

Admission and Dismission of Members by The Church

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Authority has been given to the local church to admit and dismiss members. Prospective members should be interrogated to determine basically what they believe. Allowances must be made for weakness in the faith; but when one has been subjected to the teaching of God's word, he should manifest the grace of God in his life (Acts 9:23-31). There must be mutual consent between prospective members and the church.

Discipline and the spirit of forgiveness both have their places in the local church. All judgment must be executed in the light of God's judgment, and all forgiveness must be in the light of God's forgiveness. Matters of judgment demand caution. It should be exercised by individuals, by several individuals, and finally, if need be, by the church itself (Matt. 18:15-17). Any church failing to exercise discipline is not a New Testament church.

Church history has revealed the neglect and abuse of church discipline. A guilty individual or a guilty church deserving to be disciplined will neglect disciplinary action. Those ignorant of Biblical teaching abuse discipline. The unrepentant accuse the church of unlawful judgment. The ignorant will go beyond that which is lawful. However, the Scripture is clear in its teaching of what is lawful and unlawful. Ignorance of Scripture excuses none.

The disciplinary action is against a brother in Christ (Matt. 18:15). The church does not judge a person outside the church (I Cor. 5:12, 13). Private, plural, and public judgment are taught in Matthew 18:15-17. A brother sinning against another brother is a personal offence. The offended

brother should go alone to the sinning brother to reprove him and seek to reclaim him.

There is a difference between a private and a public offence. A sin known by the church is dealt with in a different manner than a private sin (Matt. 18:16). Two or three witnesses go to the sinning brother seeking to win him over from his estrangement. The law required two or more witnesses (Deut. 19:15; II Cor. 13:1; John 8:17). After the first and second admonitions, he should be rejected: "A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject" (Titus 3:10). The matter becomes more serious if he remains unrepentant (Matt. 18:17). It must then be taken to the whole church for his excommunication.

Many in professing Christendom question the exercise of church discipline by the local aspect of the church: (1) Did not God pass over sin? (2) Did not Christ eat and drink with sinners? (3) Did not the Lord say let him that is without sin cast the first stone? (4) Did not the Lord say let the wheat and tares grow together until the harvest? (5) Does not discipline cause division? (6) Who can determine the time allotted between the steps of Matthew 18:15-17? (7) Does not excommunication imply the loss of salvation?

Did God pass over sin? The forbearance of God of Romans 3:25 and 26 is the same as God's longsuffering of II Peter 3:9. God's forbearance and longsuffering are toward those for whom Christ died that they might be brought into the ark of safety. God's forbearance is not the same as man's motive to "let it go." A brother knowing the sin of another in the same local church and remaining silent for fear of harming the guilty person's character is as guilty as the sinner himself. The apostle Paul rebuked the entire church

at Corinth because they had failed to exercise discipline against a fornicating brother (I Cor. 5:1-13; II Cor. 12:21). A recipient of grace will not argue that God passed over sin to excuse himself from obedience to the Lord in the matter of discipline.

Christ ate and drank with sinners (Luke 15:2). How does the so-called tolerance with sin by Christ stack up with Christ's suffering for sin? Jesus Christ was not tolerant with sin. His sufferings and ignominious death endured for sin prove His intolerance with it.

The Pharisees brought the woman taken in adultery to Jesus Christ seeking to ensnare Him. The Lord said the person without sin should cast the first stone (John 8:7). The answer is found in John 8:11. The Lord told the woman He did not condemn her and she should go and sin no more. Christ's statement does not include tolerance but forgiveness.

Christ interprets the wheat and tares growing together until the harvest of Matthew 13:30 in Matthew 13:38—"The field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of the wicked one." The field is the world. The word for world does not mean *ekklesia*. The sheep and goats grow up together in the world, but not in the church. We are not to try to weed out all the ungodly. The Lord was speaking of the final judgment. This eschatological judgment is not given to men. But there is a present judgment given to the local aspect of the church (Matt. 18:15-18; I Cor. 5:12).

When discipline is properly executed in the local church, heaven will sanction that which is done according to God's will on earth. The language is the same in both verses of Matthew 16:19 and Matthew 18:18 concerning

the binding and loosing, but the time and persons executing the authority differ. The time element is very important. The time of Matthew 18:18 has to do with the present dispensation of grace (Phil. 3:12-14; I John 1:8-10). There is no perfect Christian during the church age, when the church herself is incomplete and imperfect. The church is not complete because the last one for whom Christ died has not yet been brought into the ark of safety. The church will not be perfect until the Lord Jesus Christ presents her faultless before the Father (Eph. 5:27).

It is a fact that during the purest period of history of the local aspect of the church it had a mixture of people who did not have the Spirit of God. There was a Judas among the twelve apostles, a Simon Magus among the first converts to the church, and a Demus and a Diotrephes among the first servants of Christ (Acts 8; II Tim. 4:10; III John 9).

The only way the local aspect of the church could be sure of heaven's approval of her judgment on conduct was to agree in the spirit of prayer: "Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:19, 20). The standard of heaven and the spirit of prayer and agreement are necessary to keep us from acting arbitrarily in our imperfect state. Whereas, it will be impossible to act arbitrarily in the kingdom of God. There will be no need for prayer in the kingdom, because we will then be perfect. But prayer is needful for our imperfect state. There will be no condition of agreement in the kingdom because we will be like Jesus Christ. Disagreements among God's people are found in their imperfect state in the local church, which is imperfect. To have

heaven's approval on judgment in discipline during this age we must know what the Scripture has to say about discipline, learn its boundaries, and understand its limitations.

No person has the prerogative to dismiss himself from the church. Since he came in by mutual consent, he must not leave without the same mutual consent. The local aspect of the church has been given authority to dismiss members either by letter or by excommunication. When a person transfers from one church that preaches and abides by the truth of God's word to another like it, a letter should be granted to the church receiving him (Acts 18:27; Rom. 16:1, 2; Col. 4:10). No person has the right to withdraw from a church and not show up any more. He did not come by his mere consent; therefore, he cannot leave in that manner. The church has a right to know the reason for his leaving.

Scripture teaches the excommunication of members and the attitude of the church toward them (Rom. 16:17; I Cor. 5:1-13; II Thess. 3:6-15; I Tim. 6:3-6; II John 9-11). Excommunication means the excommunicated person is deprived of all the privileges of the church. This is an awesome work.

All violations of Biblical standards of doctrine and behavior require some form of discipline (Heb. 12:6). The offender may need to be admonished either privately or publicly (Rom. 15:14; Col. 3:16; I Thess. 5:14; II Thess. 3:14, 15; Titus 3:10, 11; Heb. 10:24, 25). The offender may need to be reproved, rebuked, convinced, or convicted (Matt. 18:15; Eph. 5:11; I Tim. 5:20; II Tim. 4:2; Titus 1:9, 13; 2:15). The offender may need to be excommunicated (Matt. 18:17-19; I Cor. 5:11, 13).

The necessity for the church to exercise discipline is as great as it is to preach the word and administer the Lord's Supper. Christian love is violated by serious private offenses (Matt. 18:15-18). Christian unity is violated by those who form divisive factions which destroy the peace of the church (Rom. 16:17, 18; Titus 3:10). Christian law is violated by those living ungodly lives (Matt. 15:19, 20; Rom. 13:8-14; Eph. 4:25-6:8; Col. 3:5-4:6; I Thess. 4:1-10; II Tim. 2:22-4:5; Titus 1:6; 2:1-3:3). Christian truth is violated by those who reject the essential doctrines of faith (I Tim. 1:19, 20; 6:3-5; II John 7-11).

There was disciplinary laxity in the Pergaminian church (Rev. 2:14, 15). She tolerated evil teaching and became lax in discipline. This church was doctrinally weak. Had the church in Pergamos been as doctrinally strong as the Ephesian church, she would never have admitted false teachers and their doctrine.

Christians must recognize there are false teachers (II Pet. 2:1). They must also recognize there are false brethren (Gal. 2:4). They must avoid those who cause divisions (Rom. 16:17), abstain from familiar intercourse with them (II Thess. 3:6), have no intimacy with them (I Cor. 5:9, II Thess. 3:14), and reject them after the first and second admonitions (Titus 3:10).

The effect of discipline is nullified when a neighboring church welcomes a disciplined member. Discipline is not a matter of removing names from the church roll but a matter of spiritual fellowship. It is not a withdrawal of a person from fellowship but the withdrawal of fellowship from a person. Biblical teaching shows concern for the church first and the offender second. When church members manifest concern for the offender before concern for the church, those members are in the same category with the offender and

should be dealt with in the same manner with the offender. Church purity is of utmost importance (Ps. 93:5).

The sin of one member against another, which is a breach of love, is reason for discipline. Forming factions or parties in the church, which is a breach of unity, is reason for discipline. Disorderly behavior of members, which is a breach of law, is reason for discipline.

Particularization is an important part of discipline. A Christian confesses nothing through generalization. His faults, failures, or sins must be particularized. The apostles always particularized. The apostle Paul called the names of two women at variance with one another in the church at Philippi (Phil. 4:2). He also called the names of two men who erred concerning the truth of the resurrection and tried to overthrow the faith of some (II Tim. 2:17, 18). This is the only reference in both epistles to Timothy where Philetus is mentioned. However, Hymenaeus' name is referred to in I Timothy 1:20. He was excommunicated, but he did not cease propagating false doctrine. Therefore, Paul referred to him again in his second epistle to condemn his false doctrine. Wherever false teaching finds pasture, it must be immediately condemned. The apostle's exhortation is to "mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them" (Rom. 16:17). "Marking them" is to keep an eye on them—observe them. Another instance of particularization is John warning the church about Diotrephes who loved to have the preeminence (III John 9).