

Voices: The challenge of church discipline

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Church discipline has fallen on hard times. Many of us know just how badly churches can abuse their authority and hurt people. We also know that people simply can find another church down the street, which makes exercising discipline seem almost pointless.

Nevertheless, church discipline is both biblically mandated and historically supported. We would be unwise and disobedient to neglect it. Paul's letters to the Corinthians can help us learn how to practice church discipline in ways that are God-honoring and healthy.

Church discipline in Paul's context

Paul had a difficult relationship with the Corinthians, to put it mildly. The church had numerous problems, not least of which was their frequent questioning of the apostle. In his letters, we see Paul struggle with this congregation he loved so dearly yet found so frustrating.

1 Corinthians shows Paul addressing several different theological and moral problems plaguing the community. Unfortunately, his efforts didn't quite work. After writing 1 Corinthians, Paul made a disastrous personal visit to the church.

After a painful confrontation with a certain member, Paul retreated from Corinth in anger and sadness. While away, he wrote what some call "the severe letter," an epistle now lost to us in which Paul castigated the Corinthians for their discipline problems.

Unlike the painful visit, Paul's severe letter seemed to work. The Corinthians repented and expelled the offending member from their community. But Paul still had to pick up the pieces. This leads us to 2 Corinthians 2.

Church discipline is painful

Paul spent several verses expressing his love for the Corinthians and the pain it caused him to chastise them in such a way. Verse 4 sums it up well: "For I wrote you out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you."

Paul was not some aloof authority figure; he knew these people. He served them and led them in person. He worshiped with them, broke bread with them, wept with them and celebrated with them.

Church discipline is painful, and it should be. We shouldn't want to bring pain to people we love. Church discipline is a last resort, to be used only after gentler methods of correction have failed. When we implement church discipline, we should expect to do so "with many tears."

Doing the right thing can be excruciatingly painful. But this pain is sometimes necessary, not because we want to abuse or manipulate others, but because we love them. If you can discipline another believer with complete apathy—or worse, glee—you have a serious problem.

Church discipline is necessary

In 2 Corinthians 2:6, Paul wrote, "This punishment by the majority is enough for such a person." Paul did not write, "This punishment by the majority was unnecessary for such a person." In his previous letter, Paul

also made it clear that punishment is sometimes necessary.

When he learned of a man sleeping with his father's wife, Paul commanded the Corinthians to "hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh... Drive out the wicked person from among you" (1 Corinthians 5:5, 13).

It is unclear whether Paul was referring to the same person in 2 Corinthians 2:6, but his point stands nevertheless. There are times we must exercise discipline, even sometimes going so far as to disfellowship members.

The presence of sin in the community has a corrupting and damaging influence, and not only on a few people. In 1 Corinthians 5:6, Paul used the analogy of yeast. Only a little yeast can leaven the whole dough. Just a little sin can damage the entire community. Sometimes, we must take the drastic step of forcibly removing the sin.

Church discipline is restorative

I deliberately left out the last part of 1 Corinthians 5:5 in my previous quotation to save it for this last point. Why did Paul instruct the Corinthians to hand the man over to Satan? "So that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord."

Back in 2 Corinthians 2, after he wrote in verse 6 that the punishment they doled out was "enough," Paul spent the next several verses urging the Corinthians to "forgive," "console" and "encourage" the repentant man. They were to reaffirm their love for the offender since he had repented of his sin. Paul warned that if they did not do so, the man may be "overwhelmed by excessive sorrow" and fall victim to Satan (2:7-11).

Paul did not implement church discipline to serve his own ego or to be

vindictive. Paul commanded church discipline not only to protect the community but to save the offender. Discipline ideally is meant to result in restoration to fellowship, not permanent cut-off.

For those under discipline, it can be hard to believe what's happening is for their good. (And given the possibility for abuse, it might not be sometimes.) Yet the Scriptures are clear. The church has the responsibility to exercise discipline so it may protect itself and restore those entrapped in sin.

Baptists and church discipline

Some modern Baptists might invoke principles like “soul freedom” to justify not practicing church discipline. But the Bible is clear on the subject, and if we must choose between the two, it is better to be biblical than to be Baptist.

I do not believe we must make that choice, however. Historic record abounds with examples of Baptists exercising discipline on church members. If Baptist distinctives are inimical to church discipline, someone forgot to tell those Baptists.

Of course, the most important Baptist distinctive—the one from which we derive all others—is our commitment to the Bible as our final authority for faith and practice. And the Bible could not be clearer: Discipline is necessary for the health of the church.

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