

Church Discipline

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What does the Bible really say about church discipline? The view of the traditional Church of Christ has much to commend it, and we've adopted hits view more or less wholesale. Yet it may be time to reconsider.

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INTRODUCTION

Church discipline in this paper refers not to the disciplined corporate movement of the body of Christ, nor to the personal discipline of its members. It refers rather to the vital need to keep the body of Christ pure through (occasionally) exercising disciplinary measures against its own members. This is not a popular subject, and in Christianity (in the broadest sense of the word) appears nearly to have been abandoned.

In terms of the spectrum of authoritative/authoritarian behaviors, there is a continuum. Not many of us are *Elis* or *Aarons* (at the soft end of the scale), and hopefully few are *Rehoboams* (at the hard end). Yet who has struck the perfect balance: not too soft, not too hard? We all need to be persons of conviction and, if it is our role in leadership to be involved in a disciplinary act, to do so with both firmness and love.

Those involved in administering discipline in N.T. times appear to have been elders and evangelists. It is assumed that their authority would generally have been respected.¹

I. THREE STRIKES AND YOU'RE OUT?

For years we've taught the "three strikes and you're out" approach to church discipline. After one one-on-one warning and a small group warning, a sinning church member is warned before the entire congregation. If he slips up again, he's disfellowshipped.² Matthew 18 has been interpreted as providing the pattern for church discipline matters. Moreover, this course of discipline has normally been applied only to those guilty of divisiveness (Romans 16, Titus 3) or the sins listed in 1 Corinthians 5. This understanding has become normal and "traditional."

We all want to "rightly divide the word of truth." Yet I now that believe for a long time I myself have

¹ Three kinds of authority may be discerned: biblical authority, positional authority, and moral authority. The ultimate authority lies in the Scriptures, and no one stands above them. In principle, any Christian may challenge another Christian, based on clear teaching of scripture, as to his or her lifestyle or beliefs. Positional authority (Hebrews 13:17, e.g.) inheres in the leadership position of the individual(s) in charge. It seems Jesus strongly discouraged this sort of authority (Mark 10, Matthew 20), and Paul was reluctant to use it (1 Corinthians 4, Philemon 1). And yet the "buck does stop somewhere," and N.T. concepts of leadership are far from democratic or egalitarian. Moral authority may be gained through building trust and leading without hypocrisy. It is easily eroded. One attempting to challenge another may stand firmly on the Bible (biblical authority) and by virtue of his leadership position legitimately direct the other person (positional authority), but if he has been discredited in the other's eyes (moral authority) it is a moot point whether he has the authority to challenge.

² Incidentally, there is no such word as "disfellowshippment." The noun form is *disfellowship*.

misunderstood these words of Jesus. The need for thoroughgoing church discipline isn't being called into question. Nor do I suggest that we stop taking sin seriously. As a church leader for more than 20 years, on many occasions I've had to publicly warn an individual. Often repentance is effected, though not always. But was the explanation of what was being done based on solid interpretation of scripture?

II. MATTHEW 18

Certainly this well-worn passage merits looking at:

"If your brother sins [against you], go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or tax collector. I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will [have been] bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will [have been] loosed in heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:15-20).

A. TRANSLATION: "SINS" OR "SINS AGAINST YOU"?

The translation "sins against you" is probably to be preferred to "sins," which is found in only a few manuscripts, and whose implication would really tangle up the church in a tedious queue of investigations and counseling. (Imagine the negative focus the church would develop if we all became watchdogs instead of "brother's keepers."³) My view is that the majority translation is correct. We are discussing a relationship between brothers.

B. RECONCILIATION

The passage is a unit and should be taken as such. For instance, the "binding" and "loosing" refer to the collective action of church discipline when a brother refuses to be reconciled. This is God's immutable plan and should be respected as such. The "two or three" who agree on earth are the brother sinned against (verse 15) plus the "one or two others," and this group of two or three witnesses are naturally the two or three who have come together in Jesus' name (verse 20). The "two or three" coming together are emphatically not a "church service." What is the context? Relationships between brothers: in short, reconciliation.

Furthermore, we've interpreted Matthew 18 as giving three warnings. While warning is part of the three stages, it isn't primarily what Jesus urged. "If he refuses to listen to them," refers to the assembly. The *ekklesia*, or church, does not necessarily refer to the whole body of believers in a city. After all, the early church met in homes! This shows that the gathered brothers and sisters are trying to reason with the brother who is reluctant to be reconciled. "Listening" to the church means certain individuals in the congregation are speaking to him. They are more than just witnesses of his warning; they're active agents in bringing him to repentance! This, however, is not what we've taught—me included. Ironically, as hard-line as we are against flagrant sin, we rarely (if ever) disfellowship a member for refusal to be reconciled to a fellow brother or sister! I have never sent his take place.

Matthew 18 as a process isn't a three-stage *disciplinary plan* stretching over several months or years. Rather, it's a three-stage *reconciliation plan* stretching over a much shorter period. If, at the end of it, reconciliation is refused, there is a swift disfellowship! That's how important relationships are in the body. God means for us to seriously "see to it that no one misses the grace of God, and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many" (Hebrews 12:15). Reconciliation is essential because the church is composed of imperfect individuals who can and frequently do experience relationship problems.

C. MATTHEW 18 AND "BAD ATTITUDE" PEOPLE

One final comment on Matthew 18. This is not a passage giving a "bad-attitude" person biblical permission to belch out negative feelings in the name of "openness"! I've heard leaders use Matthew 18 to direct such individuals to speak to those they resent. Openness and honesty are important and it can be dangerous to stuff feelings, but Matthew 18 is misapplied in supporting the ventilation of negative feelings.

First, the "sin against you" must be something that, unresolved, will lead to disfellowship. You should be ready to go to the next step, or even before the assembly, if you're right. Often "bad-attitude" people lack this confidence and are unwilling to press their charges to the maximum level. (Most "Matthew 18" situations are frivolous by contrast.)

³ Obviously if you opt for the other (minority) translation, it will be hard for you to accept some of the following reasoning.

Second, the brother you're going to has sinned against you. If you've sinned against him in word, thought or deed you aren't bound, by Matthew 18, to go to him and confess the mess. (I do realize that sometimes this may be helpful.) Many "bad attitude" situations don't qualify.

Third, if we all talked with each other every time our feelings were hurt in some way, we (not to mention the assembly) would be endlessly tied up in discussing feelings and attitudes, and thus wasting a good deal of precious time needed to further the mission. We need to develop both sensitivity and emotional toughness.

So next time a brother or sister confesses negative feelings towards another disciple, take it seriously but don't (necessarily) direct him to the person he has ill will towards. Deal with the situation, and think twice before giving the problem more attention than it may deserve. Don't let him plead Mathew 18 and then vent his negativity!

D. APPLICATION: MATTHEW 18.15-20

This scripture does not give the plan for dealing with sins in the body which, unrepented of, lead to disfellowship. Certainly a few principles in this passage apply to other non-interpersonal situations, but Matthew 18 does cover a specific situation:

- i. The brother who sins against you, causing
- ii. Broken fellowship within the body (lack of reconciliation),
- iii. Which must be dealt with directly and swiftly.

That's why we have to be so careful about applying it to other sins, for instance immorality. I think that not only takes it out of context, it goes against Jesus' teaching. With swindling, sexual immorality, and so on there's no "three strikes and you're out"! So what does Matthew 18 direct?

Three levels of warning, no. Three levels of attempted reconciliation, yes. That's what Jesus says. If the first talk doesn't go well, bring one or two others in on it. Probably that same day or as soon after as possible. And if that fails, make it public. If he's so unwilling to be reconciled that even going before the church fails, he's out. Yet even then we are not to give up hope. Jesus tells us to treat him as we would "a pagan or a tax collector." How did the Lord treat such people? He was their friend!

E. THE O.T. BACKGROUND

It seems that Deuteronomy 25 lies in the background of Matthew 18. If it does, then the "witnesses" witness not only the process, but they are witnesses of the sin committed by the brother. And if that is the case, then in many situations, lacking sufficient witnesses, the passage would not apply – apart from the spirit of truthfulness and fair process that are implicit in it. [This section added 4 April 2013.]

III. LUKE 17: SEVEN SINS AND SEVEN FRESH STARTS

An important question: Is the man in Matthew 18 repentant or not? Jesus' words in Luke 17, addressing a similar situation, are à propos:

"If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says 'I repent,' forgive him. The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" (Luke 17.3b-5).

According to Luke 17, if your brother sins against you seven times in one day, you still have to accept him, if he repents—no disfellowship. We could easily question the repentance of the man who messed up seven times in one day, couldn't we?⁴

He keeps "saying" he repents—mere words? Obviously, at some point we have to make a judgment call, but over all the passage is so challenging to our way of thinking because we have a shorter fuse than Jesus.

Fundamentally, Luke 17 deals with a repentant man; Matthew 18 does not. That is a significant distinction, and one that we must hold in mind if we are to interpret all these passages properly. The Luke 17 man may be weak-willed, in which case grace will work in his favor, affording him the time he needs to change in a context of accepting relationships. We may find this tricky to apply personally, and say with the apostles, "Increase our faith!" So be it, but let's accept the basic truth of the passage. Once again: Luke 17 deals with a repentant person, Matthew 18 with an

⁴ In Matthew 18:22 Jesus says we are to forgive our brother "seventy-seven times." Some translations read "seventy times seven." However, since this seems to refer to Lamech, who avenged himself "seventy-seven times" (Genesis 4:24), the former translation is to be preferred.

unrepentant person.

IV. TITUS 3

Now on to Titus 3. This passage was long an enigma to me. Why only two warnings when Matthew had three? (I even used to reason that the two warnings of Titus were the second and third warnings of Matthew 18! What lengths we are willing to go to in order to harmonize our views with scripture, and vice versa!) Here's the text:

But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless. Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned (Titus 3.9-11).

A. TWO WARNINGS OR THREE?

Who is the concern of Titus 3? This passage deals with the divisive man. This entails a hazardous sin. The divisive man, like Korah (Numbers 16), is on a course to self-destruction. That's why there are only two warnings instead of three opportunities to work things out. In addition, the issues divisive people latch on to are sometimes issues the general church member is ill-equipped to handle: the weak could be hurt, and they must be protected—this is not the situation of Matthew 18. Hence two warnings:

- i. First warning: initial conversation. Hopefully he repents. Otherwise,
- ii. Rebuke him again—as a church leader. (If he fails to repent, he's out.)

Usually this would be the same day. Not weeks or months later. Divisiveness is far too deadly a sin to dilly-dally around with for more than a day or two!

Paul assures us that a person who refuses to listen to the church leader (Titus in this case, presumably the evangelist of the churches in Crete) is self-condemned. Do not be sentimental. Do not waste valuable time trying to pacify him or reason with him. Do not wonder whether he really means well. The Bible says he's sinful—gripped by sin, not just a "sinner"—and moreover he's warped—twisted. Maybe through God's humbling him we'll see a future penitence, but for the time being let it go.

B. A WORD ABOUT DIVISIVENESS

Divisiveness is one of the most serious sins in the Bible. It's also a word thrown about quite often in the Christian circles. What is a divisive person? What is divisiveness and what is it not? We'd better define it so we know the range of application of Titus 3.

What it is:

1. Defiantly opposing the leadership of the church (2 Timothy 3.8-9, 3 John 10, Numbers 16).
2. Breaking off to start your own group (Acts 20.30, Romans 16.17-18, 1 John 4:1, 2.19, 2 S 15).
3. Maliciously gossiping, holding aloof and forming a clear faction (3 John 9-10).
4. Teaching false doctrine related to the major areas of the faith (2 Timothy 2.18, 2 John 9).
5. Refusing to stop engaging in useless controversies (Titus 3.9).

What it's not:

1. Offering suggestions to the leadership of the church or having reservations about teachings or practices of the church. Fairly often members are reprimanded for being "divisive" when they are merely "disagreeing." (Yes, I know there are ways to disagree without being "disagreeable.") In short, the "many counselors" of Proverbs don't have to be ministry staff people!
2. Offering a personal criticism to a church leader. We dish it out and we need to be able to take it. Channels need to be kept open and the "right of appeal" must be preserved for our people to keep their sense of confidence in their leaders.
3. Honestly seeking answers to questions of conscience (Romans 14).
4. Disagreeing, on biblical grounds, with a doctrine or practice (Galatians 2.11).
5. Being lethargic, lukewarm, awkward or even less than zealous in support of the leaders and activities of the church. No one is perfectly consistent. Neither does sin in general qualify. We all struggle with sin (James 3.2), so if all sin is defined as causing "division" in the body of Christ then "divisiveness" becomes a meaningless term. Of course, the idle should we warned (1 Thessalonians 5.14).

God's word says we cannot tolerate the divisive person. Warn him. If he refuses to listen, one more sharp warning may

bring him to his senses. If not, leave him alone and expel him from the church. We can be sure we've followed God's plan and there's no need to pursue the matter further.

This obviously is action to be undertaken by church leaders only — at a fairly high level of leadership (elder, evangelist, etc). There's no going before the church with the divisive man. Only if the individual needs to be publicly recognized for the threat he poses (2 Timothy 4.14-15, Revelation 2.20, 3 John 10) do his dealings need to become public. But what does "marked"—an older English word meaning "noticed"—mean? Only that we are alert and wary of him. There is no "black mark." Psalm 37:37 illustrates the point equally well. More modern translations of Romans 16:17 read "watch out for," or something to that effect.

This explains the apparent discrepancy between Matthew 18 and Titus 3. They apply to different situations. Some principles may apply from one passage to the other, but there's no need to harmonize them because they refer to different things.

V. 1 CORINTHIANS 5

1 Corinthians 5.11-13 may be the most quoted scripture in the context of disfellowshipping members of the body. Certainly it is also one of the least observed scriptures among the denominations. While it complements Matthew 18 and Titus 3, once again it covers a different practical situation. That situation is flagrant sin a disciple is unwilling to repent of: not a relationship problem, not divisiveness.

But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you" (1 Corinthians 5.11-13).

A. EXPULSION IN 1 CORINTHIANS

1 Corinthians 5 deals with the more serious sins, not a Matthew 18 situation. Where does it mention "three warnings"? It doesn't! A swindler, if unrepentant on confrontation, must be expelled. A sexually immoral person, if he sins and repents repeatedly, might well be allowed to remain. Accent on if he repents. (But remember, we've taught Matthew 18 + 1 Corinthians 5 = plan for church discipline.) I believe that this is wrong, and a closer reading of the scriptures settles the matter once and for all.

B. SINS LEADING TO EXPULSION

What sorts of sins are covered by 1 Corinthians 5? Any sin? Where do we draw the line? Watching a pornographic film? Masturbation? The specific instance of sexual immorality is an ongoing incestuous relationship (1 Corinthians 5.1-2). While the whole Bible teaches the essentiality of sexual purity (Job 31.1, Matthew 5.29-30, Ephesians 5.3), the term *hoi pornoi* in Greek applies to fornicators and prostitutes. We'd better make sure that any disciplinary action taken against offenders targets sin of more or less the same level of severity.

The greedy? Materialism is hard to define, crossing cultures yet defined by culture. Different congregations seem to have differing standards of sacrifice or austerity. Even different versions of the Bible can give us pause to consider the meaning of a word. The Swedish translation of "greed" is *själviskhet*—selfishness! So in some cases we'd better be sure we've properly exegeted the word! It surely would cover greed fed by illegal business practices, also the most ostentatious sort of affluence. I have never seen anyone disfellowshipped for materialism. (Could something be wrong here?)

Idolatry probably refers exclusively to false gods and religions. Slander is easy to identify because it leaves many witnesses; this sin could dovetail into the Matthew 18 or Titus 3 passages in one way or another. Drunkenness is a lifestyle, as is swindling. In none of these instances are we dealing with a one-time sin; the people in question keep on sinning and will be consumed as the enemies of God if something drastic is not done (Hebrews 10.26-31).

All these sorts of sin, unrepented of, will lead to damnation (1 Corinthians 6.9-10). At least if the offender is expelled in time he may come to his senses (1 Corinthians 5.5). And the Old Testament teaches the same: see Deuteronomy 17.7, 19.19, 21.21, 22.21, 22.24, 24.7, which Paul alludes to in 1 Corinthians 5.13.

An offender, if he is endangering the body, may have to be expelled even if he seems at one level to be penitent—because we know his history and his character and must protect the body accordingly. It's a judgment call. The most important consideration is the welfare of the body—love for the sheep.

C. WHERE DID THE PUBLIC WARNING GO?

None of the passages we have seen mentions a “public warning.” Matthew 18 is a public appeal to the sinner, not a warning. The Titus 3 warning is private, though scripture records some instances which needed to be public. (For instance, the rebuke of Titus 1.13 may have been public.) 1 Corinthians 5 is an expulsion, not a warning. (Except as a warning to others, which in a way is public.)

The surprising conclusion is that, though it may be beneficial at times to warn someone in a larger group, there is no standard “public warning” for a repeat sinner. And certainly not a three-stage warning as we’ve taught! We should rethink our position!

Sometimes we’ve been too hard, too quick to condemn; other times we’ve been too slow to deal with things. Only God’s plan is the best plan and will take everyone to heaven in the long run.

VI. 2 THESSALONIANS 3

One final and important note: the sin of 2 Thessalonians 3 (idleness) is not a sin leading to expulsion. It is worth taking the time to present the text and comment on it briefly:

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us... For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: “If a man will not work, he shall not eat.” We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat...If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother (2 Thessalonians 3.6...15).

Nowhere in this passage does Paul explicitly mention expelling the idle brother or sister. That individual is still right with God! Somehow that makes us uneasy. (It does me!) We want swift repentance, don’t we? But Christians don’t always change quickly. Sometimes they do, but the other times we need to teach them patiently (2 Timothy 2.24-26, 4.2). We’re saved by the grace of God even when we may be dragging our heels. We give ourselves some slack, and that’s how we should treat others.

A. GRACE FALSE AND TRUE

Though we hesitate to preach it, salvation by grace means we don’t, strictly speaking, have to be in tip-top spiritual shape all the time in order to have confidence with God. This isn’t slackness, it’s grace! We need grace as much as the next fellow. Sometimes when our critics (who have no works) accuse us of works-salvation, we want to make a snappy comeback. Realize that biblically they are in error on several counts, knowing neither the scriptures nor the power of God (Matthew 22.29). Here’s how I respond:

“Who really understands grace? Not the critics! It’s those who say ‘no’ to sin (Titus 2.11) and those who work harder than all the rest (1 Corinthians 15.10). An individual lacking conviction and hustle simply hasn’t grasped the grace of God. He has a serious need: to grow! (2 Peter 1.5-9). Similarly, a church riddled with sin and deader than Sardis has lost its appreciation of the God of all grace. Don’t bother seeking tips about the grace of God from the uncommitted and the compromisers! There is a false, unbiblical sort of grace, but there’s also the real thing.”

B. STILL SAVED

Now back to the idler. If you want proof that the idle brother or sister is saved, look at how Paul addresses him: “brother.” So we don’t get the wrong idea, he concludes in this way: “Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.” That final word brother refers to him (he’s not an enemy), not to yourself as you warn him.

Of course an idle mind is the devil’s workshop, and if this Christian slow to follow healthy instruction lets laziness gain the upper hand, he’ll in all likelihood matriculate to the University of Immorality or the College of Divisiveness. Yet at present, this man is still your brother.

Though we withdraw from him (giving him lots of extra time to feel his shame and re-order his life) we don’t stop regarding him as a brother. Nor should he be quickly dropped from the membership list! That might be convenient from a discipling perspective, but it’s unbiblical according to 2 Thessalonians 3.

VII. 3 JOHN

One more passage merits examination. [This passage was not covered in the original 1994 paper, and is the only substantive change (2005) to the earlier version.] It is found in 3 John:

I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us. So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us. Not satisfied with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church (3 John 9-10).

There may be a time to mention someone publicly. Paul practiced a similar approach to public enemies of the church (1 Timothy 1:20, 2 Timothy 2:17). Although this is not the same thing as a public “warning,” it is obviously “public.” If the church leadership deems it necessary, for the good of the congregation—and for the good of the sinner—to make public what has been done, I think it would be wrong for leadership *not* to take a public stand.

CONCLUSION

- First, Matthew 18, Titus 3 and 1 Corinthians 5 deal with different situations, so let’s apply them accordingly. There’s no need to force them all to address the same situation or process since they don’t! Let each passage speak for itself.
- Second, there is no “public warning” as we’ve taught it. Hopefully we’ll remain hard-line against sin and have more group resolution of relationship problems, but the traditional warning-cum-explanation should be dropped. Paul’s instruction in 1 Corinthians 5 relates to expulsion, not admonition.
- Third, we need to teach our people what the Bible does say so that leaders don’t unwittingly bend the scriptures in instances when church discipline is deemed necessary. Certainly it’s worth discussing at the staff level.
- Fourth, according to 2 Thessalonians 3, the idle should be warned, withdrawn from and given every opportunity to repent — but not disfellowshipped (taken off the roll) at the outset. The preached word may impel them to leave, but there’s no scriptural precedent for disfellowshipping someone who is lacking in zeal.
- Finally, it’s my hope this understanding will give more grace where it is needed and more urgency in resolving conflict. Far fewer people would leave the fellowship if we are focused more on keeping relationships tight and right. In short, sometimes we need to be tougher, and sometimes we are too tough. God’s word will help us achieve the right balance.