

QUESTION: Confronting a Fellow Christian...

Church Authority: Discipline

“The New Testament is clear on the role of the church in the individual member’s life: the organized church is responsible for each member, has spiritual authority over every member. If I sin and refuse to repent or if I teach false doctrine, it’s the responsibility of the church to discipline me, to bring me back into line. Paul rebuked the church in Corinth for failure to discipline a sinning member (1 Cor 5). Many churches, like Corinth, are defiled and weak because they don’t do the hard thing: discipline those who are sinning, first by counsel and rebuke, and ultimately by separating them from the fellowship if the gentler methods don’t work. “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector” (Matt 18:15-17).

Method of Church Discipline

Let’s apply Christ’s formula. You’ve just discovered that someone in church is having an affair. What do you do? Here are some of the things church people do:

- Nothing – it’s none of your business
- Tell a close friend
- Tell the pastor
- Bring it up in church business meeting
- Share it as a prayer request in your small group
- Go to the person alone and seek his or her repentance
- Start a campaign among the members to deal with the matter (:Political action committee”)
- Have nothing to do with the person in any way that would validate him or her as a fellow Christian

The more common approaches in the list of options violate Christ’s command and harm both the offender and the church. Jesus says that we are to go first to the offending person alone, one-to-one – not to anyone else! Then, should there be rejection of your approach, go with spiritual leaders, seeking to persuade the person to change his or her sinful behavior. If that appeal doesn’t work, it is to become an official matter of church discipline.”

McQuilkin, Robertson. Life in the Spirit. Broadman & Holman Publishers. Nashville, TN. 2000. (pp. 113-114).