

Church Discipline

The doctrine of church discipline has been used to justify division and exclusion. Support for this position is based on poor hermeneutics and an authority-driven mindset:

Matthew 18:15 – 17. Many churches use these verses as a formula for church discipline:

1. Talk to the sinner
2. Bring one or two others to talk to the sinner
3. Tell the whole congregation about the sinner,
4. Disfellowship the sinner.

However, if verses 15 – 17 should be applied to the modern church, so should verses 18 – 20, which would teach:

1. The decisions of modern church leadership are infallible
2. Jesus is only with groups, not individuals

The immediate audience was the disciples only. In short, this was a promise of inspiration by Jesus to those who would later miraculously carry the gospel to the whole world.

1 Corinthians 5:1 – 13. Many churches use this chapter to justify separating themselves from those with certain ethical inconsistencies. Some difficulty arises due to the lack of standards for the degree of sin that would justify exclusion. The benchmark is in verse 1; if unbelievers think the behavior is terrible, then action must be taken (*cf.*, Romans 2:24, Isaiah 52:5, Ezekiel 36:20 – 28). Not associating with sinners is not the issue (verse 9 and 10), rather it is the rescue of a brother (verse 5). If excommunication is not likely to, or does not, result in a change, then the action has failed and the standards for excommunication need to be reconsidered. Finally, the admonition to “not even eat with such a one” probably has to do with the Lord’s Supper (verse 8). Their assemblies were not of the same public performance style as is practiced today. Rather, they met in small groups that were intensely personal. The point was to stop inviting this person to your home on Sunday for your special time of spiritual connectedness (see 2 John 10 below).

2 Thessalonians 3:6 Many churches isolate this verse from its context to justify withdrawing from anyone who does not walk according to the traditions of that denomination. The context (verses 7 – 15) defines Paul’s meaning of disorderly conduct: not working to support oneself. Further, Paul’s instruction was to stop feeding the lazy, not to separate from them. In verse 15, Paul still called the lazy person “brother.”

Romans 16:17 – 18 Jesus prayed in John 17:20 - 21 that His followers of future generations achieve a unity of such proportions that it would stand as a miraculous sign to unbelievers that the one true God must be with them. Paul reminded the congregations in Rome to avoid divisive people. In this context, Paul referenced divisive people who are supported by other Christians to teach the gospel (paid preachers). The leadership style of the early church was not as authoritarian as most churches practice today. Eloquent but divisive teachers could be managed by just ignoring them.

2 John 9 – 10. Dispute arises over the scope of “the doctrine of Christ.” The context includes only two topics: truth and love. The definition of “walking in truth” is not given here. However, looking just to the writings of John, truth is a faith that results in actions that are beyond human ability (*e.g.*, John 3:21). The doctrine of love, doing what is best for the other person regardless of its affect on me, is described as “love one another.” The antithesis is represented as the

teaching that Jesus did not come in the flesh (verse 7). John exhorts the church to ignore those whose teaching is about esoteric concepts rather than truth (faith) and love.

Jude 19. Those who are devoid of the Spirit are not Christians. Sometimes they may be identified by their behavior (verses 16 and 18), which range from grumbling to lust to self-serving eloquence. The contrast is in the following verses: faith, praying in the Spirit, love, anticipating Judgment, and evangelism.

Titus 3:10. Those who create division are to be excluded. Examples of divisive topics are given in verse 9.

Related Warnings

2 Timothy 2:16 “Profane and idle babblings,” in this context, relate to the teaching that the resurrection had already come. For example, one could take the illustration of Romans 6:4, that our spirits are resurrected in baptism, and apply it to all passages about resurrection, eliminating the general resurrection on the last day. The result was the overthrow of the faith of some.

1 Timothy 1:3 – 7 Fables, genealogies, and rules were sources of division. Paul charged Timothy to instruct teachers to teach only grace, mercy, and peace (verse 2) or faith and love (verse 5).

Titus 1:10 – 16 Some who were paid to preach used Jewish fables and rules to subvert faith. The appropriate topics are listed in 2:1 – 3:8.

James 4:1 – 4, 5:1 – 6 James wrote to Christians, not the general population. In these two paragraphs, James described fights, adulteries, fraud, selfish indulgence, and murder. Such behaviors would be rare in the church, so James uses them as physical illustrations of spiritual sins. The battles were contentions over doctrine. Adulteries were divided loyalties. Non-payment of laborers was failing to support missionaries. Selfish indulgence was elevating physical comforts from luxury to necessity. Murder was destroying the faith of another.

Going to law against a brother (1 Corinthians 6:1 – 8). Paul was disappointed in those in the congregations of Corinth who were bring lawsuits against one another. The nature of the grievances is not given, but the local courts would be interested only in cases that caused someone to lose an asset or suffer physical harm. So, it is unlikely that they were taking differences of opinion about the nature of faith to the civil courts. Paul’s suggestion was to pick someone in the congregation to hear and judge the dispute rather than exposing the family of God to a clear sign of disunity.

Addressing the sin of another (Galatians 6:1, James 5:19 – 20). All the faithful are required to address the shortcomings of others in a productive and gentle way.

Criminal activity (Romans 13:1 – 7, Titus 3:1, 1 Peter 2:13 – 14). In general, in the US, there is no specific obligation to report knowledge of a crime. In some states, one must report crimes against a child or the elderly. Certain people (for example medical professionals and teachers) are required to report certain types of crimes as a condition of their respective licenses. The faithful follow the law.