

#### IV. The Discipline of the Church

##### A. Definition of Church Discipline

Chapter I of the *Book of Discipline of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.*, is entitled The Nature of Discipline. It states:

- "1. Ecclesiastical discipline is the exercise of that authority which the Lord Jesus Christ has committed to the visible church for the preservation of its purity and good order. It may be either judicial or administrative.
2. Judicial discipline is concerned with the prevention and correction of offenses. An offense is anything in the doctrine or practice of a communicant member of the church or of a church court which is contrary to the Word of God. The purpose of judicial discipline is to vindicate the honor of Christ, to promote the purity of His church, and to reclaim the offender.
3. Administrative discipline is concerned with the maintenance of good order in the government of the church in other than judicial cases. The purpose of its exercise is that all rights may be preserved and all obligations faithfully discharged.
4. All communicant members of the church are under the care of the church, and subject to its discipline."

The above statement defines an offense as anything in doctrine or practice contrary to the Word of God. Later in the *Book of Discipline* (Chapter III, section 5) we read: Offenses are either private or public. Private offenses are those known to an individual only, or, at most, to a very few persons. Public offenses are those which are notorious and scandalous.

But what about private offenses? Are they subject to discipline? The *Book of Discipline* Chapter III, section 6, states: No charge of a private offense shall be admitted unless the court has assured itself that the course set forth by our Lord in Matthew 18:15-17 has been faithfully followed. From this it would appear that private offenses can properly become public offenses, and are thus subject to church discipline.

What kinds of offenses are subject to church discipline? If the answer is, "All sins are subject to discipline!", then perhaps it is necessary to make a distinction between informal discipline, in terms of private admonition regarding sin and personal attempts to motivate toward greater holiness, and formal discipline, in terms of bringing an offense to the attention of the appropriate persons. Perhaps it is also necessary to make a distinction between sins toward which the offender appears to have an attitude of repentance, and sins toward which the offender shows an unrepentant and perhaps even callous attitude. And perhaps it is also necessary to make a distinction between sins which are common to a good many persons in the church, such as impatience, lack of zeal, or worry, and sins which, if indulged in, will prevent a person from inheriting the kingdom of God, such as those referred to in the following Scriptures: