

English Transcript

Foundations of the Christian Faith – Course 3

Lesson 4: The Church – Its Purity, Unity and Power

Welcome back to Foundations of the Christian Faith – Course 3. In Lesson 4, we will continue with the doctrine of the Church with a focus on its Purity, Unity and Power. This lesson begins on page 29 in your handout.

The spiritual dynamics of the church are very important! What is the power at work in the church? How is it affected by unity or lack of unity? How is a church affected by greater or lesser levels of personal purity in the congregation? We will explore these issues in this lesson.

Dating back to the time of the Reformation in the 16th century, there was much discussion about what defined a “true” church compared with a “false” church. There were at least three major doctrinal points that helped to identify a true church based on biblical principles.

1. The Word of God is the source of all preaching and teaching.
2. The gospel is clearly and boldly communicated.
3. The ordinances of Baptism and the Lord’s Table are central to the life of the church.
4. Also included is the concept of church discipline for disciple-making purposes that are both formative and corrective, as needed.

A distinction can be made between “true churches” and “false churches” based upon these minimum criteria. One area that can help with assessing a true church can be its belief in essential biblical doctrine.

In our first doctrine course, we discussed the importance of sound doctrine. We also looked at the relationship between two concepts: Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy.

Orthodoxy is a compound Greek word. The first word in the compound is “ortho” and it means “correct, right, or straight.” An orthodontist is a dentist who can “straighten” or correct teeth. An orthopedist is a doctor who works with deformities or misalignments of the skeletal system, often the spine, with the hope of being able to correct them. The second word “dox” comes from the Greek word “doxa” which means opinion. We extend this to include teaching or doctrine. If someone is orthodox, it means that he believes correctly.

Orthopraxy is the other key word. The second word in the compound is “praxis” and it sounds similar to the English equivalent—*practice*. Orthopraxy or orthopraxis is simply “correct practice” or “correct behavior.”

According to the Bible, correct doctrine will lead to correct behavior, but the doctrine comes first. In Romans, Paul spends the first eleven chapters explaining correct doctrine. In Romans 12:1 he transitions to correct practice: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.” The word *therefore* means that the instructions that follow are based upon the doctrine that has just been explained.

In summary, both orthodoxy and orthopraxy are important. If any form of Christianity emphasizes one to the exclusion or diminishing of the other, it is unbiblical. Good deeds are a necessary and normal part of the Christian life; however, they are unable to make one righteous before God. Justification is only possible by faith in the Savior whose substitutionary, sacrificial death paid the penalty for our sins and provided us with the righteousness that we need to make us acceptable to God.

The right practice of sound biblical doctrine leads us into the next discussion of the purity of the church.

What is purity?

“The purity of the church is its degree of freedom from wrong doctrine and conduct, and its degree of conformity to God’s revealed will for the church” (Grudem, Systematic Theology, 1994).

What priority does purity have in the local church?

Some New Testament churches were purer than others. The churches at Philippi and Thessalonica were relatively free of doctrinal error or moral problems (Philippians 1:3-11; I Thessalonians 1:2-10). The same could not be said for the churches in Galatia or Corinth (Galatians 1:6-9; I Corinthians 3:1-4). The same is true today.

Here is an introduction to the church in Thessalonica from 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10:

We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

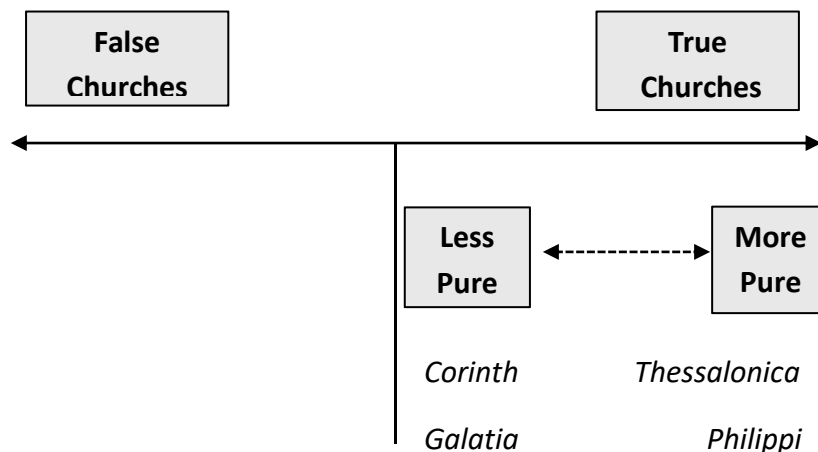
Compared that church with the church in Corinth found in 1 Corinthians 3:1-4:

But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human?

As you are aware, the church in Corinth was filled with many issues that the apostle Paul addressed in his letters. There were issues with sexual immorality, civil law suits among believers, confusion related to marriage and divorce, worship, the role of men and women in the church, spiritual gifts, abuses with the Lord's Table, and cultural and traditions compared with biblical principles.

While it is important to pray and work for purity in the church, absolute purity is not possible in this life. Purity is an ideal, but progress toward purity defines the journey on which all believers are embarked. Every church is made up of people at different levels of maturity. All of us have room to grow in our understanding of biblical doctrine. Our daily question should be, "Is the church and its members making progress in the purity of their doctrine and conduct?"

The diagram below summarizes what we have discussed so far. Distinctions can be made between a "true church" and a "false church" based on biblical criteria. Within each true church, there is a continuum of purity that we defined as the degree of freedom from wrong doctrine and conduct, and its degree of conformity to God's revealed will for the church. It is possible to assess a local church as more pure or less pure, as we did for the churches of Philippi and Thessalonica compared with Corinth and Galatia. Also each believer may assess their own level of sanctification toward purity.



Below I have listed several categories you and the leaders of your church might use to assess the growth toward increased levels of purity (degree of freedom from wrong doctrine and conduct, and degree of conformity to God's revealed will) within your church. We will review

these briefly. There are Scripture references to support each area of assessment. I included a few questions you might ask. There are many other questions you could add to this assessment. At the end of this discussion, you will have the opportunity to assess the “degree of purity” for each category for your church.

Thank the Lord for the areas of strength and also ask the Lord for wisdom to grow in the areas that may need more intentional development and growth, which is all part of the disciple-making and sanctification process.

In 2 Timothy 2:22, Paul calls on church leaders to pursue purity, along with “those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.” Thus, leaders have the responsibility not only to pursue personal purity, but also to lead the church in this pursuit.

Categories to Assess the Doctrinal Purity of your Church

You may add more questions to assess each category as you prepare for discussions with your church leadership team.

1. **Biblical Doctrine (right preaching and teaching of the Word)** (Ephesians 5:26-27; Colossians 1:28; 2 Timothy 4:1-4; Titus 1:9, 11; Jude 3)
 - *How might you systematically preach/teach through the Bible over the next few years?*
 - *Would you describe your preaching style as expository (allowing the Word to guide your message) or topical (use of biblical passages to support what you plan to communicate)?*
 - *How do you equip your church to understand the core Biblical doctrine?*
 - *How do you equip others in the church to teach and disciple your members?*
 - *Additional questions to consider:*
2. **Proper use of the Ordinances** (1 Corinthians 11:17-34; Matthew 28:18-20)
 - *Describe your process for bringing new members into your church?*
 - *What is your process for baptizing new believers?*
 - *Describe your process for the Lord’s Supper (frequency, format, theological significance).*
 - *Additional questions to consider:*
3. **Appropriate Church Discipline** (Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5:6-7, 12-13)
 - *How has your church discipline process been presented to your church members?*
 - *How effective is your discipline process in achieving restoration and reconciliation?*
 - *What changes, if any, would you like to make to your current process?*
 - *Additional questions to consider:*

4. **Genuine Worship** (Ephesians 5:18-20; Colossians 3:16-17; Hebrews 10:24-25)
 - Describe the level of genuine worship of God in your Sunday gatherings.
 - To what degree do your members live a life of worship throughout the week?
 - How would you assess your personal worship of God throughout the week?
 - Additional questions to consider:

5. **Effective Prayer** (Matthew 6:5-13; Ephesians 6:18; James 5:16)
 - Assess the health of your church's prayer ministry (strengths and areas for growth).
 - To what degree does your theology of prayer align with what Jesus taught in Matthew 6:5-13 (Upward in reverence to God, Downward in submission, Inward with requests and intercession, Outward in readiness claiming the power and promises of God)
 - Additional questions to consider:

6. **Bold Witness** (Matthew 28:19-20; John 13:34-35; Acts 1:8; 2:44-47; 2 Corinthians 5:18-21; 1 Peter 3:15; 1 John 4:7)
 - Describe how you equip your church to know the Gospel and do the work of evangelism.
 - How do you maintain a balance between worship, equipping believers and witnessing?
 - To what degree do you balance your focus on your own "Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria" with as well as "the ends of the earth"?
 - Additional questions to consider:

7. **Authentic Fellowship** (1 John 4:7-12, Romans 12:1-21; 1 Corinthians 13:4-8)
 - Describe the level of love that your church has for one another.
 - How do you equip your church members to discover their spiritual gifts and begin serving in their areas of giftedness?
 - In the next year, how would you like your church to grow in fellowship with one another?
 - Additional questions to consider:

8. **Biblical Church Government** (1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9)
 - How is the biblical principle of plurality of leadership evident in your church?
 - Describe your current leadership structure and how you identify potential elders and deacons.
 - What steps might you take in the coming year(s) to establish and/or strengthen the leadership (elders and deacons) in your church?
 - Additional questions to consider:

9. **Spiritual Power in Ministry** (Acts 1:8; Romans 1:16; 1 Corinthians 4:20; 2 Corinthians 10:3-4; Ephesians 1:17-19, 5:15-20)
- *To what degree do your members depend on the power of the Holy Spirit for life and ministry?*
 - *Describe the difference between the indwelling of the Holy Spirit at the moment of salvation and the ongoing filling of the Holy Spirit.*
 - *How would you like to see your church grow in its understanding of the power of the Holy Spirit?*
 - *Additional questions to consider:*
10. **Personal Holiness of Life among Members** (Romans 12:1-2; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Titus 2:11-12; Philippians 2:12-13, 1 Thessalonians 4:3; 1 Timothy 4:7-8, Hebrews 12:14; 1 Peter 1:13-16)
- *Describe the spiritual health and maturity of your church?*
 - *What are the primary spiritual disciplines practiced by the members of your church and where would you like to see growth?*
 - *How would you describe the desire and ability of your church to feed itself on the Bible?*
 - *Additional questions to consider:*
11. **Generous Stewardship** (1 Corinthians 16:1-2; 2 Corinthians 8:1-15; Malachi 3:10)
- *Describe the spiritual maturity level of giving within your church?*
 - *How do you develop your annual church budget and manage/report on church finances?*
 - *How can you help your church understand the biblical concept of supporting its pastor through its tithes and offerings?*
 - *Additional questions to consider:*
12. **Love for and Exaltation of Christ** (Ephesians 3:20-21; Titus 2:13-14; 1 Peter 1:8; Revelation 2:4)
- *To what degree do the members of your church live with Christ as the center of their lives with a growing desire to surrender all area in their lives to His Lordship.*
 - *Describe how your church demonstrates its love for Christ through the church, in their marriages and families, etc.*
 - *Additional questions to consider:*

Where is your church “more- pure” and “less-pure”?

Take a few minutes to review each of the categories and questions related to “purity” of doctrine within your church. Then use the following scale and rate each category on a 1 through 10 scale (1 = least pure; 5 = moderate level of purity, 10 = most pure).

Circle the number that best represents the purity level of your church for each of the twelve criteria listed below.

1. Biblical Doctrine (right preaching and teaching of the Word)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
2. Proper use of the Ordinances	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
3. Appropriate Church Discipline	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
4. Genuine Worship	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
5. Effective Prayer	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
6. Bold Witness	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
7. Authentic Fellowship	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
8. Biblical Church Government	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
9. Spiritual Power in Ministry	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
10. Personal Holiness of Life among Members	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11. Generous Stewardship	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
12. Love for and Exaltation of Christ	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

What are your church’s areas of greatest purity?

Where can you grow to become more pure?

Identify a few things you may do in the coming year to work toward greater purity in your church?

What encouraging signs do you see that the church in Senegal is increasing in purity?

Turn with me to page 33 as we shift our discussions to the **Unity of the Church**.

Definition of church unity

“The unity of the church is its degree of freedom from divisions among true Christians” (Grudem, Systematic Theology, 1994). The mandate to seek unity does not include unity with false brothers or sisters, but with true believers (Matthew 7:15).

The New Testament letters written by the apostle Paul are filled with references to unity among Christians. He encourages those in the church to love each other, have a like mind, and share purpose and belief as they experienced persecution and bore the weight of external pressures. One example of Paul’s exhortation to unity is Philippians 2:2: “Then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind”.

A great example of early church unity is when the believers “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). This was a time when “all the believers were together and had everything in common” (Acts 2:44). Later, the church in Antioch provided a gift of benevolence to those suffering a severe famine in the church in Judea (Acts 11:27–30). “How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity!” (Psalm 133:1).

There is unity within the Godhead. Deuteronomy 6:4 contains the Shema: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” Later, when Jesus said, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30), He further emphasized unity in the Godhead.

After Jesus had ascended to heaven to be with the Father, Paul encouraged the church with the idea of the Trinity, three co-equal members of the Godhead. He says of Jesus, “For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit” (Ephesians 2:18). The Holy Spirit unites and encourages believers and connects them with Christ and the Father. The church is to reflect the unity of the Godhead: “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:3–6).

The word Paul uses here for “unity” (*henotēs* in Greek) refers to a condition of harmony or oneness that can only be experienced among members of Christ’s body—the church. This unity already exists as a spiritual reality through the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer’s life. Unity of the Spirit comes from God, but its expression can be destroyed by humans and, therefore, must be guarded and maintained.

Jesus desires and is praying for unity within His church (John 17:20-23).

"I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me."

Paul commanded the *practice* of unity among the believers based on the *fact* of spiritual unity in Christ (I Corinthians 12:12-13, 21-26).

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

Paul warned against those who cause divisions (Romans 16:17-18).

"I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive."

Jude warns against divisive people (Jude 17-21).

But you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ. They said to you, "In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions." It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit. But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.

There are direct commands to separate from others are always commands to separate from non-believers, not from Christians with whom one disagrees (2 Corinthians 6:14-17).

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you..."

The unity stressed in the New Testament does not require that the church be composed of one denomination or have some kind of world-wide governance. The body of Christ is very diverse and may be well served by a variety of denominations and organizations while still maintaining unity in the Spirit. American Pastor Rick Warren says, *"It takes all kinds of churches to reach all kinds of people"* (Warren, 2014).

There are a number of qualities and characteristics that foster unity within the church.

In Ephesians 4:2, Paul offers four qualities that, when cultivated in the believer's life, help keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace in the church. They are humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance, or "bearing with one another in love."

1. Walking in **humility** means remembering to keep Jesus first, other people second, and ourselves last. We "do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit" but instead consider the wants and needs of others above our own (Philippians 2:3). The apostle Peter stresses the value of humility for maintaining relational unity and peace, encouraging all believers to "be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble" (1 Peter 3:8). "All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble'" (1 Peter 5:5). Paul teaches the Philippians that humbly serving others is one of the most profound ways to emulate Christ.

2. **Gentleness** causes one to act in a manner that is meek, mild, and even-tempered. It is closely associated with self-control (Galatians 5:23). Jesus described Himself as "gentle and humble in heart" (Matthew 11:29). In the original Greek, the word is also used for a calming medicine, a soft breeze, or a horse that has been broken.

3. In a similar holding back of power, **patience** requires the discipline to endure suffering or discomfort without striking back.

4. **Forbearance** or "**bearing with one another in love**" is a character trait inextricably linked with love. In fact, all the qualities that contribute to keeping the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace are associated with love: "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful. . . .

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends” (1 Corinthians 13:4–8).

Indeed, cultivating love is the core component to keeping the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace: “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace” (Colossians 3:12–15).

Here are a few other biblical principles that will foster unity within a local church.

- Establish plurality of leadership - shared leadership based on biblical qualifications
- Emphasis on servant leadership
- Equip members to share in the work of ministry
- Ensure transparency with budgets and financial plans
- Communicate openly, avoid gossip, deal with conflict in a biblical manner
- Encourage constructive feedback

There are several sources of division in a church that you must be on guard against.

- False teaching
- Elevating culture and tradition over biblical principles
- Lack of recognition and honor across multiple generations
- Worship style
- Favoritism and nepotism
- Over-emphasis on programs and methods in place of an abiding relationship in Jesus

Questions

- In what ways do you think that your church could grow in unity?
- In what ways do you think your church could demonstrate greater unity with other true churches in the same geographical area?
- What are some of the more significant barriers to unity within a church and across churches?

The final topic for this lesson will focus on the **Power of the church**, starting on page 34 in your handout.

1. The Church has power for spiritual warfare

The nature of the church's power is spiritual (2 Corinthians 10:3-6).

For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete.

This power includes:

- The power of the gospel to break through hardened opposition and change the hearts of unbelievers (Romans 1:16).
- Power to overcome demonic opposition, especially to the preaching of the gospel (Acts 13:8-11).
- Power to overcome human opposition from false brothers and hypocrites (Acts 5:1-11).
- The power to stand against the devil and his schemes (Ephesians 6:10-18).

2. The Church holds the keys to the kingdom

The phrase "keys to the kingdom" seems to represent the power involved in preaching the gospel which opens the doors to the kingdom allowing those who respond to enter.

This power is significant in the life of the church because Jesus said, "whatever you bind will be bound in heaven and whatever you loosen will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:19, 18:17-19).

3. Power of the Church vs. the Power of the State

The power of the church and the power of the state are of a completely different nature. God grants to the state the right to take up the sword both to enforce laws and protect citizens (Romans 13:1-7).

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is

owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

This power is never granted to the church. Jesus saw the church as having spiritual authority (John 18:36). Similarly, Paul affirmed in 2 Corinthians 10:4 that our weapons are not worldly ones. Nowhere does Scripture allow that the power of government may be used to enforce Christian dogma on non-Christians. Jesus made a clear distinction between church and state when he indicated that we have a different kind of obligation to Caesar than to God (Matthew 22:21).

4. The church has power to exercise discipline

Since discipline utilizes the spiritual power given to the church, it is appropriate to consider its parameters.

Church discipline is the process of correcting sinful behavior among members of a local church body for the purpose of protecting the church from the spread of sin, restoring and reconciling the sinning believer to a right walk with God, renewing fellowship among the church members, and protecting the honor of Christ.

For what sins should church discipline be exercised?

- Personal sin which cannot, by repeated efforts, be resolved in private (Matthew 18:15-17).
- Publicly known sins. Such as...
 - Divisiveness (Romans 16:17; Titus 3:10)
 - Incest (I Corinthians 5:1)
 - Refusal to work (2 Thessalonians 3:6-10)
 - Disobedience (2 Thessalonians 3:14-15)
 - Blasphemy (I Timothy 1:20)
 - Teaching heretical doctrine (2 John 10-11)

Matthew 18:15–20 gives the procedure and authority for a church to practice church discipline. Jesus instructs us that one individual (usually the offended party) is to go to the offending individual privately. If the offender refuses to acknowledge his sin and repent, then two or three others go to confirm the details of the situation. If there is still no repentance—the offender remains firmly attached to his sin, despite two chances to repent—the matter is taken before the church. The offender then has a third chance to repent and forsake his sinful behavior. If at any point in the process of church discipline, the sinner heeds the call to repent, then “you have gained your brother” (verse 15). However, if the discipline continues all the way through the third step without a positive response from the offender, then, Jesus said, “let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (verse 17).

The process of church discipline is never pleasant just as a father never delights in having to discipline his children. Sometimes, though, church discipline is necessary. The purpose of church discipline is not to be mean-spirited or to display a self righteous attitude. Rather, the goal of church discipline is the restoration of the individual to full fellowship with both God and other believers. The discipline is to start privately and gradually become more public. It is to be done in love toward the individual, in obedience to God, and in godly fear for the sake of others in the church.

How should church discipline be carried out?

- Knowledge of the sin should be restricted where possible (Matthew 18:15-17).
- Disciplinary measures should increase until there is a solution (Matthew 18:15-17).
- Sins of church leaders should not be ignored (I Timothy 5:19-20), but carefully and privately confirmed before action is taken.
- Other aspects of church discipline.
 - First take the plank of your own eye before taking the speck out of your brother's eye. (Matthew 7). This promotes an attitude of humility and love as you approach confrontation.
 - There should be continuing willingness for the church to forgive in the event of repentance (2 Corinthians 2:7-8).
 - There should be a spirit of meekness in discipline (Gal. 6:1).

Hopefully, any disciplinary action a church takes against a member is successful in bringing about godly sorrow and true repentance. When repentance occurs, the individual can be restored to fellowship. The man involved in the 1 Corinthians 5 passage repented, and Paul later encouraged the church to restore him to full fellowship with the church (2 Corinthians 2:5–8). Unfortunately, disciplinary action, even when done correctly and in love, is not always successful in bringing about restoration. Even when church discipline fails to bring about repentance, it is still needed to accomplish other good purposes such as maintaining a good testimony in the world.

We have all likely witnessed the behavior of a youngster who is always allowed to do as he pleases with no consistent discipline. It is not a pretty sight. Nor is the overly permissive parent loving, for a lack of guidance dooms the child to a dismal future. Undisciplined, out-of-control behavior will keep the child from forming meaningful relationships and performing well in any kind of setting. Similarly, discipline in the church, while never enjoyable or easy, is necessary at times. In fact, it is loving. And it is commanded by God.

Questions

- What is the strongest enemy to the effective proclamation of the gospel in your community right now? Consider that the greatest enemy may be the lack of biblical church discipline leading to a holy witness for the world to see.
- How might the power that God has given to the church be used against that enemy? When the church deals with sin in a transparent and biblical manner, the darkness is removed and the light of God does its purifying and sanctifying work for all to see.
- If a church refuses to carry out church discipline at all for a number of years, even though there is an evident need for it, what will be the harmful results in the church?

Spiritual dynamics such as purity, unity, and spiritual power are often unseen. They frequently take on a lower priority than outward matters such as worship styles, attendance, programs, cash flow, and buildings. However, to ignore these matters is to ignore the central assets which make the church unique and effective in its God-given work. May God grant us eyes to see as he sees!

This brings lesson 4 to close. When we continue we will pick up with Lesson 5 on the Church - its governance, ordinances and worship.