

Church Discipline:
The Biblical Basis and Practical Implications for Church Life

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Our God is truly an awesome God, and Lisa and I continue to overflow with thankfulness over how He has blessed us in these past months. Being here at Morningview Baptist Church has been one of the most joyous times in ministry that we have ever experienced. We are so thankful for the relationships we are building, for the mantle of leadership you have entrusted to us, and for the clear love of God's Word that exists in this congregation.

Even though Morningview experienced a very difficult year prior to my arrival, God's grace has abounded and our recovery from those events has progressed very well. It is evident that God is at work among us in many incredible ways. He is blessing us with many visitors, we are rebounding financially, and great excitement exists in our membership as we overhaul some ministries and develop other new ministries that will further enable us to develop mature, reproducing disciples of Christ. As we embark on this new chapter in Morningview's rich history, being obedient to God and submissive to the Spirit will be critical if we truly desire to be a force for the Gospel in our community and around the world. Thus, as we pray for His continued guidance and the power of His Holy Spirit to be active in our midst, we must constantly be evaluating ourselves according to Holy Scripture. As God's inerrant, infallible revelation, it is the source of ultimate truth, it is our guide for Christian living, and it sets forth the principles and examples of how we are to function as a New Testament church.

As I have stated on many occasions from the pulpit and from other platforms in our church, I am dedicated to being a thoroughly biblical pastor. Through my prayer life and my study of the Bible, God has firmly and repeatedly laid it on my heart that for His church to be

healthy, it must resume a critical function of church leadership: church discipline. The idea of practicing church discipline is often very unappealing, but that is mostly because there are so many misunderstandings about what it is and how to practice it. Thus, I have written this brief paper to aid our understanding of what it is and to delineate how we are to practice it at the local church level. Please give due consideration to what follows in this paper and pray that our congregation, under the Holy Spirit's leadership, will seek to honor God in this area.

What does the Bible say about Church Discipline?

We must begin first with Hebrews 12:1-14:

- 1 Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,
- 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.
- 3 For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart.
- 4 You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin;
- 5 and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprov'd by Him;
- 6 For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives."
- 7 It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom {his} father does not discipline?
- 8 But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.
- 9 Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live?
- 10 For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He {disciplines us} for {our} good, that we may share His holiness.
- 11 All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.
- 12 Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble,
- 13 and make straight paths for your feet, so that {the limb} which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.
- 14 Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. (NAS)

The above passage is clear about the fact that God disciplines us because he loves us and His ultimate desire for us is to reflect His holy character (vs.. 10). In fact, the converse is also stated in this passage – if God did not discipline us, then that would mean that He does not care and that we are not His children. Though discipline is sorrowful for the moment (vs.. 11), it is

nonetheless necessary and it ultimately yields “the peaceful fruit of righteousness.”

God likewise calls His church to discipline. The next major passage to consider is

Matthew 18:15-20 where we encounter the words of Christ Himself:

- 15 "And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.
16 "But if he does not listen {to you,} take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed.
17 "And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer.
18 "Truly I say to you, whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.
19 "Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven.
20 "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst." (NAS)

Here Christ clearly sets forth how we are to deal with disagreements and difficulties with fellow believers. Verses 18-20 clearly outline the fact that God has granted the church His authority to deal with sin in the manner prescribed in verses 15-17. Not only was this procedure prescribed by Christ, it was practiced in the early church.

1 Corinthians 5:1-11 sets forth a particular case where the church was not being faithful to discipline its members according to the biblical command. The passage says,

- 1 It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife.
2 And you have become arrogant, and have not mourned instead, in order that the one who had done this deed might be removed from your midst.
3 For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present.
4 In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus,
5 {I have decided} to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.
6 Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump {of dough}
7 Clean out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, just as you are {in fact} unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed.
8 Let us therefore celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.
9 I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people;
10 I {did} not at all {mean} with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters; for then you would have to go out of the world.
11 But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler-- not even to eat with such a one.
12 For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within {the church}
13 But those who are outside, God judges. Remove the wicked man from among yourselves. (NAS)

It is apparent that the church at Corinth was to the point of boasting (vs.. 6) about the sexual immorality in their midst. Paul rightfully expressed God’s extreme displeasure with the situation and he called them to repent and purge the errant member from their midst. It is not that Paul hated the man; he simply realized that the man (and the church) was deeply deceived and in serious error. The church was to assemble (vs.. 4) and “deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (vs. 5). To allow such sin in the church opened the door for others to be led astray and polluted by sin and impurity (vs. 6-7). The church was called to not associate nor even take a meal with someone in such sin (vs. 11). God would judge those unbelievers outside the church, but the church was to judge and cast out those members who continued in unrepentant sin (vs. 12-13).

There is another major passage about church discipline. 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15 presents a situation where believers were being lazy busybodies and freeloading off other Christians:

- 6 Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep aloof from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us.
- 7 For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you,
- 8 nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we {kept} working night and day so that we might not be a burden to any of you;
- 9 not because we do not have the right {to this,} but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, that you might follow our example.
- 10 For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone will not work, neither let him eat.
- 11 For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies.
- 12 Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread.
- 13 But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good.
- 14 And if anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that man and do not associate with him, so that he may be put to shame.
- 15 And {yet} do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother. (NAS)

How did Paul state that such believers were to be handled? He commanded them to stop being busybodies, and to work hard and earn their own bread (vs. 11-12). If anyone did not obey that

command, they were to be disassociated by the church – not hated as an enemy but disciplined as a brother (vs. 14-15).

In addition to the four major scriptures set forth above, there are other passages that support the practice of disciplining church members:

Gal 6:1

1 Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; {each one} looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted. (NAS)

Titus 3:9-11

9 But shun foolish controversies and genealogies and strife and disputes about the Law; for they are unprofitable and worthless.

10 Reject a factious man after a first and second warning,

11 knowing that such a man is perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned. (NAS)

1 Tim 1:20

20 Among these are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have delivered over to Satan, so that they may be taught not to blaspheme. (NAS)

1 Tim 5:19-20

19 Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses.

20 Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also may be fearful of sinning. (NAS)

In all of the above scriptures, did you notice how serious the consequences were for those who were unrepentantly sinful? “Put out of your fellowship . . .” (1 Cor. 5:2); “hand this man over to Satan . . .” (1 Cor. 5:5); “do not associate with . . . do not even eat . . . with such a man” (1 Cor. 5:9, 11); “keep away from . . .” (2 Thess. 3:6); “take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed” (2 Thess. 3:14-15); “ handed over to Satan . . .” (1 Tim. 1:20); “rebuked publicly . . .” (1 Tim. 5:20); “Have nothing to do with them” (2 Tim 3:5); “have nothing to do with him” (Titus 3:10). But it wasn’t just Paul; Christ Himself even said “If he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector” (Matt. 18:17). Each of the above excerpts from Scripture demonstrates the fact that open, unrepentant sin in the church is a grave issue that God is serious about. In fact, it was God Himself who exacted the punishment of death upon Ananias and Sapphira in the first recorded case of church

discipline in the Bible (Acts 5:1-11). If He takes sin in the church that seriously, so must we.

So are we just supposed to throw out all the sinners in Church?

Not quite; we are all sinners and there would be no church if we did that. There are two issues to consider in response to this question. First, it seems from the scriptures above that the sins that incurred church discipline were those that had become public sins. Second, they were situations in which the individuals were openly unrepentant. Consider the following two quotes.

The first is from Wayne Grudem, a Baptist theologian whose theology text is now the standard at many Baptist seminaries. He notes,

“all sins that were explicitly disciplined in the New Testament were publicly known or outwardly evident sins, and many of them had continued over a period of time. The fact that the sins were publicly known meant that reproach was being brought on the church, Christ was being dishonored, and there was a real possibility that others would be encouraged to follow the wrongful patterns of life that were being publicly tolerated.” (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*. Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, 1994)

The second is from John MacArthur, a well-known pastor, theologian, and author. He states,

“It is not that everyone in the church must be perfect, for that is impossible. Everyone falls into sin and has imperfections and shortcomings. The church is in some ways a hospital for those who know they are sick. They have trusted in Christ as Savior and they want to follow Him as Lord – to be what God wants them to be. It is not the ones who recognize their sin and hunger for righteousness who are to be put out of fellowship, but those who persistently and unrepentantly continue in patterns of sin about which they have been counseled and warned. We should continue to love them and pray for them that they repent and return to a pure life. If they do repent we should gladly and joyfully “forgive and comfort” them and welcome them back into fellowship.” (2 Cor. 2:7) (MacArthur, *1 Corinthians*. Moody Press: Chicago, 1984).

These two quotes together rightly answer the question. We are a congregation of saved sinners.

We all have struggles with sin, but the key is that we are *struggling*. We are humble and broken and repentant and seeking to overcome our tendencies toward particular sins. It is when a member’s sin is blatant (they know it is wrong but still continue in it), public (others in the congregation are aware of it), and they are unrepentant (they refuse to recognize their wrong,

turn from it, and seek to obey God), that Matthew 18 must be followed and they must be put out of the church.

The second issue to consider in response to the above question is the varying degrees of church discipline. Church discipline does not merely mean excommunicating someone from the church. Although that has been much of the focus up to this point, we must remember that there are steps in the process as outlined by Christ in Matthew 18. Church discipline begins first with a private confrontation with the one in sin. It is this private confrontation that should be taking place all the time in a congregation as believers admonish one another and encourage one another in the faith. We all will be wrong sometimes and we should react with humility and repentance when a brother or sister lovingly confronts us with the truth.

Here is one example of successful discipline at this level. At one point during my last pastorate, I became aware of a separation between a married couple in our church. The wife felt she was being mistreated by the husband and promptly found other living arrangements. Lisa and I contacted the woman and talked to her about her decision to leave. We found that nothing had taken place between the two of them that was irreparable – no adultery, no physical abuse, no abandonment of the faith – just difficulty in communicating and harsh words that are common problems in many marriages. We helped her talk through many of the issues and we closed the conversation by reminding her how serious God takes the marriage covenant and how she and her husband would be in sin if they pursued an unbiblical divorce. She was humble, repentant, and returned home the next day with a new dedication to honor God, honor her husband, and work through the difficulties. I was also able to have a similar conversation with her husband the next day. In following Matthew 18, we averted what would likely have become a very difficult and public divorce. This is an example of how church discipline has incredibly positive effects

within a congregation, and it is this type of discipline that helps keep the church humble and pure in accordance with God's commands.

How do you know which sins are worthy of church discipline?

As already noted above, the general guidelines for offenses that incur discipline are those that are outwardly evident and/or public and the person has continued in the sin unrepentantly. In looking to scripture, we are not given a definite, conclusive list of sins that are subject to church discipline. The examples given in the New Testament are very diverse: divisiveness (Rom. 16:17, Titus 3:10), disobeying what Paul writes (2 Thess. 3:14-15), incest (1 Cor. 5:1), laziness and refusing to work (2 Thess. 3:6-10), blasphemy (1 Tim. 1:20), and teaching heretical doctrine (2 John 10-11). Furthermore, Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18:15-20 tells us that if a situation involving personal sin against someone else cannot be resolved in a private or small group meeting, then the matter must be brought before the church. Thus, any sin could potentially become a situation of church discipline if a person refuses to repent and forces the matter to become more public.

It is important at that point to emphasize that church discipline must be guided with a spirit of humility, love, and brokenness that flows from the realization that we all lack complete sanctification in our lives – we are all sinners! We are all in need of correction at some points in our lives and we should handle the confrontation with a brother or sister in Christ the way we would want it handled if we were on the receiving end – kindly, gently, lovingly, and with restoration as the goal.

What is the Purpose of Church Discipline?

Mark Dever, a Southern Baptist Pastor at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington D.C., notes five key reasons and goals for church discipline. **First**, it is for the good of the

person disciplined. Gal. 6:1 says we are to restore the sinning brother or sister in a spirit of gentleness and James 5:20 encourages us to bring back a sinner from the error of his way. Church discipline is an act ultimately motivated by love – just as our heavenly Father disciplines those whom He loves (Heb. 12). Restoration and reconciliation are the goals as the church acts to bring the erring member back into right fellowship with God and with the church. **Second**, Church discipline is for the good of other Christians because through it they see the danger of sin. More simply stated, when we see the consequences of unrepentant sinfulness, it makes us more apt to avoid such sin in our own lives. Remember what happened to the church after God took the lives of Ananias and Sapphira: “And great fear came upon the whole church, and upon all who heard of these things.” (Acts 5:11) First Timothy 5:20 also supports this goal when it says, “Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also may be fearful of sinning.”

Third, church discipline is for the health of the church as a whole. As Paul said in 1 Cor. 5, a little yeast leavens the whole lump of dough. Yeast in this context represents the unclean and spreading nature of sin. If open, unrepentant sin is tolerated in the church, it sets a very bad example and can quickly spread to others if it is not dealt with scripturally and promptly.

Fourth, church discipline is for the corporate witness of the church. 1 Pet 2:12 says “Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may on account of your good deeds, as they observe {them,} glorify God in the day of visitation.” When the church is seen as conforming to the standards of the world, our witness is lost. Conversely, when people notice that our standards and lives are different, they are drawn to our witness by what sets us apart from the world. We don’t have to be a people whose lives are perfect, but we do have to be a people whose lives are marked by genuinely

trying to love God and love one another. When church members continue to sin in a way that is outwardly evident to those outside the church, it brings clear dishonor to Jesus Christ and causes unbelievers to blaspheme God's name (Rom. 2:24).

Finally, the **Fifth** purpose of church discipline is for the glory of God, as we reflect His holiness. 1 Pet 1:14-19 says,

- 14 As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts {which were yours} in your ignorance,
15 but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all {your} behavior;
16 because it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."
17 And if you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each man's work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay {upon earth}
18 knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers,
19 but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, {the blood} of Christ. (NAS)

We were made to bear God's image and reflect His character to creation. Fulfilling our purpose as individuals and as a church means the constant pursuit of purity and holiness. Keeping the church pure requires the proper exercise of church discipline. (See Mark Dever's *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*. Crossway Books: Wheaton, 2000, pages 174-177).

How do you go about exacting church discipline?

Christ's words in Matthew 18:15-17 give us a clear road map of how it is to take place. Wayne Grudem once again gives two clear principles (based on Matthew 18) for how it should be carried out. First, knowledge of the sin should be kept to the smallest group possible. The fewer people who know about it, the better. If less people are involved, repentance and restoration within the church are easier for the one in sin, less harm is done to the membership, and the reputation of the church and the reputation of Christ are protected. Secondly, Disciplinary measures should increase in strength until there is a solution. If the person is unrepentant, the church must continue through the steps of Matthew 18 until the person is excluded from membership.

Once again, this whole process should be guided by a desire for restoration, not revenge. It must be done in a spirit of loving accountability and humility, not with arrogance or vindictiveness. Even when a person is excommunicated from the church, the hope of the membership is that the person will one day repent and return to the fellowship. When the erring member does repent and return, they are to be welcomed back with great rejoicing, love, and thankfulness (Luke 15:11-32, 2 Cor. 2:6-8).

If church discipline is the biblical mandate and example, why did churches stop doing it?

There are likely many reasons. One is that it is difficult to be consistent with confrontation of those in offense. No one likes to confront or be confronted, and this distaste for biblical, humble confrontation leads many to disobey the biblical mandate because it is uncomfortable. Secondly, many people like to cite Christ's words in Matthew 7:1, "Judge not lest you be judged." What they do not understand is that in church discipline, we are not subjecting members to sinful, rash, human judgments, while at the same time ignoring blatant sin in our own lives (that is the context of Matthew 7:1). The whole body exists under the direction and judgment of God's Word, so when we perform biblical church discipline, we are reminding the whole body that we are all accountable for pursuing godliness and guarding ourselves from open, unrepentant sin. We are also lovingly confronting the one in open sin with the fact that God's Word is judging them, that they are inflicting harm on the church, and that they are defiling the name of Christ. Thus, Matthew 7:1 is not a verse that voids the accountability that is supposed to exist within the body of Christ as we seek to obey God's Word and be holy as He is holy.

Thirdly, some churches have clearly misused church discipline. In the past, I have met

Christians who expressed concern over this practice because they saw people excluded from churches for reasons that were not biblical. Even worse, many of them saw that the discipline was not conducted in a spirit of love with the goal of restoration, in accordance with Matthew 18. Fourthly, many churches have become so large that there is no viable method of accountability because members are able to be “anonymous,” only attending on their own whims and not opening their lives for examination. Fifthly, we live in an age when “church growth” principles seem to rule the church and the Christian faith has been made into a more “private” matter. Thus, many have forsaken biblical church discipline and cooperating discipline between churches because they value attendance numbers, offerings, and their own disobedience more than they value the purity of the church. L. DeKoster has noted,

In a time when the universal church is dispersed into churches, the administration of discipline seems to be complicated by the probability that the disciplinee will flee to – and be welcomed by – another congregation. This likelihood, combined with the rage for “church growth” tends to give discipline a flabby and indecisive character. But the local congregational leadership does well to remember that the Lord requires of their hands an accounting of the blood of each member (Ezek. 3:20-21; Acts 20:26-27). What the disciplined member does becomes his responsibility; what the leaders fail to do is ineradicably theirs. (L. DeKoster and G. Berghoef, *Elder's Handbook*)

It is the final statement in this quote that is of particular concern to me. As the pastor, I am painfully aware of the words of Hebrews 13:17 where it says that we as leaders will give an account for those under our care. Those words should cause cold shivers to run down our spines as we consider that God will call us to account for why we have not followed the clear teachings of Scripture and protected the purity of His church and the glory of His name. As your new pastor, I have already begun to take this biblical approach with a few persons in our membership. Like any church, there will always be such situations because we are all in the process of sanctification, and we all are capable of stumbling. Thus, I am addressing these situations in our

active membership in a very gentle, very loving, and very discreet manner right now, ever mindful that I too am merely a sinner saved by grace. I hope you will be in prayer for these situations and support the biblical approach we are taking with these beloved members.

There is an even greater issue, however, that remains to be addressed. There are hundreds of people on our membership rolls right now that are not even remotely active in the life of our church. I submit to you that inactive members are not members at all. It is strange that we allow people who never come to church, who never give any support to our ministries, and who quite possibly aren't even living like Christians to keep their names on our membership rolls. Are you ready to stand before God and give account for these hundreds of souls? I am not. The most loving thing we can do for them is remind them that church membership comes with the expectation of godly lifestyle choices and regular, active participation in the life of the church. The most biblical thing we can do is approach them with the standard of Scripture and either bring them back into the fold, encourage them to find another Bible-believing church, or remove them from our membership rolls for not manifesting one of the most critical fruits of salvation: proper identification with Christ's Body. It is time for evangelical churches as a whole to do the loving thing and stop avoiding what Scripture clearly calls us to do. We must regain a high view of membership and we must keep each other and the members of our family accountable to God's Word. It will be hard, but we must please God and not men (Gal. 1:10).

I know that I have opened many issues with this paper and it is my hope that we will continue to wrestle with how to be the most biblical, most loving, most Christ-exalting church possible. God is doing many great and wonderful things in our church family. However, we cannot continue to expect His blessings if we are not ready to obey Him and His Word in the governance of our church. Please be in prayer for me; please be in prayer for our leaders; please

be in prayer for our membership as we seek God's wisdom together in these matters. I love you all dearly, and I am blessed to be your pastor.

Eph 5:25b-27

25 . . . Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her;
26 that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,
27 that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing;
but that she should be holy and blameless. (NAS)

