

Church Discipline¹

I. The biblical teaching

- We talked last time about adding members to the rolls of the church. What does the Bible say about removing them?
- The hope is that our removal from the church militant will happen when we die, when we enter the church at rest. And of course our membership can transfer between local churches because of many legitimate reasons (moving, marriage, etc.).
- But sadly, there are also times when the church must remove those who prove to be false in their profession of faith.
- A process of church discipline:
 - Church discipline happens every Sunday when the word is taught and preached!
 - 2 Tim 3:16: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for *reproof*, for *correction*, and for training in righteousness”
 - Heb 12:11: “For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”
 - Note the connection between “disciple” and “discipline”: disciples are those who are *corrected by teaching*.
 - Every sin needs to be taken seriously. Every spiritual cancer cell can prove fatal (Rom 6:23)!
 - Informal discipline: Christians encouraging, rebuking, and reproofing each other in love is how we fight sin in the body (Prov 3:12; 19:25; Eph 4:15; Rev 3:19). Are you open to receive this loving input?
 - When a Christian is stubbornly unrepentant about serious sin, a trial becomes necessary (1 Cor 5:4; 6:2).
 - Needs to be done in an orderly manner, allowing both sides to speak (Prov 18:17; 1 Cor 14:40).
 - Charges must be established by two or more witnesses (Deut 19:15; Matt 18:16).
 - Needs to be for a serious offense: (1) one that seriously disturbs the peace, purity, and/or unity of the church, and (2) one that is a matter of *doctrine* or *life* that goes against someone’s membership vows (or ordination vows, in the case of an officer).
 - We should be slow to move to this step. “[A]dmonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, *be patient with them all*” (1 Th 5:14; cf. Matt 12:20 “a smoldering wick he will not quench”).
 - If a person is found guilty and will not repent, the elders must pronounce censure.
 - Degrees of censure: admonition (tender and solemn), rebuke (more severe; cf. 1 Tim 5:20), suspension (still a member, but not in good

¹ For this handout, I used Jonathan Leeman, *Is It Loving to Practice Church Discipline?* Crossway: 2020.

- standing; the privileges of membership are denied for a time), excommunication (removal from the church).
- Excommunication is the final point, a last resort in the face of persistent unrepentance. It is for when someone claims to be a brother, but his life or beliefs say otherwise (1 Cor 5:11).
 - Sometimes people are removed without full process. We call this erasure. Examples: when someone leaves and won't communicate, or when they resign their membership because they no longer believe.
 - Both erasure and excommunication say: the church is no longer willing to recognize this person as a Christian. We plead with them: repent!
 - All in the church are subject to the church's discipline! Elders and pastors included! We're all accountable to each other!
 - Discipline is a good thing! The goals of church discipline:
 - To vindicate the honor of Christ.
 - To promote the purity and reputation of the church.
 - To reclaim the offender.
 - 1 Cor 5:5: "deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so *that* his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord."
 - Leeman: "I have ... seen marriages restored, lies confessed, addictions abandoned, the gospel re-embraced, and love rescued through church discipline."
 - The process of restoration:
 - Luke 17:3: "Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him."
 - Repentance is all that is needed! But repentance must be genuine.
 - A public matter needs to have a public fix. It will require the person to publicly confess their sin and repent.
 - The church will publicly pronounce forgiveness and love (2 Cor 2:8; 1 John 1:9) and begin to celebrate (Luke 15:24)!

II. Possible objection

- Is church discipline really loving? It sounds judgmental and intolerant.
 - Remember, love isn't about what feels good. It's about what *is* good.
 - Discipline will be painful, but *good* because it leads us to repentance.
 - "For the Lord disciplines the one he loves" (Heb 12:6; Prov 3:12; Rev 3:19). "Blessed is the man whom you discipline, O LORD" (Ps 94:12).
 - Faithful are the wounds of a friend (Prov 27:6).
 - Nathan to David: you are that man! (2 Sam 12:7).
 - Real love is commitment to another person's good! (1 Cor 13).
 - Sometimes church discipline is not loving (cf. Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*). Sometimes it is abusive and vindictive, not restorative. We must guard our hearts!
 - Gal 6:1: "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted."