
Discipline in the Church

Matthew 18:15-17

Introduction

We are engaged in our evening discussions in a series that is going to deal with a few aspects of church life. These presentations are not intended to provide a complete, “full bodied” theology of the church, nor are they intended to answer every question that you may have regarding how the leadership at Clearcreek Chapel thinks about the church and its ministry. We do hope to answer some of your questions, especially those of you who are somewhat new to the fellowship here. We also hope to update and refresh the memories of the many who have been engaged in the life of this church for some time now. At the least we hope to stimulate your thinking about the community of believers that you have entered in relationship with as to what the fellowship is to look like and behave in the current culture and in relationship to the written Word.

This series is important for a number of reasons. One of which is the ferocious attack on the church being levied out there in contemporary Christendom. Yes, I said in Christendom. There has always been an attack upon the church and its ministry being levied from the world and the Gospel’s detractors. Accusations of imperfection and outright fraud have been heard since the disciples’ claim of Jesus’ resurrection. But there is currently a more subtle attack being waged by many people who think they have the church’s best interests at heart. We are not going to delve into all of the intricacies of this movement either but by positively affirming our commitment to continue to build the church upon the foundation of Christ that is clearly presented in the text of Holy Scripture we will be training the flock to stand upon the Word and in hope prepare you for the onslaught of the many churches and friends who are falling prey to less than adequate thinking with regards to how the church should stand and function in 21st century society.

Tonight’s presentation is intended to be more of a discussion. We are using a couple of key texts and seeing how they should affect our approach to the theme of the evening. The issue before us tonight is the concept of “discipline.” Discipline in church contexts often brings up bad memories of debate, threat, lawsuit, accusation, anger, punishment and woe. Some actually can break out in a cold sweat at the mere mention of the word. Others find great joy and glee in the idea and wield their Bibles much like scythes and axes. In our somewhat brief time tonight we want to examine this idea, hopefully show you how it naturally flows from an appropriate understanding of the church as community. We hope to depict the process succinctly and elaborate upon its importance in the life of the church and its function as a marker to Biblical fidelity in an era of compromise to the wisdom of contemporary politics and business. At the conclusion we hope to provide some time for a few questions from the audience.

Discipline Defined

As we begin tonight let's read this classic passage from the Gospel of Matthew and first of see how this fits into Matthew's purposes as he builds his discussion. [Read Matthew 18 entire chapter] This text is perhaps the main text in use in the development of a theology and practice of "church discipline." As we see the concept portrayed we hope to get a glimpse first of all of how "Discipline" is defined.

Connection to Community

One of the first things we are going to assert is "discipline's" connection to community. This should not surprise us as we recognize one of Matthew's overarching purposes. Matthew does not express these directly so we should exercise some caution in this regard. But it is evident from Matthew's use of Scripture and his presentation of Jesus that he has a significant concern to present Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah, the coming King. But in relation to this, he also is concerned to present a correct view of the Kingdom itself to his audience so that they can have a greater confidence in the connection and that they themselves will know how to live as disciples of this High King Jesus.

So in the presentation of the life in the Kingdom-Community he inserts this idea in the working of community life. In doing so he should cause us to first of all see the connection that this idea that we label "church discipline" has to the definition and function of community. This major unit in Matthew's gospel emphasizes relationships within the kingdom. Beginning with an answer to the question "Who is the greatest in the kingdom" to approach to sin and temptation and the importance of the care of the meek (little ones might refer back to verse 3 or could be a reference to literal children) and then culminating in an extensive parable on the importance of forgiveness Matthew is providing insights as to what a kingdom disciple looks like. And embedded into this section is the locus classicus on "discipline."

Context in Discipleship

That should first of all tell us that whatever we conclude about the "who, what and how" of discipline it should be interpreted in the context of kingdom living and discipleship. Discipleship is how one follows Jesus. In the kingdom context it is the way of life in the kingdom. It is the culture that one lives in and functions in as one follows the will of the Lord. With this in mind, discipline is how one should approach the whole idea of conflict. Within the kingdom, relationship and community matter. Living in the context of community requires a framework for interaction and what we refer to as "discipline" falls out from this concept.

Discipline Discussed

As we progress I will briefly lay out what the text says. Let me refer you to the Chapel's Book of Faith and Order for a more complete discussion of how this looks in the milieu of Clearcreek Chapel.

Conducted in Care

Matthew in verses 15 and 16 of this chapter sees that this conflict resolution is conducted in an atmosphere of care. Verse 15 tells us the goal is the restoration of relationship as we are to "gain our brother." The entire process starts small and quiet. And is not intended to bring shame or blame but is to be in the idea of restoration. It may be also that the context that is offensive to one another is a more obvious failure or sin. Galatians 6 is in this same vein as it looks to the issue of someone who needs confronted with respect to their sin. [Read Galatians 6:1-2] A spirit of gentleness is required as this is encountered. Note also the context of Galatians 5 and 6, that of community and relationship...

Culminated in Community

Which brings us back to Matthew, it is here that we see that eventually the entire community is to be affected by this "breach of relationship." Whether the primary issue of one of personal offense or of public scandal, this issue will and should cause concern for the community at large. This should cause us to see how important relationship is in the church because all of this finds its culmination in community. Verse 18 tells us that the final arbiter in the issue is the church where lack of repentance leads to a different relationship to the community, now no longer viewed as a member but rather as an object of evangelism.

Discipline Defended

So why should we care about whether we exercise discipline here at Clearcreek Chapel? Why should we defend our understanding of "discipline?" In keeping with the culture "out there" wouldn't it be easier to ignore those who have failed or to just ignore breaches in relationship. Indeed there are times when the "offense" is small and should be disregarded and looked upon as an opportunity to remove "logs from our own eyes." But in the main when we let these issues continue unresolved we weaken community and taint the message of the gospel that we claim is the center of our life. Lets look at three quick areas that demonstrate the importance of discipline in the life of any church.

Commitment to Scripture

The first is that a functioning understanding of church disciplines indicates a commitment to Scripture. It does not mean that that church understands the Scriptures correctly in every regard but it does give evidence that it cares about the Scriptures to live up them and see them as the source of what Peter in II Peter 1:3 call "all things that pertain to life and godliness," that indeed that is found in the "knowledge of him who called us" and is seen in the "prophetic word (vs. 19)" that actually comes to us from "men who spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (vs. 21)"

Care of the Flock

A “robust” concept of discipline usually also gives evidence of a healthy concern and care of the flock. If a church does not have a concept of discipline in its functioning it allows for rebellion and conflict to go unchecked. We should have a vision for the life of the church that sees an “every member” ministry to one another and to the world that only can exist in a context of vital, authentic relationships.

Call of the Gospel

Which brings us to the third area, that is a practical concept of discipline gives evidence that the church understands the power and the call of the gospel. Discipline only has hope of restoration in the context of the power of the gospel which has the ability to change hearts and restore us to relationship with God himself. That is the impact of Romans 3:21-26 where we read that the redemption in Christ “propitiates” or appeases the judgment of God to bring us into relationship once again.

Conclusion

So let’s conclude with a few ideas about discipline.

1. Discipline should be seen as a natural outworking of the concept of community.
2. Discipline is not punitive, but has as its goal the restoration of relationship.
3. Discipline should be carried out in the context of care.
4. Discipline is a mark of a church’s commitment to the Scriptures and the community life that they portray.

Any questions?