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# The Disappearance of Church Discipline—How Can We Recover? Part Four

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Wednesday, May 18, 2005

When should the church exercise church discipline? In one sense, a form of redemptive church discipline is exercised whenever the Bible is taught and the truth of God's Word is applied to the lives of believers. The convicting power of the Word of God is the first corrective in the hearts of Christ's people. Nevertheless, a more personal and confrontational mode of discipline is required when sin threatens the faithfulness, integrity, and witness of God's people.

The Bible reveals three main areas of danger requiring discipline. These are *fidelity of doctrine, purity of life, and unity of fellowship*. Each is of critical and vital importance to the health and integrity of the church.

The theological confusion and compromise which mark the modern church are directly traceable to the church's failure to separate itself from doctrinal error and heretics. On this matter the Bible is clear: "Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son. If anyone come to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting; for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds." [2 John 1:9-11] The Apostle Paul instructed the Galatians that "if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is accursed." [Galatians 1:8-9]

The letters of 2 Peter and Jude explicitly warn of the dangers presented to the church in the form of false prophets and heretics. Jude alerts the church that "certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who long before were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ." [Jude v. 4] Similarly, Peter warns "there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves." [2 Peter 2:1]

The church must separate itself from these heresies—and from the heretics. The permissive posture of the church in this century has allowed the most heinous heresies to grow unchecked—and heretics to be celebrated. Francis Schaeffer was among the most eloquent modern prophets who decried this doctrinal cowardice. Schaeffer emphatically denied that a church could be a true Christian fellowship and allow false doctrine. As he stated, "one cannot explain the explosive dynamite, the *dunamis*, of the early church apart from the fact that they practiced two things simultaneously: orthodoxy of doctrine and orthodoxy of community in the midst of the visible church, a community which the world can see. By the grace of God, therefore, the church must be known simultaneously for its purity of doctrine and the reality of its community."

The visible community of the true church is also to be evident in its moral purity. Christians are to live in obedience to the Word of God and to be exemplary in their conduct and untarnished in their testimony. A lack of attention to moral purity is a sure sign of congregational rebellion before the Lord.

Writing to the Corinthians, Paul chastised severely: “Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.” [1 Corinthians 5:9-11]

When Christians sin, their sin is to be confronted by the church in accordance with the pattern revealed in Scripture. The goal is the restoration of a sister or a brother, not the creation of a public spectacle. The greatest moral danger to the church is the toleration of sin, public and private. One of the greatest blessings to the church is the gift of biblical church discipline—the ministry of the keys.

The integrity of the church is also dependent upon the true unity of its fellowship. Indeed, one of the most repeated warnings found in the New Testament is the admonition against toleration of schismatics. The unity of the church is one of its most visible distinctives—and precious gifts.

The warnings are severe: “Now I urge you brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ, but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting.” [Romans 16:17-18] Writing to Titus, Paul instructed that the church should “Reject a factious man after a first and second warning, knowing that such a man is perverted and sinning, being self-condemned.” [Titus 3:10-11]

A breach in the unity of the church is a scandal in the Body of Christ. The church is consistently exhorted to practice and preserve a true unity in true doctrine and biblical piety. This unity is not the false unity of a lowest-common-denominator Christianity, the “Gospel Lite” preached and taught in so many modern churches, but in the healthy and growing maturity of the congregation as it increases in grace and knowledge of the Word of God.

The ongoing function of church discipline is to be a part of individual self-examination and congregational reflection. The importance of maintaining integrity in personal relationships was made clear by our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount, as He instructed the disciples that anger against a brother is a deadly sin. Reconciliation is a mandate—not a hypothetical goal. “Therefore, if you are presenting your offering at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.” [Matthew 5:23-24]

Similarly, Paul warned against participating in the Lord’s Supper amidst divisions. The Supper itself is a memorial of the broken body and shed blood of the Savior, and must not be desecrated by the presence of divisions or controversies within the congregation, or by unconfessed sin on the part of individual believers. “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes. Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly.” [1 Corinthians 11:26-29]

The ‘discipline of the table’ is thus one of the most important disciplinary functions of the congregation. The Lord’s Supper is not to be served indiscriminately, but only to those baptized believers who are under the discipline of the church and in good standing with their congregation.

In the twenty-first century, the great task of the church is to prove itself to be in continuity with the genuine church as revealed in the New Testament—proving its authenticity by a demonstration of pure faith and authentic community. We must regain the New Testament concern for fidelity of doctrine, purity of life, and unity of fellowship. We must recover the missing mark of the church.

