

NEW TESTAMENT SUPPORT FOR CHURCH DISCIPLINE

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Church discipline has three major purposes: “to vindicate the honor of Christ, to promote the purity of his Church, and to reclaim the offender.”¹ All three of these worthy goals are found in the New Testament; they are bound up together. When an offender is brought to repentance and restoration, the church is blessed and Christ’s name is honored. And even if an offender refuses to repent, still the church’s purity is maintained, and the name of Christ again is honored.

Some may object that the church has no right to discipline offenders, since we all are sinners. We realize that no church is perfect. We cannot see the heart, and all our hearts are sinful. As the *Westminster Confession of Faith* puts it, “The purest Churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error.”² However, this fact does not force us to give up the attempt to seek the purity of the church through biblical church discipline. We can see a parallel in the case of an individual Christian. While he is never free from sin in this life, he is commanded to hate sin and turn from it, “perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.”³

God himself desires the purity of his church. Christ died to make the church his pure bride: “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.” And this also was Paul’s prayer for his churches.⁴

New Testament methods of church discipline

The following Scriptural methods for obtaining church purity are listed in the general order of severity, it being preferable to exercise church discipline as mildly as possible to bring about the needed repentance or change.

Preaching of the word and prayer.—The ministry of the word itself to the congregation or to individuals is used by God to bring conviction of sin, conversion, and increasing sanctification. Likewise, God answers the prayers of the minister, elders, and people for one another’s spiritual needs.

This should be the normal mode of church discipling and discipline. By preaching on subjects which are related to the life of the church, the minister prevents many potential problems from arising in the first place.

Church discipline in receiving members.—Those who do not give an acceptable profession of salvation are not to be allowed to join the church. An acceptable profession

includes the absence of open, scandalous sin, an acceptance of the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith, and a profession of personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the New Testament adults were not admitted into the church by baptism until they had confessed their faith in Christ. Churches were to be built using genuine materials.⁵

Church discipline in matters of life.—Church members who live in open and scandalous sin are to be disciplined, and if necessary, put out of the church. Indolent members were rebuked and suspended from the Lord's Supper.⁶ A member engaged in open immorality was to be put out of the church.⁷ Paul taught that if one so put out should repent, he should be forgiven and restored to the fellowship.⁸ We note in these cases, as in others, the progressive stages of discipline: admonition, rebuke, suspension, excommunication.

Jesus himself taught the necessity of church discipline for those who offend, and especially for those who subsequently rebel against the Lord's discipline:

“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; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. 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.” (Mt. 18:15-20)

Note that Jesus did not specify the nature of the person's offense; it is called simply a “sin” or a “fault.” The person sinned against is to confront that person, then if necessary take one or two witnesses, and finally, if necessary again, take it to “the church,” which would be the elders of the church. It is assumed that if the person is found to be innocent of the charge, or if the person is found guilty and repents, that the case will be settled satisfactorily. However, if the person refuses to recognize the authority of the church exercising Christ's discipline, then that person is guilty of the sin of rebellion, and is to be excommunicated (to be considered as “a pagan or a tax collector”).

Church discipline in matters of doctrine.—Those who teach false doctrine should not be allowed to teach or lead in the church. Those who deny essential Christian doctrine are not to be permitted to be members of the church, but are to be publicly exposed and opposed. Any church member espousing such heretical doctrines should be led to repentance, and, failing that, should be put out of the church.

There are frequent warnings against false teachers in the NT.⁹ Likewise, there are many examples of apostolic warnings and actions against false teachers.¹⁰ It is because conservative

Presbyterians and others did not carry out this duty nearly a hundred years ago that most mainline denominations have been taken over by theological liberals.

It is important that the doctrines involved in these examples touched the vitals of Christian faith. The apostles allowed much latitude in secondary or questionable issues. The Christian needs a balance of toleration for differences among Bible-believing Christians, and intolerance for deviations from orthodoxy springing from unbelief of Scripture.

Church separation as a last resort.—If a church has deteriorated to the extent that it is disobedient to Christ in doctrine or life, and it refuses to allow discipline to correct the error, that church has forsaken Christ as its head. If that error is fundamental to Christianity, that church ceases to be a true church of Jesus Christ, even if it maintains an outward appearance to be such. It is the duty of Christians in such a case to separate from that apostate body and to form or join with a true church of Christ.

The visible church began with a separation, when God called Abraham to leave his country and his family.¹¹ Israel in the OT was to separate from the ungodly nations around them.¹² In Leviticus 18:3-5 and 19:2, the concept of “holy” is “set apart,” “separated to a sacred purpose”; this was the position of the church in the OT.

The church in the NT, likewise, must separate from bodies which deny the true faith. Note the example of Paul’s practice and teaching:

	<u>Paul’s practice</u>	<u>Paul’s teaching</u>
in Corinth:	Acts 18:7	2 Cor. 6:14 - 7:1; 11:2
in Ephesus:	Acts 19:9	Eph. 5:25-27

In both cases Paul made the Christians separate from a synagogue which denied the apostolic doctrines. And in both cases Paul compared the relation of the church to Christ with that of a pure bride to her husband, which illustration fits well the reality (as in Rev. 19:6-9).¹³

NT Authority for Church Discipline

The authority of the church to exercise discipline comes from Jesus Christ, the head of the church. In the passage already quoted above (Mt. 18:15-12), Jesus commanded his disciples to carry out this discipline under his authority. In Jesus’ day this duty was performed by the synagogues, with appeals being made to the local and national sanhedrins. This pattern was retained in the NT times, with elders of particular churches acting together in presbyteries and in a general synod.¹⁴

It is important that Jesus identified the authority of the church in these matters. He made three promises regarding the obedient exercise of church discipline. He said he will be present

by the Holy Spirit (“there am I with them”), he will positively answer the prayers of the church court for direction and God’s blessing (“anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven”), and he will guide the church court in coming to a proper verdict (“whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven”). This last point is made clear by the Greek tenses in Jesus’ statement. Both verbs are used in the periphrastic future perfect tense.¹⁵ Therefore, this verse could be more literally translated, “Whatever things you may bind upon the earth will have (already) been bound in heaven, and whatever things you may loose upon the earth will have (already) been loosed in heaven.” This shows us that the church does not decide what God will do, but rather that God will guide the church to confirm on earth what he has already determined in heaven.

A similar passage is John 20:23, “If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” Once again, the verbs are in the plural, indicating that this directive is given to the church at large. And once again, the verbs indicate that the church does not determine one’s forgiveness, but only recognizes what God has already done. In this case the terms “they are forgiven” and “they are not forgiven” are passive participles in the perfect tense.¹⁶ The action of forgiveness (or non-forgiveness) has already taken place, and the consequent state is in existence at the time when the church makes its judgment. The forgiveness offered by the church is external, allowing fellowship in the visible church. The forgiveness granted by God is internal and spiritual, bringing the sinner into fellowship with God.

In another passage Jesus addressed Peter in particular:

“And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” (Mt. 16:18-19)

This passage is somewhat different from Jesus’ statement in Matthew 18:18. There he was speaking to all the disciples, and the verbs “whatever you will bind” and “whatever you will loose” are in the plural number. In this passage the same verbs are used, but they are in the singular, addressed particularly to Peter. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that this primacy of Peter and his possessing of the keys places the papacy at the head of the church.¹⁷ It is most important that, as in Matthew 18, the verbs “shall be bound” and “shall be loosed” are periphrastic perfects—“shall (already) have been bound” and “shall (already) have been loosed.” In this statement, Jesus was telling Peter the same thing he later told all the apostles, that they would be guided by the Holy Spirit to recognize what God had already done. Jesus did not say that Peter or the other apostles had the authority to decide what God would do.

Protestant churches have recognized that the power of the visible church on the earth is only “ministerial and declarative.”¹⁸ Christ has given the church authority to minister his word, his sacraments, and his discipline. In all cases, the church only declares what God has done; its authority is that of God, derived from Scripture; it does not reside in the church itself.

¹ *Book of Discipline* of the Bible Presbyterian Church, 1:2.

² *WCF* 25:5.

³ 2 Cor. 7:1.

⁴ Eph. 5:25-27; 3:14-21.

⁵ 1 Cor. 3:10.

⁶ 2 Thess. 3:6-15.

⁷ 1 Cor. 5:1-8, 9-13.

⁸ 2 Cor. 2:5-11.

⁹ E.g., Mt. 7:15; Acts 20:28-31.

¹⁰ Rom. 16:17-18; Gal. 1:8-9; 5:7-12; Tit. 3:10; 2 Jn. 9-11.

¹¹ Gen. 12:1; 17:1.

¹² Ex. 19:5-6; cf. 1 Pet. 2:5, 9.

¹³ For a good development of this theme, see Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Church Before the Watching World* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1971), esp. ch. 2, “Adultery and Apostasy—the Bride and Bridegroom Theme”; see also Gary Cohen, *Biblical Separation Defended* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1966); the entire issue of the *WRS Journal* 4/1 (Feb. ’97) is related to this matter.

¹⁴ Cf. 1 Tim. 4:14; Acts 15; 16:4.

¹⁵ The verbs use the future of εἶμι (*eimi*, “to be”) with the perfect participle: ἔσται δεδεμένα (*estai dedemena*, “will have been bound”), and ἔσται λελυμένα (*estai lelumena*, “will have been loosed”).

¹⁶ ἀφέωνται (*apheontai*, “are forgiven”) and κεκράτηνται (*kekratentai*, “are retained”).

¹⁷ E.G., see article by G. H. Joyce, “Keys, Power of the,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (1910), 8:631-633; and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #551-553.

¹⁸ *Form of Government* of the Bible Presbyterian Church, 1:7.