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All in the Family

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By Glenn Wagner

Church discipline. No one wants to talk about it in public. It does not matter which facet of this explosive issue is touched, from minor admonishments such as encouraging children to respect their church to more formal disciplinary measures such as suspension or public excommunication for sexual indiscretions. When the subject is raised in a public place, eyebrows raise, top buttons are fastened, and even the pious begin to squirm. "Sure we need discipline." "Yes, the church should discipline its members." "What sins should be corrected? Not mine!" Discussion is clipped and evasive.

Church discipline. Off the record we can see open sores behind our public uneasiness. We are torn by vivid memories of individuals who have failed us by breaking the rules or of narrow-minded church members who have failed to understand our weaknesses.

A conversation with a disenchanted Christian might go like this: "Did you hear about Pastor Jones? What a hypocrite! Did you know that he was involved with women in his church office? He'd just tell the secretary he was having Bible study and would accept no calls. Some Bible study. Song of Solomon in depth, no doubt!" Can you feel the flames?

A disenfranchised church member, on the other hand, might say something like this: "I don't believe it. My husband cheated on me, beat me, stole my money, and abused alcohol. People knew it, but no one said anything. When I finally divorced him after five years of misery, I got my first call from the elders and was censured for my action. They haven't been back since. I was disciplined when I most needed

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someone to listen. I'll never ever go there to church again." Are you sensitive to the pain?

In spite of our private memories, there seems to be a consensus, which is supported by Scripture, that discipline in the church is necessary. We need to define and preserve proper human relationships in the church in order to foster communication, love, a sense of Christian identity, and a proper witness to Jesus Christ.

Scripture has much to say about the difficult task of resolving conflicts and transgressions in those relationships. In Matthew 18:15-17 Jesus set down what has long been recognized as a scriptural basis for discipline in the church. "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 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-collector." First Corinthians 5 and 6, Matthew 18:21 and 22, Colos-

sians 3:13, 1 Timothy 5:20, Galatians 6:1-2, and Hebrews 13:17 should also be studied as some of the other New Testament cornerstones of discipline. A necessary tension exists in these passages between the need for Christians to forgive sins and the mandate for decisive correction of unrepentant sinners. This tension between the need to forgive and the demand for correction in Scripture contributes to the emotional strain that we experience when trying to deal with sin in our lives and in the church.

The church has wrestled with this tension between forgiveness and correction and has learned to live without firm resolution of the tension. In the second chapter of the *Book of Church Order*, the Reformed Church's guidelines for discipline are spelled out. Each church member is subject to the care of his or her elders. More serious sins like "blasphemy, assault or other acts of violence, adultery, fornication, perjury, lying, slander, theft, forgery, violation of vows, desertion of office, intrusion in the office of another, schism, and drunkenness" are subject to discipline because they can be established as sins by the Bible. A person's actions

also may be considered for discipline if they are considered offensive by the government of the Reformed Church in America or if they cause the sinner's reputation to be dishonored. Other provisions for discipline are spelled out in the *Book of Church Order*, although private offenses are to be handled in the spirit of Matthew 18:15-17. If encouragement fails, judicial guidelines for disciplining are clear. Sin is not taken lightly by the *Book of Church Order*.

Contrary to those who proclaim, "Do your own thing," Jesus, Paul, and the church underline our responsibilities to each other. Sin is to be taken seriously because our relationships and responsibilities to each other are important. Just as a finger needs the nervous system and the brain to inform it of excessive heat, so too, according to Scripture, a member of the body of Christ needs the church to help him discern the face of sin.

Regrettably the church does not guide its members with the efficiency of a nervous system. There are several reasons why this is true. We are slow. Usually sinful behavior deemed necessary for church attention is only recognized long after the initial sin has been committed. Adultery does not just happen. It begins in wayward thoughts which influence a person's behavior. Behavior is repeated time and again before it finally explodes into public view. Divorce may be precipitated by 25 years of angry tolerance before a decision to separate is made. Children who vandalize a church have practiced a disrespect for authority at home. By the time we act on the sin of another as a church, it is typically far past the best time for intervention. Like a cancer that spreads, sin develops and is rationalized into the life of a person. Late detection makes repentance more difficult. We too frequently fail to go privately to our brother when early warning signals of a bigger sin brewing are noticed.

We are inconsistent. All too often certain sins and certain sinners are singled out for discipline. Those who withdraw from the life of the church and those who violate marriage by sexual delinquency are most frequently identified for church attention, while drunks, gossips, physically abusive parents, TV addicts, and other sinners are tolerated without much fuss. The

only consistent thing about our application of discipline is that we steadfastly refuse to incriminate ourselves.

The church is culturally influenced in the exercise of discipline. Smoking is not nearly so sinful in North Carolina as it is in states where folks are not dependent on the tobacco industry for their livelihood. Beer is rarely taboo in Milwaukee. Affluence is overlooked completely as a sin by American Christians, while the faithful of impoverished nations have little difficulty judging fat.

We are poorly prepared to discipline. Policemen, psychiatric nurses, counselors, and teachers generally receive guidelines by which they govern their disciplinary actions. Not so Christians. Sin is not a simple thing to tackle if we hope to encourage repentance and reconciliation, yet we often approach offenders as if a quote from Scripture and an ecclesiastical warning will en-

knocking on our brother's door in complaint. Do I understand him thoroughly? What is my intention in going to him? What are potential roadblocks to achieving our purpose? Clear and calm thinking by parties involved in a moral conflict is essential if healing is to occur.

Discipline is not easy also because it always affects more than one person. Friendships and prejudice always guarantee that any disciplinary action will affect a network of people across the entire congregation. Some will be bitter, others satisfied. Discipline, like any internal operation, leaves a scar and takes care to heal.

In spite of the difficulties we encounter in the process of discipline, there are some guidelines in Scripture that should help us compensate for our handicaps. Whether discipline is exercised mildly in the form of education, through Sunday school, preaching, or

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courage change of well-established attitudes and behaviors.

We are reluctant to discipline. We don't want to cast stones and open ourselves to judgment. Our powerful private emotions and our evasiveness about church discipline in public are testimony to our reluctance to be honest with our brother about his sin.

Our application of discipline is difficult because no one wants to be disciplined. The heightened defensiveness of those who are singled out as guilty is often accompanied by unpolished directness on the part of a concerned brother (creating a scene that resembles a china shop with a bull on the premises). Going to our brother if he sins is a task that catches both brothers when they are most vulnerable to hurt and least likely to either receive or offer criticism fairly. This defensiveness will only be lessened by patient work on the part of persons committed to improving their relationships—not by attack and counter-attack. We ought to ask ourselves some questions before

encouragement or more formally through suspension and excommunication, we will never be able to use our influence effectively with others until we have influence with others. The notion of Christian discipline is a sham if it is administered where no relationship is present. Jesus says, "Go to your brother if he sins. . . ." We come together as equals in the normal course of a continuing relationship to reconcile differences and encourage each other. There is no room for a holier-than-thou attitude. Discipline is a disaster when applied to strangers by strangers who never intend to be friends.

As a part of a relationship we need not be embarrassed about discipline. If we don't love someone enough to talk with them about our problems with their sin, then we haven't much of a friendship. An important purpose of Christian discipline is to foster healing of a relationship strained by sin. The passage on discipline in Matthew 18:15-17 occurs in the context of a larger discussion about the importance

of working toward this reconciliation with our brother. Such renewed health is not a matter of the sinner saying, "I'm sorry. I won't do it anymore." Sin never occurs in only one person's life. Discipline involves the lives of both brothers. A drunk, for example, cannot stop his disease if his family and friends are not strong enough to allow him to be responsible for his alcoholism. They need to change their lives, too, if healing is to occur. We need to be aware of our unknowing complicity in allowing the sins around us to happen. Humility and understanding will do more for discipline than a snap judgment and a quick condemnation.

We know from scriptural discussion and personal experience that there will be moments in the church in which a sin cannot be reconciled, tolerated, or understood. It should be remembered in these cases that neither tolerance nor forceful action that goes against the will of an errant brother will achieve the desired results of reconciliation and repentance. In such instances a third party or professional counseling can often be of service to mediate locked emotions.

Sometimes even third party intervention is not enough to settle differences. The situation gets most difficult for all when gentle methods of discipline fail to encourage holiness. At the point of collision between persistent

the position like that of the father in Luke 15. Allowing the prodigal to go where he will is a path of painful love that neither tolerates sin nor rejects the sinner.

Many, however, have chosen out of similar love and with good biblical reason to move along the path of suspension and excommunication. According to 1 Corinthians 5:5-6, such prac-

by Scripture. An active practice of suspension in a church may force sin to stay secret or a symptom of "those sinners out there." Those who are disciplined for their errors often rejoin another church that will accept them as people and will minister to their needs. Suspended Christians have argued that they did not want condemnation from their elders but emotional

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tice has a multiple purpose. Recalcitrant sinners are suspended to encourage them to repent. Suspension also keeps the sinner from heaping shame and reproach onto the name of Christ in the eyes of the world and helps encourage others not to be tempted into the same sin. The sinner, too, is protected from further defiling himself before the Lord and is confronted with the fact that he has clearly violated God's principles.

Biblically these are sound principles on which to discipline. By the grace of

support to help them in their sinfulness. Disciplining elders have their countercharges.

In those all too frequent occasions when a choice must be made between biblical disciplinary action and biblical long-suffering love that allows for stalemate and continues to keep the door open to our brotherly relationship, I choose to support the side of long-suffering love unless the life of the church itself is at stake. I do not advocate tolerance of sin but encourage us to guard against unjustly closing the door on God's people. God's commitment to us is an eternal model of how we ought to struggle to live in harmony with our brothers.

With the Lord as our model, we ought to view church discipline as a matter that is all in the family. The family is a group of people who are concerned with the behavior of each member but who also know that all belong and must continue to live together after the arguments and in spite of differences. Gathered together as a family to discuss sin, we can know that our efforts at obedience and reconciliation will not be in vain nor carried on alone. Where the family of God exercises this kind of commitment to each other, Jesus will be present. We are reminded of this familial intent of discipline when, in the conclusion of his basic instruction on discipline in Matthew 18:20, Jesus reminds us that "where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." †

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sin and the biblical mandate to correct the sinner, each church must make a difficult choice. If gentle encouragement does not restore the relationship, the church must decide whether to allow the sinner to go his own way and hope that some day the wayward will repent or to begin disciplinary proceedings to save the body and to encourage repentance.

In practice those that choose to commit themselves to a relationship in spite of sin are forced by persistent sin into

God and with hard work, suspension may indeed encourage biblical results, but in many instances the difficulties the church has in the administration of formal discipline can make suspension and excommunication like an amputation. In practice suspension can mean the termination of a person's union with the church and a severe shock to the life of the body that remains. Discipline can easily foster bitterness and fail to encourage at all the reconciliation and purity intended