

Discipline and Church Growth

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"If no society, nay, no house with even a moderate family, can be kept in a right state without discipline, much more necessary is it in the Church, whose state ought to be the best ordered possible."

John Calvin, *Institutes* IV:12:1

1. The scriptural basis for discipline
 - a. The authority of the Church (Mt. 16:19, 18:15-18, John 20:23): the Church has been given the authority not to forgive sins, but to declare Christ's judgement in that regard.
 - b. The practice of the early church: we see instances of disciplinary action taken.
 - i. God's direct discipline:
 - (1) Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11).
 - (2) His discipline of His children (Hebrews 12:5b-13)
 - ii. Discipline by the apostles
 - (1) Gross violations of God's Word: the immoral Corinthians (1 Cor. 5:1-13).
 - (2) Paul and Peter (Gal. 2:11-14).
 - (3) Disassociation with the disobedient (2 Thess. 3:11-15).
 - (4) Paul and Hymenaeus and Alexander (1 Tim. 1:20).
 - (5) Rejection of a man who causes divisions (Titus 3:10-11).
 - (6) Turning away from those who cause dissensions contrary to the teaching they have heard (Rom. 16:17).
 - c. The holiness of God (Psalms 93:5, 1 Peter 1:16).
 - i. Holiness demands purity in-and-of itself.
 - ii. The Church, as a testimony to God's holiness, must maintain itself as holy (1 Peter 2:12).
2. Purpose of discipline: maintaining holiness in the Church.
 - a. As a testimony to the world.
 - b. To promote the edification of the believers themselves by securing their obedience to Christ.
 - i. That those disciplined may be ashamed, repent and grow in godliness (Heb. 12:5b-13).

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- ii. That the rest of the church might be warned of the consequences of sin and thus avoid it.
 - c. Note that church leaders will be held particularly responsible in this regard: the holiness of the church is their commission.
 - 3. The methods of discipline
 - a. The foundation of disciplinary measures: love and humility.
 - i. The goals of discipline:
 - (1) Purity of the church.
 - (2) Repentance of the offender.
 - ii. Discipline is not revenge; to abuse it is to incur God's discipline on us.
 - b. Recognize the offense and confront the offender.
 - i. For an individual or private offense, this should be done privately in a culturally appropriate fashion (Mt. 18:15).
 - ii. For a public offense, we may confront publicly, if there is a culturally appropriate fashion (as a testimony to both the church and the world, Gal. 2:11-14). However, I do not think that this **must** be done in the public arena.
 - iii. If repentance and reconciliation take place, rejoice. If not, move to the next step.
 - c. Confront the offender again, this time with witnesses (Mt 18:16). The idea is to confront, not to attack.
 - d. Bring the case before the church, which must be in agreement with the discipline of excommunication (Mt. 18:17).
 - e. Break off fellowship with the offender through excommunication (1 Cor. 5:1-5). This does not mean to totally break off all contact, but his/her participation in the fellowship of the church as a member in good standing.
 - f. Individual churches should respect the disciplinary actions of each other.
 - 4. The forms of discipline
 - a. Warning or admonishment (1 Thess. 5:12,14).
 - b. Avoidance or withholding of fellowship (2 Thess. 3:6,14).
 - c. Excommunication (Matt. 18:17b).
 - 5. Church growth and discipline
 - a. The parable of the vine and the vine-dresser (John 15:1-8).

- i. The purpose of pruning to bear more fruit.
- ii. Applies individually and corporately.
- b. Lack of discipline over an extended time will hinder growth.
 - i. We do not, however, discipline primarily so that the church will grow. Instead, we do so to maintain the holiness of the church, and growth will be unhindered as a natural result.
 - ii. Over short periods of time, discipline may cause decline (especially if discipline has not been present before) but that must never stop us from carrying out the discipline. Holiness is more important than short term growth!