Poor church discipline

The crucial importance of Biblical church discipline can be seen in the words of my uncle. He was brought up in a church. He said that many in his hometown knew two high lay officials in this church were practicing homosexual paedophiles who had sexually interfered with young choir boys. These two fellows were never disciplined by the minister or local bishop.

¹ B.E. Underwood, “Sixteen New Testament Principles for World Evangelization”, Advocate Press, Franklin Springs, Georgia, 1988, pages 234-235 and 240.

As a result, the local church and Jesus Christ were belittled by many who knew of this unpunished undisciplined wickedness.

Similarly, as has been exposed by the media in recent years too many church leaders have failed to discipline properly other church leaders who have sexually abused little children and women. This disgraceful situation was partly a result of liberal humanistic church discipline. Using the Bible's teachings of love and forgiveness as a false cover for not disciplining wickedness, such compromising allowed these criminals to remain as leaders, to avoid criminal prosecution and to be moved to other local churches where they recommitted the same wicked acts.

Also note that throughout the 1900's, some church leaders allowed many Masons to hold high positions in a few major Protestant denominations in Australia. All of these cultists should have been disciplined by their ministers. The ministers should have told them that either they quit the Masons or leave the church. No Christian can make secret vows to other semi-religious organisations when these vows are not allowed to be examined openly by the members of God's Church.

The wheat and the tares

Some argue that Jesus' parable of the wheat and the tares found in Matthew 13:36-43 proves that church leaders should not discipline severely unrepentant churchgoers. They say Jesus here taught we must allow the righteous in Christ and sin-loving hypocritical unrepentant Christians in-name-only to remain together in the church until Jesus later separates them at His Second Coming.

But observe Matthew 13:38 says the field that the wheat and tares are in is the *world* and *not the church*. Jesus was teaching here about believers and unbelievers living together in the world and not sincere believers and continually unrepentant hypocrites sitting together in church.

Bible Study Questions

1. Explain what is the dictatorial, self-righteous legalistic type of church discipline.
2. What does liberal compromising church discipline involve?
3. What warning can we see in 1 Corinthians 5:6-7 about church discipline?
4. Explain why Matthew 13:36-43 does not prove that church leaders should never discipline severely unrepentant churchgoers.