

4. Congregational Discipline: What Is the Role of the Members?

Congregational discipline frightens many members. How shall they apply what seems to be rigid requirements to a son or daughter, husband or wife, fellow-worker, civic or social club members, teller at the bank, or the clerk at a store? The elders should do the more confrontational work of bringing the member's sin to their attention, refuting their false teaching, bringing their error before the congregation, and asking the congregation to assert discipline. However, the congregation must do the everyday work of applying the discipline.

What the Individual Members Must Do

Once the elders have brought delinquent and/or backsliding members before the congregation, the members must respond in a unified way, prescribed by the scriptures. The scriptures give the specific responses:

Watch out!

"17 I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them." Rom 16:17.

Must not associate.

"11 But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat." 1 Cor 5:11.

Take special note.

"14 If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. 15 Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother." 2 Thess 3:14-15.

Expel the wicked man.

"13 God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you." 1 Cor 5:13.

Keep away.

"6 In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us." 2 Thess 3:6.

How Members Must Do These Acts of Discipline

When first confronted with these actions, human nature takes over. Just as Heb 12:11 says: "All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful." It is only by staying with it that we can see that "afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness (Verse 11)" Or we may over-react by saying that we cannot follow through with family, co-workers, or old-time friends. Of course, we can follow through with these folks, if as we exercise the above actions, we have the proper spirit. The Bible not only tells us what to do, but also how to do it:

Restore him gently.

“1 Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.” Gal 6:1.

Carry the burden of the sinful.

“2 Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” Gal 6:2-3

Treat him as a brother and not as an enemy.

“5 Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.” 2 Thess 3:15.

Never Give Tacit or Silent Approval of the Sin and/or the Sinner

As we come and go in family, work, and social life, we must always gently admonish those under the discipline of God's word. We must be willing to bear their burdens. We must love them, but not their sin. On the other hand, they must know from us exactly where they stand according to God's word. A good application of these scriptures would be never to meet with one of these members in a social, family, or workplace setting without admonishing them to deny their sin and come back to the Lord. In this way, they will not ever think that they are OK with us and receive strength from us to continue in their sin.

In Discipline, Elders and Members Work Together

When one sets out to destroy the church through division and false teaching, the elders must take the lead, refuting and destroying their arguments and their evil spirit. Paul gives the course of action in Titus 1:9-13:

9 He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.

10 For there are many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision group. 11 They must be silenced, because they are ruining whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach – and that for the sake of dishonest gain. 12 Even one of their own prophets has said, "Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons." 13 This testimony is true. Therefore, rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith

Elders must refute those who oppose the sound doctrine before the congregation (Verse 9). Since these false teachers ruin whole households by their false teaching, the elders must silence them. Not only must the elders refute their false doctrine but they must also rebuke them sharply for their false teaching. *No pulling punches or mincing words* should be the rule.

In all situations where the church applies discipline, the members must support the elders according to Heb 13:17: “17 Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

The Lord taught in Matt 12:25, “25 Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand." When the church confronts division and false teachers, the elders and members must stand as one.

Finally, we should always love the ones that we discipline and discipline them with a spirit of gentleness.