

Church Discipline

Church discipline...scary, right? It shouldn't be though. A lot of the fear about church discipline comes from uncertainty. What exactly is church discipline? Am I being punished? And will I get excommunicated?

All of these are important questions to ask and answer! Let's ask some of the fundamental questions about church discipline:

Who?

The first question we have to tackle is this: who is subject to church discipline? We believe that church discipline is for the believer who calls him/herself a member of the church. As a church, we cannot put non-believers and non-members under church discipline, as they have not placed themselves under the authority of the local church.

This is not to say that we do not come alongside non-believers and non-members for the sake of growing, encouraging, and discipling them! We as a church should care deeply for not only our members and our established community, but equally so for the lost and those outside our community!

Now, to the member. We remind you that church membership has meaning. It's not just a status that you claim when it's convenient or as some sort of club membership where you're allowed to go to certain events and use certain facilities.

We've often heard phrases like "Only God can judge me" as a way of dismissing the "haters". However, Paul tells the church that judgement inside the church is necessary (1 Cor. 5:12). Being a member means submitting to the authority of the local church, serving, and yes, even accepting discipline. There are expectations of members, as well as responsibilities, both from the member and towards the member. This means that at times, you may be subject to church discipline. But don't be afraid of it!

Why?

Let's go into why we do church discipline to clear up some misconceptions.

First and foremost, church discipline is NOT done to punish people. It's not the church's job to punish sins, that is God's power, and his alone.

The main reason we do church discipline is for the sake of the believer's spiritual health (James 5:20). Let's repeat that, because it's important. Church discipline is done for the sake of the believer's spiritual health and growth.

If a member of the church is engaging in known, repeated, and unrepentant sin, then for the sake of the believer, it is the responsibility of the church to step in and correct. That means the church, its members, and its leaders have to recognize this sin, which requires constant community, discipleship, and partnership.

Church discipline is never intended to drive people away or to remove them from the church! Instead, it's intended to improve people's relationship with God and help shepherd them in their spiritual lives. Church discipline should benefit the believer.

Secondly, we do church discipline to protect the church. The church is commanded to uphold truth; we cannot allow church members to promote false doctrine, divisiveness, or blasphemy. The Church and its people are called to pursue holiness (1 Pet. 1:15-16), how can the church stand idly by when its members go against biblical truth?

In addition, as members, we are representatives of the church, both local and universal. The way we live and the way we present ourselves to the world are representative of the Christian faith. Discipline is a way to denounce sinful actions or lifestyles as unbiblical and ultimately, damaging to the believer. If the church stands idly by as its members engage in hypocritical, sinful lives and attitudes, the perception of God and His church is damaged (Rom. 2:19-20).

Finally, discipline is used to protect the body of believers against falling into the same sin of the member in church discipline. If the church allows unrepentant sin to run rampant in the congregation and to continue unchecked, we believe that it affects your brothers and sisters (1 Cor. 5:6-7).

Which sins necessitate church discipline? How can we be sure we're not being legalistic or too picky when it comes to administering church discipline? Here's a few of the sins that may require the offender to be put under church discipline:

- Violation of God's moral commands (Gal. 5:19-21; Col 3:8)
- Relational sins (Gal. 5:19-21; Col 3:8)
- Divisiveness in the church (Rom 16:17-18)
- False teaching (1 Tim 6:3-5)
- Refusal to work or laziness (2 Thess. 3:6-15)

What?

So we know why we do it, but what exactly IS church discipline?

Let's first establish this: church discipline is a process. The first and last step isn't excommunication!

However, it's important to say that in all of these stages, we must always do these things out of love (Gal. 6:1); we must always examine our hearts and our intentions. If at any point you recognize that you are doing this out of self-righteousness, out of hate, pride, or simply without love at the core, we ask that you seek counsel and remove yourself from the situation.

The first step is letting the offender know that they are in sin. Sometimes, members may be completely unaware of their sin or even that it is a sin!

This step should be done in private and in person (Mt. 18:15). Ideally, this should only be done by someone who has a good personal relationship with the offender. We must come alongside in love and gentleness to support and help, not to judge and condemn.

If the offender continues in their sin without repentance, the next step is to bring more people into the fold (Mt. 18:16), not to shame them, but to better reach them and to better convey the seriousness of the sin in their life.

The last step is bringing the charge before the congregation of the church, leading to removal from church membership should this be ignored by the offender as well (Mt. 18:17). This does not mean asking the person to leave and never come back! As in all the previous steps of church discipline, even excommunication is intended to better help the person repent and eventually return to the fellowship of the church. Excommunication cannot mean that the church turns its back on the person, it simply means the church treats them as a non-believer, still worthy of grace and love and desperately in need of the redemptive power of the gospel.

What exactly does excommunication entail then? The church as a whole regards them as no longer a member and certain privileges are withheld, such as the ability to teach, lead, partake in communion, and some fellowship activities. In addition, the local church may feel the need to inform other churches of the offense, lest the person go into another church community, still mired in unrepentant sin. This is done not as a punishment or to exclude the person, but to protect the Church and its members.

Finally, what do we do when someone under church discipline repents? We rejoice and welcome the believer back, forgiving their sins (2 Cor. 2:7-8). Because our goal of church discipline, the spiritual health and wellbeing of the believer, has been reached, there are no additional steps of penance or punishment that need to be taken, simply bringing the believer back into the fold of the church in full.

As a final reminder, throughout the discipline process, we must remain in prayer, support the believer, and continually point them back to the saving power of the gospel.