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# The Disappearance of Church Discipline—How Can We Recover? Part Three

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In 1 Corinthians 5, the Apostle Paul confronted a case of gross moral failure in the Corinthian church. In the face of such sin, however, the church had done nothing. So how should the Corinthians have responded to this public sin? Paul speaks in this passage of delivering this sinner unto Satan and removing him from fellowship. How is this to be done? To the Galatians Paul wrote that “if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.” [Galatians 6:1] This teaching is clear, indicating that spiritual leaders of the church are to confront a sinning member with a spirit of humility and gentleness, and with the goal of restoration. But what are the precise steps to be taken?

The Lord himself provided these instructions as He taught his disciples. “If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. 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.” [Matthew 18:15-17]

The Lord instructed his disciples that they should first confront a sinning brother in private. “Show him his fault,” instructed the Lord. If the brother acknowledges the sin and repents, the brother has been won. The fact that the first step is a private confrontation is very important. This limits the injury caused by the sin, and avoids a public spectacle, which would tarnish the witness of the church to the gospel.

In the event the private confrontation does not lead to repentance, restoration, and reconciliation, the next step is to take witnesses. Jesus cited the Deuteronomic law which required multiple witnesses of a crime for conviction. Yet his purpose here seems larger than the mere establishment of the facts of the case. Jesus seems to intend for the witnesses to be an important presence in the event of the confrontation, thus adding corroborating testimony concerning the confrontation of a sinning brother. The brother cannot claim that he was not confronted with his sin in a brotherly context.

If the brother does not listen even in the presence of one or two witnesses, this becomes a matter for the congregation. “Tell it to the church” instructed Jesus, and the church is to judge the matter before the Lord, and render a judgment which is binding upon the sinner. This step is extremely serious, and the congregation now bears a corporate responsibility. The church must render its judgment based upon the principles of God’s Word and the facts of the case. Again, the goal is the restoration of a sinning brother or sister—not a public spectacle.

Sadly, this congregational confrontation may not avail. If it does not, the only recourse is separation from the sinning brother. “Let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector,” instructed the Lord, indicating that the separation is to be real and public. The congregation is not to consider the former brother as a part of the church. This drastic and extreme act is to follow when a brother or sister will not submit to the discipline of the church. We should note that the church should still bear witness to this man, but not as a brother to a brother, until and unless repentance and restoration are evident.

What is the church's authority in church discipline? Jesus addressed this issue directly, even as He declared the establishment of the church after Peter's great confession. "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven." [Matthew 16:19] This 'power of the keys' is one of the critical controversies between evangelicals and the Church of Rome. Roman Catholics believe that the Pope, as Peter's successor, holds the keys, and thus the power of binding and loosing. Protestants, however, believe that the Lord granted the keys to the church. This interpretation is supported by the Lord's repetition of the matter in Matthew 18:18, "Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven." Here, the context reveals that the power of binding and loosing is held by the church.

The terms 'binding' and 'loosing' were familiar terms used by rabbis in the first century to refer to the power of judging matters on the basis of the Bible. The Jewish authorities would determine how (or whether) the Scriptures applied in a specific situation, and would render judgment by either 'binding,' which meant to restrict, or 'loosing,' which meant to liberate. The church still bears this responsibility and wields this power. John Calvin, the great Genevan Reformer, believed that the power of 'binding' should be understood as excommunication, and 'loosing' as reception into membership: "But the church binds him whom it excommunicates—not that it casts him into everlasting ruin and despair, but because it condemns his life and morals, and already warns him of his condemnation unless he should repent. It looses him when it receives into communion, for it makes him a sharer of the unity which is in Christ Jesus."

Calvin's interpretation is fully in agreement at this point with Martin Luther, whose essay on "The Keys" [1530] is a massive refutation of papal claims and Roman Catholic tradition. Luther saw the keys as one of Christ's great gifts to the church. "Both of these keys are extremely necessary in Christendom, so that we can never thank God enough for them." As a pastor and theologian, Luther saw the great need for the church to bear the keys, and he understood this ministry to be gracious in the recovery of sinning saints. As Luther reflected, "For the dear Man, the faithful Bishop of our souls, Jesus Christ, is well aware that his beloved Christians are frail, that the devil, the flesh, and the world would tempt them unceasingly and in many ways, and that at times they would fall into sin. Therefore, he has given us this remedy, the key which binds, so that we might not remain too confident in our sins, arrogant, barbarous, and without God, and the key which looses, that we should not despair in our sins."

What about a church leader who sins? Paul instructed Timothy that a church leader—an elder—is "to be considered worthy of double honor," when he rules well. [1 Timothy 5:17] When an elder sins, however, this is a matter of great consequence. First, no accusation is to be received on the basis of just one uncorroborated witness. If a charge is substantiated by two or three witnesses, however, the congregation is to "rebuke [him] in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning." [1 Timothy 5:20] Clearly, leadership carries a higher burden, and the sins of an elder cause an even greater injury to the church. The public rebuke is necessary, for the elder sins against the entire congregation. As James warned, "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment." [James 3:1]

The scandals of moral failure on the part of church leaders have caused tremendous injury to the cause of Christ. The 'stricter judgment' should be a vivid warning to those who would violate the Word of God and lead others into sin by example. The failure of the contemporary church to apply consistent biblical church discipline has left most of these scandals unresolved on biblical grounds—and thus a continuing stain on the church.

