

THE EPIC LIFE - BOB HALLMAN

The Lost Art of Maintaining a Healthy Church

Matthew 18:15-20

Introduction

The church is a holy community created by God and intended to reflect His character and glory in the midst of a fallen world. God loves the church and His ultimate purpose for His church is to make it a gift to His Son; thus He calls it the Bride of Christ. For this reason the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are constantly at work to purify the church and bring her to maturity (Eph 4:7-16; 5:25-27).

Until He returns for His bride, He has given believers and church leaders the privilege, responsibility and authority to keep it pure, essentially saying, "You represent Me in that church and act on my behalf as an undershepherd of my sheep!

But the biblical disciplining of sinning Christians in a church body family is almost unheard of in our society. The question is, *Why?*

1. We haven't seen it modeled and don't know how to do it! (*Ignorance*)
2. We don't want to be perceived as judgmental or unloving (*Pride*)
Matt 7:1 "Do not judge, or you too will be judged."
3. We don't want the hassle of the corrective process (*Apathy/indifference*)
4. We fear losing long-time friends and ministry associates (*Cowardice*)
5. We are afraid of losing church members -- and their tithe (*Greed*)
6. We are afraid of lawsuits (*Fear of man*)
Prov 29:25 "Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe."

Regardless of what excuse we use for not following God's directive to exercise church discipline, at the end of the day, it amounts to disobedience to His clear directives and commands!

I The Purpose of Church Discipline

What is Church Discipline? "It is the corrective process instituted by Christ Jesus to bring repentance, restoration and recovery to a sinning member of His body and to protect the church from the corrupting influence of sin."

A. To glorify God through **obedience** to His Word

John 14:21 "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him."

B. To **restore** the sinning believer

Galatians 6:1, which says, "...you who are spiritual should restore [Gk. katartizo] him gently" conveys the idea of repairing something to bring it back to its original condition. The Greek word is used in reference to mending fractured bones, putting dislocated bones in place, and mending fishing nets. To restore to the former condition is the goal of discipline.

C. To preserve the purity and unity of the church

Eph 5:25-27 "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless."

D. To serve as a **deterrent** to others

Deut 13:11 "Then all Israel will hear and be afraid, and no one among you will do such an evil thing again (worship of false gods)."

1 Tim 5:20 "Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning."

E. To strengthen and grow the church

John 15:2 "He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful."

While some may shy away from a church that exercises church discipline, there will be many more who will be drawn to a church that demonstrates this kind of internal integrity, authenticity and concern for the holiness of the church and the reputation of Jesus Christ.

F. To avoid God's **discipline** of the local church

In Cor 11:29-32, when explaining the Lord's Supper, Paul says "if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world."

Revelation 2:14-25 tells us how sin within the local fellowship in Pergamum and Thyatira resulted in God dealing with them directly.

G. To vindicate the integrity and honor of God

1 Peter 2:12 "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us."

Jonathan Edwards:

"If strict discipline, and thereby strict morals, were maintained in the church, it would in all probability be one of the most powerful means of conviction and conversion towards those who are without."

Edwards, Jonathan. *The Nature and End of Excommunication*.
<https://www.biblebb.com/files/edwards/excommunication.htm>

II The Scriptural Support of Church Discipline

A. Relational examples

1. Father-Son

Prov 13:24 “He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him.”

As a father must discipline to correct a child, so the Lord must discipline to correct His children.

2. Friendships-Acquaintances

Prov 9:8-9 “Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you; rebuke a wise man and he will love you. Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still; teach a righteous man and he will add to his learning.

3. Heavenly Father-Child of God

Heb 12:5-6, 11 “And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: “My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son ... No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”

4. Shepherds-Flock

2 Tim 4:1-5 “In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage — with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.”

Titus 2:15 “These, then, are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority.”

B. Biblical examples

1. Old Testament examples:

a. Hanani the seer confronted King Asa for his sin of relying on foreign kings - 2 Chron 16:7-10

b. Azariah the priest with eighty other courageous priests confronted Uzziah - 2 Chron 26:16-21

c. Nathan confronted David's sin with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah - 2 Sam 12

2. New Testament examples: Paul often exercised church discipline

- a. The man who was sleeping with his step-mother - 1Cor 5:1-13; 2Cor 2:5-11
- b. Specific names:
 - 1. Peter for his duplicity and hypocrisy when associating with the Gentiles - Gal 2:11-14
 - 2. Hymenaeus and Alexander for blasphemy - 1 Timothy 1:20
 - 3. Phygelus and Hermogenes for deserting Paul - 2 Tim 1:15
 - 4. Hymenaeus and Philetus for wandering from the truth - 2 Tim 2:17

III The Trigger of Church Discipline

While no believer will ever be completely free from sin until the return of Christ, church discipline involves those in the church who persist in a lifestyle of sin (1 John 5:18) and whose lives bring dishonor and/or damage to the work of God.

A. Sins that damage the **doctrine** of the church

Rom 16:17 “I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them.”

B. Sins that damage the **unity** of the church

Titus 3:10 “Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him.”

C. Sins that damage the **purity** of the church

1 Cor 5:11 “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.”

IV The Heart of Church Discipline

- A. It is to be done after careful self-**examination** - Matt 7:3-5
- B. It is to be done with **prayer** and fasting - Esther 4:15-16
- C. It is to be done with gentleness - Gal 6:1; 2 Tim 2:25
- D. E. It is to be done without a critical spirit - Matt 7:1-2
- E. It is to be done without **partiality** - 1 Tim 5:21
- F. It is to be done with patience - 1 Thess 5:14
- G. It is to be done with **love** - Prov 13:24; Eph 4:15

V The Steps of Church Discipline

The alternative to Church Discipline: *Self-discipline* (self-judging):

2 Tim 1:7 “For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.”

God calls every believer to be conformed into the image of His Son. For this to occur, the believer must be in full cooperation with the Holy Spirit and willing to identify anything that is displeasing to the Lord, to judge it, and to stop it. This kind of judging must go on in all our lives on a daily basis. Where it does there is no disciplinary action required. But in Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus is

addressing those cases where, for one reason or another, a person fails to judge themselves.

A. **Step One:** **Private** confrontation - Mt 18:15

Notice this verse is addressed to all Christians, not merely church leaders, elders, or pastors. This is to go on all the time between believers wherever we see someone refusing to judge a wrong thing in his or her life.

1. "If your brother sins" (against you)
 - a. The words *against you* are not in some of the better manuscripts, and many texts leave them out.
 - b. The sin must be biblically identifiable. The disciplinary process must not be based on "feelings", an emotion, a hunch, or personal slight. You must be prepared to quote chapter and verse of the actual sin(s).

2. "Go"

This very is in the present imperative, meaning you should continue to go immediately and pursue with issue without delay.

3. "Show him his fault"

The second verb, in the aorist imperative, conveys the idea of being convincing in getting the point across. From the Greek verb elengcho, it means "to expose to the light."

4. "Just between the two of you"

Note: This first step is to be done privately

 1. The events and information is private between the two of you
 2. The meeting itself involves only the two of you

Why just the two of you?

 1. You may not have all the facts
 2. You are protecting the offender's reputation
 3. You are eliminating additional damaging sins (gossip, slander)

5. "If he listens to you, you have won your won your brother over"

Won over = Kerdaino = "To gain or win"

Kerdaino was originally used of accumulating wealth.

In this case, it refers to the gaining back a treasured brother/sister!

So a believer is to go to a sinning brother privately and confront him in a spirit of humility and gentleness, clearly identifying and calling him to repentance. If the sinning brother repents in response to the private confrontation, that brother is forgiven and restored (v. 15b). The process is complete!

Over 90% of church discipline begins and ends here!

However, if the person fails to understand, disagrees or is resistant to your correction, Jesus gives further instruction ...

B. Step Two: Take some **witnesses** - Mt 18:16

By the way, these witnesses are not witnesses to the sins, but to the next meeting. However, it is beneficial to select witnesses who have some knowledge of the person and/or circumstances being addressed, but it is not essential.

Why is God concerned that there be witnesses?

God wants to assure that both the facts of the situation and the process itself are verified as in keeping with the truth of His Word.

What is the responsibility of these witnesses?

1. They are to provide protection for both parties
2. They are to be witnesses to the facts of the meeting:
 - a. The offender was treated fairly and with love
 - b. The offender was actually guilty of a biblical sin
 - c. The offender was properly rebuked and an appeal for repentance offered
 - d. The offender either responded in repentance or refused to repent
3. They are to add strength, counsel and validation to the truth
4. They are to provide reliable and accurate testimony in step #3 before the church should the offender be unresponsive to biblical correction.

Ideally, the witnesses' added rebuke will be sufficient to induce a change of heart in the offending brother that the initial rebuke did not cause. If this change of heart does occur, that brother is forgiven, restored and the matter is dropped.

However, should the person remain unresponsive, there are now at least 3 loving believers who are appealing to the offender brother or sister in God's name!

But if the sinning brother or sister continues to refuse to respond to the loving correction of the witnesses, Jesus explains the next step in the process ...

C. Step Three: Tell it to the church - Mt 18:17a

Note:

1. It is important to provide adequate time between steps for the Holy Spirit to do His convicting work and for the person to have time to respond.
2. Before initiating step three, send the offender a letter (registered):
 - a. To inform them that the third and fourth steps are pending
 - b. To communicate what will be disclosed to the church
 - c. To share the future collective response from the church
 - d. To provide a date and time when repentance must be evidenced in order to stop the process from going any further.

What does the Bible mean when it says “the church”?

1. The church board of directors?
2. The church leadership team?
3. The full church membership?
4. The gathered church on Sunday morning?
Ekklesia = “Called out ones” or “assembly of believers”

What are we to tell them?

1. The name of the offender
2. The general nature of the sin
3. A reporting of the first two stages of Matthew 18:15-17
4. Clear guidelines as to how to relate to the offender

What is the purpose of “telling it to the church?”

1. To aggressively pray:
 - a. For the offender that they will: 2 Tim 2:25-26
 1. “Be granted repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth”
 2. “Come to his senses”
 3. “Escape the trap of the devil”
 - b. For the person (people) who were harmed or offended
 - c. For the protection of the church from the work of the enemy
2. To resource the entire body to lovingly urge him to repentance
3. To communicate solidarity as it relates to the purity/holiness of the church

Now we have gone from *one*, to *three or four* to a *whole* church of loving, kind, gracious men and women who are appealing to the offender to repent and be restored!

If the offender still refuses, Jesus reveals the next step in verse 17 ...

D. Step Four: **Exclude** from church - Mt 18:17b

Jesus said, “Let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer”

1. The term *Gentile* was primarily used of non-Jews who had no part in the covenant, worship, or social life of the Jews.
2. The term *tax-gatherer* described an outcast from the Jews by choice, having become a traitor to his own people.
 In either case, Gentiles and Jewish tax collectors were considered unbelievers by virtue of their lifestyles.

What this *doesn't* mean:

1. It doesn't give us permission to treat people badly, unkindly or cruelly
 The offender is to be treated as we would treat any unbeliever -- with courtesy, yet with sorrow for the sin and the hurt he is bringing on himself, but with hope for his ultimate redemption.

What it *does* mean:

1. It means to treat him as non-member of God's body or fellowship
 - a. They are not to *associate* with the offender
 - b. They are not to *fellowship* with the offender
 - c. They are not to *eat* with the offender - 1 Cor 5:11
 - d. They are not to *invite* the offender to participate in the benefits of Christian assembly.

Sometimes people in the church, thinking that they are acting in love, will disregard the disciplinary efforts of the church and continue to have casual, friendly contact with an unrepentant believer.

Unfortunately, this subversive activity serves the purposes of Satan, undermines God's plan for restoration and delays the needed repentance by giving comfort when they should be dispensing the grace of discomfort.

What is the purpose of excommunication?

1. To *awaken* the offender to his sin and need for repentance - 2 Thess 3:14-15
2. To *protect* the purity of the fellowship - 1 Cor 5:6
3. To *warn* the assembly of the seriousness of sin - 1 Tim 5:20
4. To *hand the offender* over to Satan, so that:
 - a. The sinful nature may be destroyed - 1 Cor 5:5a
 - b. His spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord - 1 Cor 5:5b
5. To *give a testimony* of righteousness to a watching world

The command not to have fellowship or even social contact with the unrepentant brother does not exclude all contact. When there is an opportunity to admonish him and try to call him back, the opportunity should be taken. But the contact should be for the *purpose of admonishment and restoration* and no other.

If the offender repents, then the restoration needs as broad as the correction, ensuring that as many people as possible may rejoice (Gal 6:1; Luke 15:7; 2 Cor 2:5-11). We celebrate with a party and cake!

Note:

1. Most of the time, step four does not result in repentance.
2. Sometimes it takes years for a person to acknowledge their sin and repent

Summary of following verses:

Matt 18:18-20 "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be 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."

What do these verses actually mean?

The Rabbis had the judicial authority to act on God's behalf to either *bind* a person or to *loose* a person from an oath, an accusation or an obligation.

1. God has given the church that same judicial responsibility and authority:

- a. Those who are *unrepentant* we bind before the Lord
- b. Those who are *repentant*, we loose before the Lord

Heaven ratifies what is done on earth when the church follows this process of discipline. God the Father in heaven is our authority!

It's very comforting to know that heaven supports us in the process of church discipline, because people often think that if you try to confront sin and call it what it is, you are being unloving. But what you're really doing is fighting God's battle and lining up with principles of God's heavenly kingdom.

2. Verse 20, "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" has been mutilated and misapplied forever! The mistake occurs when we yank a verse out of context. The context of verse 20 is not prayer, but *church discipline*.

a. What it *doesn't mean*:

1. That God only meets with us in groups of two or more
2. That God only answers prayer if two or more agree

b. What it *does mean* in context:

1. The two or three are the witnesses to the disciplinary process.
2. The coming together in God's name is for the purpose of confronting sin in Jesus' name.
3. That God is with them in this judicial process is remarkable!
He is in the midst of the church's active partnership in purging and the purifying the church – the Bride of Christ!

Questions and Answers:

1. What if they leave before the process is completed?

At times a member may withdraw from the church to avoid or cut short church discipline and its consequences. The elders and members of the church are obligated and privileged to restore the wandering individual to the Lord and to His church. While the church cannot force a withdrawing member to remain in the church, the church has the right and responsibility to restore, to bring the disciplinary process to an orderly conclusion, and to make final determination as to the person's membership status at the time withdrawal is sought or acknowledged.

2. What if they don't come back?

1 John 2:19 "They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us."

3. What if they just transition to another local church?

If the elders learn that a member who left under church discipline is now attending another church, the elders may inform that church of the situation, seeking to encourage the brother or sister to repent and be restored to the Lord and to any people he or she have offended. The elders may also warn the other church to be on guard against harm that the accused might do to their members (Eph 4:1-6).

If we are aware of the church that they have gone to, then we feel an obligation to notify the leadership of that church, not of what the sin is, but that that individual is fleeing church discipline from us. What they do with that information is their business, but we don't get into specifics unless they request further information.

4. How long should each step in Matthew 18 take?

This is a difficult question to answer since there can be so many variables. The abbreviated answer is, "When the Holy Spirit makes it clear that the person is unresponsive to the previous step, continuing in sin, hardening their heart and negatively impacting the larger fellowship, then the next step should be taken."

I can't emphasize enough the importance of protracted prayer and dependence upon the guidance and timing the Holy Spirit provides in conjunction with the clear directives of scripture.

5. What kind of sins do you deal with?

All kinds of sins including immorality, unethical behavior, unfair business practices, divisive behavior, unresolved marital conflict, gossip and slander, etc.

6. What should be done with those who are fleeing discipline at another church?

People who attend our church, but have been excluded from another church, will not be allowed to participate in the fellowship of the church until they have repented of their sins, made a reasonable effort to be reconciled, and satisfied any biblically legitimate requirements of their former church.

If we are made aware of the situation, our leadership would go to that individual and say, “What’s going on here? This is sinful that you have left that fellowship without legitimate grounds for leaving them. In fact, you are fleeing church discipline. Repent! Go back where you came from. Go back!

In our day of great mobility and many churches to attend, someone who is under discipline usually finds it easy to simply attend elsewhere. It seems that word of discipline needs to be communicated to other churches, and that other churches have an obligation to honor that act of discipline if the wayward party attempts to “move his membership” to that church. It also suggests that newcomers to any church should be interviewed, to be certain that they are not under discipline elsewhere.

7. Is the offending believer allowed to attend the services when they are in this discipline process?

If it is before step four, then yes, they are allowed to attend, even if it has been step three where the whole congregation has been urged to go after them. But if it has gone to step four then they are not welcome.

8. What about the danger of lawsuit liability?

The Oklahoma Supreme Court ruling in *Guinn versus the Church of Christ*, back in 1989. <https://case-law.vlex.com/vid/guinn-v-church-of-886000084>

1. The discipline of church members is a constitutionally protected right of churches. If discipline of church members is a possibility in your church, then you should adopt a disciplinary procedure that ideally is based upon and specifically refers to scriptural references. The procedure should specify the grounds for discipline and describe the process that will be conducted.
2. The first amendment guarantee of religious freedom insulates pre-withdrawal discipline of church members from legal liability in most, if not all, cases.
3. The court concluded that the constitutional right of a church member to withdraw from the church membership is protected by the first amendment guarantee of religious freedom, unless a member has waived that right. One approach would be for a church to adopt a provision in its bylaws, preventing members from withdrawing if they are currently being disciplined and to be as safe as possible, a church should explain to present and prospective members, the provision in the bylaws, limiting their right to withdraw and explaining to them that by becoming members, they will be waving their right to withdraw from membership if they’re under discipline by the church.

There’s a summary on the eighth page, upper right hand corner: Churches have a constitutional right to discipline members, statements made to the church

members about disciplined members are conditionally privileged. Churches have broad authority to discipline clergy. Churches have constitutionally protected rights to discipline a former member, who has withdrawn from the membership, if the former member has effectively waived his or her right to withdraw from membership. That's why we teach church discipline in all our new member classes. We have new member classes every month here at Grace, there's usually 30 to 50 people in each class and it's explained to them, not only as part of the membership process, have they had to read our bylaws and agree with them, they are reminded that when they agreed to them, they waved their right to sue us if we practice church discipline with them as the recipient.

9. What can be done to limit a church's liability?

- a. Amend your church's disciplinary guidelines to address key aspects of discipline, especially the issues of whether you will continue discipline after an attempted withdrawal and whether you reserve the right to inform your members and other churches of your disciplinary actions. (Each of these issues is covered in the model Relational Commitments.)
- b. Obtain informed consent to your disciplinary policies through membership classes, interviews and explicit Relational Commitments.
- c. Teach regularly on church discipline so members remain aware of the biblical basis, purpose, and steps of discipline; this will help to reduce the likelihood of confusion and surprise when discipline is exercised.
- d. Carry out church discipline in a redemptive, biblically faithful manner.

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