

# Church Discipline in the Local Congregation

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"Verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that sheep, than of the ninety and nine which went not astray." (Matthew 18, 13) So spoke our Lord shortly before He outlined the steps of church discipline. But how often we lose that perspective when we think about delinquent members. Our sinful flesh rebels at the thought of admonishing a member, making calls on a prodigal son, deciding what to do with a divorce case or tackling the problem of "dead wood". For some reason there seems to be a lot more enthusiasm, nostalgia, and glory to preaching the gospel to all people, baptizing the little ones, or comforting the sick and the dying. Yet our Lord and Master has made all of them of equal value, for they are all means by which lost souls can be saved.

Perhaps we lose our vision too easily when we deal with members and forget the joy. Perhaps we get too impatient when we don't see quick results. Perhaps we get too weary and tired over the long battle with sin. Perhaps we are too frustrated with broken promises and broken appointments. Perhaps we have become too callused to the problem to really want to do anything about it except "chop them off the books". Perhaps we just don't know how to have a good program in our church.

Whatever the problem is I hope that this paper will bring back a little joy in this soul-saving work. My paper will concentrate mainly on the how of church discipline rather than the why. It is intended to be an extension arm of the excellent chapter in Professor Schuetze and Habeck's book, *The Shepherd under Christ* entitled "The Shepherd sees the straying sheep".

## Assessing the Real Problem

Sit back and take a critical view of your congregation. What is the problem? Understanding the problem can lead you to a solution of it. Is it size? Normally smaller congregations have fewer discipline cases than large. Is it location, inner city churches, suburban churches, mostly older members or mostly newer members? Is distance a real factor? Are there real physical problems that encourage delinquency? Is it largely a spiritual problem? Is leadership in the congregation a contributing factor or is it your leadership that is lacking? Is the congregation aware of straying sheep and are they doing something about it individually or collectively?

Some problems are inherited. A predecessor may have enjoyed a large church and you have inherited a large number of delinquents. He may have been a one-man show, handling all cases by himself and therefore the congregation has never learned to exercise church discipline or never had a board of elders to help. He may have been too legalistic and you find tremendous resistance even to evangelical admonition. You may have inherited unresolved cases which have built up animosity of one family toward another, one group toward another. And if you are new to them they may see you as another minister like he was. In most cases there is no substitute for patient instruction and patient action. Negligence is inexcusable but to be long suffering is also a virtue.

You may also have inherited wrong procedures in gaining back the erring soul. Elders untrained are prone to use the law to produce what only the gospel can produce, a change of heart. Too often the reason for forsaking sin is a matter of shame, threat of punishment, excommunication, church discipline. On the surface the results may have been gained but the member comes to church, comes to communion, remains married, etc. for the wrong reason.

You may inherit ladies organizations who have been allowed to assert themselves because they get things done, who have a few members who have fostered lordship over others, the men of the church and defy their interference. Only firmness and patience after education can change them into loving, serving servants of the Lord.

Members of the church council may have become little popes, or members of one family dictators having their own way. Vice and crime have often attacked the most influential of leaders. Only God's word and love can turn them around.

One thing comes through loud and clear from the scriptures, "that which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the spirit is spirit". You cannot effect any good change in the life of a member unless that member is spiritual. You may as well talk to the wall unless the person to whom you are talking is inside a true Christian. You can expect results from even a weak Christian but you can not expect a result that is pleasing to God from a person who is not a Christian.

It is startling to look at the results of evangelism calls made upon our own members. In my experience at least 25% of active members of the church cannot give you the correct answer to the two TAS questions. And these are the active members, the leaders of the church, members of societies and organizations. In one way it does make sense for we know that the Devil's workshop is the Christian church, and that we all have the sinful flesh which daily must be drowned and die through repentance. It makes sense for experience proves that many a long time member still has fears of being unfit for heaven because they think that they are not good enough for God's heavenly kingdom, or complain about how hard God has dealt with them. They often say, "Now what did I do to deserve this." And if this is the case with the "good" people of the church what is the spiritual condition of the wayward?

I can see no better way to counsel, no more important question to ask than the basic and fundamental questions that expose the lack or presence of saving faith. The discernment of whether you have a sheep or a goat to deal with is the most important diagnosis and governs the way in which you will handle the sinner. I have been taught never to assume anything. Of course, only God can look into another man's heart to see whether he believes. But those who seek to restore the straying sheep must seek to determine the absence or presence of true saving faith before admonition can be given.

I see a great need for internal evangelism within the church. I find that the newly confirmed have the clearest expression of faith. But the farther people get from that day the harder it seems to be able to retain that simple child-like faith. A good shepherd knows his sheep.

### **Assessing the Real Problem of the Shepherd**

A good spiritual shepherd must know himself. He must know what it means to experience sins of weakness, yes sins of willfulness. Anyone who says to himself, "I don't see how he or she could do that" must not know himself. For we are all subject to the sins that are common to man. There isn't a sin of which you are not capable of committing. By God's grace and that alone you have learned to confess your sins and to find forgiveness in Christ alone and through Him strength to better your own sinful life. Yes, if you are honest, I think that you will admit that at times it has been even hard to believe some of God's word. Otherwise none of us would need the continued help of the Holy Spirit to enlighten, sanctify and keep us in the one true faith. If you have learned to control certain sins you ought to be able to counsel others how to do the same. If you have felt as David did, the heavy hand of God upon you until you confessed your sin and received His forgiveness, you know what great things God can accomplish through you in your work as the shepherd of His sheep. Our Savior as true God knew all about sin and its forgiveness and as true man He was tempted even as we are yet without sin. A good shepherd knows himself and therefore also knows his sheep.

A good shepherd knows the joy of one sinner that repents. He must always hold that blessed goal before his eyes when dealing faith sinners in his congregation. Too often church discipline becomes a terrible task for us because we feel inadequate, the task seems too unpleasant, the subject too far gone, the results too doubtful. We fail to realize the power of the word. Who would ever guess that "one little word can fell him", the Devil? Perhaps we fail to pray with faith believing that what we ask for we shall receive. Perhaps we succumb to our own sinful flesh which says what's the use or lets find the easy way out. Perhaps we rely too much on our superior ability to persuade with words the people we deal with. We fail to realize the power is in the word, that

all glory goes to God. We only plant the seed and let the Lord do the rest. God alone makes us sheep of the Good Shepherd, and He alone raises up shepherds to tend His flock.

A pastor is a trainer. So often we forget that fact. It is more important to teach others to do kingdom work than to do it all by yourself. Scripture says, "He gave some to be pastors to prepare God's people for works of service" (Eph. 4:11 & 12 - NIV). If we don't equip our people to admonish one another, how will the church respond to God's injunction? If we do it all by ourselves, how is the church to exercise church discipline? If we have no elders to help us, how can the church increase in faith and life as it should? If we do not train our elders, how can they be effective? If we have no training materials that we like, let us make our own. Training usually includes education and practice. When was the last time that you preached a series of sermons on Christian admonition, spiritual concern for members of your Christian family? Do you have a training program for your elders? Do they practice or learn by doing it with others? To do nothing is inexcusable. To do something is admirable. To improve is our goal. The pastor is the key to the training program. He may have to rely heavily upon the resources of others, even his own elders for practical advice. He is equipped to give the sound biblical training that is needed.

A pastor is a peacemaker. He can often ward off terrible sins of anger and hatred by his good counsel and patient instruction. Counseling in family troubles, marriage troubles, neighbor troubles, member troubles, teaching forgiveness, love, putting the best construction on everything, squelching rumors, gossip, upbuilding the good name of others he not only teaches Christian love but also can nip in the bud gross sins that become harder to deal with. Here an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

A shepherd tries to prevent the sheep from straying. This is another aspect of church discipline which has rewarding results. Our Lord warned Peter before his betrayal to try to stop his awful sin. We can do no less than to be concerned about ways to prevent the loss of our Christian faith. This is the most positive side of the church's program and perhaps bears the best results. Anything that will minimize the case load for church discipline has got to be good.

It is almost vitally necessary that every pastor have a plan for himself and his church to prevent the problems that come under church discipline as well as a plan of how to deal with those problems when they arise.

### **System and Programs that Can Work**

Preventive measures can be taken in a local congregation to avoid some of the problems which result in church discipline. In addition to thorough indoctrination of new members and pulpit and private instruction of the congregation there are areas which need specific attention.

The first area of concern might be the youth of the church, the newly confirmed. Some congregations assign on a voluntary basis a faith friend to the newly confirmed. These two people promise along with their regular confirmation vows to seek the spiritual welfare of the other. They both kneel at the altar promising before God that by His grace they will spiritually take care of one another so that if either of them begins to fail in being faithful to their Savior they will feel personally responsible to encourage one another. Youth listens to youth when they are brotherly admonished, and the training is vital for their adult life.

New members are special targets for training in spiritual concern. Some congregations assign sponsors for every new member from those in the congregation that are qualified and eager to become their spiritual sponsor. A sponsor is not only the host or hostess at the new member initiation night but promises to look after them spiritually for an indefinite period of time, encouraging their church and communion attendance, making them feel at home in the church and being genuinely interested in their spiritual growth. Members or couples of the church are selected for this task from active and spiritually mature Christians of the church. They find a real joy in being useful to the total spiritual life of the church and they find a real commitment in being responsible for one or two particular people of the congregation.

A systematic reminder from the pastor or church office can prevent communion delinquents. Following Luther's advice on four times a year communion, some congregations adopt a three month reminder to those

who have not attended communion. The first reminder in three months is mild, the second reminder in six months is quite general, but the nine month and yearly reminder comes down to the real issue of the matter. After a member is delinquent for one year the matter is turned over to the board of elders who make continuous calls until the matter is resolved, either by spiritual renewal or by excommunication. This timetable is arbitrary but it has been found to be effective and its preventive measures are valuable in limiting the number of delinquents to be dealt with by the Pastor or board of elders.

The aged, the distant member and the odd hours of work for some members present a special problem to many congregations. Some have solved this problem with special shut-in services once a month. At these services these members are brought or come to the service by the special encouragement and help from some group or organization. After the communion service a fellowship hour is usually held when these people eat together. Some members find these services the perfect answer to their special problems of distance or working schedule and again delinquency is prevented. Those who cannot arrange for this type of service are often placed on the pastor's shut-in list. Yearly, this shut-in list is updated to include such people who are of retirement age who have not attended communion regularly in the past year.

The out-of-reach member also presents special problems in a moving society. Often if the pastor notifies the Special Ministry Board early enough, or the local pastor, these people can be kept for the church by joining a closer congregation. Again time is of the essence and unless the member is very active in the home church a speedy transfer may save a member from being delinquent. Congregations should value the spiritual life of the member more than membership in the home church.

Don't forget a note or letter of commendation when a member has shown spiritual interest to attend church and communion or to join another church. Thank the Lord that His Word has not returned void but has accomplished that which pleases Him. The shepherd's staff can be a gentle nudge in the right direction and his rewarding pat on the head saying "Thou good and faithful" is as necessary in training the sheep as the rod that falls on the wayward. Let the sheep know that they are doing the right thing for the right reasons.

### **The Disposition of Cases**

There are four categories of sins that we deal with in straying sheep. They are unbelief, misbelief, sins of weakness and willful sins. The greatest sin is impenitence. The church or pastor must determine if the sin which has been committed is the result of impenitence. If the sinner is not sorry for his sin, does not recognize that it is a sin and that he has offended his God by that sin there is no hope for forgiveness.

Again if a sinner realizes his sin and is sorry that he has done it but does not accept Christ's full and free pardon he is not forgiven. Nor can you expect a true reformation in heart and life from those who have not done both of these two. It is the purpose of the shepherd and his flock to bring about such confession and absolution to the wayward sheep. Anything less than this leads to indifference or self righteousness which will in no way cure the sheep.

Therefore we must determine somewhere along the line whether the sheep is penitent or impenitent. If it is a case of impenitence and that persists we have no choice but to declare that sheep out of the fold, not to punish by excommunication but to preach the law in all its severity, hoping that true sorrow over sin may take place.

In the case of misbelief, if the sinner still clings to the saving gospel but denies through unbelief certain clear teachings of the Bible, he must eventually be dropped as a member of the church.

In the case of sins of weakness, and who of us do not have them, as St. Paul says, "not as though I had already attained either were already perfect: but I follow after" (Phil. 3,12) if we know that the member is truly sorry for these sins but has not mastered them as yet, only an encouraging word is in order. Most of them will not receive our attention.

However if a sin is willful, and the sinner wants no forgiveness for he is determined to live in his sin, then it is our duty as fellow members and eventually the elder's and Pastor's responsibility to deal with the sinner with brotherly admonition to seek the salvation of his soul.

Thus the disposition of cases may result in reclamation and total forgiveness, transfer, release, dismissal or excommunication.

Let me stress again that the purpose of this paper is not to treat the entire subject of brotherly admonition and church discipline. It is intended only as an extension of the subject as treated in the book, *Shepherding the Sheep*. It is largely concerned with the joy of reclaiming the sheep for the good shepherd and the practical way in which it can be carried out in a local congregation. May God richly bless your efforts.