



Church Discipline: Church Practices Series

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Church Discipline

Introduction

By way of introduction two quotes are offered to provide some historical context for what follows:

“But as some have such a hatred of discipline, as to abhor the very name, they should attend to the following consideration: That if no society, and even no house, though containing only a small family, can be preserved in a proper state without discipline, it is far more necessary in the Church, the state of which ought to be the most orderly of all. As the saving doctrine of Christ is the soul of the Church, so does discipline form the ligaments which connect the members together; and keep each in its own place. Whoever, therefore, either desires the abolition of all discipline, or obstructs its restoration, whether they act from design or out of ignorance, they certainly promote the entire dissolution of the Church. For what will be the consequence, if every man be at liberty to follow his own inclinations? But such would be the case, unless the preaching of the doctrine was accompanied with private admonitions, reproofs, and other means to enforce the doctrine, and prevent it from being altogether ineffectual. Discipline, therefore, serves as a bridle to curb and restrain the refractory, which resist the doctrine of Christ; or as a spur to stimulate the inactive; and sometimes as a father’s rod, with which those who have grievously fallen may be chastised in mercy, and with the gentleness of the Spirit of Christ. Now, when we see the approach of certain beginnings of a dreadful desolation in the Church, since there is no solicitude or means to keep the people in obedience to our Lord, necessity itself proclaims the want of a remedy; and this is the only remedy which has been commanded by Christ, or which has ever been adopted among believers.” (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by John Allen, 1902, Volume 2, page 410)

“Church censures are necessary, for the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren, for deterring of others from the like offenses, for purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump, for vindicating the honor of Christ, and the holy profession of the Gospel, and for preventing the wrath of God, which might justly fall upon the Church, if they should suffer His covenant, and the seals thereof, to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders.” [I Cor 5:1-13, 1 Tim 5:20, Matt 7:6, 1 Tim 1:20, 1 Cor 11:27-34, Jude 23.] “For the better attaining of these ends, the officers of the Church are to proceed by admonition; suspension from the sacrament of the Lord's Supper for a season; and by excommunication from the Church, according to the nature of the crime, and demerit of the person. [I Thess 5:12, II Thess 3:6, 14-15. I Cor 5:4-5, 13. Matt 18:17. Titus 3:10.] (*The Westminster Confession Of Faith*, 1646, Articles 30.3 – 30.4)

Notice how the primary meaning of the verb *discipline* has changed in the last 170 years. According to *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, (the first edition of “Webster’s Dictionary”) by Noah Webster, published in 1828, discipline is defined as follows:

DISCIPLINE, *v. t.* To instruct or educate; to inform the mind; to prepare by instruction in correct principles and habits; as to *discipline* youth for a profession, or for future usefulness.

To instruct and govern; to teach rules and practice, and accustom to order and subordination; as, to discipline troops of an army.

To correct; to chastise; to punish.

To execute the laws of the church on offenders, with a view to bring them to repentance and reformation of life.

To advance and prepare by instruction.

Whereas, *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition* copyright © 1998 by Merriam-Webster, Inc., contains this definition for the same word

²**discipline**

1 : to punish or penalize for the sake of discipline

2 : to train or develop by instruction and exercise especially in self-control

3 a : to bring (a group) under control <*discipline* troops> **b** : to impose order upon <serious writers *discipline* and refine their writing styles>

(Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition copyright © 1998 by Merriam-Webster, Incorporated)

Notice in the earlier definition of discipline, the primary meaning is to educate or instruct, and this is the primary impetus in church discipline. The second meaning of the 1828 definition conveys the thought of good order, organization and decency. Learning and education are facilitated by peace and order, and hindered by unrest and chaos. It is the responsibility of the church to provide an environment where learning can take place by the enforcement of Christ's rules for good order (Matthew 11:28-30 "...Take my **yoke** upon you and **learn** from me...", 1 Corinthians 14:40 but all things should be done decently and in order.) Jay Adams captures this thought when he writes:

Thus, discipline is not, as many have thought, simply the negative task of reading troublemakers out of the church. Rather, first above all, it is God's provision for good order in His church that creates conditions for the instruction and growth of the members. Discipline has a positive function. (Jay E. Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline*, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1986, p 17)

Let's examine then church discipline under four headings:

- The **Purpose** of Church Discipline
- The **Protestations** against Church Discipline
- The **Process** of Church Discipline
- The **Provocations** receiving Church Discipline

Keep in mind, this is not an exhaustive study of this vast subject, but is intended to highlight the key principles involved in the proper conception and practice of discipline within the church.

The Purpose of Church Discipline

To glorify God

First of all, the purpose of church discipline is to glorify God by obeying His instructions for maintaining relationships within the fellowship of God's people.

- Romans 15:5-6 May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Notice that God is glorified when the body functions in harmony with one voice. The Greek is *homothumadon* {hom-oth-oo-mad-on'} means with one mind, with one accord, with one passion. A unique Greek word, used 10 of its 12 New Testament occurrences in the Book of Acts, helps us understand the uniqueness of the Christian community. *Homothumadon* is a compound of two words meaning to "rush along" and "in unison." The image is almost musical; a number of notes are sounded which, while different, harmonize in pitch and tone. As the instruments of a great concert under the direction of a concertmaster, so the Holy Spirit blends together the lives of members of Christ's church. Church discipline is a critical element in the maintenance of this harmony as each member of the body employs his gift for the common good.

- 1 Peter 4:10-11 As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who utters oracles of God; whoever renders service, as one who renders it by the strength which God supplies; in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.
- 1 Corinthians 10:31 So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

The first question of the Westminster Catechism is: "What is the chief end of man?" The answer being, "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him for ever." Lest "glorify God" become a cliché, let's expand its meaning to include: to praise; to magnify and honor in worship; to ascribe honor to, in thought or words. God is glorified, when such His excellency, above all things, is with due admiration acknowledged. Therefore, God is glorified by our humble obedience to His commands, among which are His instructions concerning church discipline. We cannot live as we please; rather we must live to please Him.

- 1 Peter 2:9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

- 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12 To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his call, and may fulfil every good resolve and work of faith by his power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.
- John 15:8 By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples.

Remember, this verse is in the context of Christ being the true vine, and God the Father, the vinedresser. The vinedresser removes and destroys branches that do not bear fruit and he prunes the fruit bearing branches that they may bear more fruit. When compared with the passage on discipline in Hebrews 12:3-11, it is clear that God's exercise of discipline in our lives and His glory are inextricably linked, "...He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness."

All that we do is for the express purpose of glorifying God. Therefore, when we **worship** we glorify God, when we **preach the gospel** we glorify God, when we **celebrate the sacraments** we glorify God, and when we exercise **church discipline** we glorify God.

To restore and reconcile the offender

The second purpose of discipline is to bring about restoration in the sinning believer's life and to reconcile him to those he has offended. Webster (1828) defines these two words as follows:

- Restore - to bring back or recover from a lapse, degeneracy, declension or ruin to its former state; to bring a sense of sin leading to an amendment of life.
- Reconcile – to conciliate anew; to call back into union and friendship the affections which have been alienated; to restore to friendship or favor after estrangement; as, to *reconcile* men or parties that have been at variance.

The **goal** of church discipline is to restore the offender to a proper, Christ-like behavior and to reconcile him to God and to his fellow believers. We don't discipline our children to reduce the size of our family; we discipline them to modify their conduct so that they can enjoy right relationships within the family. So the church, in its discipline is acting in love to **bring back** a brother or sister who has gone astray, reestablishing that person in Christian fellowship, and rescuing them from destructive patterns of life.

- Galatians 6:1 Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted.
- James 5:19-20 My brethren, if any one among you wanders from the truth and some one brings him back, let him know that he that brings back a sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death and shall cover a multitude of sins.

To arrest the spread of sin in the church

The third purpose of church discipline is to prevent the sin of one member from infecting others. The author of Hebrews, well aware of this possibility states, “See to it that no one fail to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" spring up and cause trouble, **and by it the many become defiled**” (Hebrews 12:15). Paul demands that the Corinthian church discipline the incestuous man for, “Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?” (1 Corinthians 5:6).

To maintain sound doctrine within the church

Fourthly, the church is to maintain the purity of Christian doctrine and to refute those who would pervert the truth. Titus 1:9, speaking of the Elder says, “he must hold firm to the sure word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it.” The church cannot stand idly by while heretical doctrine is espoused within its fellowship. Christ himself rebukes and judges two of the seven churches in Revelation (Pergamum and Thyatira) because some of their members held to heretical doctrine, and commends one church (Ephesus) for testing and rejecting false teachers (Revelation 2:1 – 3:22).

- 1 Timothy 1:3-4 As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies which promote speculations rather than the divine training that is in faith;
- Titus 1:13 This testimony is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith
- Romans 16:17-18 I appeal to you, brethren, to take note of those who create dissensions and difficulties, in opposition to the doctrine which you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by fair and flattering words they deceive the hearts of the simple-minded.

To protect the purity of the church

The church which refuses to exercise church discipline will neither command the confidence of its members nor the respect of the watching world. Apparently the Corinthian church was boasting about their leniency toward one who was openly immoral and Paul was shocked that they had not disciplined him. “And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn?” (1 Corinthians 5:2a) For as the church is the **body** of Christ, it cannot harbor openly rebellious and sinful members without some dishonor being reflected upon the Head. As the church is also the **bride** of Christ, He loves and protects her “that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Ephesians 5:27). Church discipline is the God ordained means whereby the body can cleanse and heal itself or the

bride can keep herself pure and chaste and “make herself ready” for the great marriage of the Lamb.

- Revelation 19:7 Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready;

As the watching world observes our good conduct and our abstinence from the passions of the flesh (in essence, the purity of the church), even they will ultimately give glory to God.

- 1 Peter 2:11-12 Beloved, I beseech you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh that wage war against your soul. Maintain good conduct among the Gentiles, so that in case they speak against you as wrongdoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

These may not be all the purposes of church discipline, but at a minimum, its purpose is:

- To glorify God.
- To restore and reconcile the offender.
- To arrest the spread of sin.
- To maintain sound doctrine.
- To protect the purity of the church.

What then are some common objections against the exercise of church discipline? This brings us to our next point:

The Protestations Against Church Discipline

It obliterates unity

If done improperly, church discipline can cause divisions within the church, but it need not be so. If the membership has a proper grasp of the **purposes** of discipline discussed above, they will understand that discipline is the only proper loving and obedient response to sin.

Augustine observes, “He who attentively considers these things neither neglects severity of discipline for the preservation of unity, nor breaks the bond of fellowship by an intemperance of correction.”

Nowhere in Scripture are we commanded to maintain unity at the expense of obedience. We are to seek the unity of the **faith** and to speak the **truth** in love. Church discipline, properly administered, will strengthen the church and bring about biblical unity.

- Ephesians 4:13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ

It's not loving

God, who is love, is the very one who commands that discipline be practiced in the church. To the church of Laodicea, Christ says, "Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten; so be zealous and repent" (Revelation 3:19). The absence of discipline is a sure sign of being **outside** the sonship (Hebrews 12:3-11).

You're not empowered

Some may say, "In a family we understand discipline, but by what authority does the church discipline its members?" By the authority of God's Word! This is not something that is optional... we cannot take it or leave it as we please... church discipline is commanded by God.

- Matthew 18:15-20 "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence 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, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

The Process of Church Discipline

As is the case in many areas of the Christian life, so it is with church discipline. Although much instruction is provided, an exact, detailed procedure for church discipline is not contained in Scripture. Therefore, we must prayerfully assemble a process of church discipline that is consistent with all of Scripture. The following process will not account for every conceivable contingency encountered in the exercise of church discipline, but it should, at least, serve as the superstructure upon which each individual case may be built.

Admonish

Romans 15:14 And I myself also am persuaded of you, my brethren, that ye also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another.

Church discipline is a self-purifying mechanism. Church discipline is continually practiced at Southside Bible Church, and in any church worthy of His name. For every time we warn one another of the dangers of sin, and encourage one another to pursue holiness, we are practicing church discipline. According to Webster, admonish means:

- To warn or notify of a fault; to reprove;

- To counsel against wrong practices; to caution or advise;
- To instruct or direct
- In ecclesiastical affairs, to reprove a member of the church for a fault, either publicly or privately; the first step of church discipline.

What is more loving: to do nothing as your child mindlessly plays in the street, (“not wanting to hurt their feelings or appear intolerant”) or to sternly warn them about the life and death consequences of this behavior, and to rebuke them sharply if they disobey? Biblical love is a **deep, abiding concern that seeks to do another’s good, often at the sacrifice of self**. Given this definition of love, the truth of the following verses is immediately obvious.

- Proverbs 27:5-6 Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.

Generally nobody wants to be the one to tell someone his or her behavior is offensive, but a true friend will risk the friendship to improve the friend.

- Proverbs 28:23 He who rebukes a man will afterward find more favor than he who flatters with his tongue.
- Proverbs 9:8 Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you; reprove a wise man, and he will love you.

Think of your own educational experience. What schoolteacher do you now admire? Is it not the one who **demand**ed your best efforts and did not allow you to slide by? Is it not the same in the church?

- Proverbs 27:17 Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another.

If you’ve ever seen “iron sharpen[ing] iron,” you know that often sparks fly, yet when the metal cools; the result is a sharp instrument, fit for the precise requirements of the Master’s hand.

Non-contentious

A person who is contentious is someone apt to contend; given to angry debate; quarrelsome. This is **not** how we are to approach a brother or sister in Christ. When an offense has been given, approach the offender in a tender way, seeking first an explanation for the offensive behavior, for perhaps it was only a misunderstanding. Don’t come charging in with all kinds of accusations and platitudes, but compile your case calmly and carefully, with a design to bring about conviction and repentance, in full awareness that you too are a sinner redeemed by the grace of God.

- Proverbs 12:18 There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

Both a sword and a scalpel are used to cut, the first to destroy a life, the latter to save it.

Finally, we are instructed to be aware of our own weaknesses when approaching a brother about a particular sin.

- Matthew 7:3-5 Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.
- Galatians 6:1 Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted.

One-on-one

Matthew 18:15 "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.

A principle of church discipline is that the matter must be kept to as few as possible. Hopefully it will be resolved with a meeting between just the injured and injurer. Untold havoc has been caused in the church, by blatant disobedience to this command of Christ. Due to man's fallen nature, there is desire to tell almost everyone about an offense except the offender himself. We must control this unholy desire to share the titillating news and to recruit others to our side, even if it's under the pretext of sharing a "prayer request." Go and confront the offender **privately**. "If he listens to you, you have won your brother over"... what a great blessing that will be for both parties!

Notice also that, if you have given offence to a brother you are under obligation to go to him, confess it and seek reconciliation. Notice also the priority and urgency in performing this duty.

- Matthew 5:23-24 So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

So, it matters not, whether you are the offended or the offender, **you** are responsible to make the first step toward restoration and reconciliation.

Be mindful that it is sometimes more loving to overlook, or forebear a minor offense, especially one coming from a young believer, for 1 Peter 4:8 says, "Above all hold unfailing your love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins." But anything

that creates an unreconciled state between you and another believer, or is debilitating to his spiritual life, must be dealt with in a one-on-one meeting.

Two or three witnesses

Matthew 18:16 But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

The trigger for moving to the next step of church discipline and widening the circle of involvement is an impenitent attitude by the offender, "...if he does not listen." If the offender refuses to acknowledge the offense, if he says, in effect, "you're wrong and I'm not going to discuss it further" then we are instructed to confront him again, this time in the presence of one or two others. Who are these witnesses? It would be preferable if they themselves were witnesses to the original offense or had first-hand knowledge of the offense. However, the language indicates the primary purpose of the "others" is to witness and confirm "every word." They are witnesses of the confrontation who can attest to the posture and attitude of both parties. "Their presence is as much a protection for the one being approached as it is for the one approaching" (John F. MacArthur, *The Master's Plan for the Church*, Moody Press, Chicago, IL, 1991, p241) since according to Deuteronomy 19:15-16, two witnesses were required to substantiate an offense and to prevent "a malicious witness from arising against any man to accuse him of wrongdoing" (see also 2 Corinthians 13:1-2). "Since these persons must offer counsel and possibly will become witnesses if that counsel is spurned, it would seem wise, where available, to call on persons who are best able to offer wise counsel and whose words of testimony, if needed, would be respected by the congregation. ... If persons highly respected by both of the estranged parties can be found, it would seem good to tap them." (Jay Adams, *ibid.*, p.61)

Whole church

Matthew 18:17a If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church;

What is the goal of discipline? Restoration and reconciliation. Again the operative phrase is "If he refuses to listen to them..." then the full resources of the church are brought to bear on the individual, in an attempt to "bring him back." To quote again from Jay Adams;

Obviously, these brief words lack a clear statement about how to carry out Jesus' instructions; no process for telling the church is even outlined, let alone detailed. Therefore we shall have to piece together the ways and means as best we are able from other passages of Scripture and from an application of the principles of decency and good order that are required by God in 1 Corinthians 14.

I think it goes without saying that to tell it to the church is not to be done by a brother standing up in the

middle of a worship service (in which there is a mixture of believers and unbelievers: according to 1 Corinthians 14:23-25, unconverted persons were allowed to attend Christian services) and declaring what has happened. That would violate the principles of good order set forth in 1 Corinthians 14, and it would also violate the command to tell it to the church. At this point, the world has no right to know about the matter. ... The church alone must hear... There is some indication that the elders themselves, being the first informed about the recalcitrant brother or sister, should seek to persuade him or her about the sin before telling the congregation at large. It is one step, in two phases, carried out decently and in order: (A) The elders officially deal with him and (B) then, if that is unsuccessful, the entire congregation does so. (Jay Adams, *ibid.*, p. 68-69)

At this point, the congregation is told three things about their duty toward the brother undergoing official church discipline:

1. The person is identified or “marked” [Greek *semeioo* {say-mi-o'-o} meaning; to mark, to note, distinguish by marking 2) to mark or note for one's self]
 - 2 Thessalonians 3:14 If any one refuses to obey what we say in this letter, note that man, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed.
2. Fellowship with the individual is broken.
 - 1 Corinthians 5:9, 11 I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with immoral men; But rather I wrote to you not to associate with any one who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber--not even to eat with such a one.

The offender is forbidden to partake of the Lord's Supper since communion is fellowship.

- 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.
3. All who know him must counsel him.
 - Galatians 6:1-2 Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.

- James 5:19-20 My brethren, if any one among you wanders from the truth and some one brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Exclusion

In the final step of church discipline, the church is to consider the rebellious impenitent as outside the fellowship of believers. He is to be “removed from your midst” (1 Corinthians 5:2) and “delivered to Satan” a reference to him being returned to Satan’s realm, which is the world (1 Corinthians 5:5 and 1 Timothy 1:20).

- Matthew 18:17b and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.
- 1 Corinthians 5:13 Drive out the wicked person from among you.

Reversible

The one thing that keeps a person from enjoying the fellowship of the church is an impenitent heart. However, if repentance occurs at any stage, the process is reversible and great joy should be expressed by the body as the ultimate goal of church discipline has been accomplished. The occasion for the parable of the prodigal son was the grumbling of the Pharisees over the fact that “tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him [Christ]” (Luke 15:1). Jesus paints a beautiful picture of the father, compassionately scanning the horizon for his lost son and experiencing great joy upon his **return** (Luke 15:11-32). This should be our response toward one who repents, after being subjected to the disciplines of the church.

Although not stated explicitly, the incestuous man which Paul instructed the Corinthians to disciplined in 1 Corinthians 5, is probably the same man Paul tells the Corinthians to embrace after his repentance in 2 Corinthians 2.

- 2 Corinthians 2: 6-8 For such a one this punishment by the majority is enough; so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.

Share the gospel

Matthew 18:17b and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

In the Jewish culture of that day a “Gentile” was one outside the family of God’s chosen people, and a “tax collector” was one, formerly within the family, but who was now in collusion with the enemy. What do you do with such, but share the gospel with them, for by their behavior they demonstrate that they are outside the family of God.

The Provocations Receiving Church Discipline

As fallen men and women, we all daily commit sin in thought and deed. So, what makes one a candidate for formal church discipline? It is with those who refuse to acknowledge their sin and become hardened and impenitent that church discipline deals. In addition, some sins are secret, and do not come to light in this age, “The sins of some men are conspicuous, pointing to judgment, but the sins of others appear later” (1 Timothy 5:24). Those whose sins are “conspicuous” [Greek *prodolos* {prod'-ay-los} 1) openly evident, known to all, manifest] make themselves candidates for formal church discipline. Among these, Scripture lists the following:

Those who espouse heresy

2 John 10-11 If any one comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into the house or give him any greeting; for he who greets him shares his wicked work.

Those who abuse God’s name or divine majesty

1 Timothy 1:20 among them Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.

Those who are negligent of responsibilities

2 Thessalonians 3:6-15 Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is living in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. ...For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work in quietness and to earn their own living. If any one refuses to obey what we say in this letter, note that man, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not look on him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

Those who are divisive or disobedient

Romans 16:17 I appeal to you, brethren, to take note of those who create dissensions and difficulties, in opposition to the doctrine which you have been taught; avoid them.

Titus 3:10 As for a man who is factious, after admonishing him once or twice, have nothing more to do with him.

Those who engage in sexual misconduct

1 Corinthians 5:1-2 It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even among pagans; for a man is living with his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

Conclusion

We began by saying the purpose of church discipline is to glorify God and that God is glorified when the body functions in harmony with one voice. Jesus concludes the instruction on church discipline in Matthew 18 by saying, “Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven” (verse 19). The Greek word translated “agree” is *sumphoneo* {soom-fo-neh'-o} literally means “to produce a sound together.” We derive the English word symphony from this word. Hence, when the church is working in harmony with one another in confronting a sinning brother, the Father is also in agreement with the decision and action of the church. If we follow this biblical pattern, we can have confidence we are doing the will of God and bringing Him glory, just as a beautifully harmonious symphony bring glory to the composer and conductor.

Finally, take heed to yourself lest this is your lament, “and at the end of your life you groan, when your flesh and body are consumed, and you say, ‘How I hated discipline, and my heart despised reproof! I did not listen to the voice of my teachers or incline my ear to my instructors. I was at the point of utter ruin in the assembled congregation’” (Proverbs 5:11-14).

Church Discipline

The main points of this study can be remembered by means of the acrostic, “GRASP ONE ANOTHERS HANDS.”

Purpose

- **G**lorify God
- **R**estore and **R**econcile the offender
- **A**rrest the spread of sin in the church
- **S**ound doctrine
- **P**rotect the body

Protestations

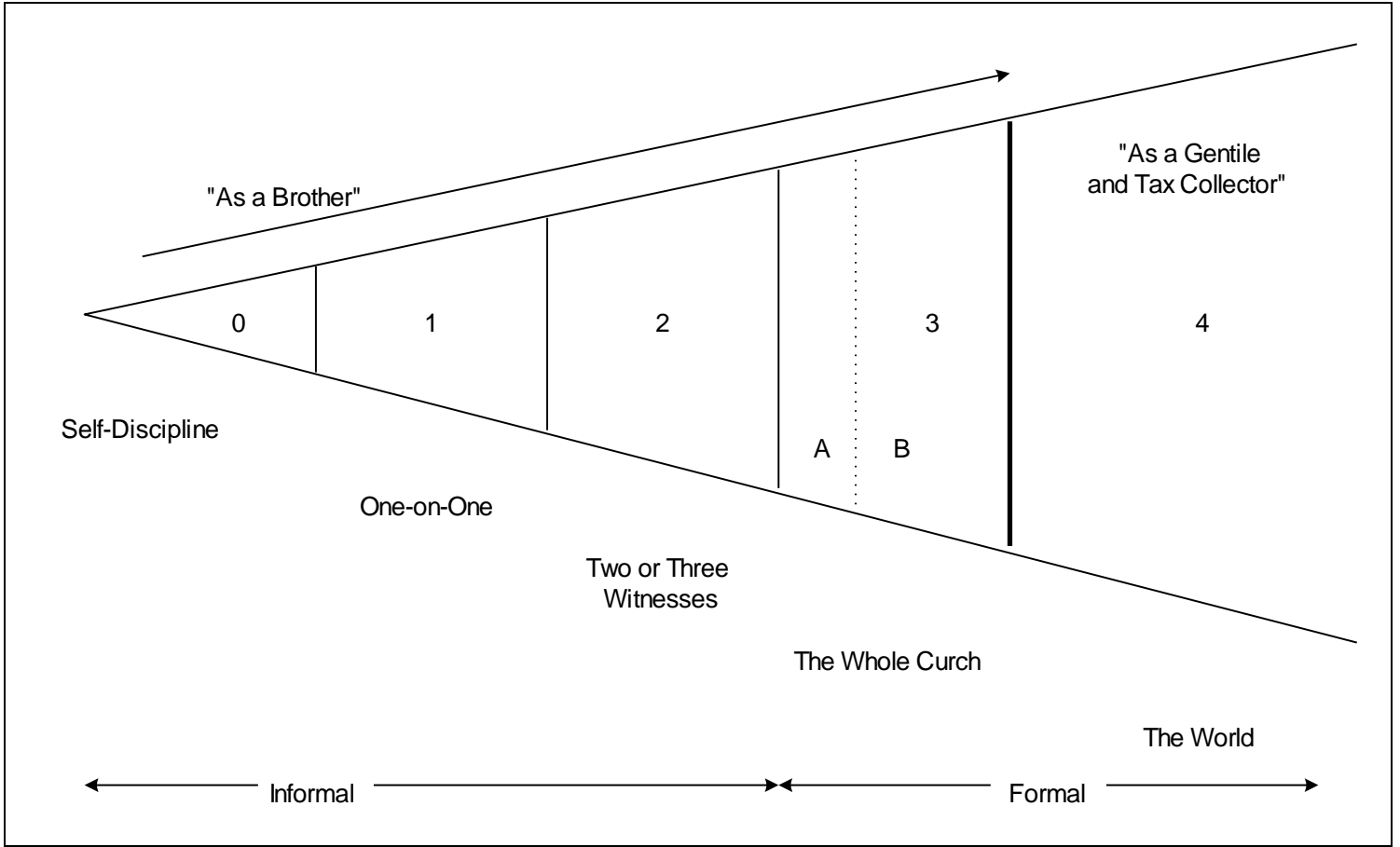
- **O**bliterates unity
- **N**ot loving
- **E**mpowerment not granted

Process

- **A**dmonish
- **N**on-contentious
- **O**ne-on-one
- **T**wo or three
- **wH**ole church
- **E**xclusion
- **R**eversible
- **S**hare the gospel

Provocations

- **H**eresy
- **A**buse of God’s name or divine majesty
- **N**egligence of responsibilities
- **D**ivisive or **D**isobedient
- **S**exual misconduct (esp. adultery, incest)



(Jay Adams, *ibid.*, p. 27)

