

# Discipline in the Church

by William MacDonald

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*William MacDonald emphasizes the necessity and proper administration of discipline within the church to maintain its holiness and restore believers.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 18:15-17, Romans 16:17, 1 Corinthians 5:11, Galatians 6:1, 1 Thessalonians 4:3, 1 Thessalonians 5:14, 2 Thessalonians 3:11, Titus 3:10, 1 Peter 4:17, 1 John 2:19

**Topics:** "Church Discipline", "Holiness in the Church"

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## Description

William MacDonald emphasizes the necessity of discipline within the church, arguing that prevention through godly living and systematic Bible teaching is crucial for maintaining the church's integrity. He outlines the purposes of discipline, which include exposing unregenerate members and restoring erring believers, and describes various degrees of discipline as prescribed in the New Testament. MacDonald stresses that discipline should be administered with meekness and impartiality, and that it is a collective responsibility of the church rather than an individual act. He concludes that the church must act decisively against sin to uphold its character as a representation of God's holiness.

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## Transcript

### PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN CURE

First of all, it can do so by the godly lives of those who are associated with it. This is fundamental. God desires practical sanctification (1 Thessalonians 4:3). This is why Church truths are not given as an isolated and distinct outline in any one section of the New Testament. Rather, they are found in many different places, and are interspersed with practical instruction for holy Christian living. The Lord does not simply want people who are outwardly correct in their church life, but those whose lives are testimonies to the truth.

To that end the local church should provide a good diet of Bible teaching. This instruction should not consist of mere snatches from here and there, but of consecutive, systematic teaching of the word of God. Only in this way will the saints receive all the Word, and in the balance in which God has given it.

Though sound and systematic teaching will have a definite preventative effect as far as sin in an assembly is concerned, inevitably every local church will be called upon to take disciplinary action at one time or another. Whenever sin comes in to affect the peace of the assembly or its testimony in the community, action must be taken. "Judgment must begin at the house of God" (1 Peter 4:17).

## REASONS FOR ACTING

Disciplinary action has two principal purposes: (1) To expose and expel from the fellowship professing Christians who are actually unregenerate -such people as are described in 1 John 2:19, (2) To deal with an erring believer in such a way as to bring about his restoration to the Lord and to the local church. Discipline of Christians is never an end in itself but always a means of effecting spiritual recovery.

## DEGREES OF DISCIPLINE

Various degrees of discipline are described in the New Testament. In the case of a brother who sins against another, he should first be dealt with privately. If he will not listen, then one or two more persons should go to him. Failure to listen to this collective witness results in his being brought before the church. If this latter action should fail, then he is to be counted as an heathen man and a publican (Matthew 18:15-17).

Another form of discipline is a warning (1 Thessalonians 5:14). This is to be employed in the case of a brother who is unruly; that is, one who refuses to submit to those who are over him in the Lord.

Then we read that two classes of people are to be avoided: namely, a disorderly man (2 Thessalonians 3:11, 14, 15), and one who causes divisions (Romans 16:17). The disorderly person is one who refuses to work, while the other creates divisions among God's people in order to attract a following and profit materially.

An heretic should be rejected after the first and second warning (Titus 3:10). (There is some question as to whether this is a less severe form of discipline, or whether it amounts to excommunication.)

Then there is the extreme form of discipline - excommunication from the church (1 Corinthians 5:11, 13). This is reserved for a one or more. Is the local church to be deemed indifferent or supine because it refuses to act on the testimony of a solitary witness? Nay, it would be flying in the face of a divine command were it to do so.

"And be it remembered that this great practical principle is not confined in its application to cases of discipline or questions connected with an assembly of the Lord's people; it is of universal application. We should never allow ourselves to form a judgment or come to a conclusion without the divinely appointed measure of evidence; if that be not forthcoming, and if it be needful for us to judge in the case, God will, in due time, furnish the needed evidence. We have known a case in which a man was falsely accused because the accuser based his charge upon the evidence of one of his senses; had he taken the trouble of getting the evidence of one or two more of his senses, he would not have made the charge."

## HOW TO ADMINISTER DISCIPLINE

Another aspect of this subject that deserves careful consideration is the manner in which the discipline is carried out. For example, it should be accomplished in the spirit of meekness, considering one's self, lest he also be tempted (Galatians 6:1). Also, it should be strictly impartial. The fact that a wrongdoer is related to us by ties of nature, for instance should in no wise influence our decision in the matter. Respect of persons must not be shown (Deuteronomy 1 :17; James 2:1).

In the case of excommunication, it should be the action of the church, and not of any one person (2 Corinthians 2:6). We refer once again to C. H. Mackintosh for the spirit in which this form of discipline

should be effected. He says: "Nothing can be more solemn or affecting than the act of putting away a person from the Lord's table. It is the last sad and unavoidable act of the whole assembly, and it should be performed with broken hearts and weeping eyes. Alas how often it is otherwise! How often does this most solemn and holy duty take the form of a mere official announcement that such a person is out of fellowship. Need we wonder that discipline, so carried out, fails to tell with power upon the erring one, or upon the church.

"How then should the discipline be carried out? Just as 1 Corinthians 5 directs. When the case is so patent, so clear, that all discussion and all deliberation is at an end, the whole church should be solemnly convened for the special purpose-for, most assuredly, it is of sufficient gravity and importance to command a special meeting. All should, if possible, attend, and seek grace to make the sin their own, to go down before God in true self-judgment, and 'eat the sin-offering.' The church is not called to deliberate or discuss. The case should be thoroughly investigated, and all the facts collected by those who care for the interests of Christ and His church; and when it is thoroughly settled, and the evidence perfectly conclusive, then the whole church is called to perform, in deep sorrow and humiliation, the sad act of putting away from among themselves the evil doer. It is an act of holy obedience to the Lord's command."

Finally it should not need emphasis that Christians should not broadcast the sin of their fellows, but rather throw a kindly cloke of secrecy around the sin and its discipline, as far as outsiders are concerned.

## CONCLUSION

Only as the church takes resolute action when sin is discovered can it hope to maintain its true character as a miniature of the holy temple of God.

Perhaps it should be added here that the New Testament assumes every believer to be attached to some local church; otherwise he would be free from the discipline of any assembly, and such a freedom would be fraught with the gravest perils for the individual.

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