

Church Discipline in the life of Eastgate Bible Church

Johnathan Leemer asks the following questions in an article on church discipline;

What would you think of a coach who instructs his players but never drills them? Or a math teacher who explains the lesson but never corrects her students' mistakes? Or a doctor who talks about health but ignores cancer?

You would probably say that all of them are doing half their job. Athletic training requires instructing and drilling. Teaching requires explaining and correcting. Doctoring requires encouraging health and fighting disease. Right?

Okay, what would you think about a church that teaches and disciplines but doesn't practice church discipline? Does that make sense to you? I assume it makes sense to many churches, because every church teaches and disciplines, but so few practice church discipline. The problem is, making disciples without discipline makes as much sense as a doctor who ignores tumors.¹

To maintain healthiness the human body has been designed with its own immune system, likewise the church has an immune system to fight against sickness- church discipline. And Eastgate desires to see itself as a fit and healthy part of the body of Christ.

The idea that the church's immunity system is to remove "cancerous" parts can be seen clearly in 1 Corinthians 5. Here Paul writes to the Corinthian church and he is shocked at their behavior. One of the church members has committed sexual immorality with his stepmother!² What is worse though is that the church hasn't done anything about the offender; in fact the church is puffed up and has not mourned. Paul in the passage doesn't write anything to the offender but he does rebuke the church for not removing the immoral member. He reminds them that a little leaven ruins the whole batch and that as a church they are to purge out the old leaven³.

In some ways Paul wasn't surprised that the offender had sinned, the bible gives many examples of people who sin against God. He was more worried that the churches immunity system had failed, he knew that if this continued the body would become sick and eventually die.

The idea of church discipline is foreign to some and intimidating for others. For those who have been in an abusive church, the scars can still run deep however just as we don't discard doctors and medicine because of bad practitioners neither should church discipline be disregarded because of abusive shepherds.

¹ <http://www.9marks.org/ejournal/church-discipline-primer>

² 1Cor 5:1

³ 1Cor 5:6-7

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With these thoughts in mind the following points will be addressed;

1. Why church discipline?
2. What is the purpose/ desired outcome of church discipline?
3. How will it be practiced?
4. What sins will be disciplined?
5. Do I have a get out of jail for free card?

1. Why church discipline?

The motivation for discipline is love, with the example of this being God. God's love through discipline can be seen clearly in Hebrews 12.

"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. **For the Lord disciplines the one he loves**, and chastises every son whom he receives." 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?** If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live?" (vs 5-9 ESV Emphasis added.)

Within this passage the author makes several points. Firstly he calls for us to not think it a light event to be disciplined by God. He does not want us to be blasé, or at the other extreme, scornful when God disciplines us. Why is this? The reason is simple God is disciplining us because he loves us. He wants to see us grow. We will look further in point 2 below.

The author of Hebrews then reminds us of earthly fathers disciplining their children. What father would allow their young son to wander the streets at night, to be in with the wrong crowd, or to be involved drugs or out at parties? If a father does this it is evident that he doesn't care for his son. If an earthly father will discipline his son when they are wicked shouldn't we expect our perfect heavenly father to also discipline his children?⁴

In fact a father that doesn't discipline his child, according to proverbs, hates the child; "Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him."⁵

Furthermore to this love that is genuine isn't a wishy-washy pat-on-the-head love but is real and tough that according to Paul *"does not rejoice in iniquity but rejoices in the truth."*⁶

⁴ Further examples of this can be seen in Proverbs 3:12, 19:18, 22:15, 23:13-14, 29:15,

⁵ Proverbs 13:24 ESV

⁶ 1Cor 13:6 NKJV

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Following in the footsteps of our Heavenly Father Eastgate bible church desires out of love to exercise discipline upon sinning members. The church wants to have genuine love present not a soft love.

2. What is the purpose/desired outcome of discipline?

The purpose and desired outcome of discipline can be seen again in Hebrews 12 passage;

“For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, **but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.** For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but **later it yields** the peaceful fruit of **righteousness** to those who have been trained by it.” (vss 10-11 ESV)

The reason God as a Father disciplines us is for our own good! He does it that we may share in his holiness and to bring forth fruits of righteousness. That we may grow in the fruits of the Spirit- to become more like Jesus.

This is really the chief end of all disciplining within the church -that the offender may repent and grow more like Christ. Eastgate Bible Church seeks and strives to see all its members ready for the return of our Lord Jesus. To do this we seek to use church discipline so that its members may grow in holiness, righteousness and all the fruits of the spirit.

From this further benefits naturally occur; sinners are saved from fire⁷, brothers are gained⁸, a fear of God grows⁹, fear of sin grows¹⁰. Through it all, the world will see our genuine love for each other and will know that we are Christ’s disciples.

3. How will it be practiced?

The principle text on how church discipline is to be practiced is found in Matt 18:15-20 from which four steps can be seen;

- a. If a brother sins against us we are to go and speak to him. If he accepts case closed.¹¹
- b. If the brother doesn’t listen then the offended party is to bring in mediation. These two or three witnesses are to investigate the matter hearing both sides of the arguments and are to pass judgment.¹² This would normally be done by the elders of the church.
- c. If the sinning party still doesn’t repent the next stage would be for the elders of the church to make an announcement to the members.¹³ This

⁷ 1Corinthians 5:5

⁸ Matthew 18:15

⁹ Acts 5:11

¹⁰ 1Timothy 5:20

¹¹ Matthew 18:15

¹² Matthew 18:16

¹³ Matthew 18:17

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announcement would briefly outline the sins involved in a way that would not cause other members to stumble or to embarrass the offending parties family. The purpose of this is so that the church prays for the repentance of the sinner and to call them to repent

- d. If the offender still refuses to repent after a certain period of time he is to be excommunicated from the church and his membership will be withdrawn. The church is to treat him as a person who isn't saved and are to continue to call him to repentance¹⁴

4. What sins will be disciplined?

Not all sins require such drastic measures; Peter wrote that love covers a multitude of sins.¹⁵ So which sins should be covered and which should be brought out into the open?

The bible doesn't give a clear precise delineating list to run by, it does however give some lists from which the following guidelines can be drawn;¹⁶

- a. Clear outward vices - Sexual immorality, greed, idolatry, abuse, drunkenness, swindling¹⁷, adultery, fornication, homosexuality, stealing¹⁸
- b. Stirring up divisions¹⁹
- c. Denial of Christian doctrines²⁰
- d. Failure to provide for ones household or relatives²¹
- e. Unreconciled enmity²²

What can be seen is that all of these sins are outwardly manifested. They are sins that are externally visible to a secular eye or have an impact on the unity of the local church. They are sins that bring dishonor to the name of Christ and these are the kinds of sins that should be disciplined.

Based upon these guidelines we can draw conclusions upon what modern day sins should or shouldn't be disciplined by the church. For example would a person who is addicted to pornography be discipline? Yes it would fall under the first category above. What about a Christian who is has the habit of losing his temper and getting angry? Maybe not, a brother should speak to him in love however if he doesn't repent it may not be case for further disciple depending on how extreme the circumstance is.

¹⁴ Matthew 18:17

¹⁵ 1Peter 4:8

¹⁶ 1. John Angell James, Church Fellowship or The Church Member's Guide, excerpted from volume XI of the 10th edition of the Works of John Angell James, 53.

¹⁷ 1Cor 5:11

¹⁸ 1Cor 5:9-10

¹⁹ Titus 3:10-11

²⁰ Gal 1:8, 2 Tim. 2:17-21, 1 Tim. 6:35; 2 John 10 f.

²¹ 1 Tim. 5:8

²² Matt 18:7

5. Do I have a get out of jail for free card?

A final point that needs to be brought up is, what will happen to an offender if they withdraw their membership while they are undergoing membership. What if a person has been caught in fornication or adultery and when confronted he leaves the church? Does all discipline stop? If they go to another church will the leaders of the other church be contacted? Will the offender receive a get out of jail for free card?

The answer to this lies in a correct understanding of what the church is. The church of Jesus Christ is not on par with a sporting club, in which the member applies for membership and can withdraw at any time. The visible church consists of all who confess Jesus Christ as Lord, the local church is a manifestation of the greater body of Christ.

When a person withdraws their membership from a local church to go to another church they are not removing themselves from the body of Christ. They are only removing themselves from a local manifestation of the greater body, in this case Eastgate bible church.

For Eastgate to ignore the sin that has been brought to its attention and allow the offender to proceed to another church is unloving. It is unloving to the offender because they will continue to live a sinful lifestyle, and it is unloving to the other church involved because the offender may hurt other brothers and sisters within that church.

Eastgate Bible church will therefore continue to discipline a member who withdraws their membership, and the church will not accept the resignation until the discipline has reached its necessary completion. If a person leaves when first confronted about sin such as adultery the elders will announce to the congregation the sin involved as per the practices explained above. Eastgate will also inform the leaders of the other church where the offender is attending.

Final points.

It is to be noted that whenever matters of discipline come before the church, priority must always be given to pastoral ministry in resolving conflicts. An exception to this is where legislation requires a specific process to be followed (e.g. Child Safety legislation), these legislated processes must be carried out. In these cases the leadership will without hesitation refer the matter to the proper legal authority.