

Philosophy of Church Discipline

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[With input and editing from the brothers of ATM International]

Introduction

When one looks at the promises of God where He states His intentions for His Church at His return, we realize how much has to happen in His Church between now and His Coming. Jesus clearly states that He intends to present us to God as a glorious Church without spot or blemish - **Ephesians 5:25-27**. The Bible teaches that Jesus is not coming back to fix the Church, but rather He is coming back to receive to Himself a glorious Church that is fixed and has made herself ready - **Revelation 19:7**. As Christians, most have learned that when God clearly states some good intention toward us, the Devil commits himself to steal, kill, and destroy. He does this to keep God's good intentions from becoming our current realities. God said that He has put us in His will as His heirs and as joint heirs with Christ. He has promised to transform all who are His into the very likeness of His Son, Jesus. He is doing this so Jesus would not be the only one of His kind, just the first of His kind. Christ was meant to be a prototype not merely one of a kind. A prototype is a perfect model of what an inventor/creator wants to mass-produce. What a glorious inheritance and destiny we have as Christians!

When we consider the above statements, we might ask ourselves, "How is that working out for us as we draw nearer to His second coming?" One only has to look back a mere one hundred years to see the trend line that both the world and the Church are on currently. Even looking back fifty years is very telling. Many of the older saints today could say, by experience, that not too many years ago, the world embraced and held to higher values, standards, and morals than the present day Church! Divorce seldom occurred and was considered to be an embarrassment; homosexuality was considered sin and deviant behavior rather than an alternate life-style; a man's word was his bond without signing a dozen or more papers promising to keep a mutually agreed upon commitment, contract, or covenant! There are many other examples that could be cited here, but I think the point is sufficiently made. The trend line seems to be going in the wrong direction. I believe this why it is prophesied that Jesus will come suddenly **to** His temple before He comes **for** His temple - **Malachi 3:1-3**. The obvious question that we, the Church, should be asking is, "Why this trend?" Is it because the membership of the present day Church is inferior to the quality of the members of the Church fifty or a hundred years ago? I don't think so. I believe it's not a membership problem as much as it is a management problem. The majority of the onus of the alarming trend line has more to do with management or government than it does membership.

All of us who are called to church government need to carry out our responsibilities in such a way as to be "**divinely** correct" rather than "**politically** correct". God has expectations of those He places in Church government in order that the Church will fulfill her God-intended destiny. We are not only required to watch over and govern the individual lives of those who make up the Body of Christ, but also the corporate life of

the Church in this present world. The scriptures clearly teach that the Church is to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Salt is to be a preserving influence and a flavoring additive. Light is to reveal what is hidden by darkness. The world is decaying by the moment and groping about in darkness. Why? Because the Church has not been all that she should be in this world. How is this to happen if the Church has lost its savor and put God's light under a bushel? The Church complains about the world in which she lives to justify why she is not everything God wants her to be. She is wanting a better world to live in to enable her to serve God more effectively. The truth is that the Church does not need a better world in which to live, but rather the world desperately needs a better Church to live in her! Until the government of the Church takes their places as watchmen on the wall and assume their God-given responsibilities, the trend line will continue to spiral downward. Is it any wonder that the Church is on this negative spiral when it is explicitly evident the vast majority of the churches have not exercised church discipline in the past fifty years. Even in charismatic churches there have been horrific national scandals by well known ministers who continue to minister without coming under any discipline by the church in which they serve. Like in Eli's day, there are leaders fornicating with women in the congregation, misappropriating kingdom monies, and even proudly declaring that God has made them a homosexual. All too often they remain ministering in good standing in their churches and in many religious circles throughout the world. One would think that with carnality on the rise, church discipline would be more of a common place occurrence. However, we all know that isn't true. Again, the problem is government that is more committed to tickling ears rather than teaching truth! Government is to lead the Church not placate the Church! It is time for God's leaders to wake up and lead, lest the Church becomes more of a joke and derision than she already is in the eyes of the world. Why should the world respect the Church and take her seriously if her leaders don't? If the government of the church does not clean up their act, the world will never see the Church as having the important, vital role in society that God says she is to have.

With that in mind, let us examine four primary areas of Divine Church Government. These are general areas and are not meant to be exhaustive or exclusive of others one might see or suggest. For didactic purposes, we will refer to these general areas as the "4 D's" of government.

The 4 D's of Church Government

The "4 D's" or God-given responsibilities of church government are Doctrine, Direction, Discipleship, and Discipline. Since the scope of this treatise is "Church Discipline", we will limit the focus of this position paper to the last of the "4 D's". The others are as worthy of our attention and discussion, but we will leave that for another time and venue.

Our earnest desire and goal in writing this position paper is to enable us as apostles, through the multitude of counsel, to come to a place that is ***in harmony with*** and ***documented by*** the scriptures. We all see and know in part. We are confident that

there is wisdom and safety in the divine interchange of illumination and revelation received by a multitude rather than one or a few.

With that in mind, let us begin by looking at a very difficult responsibility given to us as leaders. The responsibility I refer to is to make judgments and if necessary bring discipline to the members we are watching over in matters of doctrine, practice, business, attitude, conduct, etc.

Before continuing to investigate a scriptural position on this expectation of God in governing, I would like to interject a sobering word of caution to all elders. Over the course of Church history, the misappropriation of this area of responsibility has led to the abuse of authority or the lack thereof in the lives of numerous professing Christians. Many lives and even ministries have been shipwrecked by an overbearing approach to Church Discipline or the failure to exercise any loving discipline at all. The improper implementation of Church Discipline has led to two extremes which are equally devastating to the spiritual life of the Church and consequently, to the world to which She is to be both salt and light. The two extremes I speak of are **Legalism** and **Permissiveness**.

Legalism is the result of an overuse of authority and control; this is caused by elders implementing the **Letter** of the word and not the **Spirit** of the word. It is more carnal and mechanical than spiritual and organic. As leaders we must never forget that though Divine Relationship is greater than Divine Order, it always includes and embraces Divine Order. **2 Corinthians 3:6** clearly says that the letter of the word kills but the spirit of the word gives life. **John 7:4** and **1 Samuel 16:7** emphatically state that judging by outward appearances rather than judging the heart of a person is not righteous judgment. Legalism brings judgement based on outward and rational perceptions.

Permissiveness is the result of an underuse of authority and is caused by elders violating both the spirit and the letter of the word. This leads to lawlessness and lasciviousness in the Body of Christ. This is a mockery of God's grace and mercy!

As leaders, we must strike a balance of following the letter of the word without violating the spirit of the word. This is easier said than done. It is more likely to happen where the government of the local church consists of a team of leaders rather than an individual leader. The Bible clearly declares that there are both wisdom and safety in the multitude of counsel.

As a final reminder to church leaders, I want to admonish all, that government is not primarily about the leaders, the people, or even the Church. Jesus and the early apostles made it evident through their teachings and their practices that they were Christ focused and Kingdom of God focused not church focused. **Acts 8:12** and **Acts 28:31** define the emphasis of their teaching and ministry by saying that they preached the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus. They were all about the kingdom or Kingdom-centric in doctrine. Concerning their practice, they committed their life and ministry to the principle taught in **Isaiah 9:6-7** which is also Kingdom-centric. This

passage makes clear that of the increase of His government (Kingdom rule) and His peace there would be no end. And this they did with the zeal of God through the Spirit! May God help us to do the same as we watch over His sheep!

The Basis of Church Discipline

The basis of everything created is God, Himself. All creation, whether animate or inanimate has the ability to reveal the glory of God. The Bible declares that God *is* love, not that God *has* love. Love is what God is! The basis of all that God does is love whether birthing, healing or judging. Everything in God's kingdom operates by faith that works out of His love. Love conquers all and is the greatest power known. In the end, God or Love will subdue all powers and principalities because there is nothing more powerful than Love. Love is the basis of all that God does. Consequently, love is what He calls us, who are made in His image, to do to reveal His very nature and glory.

1Jn 4:7 Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.

1Jn 4:8 Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

When we read **Colossians 1:15-17**, we see that all things were created by Him, through Him, for Him, and that by Him all things consist. Therefore, every act of church governance should be an act of love whether it be teaching doctrine, giving direction through counseling, discipling, or implementing church discipline. In the following verses it is clear that discipline and love go hand in hand. As a matter of fact, discipline is an act of love and a proof of love.

Heb 12:5 And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him.

Heb 12:6 For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises [scourges] every son whom he receives."

Heb 12:7 It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?

Heb 12:8 If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.

The 4 Whys of Church Discipline

Many Christians ask, "Why does the Church need to practice church discipline? Isn't that meddling in personal affairs that are none of our business?" The Bible declares four main reasons that this aspect of governance should be practiced by all churches!

1. **Discipline is commanded** - God never made obedience optional even if we don't think it's fair - **1 Corinthians 6:1-8; 2 Timothy 2:16-18; Titus 1:9-14; Titus 3:9-11; 1 Timothy 1:19-20; 2 Timothy 4:14-18; 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 10-15; Galatians 6:6-9; Romans 16:17-18; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13.**
2. **Discipline brings God's blessing and commendation** - Those who obey God in this unpleasant responsibility will come under God's blessing and receive His commendation - **2 Corinthians 7:8-13; Revelation 2:2.**

3. **Discipline brings God's rebuke and disapproval if neglected** - Failure to obey and do it God's way will result in God's rebuke and disapproval of the leaders whom He holds responsible - **Revelation 2:14-16, 20-23; 1 Corinthians 5:1-7.**
4. **Discipline affects the health and strength of the Body of Christ** - The Church is a living organism and therefore, any diseased part can infect and threaten the wellbeing of the whole body. Never jeopardize the whole body carelessly to show favor to a diseased part. Remember, we are members one of one another, are in vital relationship with one another, and affect one another both positively and negatively - **Romans 12:5; Ephesians 4:25; 1 Corinthians 5:6.**

If we as leaders shirk our responsibility, the consequences are debilitating to the Church. It encourages others also to dabble in spiritual carelessness and sin. It weakens the Church's testimony and ultimately destroys the quality of spiritual life in the Church. This results in the Church losing her impact in the world and her distinction of being the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

The Proper Goal of Church Discipline

As we said earlier, Jesus is our role model. Since we are to walk as He walked, it becomes evident that God's goal for us is the same in type as it was for Jesus. He is the Savior and we are to be saviors. He is the Lord, the King, the High Priest and we are lords, kings and priests. He is the brightness of God's glory and the express (visible) image of His (invisible) being. The Church's goal is the same. To accomplish this, He has provided exceedingly great and precious promises so that we can be partakers of His Divine Nature! The Church is to be found to be the praise of God's glory and pleasure - **Ephesians 1:3-12.**

So what does this have to do with church discipline? Everything! It reveals what God's priority for the Church is. Church discipline should preserve and ensure God's priorities. The ***first priority*** of church discipline then must be to protect the spiritual wellbeing of the Body of Christ so she can fulfill the purpose to which she has been called. The ***second priority*** is to preserve the purity of the Church's testimony so as not to lose her credibility in the world she is to impact. Often times the world loses respect for the church because she preaches one standard and practices another. She allows sin to go unchallenged and the sinning members to hold positions and remain in good standing in the church. The ***third priority*** is to bring the sinning member to genuine repentance. The proof of genuine repentance is determined by the fruit of what they do, not what they say. This fruit is based on their walk not their talk. The ***fourth priority*** is the restoration of fellowship between the disciplined member and the Church. Let us be careful that we do not tamper with the order of God's priorities when implementing discipline because of what seems right in our own eyes!

The Nature and Scope of Church Discipline

All matters of governance in the local church needs to be carried out with the understanding that the government of the church is to operate as a theocracy under

Christ and not a democracy. Democracy promotes disunity and factions within. You need not look any further than what's happening in the USA today to prove that point. Theocracy promotes unity through one mind, one spirit, one faith, and one body under the one Chief Shepherd, Jesus. Voting is not an option since God does not give us the right to vote as to whether we accept the mind and will of Christ. Our job as leaders is to seek God's mind and leading rather than offering our own. Theocracy is best served when you have a multitude of leaders seeking God's counsel together.

The elders of each local church bear the responsibility of maintaining the testimony of Jesus Christ in the church.

Act 20:28

(28) Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

This can not be done if they fail to make judgments and implement discipline whenever needed in matters of doctrine, practice, business, attitude, conduct, etc. When it concerns doctrine in particular, judgments and/or corrections need to be made when such teachings cause a departure from the apostolic/prophetic foundation laid in the local church. If they fail to do this, the responsibility to intervene in the unresolved affairs of that local church falls upon any apostles and/or prophets who bear a relationship to that local church - **1 Corinthians 4:15-21**; **1 Corinthians 5:1-13**.

The Right Attitude of Church Discipline

When considering the right attitude we should have when implementing Church Discipline, we should remember that we who are spiritual ought to walk as Jesus walked. His attitude should be our attitude or we will fail to represent Him in this divine responsibility! In Matthew 9, Jesus sums up the attitude He wants us to embrace when ministering to sick people, whether the sickness be spiritual, emotional, or physical in nature.

Mat 9:12-13

(12) But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.

(13) Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

Love and mercy should always be the basis of judging the disorderly actions of the members of a local church because love is not a respecter of persons - **Proverbs 24:23**; **Leviticus 19:15**; **Deuteronomy 1:17**; **James 2:1-9**. Therefore, we must stand with righteousness over relationship when making judgments. If you always stand with a person, sooner or later you will be supportive of unrighteousness. We need not look any further than the scriptures to know this is true. **Romans 3:23** says that *all* have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. Eventually we must all take a stand contrary to

those we are related to by blood or friendship. This includes not even siding with and justifying ourselves when we are wrong or in sin - [Matthew 10:34-38](#).

A Godly attitude should reflect not only how we view the sinning one, but also **how we view ourselves** - [Matthew 7:3-5](#); [Galatians 6:1](#); [2 John 8](#).

Mat 7:3-5

- (3) Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?**
- (4) Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye?**
- (5) You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.**

Gal 6:1

- (1) Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.**

Another important characteristic of a proper attitude should be the desire to cover sin rather than to expose sin - [James 5:19-20](#). It should absolutely break our hearts and be painful if the discipline has to result in the sinning member's removal from the local body. This should be the last resort after all else fails, and it is clearly established that the sinning one refuses to hear those who are attempting to restore him - [Matthew 18:8-9](#). As painful as it might be, we should never shirk our responsibility of exercising surgical authority in the Body of Christ when a body member threatens the well-being of the entire body!

The Right Method of Church Discipline

When considering the right method to be employed when implementing Church Discipline, we should remember the words of God. God emphatically declares that He does not judge according to outward appearances, but rather He looks upon the heart of the man He is judging - [John 7:24](#); [1 Samuel 16:7](#); [Jeremiah 11:20](#); [Jeremiah 17:10](#); [Psalm 139:1-4](#); [Revelation 2:23](#). For discipline to be divine, it must be internal (heart) not outward (acts); it must be spirit, not letter. Judgment based solely on the letter of the Word is not necessarily right. We must take into consideration willful sins verses sins of ignorance. This is why it is important to know what is within a person's heart and not just his actions. Spiritual judgment is seeing things as God sees them. He often reveals His insights to His servants through the witness of the Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit. Though spiritual judgment is not to be limited by the letter of the Word, it does not violate the letter. An example of this would be that the letter declares that one should not commit adultery. The spirit of that word says that one who looks at a woman to lust after her commits adultery. So you see, the one who keeps the spirit of the word will not violate the letter but rather establishes it.

Mat 5:17-20

- (17) "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.
- (18) For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.
- (19) Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. [Emphasis Added].
- (20) For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

When disciplining a sinning member, we must judge whether there is a genuine repentance and a willingness to follow the clear directives of the leaders overseeing their restoration process. Leaders should never disfellowship a member for sin, but rather the refusal to turn from their sin and/or the refusal to come under the authority of those watching over their souls in the restoration process. Often times it is not necessary to expose their sin as long as they cooperate with leadership. Love covers sin, it does not expose it. Sin only has to be exposed if the one in sin refuses to come under authority.

The 4 Degrees of Church Discipline

Now let us begin to look at four general levels or degrees of Church Discipline. These are not meant to be exhaustive or rigidly definitive given there is an overlapping of some of these degrees portrayed in the scriptures. Again for didactic purposes, we shall label them and cover each one separately. Remember, the implementation of these degrees of discipline varies according to the severity of the disorderliness and the response of the disorderly.

1. Private Admonition

This is usually the result of interpersonal conflict. This could also include you witnessing someone committing any sin even though it was not against you personally - **1 Thessalonians 5:14-15**.

In these cases God instructs us to go to the offender and speak to him in private. When it comes to interpersonal conflicts it involves two or more people. The ideal size of the circle of people who have knowledge of the offense is two, the offender and the offended or eye witness. Two is better than one according to **Matthew 18:15**. The offender might not even know that he has offended you and needs to know to enter the circle of two. If that doesn't resolve it, then the circle of exposure is to be increased by one or at most by two so that every word, attitude, and action can be established - **Matthew 18:16**. This approach is also fitting when it has come to your attention that one has been offended by you and that they have not exercised their responsibility to come to you - **Matthew 5:23-24**. This is so important to God that He instructs us who have offended another brother to deal with the offense before we offer up our gifts and spiritual sacrifices to God. We are commanded to leave our gift at the altar and get the relationship with our brother right, and then come to offer unto God.

2. Public Censure

This is usually the result of one who refuses to hear the circle of two or the circle of three or four.

At this juncture, we are commanded to publicly inform the local church of these matters. This escalates what God desired to remain as a private matter into becoming a public matter. Public censure is appropriate whenever people need to be warned about the dangers of associating with disorderly members. This is because they pose a danger to the local church by being divisive (separating people relationally) or infectious (contaminating with false doctrine, evil reports, gossip, slander, or lies) - **Romans 16:17-18**. God hates the sowing of discord in the Church - **Proverbs 6:16-19**; **Proverbs 16:27-28**; **Proverbs 17:9**. Therefore, these are to be marked much like we would mark a construction hole that people might fall into or like a warning label that would be put on a bottle containing poison.

Pro 6:16-19

(16) There are six things that the LORD hates, seven that are an abomination to him:

(17) haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood,

(18) a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil,

(19) a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers.

Pro 16:27-28

(27) A worthless man plots evil, and his speech is like a scorching fire.

(28) A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends.

Pro 17:9

(9) Whoever covers an offense seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates close friends.

Paul, the apostle, often used “Public Censure or Rebuke” to warn the body of Christ of dangerous people who were affecting or infecting the people of God by their bad attitudes, actions, or doctrines. He spoke directly to God’s people and also wrote letters, which were to be circulated and publicly read in the churches to which he related. He often named names in his “Public Censures” - **Galatians 2:12-14** (**especially vs.14 - “before them all”**); **1 Timothy 1:19-20**; **2 Timothy 2:16-18**. Whether or not he talked to them privately to warn them before he publicly rebuked them is not known. However, he was not timid in exposing those who endangered the spiritual well-being of God’s flock! Paul’s goal in publicly exposing the offenders was to warn God’s people not to listen to them or have any company with them.

John, the apostle, did the same thing to protect God’s people - **2 John 7-11**; **3 John 9-12**.

There are numerous people, who because of their evil ways, were named in the Holy Canon (OT & NT) as a warning not only to their generation but also to all future

generations. Study **Jude 3-19** to see some of the names and types of people that will forever live in infamy!

3. Disfellowship

Some describe the disfellowship or excommunication of a member as the “Nuclear Option” and rightly so. This is not the only option or even the first option when dealing with a rebellious, sinning member. This option should only be used when all else fails or when the sin is so grievous and infectious that the vitality of the body is in jeopardy.

When public censure is not heeded by a sinning member, then they are to be treated by the local church as a heathen and a tax collector - **Matthew 18:17**. As you know, heathens and tax collectors are not considered to be a part of the body of Christ. It is important to note that this does mean that we are to be unfriendly or nasty to them. Why? Because the heart of all Christians should desire the salvation of unbelieving sinners not their condemnation. It is God’s place to judge them, not ours. We are only responsible to judge those who are **within** the local church.

When a sinning member refuses to turn from his sin and come under the authority of the Biblical directives concerning Church Discipline, it becomes the responsibility of the elders to bring judgment.

1Co 5:1-13

(1) It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife.

(2) And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

(3) For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing.

(4) When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus,

(5) you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

(6) Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?

(7) Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.

(8) Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

(9) I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people--

(10) not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.

(11) But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler--not even to eat with such a one.

(12) For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?

(13) God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."

Paul rebukes the leaders in Corinth as being arrogant for not judging the brother guilty of fornication. He said that he had already pronounced judgment on the sinning one without even being present. To think the sinning one could continue in the church without endangering the members is to be as foolish as the one who thinks he can take fire into his bosom without burning his clothes - **Proverbs 6:27**. He charged them with recklessly endangering the corporate vitality of the local church. He told them that the sinner was like a spiritual leaven or cancer that would infect the entire body of Christ if allowed to remain. Time is of the essence when the local church is in danger of being contaminated! We are often afraid of going **faster** than we perceive grace would permit, but in this instance Paul indicated it was more dangerous to go **slower** than we perceive grace would permit. There is to be a space for repentance before judgment even as in the case of Jezebel - **Revelation 2:20-23**. However, it seems that the length of that space is determined by how infectious and dangerous the sinning one is to the well-being of the local church. **Ephesians 4:27** instructs us not to give place to the Devil. If permitted, he will build strongholds in the church. Paul did not give place to such nonsense for even one hour if it jeopardized the liberty of the Spirit in the body - **Galatians 2:4-5**.

His clear instruction was that when they assembled the congregation, they should publicly deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit might be saved in the Day of the Lord. They were commanded to purge out this leaven from their midst. Remember rebellion is equivalent to the sin of witchcraft - **1 Samuel 15:23**. Should a local church allow a witch to have fellowship with them? **2 Corinthians 6:14-17** would seem to indicate otherwise. God makes a strong argument that unchecked rebellion is as spiritually perilous as allowing witchcraft to be practiced in a church. Therefore, rebellion towards authority is to be dealt with swiftly.

What was this to look like? They were not to fellowship with any **unrepentant** Christian that was guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler--not even to eat with them.

Though this seems harsh to many, we must understand it from God's perspective. He tells us that it is our responsibility to judge those in the local church. He says that if they will not **hear** the church, they are to be put out. The reason for this is because it is His responsibility to judge those who are outside the local church. If they won't listen to us, it is going to take God to get them to **hear**. God is saying to us as leaders that He can get their attention when we can't, but that we should earnestly try first before putting them out of the Church. If we want God to redeem those we lovingly discipline, we must submit to His ways. For leaders to expect God to move in their behalf as well as on the behalf of the sinning one while implementing a course of action that is contrary to what He clearly commands, is indeed foolish. His ways are higher than our ways. We are to follow the clear biblical directives if we expect to enlist His help to do what we have been unable to accomplish in the life of the sinning member. The most merciful thing we can do is to, in faith, submit to God's ways and commit the sinning one into God's hands. In this place the sinning one has the best chance to **hear** and learn the **fear** of God - **Hebrews 10:30-31**.

4. Shunning of Church Members

Shunning seems to be the course of action when those in the church refuse to follow the direction of the leadership in important issues. An example of this can be seen in **2 Thessalonians 3:6,14-15**. Here the elders command, not suggest, that the members are to withdraw themselves from every brother who walks disorderly. In verse 14 and 15 of the same epistle, the elders command that the members who do not withdraw themselves from disorderly brothers are to be shunned. The purpose of shunning is not to remove a member from the local church but rather to note them and have no company with them that they might be ashamed. However, in this degree of discipline, we are not to treat them as our enemies, but admonish them as brothers in Christ.

Another possible example for the need of shunning can be seen in **Titus 3:10-11**. Here Paul instructs leaders such as Titus to shun or reject a man who is a heretic after he has been warned or admonished two times. The literal meaning of the word "heretic" is more broad than simply those who teach false doctrine. It simply refers to those who cause schisms or divisions in the body of Christ by whatever means including false doctrine. If such a person continues to endanger the local church, his actions could lead to disfellowship.

5. Discipline of Church Leadership

The next issue concerning Church Discipline is indeed very sensitive and very important! The issue I speak of is the judgment of church leaders who are accused of and /or are guilty of sin. For this very reason, it is essential that a proper attitude and approach be strictly adhered to according to clear Biblical teaching.

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 speaks clearly to the attitude one should have towards leaders. God instructs Christians to know those who labor among you, watch over you, and admonish you. We are to esteem them highly for the position in which God has placed them, not for their performances in that position. In other words, we are to honor the position even if the performance is lacking. This does not presume that because of their positions they are exempt from Church Discipline. It simply indicates that we are to be careful when dealing with those who are in these God-given offices.

Concerning accusations against leaders, extreme caution should be exercised in either bringing an accusation or receiving an accusation - **1 Timothy 5:1,17-19**.

1Ti 5:17-1

(17) Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine.

(18) For the Scripture says, "YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE AN OX WHILE IT TREADS OUT THE GRAIN," and, "THE LABORER IS WORTHY OF HIS WAGES."

(19) Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses.

Here the Church is instructed not to rebuke or chastise an elder but rather implore and pray for him. Christians are also directed not to even receive an accusation against an elder except by the mouth of two or three eye witnesses of the sin. Is this because leaders are special and deserve more preferential treatment than the saints? No!!! Why then? Here are several important reasons. First of all, God ordains all in authority, and they should be given every benefit of the doubt - **Romans 13:1-7**. In addition, as spiritual leaders they are constantly exposed to malicious gossip and attack especially by those who resent their ministry or teaching. They accused John the Baptist of having a demon for not eating, while at the same time they accused Jesus of being a glutton for eating. They also accused Jesus of being a winebibber, whoremonger, having a demon, being factious (heretic), and a leader of a revolution against God's people. Throughout the ages, godly men have been accused of the very same things. All ministry would become ineffective if rebuked for every charge, rumor, or bit of idle gossip. Does anyone doubt that the Devil has authored and still does author any lie that might render powerless those who pose a threat to his purpose and agenda? As a matter of fact, the more of a threat a leader is to Satan, the more apt he is to desperately fabricate anything that would diminish that leader's impact within the church and in this world.

When a leader is guilty of the accusations brought in the mouth of two or three witnesses, what procedure is to be followed? The main scripture used by many for the procedure to follow is found in **1 Timothy 5:20-21**.

1Ti 5:20-21

(20) Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear.

(21) I charge you before God and the Lord Jesus Christ and the elect angels that you observe these things without prejudice, doing nothing with partiality.

There are three schools of thought concerning the interpretation of this passage.

1. The sinning elder is to be rebuked before all the congregation to discourage sin.
2. The sinning elder is to be rebuked before all the elders to discourage all of the other elders from sinning.
3. The one who is to be rebuked refers to the one or ones that have sinned by bringing forth an accusation against an elder without having two or three witnesses ~ verse 19.

Whatever school of thought you subscribe to on the literal meaning of these particular verses, there is plenty of other evidence from the scriptures that would indicate that Paul, the apostle, believed in and practiced the public rebuke of sinning leaders who were able to influence others. Examples of this practice by Paul can be seen in the following passages of scripture ~ **Galatians 2:9-14**; **1 Timothy 1:19-20**; **2 Timothy 2:16-18**.

What about the circle of two or the circle of three/four? What if they repent and submit to the restoration process? Can it then be dealt with privately even as we are directed to do when a saint sins? No, how could this be done privately if they have to be

removed from their position until the restoration process is complete. You can be sure that Satan will make sure that someone finds out and spreads the bad news if the Church sweeps the leader's sin under the carpet. Other reasons why a leader is to be held to a higher standard of scrutiny concerning sin that is worthy of discipline are listed below:

- his public position makes his conduct infectious to others.
- it will discourage others of following his example of misconduct.
- it vindicates the Church in the eyes of the world they are to impact.

Ungodly leadership who persist in ungodliness, should not be followed but departed from and/or replaced - **3 John 5-12**. Often times Christians tend to criticize leaders when they shouldn't and then refuse to take a stand when they should! In not taking a stand, they justify their actions by saying, "Who are we to judge?" In so doing they allow unrighteousness to continue in their midst.

Discipline of Relatives and Household Members

What attitude and procedure should be followed when a member of one's own household or a relative is disciplined by the local church?

Concerning attitude, the scriptures make no exceptions for relatives - **Matthew 10:33-37**; **Luke 14:26-27**; **1 Corinthians 5:4-5**; **Deuteronomy 22:13-21**; **Deuteronomy 21:18-21**.

There are serious consequences when nepotism is practiced in making judgment on disorderly behavior. A classic example of this can be seen in 1 Samuel, chapters 2-4, where Eli was a respecter of persons when it came to judgment. This caused the loss of his life and the lives of his two sons. It even cost his posterity because they were banished from the priesthood that was to forever be their promised heritage - **1 Samuel 2:30-31**.

Concerning procedure, the following guidelines should be carefully considered:

- We are to be consistent in discipline regardless of relationship. (Remember Jesus said that this was the test of true disciples.)
- We are to willingly act in harmony with the local church's discipline in one mind and one accord.
- We are to in faith, believe for their deliverance, repentance, and restoration.
- We are go to them, point out their error, and pray ***for*** them if they won't allow us to pray ***with*** them.

If they refuse to repent and come under the discipline, you should humbly inform them that your loyalty is to Christ and His body. Tell them that their actions have severed spiritual fellowship with the body of Christ of which you are a part. Remind them that

the word of God clearly states that relationship is never to take precedence over righteousness because the blood of Jesus is thicker than the blood of relatives! Explain to them that you are making your position clear that they might see the seriousness of their actions and positions! If they won't hear you, have no spiritual fellowship with them, yet do not forsake what love would require of you as to natural fellowship. For example, don't miss the family Christmas dinner because the disciplined member is attending. If the disciplined one is not in your household, have as little fellowship as love would require. Though there are no specific laws to govern our every step in matters like these, there are principles that other godly people have followed which help us in taking a godly approach before them - **1 Kings 15:11-13**. Remember, God is love; seek Him for wisdom and direction to represent Him well in these very difficult matters - **1 Peter 3:1-6**. Those who are mature sons are to be led by the Spirit. If you are not a mature Christian, seek someone who is spiritually mature for wise counsel in these matters.

Discipline of Members of Other Churches

What should one do when a member of another local church has been righteously disciplined? What does God expect of us in these situations? Remember, in the Early Church this was not a problem? Why? Because when one was put out of the Jerusalem Church, there was no second Jerusalem Church to go to for comfort. Today, however, we should unite with and honor the discipline of other churches if it was righteous judgment. Any church who ***knowingly*** receives a disciplined member of another church is in rebellion and therefore subject themselves to the judgment of God! God only has one Church and He desires unity between the many expressions of the many-membered body of Christ. The testimony of communion is that we being many are one body and one bread with Jesus being the head of the body - **1 Corinthians 10:16-17**. If local churches stand together in Church Discipline, the sinning member might begin to feel the gravity of his unrepentant sin and sooner come to true repentance. We should never be in the place of taking off the pressure that God is putting on the one He is judging.

When it comes to Church Discipline, it makes no difference what building they were previously attending. If they were righteously put out of one church, the discipline should be universal. If they come to another building, they should be directed to go back to the disciplining church to be restored and released before being welcomed into fellowship. Another note to consider is that we should not receive into our midst a professing Christian who is in sin just because the previous church did not place him under discipline.

Discipline of Previous Members - What does God expect

What is our responsibility to be in the case of a previous member getting into sin after having left and is not attending another local church? We must realize that members of a local church are considered such because of their assembling together, fellowshiping, and functioning in that church. Therefore, if a previous member begins

practicing sin and continues in it, we don't need to put them out because they are already out. Excommunication removes them from fellowship not salvation. If they are not a part of another local assembly, it would be good for leadership to make an attempt to recover such a one in love. If they don't respond, they need to be informed that even though they were not put out of the local church, they are not welcome back without first being restored. However, we still have a responsibility to our local church because some members might still relate to the sinning one. Therefore, the elders need to warn the people of the spiritual dangers of fellowshiping with him and also of their unsuccessful attempt to recover him.

Church Membership

Generally speaking, today church membership involves something you join; you can even transfer that membership from one church to another. The scriptures teach otherwise. In **1 Corinthians 12:18**, Paul says that one does not join a church, but rather God joins each individual to a church of His choosing. As leaders, we are simply to recognize what God has done and bear witness that He has placed each member in the body of Christ as it pleased Him. It is God who makes one a member of a local church, not the leaders or the local church, itself. It is the responsibility of leadership to guard the fellowship of believers, not merely membership. Just because we disfellowship a sinning member, it does not mean that we have removed them from the membership role of the Church of Jesus Christ. Only God can blot people out of the Book of Life. For that reason we must be careful not make our concept of local church disfellowship more than it really is to be. With that in mind, we as leaders need to understand that in the restoration process we are only responsible to restore fellowship. A restored sinner does not need to get born again, yet again.

Restoration of Fellowship

Though the Bible has numerous references dealing with putting people outside of the church, there is little mention of the procedure to restore them. It is the heart of God to restore such an one who has been surgically removed or has been placed "outside of the camp". As I personally agonized over this dilemma in the past, the example of the restoration of a leper came to mind.

Leprosy, like leaven, has been used typologically in the Bible as sin or spiritual sickness. A study of **Leviticus 13 & 14** provides many insights that serve as guidelines in restoring a once infectious sinner who has been healed and given a clean bill of health by the local leaders.

Any leprosy was to be inspected and subjected to a period of observation by the priests to determine whether it was contagious or not. If it was contagious, the leper was put out of the camp to protect the healthy ones - **1 Corinthians 5:6**. In the case of a leper getting healed, the priests were to meet with them outside the camp to determine if and when it would be safe to allow them back into the camp. The priests were to inspect the leper's condition in accordance with the clear mandates of God's laws concerning the

leper. If it were deemed that there had indeed been a divine healing, the priests were to offer up prayers, praise, and thanksgiving - **Matthew 18:15-22**; **John 20:23**. A time of verifiable cleansing was to take place before they were allowed back into the camp. Once the leper was restored to the camp, there was still to be a period of observation by the priests before complete spiritual restoration was to be declared final. It is interesting to note that before their healing they were to put their hand over their mouth and shout, "Unclean, unclean" to warn the healthy to stay away. Once healed, it is good to publicly change their confession to be in accord with what God has done - **Matthew 3:1-8**; **James 5:16**. When restoration involves public confession on the part of the leaders and the one being restored, it facilitates a quick reconciliation to the local body and erases any reproach of the church in the eyes of the world. Often the member, once restored, values the church more and is more productive for the kingdom of God than he was before falling into sin. As members of the body of Christ, when a member is restored, we are to rejoice and forgive because we have gained a brother, not an ex-convict.