



Foundations of a Healthy Church

Accountability & Discipline

Questions for Discussion

- How would you define “accountability” as it relates to church life?
- When you hear the words, “church discipline”, what comes to mind?
- What are some ways you’ve heard of churches exercising discipline poorly? What are some ways you’ve seen it work?

Biblical Foundations¹

- **Discipline as Integral to Discipleship**
 - Our calling is to be “disciples” of Christ.
 - Earlier in this series, we defined a disciple this way:
 - **Disciple:** A believer in Jesus Christ who, by the power of the Spirit, loves Jesus, follows Jesus, obeys Jesus, becomes more like Jesus, and sacrificially invests in others to do the same.
 - Discipleship, therefore, is the process of doing spiritual good to others to help them in their journey as a disciple, even as we too are growing in Christ-likeness.
 - The greatest threat to our growing as disciples is our sin.
 - Accountability and discipline are the mechanisms God uses to aid us in the fight against our sin.
 - **1 Corinthians 9:27** But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.
 - **Proverbs 12:1** Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates reproof is stupid.
 - **2 Timothy 1:7** For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.

¹ Much of this lesson is taken and adapted from David Platt’s *12 Traits of a Healthy Church*, pgs. 110-122.

- Discipline is an expression of God's love toward us.
 - **Hebrews 12:6** For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."
- Discipline is an expression of God's love toward each other.
 - **Galatians 6:1** Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.
 - The word "caught" implies a continuing in sin and lack of repentance.
 - "Those who are spiritual" are those walking in accord with the Spirit (Galatians 5:16, 22-26).
 - As we walk in the fruit of the Spirit, our efforts should be directed at restoring others to walking in the fruit of the Spirit.
 - **Hebrews 3:12-14** Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. ¹³ But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. ¹⁴ For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.
 - Sin by it's nature is deceitful. Once ensnared, it's hard to see it for what it is. Sometimes, you may not even know you're sinning due to ignorance of God's Word or lack of awareness how a behavior or pattern is hurting others.
 - God's given us *each other* in the church to help us make progress in our Christian journey. Discipline is a tool used by God in the body to help us make it to the finish line.
- **Discipline is Commanded in Scripture**
 - While the benefits of discipline for a church's health should be motivation enough, Scripture also commands discipline.
 - Galatians 6:1 (See above)
 - Hebrews 3:12-14 (See above)
 - Matthew 18:15-7 – Jesus lays out the pattern for addressing sin between brothers and sisters and in the church.
 - 1 Corinthians 5:1-5 – Paul commands the church in Corinth to exercise church discipline for the sake of the man's soul and for the purity of the church.

Patterns of Church Discipline

- In Scripture, there are two types of church discipline. Both are necessary for the health of a church and its disciples.
- The first is **formative church discipline**, and the second is **restorative church discipline**.
- **Formative Church Discipline**
 - “Formative church discipline involves continual encouragement to repent of sin and walk with God.”²
 - This form of discipline is ongoing in the life of every member and all relationships within a church:
 - Corporate Worship – We preach, sing, and pray together such that we’d all be conformed into the image of Christ. We’re encouraged through our fellowship to turn from sin and walk with God.
 - Bible Studies and Discipleship Groups – We hold each other accountable as we discuss God’s Word and what it means for our lives.
 - Essentially, the our maturation as disciples is, at the root, formative discipline.
- **Restorative Church Discipline**
 - “Restorative church discipline involves corrective care when someone is living in unrepentant sin.”³
 - This form of discipline is what most think of when they hear “church discipline,” and it’s implemented at differing levels of severity as fits the occasion.
 - Church discipline is an extension of church membership. The church affirms one’s belonging to the church based on a credible profession of faith.
 - When we sin, we’re working “against” our testimony. We all sin, but each time we do, we’re not following Christ. By His grace, we confess our sin and are washed afresh with His grace; this is the pattern of ongoing repentance in our lives.
 - However, when we walk in unrepentant sin, it becomes increasingly difficult to affirm one’s profession of faith. Unrepentant sin is a potential marker of never having received Christ in the first place.

² 12 Traits of a Healthy Church, Platt, pg. 113

³ Platt, 114

- **Matthew 7:21-23** 21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' 23 And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'
- **1 John 2:19** They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.
- **1 John 3:9** No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God.
- **Practicing Restorative Church Discipline**
 - **Pattern One: Progressive**
 - **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. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."
 - **Step One: Private Correction.** Jesus says that when we see a brother or sister in sin, we should first address it directly.
 - We should also address it with humility (Galatians 6:1), acknowledging that we could have a speck in our own eye (Matthew 7:3-5) that prevents us from seeing clearly.
 - A key to doing this well is not assuming you know everything; generally, asking good questions is a helpful first step. You may have misread a situation or don't have all the information.
 - *Example:* Instead of "You sinned when you _____," consider, "Brother, I've noticed a pattern that when _____ happens, you react in _____ way. I may be missing something, but I wanted to mention it because it doesn't appear to align with God's Word. What do you think?"

- **Step Two: Small Group Clarification.** Jesus says that if someone doesn't respond to private correction, that one should bring along 1-2 other church members to confront the one caught in sin.
 - This is rooted in the Old Testament practice for justice, requiring 2-3 witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15).
 - The others involved should also be humble and gentle.
 - At this step, it may be wise to involve a pastor. Strive to involve people that have a relational connection, if possible.
 - your goal isn't "ganging up" on the individual, but rather to involve others who with love and concern desire to see repentance and to help the individual discern the right course of action.
- **Step Three: Church Admonition.** If the person refuses to listen to the smaller group of people, you're supposed to "tell it to the church."
 - This should be brought to the elders, if it hasn't already.
 - The goal is to bring the weight of the congregation to bear on urging repentance.
 - Note: The issue should be shared with the congregation *before* the vote on excommunication. In other words, church discipline cases should be brought to the congregation's awareness so that prayer and admonition among the larger body can take place before one is excommunicated.
- **Step Four: Church Excommunication.** If the person in sin will not repent even after being confronted by the church, then the individual should be expelled from the body.
 - At this stage, the church body is communicating to the individual that, as far as they can tell based on the individual's actions, they are not a believer.
 - *Remember: There's no such thing as an unchurched Christian in the New Testament. To kick someone out of the church is to declare that, as far as a church can discern, that individual has evidenced that they do not have faith in Christ.*
 - **Matthew 18:20** "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them." This is an often-misunderstood and misapplied verse; it means that when sin

is being confronted for the good of the body, Christ's authority is present there. It's an extension of the gospel.

- The promise of God's power and authority is comforting to us because of the difficulty of restorative discipline. It's a painful, difficult process; no one should be gleeful when a member is excommunicated.

- **Pattern Two: Immediate Excommunication**

- Scripturally, there are some instances where a sin or revealed pattern of sin is so egregious, the church should immediately move to step 4 in the preceding process.
- **1 Corinthians 5:1-6** It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. 2 And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? **Let him who has done this be removed from among you.** 3 For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. 4 When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, 5 you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. 6 Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?
- Heinous acts of sexual immorality, abuse, murder, etc. would fall into this category.

Motivations for Church Discipline⁴

- Church discipline, including restorative church discipline, is difficult because it involves confronting sin and navigating its destructive effects.
- Below are a few reasons why churches should practice accountability and church discipline.
- **For the Purity of the Church.**
 - We often think of sin individually, but what's clear in the imagery Paul includes in 1 Corinthians 6:6-8 is that all sin has a corporate effect. The hurtful words of a gossip multiply. The divisive tone of one who pursues conflict polarizes the body.
 - We are one body, and thus are accountable to God for one another.

⁴ These points are taken and adapted from Platt's *12 Traits of a Healthy Church*, pg. 120-122.

- Consider 1 Corinthians 5 – According to Paul, the church should have been mourning the man’s sin, not ignoring it! Pride, arrogance, and fear are at the root of inaction when it comes to sin in the church.
- For the health of the church and the purity of its witness, we must be vigilant in the fight against sin – including discipline.
- **For the Salvation of the Individual.**
 - To remove someone from the church is to declare publicly that they do not give evidence of being a follower of Christ.
 - However, according to Paul, this sobering verdict has a redemptive purpose: “You are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord” (1 Cor 5:5, emphasis added).
 - The church is to remove this man so that his spirit may be saved on the day of judgment. Paul uses a similar phrase when talking about two men, Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom he “handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme” (1 Tim 1:20). The goal in removing someone from the church is so that they might acknowledge the seriousness of their sin and repent.
 - If they never repent, it becomes clear that they went out from the church because they were never really of the church (1 Jn 2:19). But if they do repent, we should welcome them as a member of the church again.
 - In 2 Corinthians 2:5–8, Paul mentions an individual who had been excluded from fellowship but had since repented of his sin. He urged the church to “reaffirm your love for him” (v. 8). Jesus makes this kind of loving restoration possible because He is our “Passover lamb” (1 Cor 5:7). This is the gospel, and it should inform the purpose behind our church discipline.
- **For the Glory of God.**
 - When Paul addresses the topic of church discipline with the Corinthian church, he tells also considers the world’s perception.
 - To permit sin sends a confusing signal to the culture, which expects the church to take sin seriously. But when we tolerate sins that are not even tolerated by the world, then it affects what the world thinks about God.
 - No church will ever be perfect this side of heaven, but every church must lovingly pursue holiness among its members. The way we deal with sin, or fail to deal with it, affects the reputation of Christ among our unbelieving neighbors. Therefore, churches must practice biblical accountability and discipline for the glory of God.