

Chapter Eight

“When the Congregation Deals With a Member’s Sin”

“THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST: ITS DISCIPLINE”

This chapter unfolding the New Testament’s teachings about “The Church Of Jesus Christ” will address the matter of discipline. Church discipline is usually thought of as a congregational proceeding seeking a member’s reconciliation that can result in the removal of a Church member from membership in the Church for refusal to repent and make restitution for a very serious offense of some kind. A wider notion of discipline reflects the importance of a congregation being of one mind and one accord.¹

To begin, I present an excerpt from a book written by Kevin Bauder, formerly president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary and now a research professor of systematic theology at the same institution in Plymouth, Minnesota. The book is titled “Baptist Distinctives and New Testament Church Order”:

To understand how Baptists bring the New Testament to bear upon church life, we need to revisit the dispute between Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli, leaders of distinct branches of the Reformation. The two men agreed that Roman Catholic beliefs and practices had corrupted the existing churches. To amend matters, both began a process of removing the most blatantly anti-Scriptural doctrines and forms. They disagreed, however, about what to do with Romanist doctrines, forms, and customs that, while not authorized by the Bible, did not obviously contradict Biblical teaching.

Luther argued that these teachings and customs could be retained as long as they did not directly violate Biblical doctrine. He recognized that ordinary church members had become used to these customs and rituals. The sudden removal of these

¹ Acts 2.46

teachings and practices might prove unnecessarily upsetting. Therefore, to avoid controversy and to deflect the charge of extremism, Luther allowed some Roman customs to persist even though he could find little direct Biblical support for them. If those practices did not contradict any Biblical teaching, he reasoned, they would then do no harm, and they might even do some good.

Zwingli gave just the opposite answer. He insisted Christ is the Lord of the Church, and the Bible is the church's law. Zwingli believed that Christians have no liberty to introduce teachings or customs into the ministry of the church unless Christ authorized them. Therefore, if a ritual or observance (i.e., an element of worship) is not authorized in the Bible, the church must regard it as forbidden.

The principle that motivated Zwingli is called the sufficiency of Scripture. The idea is that Scripture reveals everything necessary to life and godliness. The New Testament reveals everything that is necessary to the right order of the church. Since Christ has addressed the question of how He wants His people to live and worship, and since He (through His apostles) revealed how He wants His churches to be ordered, Christians do not have the liberty to invent these things.

... In general, Baptists have taken Zwingli's side in this argument.²

Taking up several pages later, Bauder continues:

The Baptist position is really rather straight- forward. Since Christ is the head and Lord of the church, He alone has the authority to define its nature, mission, constitution, order, membership, ordinances, offices, and worship. He has not left us to wonder about these matters, but has addressed them through His apostles in the New Testament. Since Christ has given us the authoritative word on these matters, we do not have the prerogative to introduce new doctrines, offices, ordinances, or

² Bauder, pages 24-25.

forms of worship on our own initiative. If we do, then we are usurping a right that belongs to Christ alone. We believe that Scripture has given complete and sufficient guidance in all of these areas.³

Now, to the third place in his book:

When people are regenerated, they receive new life. They are changed. Their thinking, sensibilities, and priorities are transformed. While they do not attain sinless perfection until they stand in the presence of their Lord, they do begin the process of sanctification. That process continues as they are progressively transformed by the renewing of their minds (Rom. 12:2). They put off the old man whose corruption and deceitful lusts characterized their former lives; and, as they are renewed in the spirit of their minds, they put on the new man, who according to God is created in righteousness and true holiness (Eph. 4:22-24).

Those who are truly born again will increasingly forsake their former patterns of life. The gospel itself dictates that their lives will change. A relapse into the old life is, in effect, a denial of the gospel. Returning to the old ways is inconsistent with a profession that one has believed on Jesus Christ and been saved from one's sins (1 Cor. 6:9-11). Consequently, the practices of the old life should never be named among Christians (Eph. 5:3-11). To live according to the sinful patterns and habits of the unsaved is a scandal and an affront to the gospel.⁴

Bauder has provided a very good and concise history of the issue that frames our consideration in this chapter. The context is a Baptist Church. Historically, Baptists have embraced the notion that the Word of God is our final authority for faith and practice, both as individuals and as Baptist congregations. Additionally, we embrace the notion that our Church

³ Ibid., page 27.

⁴ Ibid., pages 62-63.

members, though regenerated, are not sinless and are expected to grow and mature spiritually over time.

To be sure, Ephesians 4.7 reveals to us that we are not at all the same and that each believer in Christ will grow at a different pace than every other believer:

“But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ.”

This is why we must strive to avoid the judgmentalism that is so condemned in Scripture, as Paul applies the principle to himself in Second Corinthians 10.12:

“For we dare not make ourselves of the number, or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.”

Additionally, we recognize that each believer is ultimately accountable to the Lord at the Judgment Seat of Christ, First Corinthians 4.1-5:

- 1 Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God.
- 2 Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful.
- 3 But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment: yea, I judge not mine own self.
- 4 For I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified: but he that judgeth me is the Lord.
- 5 Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts: and then shall every man have praise of God.

What the Apostle Paul speaks to in this passage has primarily to do with the Church member's motives and not that individual's conduct, because Christians and Churches most definitely are expected to judge sinful behavior that we observe.

The question is how we are to go about addressing observed sins. What are we to do in our efforts to maintain discipline within the

congregation? Of course, we love and pray for one another. Of course, we minister grace to one another with our words. Of course, we teach and train and otherwise encourage one another. Of course, we seek to restore a brother overtaken in a fault. Of course, we seek to set a good example for others. Although those things are all understood, we still need to address specific issues along this line.

Therefore, I set before you five considerations:

First, CHURCH MEMBERSHIP IS ENTIRELY VOLUNTARY

Contrary to Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Coptic, and all Protestant Christian denominations that baptize infants long before they have any say in the matter, membership in a Baptist Church reflects the Biblical principle that Church membership is entirely voluntary. Baptist Churches recognize no coercive authority granted by the Lord Jesus Christ to any congregation to make someone a Church member. Thus, no pastor calling himself Baptist or congregation calling themselves Baptist have any business bossing Church members around. The absence of coercive authority is why I maintain that the Church is the ultimate democracy with respect to people voting in the affirmative with their feet every service they attend.

What is not recognized even by many Baptists is that the door of voluntary association and membership swings both ways. While no professing Christian (and certainly no infant) can be forced to become or remain a member of a Baptist Church, likewise it must be recognized that no Baptist Church can be forced to either welcome into membership or allow to remain in membership any individual. Thus, membership in a Baptist Church is voluntary for the individual as well as for the congregation.

This voluntary relationship is important as it affects several aspects of Church life: *First*, the Church of Jesus Christ, while it is the highest ecclesiastical authority on earth, Matthew 18.18, possesses no compelling authority to coerce anyone to comply with Biblical directives, not even Church members. *Second*, the Church of Jesus Christ's only ability to deal with matters of discipline and response to serious sins is regarding membership. We as a congregation can either remove or not remove

someone from membership in the Church. *Third*, the Church member cannot in any wise be forced to submit to the authority of the congregation. The Corinthian fornicator could not be compelled by the Church to alter his sinful behavior. Ananias and Sapphira were not compelled by the Church to alter their dishonest behavior. At any time, a Church member can choose simply to walk away, as has been many a Church's experiences on some occasions when attempts were made to address very serious sins with Church members.

Thus, there are two ways in which a Church member and a congregation can part company: The Church member can voluntarily end the relationship by walking away. Can any Church stop that member from leaving? No. As well, the congregation's members can choose to end the voluntary relationship by terminating that person's membership, leaving that person in the Lord's capable hands. Of course, a Church's proper desire is for repentance and complete restoration to be the result of God's dealings with both the individual and the congregation. After all, Churches have a ministry of reconciliation.

Next, NOT ALL SINS ARE SERIOUS ENOUGH OR CAUSE ENOUGH DAMAGE TO WARRANT DISCIPLINE

I am not suggesting that sins are not, in essence, more or less rebellious, but that the Word of God shows that not all sins are equally damaging in their effects. A lie is a lie is a lie is a lie. But telling your mom that you were doing homework when you were playing a video game is somewhat less destructive than shooting a schoolmate with a rifle or a pistol. Who would dispute that?

Some sins that people commit against members do not rise to the level of significance to warrant discipline. Someone may give you the cold shoulder at a birthday party and pretend you are invisible, but even though the snub makes you cry when you get home, it is not important enough to get agitated about. Proverbs 17.9 covers the slights and hurt feelings that do not rise to the level of seriousness that merits Church discipline:

“He that covereth a transgression seeketh love; but he that repeateth a matter separateth *very* friends.”

Keep in mind that the Apostle Paul directed the Christians in the Corinthian congregation who were defrauded by other Church members to suffer financial loss rather than taking the matter of fraud or embezzlement to court, proving that some sins are simply not important enough for discipline.⁵ We know this because Paul did not suggest to the Corinthians that had been defrauded by Church members that they consider Church discipline as an alternative to prohibited civil court proceedings.

I am not suggesting the Christian is to say or do nothing in response to being sinned against by a fellow Church member. However, it must be recognized that the vast majority of sins and slights we believers deal with are properly addressed by turning the other cheek, by replying with a soft answer, by displaying tender and loving encouragement, by voicing a spiritual rebuke, by doing nothing beyond praying, or something similar.

Third, EVERY CHURCH MEMBER IS EXPECTED TO CHANGE FOR THE BETTER OVER TIME AND GROW IN GRACE

We should not accept as Church members those whose plan is to remain the same for the rest of their lives. Neither should we baptize hopeful converts with the expectation that they will produce no fruit, experience no change, or fail to exhibit over time some amount of growth and maturity. What woman wants her husband to be currently the same juvenile couch potato she married ten years ago? What husband will be satisfied with a wife who does not gain expertise over time as his helper in ministry?

Speaking theologically, we are committed to the notion that sanctification is inextricably linked to justification and that progress over time is a reasonable expectation for every Church member. I well remember the discussion I had as the new pastor with the Church's elected leaders more than forty years ago in which I committed to them my intention to grow and develop as a Christian man and senior pastor, begging their patience with me during the process.

During Church members' growth and development, each member will need to address his or her sins that are not serious enough to warrant Church

⁵ 1 Corinthians 6.1-8

discipline. Allow me to cite some examples: In Titus 1.13 the Apostle Paul instructed Titus to rebuke Church members on the island of Crete for the sin of being silent when they should have spoken out against false teachers:

“Wherefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith.”

However, Paul offered no recommendation that they be subjected to Church discipline.

In First Timothy 5.1-2, young Timothy was advised how to deal with sins in the lives of Church members according to their sex and age:

- 1 Rebuke not an elder, but intreat *him* as a father; *and* the younger men as brethren;
- 2 The elder women as mothers; the younger as sisters, with all purity.

Paul did not suggest Church discipline in this passage. Thus, it is clear that many occasions in which something in a person’s behavior and conduct needs to be addressed should not become a matter of discipline because it is not important enough.

What is important for each of us to remember as Church members is that our attitudes, grace, and humility, are profoundly important. We each need to be open to the correction and encouragement to do right that is offered by other Church members. None of us has arrived. I still have two letters from members taking me to task concerning two actions I took that they strongly disagreed with. I took seriously the efforts of Church members to deal with me about matters they took issue with and so should any other spiritual leader.

How should a pastor respond when a Church member approaches him in an attempt to correct him? Never happened? Do pastors never do anything wrong? Or do some pastors project an aura of such ferocity and spiritual superiority that someone who is meek dares not approach them?

I know how I respond. I listen, carefully. I try very hard to learn from what is said to me and to humble myself to ask forgiveness for what wrong I have done. Why so? I want to grow. I want to become a better Christian than I am at present. That is something every believer should want, as well. Every Church ought to expect such conduct by every member.

Fourth, SOME SINS COMMITTED AGAINST YOU WARRANT THE ESCALATING INVOLVEMENT OF THE CHURCH

This is where Matthew 18.15-20 comes into play:

- 15 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.
- 16 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.
- 17 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.
- 18 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.
- 19 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.
- 20 For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

Notice how our Lord Jesus Christ opened the topic of disciplining someone who sins against a Church member and refuses to repent of the sin, verse 15:

“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.”

In this most familiar passage addressing the Christian’s response to being sinned against by a fellow Church member (because taking the matter to the Church makes no sense if the offender is not also a member), we are shown what to do in the case of a serious sin when the offender does not demonstrate repentance. But what if you go to a brother about a sin that is not so serious, and he shows no remorse? My friend, you just have to let it go.

Not every sin committed against you warrants escalation of the remedy to the entire congregation for consideration of that person's removal as a member. However, some sins do warrant such an escalation. Thus, when a Church member grievously sins against another Church member but refuses to repent when confronted, the Church member is given recourse in cases of serious sins, all the while the goal of his actions being reconciliation.

If, however, the sinning member stubbornly refuses to repent, and the matter proceeds until it is properly brought before the congregation, we are then confronted with deciding between the sinning member and the sinned against member, with the Lord determining the proper course of action. The proper course of action is for the congregation to choose voluntarily to disassociate from the recalcitrant Church member, revoking membership privileges.

Keep in mind that this sin committed against a Church member might very well be a serious sin that was done in secret, initially known to no one but the offender and the victim. Sadly, it does not end that way, the sin being made public with serious consequences in the hope that real repentance is forthcoming. All the while, what can a congregation compel the sinning Church member do? Nothing. But neither can the sinning member compel the congregation do anything.⁶ Specifically, the sinning member cannot force

⁶ This illustrates an essential feature of the Baptist distinctive of soul liberty. "The basic concept of individual **soul liberty**, is that, in matters of religion, each person has the liberty to choose what his/her conscience or soul dictates is right, and is responsible to no one but God for the decision that is made. A person may then choose to be a Baptist, a member of another Christian denomination, an adherent to another world religion, or to choose no religious belief system, and neither the church, nor the government, nor family or friends may either make the decision or compel the person to choose otherwise. In addition, a person may change his/her mind over time. According to Francis Wayland, president of Brown University (1827–1855), Roger Williams, established the commonwealth of Rhode Island on the fundamental principle of perfect freedom in religious concerns; or, as he so well designated it, 'SOUL LIBERTY'. No man of his age had so clear conceptions of the rights of conscience as the founder of Rhode Island, and no one had ever carried them so honestly to their legitimate conclusions. I go further: no one has yet been able either to take from or add to the principles of religious liberty which he so simply and powerfully set forth. They stand as imperishable monuments to his fame, like the obelisks of Luxor, on which the chiseling of every figure is now just as sharply defined as when, three thousand years since, they were left by the hand of their designer." - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soul_competency 2/10/2018

the congregation to tolerate that unrepentant member.

Finally, SOME SINS ARE COMMITTED AGAINST THE CHURCH AND WARRANT THE CHURCH'S RESPONSE

A case where a serious sin is committed not against one person but the entire congregation is found in First Corinthians 5. Here Paul addressed a matter of serious sin committed by a Church member with someone who seems not to have been a Church member, his father's wife. There was obvious damage to the professing Christian Church member offender, as well as his unbelieving accomplice. But Paul drew attention to the most serious matter, which was the sin against the congregation that resulted in the great harm the offender inflicted on the reputation of the congregation and the cause of Christ.

Sadly, the Corinthian Church members seem to have been unwilling to deal with the sin against their Church, fancying themselves to be forgiving, tolerant, and compassionate in the face of the member's wicked and destructive behavior. However, the Apostle Paul was very clear that such a sin, which was, in fact, a sin against the body of Christ, was a sin that the congregation *must* address even though the offender did not directly sin against any individual member.

I do not mean to suggest that every sin committed against the Church warrants Church discipline. After all, we do not call for the excommunication of a member for everything that is done that might damage the Church's reputation and testimony, but only for those offenses that compromise our ability to present the Gospel of God's grace effectively as a remedy for man's sins. On the other hand, neither do I suggest that no sin committed against the Church warrants Church action.

I mention this because many pastors in this modern era have chosen to deal with serious sins against the congregation by Church members privately, removing members from Church membership without bringing the matter before the Church body. This is done under the guise of Church leadership action on behalf of the congregation, but what is occurring is a usurpation of a congregation's role that cannot be properly delegated to a pastor or deacons. Fear of lawsuits or possible embarrassment are often the motives

for such distortions of Scriptural procedure. Neither of these is a proper motive for disobedience.

We live in an era of complete lawlessness and anarchy in which some think they ought to be able to do anything they want without consequences or accountability for their actions as if no organization has any right to establish or maintain discipline within its ranks. However, what do we observe in families where discipline is not maintained? What do we observe in the military when discipline is not maintained? What do we find in a workplace environment where there is no discipline in the workforce? How about clubs and social organizations? Do they not enforce behavioral requirements of their members? How about in a nation where none of the citizens are expected to or held liable to demonstrate a level of discipline?

So it is in the Church of Jesus Christ, which is, after all, a voluntary association of individuals who profess to know Jesus Christ, who have been immersed in water subsequent to their conversion, and who have banded together in obedience to Christ for the purpose of seeking to glorify God by exalting Christ in our efforts to fulfill the Great Commission.

Don't our experiences and the Bible reveal to us that we still need instruction, correction, encouragement, and sometimes strong discipline? Of course, they do. Is that entire process of interaction between members not completely voluntary? It is. At any time, any Church member can end the relationship by walking away, just as the Church can end the relationship with any member using the process outlined in the New Testament.

I trust that your love for and commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ precludes that from ever happening. I trust your passion for being a disciple of Jesus Christ is such that we are all of one mind and one accord, so that discipline, as we normally understand it, is never necessary.

My prayer is that each Church member's love and devotion to the Savior is such that formal Church discipline (a tool the Savior gave to His Church, after all) will not ever have to be implemented in your life. Far better for each of us to so love Christ, and to humble ourselves as our Savior did.

Purpose to listen attentively when another member confronts you in an attempt to correct you. Purpose to be truly thankful for the opportunity God has provided you to respond spiritually, in a godly fashion, and in a way

that you can encourage that believer who loves you enough to approach you.
God's child should always seek to minister to others spiritually.