

Church Discipline: Dealing with Sin in Family Relationships

The story is told of a wife who went to lunch with eleven other married women who were taking a college course together. One woman asked, “How many of you have been faithful throughout your marriage?” One lady, alone, raised her hand. That evening, as another of the group told her husband the incident, her husband responded with shock and disappointment. The wife quickly countered, “But I’ve been faithful to you.” When the husband, in response, asked why she had not raised her hand, she answered, “I was ashamed.”

We live in a time where infidelity, like an ugly older sister, rules over Cinderella fidelity. In comparison to at least recent memory, the adage “good girls used to blush, but now girls blush when they are good” fits our culture and day.

How prevalent is any practice of discipline in our churches? In our informal surveys, we have found that fewer than 10% of believers in churches—even in the *best* of the churches—have ever known of, or seen, this discipline process work itself out in a private or public fashion! We think this is an incredible indication of spiritual irresponsibility in our day.

How does the church face this pressure, and respond in a way

that reflects the standards of God's will, and *keeps its own house swept* in relation to sin? Does this just apply to the *big sins*—of infidelity or immorality? What is to be the response of a church to known sin among its members? Would it be better to quietly put the matter, and persons, aside? Or should it turn into a kind of public sideshow?

THE PROCESS: LIVING WISELY AS OBEDIENT SERVANTS

Almost ten years ago, John's summer class was interrupted by the unexpected entrance of an administrator at MSB.¹ After calling John outside, he gave him the following details of the past 24 hours: a faculty colleague and friend, who also served as a fellow elder in the church John attended, had unexpectedly left town the night before. Evidence indicated that he left with a co-worker, and that they were now out of the state.

Those details, and suspicions turned out to be true. It quickly became apparent that these two believers had been planning this, as they later admitted, for some time. Each individual left a spouse and children. Each couple was active in the life of their separate churches. The effect in those next days was disbelief and shock in two homes, on two leadership church boards, and at one Bible college. What were we to do?

Before explaining the procedure, let's look past the trees to the forest. First, we have established, for your consideration, that the church is not a place, but a people. Further, it is not just a people, but a family of believers who are to live as fathers and mothers, and brothers and sisters (cf. 1 Tim 5:1-3; Tit 2:1-8; Phile 16; Matt 23:8).

Just as a family is concerned for encouragement, admonishment and discipline, so a church family is similarly concerned for proper growth, or correction. The analogy is made, and repeated for force and effect, in considering qualifications for overseers or elders:

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He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) (1 Tim 3:4-5).

The connection in this text is very pointed—proper family conduct is the training and proving ground for proper leadership in the church as the family of God. Without pushing the analogy beyond the details of Scripture, the responsibilities of parenting, and the skills associated with marriage (cf. “husband of but one wife” [1 Tim 3:2]), all become part of the composite responsibilities of elders who pastor and teach the flock.

Parenting involves the twin responsibilities of instruction and correction. The one provides the preferred path for maturity, and the other the corrective for wrong behavior—the first reflects wisdom, and the latter foolishness.

Sin in the life of any believer is a result of thoughts, desires or actions that deviate from God's standard of holiness. A brother or sister is caving in to temptation, and the evil desires within them—reflective of the flesh (cf. James 1:12-15; Gal 3:1-5, 5:16-21). This difficult situation, and the predicament of this brother or sister,² falls on the shoulders of the undershepherds of a local church—to lovingly handle in a way that reflects God's concern for this disobedient son (cf. Heb 12:1-13). Large measures of wisdom are needed in these situations!

Secondly, beyond general considerations of the church as a group of believers bound together by common or family concerns, it is important that we affirm the standard for proper judgment:

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted (Gal 6:1).

The beginning emphasis, here, is on someone “caught in a sin.”

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The point is not only that sin is a trap or snare, but also it is a known sin. In other words, it is behavior observed in such a way that there is no doubt—measured against the standard of Scripture—that this is a sin.³ There is no merit in taking matters of personal dispute or petty grievances to-the-wall, so to speak, in manners similar to the strong New Testament injunctions dealing with church discipline.

Third, and at the beginning of this discussion, it should be emphasized that this matter is serious not only for the individual, but also for the gathered church assembly. Just as Israel was warned about the contaminating effects of sin, so the church is equally vulnerable. We are often asked: “What if the person is gone from the community?” “What good will it do without the person present, and affected by these actions?” The answer comes easily to our mind when we think not just of the sinning brother, but the ones who are left! The corporate effect of these actions is to teach the church about matters of holiness and righteousness, and the sheer terror of sin in the assembly (cf. Acts 5:1-11).

THE PROCEDURE: LOVING CONFRONTATION AS DISCIPLINE

The community of believers in Portland—two churches, and one para-church—now had a shared concern and problem. In some circles, discussion ranged from cover up to crashing confrontation.⁴ But it quickly became evident that Christ’s teaching on this provided the essential pattern for proper conduct:

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

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even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector (Matt 18:15-17).

The first step is individual, loving confrontation.

STEP ONE: A LOVING CONFRONTATION⁵

In the case in Portland, each of the remaining spouses went to their respective mates in this other state, and pleaded with them to reconsider, and come back to their marriages and families. This had no apparent effect, and the problem continued.

How is this first step to be done? Again, the Scripture states that when this sin is confirmed to be true (“sins against you”), the brother or sister is to go privately, and humbly plead with the sinning saint to repent.⁶ The sin is to be dealt with in a direct and sober manner (“show him his fault”).

Just as serious physical disease can kill a person, so sin can take a Christian’s life *prematurely*.⁷ Therefore, compassion and urgency are critical here—as well as a concern for conformity to the will of God. We suspect that the command to “love one another deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins” (1 Pet 4:8) applies in a timely sense to this situation. As Paul wrote, “speak the truth in love” (Eph 4:15).

The hoped-for result of this loving confrontation is repentance. If this takes place, restoration with God, and you as the confronting brother, has taken place (“you have won your brother over”). The matter needs to go no farther, and godly forgiveness should be given without carrying grievances or grudges (cf Col 3:12-14). In each of these steps, restitution need only be made to the level of the offense. In other words, restoration needs to be made with the offended or informed parties.

But, “if he will not listen”, then the matter is carried to the second step. One caution: the repeated phrase “if he will not listen” tells each believer or church to go slow enough in these steps to allow for

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consideration and a response, but not so slow as to lose the point of the process altogether. This is the most common mistake in trying to apply this text today.

STEP TWO: CONFIRMATION BY WITNESSES

Back to the scene of Christendom in Portland. The leadership, of the church John was part of, determined—after waiting a couple of weeks past the visit by the spouses—to go and beg this sinning couple to reconsider, and repent. Three major issues at stake were the relationship of these believers to their Lord, their relationships with family and believing friends, and the reputation of Christ in the community. After convincing the second church, which was reticent—believing “that it would not help anything”—a team of elders from both churches visited with this couple, and shared the above concerns. This was done, we might add, with many tears. The couple refused to repent, and the elders returned to Portland.

Charging a person with sin is no light matter. Consequently, the Bible, in both the Old Testament and New, cautions that charges need to be confirmed by more than one witness. In the Old Testament, this is seen in charges of homicide, evil acts, or idolatry (cf. Num 35:30; Deut 17:2-7). In the New Testament, this applies to any sin, and equally applies to leaders as well as believers in the church (cf. Matt 18:15; 1 Tim 5:19).

In fact, in matters of sin among church leaders, it seems the Scripture holds elders doubly accountable. This is illustrated by the strong public nature of the rebuke (1 Tim 5:20), and the warning that teachers “will be judged more strictly” (Jam 3:1). Christian leaders in the church hold no immunity whatsoever from the same standards for living applies to any believer from the Scriptures. If anything, for them, it is double jeopardy!

The purpose of the witnesses (again, more than one) is to confirm the facts of the sin, and to join in the loving concern that pleads with this brother or sister to repent, and be restored to fellowship

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with God and men. If the sinning brother refuses to repent—again, this calls for a period of time to wait in order to get a considered response—then the leaders, and church, proceed to the third step.

STEP THREE: COOPERATION AS A CHURCH

In some respects, the hard (at least *virgin*) work for the Portland Christians now began. It was time, after waiting two or three more weeks, to “tell it to the church.” For the assembly John was part of, it involved taking a whole morning service to both teach on these matters, and then to inform the congregation about the current state of the affair—literally.⁸

This Portland assembly was then given instructions about praying for, writing letters, or calling this couple—again with the express goal of loving confrontation through discipline, and restoration and reconciliation. It was at this point, we are happy to report, that God used these prayers and letters to convict the errant brother and sister of their sin, and cause them to return to their respective spouses—within a period of two weeks after this public meeting. Now, almost ten years later, the families are restored and reconciled—although the effects of this sin still reappear occasionally in ways that need to be faced, and dealt with in a spirit of gentleness, compassion and forgiveness.

Here is an important point. Churches who proceed to this third level often assume that it is time for “treating them as a pagan and a tax collector.” They, therefore, combine this third and fourth step without noting the cautioning phrase “and if he refuses to listen even to the church.” This step, like the first and second, requires appropriate behavior followed by a period of waiting—to allow the offending or sinning brother time to give a considered response.

Are there any interpretational options in this step? The answer is yes: two. One alternative sees the “church” as consisting strictly of leaders, and therefore, matters of sin in the assembly need not be brought to the point of public meetings and information.⁹ Near

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and far context, as footnoted, lead us to conclude that the second interpretation—assumed above in discussion of this step—is the better one. The entire church family is to be informed, taught, and given recommendations for appropriate acts of ministry and concern.

Lacking a listening and repentant response, the church, and its leadership, are obligated to go to the fourth step.

STEP FOUR: CONSISTENCY IN THE COMMUNITY

Essentially, this fourth step is a separation from the saints in a way that breaks fellowship.¹⁰ The point of the phrasing “pagan or tax collector” is to show the sense of alienation, or that the life of the body is distinct from the life of this sinning brother.

Three recommendations follow, and make up the spirit as well as the letter of this step of church discipline. First, even this step is to be done in a loving manner:

If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother (2 Thess 3:14-15).

Even in this absence of association, or alienation in terms of fellowship, he is not the enemy. Just as a family waits anxiously for the return of an estranged member, so the church prayerfully, yet obediently, is to wait for the restoration of this saint. The issue is severing fellowship or association.

Second, in our judgment, this instruction suggests that even spiritual family take precedent over physical family. In other words, if adult children in a family—being professing believers—choose to get involved in habitual sin without repentance, parents and siblings should restrict associations of family fellowship and social gatherings (cf. 1 Cor 5:6-11, Mark 3:31-35).¹¹ However, since believing spouses are specifically instructed to stay with their disobedient or

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unbelieving mates, this would not apply in a marriage relationship (cf. 1 Pet 3:1-6; 1 Cor 7:10-16).

Third, this discipline is profitably enhanced if local assemblies in a community cooperate together in these matters. Actually, we recommend that any believer leaving an assembly have a letter of reference forwarded by the elders to his new church home, and any believer joining an assembly be asked for a similar correspondence (cf. 2 Cor 3:1, Rom 16:1).¹² This greatly benefits corporate maturity in a community, and, in this spirit of unity, provides a consistent corrective needed for this unrepentant brother or sister.

These, then, are the four steps necessary for church discipline. We have been part of this process which resulted in repentance, as cited above, and other times resulted in no repentance—much to our grief. The point is not that we measure our conduct by the results, but rather, in obedience to the Text, and its Author.

THE PRODUCT: LEADERS AND BELIEVERS WHO OBEY THEIR LORD

The trauma of the above procedure has not been lost on us—either in theory or practice. We have been part of both—more often than we care to remember. But, in this study on the church, we have already agreed to a couple of ground rules: one, we will obey the Word—even if it is hard. And, two: we will obey the Word—even if the physical results turn out, to our glance, badly. We are not responsible to insure our ease in life, or visible results from our lives of faith. We are responsible to love God, and love others—or, to obey God, and serve others. Doing that is a job in itself!

Finally, four common questions round out our discussion of this important matter for the New Testament church, and its leadership. First, what sins qualify for this discipline? The answer: what sins do not? It is odd that we take a person struggling with substance abuse—for example—into our assemblies, and offer to help, but to the man who is greedy, we make him a deacon! Actually, its not

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that bad . . . quite. But the Scriptures are clear. All sin is always an offense against God, and against brothers and sisters who follow Christ, and needs to be loving but firmly dealt with in a biblical manner.

Second, won't this behavior—if generally recommended—lead to a kind of chaotic witch hunt in the church? The answer: we think not, but, whatever the results, we are obligated to obey the Scriptures in this regard. This emphasis just sounds odd—kind of an *unfamiliarity breeding contempt*—because it has been so lacking in our churches.

Third, what will the community think? Our answer: we are not sure, and further, are not sure we should care—if we can say that gently. Whatever reputation comes from this—good or bad—is certainly a distant issue compared to obedience as leadership, and a church.

Fourth, won't the leaders and the church get sued: Our answer: maybe! The current cases, where a judgment has gone against a church and its leadership, seem to indicate some additional disciplinary actions beyond the parameters of our recommendations. But, if it leads to this, then so be it. Frankly, whatever we have or own does not compare in value to the need to encourage the saints, individually and corporately, toward maturity and growth—and away from the destructive and contamination effects of sin.

The key to this matter rests with the leaders who have been charged with pastoring and teaching the flock. Providing leadership and initiative at these levels is the single greatest factor in implementing these principles wisely and biblically. Elders must provide examples of obedience, and Lordship, in a way that both warns and encourages the assembly that they serve.

The conduct of church leaders, in this matter, is somewhat equivalent to a true incident that happened recently to a friend of ours. In checking his uncovered septic tank, the ground next to the tank gave way, and in he went—head first! Though he could not swim, his wife and neighbor came and quickly rescued him—at arms

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length! As horrible as that experience was, this Christian brother has lived to tell about it. There really is life—even after this kind of an experience.

Similarly, the willingness of leaders and believers in the church to help a brother or sister caught in sin is something akin to the wife and neighbor reaching out to rescue this *fallen* husband and friend. Its not an experience anybody is too thrilled about—but it is very necessary. It pulls the sinning saint out of the muck, and, in that sense, is life-saving.

Thus, the question: what would you do if you heard this call for help from our septic swimmer? It would not be the highlight of your day, but you couldn't walk away! You wouldn't, would you?

The Church of God needs a helping hand on this. Churches of custom and tradition, and leaders who have disregarded their responsibilities too long, have turned deaf ears and blind eyes to the sins of the saints. It needs to change.

Our friend got cleaned up, and is fine. Christians who are involved in habitual sin are not nearly as fortunate, or fine, . . . or as clean.

