



## Church Discipline and Restoration

*Part 3 of a three-part series*

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*Thus far in our study we have seen the principle of church discipline (its definition and objective, the local church's authority to do it, the right and wrong time to judge); the process of church discipline (the sins that lead to it and the steps and restoration of church discipline); and the participants of church discipline (leaders' and the congregations' actions and attitudes toward the disciplined, the question of whether genuine believers sin, and the church's actions if a leader is caught in sin). Now we will consider the product in this matter of church discipline.*

### The Product

#### What Are the Biblical Evidences of Repentance?

If the discipline of a wayward believer accomplishes its divine goals, the prodigal will exhibit true repentance. Repentance is a change of direction, a confession of sin followed by the desire to make restitution, to rebuild relationships and, in general, to make everything right.

The evidences of true repentance will be the repentant believer's

- honestly acknowledging sin (Psalm 51:2, 3; 1 John 1:9);
- discontinuing the sinful behavior that initiated discipline (James 5:19, 20);
- seeking Biblical counsel, if needed, to gain victory over sinful patterns of behavior (Proverbs 8:32–36);
- making financial restitution if necessary (Luke 19:8);
- initiating confession and asking forgiveness from all parties involved (Matthew 5:23, 24); and
- exhibiting a spirit of humility and brokenness, revealing a true work of God's Spirit (Psalm 51:17).

#### What is the difference between a person who is temporarily remorseful and one who is genuinely repentant?

<p><b>The Remorseful Believer</b> (Remorse is a short-lived characteristic involving the emotions.)</p>	<p><b>The Repentant Believer</b> (Repentance is a long-term characteristic involving the emotions and the will.)</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distressed by sins' consequences</li> <li>• Makes vague resolutions</li> <li>• Wants public attention</li> <li>• Desires immediate return to positions of ministry/authority</li> <li>• Makes external displays of contrition</li> <li>• Finds fault in how he or she is treated in the process</li> <li>• Hesitates to follow counsel in relation to reconciliation/restitution</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distraught by his or her sinful actions</li> <li>• Makes specific restitution</li> <li>• Humbly accepts obscurity</li> <li>• Recognizes need to rebuild trust over time</li> <li>• Reveals internal development and change</li> <li>• Exhibits submission to the humbling process of discipline</li> <li>• Initiates action toward restoring broken relationships and making restitution</li> </ul>

With the Holy Spirit's guidance, these characteristics will enable a discerning church to recognize, over time, whether or not the individual is truly repentant or merely remorseful.

### **Shouldn't we just forgive everybody anyway, regardless of true repentance?**

Often the following conversation between Peter and Christ is misunderstood and misapplied: "Then Peter came to Him and said, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven'" (Matthew 18:21, 22).

People take this passage and create a form of subjective sentimentality. As a result, many Christians today are running around forgiving everybody for everything. They are misguided in their efforts to reveal a distorted definition of unconditional love and forgiveness toward defiant believers who haven't even repented yet, much less asked for forgiveness.

They overlook another statement by the Lord: "Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him" (Luke 17:3, emphasis added).

Average churches today say, "Well, let's just forgive him and not worry about it; let's certainly not exclude him from coming to church!" So they end up overlooking the sin and refusing to confront the sinner. They erringly believe that unconditional love means we never deal with judgment and accountability to holy and honest behavior.

Jesus Christ clearly stated, "If he repents, . . . forgive him." In other words, forgiveness comes only after repentance. Without repentance, we are not to forgive the sinning believer.

When Peter asked the Lord that question about forgiveness, he would have been referring to a brother who sinned, repented, and then asked for forgiveness. His question could be amplified to read, "How many times do I forgive someone

who sins against me and then repents, asking forgiveness?" And the Lord's answer was simple: forgive him as many times as he repents and asks for forgiveness . . . even if it's 490 times!

### **What are the benefits of church discipline?**

#### *1. The church's integrity is preserved.*

The world's attitude toward the church makes for an interesting discovery. The church that confronts sin is a church that is respected by the world. Though unloved and perhaps ridiculed, the true church is respected.

On the other hand, the church that ignores sin and refuses to stand for truth will ultimately lose credibility in the world, which intuitively knows what is truly right from wrong (Romans 2:14).

Modern church growth movements seek to make people comfortable with sin. In fact, they choose not to use words like "sin," "hell," and "judgment" in their assemblies. The result is a spiritually neutered church without any power to reproduce, since it has abandoned the very nature of the gospel—that humankind is sinful and needs redemption from its depraved condition (Romans 3).

The accompanying loss of the world's respect is obvious. American culture today views the church as simply one more club to join, one more place to be seen, one more location to hand out business cards. The church has simply lost its reputation as a holy community of people who represent a righteous God.

The reputation of the church in Acts is generally no longer experienced in America. "None of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly" (Acts 5:13). This text followed an act of discipline upon sinful believers.

It would be good for any church to remember the vast difference between drawing a crowd and building a Christ-honoring church.

#### *2. The honor of God's name is promoted.*

People pursuing holy living are to introduce a holy God to the world

(1 Peter 2:9). The true church is not made up of believers who have never sinned; it is made up of believers who sin and then repent. Discipline is reserved for those who are unwilling to repent and return to a united effort to represent a holy God. Their sin has become public, thus discrediting the holy reputation of God's own name.

When the church confronts sin, obeying God's standard for the treatment of unrepentant sinners, it literally protects and promotes God's reputation! "As obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, 'Be holy, for I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:14–16).

#### *3. Pure doctrine is protected.*

"For there are many insubordinate, both idle talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole households, teaching things which they ought not, for the sake of dishonest gain" (Titus 1:10, 11).

Paul went on to instruct the church on how to deal with a false teacher who threatened the doctrinal purity of the church: "Avoid foolish disputes, genealogies, contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and useless. Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned" (Titus 3:9, 10).

The original word translated "factious" is the Greek word *hairetikos*, which gives us the transliterated English word "heretic." This word refers to a "self-chosen teaching" as opposed to God's revelation.<sup>1</sup>

Paul clearly told the church to reject—to leave out of the assembly—anyone who rejects the doctrine of Scripture, choosing instead his or her own form of teaching over God's revealed truth.

#### *4. A rescue of wayward believers is performed.*

Believers who persist in unrepentant sin are in danger of at least two things:

forfeiting their full rewards and losing their full lives.

Regarding the first danger, the apostle John warned believers to watch themselves, keeping out of the way of false teachers who encourage disobedience. He indicated that those who stay faithful to Christ will receive “a full reward” (2 John 8).

This text implies that believers who fail to walk faithfully will, in fact, forfeit their full rewards—rewards dispensed by Christ to believers, who are called to give accounts of their lifestyles.

Paul wrote of this coming day of reckoning for believers. The Judgment Seat of Christ will be that final judgment for believers only, a time of determining what was profitable and unprofitable in the life and walk of the true Christian.

The judgment will not be made to determine acceptance into Heaven but to reward authenticity on earth. Paul gave us a picture of that scene: “If anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one’s work will become manifest; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is. If anyone’s work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire” (1 Corinthians 3:12–15). The “loss” Paul mentioned likely refers to the loss of a full reward.

Regarding believers’ second danger, losing their full lives, Paul referred to believers in Corinth who had died prematurely because they approached the Lord’s Table with unrepentant sin. He wrote, “For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep” (1 Corinthians 11:29, 30). The reference to “sleep” does not teach some sort of limbo but refers to the actual physical deaths of those who were unrepentant.

The person who practices sin without any evidence of discipline from the Lord is actually the one who should fear most. As the writer of Hebrews suggested, an unrepentant sinner who never seems to face any sort of discipline may not actually belong to God’s family. “If you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons” (Hebrews 12:8, NASB).

We have every reason to assume that Ananias and Sapphira were believers who had fallen into the sin of lying. Why? Because God dealt swiftly with them, taking their lives as a way of warning the new institution of the church that He would not tolerate sin (Acts 5:1–11).

That act of severe discipline may well have meant they were Christians and that God took their lives prematurely because of the danger their hypocrisy posed to themselves and to the church. Discipline then may not be proof of unbelief but of belief!

The opposite is also true: the absence of discipline is proof, not that God is pleased, but that He may not love the individual as one of His own children, “for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines” (Hebrews 12:6, NASB).

##### *5. A warning to the assembly is pronounced.*

When an unrepentant believer is held accountable through church discipline, those in the assembly are given a clear warning against any sins or temptations they may be encountering. It is not unusual for leaders to receive testimonies from individuals, testifying that they were rescued from sin by observing discipline taking place in the assembly. This is precisely the result Paul had in mind when he wrote, “Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear” (1 Timothy 5:20).

### **What about people who wrong us and refuse to apologize and repent?**

While you cannot fully restore those relationships and express forgiveness to those people, you can forgive them before God. In other words, with the help of the Holy Spirit, you can adopt the attitude of Stephen, who prayed for those who literally took his life (Acts 7:60).

This attitude of “forgiveness before God” will keep your own heart from becoming filled with bitterness and resentment toward those who wrong you and refuse to ask for forgiveness. You will cast this burden on the Lord, understanding that He, more than anyone else, can feel the pain and sorrow of your mistreatment.

As you humbly accept the disappointment of these situations, keeping your eyes on Christ, you will grow more deeply in Him and truly come to know the fellowship of His sufferings (Philippians 3:10).

### **Are unrepentant people who are disciplined genuine Christians?**

It is impossible to determine true salvation. Furthermore, it is unnecessary. A Bible-believing local church disciplines individuals as if they are believers, leaving to God the final verdict.

It is possible for a believer to sin unto death—to sin and refuse to repent to the point that Christ takes that person Home. This truth was clearly taught by the apostle John, who wrote, “If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death” (1 John 5:16).

But who would want to risk death? Who among us would want to say, “I will refuse to repent, but I am sure of Heaven.”

One text in particular should give terrifying pause to any unrepentant person who believes he or she will go to Heaven, even if that person leaves the church: “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be

made manifest, that none of them were of us” (1 John 2:19).

### **What if a person leaves our church and goes somewhere else?**

A Bible-believing church believes in the local and universal church of Jesus Christ. In other words, a person cannot leave a church under discipline and expect fellowship in another church.

Can you imagine the individual in Corinth being excluded from the assembly and saying, “This isn’t a problem. I’ll just ride my donkey over to the church in Ephesus. They’ll let me in over there.” Hardly.

To be out of fellowship with one church is to be out of fellowship with the church. In other words, to be out of fellowship with any one church is to be out of fellowship with every church!

Therefore, the church should not recommend an individual to another church should he or she leave and try to attend another. We also will not accept an individual who has been involved in unresolved conflict in another assembly.

Furthermore, while an individual currently under the disciplinary process may resign his or her membership, we will remain committed to obeying the Scriptures by completing the process of discipline.

Should the person not have been a member of our church, following the third step—private corroboration—the church leaders will communicate to the unrepentant individual that he or she is forbidden from any further participation or attendance. No further public steps will be taken regarding this individual, except that of reconciliation should the individual repent. Upon repentance and an agreement to follow the counsel of the leaders (pastors, deacons, and such), in accord with the doctrine and practice of the church, the church will extend an invitation to return.

On the other hand, if the individual has joined a church, there is a special

sense of accountability to the flock from which this wayward member has wandered. Thus, both private and public steps will be taken, regardless of any resignation from membership.

### **What should you do if you know about someone involved in sin?**

Several principles could be followed as guidelines.

- *Be sure the sin is an offense that calls for discipline, not a personal difference of opinion.*
- *Remember how we, too, have sinned and are capable of committing the same offense.*
- *Bring the matter before the Lord in prayer.*
- *Don’t gossip about the person to others.*
- *Don’t procrastinate in planning to meet with the wayward believer.*
- *Talk to the pastor about the situation, and follow godly counsel.*

### **What do you do when disciplined individuals repent and seek reconciliation?**

– *Rejoice!*

God’s plan of warning, rebuking, and convicting through His church has brought forth the fruit of repentance.

– *Reconcile!*

Don’t hesitate to reestablish your relationship with the returning prodigal with open arms. This will reinforce and strengthen the person’s commitment to follow Christ and reconcile fully with the church.

– *Reaffirm!*

You are experiencing the “end of the story” found in 2 Corinthians 2. What a happy day! Evidently, from what Paul wrote in this text, the immoral man repented of his sin and expressed his desire to rejoin the fellowship of believers. Discipline worked!

“This punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for

such a man, so that, on the contrary, you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow. Therefore I urge you to reaffirm your love to him” (2 Corinthians 2:6–8).

After the man responded to his discipline and confessed his sin, the church was instructed to receive him back with loving forgiveness and affirmation. What a thrill it must have been in Corinth to receive back into fellowship the one who had strayed.

Likewise, depending on the public nature and the exposure of the one who was disciplined, restore him or her with equal publicity, forgiveness, and affirmation. The repentant believer will only be helped as the news is broadcast to as many people as possible. Publicly, before the assembly, reintroduce him or her back into the body with the thrilling news of repentance and reconciliation.

While you’re at it, dinner on the grounds in honor of the reconciled believer might be a great way to end the day of celebration . . . the prodigal has come home! ■

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Fritz Rienecker and Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Regency Reference Library, Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 657.

Excerpts taken from sermons delivered by Stephen Davey, pastor of Colonial Baptist Church, Cary, North Carolina, on October 5 and 12, 2003.

*Adapted from the book In Pursuit of Prodigals by Stephen Davey. For more information, e-mail the author at [davey@colonial.org](mailto:davey@colonial.org).*