

Church Discipline

A Valley Bible Church Position Paper www.valleybible.net

Valley Bible Church is committed to understanding and applying what the Bible teaches. We believe the Word of God is authoritative, infallible and inerrant. It is our sincere desire to apply its teachings to our individual lives and to the corporate life of the church.

Since the topic of church discipline can strike many as being harsh and unloving, we trust that you will read this prayerfully, examining what is presented to see whether these things are so. If after prayerfully examining this paper you find that you agree, it is hoped that you will not be just merely a hearer of the Word but a doer as well.

What is church discipline?

What is to be done if we know a brother in Christ is acting in willful sin? The procedure is clearly spelled out in Matthew 18:15-20. There are four steps that are to be fulfilled if necessary.

1. Personal contact

The first step is an individual conversation that takes place when we are convinced that our brother has performed an unrepentant, willful act of sin. This confrontation should be from the Word of God (Hebrews 4:12) and done in private (Matthew 18:15). If he does not listen to you then you are to go to the second step.

While the initial contact must be in private, this should not be understood to mean more than it says. It does not prohibit us from having contact with other people about the situation or to attempt to minister to others in light of the situation. Indeed, it is wise to listen to counsel (Proverbs 12:15) and this may prevent us from wrongly or ineffectively rebuking our brother. Of course, all of our communication must be for the purpose of edification (Ephesians 4:29).

2. Group contact

The second step is to confront multiply, with two or three individuals who are witnesses, which takes place only if the sinning brother continues to be unrepentant. These individuals are there to confirm every fact (Matthew 18:16). They are to confirm to themselves that the act has been committed, that it is indeed sinful and that it has been committed willfully and without repentance. They are to confirm to the sinning person that his behavior is clearly outside the clear teaching of God's Word and that he needs to repent. It is best that the individuals know the person well. The advantage of this is that the motivation of the confrontation is clearly one of love and concern. However, it is essential that these individuals be witnesses of the facts. If he does not hear these individuals then we are to go to the third step.

3. Church contact

The third step is to tell it to the church (Matthew 18:17). The goal is to have every relationship in the church used by God to persuade a person toward repentance. While this allows the possibility of the entire church to be mobilized in the attempt to restore the sinning brother but it does not need to be with everyone in the church. But this step must involve those in the church who have spiritual oversight of the church. At Valley Bible Church, this is the church elders or those whom the elders have entrusted their oversight (such as a Growth Group leader). The church leaders will decide how to proceed so that the sinning brother will be ministered to the extent of his existing relationships within the church. If the person does not listen to the church then we are to go to step four.

4. Non-contact

The fourth and final step is to treat him as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer (Matthew 18:17). This is commonly referred to as disfellowshipping. The church at this point would have no further social contact with the individual. This is clear from 1 Corinthians 5:11 where we are instructed “not even to eat with such a one.” This does not mean that if we see them that we cannot acknowledge them. We should not be rude. It simply means that we are to keep our distance from them socially until they repent. We should never give the impression that the sin issue is not important. This action on the part of the church, which severs the ties with the sinning brother and thrusts them into the world which is Satan’s domain, hopefully would lead them to a point of repentance.

The purpose of church discipline

We practice church discipline because our Lord instructed us to do so. Jesus told us this in Matthew 18:15-20 and we see this supported in 1 Corinthians 5:1-13, Titus 3:10-11 and 1 Thessalonians 5:14. Obeying Christ requires us to practice church discipline. The basis of all discipline is the holiness and love of God. We believe that by obeying Christ in church discipline, we are loving our neighbor as ourself. To ignore sin may appear to be kind and caring but in fact truly demonstrates a lack of care for our brother in Christ.

The reason the Lord instructed that we practice church discipline is for two very practical reasons:

1. Restoration of the person

In Matthew 18:15 it is clear that the individual who has chosen to willfully sin has already been lost to us in a practical sense as a brother, for it says, “if he listens to you, you have won your brother.” The rebuking and even the disfellowshipping is all performed with the hope that there might be true repentance, so that we might once again enjoy true fellowship (1 John 1:7).

2. Purity of the church

In 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 it is clear that those who choose to continue to willfully disregard God's teaching will have a negative, leavening effect on the church. In other words, the church will become infected with the same sinful condition. The rebuking and even the disfellowshipping is performed with the hope that others would be spared the infection of sin.

The analogy of parenthood

Those of us who have children recognize that with the privilege of parenthood comes responsibility. Our responsibility is to train them up in righteousness. This experience of training will differ from child to child. For example, a compliant child may need to be less firmly disciplined. We have heard of children where all that was necessary to shape their behavior was simply a word from the parent. We have also heard of others who it appears had chosen to be defiant from the cradle. Those children who are more rebellious will cause us to respond with discipline in order to serve them. If we really love and care about our child we cannot let him get away with rebellion. Parents must love their children enough to discipline them (cf. Hebrews 12:7-8).

We will discipline our children because we love them and feel responsible for them. Do the members of God's family feel the same way toward the members of their spiritual family? If we do then we will be willing to discipline the wayward family member even as the parent would his child.

Though discipline has a proper and beneficial place in the development of righteousness, it is largely ignored in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. We believe this leads not only to severe consequences in the life of the wayward brother but also to an ever increasing toleration of willful sin in the local church fellowship, even to the extent that it becomes acceptable. We define willful sin as that action which is performed in conscious disregard of what the Scriptures clearly teach as wrong. Valley Bible Church, concerned about our corporate purity and believing that the Bible gives clear instructions in respect to church discipline, adheres to the following teaching.

Is it loving to church discipline?

Many view church discipline as unloving. However, the basis of all discipline is the holiness and love of God. For the church of the Lord Jesus Christ to be disobedient to the clear teachings of God's Word on the pretense that is unloving is to love without understanding. Paul prayed for the Philippians that their love might "abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment." We pray that Christians would stop attempting to define love according to their imperfect mind and affections and look to the clear teachings of the Word of God for a proper definition of love in respect to a willfully sinning brother. In church discipline we are trusting that the Lord knows better than we what it means to truly love (Matthew 22:39-40; 2 John 5-6).

Who are we to church discipline?

Matthew 18:15 says, “And if your brother sins go and reprove him...” We are to only confront Christians. We should not confront those who do not profess belief in Christ.

Another major question involves “Who is the sinning brother?” Is the sinning brother we are to rebuke a member or a non-member, a frequent attender or an infrequent attender, etc.? The Scripture tells us that if a brother sins, we are to go to him and reprove him (Matthew 18:15). It does not say a member or frequent attender, it simply says a brother. If a brother in Christ has committed willful sin, we have the responsibility of rebuke, even though he may not even go to our local church. We have the same responsibility toward the body of Christ.

It is not unusual for an individual to stop attending a fellowship when they are knowingly rebelling. Discipline should not be ignored, for it still can be very effective. It must be admitted, however, that if a brother in Christ is presently attending another church that the procedure of discipline may be disrupted, but this does not remove the responsibility to go as far as possible in following God’s clear guidelines. We are able to minister to the person individually and with two or three witnesses, even without the cooperation of their local church.

Who should participate in church discipline?

The basis of all discipline is the holiness and love of God. In loving grace, God has joined Himself to mankind in the members of the church. As such we need to recognize that we are the holy temple of God and should act accordingly (1 Corinthians 3:16; Ephesians 2:21). If we fail as His children to act properly in light of God’s holiness, the Lord in His lovingkindness will discipline us (Hebrews 12:6-13). This discipline may be expressed in different ways but one of the ways it is to be expressed is through the church. More specifically, it is to be expressed through you.

As you read this you may think:

“It’s not really my business.”

“Let someone else do it.”

“I’m hardly qualified, morally, not to mention my training, to interfere.”

“Perhaps it’s just a passing thing and will go away by itself.”

“It just is not done.”

“I just don’t have time.”

Our excuses shrivel before the clear command of Jesus in Matthew 18:15-20. In this passage the Lord is expressing to the church that they possess the authority and the responsibility even to disfellowship a sinning brother in Christ if he continues to be

unrepentant. For a church not to confront sin within its fellowship is unthinkable. It is also disobedient. The seriousness of a church ignoring willful sin is clearly communicated by Paul in 1 Corinthians 5:1-13.

What sins should be church disciplined?

The following criteria must be met before Matthew 18:15-20 can be applied:

1. The sin must be willful.

Not all sin that is committed in the body of Christ is willful. We believe that clear distinction in respect to sin is drawn in 1 Thessalonians 5:14. Those who are described as weak are to be helped. Those described as fainthearted are to be encouraged. But the unruly, the rebellious, the insubordinate are to be admonished. When an individual knows the truth of God's Word and yet chooses to act in disobedience to it, there is no other recourse than discipline. This is clearly demonstrated in the Scriptures.

2. The sin must be an action expressly forbidden in God's Word (1 Cor. 5:9-11).

We believe that though sinful thoughts and attitudes are clearly outside of God's desires for His children, an individual cannot be admonished by us until those thoughts and attitudes are expressed in word or in deed. We believe this, first of all, because, we are limited in knowing what may be in a man's heart (1 Samuel 16:17) and secondly, what is in a man's heart will be expressed (Matthew 15:15-20).

This would exclude areas of conscience where what might be sin for one would not be sin for another. For example, a man may be convicted that the Lord would not have him watch a particular program on television and for him to therefore watch it would be sin for him. But we cannot confront others on the basis of his conscience (Romans 14:1-12). Therefore we would not discipline a man for watching a particular television program but we would discipline a man for stealing a television, for the Scriptures clearly teach us, "Thou shalt not steal."

This would also exclude areas of righteousness that are relative. We could not discipline a man for not being loving. The reason is very simple: We all lack in the area of love and are at various stages of development. But though we would not discipline for being unloving, we could discipline a brother for performing an unloving act like being unfaithful to his wife.

The process of church discipline

When repentance occurs, the discipline of the sin ends. Matthew 18:15-20 tells us if our brother would hear us, which clearly speaks of repentance, we gain a brother and the process of rebuking which would lead to disfellowshipping ceases. We would never discipline an individual who admits his wrongdoing and brings forth the fruit of repentance, even if he has repeatedly failed in the past.

This restoration is clearly demonstrated in 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 where the man who had been disciplined is restored following his repentance. The man that should be disciplined would be the man who demonstrates a willful disregard for the truth. He will either not admit to the wrongfulness of a clear cut and obvious violation of God's Word though confronted or he will admit the wrongness but refuse to change his behavior. Therefore, the problem always becomes the lack of a repentant heart.

Also, the process of church discipline appears to be more direct in cases of factiousness (Titus 3:10-11). This is due to the unique threat of division that a factious man poses to the church. While much of Matthew 18:15-20 remains applicable, care must be given in informing the church so that the unrepentant, divisive man can be rejected without harm to the unity of the fellowship.

Conclusion

We recognize that this position though clearly taught is not easily embraced. We recognize that Hebrews 12:11 tells us "all discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful" and yet though there will be momentary sorrow, we recognize this verse also says, "...yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness." Therefore, though it is not easy, we believe that we must obey God's commands, trusting Him that His church will be served.

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