

Sermon follow-up
6/13/10
1 Cor. 5
The Blessings of Church Discipline
Rich Lusk

Ok, so it wasn't my most polished sermon (to put it mildly). I got distracted a few times and things didn't come out quite right. One line I want to correct here came early in the sermon. I really believe that when it comes to church discipline, the church is caught on the horns of a dilemma: If we practice church discipline, we look judgmental; if we not, we look hypocritical. It's a no-win situation if you're trying to please people. But if we're trying to please God and adhere to his Word, we can move forward, leaving the consequences to him. Unfortunately, most churches err to one side or the other, practicing discipline with too much rigor/severity (often disciplining for things that aren't even sins, biblically defined), or they are so lax, they don't practice any discipline at all. We need to strike a biblical balance.

Here are the overarching purposes church discipline aims to accomplish:

1. The good of the sinner, namely his repentance
2. The health and well-being of the church, removing the "leaven" of corruption before it spreads, and deterring others from similar sins.
3. The glory and honor of the Savior, which is always preeminent
4. The integrity of our witness in the world, which is to say that disciplining insiders is closely related to our mission towards outsiders.

There is a fifth aim I did not mention because I do not know if we'll actually get to it, but you could call it "the politics of church discipline." Church discipline is a potent tool/weapon for cultural transformation, though sadly the contemporary American church rarely implements it effectively in this way.

Why were the Corinthians proud in 1 Cor. 5:2? This is a question that has baffled the commentators. We've already seen that Corinthian arrogance was a huge problem in this community, but here it's not as easy to tell what's going on. Are they proud because of this man's sin or in spite of it?

It might be that they were proud because they saw sexual permissiveness as a sign that had really arrived spiritually. It was a sign that they were mature, tolerant, progressive, and free. They could say, 'Hey, any alternative lifestyle is acceptable to us. Look at the freedom we have in Christ. Look at how open our society is. Look at how far we have advanced in our understanding of what it means to be in Christ. We're not under law, and what we do with our bodies does not matter because we live in the spirit.' They were turning the grace of God into a license for sin and abusing their true freedom in Christ (cf. Jude, Gal. 5).

This would be kind of like churches today having 'gay pride' rallies: They are boasting of something that should actually make them ashamed. They're confusing tolerance with freedom – and they are most emphatically not the same! To call incest or homosexual practice good is to call God and his word evil because God explicitly condemns these behaviors in his word. They are aspects of Torah legislation that continue to bind the church in the new age. To claim that these things are acceptable is an act of pride because it arrogates humans to the ultimate position of authority.

But it's entirely possible their pride stems from another source. We have already seen how status-conscious the Corinthians were (cf. 1:26ff). There are some hints that this man committing incest is one of the few in the church who would qualify as wealthy, well-born, wise, and well-educated by world standards. He's likely a benefactor of the church. Thus, the Corinthians might be proud they have a man of this stature in their midst. They brag and boast about having a socially elite church member – and they're not about to kick him out! After all, in that culture, it was simply not acceptable to confront or rebuke someone who socially outranked you. Instead, you tried to stay in their good graces, and ride on their coattails.

The Corinthians pride in this 'celebrity Christian' might have blinded them to the seriousness of his sin. They were too thrilled to have someone so important in their church body, and they were not about to challenge someone so powerful. They liked the prestige this man brought to their community. But the church can never let someone's social status shield them from a needed rebuke. The discipline of the church must be equitable and never class-conscious; the church must never show favoritism (cf. James 3). (Note this also means that pastors and elders should not be exempted from church discipline. If anything, they must be held to a higher standard. See William Willimon's *Calling and Character*, ch. 3.)

For more on this latter approach to the text, see David Garland's commentary, especially 159ff, and Bruce Winter's *After Paul Left Corinth*, ch. 3.

Church discipline as a rescue mission for the good of the sinner is seen in many places in Scripture. For example, James tells us that if we turn an erring brother back from his sin, we have saved his soul from death (James 5:19-20). How many times have we let a brother destroy himself by failing to go after him when he drifts (or runs headlong) into sin? How often have we made excuses for not confronting the wayward, telling ourselves it isn't the right time, or someone else should do it?

Our OT reading was from 2 Sam. 11-12. Sometimes, we have to play Nathan to the Davids in the congregation. When a brother falls into sin, as David did, we have to winsomely and gently, yet firmly and forcefully, call him back to the path of life. Nathan provides a great model of doing discipline the right way, neither compromising with sin nor attacking it in a self-righteous manner.

To many people, church discipline seems narrow. But, then again, Jesus told us the way to life IS narrow (Matt. 7). If a brother veers off the narrow way and onto the broad path that leads to destruction, church discipline is the mechanism by which we call him back and reclaim him for the kingdom. Discipline is a way of telling the straying brother, 'You have the left the path of life. Let us help you get back on track. Face up to your sin, repent, and return to the right way.' Of course, if he won't repent, then church discipline escalates, following the steps laid out in Matthew 18.

For an answer to the question why Paul jumps straight to excommunication in 1 Cor. 5, without going through the various steps laid out in Matthew 18, see Jay Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline*, 67f. While I do not necessarily agree with every detail of Adam's work, the book as a whole is a very informative and practical guide to the practice of church discipline.

Some time ago, I was asked to be part of a survey a Beeson student was doing on church discipline practices. While my answers were all too brief, this will give you some idea of how we seek to implement discipline at TPC:

Church Discipline and Conflict Resolution in the Church

Questionnaire

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Church's Name: Trinity Presbyterian Church

Denomination: CREC (Confederation of Reformed Evangelicals)

Instructions: The following 10 questions were compiled in order to gain a better understanding how the Church today handles/views biblical discipline and conflict resolution. Please read all questions before answering because some questions may overlap somewhat. I have provided space for your answers, but please feel free to continue your answers on the back or on another sheet of paper if necessary. I will be compiling the results of this questionnaire into a research paper, so please indicate on the last page whether or not you desire to have your name or your Church's name included in the research paper.

1. According to many studies, the Church in America has almost abandoned Church Discipline and Conflict Resolution within the Church. What is your overall opinion of the stance of the Church today when it comes to Discipline or Conflict Resolution?

The church in America on the whole has certainly abandoned the biblical pattern of discipline. A handful of churches may be overly zealous, judgmental, and rigorous in their application of discipline to members who fall into sin, but the vast majority of American churches do not practice any form of discipline whatsoever. Very few churches seem committed to a disciplinary procedure that holds together the biblical demands for *both* purity *and* mercy.

This absence of discipline seems to afflict virtually every denomination, whether “high church” or “low church.” Take Christian politicians, for example, since their views and actions are very public. As far as I know the Baptist church of which Bill Clinton is a member never took any disciplinary steps to deal with his patently unbiblical view of abortion, or to deal with his sexual sin. Likewise, while Roman Catholic church leaders often *threaten* discipline against church members in public office who do not support pro-life legislation, they rarely if ever follow through with it (e.g., John Kerry). In failing to discipline civil leaders, the church is missing one of her most potent forms of cultural transformation. We should compare this to the ancient bishop Ambrose, who reformed civil policy in the Roman Empire through disciplining Theodosius for his tyrannical actions.

Another serious problem is that when a church does have the courage to carry out biblical discipline, that disciplinary work is often disregarded by other churches. Unless churches recognize one another’s formal disciplinary actions, the entire purpose of church discipline will be subverted. That’s not to say churches must agree; after all, churches are fallible and often make mistakes in their disciplinary actions. But there should at least be a respect shown for the disciplinary actions of other bodies, and a desire to communicate and cooperate with one another (even across denominational lines).

It also seems that most churches do very little to practice biblical conflict resolution. In our denominational, consumerist approach to church life in America, it is always much easier for someone to simply leave for another church than get conflicts worked out biblically.

2. What is your denomination’s stance on Church Discipline or Conflict Resolution? (Does your denomination have enforceable guidelines for Church Discipline or Conflict Resolution?)

My denomination is very committed to the practice of church discipline. The CREC uses a “Continental Reformed” model of church government. Higher courts do not discipline individuals (that is left to local sessions), but can remove churches from the federation. The constitution can be found here:

<http://www.crechurches.org/infofiles/creconstitution05rev.pdf>

Our local church body is very committed to church discipline as well. When new members join, one of their membership vows includes submission “to the government and discipline of the church.” Our constitution makes a number of references to church discipline and conflict resolution, especially on pages 25ff:

<http://trinity-pres.net/TPC-Constitution.pdf>

Our elders desire to be very patient and merciful with any member who falls into sin. The church discipline process should be carried out in a spirit of love, gentleness, and humility. But we are also committed to preserving the purity of the church, even if it means excommunicating an unrepentant person. In my nearly 4 years here, we have had several occasions where members fell into serious sin. We have initiated church discipline in its early phases each time. Thankfully, in each case thus far, the sinning member has repented and been fully restored to fellowship.

3. Does your Church practice biblical discipline or conflict resolution? Please Explain why or why not. (If yes, please give a brief description of how you administer discipline or handle conflict.)

Yes, we do practice both church discipline and conflict resolution. Issues are handled as discreetly as possible. We encourage members to go to one another if they see a brother or sister falling into serious sin. If that is not effective, they can bring it to the pastor or an elder. Very public, “scandalous” sins have to be addressed before the congregation as a whole. We seek to follow the biblical guidelines found in passages such as Matt. 18:15ff, Gal. 6:1, etc.

We take seriously Jesus’ admonition to be reconciled to one another before participating in acts of corporate worship (Matt. 5:21ff). Our church celebrates communion weekly, and as part of that we insist that every member be reconciled with every other member as much as possible before partaking.

4. What would you consider to be the biblical guidelines for how discipline or conflict resolution are to be handled?

This is outlined in our constitution.

One way in which our form of discipline differs from Roman Catholics and some misguided Protestants is that we do not practice “penance,” nor do we distinguish “suspension” from the Lord’s Supper from “excommunication.” Sinners are restored to full fellowship immediately upon repentance. We do not suspend anyone from the Lord’s Table provided they are repentant. We believe withholding the Supper for period of time from a repentant person as punishment is a very un-Jesus-like thing to do. He delights to eat and drink with struggling sinners who are looking to him for forgiveness and strength. What someone has done does not matter; what matters is that they repent and trust Jesus. In this way, our discipline process

actually becomes an embodiment of the gospel, much as Jesus' meals in the gospels embodied and enacted his message.

5. What do you feel the pastor's role in Church discipline and conflict resolution is? Please explain.

99% of church discipline should be informal. The entire church is a royal priesthood (1 Pt. 2); our priestly tasks include mutual exhortation, correction, and admonition. In that sense, the pastor should not be the one who is doing most of the church's disciplinary work.

However, when a situation arises that requires formal discipline (e.g., informal discipline is ineffective, or the sin is of a serious public nature), the pastor has to be involved. He should help the elders and members carry out their various roles, help them understand how to relate to the sinning brother or sister, and make sure the disciplinary action is carried out according to Scripture and the church's constitution.

6. What do you think the overall goal (biblical goal) of Church discipline is? Please explain.

I think there are 3 goals: the glory of God, whose reputation is tied to the purity of his people; the restoration of the sinner; and the prevention of similar falls on the part of other Christians. Thus, discipline is doxological, corrective, and formative – it's an act of Spiritual worship, an act of Spiritual correction, and act of Spiritual formation.

I believe discipline is necessary to the health of the church. It serves the good of the whole body. Unrepentant members have to be removed, the same way cancerous cells have to be cut out, for the sake of the well-being of the rest of the body.

Discipline is also essential to the mission of the church. The world may mock the practice of church discipline as harsh and judgmental, but the fact is the world will not respect an undisciplined church. We set ourselves up for the charge of hypocrisy if we do not deal with sin in our own ranks (especially on the part of our leaders, who are held to a higher standard). The purity of the church is supposed to be one of the ways we attract outsiders to the gospel (1 Pt. 2, Matt. 5, etc.).

7. In light of a passage like 1 Corinthians 6: 1-8, what is your stance/opinion on lawsuits within the Church?

Disputes between Christians should be taken to the elders, to serve as judges. If the two Christians do not belong to the same church, they should find an ad hoc body of elders composed of elders from both churches, or find a trusted Christian judge who can arbitrate their dispute. They should not subject their dispute to courts outside the church.

There are situations where civil law makes this procedure very difficult, but it should certainly be the goal.

I highly recommend Ken Sande's Peacemaker materials on this topic.

8. According to statistics from Peacemaker Ministries there is no noticeable difference between the amounts of lawsuits filed by Christians versus non-Christians. What are your thoughts on this?

It is a travesty. It is sheer worldliness in the church. It is disobedience. It is one of the reasons the church has so little respect and influence in our culture.

9. What do you feel is the biggest hurdle(s) in implementing discipline within the Church? (Basically, why do you feel a lot of Churches choose not to practice biblical discipline?)

There are several hurdles to the implementation of discipline in the church. Many pastors and elders do not want to be perceived as unloving or judgmental. Tolerance is an idol in our culture and church discipline *looks* intolerant. Abuses of church discipline in the past have given the whole practice a bad name. There is stigma attached to the practice of discipline in our day that is hard to overcome.

I also think that American Christians have largely "privatized" their religion. They think of Christianity solely in terms of a personal, individualized relationship with Jesus. There is no corporate or public dimension to it. Thus, the need for church discipline (and other ecclesial ministries) seems superfluous at best, threatening at worst. Most Christians do not think the church should exercise any real authority in their lives and they do not see any intrinsic connection between membership in the church and eternal salvation.

American Christians tend to be very egalitarian and therefore do not really think of pastors or elders as having any genuine authority. The church is regarded as a "voluntary organization" rather than the body and bride of Christ "outside of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation" (Westminster Confession 25.2). The dictum of the church fathers and Reformers, "One cannot have God for his father unless he has the church for his mother," is lost on us. We do not practice biblical discipline because we do not have a biblical view of the church.

Also, most evangelicals have a very low view of the sacraments. What difference does excommunication make in a church that only takes communion 4 times a year anyway? And that believes the Lord's Supper is mainly about *subjectively* remembering Jesus' death rather than celebrating the *objective* presence of the risen Christ with us at his table? If communion is not actually a meal with and upon Jesus, what difference does excommunication make anyway? What is lost when a person is excommunicated, and what is regained if they are restored? Excommunication only makes sense in a context where the church truly believes that Jesus is present with his people in a unique way as they eat and drink the bread and wine. If communion

is just a symbol, if it is not a genuine means of communion with the risen and glorified Christ, then excommunication has no real force because it is no longer seen as matter of life and death.

Evangelicals in America will *never* recover the biblical practice of church discipline unless they *also* recover a biblical theology of the visible church as Christ's body and bride, a biblical theology of ministers as Christ's earthly ambassadors and representatives, and a biblical theology of the sacraments as effectual means of salvation. Unfortunately, most American evangelical denominations are not willing to do these things and so (for now, at least), we are consigned to die a slow death. I am quite happy to be part of one of the few denominations in America where this entire package is believed and embraced.

10. I want to let you use this final question to express any additional thoughts/opinions on the subject of Church discipline and conflict resolution that you may have. Please feel free to do so.

As just stated, any pastor or church leader who thinks he can recover the biblical practice of discipline without also recovering a biblical view of the ordained ministry, visible church, and sacraments is on a fools' errand. It just won't happen. What we need more than anything else is a recovery of the much-neglected Book 4 of John Calvin's *Institutes*. Calvin has the whole package, though sadly his theological heirs have largely lost it.

May I include your name and your Church's name in my research paper.(Circle one) YES
NO

Yes, you can include these things.

I would like to extend my gratitude for taking your time to answer this questionnaire. Your efforts are greatly appreciated. GOD BLESS.

Your Brother in Christ,

Cory Varden