



Church Discipline and Restoration

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Introduction

The Belgic Confession of Faith of 1561 proclaimed that a true church would be identified by three distinctives: (1) preaching pure doctrine, (2) administrating the ordinances, and (3) exercising church discipline.

Imagine that!

Once upon a time the kind of church viewed as true to Scripture was revealed by its determination to follow these distinctives. What can the average church today lay claim to?

First, the preaching of doctrine has all but disappeared from pulpits. In its place are trainloads of self-help techniques, quick-fix sermons, and topical studies with churchgoers' "felt needs" in mind. Happiness, not holiness, is in demand today as this *first distinctive* has been ushered out the front door.

Furthermore, since the primary meaning of the Greek word for baptism is "to immerse,"¹ any church that sprinkles infants or adults fails to Biblically fulfill the *second distinctive*. The Greek words for "pour" or "sprinkle" are never used in passages referring to a person's baptism. In addition, our Lord clearly commanded that disciples, not infants, were to be immersed as a sign of their devotion to Christ and His teaching (Matthew 28:19, 20).

Many churches today have strayed far from the example and courage of our spiritual forefathers. The average church

has never practiced the *third distinctive*—exercising church discipline, which includes restoring unrepentant believers. Most believers have never even seen this process carried out.

Recently 439 pastors and church leaders were surveyed on the subject of church discipline. Of those questioned, 50 percent admitted that they had never intervened or gotten involved with church members or attendees who needed confronting, rebuking, or any other form of discipline.

This survey didn't mean that the other 50 percent actually carried out some form of church discipline; it simply recorded the astonishing statistic that half of the shepherds never took any action regarding unrepentant believers.

These leaders, who had evidently forgotten that God had charged them to care for the flock (1 Peter 5:3), gave one of three reasons for not intervening: (1) a fear of the outcome; (2) a desire to avoid disruptive problems; (3) an ignorance of what disciplining entails.

The church has, in effect, abandoned untold numbers of wayward believers to wander into the clutches of sin without any warning, without any reproving, without any rebuking or challenging. Al Mohler, an evangelical leader, quoted J. Carl Laney, who lamented,

The result of the loss of discipline is the loss of the biblical pattern for the church,

and the impending collapse of authentic Christianity in this generation. The church today is suffering from an infection which has been allowed to fester[.] . . . [A]s any infection weakens the body by destroying its defense mechanisms, so the church has been weakened[;] . . . it has lost its power and effectiveness in serving as a vehicle for social, moral and spiritual change. This illness is due, at least in part, to a neglect of church discipline.²

How did something previously held as critically important nearly vanish from the religious landscape of our country? How do we go about restoring this critical distinctive back into the fabric and function of the New Testament church?

The Principle

What Exactly Is Church Discipline?

Church discipline can be broadly defined as the confrontational and corrective measures taken by an individual, church leaders, or the congregation regarding a matter of sin in a believer's life.

The words "discipling" and "discipline" provide different nuances of the same Greek word—different expressions with the same goal: the growth and maturity of the believer.

Discipling: activity geared toward the growth of those who are walking in obedience.

Discipline: activity geared toward the restoration of those who are walking in disobedience.

Without a doubt, the discipline and restoration of sinning, unrepentant believers is a difficult, time-consuming, awkward process. No wonder rebuking and correcting wayward believers is usually short of volunteers, even though the Bible commands it (1 Corinthians 5:1–13); the Lord models it (Hebrews 12:6); the church loses credibility and effective witness without it

(Revelation 2; 3; 1 Peter 2:11, 12); and the Lord explained how to exercise it (Matthew 18:15–20).

What Is the Main Objective of Church Discipline?

While punishment may be a consequence of church discipline (2 Corinthians 2:6), it is never the motive or the objective for exercising discipline. When being disciplined by their parents, children might be convinced that "My parents don't love me," "They're being too hard on me," or "This hurts!" Parents, on the other hand, deliver discomfort as a consequence for wrongdoing and to motivate their children toward the safe, productive path of wise living—which, in the end, protects them from a life filled with far greater pain and suffering.

Similarly, the main objective of church discipline is the restoration of unrepentant believers to a safe, productive lifestyle of godly obedience and intimacy with Jesus Christ.

What Gives the Church the Right to Judge Someone Else?

A popular question hurled in the face of the Biblical church is, "Who gives the church the right to call somebody a sinner in the first place?" Didn't Jesus say, "Judge not, that you be not judged"?

Yes, He did say that (Matthew 7:1). Does this mean that the church should never call a sinner a sinner? Is the church never to point a finger and call sin a sin?

Matthew 7:1 is perhaps one of the most misunderstood and misquoted verses today. It is often quoted as the primary justification for wearing moral blinders toward someone who is blatantly, openly sinning.

The question remains, Is it ever right to judge? Yes! In fact, the New Testament gives several examples of when it is actually right to judge.

When Is It Right to Judge?

1. It is right to judge someone who is openly living in sin.

The apostle Paul instructed the church in Corinth, "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you" (1 Corinthians 5:1–3).

Paul announced, "I indeed . . . have already judged . . . him"! It is important to note that in the presence of the congregation, Paul called attention to this man's sin (sexual relations with his stepmother). It is also ironic, in respect to our own culture today within mainline denominationalism, that Paul considered the church arrogant for refusing to condemn sin (v. 2). He did not applaud the members for tolerating other views regarding sexual activity. Instead he publicly judged the church in Corinth by calling the believers what they truly had become: arrogant; believing they were above God's Word, smarter than God's design for relationships, and more sophisticated than God's age-old plan for sexual relations! He then challenged them to deal with the sinning man by removing him from their fellowship (v. 5).

2. It is right to judge someone who denies Biblical doctrine.

Increasingly our culture and the church are resisting the idea of doctrinal and theological absolutes. Doctrine is considered too dogmatic . . . too black-and-white . . . too divisive! Today the siren song to the church is, Lay aside doctrine and unite in love.

But popular mantras are often unbiblical messages. Politically correct may be Biblically corrupt. The Bible actually delivers a far different message: "Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them" (Romans 16:17).

"If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house, nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds" (2 John 1:10, 11).

Paul further warned the Galatians, “Even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed” (Galatians 1:8).

Imagine the implications of these verses! Ministers who preach that Jesus Christ didn’t literally resurrect from the grave are accursed. Religious leaders who deny the sufficiency of Christ’s atonement are accursed. Those who deny the divine inspiration of Scripture are accursed. Church leaders who preach a gospel of salvation by grace plus something else—penance, church membership, baptism, or any other form of good works—stand in judgment as accursed!

By the way, Paul did not call for open dialogue with these false teachers; he judged them according to their false doctrine. He actually endorsed division on the grounds of doctrine.

3. It is right to judge ourselves as we evaluate our own walk with God.

First Corinthians 11 carries the repeated exhortation for judging ourselves as we approach the Lord’s Table. Five times in three verses, Paul encouraged a form of self-discipline as he commanded, “Let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup” (1 Corinthians 11:28).

This means nothing less than holding ourselves accountable to the standard of God’s Word for holy living—confessing our sins prior to partaking in Communion. Thus the ordinance of Communion becomes a regular event that includes self-discipline in the believer’s life. Tragically, within our own Christian culture, self-discipline involving evaluation, repentance, and confession of sinful behavior is considered too depressing. Yet the pursuit of holiness on the part of the true believer will consistently bring about conviction of sin and an attitude of judgment upon that sin, with resulting confession and repentance before Christ (1 John 1:9).

4. It is right to judge our culture in light of Scripture.

Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers, “He who is spiritual judges all things” (1 Corinthians 2:15).

What was he talking about? Paul was referring to critical thinking and critical judging by alert, discerning Christians, who judge all things. That is, they examine, investigate, inquire into, question, and discern all things. They don’t mindlessly follow the crowd—pagan or Christian.

However, this doesn’t mean they are critical people who complain about everything. There is a difference between thinking critically and being critical! This is the same difference between being judgmental, which the Bible does not accept, and wisely judging all things, which the Bible commands.

Today a barrage of conflicting advice, differing religious perspectives, and a vast array of pseudo-spiritual leaders confront and challenge believers. So spiritual discernment is of paramount importance. The church must be capable of judging experiences, trends, and beliefs in light of Scripture.

We desperately need people in the church who think critically and judge current opinions in light of Biblical truth. History is replete with courageous people who did this very thing. William Tyndale, in 1526, judged the religious sentiment of his day as wrong. The church had declared the Bible as a book to be owned, read, and interpreted only by priests. Tyndale rejected this “politically correct” notion and gave his countrymen an English translation of the Scriptures. He paid for his judgment on the church with his own life.

When Is It Wrong to Judge?

1. It is wrong to judge someone before you know all the facts in the case.

The apostle John wrote, “Does our law judge a man before it hears him and knows what he is doing?” (John 7:51). In other words, believers should

never judge on a whim, an impression, or a rumor. Facts are necessary, and believers should be quick to hear and slow to speak (James 1:9).

2. It is wrong to judge when judging is based on another person’s personal convictions.

Romans 14 makes it clear that personal convictions often dictate activity in areas that the Scriptures do not address. Just remember, judgment can travel in both directions. Those who condemn believers who allow certain things in their lives judge wrongly; so do those who scoff at believers who choose stricter guidelines by which to govern their choices.

Judging wrongly oftentimes has nothing to do with a Biblical violation but with differing opinions, convictions, and personal preferences. And in these matters of preference and personal conviction, we must not be judgmental. What a difficult lesson to learn that God often blesses people with whom we disagree!

3. It is wrong to judge someone by attacking his or her motives.

Paul wrote, “Judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts” (1 Corinthians 4:5).

This text certainly instructs us to leave off judgment that relates to motives. It implies that only the Lord can judge motives and intentions, since He alone can see the heart. Therefore, we should confine our judgment to observable actions and leave hidden motives for the Lord to judge at the coming judgment. In the meantime, we must be careful to give people the benefit of the doubt! If all we have to go on is our perception of another person’s motives, our judgments will be skewed.

One of the reasons the Bible requires two or more witnesses to agree on charges brought against another person is because one person can too easily misread or misinterpret another

person's motives. One person alone may fail to give the benefit of the doubt and jump to judgment. Thus, taking the time to gather additional counsel will often slow the process enough to carefully arrive at the truth.

In the meantime, we would do well to remember something that Jewish rabbis taught centuries ago: the six greatest works a person could do. They are to study the Scriptures, to visit the sick, to show kindness to strangers, to pray, to teach children the Scriptures, and to think the best of people.

Giving someone the benefit of the doubt is often the first step to avoiding the pitfall of enacting wrong judgment.

4. It is wrong to judge when the act of judging becomes a display of self-righteousness.

Jesus said, "Judge not, that you be not judged" (Matthew 7:1). He couldn't have been talking about all the forms of judgment validated in Scripture. Instead the Lord was referring to a type of judging typical of religious leaders. In fact, He was speaking directly to Pharisees (Jewish leaders), who had a reputation for censorious, pietistic, critical attitudes of judging and for their love of exposing and embarrassing the sinner. Thus Christ warned, "For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged" (Matthew 7:2).

In other words, self-righteous, condemning judgment builds its own gallows—especially when self-righteous individuals refuse to deal with their own sinful behaviors.

Jesus illustrated this principle when men brought before Him a woman whom they had caught in the act of adultery. Those proud judges, with their sinful private lives, had come not only to condemn the adulterer but to corner the Savior.

After seemingly ignoring the men and their captured prey, the Lord

stooped down and began to write in the dirt. John recorded, "When they continued asking Him, He raised Himself up and said to them, 'He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first'" (John 8:7).

Then back down He went to write in the dirt. The answer to this "strange" behavior from the Lord, the only record of His writing anything, is found in the text itself. John didn't use the common Greek verb here. Instead he used *kategraphen*, a compound word that means to write down "a record, a register."³ It indicates the writing of a record against someone. Furthermore, the fact that Jesus "wrote with his finger was symbolic of divine legislation."⁴

In the stillness of that temple court, Jesus was revealing the hypocrisy of judging others while harboring an unrepentant heart. What was Jesus recording in the sand? He was writing "a record against" those men—more than likely, a sampling of sins they had hidden in the shadows of their secret lives.

Peter Marshall once imagined "Jesus Christ [seeing] into their very hearts, and that moving finger [writing]: idolater, liar, drunkard, murderer, adulterer. [Then] the thud of stone after stone falling on the pavement as one by one, they crept away, slinking into the shadows, shuffling off into the crowded streets to lose themselves in the multitude."

What happened next is recorded in John 8:10 and 11. Imagine this scene: The temple courtyard is quiet; the woman's accusers have disappeared. Jesus alone had the right to cast the first stone, but He looked at her and said, "Neither do I condemn you."

But isn't this the opposite action of discipline? Did Jesus overlook her sin?

Wouldn't His inaction be proof enough that we should never judge or condemn someone in sin? Not really! You must understand Christ's response.

1. *Jesus Christ did not dismiss her sin; He told her to stop sinning.*

The human judges wanted to condemn. Jesus, the righteous Judge, yearns to forgive. Any true church involved in rebuking, challenging, and judging sinful behavior would do the same thing—forgive—if the sinning person turned from his or her sin.

2. *Jesus Christ not only forgave her past but also challenged her future.*

The Lord said to her, "Go and sin no more" (John 8:11). Jesus confronted the woman's lifestyle of immorality. He did not say, "Oh, it's all right, don't worry, just go on back to that man you were with; . . . keep on doing what you were doing and choosing to live the way you think is best."

Instead His words strongly declared, "Your actions are wrong! Stop living the sinful life of an adulterous woman!" This was no easy forgiveness. This wasn't tolerance of sinful immorality. Jesus confronted the woman with a choice that day: go back to her old ways or live in the light of God's mercy and grace as a forgiven woman. We have every reason to believe that this woman left her life of adultery. She probably never forgot that encounter with the Lord, an encounter that combined mercy and a life-changing directive.

Notes

¹ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), 92.

² John Armstrong, ed., *The Compromised Church* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1998), 175.

³ Fritz Rienecker and Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Regency Reference Library, Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 237.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 237.

Next month Part 2 will deal with these and other matters: sins that lead to church discipline, steps of church discipline and restoration, participants in the process, treatment of someone under discipline, and dealing with a leader caught in sin. ■