

An Overview of Church Discipline (Steven J. Cole, 2006) (Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13)

Years ago, I read about a pastor who became involved immorally with a married woman in his congregation. They each divorced their respective mates and then were married to each other in the church of which he was the pastor. The congregation turned out en masse for the wedding, giving open support.

That tragic story reflects the dominant mood in the American church today, that we should show love and tolerance to those who fall into sin. That mentality is behind the push to accept practicing, unrepentant homosexuals as church members and even as pastors. Even among churches that would not condone these things, there are very few that practice biblical church discipline towards those who persist in sin. Pastor John MacArthur reports (foreword, *A Guide to Church Discipline*, by J. Carl Laney [Bethany House, 1985], p. 7) that a leading pastor once told him, "If you discipline church members, they'll never stand for it, and you'll empty the place. You can't run around sticking your nose into everyone's sin."

If you've ever attended MacArthur's church, you know that that pastor's advice was *not* prophetic! The place is not exactly empty! But neither was that pastor's advice biblical. Following his counsel would put us in disobedience to the words of the Lord Jesus and the apostle Paul. Scripture is clear: **The church must practice biblical church discipline toward professing Christians who persist in known sin.**

Perhaps no verse is so taken out of context and misapplied as Matthew 7:1, "Do not judge so that you will not be judged." If you keep reading, in verse 6 Jesus says, "Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine...." In verse 15 He adds, "Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves." To obey those verses, you must make some fairly astute judgments! You must judge that a person is a dog or a swine or a wolf in sheep's clothing. Furthermore, in 1 Corinthians 5:12, Paul tells the church that they are responsible to judge those within the church. Practicing biblical church discipline does not violate Jesus' command, "Judge not."

Matthew 7:1-6, 15-20 AMP

Do not judge and criticise and condemn others, so that you may not be judged and criticised and condemned yourselves.

2 For just as you judge and criticise and condemn others, you will be judged and criticised and condemned, and in accordance with the measure you [use to] deal out to others, it will be dealt out again to you.

3 Why do you stare from without at the very small particle that is in your brother's eye but do not become aware of and consider the beam of timber that is in your own eye?

4 Or how can you say to your brother, Let me get the tiny particle out of your eye, when there is the beam of timber in your own eye?

5 You hypocrite, first get the beam of timber out of your own eye, **and then you will see clearly to take the tiny particle out of your brother's eye.**

6 Do not give that which is holy (the sacred thing) to the dogs, and do not throw your pearls before hogs, lest they trample upon them with their feet and turn and tear you in pieces.

¹⁵ "Beware of false prophets who come disguised as harmless sheep but are really vicious wolves. ¹⁶ **You can identify them by their fruit, that is, by the way they act.** Can you pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ A good tree produces good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can't produce good fruit. ¹⁹ So every tree that does not produce good fruit is chopped down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ **Yes, just as you can identify a tree by its fruit, so you can identify people by their actions.**

1 Corinthians 5:12-13 NLT paraphrase

It isn't my responsibility to judge outsiders, but it certainly is your responsibility to judge those inside the church who are sinning. ¹³ God will judge those on the outside; but as the Scriptures say, "You must remove the evil person from among you."

What is the difference between God's judgement and believers judging between each other? Only God has the right to eternally condemn or pass sentence on someone because only He has perfect knowledge and that kind of authority. However, every believer is instructed to judge or discern between good and evil, and choose the good and reject or remove the evil. We do this first with ourselves, purifying ourselves of evil. However, if a brother or sister in Christ continues in a sin, then they must be rejected or removed from the church as well, until they repent.

I realize that for some of you who do not have much background in the Bible, this topic will sound as if we're trying to revive the Salem witch trials or the Inquisition. But the Bible is our standard for faith and practice and it has much to say about this subject. While I cannot be comprehensive, I want to give an overview of biblical church discipline. We will consider the purposes of church discipline, the problems that require church discipline, and the procedure for church discipline.

The purposes for church discipline—We may consider these purposes in four directions.

1. TOWARD GOD — CHURCH DISCIPLINE VINDICATES PUBLICLY HIS HONOUR AND HOLINESS.

God's holiness is a dominant theme in the Bible. It means that He is totally apart from and opposed to all sin. In the Old Testament, God told His people Israel (Leviticus 19:2), "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." The New Testament repeats that command (1 Peter 1:15-16). Peter refers to the church as a holy priesthood and a holy nation (1 Peter 2:5, 9).

1 Peter 2:9 AMP

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a dedicated [holy] nation, [God's] own purchased, special people, that you may set forth the wonderful deeds and display the virtues and perfections of Him Who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light. [Exodus 19:5, 6.]

Because of this, when God's people sin, He will disassociate Himself from them and take them through severe discipline if they do not repent and deal with the sin in their midst. You see this often in the Old Testament (e.g., the story of Achan, Joshua 7), and also in the New Testament. In the messages to the churches in Revelation 2 & 3, the Lord repeatedly warns that if they do not deal with their sins, He will set Himself against the church and even remove that church's lampstand. God would rather have no testimony in a city than to have His name mingled with sin.

We also see this in the Old Testament where God says that He is against His people Israel in the sense that He will fight against them as He disciplines them because of their sin; His goal always being to purify them and bring them back into fellowship with Himself.

Ezekiel 5:7-10 NLT paraphrase

"Therefore, this is what the Sovereign Lord says: You people have behaved worse than your neighbours and have refused to obey my decrees and regulations. You have not even lived up to the standards of the nations around you. ⁸ **Therefore, I myself, the Sovereign Lord, am now your enemy. I will punish you publicly while all the nations watch.** ⁹ Because of your detestable idols, I will punish you like I have never punished anyone before or ever will again. ¹⁰ Parents will eat their own children, and children will eat their parents. I will punish you and scatter to the winds the few who survive.

2. TOWARD THE CHURCH ITSELF — CHURCH DISCIPLINE RESTORES PURITY AND DETERS OTHERS FROM SINNING.

1 Corinthians 5:1-13 AMP

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, impurity of a sort that is condemned and does not occur even among the heathen [unbelievers]; for a man has [his own] father's wife. [Deuteronomy 22:30; 27:20.]

2 And you are proud and arrogant! And you ought rather to mourn (bow in sorrow and in shame) until the person who has done this [shameful] thing is removed from your fellowship and your midst!

³ As for my attitude, though I am absent [from you] in body, I am present in spirit, and I have already decided and passed judgment, as if actually present, ⁴ in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, on the man who has committed such a deed. When you and my own spirit are met together with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵ you are to deliver this man over to Satan for physical discipline [to destroy carnal lusts which prompted him to incest], that [his] spirit may [yet] be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

⁶ [About the condition of your church] your boasting is not good [indeed, it is most unseemly and entirely out of place]. Do you not know that [just] a little leaven will ferment the whole lump [of dough]?

⁷ Purge (clean out) the old leaven that you may be fresh (new) dough, still uncontaminated [as you are], for Christ, our Passover [Lamb], has been sacrificed [for us].

⁸ Therefore, let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with leaven of vice and malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened [bread] of purity (nobility, honour) and sincerity and [unadulterated] truth. [Exodus 12:19; 13:7; Deuteronomy 16:3.]

⁹ I wrote you in my [previous] letter not to associate [closely and habitually] with unchaste (impure) people—¹⁰ not [meaning of course that you must] altogether shun the immoral people of this world, or the greedy graspers and cheats and thieves or idolaters, since otherwise you would need to get out of the world and human society altogether!

¹¹ But now I write to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of [Christian] brother if he is known to be guilty of immorality or greed, or is an idolater [whose soul is devoted to any object that usurps the place of God], or is a person with a foul tongue [railing, abusing, reviling, slandering], or is a drunkard or a swindler or a robber. [No] you must not so much as eat with such a person.

¹² What [business] of mine is it and what right have I to judge outsiders? [none]. Is it not those inside [the church] upon whom you are to pass disciplinary judgment [passing censuring sentence on them as the facts require]? [Yes].

¹³ God alone sits in judgment on those who are outside. Drive out that wicked one from among you [expel him from your church].

In 1 Corinthians 5:7, Paul commands, "Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened." Leaven (yeast) is a type of sin. If you put a small amount of yeast in flour, it spreads throughout the entire lump (5:6). Paul is saying symbolically what he also (5:2, 13) states plainly, that the church needed to remove the sinning man so that the purity of the church would be restored and the sin would not spread any further.

You can see this principle in a family. If the parents do not consistently and impartially discipline a defiant child, very soon the other children learn that there are no consequences if they disobey their parents. The sin of the first child spreads to the others. The same thing happens in a classroom with a teacher who does not enforce discipline. Soon the entire class is out of control. On the government level, if the authorities do not enforce the laws, the whole country soon devolves into anarchy.

In the local church, God has given authority to the elders.

Hebrews 13:17 NKJV

Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.

Part of their responsibility is to uphold God's standards of holiness and do all that they can to keep the church doctrinally and morally pure. For example, take a single Christian woman who knowingly disobeys Scripture by marrying an unbeliever. If the elders do not deal with her sin, other single women in the church, who have been waiting on the Lord for a Christian husband, will be tempted to date and marry unbelievers. The biblical standard that believers should only marry believers would be diluted and sin would spread through the church.

If we don't uphold God's standards of holiness, it doesn't take long for the church to become just like the world. Although the city of Corinth was infamous for its sexual promiscuity, this sin went beyond what the pagans practiced (1 Cor. 5:1)! But, it didn't shock the Corinthian church! They were actually boasting about their acceptance and love toward this man who was intimate with his stepmother (5:2)! The woman was probably not a believer, or Paul would have told the church to remove her as well. But he says that they should have mourned and removed this man from their midst. Sin in other professing Christians should cause us to mourn, not to be tolerant. God would rather that a local church be pure and small than that it be big, but tolerant of sin in its midst.

3. TOWARD THE WORLD — CHURCH DISCIPLINE DISPLAYS GOD'S STANDARDS OF HOLINESS AND DRAWS A LINE BETWEEN THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD.

To attempt to attract people from the world into the church, today's church seems bent on showing the world, "See, we're just like you are. We're normal folks. We watch raunchy movies and TV shows, just as you do. We have marital problems and get divorced just as frequently as you do. We won't judge sexual immorality of any kind, because we're tolerant people, just as you are. Come and join us!"

But Scripture is clear that the church is to be distinct from the world by being separated unto our God, who is holy. I'm not talking about adding legalistic rules for things that are not in the Bible, but rather about being a people who are captivated by the beauty of God in His holiness, so that we willingly distance ourselves from this corrupt world. As 1 John 2:15 puts it, "Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him."

[Summary so far:]

Toward God, church discipline vindicates publicly His honour and holiness.

Toward the church itself, church discipline restores purity and deters others from sinning.

Toward the world, church discipline displays God's standards of holiness and draws a line between the church and the world.

4. TOWARD THE OFFENDER — CHURCH DISCIPLINE CONVEYS BIBLICAL LOVE AND SEEKS TO RESTORE THE SINNER.

Some wrongly think that love is opposed to discipline. But the Bible is clear that we cannot love our brothers and sisters in Christ if we do not deal with their sins in the way that God prescribes. Because God loves us, He disciplines us so that we may share His holiness (Hebrews 12:6,10). Because sin destroys people and relationships, to be indifferent toward someone who is sinning is really to hate that person [*because it shows that we are not concerned about them or our relationship with them*].

Also, as we've seen, sin is like yeast that spreads throughout the whole lump of dough. It's like a contagious disease. If it isn't checked, it will infect others. That's why James (5:19-20) says, "My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins." **Love seeks to turn a sinner from his sin.**

The goal in church discipline is never vindictive. We are not seeking to punish people or to throw them out of the church. Our aim is to restore the offender. In Galatians 6:1, Paul writes, "Brethren, even 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." "Looking to yourself" implies that you, too, could fall into sin. So, do not be self-righteous or condescending. "Gentleness" does not mean weakness, but strength under the control of God Spirit. Whether we sharply rebuke (Galatians 2:11-14; Matthew 16:23; Titus 1:13) or gently appeal should be determined by what we think will be the most effective in restoring the sinner to obedient fellowship with God.

Galatians 2:11-14 NLT paraphrase

¹¹ But when Peter came to Antioch, **I had to oppose him to his face**, for what he did was very wrong. ¹² When he first arrived, he ate with the Gentile believers, who were not circumcised. But afterward, when some friends of James came, Peter wouldn't eat with the Gentiles anymore. He was afraid of criticism from these people who insisted on the necessity of circumcision. ¹³ As a result, other Jewish believers followed Peter's hypocrisy, and even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.

¹⁴ When I saw that they were not following the truth of the gospel message, **I said to Peter in front of all the others**, "Since you, a Jew by birth, have discarded the Jewish laws and are living like a Gentile, why are you now trying to make these Gentiles follow the Jewish traditions?"

Some will ask, "But what if it doesn't work?" The answer is, we need to be obedient to God and leave the results to Him. There is no biblical guarantee that it will work every time. Jesus said (Matthew 18:15b), "if he listens to you, you have won your brother."

The problems that require church discipline

First, I will give the principle and then comment briefly: We should deal with any professing believer who associates with this church who is knowingly and rebelliously disobeying the clear commandments of Scripture.

- **The person must be a professing believer.**

Paul had written a now lost letter in which he told the church not to associate with immoral people (1 Corinthians 5:9). Now he clarifies that he did not mean unbelievers, but rather a "so-called brother" who is immoral or covetous or an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or a swindler (5:11). He states (5:12) that it is God's business to judge those outside of the church, but it is the church's responsibility to judge those within the church. Our first step should be to make sure that the sinning person understands the gospel. Sometimes the problem is that the person is not truly born again.

- **The person must associate with this church.**

Our church constitution and by-laws spell out that by joining this church, you are submitting to the process of church discipline. But, also, if someone attends this church regularly and especially if he is involved in any church ministry, we must practice church discipline. The testimony of this church is at stake, and the world doesn't check to see if the person is an official member.

- **The person must be knowingly and rebelliously disobedient.**

This calls for discernment. Paul writes (1 Thessalonians 5:14), "**And we urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone.**" We should not encourage the unruly, but admonish him. We should not admonish the fainthearted or weak, but encourage and help them. Sometimes, a newer believer is in sin due to ignorance of God's Word. He is weak. But, if he continues defiantly in the sin after you show him what the Word says, he then becomes unruly.

I find the analogy of child rearing helpful here. If my three-year-old was acting like a three-year-old, I tried to help him learn how to behave in a more mature manner. But I didn't discipline him for being three. But when your three-year-old is defiant, you must deal with his rebellion. If a believer is overcome by a sin, but is repentant and wants help, you help him. But if he says, "I have a right to do as I please," he is defiant and needs discipline.

- **The person must be disobeying the clear commands of Scripture.**

You don't discipline someone for areas on which the Bible has no clear commandments. Drinking alcoholic beverages is not grounds for discipline; drunkenness is. Watching movies is not grounds for discipline; watching pornographic movies is. Scripture contains many lists of sins (1 Corinthians 6:9-10; Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 4:25-5:6; 1 Timothy 1:9-10; 2 Timothy 3:2-5). We may summarise these as:

1. Violations of God's moral commandments (1 Corinthians. 5:10-11; 6:9-10; 2 Corinthians. 6:14-7:1; Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 5:3-5).
2. Unresolved relational sins, such as gossip, slander, anger, and abusive speech (Matthew 18:15-20; Ephesians 4:25-31; Galatians 5:19-21; Colossians 3:8).
3. Divisiveness in the church (Romans 16:17-18; Titus 3:10; 3 John 9-10).
4. False teaching on major doctrines (Galatians 1:8-9; 1 Timothy 1:20; 6:3-5; 2 John 9-11).
5. Disorderly conduct and refusal to work (2 Thessalonians 3:6-15; 1 Timothy 5:8).

The procedure for church discipline

Matthew 18:15-17 NKJV

"Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' ¹⁷ And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.

How do we deal with those who persist in such sins? The Scriptures give the following steps:

1. A PRIVATE MEETING (Matthew 18:15)

“If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.” Usually it is better to go in person (rather than talk over the phone), unless there are concerns for physical safety or propriety. Do not put yourself in a potentially compromising situation with the opposite sex.

Your objective is not to “set him straight” or to “get things off your chest” by letting him know how wrong he is. Your aim is to get him to listen so as to win him back to the Lord. The Greek word translated “show him his fault” is a legal term that means to convince in a court of law. The best way of convincing someone of his sin is to take him to Scripture. Your opinion really doesn’t matter. God’s Word is the authority.

Jesus says that if you have knowledge of your brother’s sin, then **you** (not the pastor) are the one to go to him. While you should **pray** before you go, you should not call 15 people to have them pray. That just spreads gossip. You may need to seek godly counsel, but limit the circle of knowledge to those who can help.

Also, **check your own heart first**, to make sure that you’ve taken any logs out of your own eye (Matt. 7:3-5). You are not exempt from temptation and sin, so look to yourself (Gal. 6:1). **Check your motives.** If you are going to try to prove that he’s wrong and you’re right, you’re going for the wrong reason. You should go in obedience to God, with the aim of restoring your brother to God and to those he has wronged.

Make sure that you **get the facts**. If someone tells you about someone else’s sin, tell the informant to go directly to the sinning person in line with these guidelines. Do not go to someone on the basis of hearsay or gossip, unless you are going to find out the facts. Go in **gentleness** (strength under control) and **wisdom**. Sometimes, there is a need for sharp rebuke (Titus 1:13; 2:15), but usually the best course is a brotherly, heartfelt appeal (1 Timothy 5:1-2). If the sinning person knows that you genuinely care for him, he will be more likely to listen and respond positively.

How many times should you go to the person before going to the next level? Scripture does not say. If the person repents, the discipline process stops there. You have won your brother. The exception to this would be a situation where the person’s sin is publicly known. For example, if a woman gets pregnant out of wedlock, she (and the man, if he is in the church) needs to make a public confession, so that the church can openly forgive her and support her in having her child. Or if a Christian man is convicted of a crime that is made public, even if he repents, he needs to ask the church to forgive him for dishonouring the name of Christ.

2. A PRIVATE CONFERENCE WITH WITNESSES.

If the person does not listen to you, Jesus says to take two or three witnesses (Matthew 18:16). These may be others who know of the problem or it may include church leaders. The point is to strengthen the reproof and to cause the offender to realize the seriousness of the situation. Your goal is to bring the sinner to repentance and restoration. *Sometimes this is not possible because the person will not be willing to communicate.*

3. A PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENT TO THE CHURCH.

Although Christ does not specify, other Scriptures indicate that this step should be administered through the church leaders, who have authority over the church (Hebrews 13:17). Before an announcement is made to the church, the leaders should make an effort to contact the offender and warn him that his sin will become public knowledge on a particular date if he does not repent before that time.

If the sin has to be made public, the church should be instructed in how to relate to the sinning person. Church members should no longer fellowship with the person as if there is no problem. Paul says not even to eat with such a one (1 Corinthians 5:11). He tells the Thessalonians not to associate with such a one, but then adds, “And yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother” (2 Thessalonians 3:14-15). This shows that all contact is not forbidden, but we aren’t to relate on a normal, buddy-buddy level that ignores the person’s sin. Any contact must communicate. “We love you and we want you back in the fellowship of the church, but we can’t condone what you’re doing and we can’t accept you back until you genuinely repent.”

4. PUBLIC EXCLUSION FROM THE CHURCH.

The Lord says that the final step is, “Let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer” (Matthew 18:17). Paul says, “Remove the wicked man from among yourselves” (1 Corinthians 5:13; also, 5:2). It seems to me that Paul combines steps 3 & 4, mentioning the man’s sin before the church and excluding him from the fellowship at the same time. If someone’s sin is damaging the reputation of the church, he needs to be removed from the fellowship quickly.

5. PUBLIC RESTORATION WHEN THERE IS GENUINE REPENTANCE.

Sadly, some love their sin more than they love Christ and they will not repent. Others do not repent and find another church that accepts them in spite of their sin. That is too bad. Churches should not welcome those who are under the discipline of another church. But some will repent, which involves godly sorrow over their sin (2 Corinthians 7:8-10) and restitution where appropriate (Philemon 18-19). A person’s deeds should reflect repentance (Acts 26:20).

If the person expresses genuine repentance, then the church should be informed and the person should be forgiven and accepted back into the fellowship (2 Corinthians 2:5-11). Of course, there should be a time of proving before a repentant person is put into positions of ministry or leadership. Also, the restoration process should include some training or discipling to help the person grow and avoid the sin in the future.

Conclusion

The church is not a fellowship of sinless people. We are a fellowship of forgiven sinners who, by God’s grace, are pursuing a life of holiness and obedience to our Lord. We dare not fall into spiritual pride by thinking that we are better than a member who has fallen into sin. Paul says that our response to sin in a church member should be to mourn (1 Corinthians 5:2).

But if we do not deal with those who refuse to repent of sin as the Lord commands, His church will soon blend in with the world and the salt will lose its savour. The Lord warns that He will come and remove our lampstand (Revelation 2:5). So we must practice biblical church discipline toward professing Christians who persist in sin.

Application Questions

1. How do you know when to confront a sinning Christian? Since we’re all sinners in process, what sins need confrontation?

Any habitual or ongoing sin that is in any of the lists of sins listed previously, and also any sin that dishonours both God and the church — whenever there is a hardened heart and a refusal to listen to correction.

2. What should a church do if a member who is close to another member under discipline refuses to break fellowship?

Because they are agreeing with and identifying with the sin, as well as not submitting to the authority of the church (see Hebrews 13:17), they should also begin the process of church discipline. If they don't repent, then they also will be disfellowshipped.

3. How should family members relate to a sinning family member who is under church discipline?

As long as there is no danger—mental, physical, sexual, or spiritual—to the other family members, they should continue to live under the same roof. The key here is to treat them as an unbeliever, but at the same time treat them with love and respect. For example, 1 Peter 3:1-2 gives instructions for wives whose husbands do not obey the Word of God, “In the same way, you wives must accept the authority of your husbands. Then, even if some refuse to obey the Good News, your godly lives will speak to them without any words. They will be won over ² by observing your pure and reverent lives. (NLT)

In whatever relationship, husband/wife, brother/sister, parent/child, there would have to be a break in Christian fellowship—no longer praying or reading the Bible together etc, with that person under church discipline, until they repent.

4. How would you answer the objection that church discipline will drive people away and that we can't minister to people who leave our church?

Read Hebrews 12:1-12. God disciplines those He loves; “For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives” (v6). God works through the church both to build up and to discipline. Consider that children who are not disciplined end up destroying themselves—“He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him promptly”—Proverbs 13:24). Church discipline is a form of ministry, an expression of genuine love. If people with hard and unrepentant hearts are allowed to stay in fellowship, they won't be able to receive anything anyway, because they are not right with God. They will also most likely continue in their sin much longer because they see no consequences for it, which in the end will only hurt them more.

5. In light of the possibility of a lawsuit, is church discipline advisable in our day? Why/why not?

For the sake of purity and obedience, it is worth it. No church is better than an impure and compromising church which only brings shame on God and those who attend. At the same time, we must remember the advice Jesus gave in Matthew 10:16, “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.”

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Respecting The Marriage Covenant

What does the bible say about the importance of marriage vows?

Malachi 2:13-15 NKJV

And this is the second thing you do: you cover the altar of the Lord with tears, with weeping and crying; so He does not regard the offering anymore, nor receive it with goodwill from your hands.

¹⁴ Yet you say, "For what reason?"

Because the Lord has been witness between you and the wife of your youth, with whom you have dealt treacherously; yet she is your companion and your wife by covenant.

¹⁵ **But did He not make them one**, having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring. "Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth.

God is the silent witness at every marriage—when the wedding vows are made, they are a binding promise that are remembered and upheld by God. Once married to someone, God considers you to be married to that person until either they die, or, the other spouse is unfaithful.

Matthew 19:3-9 NKJV

The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?"

⁴ And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' ⁵ and said, '**For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh**'? ⁶ **So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.**"

⁷ They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?"

⁸ He said to them, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. ⁹ And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery."

What about when a married couple separate?

Although someone may be separated from their spouse, the Bible clearly says that God still considers them married; God's will is that they may be reunited again. Of course, this would only be recommended if it were safe for both parties, with the original grievance having been resolved. Until then, they should remain separated. We need to choose our spouse carefully as this decision has very long term consequences.

1 Corinthians 7:10-11 NKJV

Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband.

¹¹ But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife.

The marriage vow must be respected

Hebrews 13:4 NKJV

Marriage is honourable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge.

Hebrews 13:4 NLT

Give honour to marriage, and remain faithful to one another in marriage. God will surely judge people who are immoral and those who commit adultery.

Hebrews 13:4 AMP

Let marriage be held in honour (esteemed worthy, precious, of great price, and especially dear) in all things. And thus let the marriage bed be undefiled (kept undishonored); for God will judge and punish the unchaste [all guilty of sexual vice] and adulterous.

Clearly, God values marriage and sees it as being very important. This is a clear warning that God will judge those who do not honour marriage. Remember that marriage is a picture of Christ and the church (see Ephesians 5:22-33).

Even just the appearance of evil is sin

1 Thessalonians 5:22 KJV

Abstain from all appearance of evil [it's not just the sin that is wrong in God's eyes, but also the appearance of the sin as well].

1 Thessalonians 5:21-23 AMP

21 But test and prove all things [until you can recognise] what is good; [to that] hold fast.

22 Abstain from evil [shrink from it and keep aloof from it] in whatever form or whatever kind it may be.

23 And may the God of peace Himself sanctify you through and through [separate you from profane things, make you pure and wholly consecrated to God]; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved sound and complete [and found] blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (the Messiah).

Simply put, any activity or appearance that causes people to think there is sin, is sin, because it causes the name of God to be blasphemed or dishonoured. People will always think the worst, and unbelievers are always looking for reasons to ridicule and put down the church, and by association, God. It could be someone of the opposite sex going around to a married person's house while their spouse isn't there, giving the appearance of an affair. It could also be two believers who are courting, and they stay over at each other's house (even if it's just once)—unbelievers will simply assume that they are sleeping together, and other believers will be made to stumble as they copy their bad example and put themselves in precarious situations. Whatever the exact situation, people around see what is happening, and as a result, the name of God is being blasphemed or dishonoured.

Conclusion

Thus the main issue here is that the marriage must be respected because it's marriage—an institution given to man by God that is a picture of our, the church's, relationship with God (Ephesians 5:22-33). It doesn't matter what either spouse has done or not done, as long as they remain married, then in God's eyes they are married, and that must be respected and honoured.