

THE DISCIPLINE OF THE CHURCH

Matthew 18:15-18; I Corinthians 5:1-13

by John Kohler

Church discipline is designed by God to promote individual integrity and maturity and to preserve congregational purity and unity. There are two broad categories of church discipline. These are called *positive, formative, or preventive* church discipline, which is the edification of God's saints and their growth in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, and *negative, reformative, or corrective* church discipline, which is the rectification of God's saints and their restoration to a right relationship with God and man. *If positive, formative, or preventive* church discipline is faithfully practiced, it will greatly reduce the need for *negative, reformative, or corrective* church discipline. In this study of God's word, our major focus will be on the practice of *negative, reformative, or corrective* church discipline. This is because there is very little disagreement or controversy about the practice of *positive, formative, or preventive* church discipline.

OCCASIONS FOR NEGATIVE, REFORMATIVE, OR CORRECTIVE CHURCH DISCIPLINE

A. Steps to be followed in the case of private or personal offenses committed against an individual church member (Mat. 18:15-18):

1. Individual Confrontation: Offender confronted by Offended (w. 15, 21-22). If repentance occurs, the matter is to be forever dropped. If repentance does not occur, the next step is to be followed.

2. Combinational Confrontation: Offender confronted by Offended, plus one or two other members (v. 16). If repentance occurs, the matter is to be forever dropped. If repentance does not occur, the next step is to be followed.

3. Congregational Confrontation: Offender confronted by entire church membership (v. 17). If repentance occurs, the matter is to be forever dropped. If repentance does not occur, the next step is to be followed.

4. Exclusion or Excommunication: Offender excluded from the membership and fellowship of the church for his failure or refusal to repent and make things right (v. 18).

This writer shares the convictions of Baptist theologian B .H. Carroll about the need for the faithful practice of Biblical corrective church discipline. He writes as follows:

"Christianity is designed to be a maker of character. If it does not make a man better than he was before, it is not worth anything; if it does not make a father a better father, a mother a better mother, a sister a better sister, a brother a better brother, a child a better child — if there is no improvement in the character of the man, then we may be sure that he has never been born again, because the Spirit does not produce that kind of fruit...

"Suppose in the jungles of Africa a company of people and animals were camped for the night, and they built a stickade to keep off wild beasts, and some of the animals, a cow perhaps, gets unmanageable and bellows and butts around and tries to get out. They turn her out, and let her hear the lion roar, and she wants to get back. The thought is that the one that won't be quiet in good company should be shown that there is worse company on the outside. I heard an old Baptist preacher say, 'If you put a wild hog in a pen and he goes to squealing, let him out, and he will strike for the woods and never come back, because he is a hog. But if a sheep is turned out it will bleat around the gate until you open the pen and let the sheep come back on good behavior.' If a man is not converted he ought not to be in there; let the hog out and let him strike for the woods; if he is a sheep and hears the lion roar he will bleat around to get back, and he will behave himself next time" (An Interpretation of the English Bible, James, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, pp. 175,170-171).

B. Steps to be followed in the case of public or general offenses committed against the church as a whole or against the cause of Christ in general (I Cor. 5:1-13):

1. Immediate exclusion from church membership and fellowship for one gross offenses such as persistent heresy, immorality, and disorderly conduct.

This writer wholeheartedly agrees with Baptist theologian Augustus H. Strong on this point, who writes as follows: "Public offenses against the church as a whole are to be dealt with according to the rule in I Corinthians 5:3-5,13 and II Thessalonians 3:6. Notice here (I Corinthians 5—JK) that Paul gave the incestuous person no opportunity to repent, confess, or avert sentence. The church can have no valid evidence of repentance immediately upon discovery. At such a time the natural conscience always reacts in remorse and self-accusation, but whether the sin is hated because of its inherent wickedness, or only because of its unfortunate consequences, cannot be known at once. Only fruits meet for repentance can prove repentance real. But such fruits take time. And the church has no time to wait. Its good repute in the community and its influence over its own members are at stake. These therefore demand the instant exclusion of the wrong-doer as evidence that the church clears its skirts from all complicity with the wrong. In the case of gross public offenses, labor with the offender is to come not before, but after his excommunication (II Corinthians 2:6-8). The church is not a Mutual Insurance Company whose object is to protect and shield its individual members. It is a society whose end is to represent Christ in the world and to establish his truth and righteousness. Christ commits his honor to its keeping. The offender who is only anxious to escape judgment and who pleads to be forgiven without delay, often shows that he cares nothing for the cause of Christ which he has injured, but that he has at heart only his own selfish comfort and reputation. The truly penitent man will rather beg the church to exclude him in order that it may free itself from the charge of harboring iniquity. He will accept exclusion with humility, will love the church that excludes him, will continue to attend its worship, will in due time seek and receive restoration. There is always a way back into the church for those who repent. But the Scriptural method of ensuring repentance is the method of immediate exclusion" (Systematic Theology, pp. 924-925).

2. Eventual restoration to church membership and fellowship upon genuine repentance with its evidential fruits.

OBJECTIVES IN NEGATIVE, REFORMATIVE, OR CORRECTIVE CHURCH DISCIPLINE

- A. To glorify God by obeying His word. (I Cor. 10:31).
- B. To preserve the purity and unity of the church (Mat. 5:13-16; Acts 5:11-13).
- C. To remove cancer from the church before it spreads throughout the whole body (I Cor. 5:6-7).
- D. To reclaim wayward brethren for Christ and His church. (I Cor. 5:5).
- E. To avert God's judgment upon way ward brethren. (I Cor. 11:30-31).
- F. To maintain a godly, Biblical testimony in the community, (cf. I Tim. 3:7).

This writer is in basic agreement on this point with Willard A. Ramsey, pastor of Hallmark Baptist Church of Simpsonville, South Carolina, who writes as follows: "The discipline by the church body, not just the pastors or deacons (see I Cor. 5:4), is the ultimate scriptural filter to screen the membership to keep it pure for the proper representation of the name of Christ. Today few churches use this filter anymore, and those who do not become cesspools of covert corruption. But it cannot be completely covered. Sooner or later undisciplined sin breaks through for the world to see! How then can this be anything but a misrepresentation of Christ and gross disobedience to the Word of God?...So then would we expect church discipline to influence evangelism? It most certainly does; the biggest cry in all the land is 'hypocrites in the church.' Everywhere I go, people, unbelievers, tell me, 'I am just as good as so-and-so in the church over there.' They will not listen to the gospel. The unbelieving world knows what its church-going neighbors do. They know of their drinking, and their adultery unrebuked by the church. And they say, 'I'll make it to heaven if they do,' and they will not hear the gospel. Why? Because the Christian people of this generation have fallen down on those first principles — they do not love and long for obedience to the Word of God. If each church would consistently apply the principles taught in Matthew 18:15-18; Romans 16:17; I Corinthians 5:1-13, I Thessalonians 5:14; 2 Thessalonians 3:14-

15; 1 Timothy 5:20-21; Titus 3:10, the churches would be much smaller but much more powerful in evangelism. They would be respected for their purity, and their gospel would be heard (The House of God, pp. 9,119-120).

OUTLOOK DURING CORRECTIVE CHURCH DISCIPLINE

A. It is to be done in a spirit of meekness as we remember our own imperfection and weakness. (Gal. 6:1).

B. It is to be done in a spirit of brotherly love. (II Thes. 3:15).

C. It is to be done in a spirit of sorrow and grief. (I Cor. 5:2).

D. It is to be done in a spirit of forgiveness, or with a willingness to practice true forgiveness upon real repentance. (II Cor. 2:7; Lk. 17:3-4).

E. It is to be done in a spirit of unity, with a willingness on the part of the whole church to avoid all Christian and church fellowship with the excluded member.

OBJECTIONS TO NEGATIVE, REFORMATIVE, OR CORRECTIVE CHURCH DISCIPLINE

A. "We are not supposed to judge others." ("For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person" ~ I Cor. 5:12-13; "Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment" ~ Jn.7:24).).

B. "It is unloving to practice corrective church discipline." ("If ye love me, keep my commandments" ~ Jn. 14:15; "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous" ~ I Jn. 5:3; "He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes" - Prov. 13:24).

C. "We just need to be patient with people." ("Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us" ~ I Cor. 5:6-7).

D. "We should just let the Lord deal with the problem." (The Lord deals with church problems through the Scriptural actions of the church membership; church inaction invites divine intervention.)

E. "We should just practice forgiveness." ("Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him" ~ Lk. 17:3).

F. "We don't deal with problems that way at our church." (Then your church does not bow to the supreme and final authority of God's word; corrective church discipline is not optional, but mandatory.)

G. "We're not perfect, either." (The members of the Corinthian church were not perfect, but they were still commanded to practice corrective church discipline; See Mat. 7:1-5 as well, which teaches us that we are in a position to judge others after we have practiced self-judgment).

May God help true New Testament churches everywhere to faithfully practice church discipline as it is taught in God's holy word! Such churches show a lack of love for Christ and others when they fail or refuse to obey this clear-cut Bible doctrine.