

Today we will not focus on the particular situation Paul is addressing in 1 Corinthians 5, but on the wider principle behind it. Paul is addressing a case of incest, something we are not facing. The Corinthians were not bothered but Paul is demanding that the culprit be disciplined.

Jesus also gave instructions for church discipline, so that is our topic today.

A definition of church discipline could be: 'any corrective action within the church regarding teaching and practice'. It is a form of mutual accountability.

Although today it sometimes seems different, church discipline is not only about sexuality. It pertains to all of life and all of our ideas about God (theology, doctrine).

Sometimes our ideas about church rules can be time-conditioned, as in the case of the 19th century Dutch Baptists who prohibited alcohol and made members promise to abstain. That was the right thing to do at the time but it is no longer necessary (so the Salvation Army could now drop its ban on alcohol). The purity of the Church of Christ is a matter of timeless principles of holiness.

We briefly look at the following biblical examples of calls for mutual responsibility in the Church and attention to lifestyle: Acts 20:31, Colossians 3:16, 1 Thessalonians 5:14, 2 Thessalonians 3:6 and 1 Timothy 5:20. And of course Jesus himself asked for mutual correction in Matthew 18.

First Corinthians 5 is about lifestyle; many of the other passages are about teaching/ideas. Both are important. As we heard at Pentecost, the Church is a temple of the Spirit. It has to be holy. The Church is a counterculture, distinct from the world. Preservation of the identity of the Church is vital. The Church is not a place where 'anything goes'. We do engage with the world, for example by inviting anyone into Renew 88, but we should not adopt the ways of the world. This is a fine line to tread and we need wisdom!

The aim of all discipline is positive: 'so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord' (verse 5). We are not after catching each other out, but after helping one another to grow.

Church discipline can get into conflict with human bonds, if family members protect each other. If anything happens and someone needs to be corrected, let the family not form a wagon fort, a corral or defensive circle, around them just because they are relatives.

Back to the Bible: what did Jesus do? Let us focus on John's Gospel. In John 2, Jesus gets angry and kicks the traders out of the temple. The temple has to be available for the worship of God. In John 4, Jesus gently confronts the Samaritan woman by simply asking for her husband. His wise comment on her many relationships wins her over. In John 8, Jesus forgives the adulterous woman [why was the man not brought to him?]. He both says that she should not sin again and that He will not punish her. In John 21, Jesus confronts Peter *by means of questions only*. Three times Peter denied Him, three times he has to say that he loves Jesus. Then Jesus takes him back as disciple.

Jesus surely did church discipline better than we ever can do it. Yet he delegates it to us, as we also see in Matthew 16:18-19. It's Peter, the Church, that is given the keys. That's why Paul acts against the Corinthians. And why we may need to act as well, if the situation occurs.

What does this mean for us? 1. Personal conversion comes first, but if necessary the church gets involved. Among us it's the church (meeting) that acts; not the minister or a synod. 2. We are responsible for each other, but in a positive way. We encourage each other and look after each other; we are not like the Stasie! 3. All this works best if all who belong to the congregation are also formally members of the church; so once again I urge those who are merely 'in attendance' to join us.

The positive effects of good church discipline and mutual accountability are: 1. It makes God's holiness tangible. 2. It improves our quality of life. 3. It makes us attractive to outsiders. But let's hope, pray, work that we don't need it.