

Rich Lusk
Sermon follow-up
6/27/10
1 Cor. 5:1-13
“The Burdens of Church Discipline”

While 1 Cor. 5 focuses especially on church discipline, we should notice that this whole letter is disciplinary. Paul is seeking to re-form a misshapen church. Paul is rebuking, correcting, and admonishing the whole way through.

For a good overview of how Paul addressed the problems in Corinth, and how those problems relate to our contemporary church problems, see Ray Sutton’s article “The Church in an Age of Democracy” from *Christianity and Civilization*, vol. 4.

Other treatments of church discipline are found in *Life in the Father’s House* by Wayne Mack and David Swavely, ch. 8; James Jordan’s essay “The Death Penalty in the Mosaic Law”; Philip Lee’s excellent *Against the Protestant Gnostics*, 259f; portions of John Frame’s *Evangelical Reunion*; Brian S. Rosner’s study, *Paul, Scripture and Ethics*; Ken Sande’s *Peacemaker* materials; and Don Garlington, *Exegetical Essays*, ch. 8.

As I said in the sermon, most of the time we should simply let love cover a multitude of sins. But note: If love covers the sin, it covers it completely. What we so often do is let love cover it enough that we do not confront the person who sinned against us, but do not allow love to cover it so much that we are prevented from gossiping about the sin to others.

We should distinguish formative discipline from corrective discipline. Formative discipline includes all the various ways we seek to form and shape character: teaching, preaching, liturgy, singing, corporate prayer, mimesis, etc. Corrective discipline is like a trip to the doctor when you’re sick: It seeks to address problems in the church when things go wrong. Again, when we corrective discipline kicks in, we should start as privately and informally as possible, only progressing through the steps in Mt. 18:15ff as need arises.

What happens to a church that fails that practice discipline? Jesus’ letters to the 7 churches in Rev 2-3 are instructive. For several of the churches, Jesus’ message amounts to saying, “You haven’t kicked enough people out! Get on it! You’re too

compromised and tolerant!" (e.g., Rev. 2:20, which condemns the church at Thyatira for tolerating "Jezebel"). If these churches do not shape up, Jesus threatens to come and take their lampstand away (Rev. 2:5). In other words, if they will not practice discipline, Jesus will discipline them!

The same thing happens in the book of Ezekiel, when the prophet sees the shekinah glory of God move out of the temple because of the nation's idolatry. If the church is God's temple (which she is!), the church is in the same situation: If we are going to continue to be a house for God then we must be a holy and faithful community, and that includes doing discipline. God's presence and glory will depart from us if we harbor immorality and idolatry.

We also see this in the Torah. The law says that the land will vomit Israel out if she is unfaithful. In the same way, Jesus will spew the lukewarm church out of his mouth (Rev. 3). God's holiness cannot tolerate the presence of unchecked sin amongst his people.

The politics of church discipline:

A handful of anecdotes may help demonstrate how the church, simply by being a faithful church, can exercise great pressure to bring about significant cultural change.

1. Ambrose and Theodosius – see Peter Leithart, *The Kingdom and the Power*, ch. 10.
2. Roman Catholic priests who threatened to excommunicate John Kerry and other pro-abortion Roman Catholic politicians, as chronicled in various places, including *TIME* magazine (<http://www.time.com/time/election2004/article/0,18471,605436,00.html>); see also Rodney Clapp's *Border Crossings*, 48f on the politics of excommunication in American public life
3. The political use of excommunication in the church in Chile, as found in William Cavanaugh's *Torture and Eucharist*.
4. Thomas Oden's book *Corrective Love*, ch. 10-11, which demonstrate how the church's discipline can have a formative role in the moral shape of civil society
5. "The Church as Shadow Government" by Ray Sutton in *Christianity and Civilization*, vol. 3, showing that the church's courts function as an alternative legal system in times of corruption and tyranny

Church discipline can and must cut across the American divide between public and private life. One of the reasons discipline has fallen by the wayside is that we have allowed religion to be so totally privatized. We have entrusted the stewardship of public morals to the state. But historically, the church has policed her own members,

not only in private life, but in the public square as well. If the church is to be a vital force for good, discipling and transforming the nations, she must exercise comprehensive discipline.

Note how ecclesiocentric 5:11-13 are. Paul is not focused on shaping up the world, but bringing the church into line with the biblical vision. It's not that Paul is uninterested in transforming culture; he most assuredly is, as his overall theology and mission reveal. But just as judgment begins with the house of God, so reformation and transformation do as well. It does no good to pass judgment on outsiders when our churches are in disarray.

Examples of doing what Paul forbids here are legion: I know Christians who openly criticize the federal government for fiscal irresponsibility and level of taxation they describe as "theft"; meanwhile, these same Christians are failing to tithe and drowning in consumer debt. Or, what of Christians who cry for the death penalty in the civil arena for murder, but would never abide their church leadership applying the "spiritual" death penalty of excommunication to an unrepentant church member?

Here are our TPC membership vows:

1. Do you acknowledge yourselves to be sinners in the sight of God, justly deserving His wrath, and without hope apart from His sovereign mercy?
2. Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Savior of sinners, and do you trust in Him alone for salvation as He is offered in the Gospel, as priest, king, and prophet?
3. Do you promise, in faith and in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will strive to live a life of repentance and obedience, in a manner worthy of the followers of Christ?
4. Do you promise to support the Church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?
5. Do you submit yourselves to the government and discipline of the Church, and promise to pursue its purity and peace?

You'll notice that every TPC member has made a promise to submit to the discipline of the church. We see discipline as an integral part of church life.

Church discipline is not like a police man going after a thief but a shepherd going after a straying sheep. Church discipline is never about personal vengeance or spite. It's not really even primarily about "punishing" someone for their sin in a retributive way (though it can require things like restitution). Church discipline is a form of shepherding, a form of corrective love. It's a search and rescue operation. It's not about killing our wounded but healing our sick, before they spread infection to others.

Of course, discipline also protects the church as a whole. It protects the victims, it acts as a deterrent from like sins spreading through the church, and it maintains the integrity of the church's mission and witness.

Even a church that is committed to the biblical pattern of discipline will be very imperfect. But imperfections, even gross mistakes, in fulfilling the biblical mandate to discipline, are generally speaking not reasons to leave a church. Witness Calvin, following Augustine (*ICR*, 4.12.11-12):

Another special requisite to moderation of discipline is, as Augustine discourses against the Donatists, that private individuals must not, when they see vices less carefully corrected by the Council of Elders, immediately separate themselves from the Church; nor must pastors themselves, when unable to reform all things which need correction to the extent which they could wish, cast up their ministry, or by unwonted severity throw the whole Church into confusion. What Augustine says is perfectly true: "Whoever corrects what he can, by rebuking it, or without violating the bond of peace, excludes what he cannot correct, or unjustly condemns while he patiently tolerates what he is unable to exclude without violating the bond of peace, is free and exempted from the curse" (August. contra Parmen. Lib. ii c. 4). He elsewhere gives the reason. "Every pious reason and mode of ecclesiastical discipline ought always to have regard to the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. This the apostle commands us to keep by bearing mutually with one another. If it is not kept, the medicine of discipline begins to be not only superfluous, but even pernicious, and therefore ceases to be medicine" (Ibid. Lib. iii. c. 1). "He who diligently considers these things, neither in the preservation of unity neglects strictness of discipline, nor by intemperate correction bursts the bond of society" (Ibid. cap. 2). He confesses, indeed, that pastors ought not only to exert themselves in removing every defect from the Church, but that every individual ought to his utmost to do so; nor does he disguise the fact, that he who neglects to admonish, accuse and correct the bad, although he neither favors them, nor sins with them, is guilty before the Lord; and if he conducts himself so that though he can exclude them from the partaking of the Supper, he does it not, then the sin is no longer that of other men, but his own. Only he would have that prudence

used which our Lord also requires, “lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them” (Mt. 13:29). Hence he infers from Cyprian, “Let a man then mercifully correct what he can; what he cannot correct, let him bear patiently, and in love bewail and lament.”

This he says on account of the moroseness of the Donatists, who, when they saw faults in the Church which the bishops indeed rebuked verbally, but did not punish with excommunication (because they did not think that anything would be gained in this way), bitterly inveighed against the bishops as traitors to discipline, and by an impious schism separated themselves from the flock of Christ. Similar, in the present day, is the conduct of the Anabaptists, who, acknowledging no assembly of Christ unless conspicuous in all respects for angelic perfection, under pretence of zeal overthrow everything which tends to edification.

In another place, Calvin wrote, “We must bear with the evils which it is not in our power to correct, until things become ripe and the proper season for purging the church arrives” (see R. S. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 236f; cf. 186ff). Calvin said “our reproofs must proceed from a friendly disposition” because “Christ enjoins his disciples to forgive one another, but to do so in such a manner as to correct their faults.” In still another place, Calvin says “If we wish to do good, gentleness and mildness are necessary, that those who are reproved may know that they are nevertheless loved. In short excommunication does not tend to drive men from the Lord’s flock, but rather to bring them back when wandering and going astray” (see *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Church* by Ben Milliner, 176f).

A compact discussion of church discipline is found in Doug Wilson’s *Mother Kirk*, 158ff. Wilson rightly points out that wisdom, not procedures, must govern.

Church discipline is necessary for the health of the church body. Would you want cancerous cells taken out of your body? Yes. So does Jesus. Church discipline removes malignant tumors to keep them from spreading and overtaking the body.

David Garland’s commentary on 1 Cor. 5 is very helpful. On p. 150f, he notes several parallels between 1 Cor. 5 and 1 Cor. 6. On p. 157 he notes the connection between church discipline and church mission. On p. 181, he writes, “The church walks a tightrope between being a welcoming community that accepts confessed sinners and helps the lapsed get back on their feet and being a morally lax community where anything goes. The danger of carrying out disciplinary measures is that the church can become judgmental, harsh, and exclusivistic.” He further develops the notion that the church should be in the world but not of the world on 186f., noting that “The gospel does not call Christians to retreat from the world but to witness to

it. Christians are to be like salt, which does no good unless it comes into direct contact with what needs to be salted.”

Richard Hays’ commentary on this text is very helpful as well. Hays notes that we should expect the world to be worldly; when sinners sin, why should we act as if we are shocked? But worldliness in the church is a different matter, and must be confronted because of the church’s special calling to be God’s holy people. Sin – and a failure to deal with that sin – in the church will “seriously blur the identity of the church as God’s holy people.” It blurs the line between the church and the world.

Hays’ real strength is in identifying the echoes of the OT, especially Deuteronomic law, in this passage. See p. 87f. See also Rosner 92f, 177. These scholars make it clear that Paul identified and addressed Corinthian problems in light of Deuteronomic legislation. As far as Paul is concerned, Moses still speaks to the people of God in an authoritative voice. While the application of the Torah is not always straightforward, Paul still clearly expects the church to submit to and be guided by the Mosaic law. Implementing old creation law in a new creation situation takes exegetical skill, but it is a skill Paul expects even baby churches to possess. See also Hays, *Moral Vision of the NT*, 43.

1 Cor. 5:6 expresses a well known saying of the time, much like our “one bad apple spoils the barrel.” Paul’s entire letter calls us to live within a tension, often described as being “in the world but not of the world.” In chapter 2, he warns them about adopting the methods and means of the contemporary sophists. In chapter 5, he makes it obvious he expects them to associate with – that is, having dealings and friendships with – immoral and idolatrous people in their city. In chapters 8-10, we find that he allows for and expects them to have social interaction with pagans, provided they do engage in pagan temple worship or sacraments. But in chapter 7, he insists that they marry only in the Lord, and in chapter 15 he reminds them that bad company corrupts good character. Obviously, then, some kinds of relationships with non-Christians are expected and encouraged, while other, deeper forms of relationships are forbidden.

On the structure of this section of the letter, see Charles Talbert, *Reading Corinthians*, p. 12. For a quick overview of the broader structure, see Sutton’s article “The Church in an Age of Democracy, “ p. 90ff.

I explained the leaven metaphor in the sermon, but there is more to explore. In its immediate context, it means something like this: The Corinthian Christians have left the old behind, both eschatologically (the old covenant, especially relevant for Jewish converts) and sociologically (the pagan culture of the city). But, as the first several chapters of the letter demonstrate, they are still infected with the old; they do not understand the newness of the new. Thus, Paul commands them to purge themselves of all that is old so they can fully celebrate the new. Passover stands in the background: As the Jews left Egypt, they had to leave behind the leaven of Egyptian culture. The Corinthians are a new Israel, undergoing a new exodus.

Paul makes it clear that we can most certainly be friends with adulterers or homosexuals or pagans who are outside the church and know they are outside. But if someone lives an immoral lifestyle while trying to claim a Christian, we have to challenge that claim in variety of ways. We cannot have fellowship with them on their terms, e.g., we cannot have Christian fellowship with them. So often we do the reverse: We shun sinners in the world, and then tolerate all kinds of moral and doctrinal crap in our churches.

1 Cor. 5 has some connections with Ezra. See Hays' commentary, p. 82, and Rosner, ch. 3

1 Cor. 5 shows us what the exercise of the keys look like in action. Jesus entrusted his disciples with the power to bind and loose sins. Those who repent are to hear, through the church, God's declaration of freedom and forgiveness. The kingdom is opened to them through preaching, baptism, and reception into the membership of the church. Those who refuse to repent are bound in their sins. They hear, through the church, God's declaration of condemnation against their sins.

The keys do not give the church power to act autonomously or infallibly. But it does mean that Jesus works through his church to bind and loose. The church is his instrument or agent. When the church is faithful to Scripture, she can be confident that God adds his "Amen!" to her actions and declarations. Again, this does not mean the church never errs, as if her action could be identified with God's in a simple, unqualified way. But it does mean that when the church acts according to the word, heaven backs her up.

If this were not true, of course, church membership and excommunication would be meaningless. The church only has significance insofar as she mirrors and shadows God's actual application of salvation. The NT is clear that God designed the church to

be his saved community; the fact that the church has fuzzy or imperfect boundaries at times does not negate this.

Excommunication has bite because “outside the visible church, there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.” Sure, the church has erred in excommunicating the wrong person. Chrysostom, Athanasius, Martin Luther, William Tyndale and others were wrongfully disciplined by the church. There is always an appeal above the church, to the word and to the court of heaven. But in normal circumstances, the judgments of the church should be seen as reflections and declarations and applications of God’s own judgments.

You can think of church discipline as an insurance policy for your marriage. More than once, I’ve seen the whole church body work to save a marriage, and been successful. It should be comforting to know that if a spouse gets into an adulterous relationship, the church will be there to deal with him or her, to call the offender back to the truth, and protect the rights of the victim. We don’t just let people walk away from a marriage without a fight.

None of us like to be corrected. In our culture, the ultimate wrong is to make someone feel guilty. But this is just Satan’s brainwashing. We need to mutual rebuke and admonishment. We all have blind spots that can only be pointed out to us by others who love us enough to get involved in our lives.

One of the Puritans said Satan is always looking for a vessel without a fleet. “Lone ranger” style Christians are always vulnerable. These Christians may even seem to be active church members, but make themselves very difficult to shepherd, and resist accountability when pressed.

As Jay Adams has put it, churches never benefit from taking Jonahs on board. If someone is running from discipline in another church, you best check into it before inviting them into your membership.

It is crucial that churches learn to cooperate with one another when it comes to disciplinary actions. If a member under discipline can simply flee to another church down the street, discipline becomes a practical impossibility. Churches may not agree with one another every time, but they should at least love and respect one another enough to communicate about these matters.

Excommunication not only excludes one from the society of believers; it also excludes one from participation in the communion meal.

Excommunication makes no sense without a high view of the eucharist, without some kind of “real presence” view of what happens in the communion meal. How does excommunication have any teeth if communion is just a snack on crackers and juice while we try our best remember Jesus?

On how participation in the Eucharistic meal creates boundaries for the church, see Peter Leithart, *Blessed Are the Hungry*, p. 178

Calvin’s restoration of church discipline as a function of pastors and elders led to our modern separation of church and state. See *Christianity and Civilization*, vol. 3, 326f, and numerous other historical studies of Calvin’s reformatinal work in Geneva.

Philip Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics*, p. 260:

As opposed to the patristic and Calvinistic picture of the church as a mother who nurses, comforts, scolds, punishes, in short, loves her children into a healthy maturity, the present image of church is that of an organization that cashes our checks, mails us notices and newsletters, but otherwise leaves us to our own devices. In one way or another, what needs to be affirmed is the reality of each member of the congregation’s belonging no longer to himself or herself alone but to Christ.