

TEN MARKS OF A HEALTHY CHURCH

MARK 7: CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Biblical church discipline is a crucial but often-neglected mark of a healthy church that flows from, and gives meaning to, church membership. In a broad sense, church discipline is teaching. In a narrower sense, discipline is corrective. In the narrowest sense, it is the act of responding to serious, unrepentant sin in the life of a professed Christian by excluding him from membership in the church and participation in the Lord's Supper.

1. WHY DO WE HAVE CHURCH DISCIPLINE?

Each local church is responsible to judge the life and teaching of its elders and members, particularly when either compromises the church's witness to the gospel.

But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard or swindler – not even to eat with such a one..." (1 Cor 5:11)

If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works. (2 John 9-11)

Enacting church discipline shows concern for:

- a) The individual disciplined
- b) Other Christians as they see the danger of sin
- c) The health of the church as a whole
- d) The corporate witness of the church and, therefore, non-Christians in the community
- e) The glory of God

Furthermore, when we discipline in a godly manner, we are reflecting God's discipline of us. He disciplines us because he loves us, and His purpose is to help us grow in holiness and humble dependence on Him.

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? For they disciplines 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. (Heb 12:7-12)

2. WHAT DOES DISCIPLINE LOOK LIKE?

The ultimate goal of church discipline is to lovingly lead a member to repentance and restoration. In order to reach this point, there are five major stages of church discipline.

1. FORMATIVE DISCIPLINE

God continually and graciously disciplines us through the ordinary means of grace, particularly through the preaching of the Word and through Christian community. He exposes sin and meets it with grace.

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. (Col 3:15-16)

2. CONFRONTATION

God calls us to lovingly confront and restore our fellow church members who are caught in sin.

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. (Gal 6:1-3)

3. EXCLUSION

Where sin has been confronted and the church member refuses to repent, after a due process the church is to exclude that person from its membership.

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 charge may be established 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. (Matt 18:15-17)

4. DISASSOCIATION

If a professing Christian's sin is so serious that it renders his or her claim to be a Christian no longer believable, the church should exclude that person from their membership and not associate with him or her until it can observe the fruits of repentance.

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of our Lord... But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard or swindler – not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you." (1 Cor 5:1-5, 11-13)

5. REPENTANCE AND RESTORATION

With respect to the disciplined individual, the goal of church discipline is to help the individual repent of sin and be restored to fellowship in the church.

For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter. So although I wrote to you, it was not for the sake of the one who did the wrong, nor for the sake of the one who suffered the wrong, but in order that your earnestness for us might be revealed to you in the sight of God. Therefore we are comforted. (2 Cor 7:10-13)