

**PRACTICING CHURCH DISCIPLINE**  
**1 Corinthians 5**  
**November 6, 2005 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church**

Imagine, if you can, a home with no discipline. One word would describe such a scene: anarchy. Or imagine your body if you did not exercise some discipline. If we did not have some self-control or restraint, we would not last very long. Yet discipline is never easy, nor would we ever describe it as fun. As one writer points out, “Discipline, admittedly, is not a happy word. It’s a little like Brussels sprouts—we know we should like them, but it sure seems like an acquired taste” [Paul Alexander, *The Deliberate Church*, 67]. While it is often painful for the moment, we would all agree that discipline is necessary for a body to function properly, whether it is our own body or some corporate body, such as home, work, or school. There are rules that must be followed because when these rules are broken, the body is injured. So great care must be taken to assure that the rules are kept. And when they are not, there must be consequences for those actions. The church is no exception.

The Protestant Reformers taught that the true church is identified biblically by three marks: (1) the right preaching of the Word (or sound doctrine), (2) the right administration of the ordinances (which are baptism and the Lord’s Supper), and (3) the right exercise of church discipline. Our confession at Grace Covenant, adopted at Charleston, SC in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, states, “To each of these churches thus gathered, according to his mind declared in his word, he hath given all that power and authority, which is in any way needful for their carrying on that order of worship *and discipline*, which he hath instituted for them to observe; with commands and rules for the due and right exerting, and executing of that power” [26.7]. Our church covenant that we read together a moment ago, which I would have you to know is the covenant used in many Baptist churches, pledges the following in relation to the church, “to sustain its worship, ordinances, *discipline*, and doctrines.” In a commentary on sec. VI of the *2000 Baptist Faith and Message*, Greg Wills, professor of church history at Southern Seminary, wrote the following:

To covenant together in the fellowship of the gospel implies agreement to maintain the discipline by which Christ intended the preservation of fellowship. The discipline includes admitting those only who credibly profess faith in Christ; correcting, warning and rebuking those who stray from truth or righteousness; excluding those who refuse the church’s loving entreaties to return to the path of truth and righteousness; and restoring the repentant to fellowship. [<http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=14069>]

The confessions of other denominations that contain statements on church discipline could be given, but these will suffice to show that church discipline has been a part of Protestantism in general, and Baptist life in particular, from their infancies. However, in the church today, it is not difficult to find people who are absolutely indignant toward church discipline. They are more incensed by the mere thought of church discipline than they are by the sin itself that should be disciplined. However, this should not surprise us. We live in a culture that is desensitized to sin. For many, there simply is no sin that could be so heinous as to actually require removing someone from the church roles. Therefore, we live in an era where church discipline is not the norm. It has become “the missing mark” of the church, even though, as we have demonstrated, it is an important part of the confessions and, more importantly we will see, it is an explicit command of Scripture.

In our text this morning, Paul addresses another issue that had come to his attention concerning the church at Corinth. You remember the first broad issue that Paul dealt with in chapters 1-4 was instigated by the report he had received from Chloe concerning divisions in the church stemming from prideful leadership (1:11). Having addressed that situation, Paul, in these next chapters, addresses some specific areas of concern with the membership. In chapter 5, he is once again concerned about a report he had received concerning a certain individual in the church. In dealing with this issue, Paul shows, as the Reformers showed later, that *the health of a church depends on the right exercise of church discipline*. Church discipline is a vital mark of a true church.

## I. The Process of Church Discipline (1-3)

If a pastor wants to keep his pastorate, he must take great care that he does not simply exact church discipline willy-nilly, off-the-cuff. He will probably face a big enough hassle for even mentioning discipline. Therefore, when we discuss church discipline, it is important to do so biblically. We want those that oppose discipline to know that their argument is with Scripture, not with us. And, contrary to popular belief, the Bible does give clear direction for church discipline. Our text is one of the key texts concerning the process of church discipline.

### 1. Confront the sin (v. 1-2a)

Notice the first thing Paul did. Paul did not beat around the bush. He dealt straightforwardly with the issue. But notice how he did it.

First, he identified the sin *as* sin, **“It is actually reported that there is immorality among you.”** I can just imagine the thoughts of some of these as Paul announced what he had heard. I am sure that some were surprised by Paul’s announcement. Others ears were pricked as this letter was read aloud wondering if Paul was addressing them. This is why it is so important that Paul called sin *sin*, **“There is immorality among you.”** Paul then describes their attitude towards the sin in v. 2, **“You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead.”** This sin, known to all in the church, was simply overlooked by all in the church. When there should have been deep grief and mourning for both the soul of this man and the testimony of the church, they were proud. There was no godly sorrow leading to repentance because these at Corinth saw no need for repentance. They were blind not only to the sin itself, but also to the heinousness of the sin, as we will see in a moment. The problem with these at Corinth is that they had interpreted freedom from the bondage of sin as liberty or license to live however they pleased. They abused God’s grace! I agree with one commentator who wrote that Paul “almost seems less bothered about the immorality itself than the blasé, arrogant attitude being displayed towards it” [David Prior, *BST: 1 Corinthians*, 71]. Paul was disturbed by their tolerance of this act.

Do you see how important this initial step in confronting sin is? We live in a culture that has become numb to sin. In many places culture dictates what is sin and what is not. Scripture is no longer the foundation for right and wrong. God’s Word has taken a back seat to the mantra, “if it feels good, do it.” Satan and the world have their claws deeply embedded in the self-gratification of the flesh. The bigger problem is that this cultural dictation has gained a foothold in the church. Postmodernism tells us that sin is such a dirty word. We need to be more compassionate in our understanding. I am not against compassion. We need to be compassionate. The problem is that the world has confused compassion with tolerance. We should compassionately confront the sinner with his sin. However, therein lies the rub

concerning our culture—confrontation and toleration are enemies of one another. We must confront sin, not tolerate it. We must call sin sin.

Next, in confronting the sin, Paul identified the nature of the sin, **“and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife.”** Again, the Bible is very clear as to how we are to approach church discipline, and the nature of the sin and the response of the sinner determine the action taken in the disciplinary process.

In 1697, Benjamin Keach, an early General turned Particular Baptist who was also involved in the framing of 1689 London Baptist Confession, published a treatise for the church entitled, *The Glory of the True Church, and Its Discipline Displayed*. In this treatise, Keach set forth three reasons for “censure” or enacting church discipline: 1) private offenses of one brother against another, 2) scandalous persons guilty of gross acts of immorality, and 3) heresies and blasphemies [<http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/library/polity/keach.htm>]. These reasons serve as a sort of grid to help us in exercising biblical church discipline.

In the case of private sins, Matthew 18:15-17 serves as our guide. Keach called this the “rule of Matt. 18.” Here the action to be taken is plainly spelled out. You are to go to a brother privately (alone!) and tell the brother his fault (18:15). If he repents, the process is complete. If he does not repent, you are to take one or two others with you (18:16). I like Keach’s warning here: “Be sure they are discreet persons, and such that are most likely to gain upon him.” I would suggest that in this step you rely on some godly leader in the church. Then, if there is repentance, there is no need to continue. If he is still unrepentant, he is to be brought before the entire church for rebuke. If he still does not repent, he is to be removed (18:17). While these rules for private offenses are fairly straightforward, we often do not implement them very well. How often do we see situations where the entire church knows what is going on before the individual is even approached? This often happens because of either known or well-intentioned gossip. What is the difference in these? Known gossip is just that—the gossipier does so intentionally. But well-intentioned gossip often comes in the form of genuine concern, often expressed “just-between-me-and-you” or perhaps in the form of a “prayer request.” Regardless of the intent, gossip is itself sin and causes the disciplinary process to run amok, often causing a defamation of one’s character or bringing disgrace to the entire church.

In the case of public, scandalous sin, the process is different. These situations must be dealt with swiftly because the sin is public knowledge and the reputation of the church is at stake. This was the situation at Corinth. This man’s sin fulfilled all of the requirements for swift excommunication. His sin was of the type of immorality that even the pagans in the midst of the sexual perversions in Corinth would not have committed, it did **“not exist even among the Gentiles.”** While it is difficult to know precisely what **“someone has his father’s wife”** means, we know that it was an immoral relationship with a woman that was currently or had been married to this man’s father, but she was not his biological mother. If Paul were referring to his mother, he would have called the woman his mother, and not **“his father’s wife.”** Whether the father was alive or dead made no difference. Whether the woman was his stepmother (most likely) or his mother-in-law does not matter. Whether the man had in fact married the woman as some suggest is of no consequence. As Calvin firmly stated it,

It is not certain, whether he had seduced her from his father as a prostitute, or whether he kept her under the pretence of marriage. This, however, does not affect the subject at hand; for, as in the former case, there would have been and abominable and execrable whoredom, so the latter would have involved incestuous connection,

abhorrent to all propriety and natural decency. [*Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. XX, 1 Corinthians, 179] (NOTE: Calvin believed the woman to be the man's mother-in-law)

So what we have in this case is the blatant, public, unrepentant sin of a professing Christian that had to be dealt with quickly. Which leads to the second step in the process of church discipline.

## 2. Render a judgment (vv. 2b-3)

I mentioned earlier that we often do not handle private church discipline very well. We sort of get the cart before the horse. However, cases of public scandal are often not dealt with at all. This was the case at Corinth and remains the case in many churches today. Again, Paul was apparently more concerned about their lack of concern over this man's sin and its consequences in the body than the sin itself. Notice his rebuke is not towards the man, but the church. Paul did not have to be there with them to examine the situation more closely. The report he received was public knowledge and had evidently been verified. Therefore, Paul had **"already judged him who has so committed this"** (v. 3). There was no need for further review. Unless there was immediate repentance, this man was to be removed from the fellowship at Corinth. Again, Paul's assessment was that if these were not so blinded by their arrogance and abuse of God's grace, if they truly understood the sinfulness of this sin, they too would have mourned and grieved to the point of removing him.

A story that Voddie Baucham shares in the preface to his book, *The Ever Loving Truth*, helps illustrate the importance of removing an unrepentant sinner such as this from the body. He tells of a conversation he had with a pastor friend about a Bible study he led on this very text. As was their practice, the young people were sitting together as a group towards the front. The pastor knew that the discussion of a man who had been involved in an adulterous affair with his stepmother would intrigue them and he was curious as to their reaction. Much to his surprise, it was not the young people's response to the illicit affair that caught their attention, but that Paul would have the audacity to suggest to the church at Corinth that the man should be removed from their midst. This disturbed them greatly. Many present, both young and old, could not believe that Paul said, "I have already judged him who has committed this." One of the young people reacted, "I did not think we were supposed to judge." But his surprise came from one of the older members, who stated, "I don't care what the Bible says; we are not supposed to judge other people" [Baucham, *The Ever Loving Truth*, x-xi].

This response, "we are not supposed to judge other people," is typical of those who do not understand the biblical teaching of church discipline or have seen it exercised improperly. They take Matthew 7:1, "Do not judge, so that you will not be judged" totally out of context to support their position. However, in Matthew 7, Jesus did not intend that we are not to make moral judgments. How else are we to examine a tree and its fruit (7:15-19)? We have to make moral judgments. Jesus' warning to "judge not" had the presumed superiority of the scribes and Pharisees in mind. They judged others harshly and often legalistically, ignoring their own faults. Jesus' teaching in Matthew 7 should strike fear in the hearts of those that condemn others in this way. But this is not to say that we are not to pass moral judgments. If that is what Jesus was teaching in Matthew 7, then not only was Paul unjustified in judging this brother, but he sinned in doing so, and here asks the church to follow in his sin. We know this is not the case.

Declaring a verdict requires making a judgment. We have not properly exercised church discipline until we have carried it out to its conclusion. If there is no judgment made, then both the individual and the church as a whole suffer. Which leads to the second part of this text.

## II. The Goal of Church Discipline

We have seen the steps in the process of church discipline. Whether the sin is private or public, the sin is to be dealt with. So what is the purpose of church discipline?

### 1. Restoration of the individual (vv. 4-5)

Paul's first concern in removing this individual was that he might be restored to fellowship, that he **"may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus."** In other words, Paul's concern was that when this man stood in *the* judgment, he would be saved.

This strikes right to the heart of much of what we see in church life today. It is not uncommon for a church to have an inflated membership that contains people they have not seen in years and perhaps do not even know how to contact them. But that is just the beginning. You will not find church discipline in any church growth course. Perish the thought that you would actually consider removing an unrepentant sinner, even of this scandalous nature, from your midst. So there are inflated church roles containing those that are never seen, and of those that are seen, there is no sin serious enough to remove them. This type of church philosophy is absolutely unbiblical and is not fair to the individual. They are led to believe that they are safe in the arms of our Lord and free from His wrath when nothing could be further from the truth. We do a great disservice to a person when we do not confront them with their sin and take the necessary action in hopes that they might truly be saved.

Notice Paul's seriousness here, **"In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, deliver such a one to Satan."** You will notice I did not include the words, "I have decided" in v. 5. In the NASB those words are italicized. That means that they are not found in the original text and are added for clarification. While this usually does not cause any textual concerns, I believe it does here. The NASB is the only version that adds these words, and rather than clarifying, they actually change Paul's intent. The NASB shows that it was Paul's decision to turn this man over to Satan. And while that is probably true, it is not the emphasis of the text. Paul emphasized that this removal, this delivering of this man to Satan, was to be the action of the congregation. *They* were to remove him. *They* were to purge him. *They* were to turn him over to Satan. Do you see the difference? This disciplinary action was not to be the action of Paul, though he instigated the process. It was to be the action of the church. And not only that, it was to be done **"in the name of our Lord Jesus... with the power of our Lord Jesus."** In other words, it was to be done in His authority and according to His power. Jonathan Edwards' conclusion was, "When duly inflicted, it is to be looked upon as done by Christ Himself" [quoted by Frank Barker, *1 Corinthians*, March 9, 1980, 6].

And what purpose does Paul give for delivering him over to Satan? **"For the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit might be saved."** It was for his own good! While it might be painful, Paul's hope was that, if this man was truly in Christ, then, when turned over to Satan and the world, he would come to his senses and understand the love and forgiveness he had in Christ, the love and forgiveness that he spurned by his unrepentance. Paul's hope, as with Hymenaeus and Alexander, also handed over to Satan in 1 Tim 1:20, was that perhaps he would be taught his sinfulness. If he was not in Christ, then perhaps this would drive him to Christ. Perhaps he would see the sinfulness of his sin and how it separated him from his holy Creator and Judge. Perhaps he would see the wrath of God that awaited him because of his sinfulness. This would not happen as long as he was able to remain in the church and have his sin tolerated and coddled. For Paul, this man's eternity was at stake.

Oh dear friends, who are we to sin by not obeying God in this area of discipline, particularly as His children. Do we no longer realize that this divine discipline has always been God's loving action towards His children? What kind of Father would not discipline His children for their own good (Heb. 12:4-11)? Verse 11 of that text draws this conclusion, "All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful (but does that mean we are to neglect it?); yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness." This has always been God's way. I have been reading through Jeremiah this week in my devotions and I noticed that the theme in chapters 31-34 is God's discipline at the hands of the Babylonians for the sole purpose that His people might be restored.

When we do not exercise church discipline, we are withholding a means of grace that God has given to make one more righteous.

Baptists (in the past) sought to restore offenders to holiness. They believed that church discipline helped believers overcome sin and temptation. God gave the church prayer, scripture, preaching, and praise as means to sanctify them. He gave church discipline for the same reason. It was a divine medicine to heal the soul. It was for the good of believers who strayed from righteousness. [Greg Wills, *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, 27-28]

## **2. Purification of the church (vv. 6-8)**

In verses 6-8 Paul uses the imagery of the Passover to stress the urgency of removing this wicked man from their midst. He began by reminding them, "**Your boasting is not good.**" Overt boasting was certainly out of place given the circumstances of their tolerance towards this man's sin. Yet they were guilty. As Leon Morris put it, "The Corinthians did more than acquiesce in the situation; they were proud" [*TNTC: 1 Corinthians*, 86]. In their arrogance they minimized the entire incident and Paul shows them the threat that existed in the body with the question, "**Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough?**" Leaven is used in the Scripture as a symbol of evil. Paul asserts that a small quantity of leaven, or yeast, is enough to permeate the entire lump of dough, affecting the entire lump. If you have ever seen yeast at work in a batch of dough in the kitchen, you know that the entire lump rises. Ever ounce of dough is affected. That symbolizes the corruption of sin. Just as one unconfessed sin in our lives personally affects our fellowship with Christ and others, so too sin has the same affect in the corporate body. So Paul tells them in verse 7, "**Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump.**" This is where the Passover symbolism comes in. Just as the Jews had to remove old yeast from their homes and were to eat only unleavened bread for an entire week, so the Corinthians were to purge the old leaven, the evil, from their midst. Paul emphasizes this by reminding them that they were already holy, "**you are in fact unleavened.**" They were called to live holy lives and an evidence of their sanctification was their dealing with sin. The ultimate importance of this, "**For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed.**" There certainly is a lot packed into that little statement. The Jews were required to seriously and solemnly search out and remove all the old leaven before they could partake of the Passover lamb. The Passover lamb was then killed and the blood of the lamb was spread over the tops of the outside doorposts and the angel of death, sent by God, passed over their household. Do you see the picture Paul is painting? "**Christ our Passover has already been sacrificed.**" The once-for-all sacrifice of the Passover Lamb of God took place on the cross of Calvary. He removed the sin of the world and his people are sanctified, holy, because of Jesus' atoning death on the cross. Paul's warning here should be obvious. The sacrifice had already been made and it was high time that the

Corinthians cleaned out the wickedness, the old leaven. It was time for their morality to catch up with the actions God had taken in saving them and sanctifying them.

Then in v. 8 Paul ties this Old Testament festival of Passover to the present. **“Let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.”** Our entire life as a Christian is to be consecrated, set apart to God for holiness. That is what we remember when we come to the Lord’s Table. We are to examine ourselves and purge the old leaven before we partake. We are to consecrate ourselves before Him or else we eat and drink judgment upon ourselves. And we do this corporately as a body with the goal of holiness.

So we see the second goal of church discipline is the purity of the church.

But Baptists sustained church discipline for another reason. They believed that Christ commanded it. They held that Christ required them to maintain the purity of the church through the exercise of church discipline. They held that every member was accountable to Christ for sustaining purity through discipline. And they participated in it. They voted, accused, gave evidence, asked questions, investigated, and exhorted. [Greg Wills, *Polity*, 28]

### III. The Sphere of Church Discipline (vv. 9-13)

#### 1. Not the world (vv. 9-10)

In verse 9, Paul refers to a prior letter to the Corinthians, now lost, where he exhorted them not to associate with immoral people. However, they misinterpreted what Paul meant. F. F. Bruce suggests that their misinterpretation was intentional. They took Paul to suggest that they were to separate themselves from evil, and since this was impossible, they conveniently excused themselves from dealing with evil. But Paul did not write for them to disassociate themselves from the world. The only way to do that would be to withdraw from the world. Lest we misunderstand what Paul meant, he is not suggesting that we seek to hang out with **“the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters.”** He dealt with that elsewhere. His point here was that in the prior letter, Paul did not ask them to separate themselves from the world, but from the immoral brother in the church. In this context, Paul is showing that church’s concern in discipline is not with those outside the church. God would judge them. The sphere of church discipline is not the world, but the church.

#### 2. The church (vv. 11-13)

They were **“not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler.”** He expanded his list from the prior vices of the world and included **“reviler”** and **“drunkard.”** I do not feel the need to expand on what each of these areas of sin means because it is not an exhaustive list. Paul was simply urging the Corinthians not to keep company with one who professes to be a Christian but who denies it by their lifestyle. They were **“not even to eat with such a one.”** They were to have virtually no social contact with the one who had been delivered to Satan. We see this in other places in Scripture as well.

**Matthew 18:17** – <sup>7</sup> 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.

**2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15** – <sup>6</sup> Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. <sup>14</sup> If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame. <sup>15</sup> Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.

Through church discipline Baptists maintained a clear distinction between the church and the world. Unbelievers knew that joining a Baptist church meant submitting to the church's authority to judge their belief and behavior. The gospel message had little power, Baptists believed, unless the churches were distinct from the world. [Greg Wills, *Polity*, 28]

Paul, quoting Deuteronomic law, exhorted these at Corinth to, "REMOVE THE WICKED MAN FROM AMONG YOURSELVES."

**Application:**

- 1. Discipline should be founded upon and flow from the gospel.**
- 2. All Christians are to be involved in discipline.**
- 3. God will bless a church's obedience in church discipline.**

God apparently blessed it—the churches experiences the greatest revivals in the period in which they practiced church discipline. Between 1790 and 1860 Baptists in America kept up strict discipline and grew at twice the rate of the population. In the twentieth century, Southern Baptist membership continued to grow faster than the population (though only marginally so since 1960) even though they abandoned discipline. The rate of growth, however, is considerably lower than it appears, for in the twentieth century it was much easier to become a Baptist and almost impossible to become and ex-Baptist. [Greg Wills, *Polity*, 28]

J. L. Dagg, one of the few great writing Baptist theologians, said, "It has been remarked, that when discipline leaves the church, Christ goes with it" [*A Treatise on Church Order*, 274]. The Corinthians were cavalier in their attitude towards sin. They abused the liberty that comes with being saved by grace. They saw no need for discipline because they did not see the sinfulness of sin. Paul rebuked them for it. As you prepare your heart for the Lord's Table this morning, examine yourself in light of this question: "*Are you shocked by sin?*" Do you hate sin like God hates sin?