

Why should the church correct sinful Christians and leaders?
By Dr. Roger Sapp, November 2011

There is quite a bit of confusion and emotional resistance in the North American church culture and probably elsewhere to the idea of the discipline of sinning Church members and leaders. Some see it as a contradiction of forgiveness, mercy and grace. Some will even offer examples from the Old Testament such as King David's sins to suggest that we should not be too concerned about the sinful lifestyles of leaders. Some suggest that God will take care of these matters and we need not be concerned at all. Some are greater critics of those who advocate discipline than of those Christians and leaders who seriously need correction because of sinful lifestyles. They may even suggest that we are not practicing forgiveness and that we are now *throwing stones* at people that should be forgiven.

They may suggest that we do not love people properly by advocating Church discipline in general and specific cases. However, when we go to the New Testament, we find the Lord Jesus Christ encouraging us to Church discipline. Surely, no one would suggest that Christ Himself is not loving or forgiving properly by teaching us to deal with sinning Christians. Therefore, no one advocating what Christ says to do is somehow violating a biblical standard of love, grace or mercy. Christ says:

"And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer." Matthew 18:15-18

So the first reason that we should practice Church discipline is that Christ Himself teaches His disciples to practice it. In fact, the process of discipline above is not advice. These are the commands of the Lord Himself to His Church. The above commands a three step process that this we will discuss in detail later in this document. Before we do that, there is a second very important reason for practicing discipline that is found in the context of the verses above that is often overlooked. The verse just before these verses on Church discipline is Matthew 18:14. Christ says in that verse:

"Thus it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish".

A key phrase in this verse that reveals the context of this passage is *little ones*. The passage is about something in particular that may cause *little ones* to perish. The *little ones* that Christ is referring to are *children*. Christ uses the word *child*,

children and little ones in verses 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 10 in the passage just before He gives us the command to practice Church discipline.

What does Church discipline have to do with children? Christ tells us in this passage right before His command to discipline sinning church members. He says:

“...but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it is better for him that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes! Matthew 18:6-7

The second reason that we practice Church discipline is to prevent our children from stumbling over bad examples. Emotionally healthy children are inevitably idealistic about Christ and His Church while they are young. They expect adults and especially Church leaders to do the right thing. They will not and cannot understand when adults and leaders fail to do what they say they believe.

When we allow bad examples to be common and fail to discipline them, we send a very mixed message to our children that will destroy their faith. They may attend church with their parents until they are grown but they are no longer really believers. They will be seeking other answers when they leave our homes. Our children, particularly the teenagers, will be the persons most harmed by failure to set a high standard in the Church.

Statistically, this is happening already in the Church in America. We are seriously failing to reach the next generation that is sitting in church with us. They are offended by numerous stumbling blocks which may or may not include their parents. Churches that have few young people attending or those attending are disaffected, may have overlooked what failing to discipline erring members has done to these once idealistic young people. Adult believers, less idealistic and more sophisticated perhaps, can deal with hypocrisy and bad examples without it damaging their faith but not young people. So the reason that Christ commands us to discipline erring church members (which would include leaders) is simply that we must do it for the sake of our children.

We need to come back to the passage where Christ commands it. We will add the verse before and the verse after it to get a better picture of the context.

"Thus it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish. And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-

gatherer. Truly I say to you, whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Matthew 18:14-18

To examine it in detail, we will look at it phrase by phrase. Here’s the first phrase:

“Thus it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish”.

Again, the context of the fourteen verses above the discipline process is not causing children to stumble as that might destroy their faith and cause them to perish. *Perish* means to not be saved eternally, to be lost. This leads us to the second phrase:

“And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private”

There are several important aspects to this phrase. The verse begins with “and” which means it continues the thought in the verse above it. This means that if there is a danger of a child stumbling over the sinful behavior of a Christian, then the proper thing to do is to go to him and reprove him in private. The attitude that it is not my business or that I have no responsibility is simply wrong. Everyone is responsible for correction. This is not just a function of leadership. Christ said nothing about leaders doing correction. It is everyone’s responsibility. The object of the correction is repentance meaning a changed mind that will result in changed behavior. Since there is quite a strong condemnation from Christ Himself about someone causing a child to stumble, correction is the right thing for the erring Christian as well. This leads us to the next phrase:

“ if he listens to you, you have won your brother”.

This is the ideal thing to happen in a situation of correction. The person being corrected shows good character, humility and repents of the sinful behavior. The Bible has a great deal to say about the wisdom of listening to godly reproof. In fact, the Bible says that a person who will not listen to correction is a fool. This process of correction would end if the person listened and repented. However if they were foolish and chose not to repent then the process must continue. Jesus says:

“But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed”.

The process is not so private if there is a failure to repent. We go now with others to address the sinful condition of this believer (or leader). It is not just one person speaking to them but others as well. They provide a witness to the erring Christian and to the rest of the church if necessary that this sin cannot be

tolerated and that the person is in a process of correction according to the command of Christ. It should be made clear to the erring Christian that the process will continue to the third step that Christ commands if there is no repentance.

“And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church”

The erring Christian needs to know that failure to listen to the two or three witnesses means that the matter will become public. Failure to repent for whatever reason results in public exposure. Often, the threat of this happening is enough to make the erring Christian pay attention to the correction. There is no timing revealed in this passage which would indicate that the circumstances would dictate how long each step would take. Too short a process would not allow the people involved to consider repentance properly. Too long a process would cause further damage to the witness of Christ and to the faith of the children.

This kind of correction is consistent with what Paul says about public correction of leaders that are in sin. He says that the other leaders will become fearful of sinning because of public correction. (1 Timothy 5:19-20) Our love for God, His people and especially the children should keep us from sinning. However, some need a more negative motivation apparently. They need to fear that the Church will no longer accept them if they continue in sin. There is very little of this kind of fear in the Church among “charismatic” leaders in North America in recent times. The hope, in this passage, is that the person exposed in sin to the church would repent but some stubbornly will refuse and have no fear of loss in sinning. Christ then tells us:

“and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer”.

Christ does not expect everyone to listen and repent but He does expect the Church to do the right thing for the sake of the children. He expects the Church to no longer endorse, receive or allow this sinful Christian to be considered a proper Christian any longer.

This is consistent with what Paul teaches as well. He writes:

But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler-- not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges. Remove the wicked man from among yourselves. 1 Corinthians 5:11-13

Paul writes and commands not to associate with a brother living in serious sin and to remove him from the midst of the church. This would include leaders as well. This is excommunication.

We have included the verse after the three step process which is significant in this context. Christ says in Matthew 18:18:

"Truly I say to you, whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

In this context, this would mean that God will back up the decision on the part of the Church to discipline a sinful Christian that goes through this three step process. It also is another way to say to us that we have authority and responsibility before God to do this when appropriate. The idea that we can leave this to God to do is completely wrong. Christ gives us the responsibility and authority to discipline erring Christians. If we would do it consistently, we would have many fewer erring Christians and leaders and not have to do it very much. Additionally, many who are disciplined properly according to Christ's command do repent and are restored completely.

We must not resist discipline of sinful Christians for the sake of the reputation of Christ and His Church in the eyes of our children. Allowing sinful Christians to stumble our children so that they perish is a very serious matter according to our Savior. It needs to be serious enough to us to embrace intellectually and emotionally the need to correct and even remove sinful Christians from our midst as Christ has taught us.