

Is Church Discipline a Thing of the Past?

During a recent sermon, I ventured into turbulent waters—twice. I seemed determined to find something to upset one or two people.

- Many Christians drink alcohol. I don't.
- Many Christians think homosexuality is OK. I don't.

Both of my views fall in the categories of a "non-negotiable," but for different reasons.

My choice not to consume alcohol is my own personal conviction. But the operative word is "personal." I don't drink, yet I have no qualms about those who do—so long as (1) they are not letting the alcohol take over (i.e., get drunk, which is wrong according to Scripture [Eph. 5:18]) and (2) they are not compromising their own convictions.

My stance on homosexuality is a non-negotiable for a wholly different reason: it's spelled out in Scripture. People can attempt all the bad hermeneutics they want to justify their support of homosexuality, but they don't succeed. Scripture condemns the act of homosexuality, and therefore, my stance on the matter is non-negotiable.

Of course, Scripture also condemns a lot of other actions. One of the most oft-quoted Scriptures condemning the act of homosexuality is Romans 1:26-27, and in the verses that immediately follow, other sins are also listed: envy, strife, gossip, and disobedience to parents. (No one in the church ever talks about the #1 sin among Christians: gluttony.)

But let's not make the sole focus of the Bible to be a list of things God is against. Let's focus on what God is for: He is for us. He created us to live an incredible life with Him, and even when we rebelled, He took action through Jesus Christ to restore us back to that life. Any prohibitions are for our benefit. *Do you want to enjoy life—I mean, really enjoy life? Follow these instructions.*

So let's get to the conversation my wife and I had on the way home after the sermon. Mary asked a valid question: *What do we do when someone wants to join the church who is a homosexual?*

That depends. Is this a believer who struggles with the pull of homosexuality? Or is he a person who proudly identifies himself as gay and thinks the act of homosexuality is perfectly OK for a Christian?

Let's consider the first guy, but in the place of "homosexuality," insert any other sin: the pull of recreational drugs ... pornography ... anger ... gluttony ... a bitter spirit.

We all struggle with sins and habits, and hopefully, we are gaining victory over those as we grow in Christ. And there are many homosexual believers who struggle. Do we push these struggling believers away?

I wouldn't put such a person in a position of leadership, but neither would I ask someone to lead a small group who has a violent temper. However, I would encourage their participation with other Christians. The accountability and support of the body of Christ is a key factor for all of us to overcome sinful habits and grow in our faith.

It's a whole different issue with the person who believes his homosexual behavior is perfectly acceptable, and therefore, he will continue in it. Or the person who goes on a bender every Friday night but wants to be seen as a respected member of the church. We're talking about *continual* sinful behavior with no reservations about it.

Paul had something to say about this: "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and the kind of sexual immorality that is not even tolerated among the Gentiles — a man is sleeping with his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Shouldn't you be filled with grief and remove from your congregation the one who did this?" (1 Cor. 5:1-2).

Paul's choice of words shows this man and woman were living this lifestyle continually (and even worse, the church seemed to be OK with it). Paul's response was to remove them from the fellowship of the church until repentance was evident.

As Mary and I drove home, our conversation landed on the issue of church discipline.

- *At what point do you tell a person he's not welcome in the church, or he can no longer have a leadership role?*
- *What sins call for church discipline, and what sins do we give a pass to?*
- *Do we make a blanket rule about a particular sin, or do we make it a case-by-case matter?*

These are hard questions to answer (which is why most churches don't deal with it). But I think churches need to consider how they will respond, since culture's unbiblical view of sin is creeping into the church. Three principles need to guide the process:

1. Stand your ground on biblical teaching.
2. Stand your ground in love.
3. Discipline with the goal of being redemptive. Seek to bring the person away from sin and into a life lived under the lordship of Christ.