

Church Discipline: Part 2

By David de Bruyn

'All talk and no action' is a saying used to describe people who speak about what they want, but take no action to see it accomplished. Unfortunately, the church, which has the most important words of all, is all too often guilty of the same thing. There is preaching about sin and the need for personal holiness, but sadly there is very seldom any action taken to make sure this occurs in the lives of its members.

We're looking at the topic of church discipline. In Part 1 of this series, we saw that church discipline is commanded in Scripture. We saw its many benefits. We saw that the objections that are raised against it are rooted in faulty thinking and not in Scripture. We saw that a pure church is a prerequisite to a loving church.

Church discipline preserves purity, which preserves unity. Unity at the cost of purity is not unity at all. So, far from being a destructive thing, church discipline is to be a restorative, life-giving thing, something that preserves the unity of the body, protects it from sin and false teaching, and portrays a Holy Saviour to the onlooking world.

Now, let's look at the text that deals with church discipline to try and understand when, how, and why one is to exercise church discipline.

Moreover, if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses, every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

Matthew 18:15-20

1. The meeting's purpose

Jesus says that if your Christian brother sins against you, you are to go and meet with him. Church discipline is a meeting between concerned parties. It is not where you gossip about the person to others and then go and meet with them. It is not where you say, 'Brother so-an-so is in sin, it's so sad, but we're praying for him.'

No, the specific purpose that Jesus mentions here is to 'gain your brother.' In other words – to restore him, to deliver him from sin. Church discipline's motive is entirely unselfish – it is to help someone who is falling. The goal is to mend them and to preserve them from hurting themselves, and the name of Christ.

This raises the questions, who must approach the sinning brother or sister, and when? Well, the answer to the first question is simple – you and I. Jesus addresses us – *"if thy brother sins against you – go and tell him."* This is not something reserved for church leadership, it is for every Spirit-controlled Christian. Every Christian with a heart for their fellow Christian's spiritual health is to be involved here.

Well, when must we do this? What sins occasion the start of this process? Is it for only certain sins? No, Jesus doesn't say that – he simply says, *"if thy brother sins against thee."* Now, that might make some say, 'Oh, so only if they hurt me, I'll go and tell them, but if it doesn't involve me, then I will mind my own business.'

But the problem with that thinking is that when a fellow Christian is sinning, it is a sin against you, indirectly. Sin affects the body of Christ. If the toe is infected with disease, it affects all the other parts of the body as well. So the truth is, any sin can be something we approach another Christian about.

Does this mean I must begin this process for every failing of every Christian I see? No, it means we are to use wisdom to see if a Christian is falling into a pattern of unrepentant sin. If we see a sin that is a pattern in someone's life, or we believe a Christian has fallen into sin which they are hiding instead of confessing, then we need to proceed.

The issue in church discipline is not the kind of sin, it's the unrepentant attitude of the Christian concerned. So Jesus instructs us, if this is the case, go and tell your brother or sister alone. This is stage one.

2. The meeting in private

Instead of sulking over someone else's sin, murmuring about nothing being done, retaliating against that person for sinning against you, or gossiping, we initiate a private meeting with them. This also means that you do not broadcast that fact. If you have informed ten people of that person's problem and your desire to meet with them, that sounds more like boasting than respecting true privacy.

What is the meeting for? To brand them as a sinner? To rush into the room, screaming, "Repent" and rush out? No, we must begin simply by finding out if that person truly has been sinning, and if they are unrepentant. Too many people take some hearsay and go into the meeting pinning it onto a person. Then if the person denies it, they say, "Ah, they're unrepentant, I must move on to stage two!"

But that's not Biblical. **Proverbs 18:13** tells us: *"He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him."* We need to ask questions to find out if a person is truly in sin. It is only by listening that we can actually establish if they are in unrepentant behaviour.

What if they lie? Well, it will do nothing to accuse them of lying in the midst of that situation. The best thing to do in that case is present other facts that you may be aware of, and ask them to explain them. If you believe they are still concealing the facts, then it is best to explain that you will take them at their word.

"Love thinketh no evil," (**1 Corinthians 13:5**) so to walk around with suspicions is the kind of judging Christ condemned. We are to regard other Christians as innocent until proven guilty. Besides, God says that one's sins will find one out. If they are truly concealing sin, it will come out, now or later. By attempting to help them, you have done what was right.

But very often, especially in the case of sins of immorality, they will not deny the sin. They will deny its sinfulness. They may become defensive, or turn the table and ask, why you are suddenly so holy. They may excuse it. All these we should expect when the sinful nature is confronted – it is like a cornered animal.

How should we handle this? **Galatians 6:1** gives us the prevention and the cure: *"Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such a one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted."*

If you can clearly see that they are being swallowed up into repetitive sin, into a dangerous relationship or whatever the case may be, seek to restore them in a spirit of meekness. The attitude here is crucial.

The motive is clear – *"restore such a one."* The word 'restore' literally means to mend broken bones, to restore to a former condition. This is a tender operation. This is not a proud, guns blazing, 'either you follow me or you don't' approach. Only utter humility can offset the contention that can come about as you reprove their sin.

Notice Paul says that we are to consider ourselves, lest we also be tempted. The easiest way to have the right spirit is to let this thought saturate into your heart: 'I could be guilty of exactly the same thing, I am made from the same sinful flesh. I am just as capable of doing that. That could be me.'

If you don't believe that, you're probably not ready to confront them, and your false sense of superiority will come out in your meeting. When the goal is restoration, and the attitude is a spirit of meekness, there can be a real dialogue.

Notice, Paul also says *"Ye which are spiritual."* What does that mean? It means those who are Spirit-controlled, those who are seeking to be mature and grow in the faith. Church

discipline is not open season for all the immature to seek to rub their enemy's noses in the dirt. This is not the chance to get back at someone.

Indeed, often the reason church discipline is so warped is because of the immaturity of the ones doing it. Children can't discipline children. When you have an emotionally and spiritually immature man exercising church discipline, expect it to be a mess of non-communication, silent treatment, hard feelings and emotional abuse.

No, the Bible calls on those exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit to be involved in seeking to restore the erring Christian. So, if this person admits their sin, then in this spirit of meekness, there is to be a reproving of it. There is to be the humble and firm call of one brother to another to leave this sin and follow Christ.

If the person agrees that they are involved in that sinful activity, there must be a Scriptural explanation of why it is sinful, and a loving call to leave that sin and come back to God. Always use the Bible to show why what they are doing is wrong.

2 Timothy 3:16 tells us all Scripture is inspired and profitable for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness. Don't talk about why you think it is wrong. Show them from the Bible. The Bible has judged them to be wrong. You are humbly reminding them of the Bible's statements.

If they admit their sin and repent of it, Jesus says that you have gained your brother. You have restored them. The process ends there and then. Indeed, this simple process of reproofing each other should be a continual, natural part of any Christian fellowship. If it was more part of natural Christian relationships, we would not see church discipline like some foreign, strange thing.

But let's turn the tables. What if you are the one being approached? Well, we should be Christians that welcome correction. Indeed, we should look at someone reproofing us as a loving, truthful messenger, someone who preferred to help us, rather than flatter us. Prepare your attitude in advance, so you can receive correction.

If they are right about your sin, then you need to repent and confess it. As **Proverbs 28:13** says: *"He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy."* Don't make excuses, justify or try to turn the tables on the one confronting. Just confess it and thank them for helping you.

If their statement is wrong, or even if their attitude in approaching you is wrong, you still need to show wisdom in dealing with it: *"He that is slow to wrath is of great understanding: but he that is hasty of spirit exalteth folly"* (**Proverbs 14:29**). Show patience, and leave off contention, as **Proverbs 17:10** tells us. If they have misunderstood you and follow the next step, it will be sorted out if they bring a reasonable witness with them.

One other question – what if the person is one of the pastors of the church? No difference at all. **1 Timothy 5:19-20** says: *"Against an elder receive not an accusation, but*

before two or three witnesses. Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear."

You go to them, with the same procedure and spirit. If they are truly in sin, and refusing to admit it, then stage two is to be followed.

3. The meeting in plurality

Jesus says, *"If he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established."* If the sin is obvious, and the person refuses to repent of it, then stage two is to take one or two people with you. Why do we do this?

People wrongly reason it is to show strength in numbers. When they see you coming with the 'repentance committee' they'll get scared and repent, right? No, this is not the reason. The reason is the same as in Jewish law where no charge could be held against a man on the testimony of just one witness. This is a protection against grudge matches and carnality in the church.

Bob cannot broadcast to the church that Bill is in sin unless there is more than one witness to agree with Bob that they, too, sat in a meeting where Bill refused to repent. It protects both you – the one confronting – and the one being confronted. If the accusation is unreasonable, this third party will see and hear that. If the accusation is true, and the person is not repenting, this too will be clear.

So, that is why you take one or two with you. Who should one take? Ideally people with spiritual integrity. Perhaps take some of the church leadership. As much as possible, do not select witnesses who could be accused of siding with you for friendship reasons. Pick people who can be neutral, who have spiritual insight, and the ability to make sound judgement.

Before the meeting, do not tell the witnesses all the details. Simply inform them that there is an issue you believe is happening in this believer's life, and you want them to come and observe as silent witnesses to determine if that person is truly unrepentant, or if perhaps you have got it all wrong. By withholding all the details, you avoid clouding their judgement and prejudicing them.

Again, go to find out. Ask the same questions again. Do not accuse or come to conclusions without hearing their side. The same procedure is followed in terms of the spirit, the attitude and the way of approaching it. Once again, if they repent, then the process ends – you have gained or restored your brother.

Perhaps, with the witnesses, you will see that your perspective was wrong, and it ends there. But if they refuse to repent, and the silent witnesses testify to that fact, then one moves on to the third stage.

4. The meeting in public

"And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church." What does this mean? It means now taking the matter to the church, ideally through its leadership. With the witnesses who can confirm your report, the entire church is to take this matter up.

This means perhaps that the person could be called upon in a service to explain themselves, and ideally repent before the body. It could mean that the whole church is told about it, so that all the members can get busy approaching them. However it is done, it is again the exact same motive and method, only now it is on a larger scale.

Jesus says, *"If he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican."* What does that mean? A heathen and a tax-collector was outside of the fellowship of the Jews. So it means that if the person refuses the authority of the church on his life, you have reason to suspect he may not be saved, and the privileges of membership and fellowship in the local church are to be removed from him.

What will that look like? It means the church will not sit down to have close fellowship with such a person. They will not share meals, or enjoy their company in a sharing sense, until they repent. Instead, they will show love from a distance. They will not love that person any less, but they will not allow that person to think that nothing has changed.

Indeed, the church may seek to evangelise him, since he is acting like he is unsaved. Paul said in **2 Thessalonians 3:14-15** how the balance was to be: *"And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother."*

The idea in the lack of fellowship is *"that he might be ashamed"* – to cause the person to feel the chill of a lack of warm fellowship and protection among God's people, and desire to return to that. This is what Paul meant in **1 Corinthians 5:**

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such a one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

1 Corinthians 5:4-5

In other words, though their spirit will be saved in the end, believers who persist in rebellion and are unrepentant need to be put out of the church and turned over to the Satan-controlled worldly system so that their fleshly desire to sin may be destroyed. Perhaps repentance will only come when they hit rock-bottom.

Titus 3:10 carries this idea as well: *"As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned."* So there is a breaking of close fellowship with them. Paul also warns:

But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such a one no not to eat.

1 Corinthians 5:11

This sounds harsh, but the consequences of sin are harder. Don't rob a person of the opportunity to repent because you feel sorry for them, and you don't want to seem hard. Because the good news is that if they repent, there is to be a warm welcome back. This happened in Corinth, and Paul writes in **2 Corinthians 2:**

But if any have caused grief, he hath not grieved me, but in part: that I may not overcharge you all. Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many. So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow. Wherefore I beseech you that ye would confirm your love toward him.

2 Corinthians 2:5-8

Paul says, if he's repented, bring him back in and confirm your love toward him. He feels ashamed, but now that bitter medicine has worked, welcome him.

5. The meeting's power

Finally, we might ask – what gives us the right to do all this? Who am I to get involved in the affairs of others? Since when can the local church get so personal with people? Jesus answers those questions with some verses that are often misquoted or misinterpreted:

Verily I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

Matthew 18:18-20

These verses about binding and loosing have nothing to do with spiritual warfare, binding Satan, or positive confession. To make those verses support those ideas is completely wrong Bible interpretation. The context here is church discipline. The Greek is actually in the perfect passive. It's literally, 'shall have been bound' and 'shall have been loosed.'

What Jesus is saying here is that the binding and the loosing of people's sins has already been decided by God in heaven. When the church is Spirit-controlled, that decision is worked out in practical ways through church discipline. An unrepentant church member under church discipline by a good, Spirit-controlled church has God's indictment on him – your sins are still on you.

This is what God has said, and we find it out by following the Biblical procedure. A repentant man can say the opposite; God says, your sins are loosed. It is not that the church forgives sins; only God does that. No man can purge another man's sins. But when church discipline is exercised by a godly, Biblical church, it has God's authority behind it.

This is what Jesus means by referring to *"if two or three are gathered together"* (**Matthew 18:20**). These verses have nothing to do with prayer, and everything to do with church discipline. When believers in plurality carry out church discipline in a Biblical way, with Biblical motives, Christ promises that He is in it – He gives it authority.

In and of ourselves, we sinners don't have a moral leg to stand on when it comes to disciplining each other – that is why Jesus puts His power behind it. He says, if you do it My way, I give it credibility; I am among you in it.

So the purpose of church discipline is the loving rescue and restoration that we all need, because we all need outside help, accountability and rebuke. The method is to have a meeting in private, and if required, then a meeting in plurality and a meeting in public. The meeting's power comes from God Himself, because this is His ordained method for helping believers stay on track.

May we not shy away from the needed correction in our churches today. May we not refuse to do what needs to be done because of a misguided view of love and unity. Instead, may we so love the unity that we are willing to go all the way to preserve the unity, in and through purity. Indeed, may we love each other, by not allowing sin to go unchecked in each other.