

# WALKING TOGETHER



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*A Congregational Reflection on  
Biblical Church Discipline*

Wyman Lewis Richardson

Foreword by James Leo Garrett, JR.

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WALKING TOGETHER  
A Congregational Reflection on Biblical Church Discipline

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*For Roni, my wife.*

“Dal mondo,  
per seguirla,  
giovinetta  
fuggi’mi, e nel  
suo abito mi  
chiusi  
e promisi la via  
de la sua setta.”

Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto III.103



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## Foreword

**F**OR A century or more it has been “out of style” in American Protestant churches to talk about corrective church discipline. It has been cast into the rubbish of abandoned church practices, often because of its misuse. But now, after constructive church discipline, i.e., discipleship training, has been recovered in many evangelical churches, one begins to hear voices calling for the recovery of corrective discipline.

Wyman Richardson, knowing well that such cannot be successfully imposed by leadership, has produced a useful guide for church members to study if and when a congregation begins to consider inaugurating corrective discipline. He handles admirably the biblical texts, provides pertinent case studies, clearly delineates the choices between biblical church and contemporary culture, and calls for a redemptive and restorative discipline. Timely, attractive, and balanced, Richardson’s book should prove to be a great blessing to those congregations that seriously make use of it.

—James Leo Garrett, Jr.  
Distinguished Professor of Theology, Emeritus  
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary



## Acknowledgments

I WOULD LIKE to thank Stonecrest Baptist Church in Woodstock, Georgia, for allowing me to enter the Doctor of Ministry program at The Beeson Divinity School of Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama. The first draft of this study was created as my final project in the Doctor of Ministry program. I am indebted to this fine church.

This final form of the study is the result of the feedback I received from the First Baptist Church of Dawson, Georgia, where I have served as pastor since 2002. The members of this church were the first to sit through its teaching. Their response was both encouraging and enlightening. I listened attentively to their suggestions and reformatted the study into its current form as a result of those suggestions. What strengths there may be in the arrangement of this study, I attribute to this dear church.

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I would like to thank my mother, Mrs. Diane Richardson, of Sumter, South Carolina, Mrs. Juanita Hughes of Woodstock, Georgia, and Mrs. Linda Brown of Dawson, Georgia, for their tireless and long-suffering proof-reading of this work. My father, Wade Richardson, as well as my brothers, Rev. Condy Richardson, pastor of Hermitage Baptist Church in Camden, SC, and Rev. David Richardson, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Williston, SC, also provided me great encouragement and assistance.

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I also wish to express my love and appreciation to my daughter, Hannah Dale Richardson. Hannah is eight years old at the time of this writing, yet she has shown an uncanny interest in her Daddy's big paper. As can be understood by any person who has received the devotion of a child, I am humbled by her love and would hope to become in reality what she perceives me to be in her heart. Her affections hold for me a value that is indescribable.

This study is lovingly dedicated to my wife, Roni Richardson, without whom I do believe it would have been impossible. This is her work, as much as my own, and we send it forth with hopes that the church may be strengthened and encouraged.

—Wyman L. Richardson  
Dawson, Georgia

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## Introduction

SOMETHING AKIN to fatigue is setting in among many evangelicals: fatigue with low expectations, moral failure, tepid concepts of membership, non-existent accountability, and a version of lowest-common-denominator Christianity that does not resemble the robust faith and practice of the church universal at her greatest moments throughout history. Perhaps more than anything else, though, there is a growing unease with our own hermeneutical dishonesty. To put it bluntly, many evangelicals are coming to feel that the practice of church life in modern North America simply does not harmonize with what they read in scripture.

The time is right for the church to return to church discipline. The matter is simply one of obedience, and the time is always right for obedience. This book arose out of my own pastoral experience with church discipline, particularly with a rather difficult situation that the church I pastor, the First Baptist Church of Dawson, Georgia, found itself facing in the summer of 2002. In truth, this book was first designed to be taught in a classroom setting. I designed it originally as a leader's and student's workbook. These workbooks are likewise published by Wipf & Stock Publishers and I would encourage you to obtain copies to teach in your church or in a small group setting. I am grateful to Wipf & Stock for the opportunity to write this accompanying book. Much of the contents of this book are present in the workbook, though much is not. I have tried to delve more deeply here into some of the murkier and more contested areas of church discipline. The workbooks are designed to be more accessible for lay people.

It is my hope that this book (as well as the workbooks) will take their place in some small way in the fascinating conversation that is going on today in evangelical circles concerning church discipline. I believe the stakes are high and courage is needed. My prayer is that this work will assist in the reconsideration and, I trust, eventual reimplementation of biblical church discipline within the congregational lives of Christian churches today.





## A Most Unlikely Development

SOMETHING INTERESTING has been happening within Evangelicalism over the last few years. A long-neglected and almost forgotten topic has re-emerged as a viable topic of discussion. What was considered a bit taboo, uncouth even, is being looked at again with fresh eyes in many quarters. One can even sense a bit of urgency in the discussion, a growing momentum of conviction and a boldness in calling people back to this long lost topic. The topic is church discipline.

Consider: In February 2005, Ron Sider, the well-known author of *Rich Christians In An Age Of Hunger*, published a little book entitled *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*. In it, he chronicles the shocking moral life of evangelical believers in the United States: a sky-rocketing divorce rate, miniscule giving, racial prejudice, etc. Near the end of his book he offers some proposals to address this scandal. The first one? The reinstatement of church discipline in congregational life.<sup>1</sup>

Consider: *Christianity Today*, largely regarded as the flagship publication of Evangelicalism, publishes a cover story for its August 2005 issue with these words boldly affixed across the top of the magazine cover: “Fixing Church Discipline.” To be sure, the curious drawing beneath these words—a man on his knees bent over with his head and hands entrapped in wooden stocks in the shape of a church (his helpless face crowned with a large scarlet “A” on his forehead, conjuring all the caricatures of Hawthorne’s oppressive Puritan New England)—seem to suggest in a none-too-subtle manner that legalism concerning church discipline, and not (more accurately) outright neglect, is the great danger we face. Nonetheless, the five articles on church discipline in this issue

<sup>1</sup> Sider’s language is in no way ambiguous: “Recovery of the practice of church discipline in our congregations is absolutely essential if the church today is to end the scandal of cheap grace and gross disobedience.” Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*, 109.

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are a credit to the magazine and give one hope that the great tragedy of the disappearance of church discipline from congregational life in North America and beyond is finally being recognized and addressed.<sup>2</sup>

The growing sentiments of sympathy toward church discipline are no less obvious in my own denomination, The Southern Baptist Convention. The Winter 2000 issue of *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, the journal of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY, was dedicated entirely to the issue of church discipline. It contains an editorial, five articles, one sermon and a round-table forum calling for Baptists to reconsider church discipline. In May 2005, Danny Akin, President of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, NC, preached a sermon entitled “Church Discipline” in a Southeastern chapel service. On June 11, 2005, in two overflow sessions at the Southern Baptist Pastor’s Conference in Greensboro, NC, Mark Dever, pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC, and founder of Nine Marks Ministries, called upon Southern Baptist pastors to return to the lost practice of church discipline. A September 29–30, 2006, conference at The Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, TX, was titled “Maintaining the Integrity of a Local Church in a Seeker Sensitive World: The Baptist Perspective on Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and Church Discipline.” At this conference, a number of Southern Baptist seminary professors and pastors gathered to consider, among other things, how church discipline might be reclaimed in a church-climate gone awry.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, numerous Baptists have called for a renewed consideration of church discipline in a number of recent books.<sup>4</sup> This is just a sampling of the many calls coming from

<sup>2</sup> Jeschke, “How Discipline Died,” 31–32; Dever, “Shaping Holy Disciples,” 32–33; Ortberg, “Spheres of Accountability,” 33–34; Sande, “Keeping the Lawyers at Bay,” 34–35; Neff, “Healing the Body of Christ,” 35–36. All of these articles are exemplary examples of balanced approaches to biblical church discipline.

<sup>3</sup> At this conference, Dr. Gregory Wills said, “[Church discipline] is the canary in a coal mine. When the canary in a coal mine keels over, catastrophe impends. When church discipline is lost, catastrophe impends.” This is an apt and powerful illustration of the importance of biblical church discipline. “Baptists Must Reclaim Church Discipline and Membership, Scholars Say,” <http://www.swbts.edu/publicrelations/story.cfm?id=3E11214F%2DF75D%20DBE66%2D8426C07C27504EDE>.

<sup>4</sup> In 2004, The Baptist Standard Bearer reissued theologian James Leo Garrett, Jr.’s, 1962 book *Baptist Church Discipline*. See also Hammett, *Biblical Foundations For Baptist Churches*, 34, 84, 63, 105–107, 110–116, 124–126, 147–148, 285, 331–332; Norman, *The Baptist Way*, 64–83. Perhaps no single Baptist has been as stalwart in his call for a return to church discipline than Mark Dever. See his *Nine Marks of a Healthy*

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within the Convention for Southern Baptists to prayerfully consider a return to biblical church discipline.

These examples and others are signs of hope, yet it cannot be denied that the practice of church discipline has yet to make anything like a substantial impact on evangelical congregational life in North America. It is still, tragically, ensconced in the conversations and conferences and lectures of evangelical academia. Many churches that do practice church discipline are stellar in their examples, but they are also the exception and not the rule. James Leo Garrett, Jr.'s, 2004 observation that "there is little evidence of a renaissance of the intentional and consistent practice of any congregational discipline . . . in churches related to the larger Baptist conventions in the United States" remains irrefutably true.<sup>5</sup>

### Whatever Happened to Church Discipline

There have been many theses put forth to attempt to explain exactly why church discipline disappeared. Gregory A. Wills has chronicled the disappearance of church discipline from Southern Baptist congregations. "In the 1870s," writes Wills, "the practice of church discipline in Southern Baptist churches began to subside. The trend accelerated in subsequent decades. By the 1930s discipline was quite rare—most reported exclusions were merely the cleaning of church rolls of names of members long inactive and forgotten. In the 1940s most associations stopped bothering to record exclusions."<sup>6</sup>

A fear of the abuses of church discipline is widely regarded as one of the reasons for its widespread abandonment, but there are many others as well. John MacArthur, Jr., lists 4 "P's" to explain why church discipline has disappeared: (1) Privacy, (2) Permissiveness, (3) Pride, (4) Persecution (of sinners by gossiping Christians).<sup>7</sup> J. W. MacGorman cites (1) the "abuses of the past", (2) a low "level of Christian commitment in our churches", (3) the decline of adequate pastoral care in large congregations, (4) the ease with which excluded members may simply

*Church*, 153–179, *The Deliberate Church*, 67–74 and "Shaping Holy Disciples," 32–33. Dever's book, *Polity*, is a collection of historic Baptist documents, many of which refer in large part to the issue of church discipline. Mark Dever is the founder of Nine Marks Ministries, a tremendous ministry that offers a number of very helpful resources for churches ([www.9marks.org](http://www.9marks.org)).

<sup>5</sup> Garrett, *Baptist Church Discipline*, i.

<sup>6</sup> Wills, "Southern Baptist and Church Discipline," 10.

<sup>7</sup> MacArthur, *The Elements of Church Discipline*, 9–10.

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go to and join other congregations, (5) sympathy for an offender's family, and (6) a fear of litigation.<sup>8</sup>

J. Carl Laney cites some interesting statistical data that sheds some light on this phenomenon: "In a recent survey of 439 pastors on the matter of church discipline 50 percent acknowledged situations in their ministry where discipline would have been appropriate but no action was taken. Three major hindrances to the practice of church discipline were mentioned: (a) fear of the consequences or outcome, (b) preference for avoiding disruptive problems, and (c) ignorance of the proper procedures."<sup>9</sup>

Stephen M. Haines has detailed a number of reasons for the decline of church discipline, including: the secularizing results of increased urbanization and industrialization in American society, an over-reaction to previous abuses of church discipline, the encroachment of Enlightenment optimism and the rejection of Calvinist theology, an emphasis on individualism, and the importation of secular management techniques into the life of the church.<sup>10</sup> In his fascinating study of the decline of church discipline in the Church of Scotland at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, Stewart J. Brown notes that an unbalanced preoccupation with sexual offenses, a distorted use of church discipline against women, and the unforgiving nature of the church's policy of discipline led to its demise.<sup>11</sup>

R. Stanton Norman points to "the rise of a stringent individual autonomy," the "absolute relativism that pervades Western secular society," "a general lack of respect for authority within the church," "differing denominational policies," "confusion over Christian accountability within the local church" and "the rising fear of litigation." Most damning of all, however, is Norman's observation that the fear of a "loss of revenue" has hindered Baptist churches from practicing discipline.<sup>12</sup>

This list is not exhaustive and many other factors might be mentioned, but it will certainly not be closer to being complete until biblical illiteracy is added. Indeed, this lack of knowledge of what the contents

<sup>8</sup> MacGorman, "The Discipline of the Church," 82.

<sup>9</sup> Laney, "The Biblical Practice of Church Discipline," 357.

<sup>10</sup> Haines, "Southern Baptist Church Discipline, 1880-1939," 25-26.

<sup>11</sup> Brown, "No More 'Standing the Session': Gender and the End of Corporate Discipline in the Church of Scotland, c. 1890-1930," 456-457.

<sup>12</sup> Norman, *The Baptist Way*, 80-81.

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of the Bible actually are is almost certainly the most prevalent reason for the disappearance of church discipline from the life of the church.

Regardless of the reasons, it would be hard for even the most casual observer to deny the absence of that communal accountability in the life of the average church that church discipline brings. As shown above, there are many and varied reasons that students of the topic have mentioned to account for this neglect. However, it is perhaps not inappropriate to suggest that an unstudied and non-technical observance of the workings of the average church life provides its own proof for this reality. In other words, personal experience must be taken into account as well.

It would be difficult, for instance, to find a member of a church who has not either experienced first-hand or watched from a distance as a church wrongly, badly, abusively, or negligently responded to members who had fallen into sin. It would be possible for such a member to recount tales of churches splitting over issues left unresolved, of dominant personalities essentially hijacking whole congregations because congregations did not know how to respond to them or even that they could, or of moral failings in the leadership or the laity that were simply left unaddressed because nobody knew how to address them. Thus, whether churches have a history of these types of situations or not, the modern evangelical will have no problem recalling or recounting some wound in the life of a congregation that might have been avoided and certainly would have been better treated had church discipline been properly understood and practiced.



## A Conversation and a Plea

“When discipline leaves a church, Christ goes with it.” —John L. Dagg<sup>1</sup>

“Where there is discipline, Christ is in the midst. Where there is none—can you expect Him to be present?” —Jay Adams<sup>2</sup>

“Those who would lead in the renewal of discipline must be thoroughly convinced of its terrible urgency.” —James Leo Garrett, Jr.<sup>3</sup>

### “Love”—The Hard Call

**A** NEW COMMANDMENT I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34–35). The full implications of the words of Jesus could no more have been grasped by His original band of disciples than they can be grasped by His worldwide band of disciples today. His teachings are always larger than the comprehension of His audience, and the Christian church is even now struggling to understand what this call to love means.

This is the call that Christ has placed upon His followers: to love as Jesus loves, to love so radically and so fully that the watching world will know by observing us who we are and to whom we belong. And who are His followers? They are the church, the body and bride of Christ,

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Dever, *Polity*, 15.

<sup>2</sup> Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline*, 116.

<sup>3</sup> Garrett, *Baptist Church Discipline*, 25.

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the new Israel, the fellowship of the followers, the community of the redeemed.

The church, then, is to be characterized by love. Simple enough, one would think, but we immediately find ourselves with a problem. We might reveal this problem by looking at the following imaginary conversation between two people:

“The church is to be characterized by love.”

“What do you mean by *love*?”

“Well, everybody knows what that means.”

“No, I don’t think they do. In fact, I think the word *love* has been used in many different ways, some of them good and some bad.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Listen, some people today say *love* and they really mean ‘intensely strong feelings;’ but that sounds more like passion than love. And some people say *love* and they really mean ‘always saying something nice to somebody;’ but that sounds more like affirmation than love. And some people say *love* and they really mean never telling somebody they’re wrong; but that sounds more like permissiveness than love. So what do you mean when you say the church is to be characterized by love?”

“Well, Jesus says in John 13:34 that the church should love one another ‘just as I have loved you.’ So I guess when I say *love* I mean the love of Jesus.”

“So the church is to be characterized by the love of Jesus?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Why, yes. I’m sure.”

“And we’re to act towards each other as Jesus acted?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Well, I can go with that. In fact, I agree with you completely. But I don’t think a lot of churches will like that.”



*A Conversation and a Plea*

“Really? I’m not so sure. I mean, I think that churches will struggle with loving their enemies and all of that kind of stuff, but I think they would agree that they should love as Jesus loves.”

“I think that they will *think* they agree with that, but I’m not sure they’ve really understood the hard parts of the love of Jesus.”

“What do you mean, *the hard parts*?”

“I mean the parts that don’t match up with our current understanding of love.”

“Like what?”

“Well, like where Jesus says in Matthew 18 that ‘if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.’”

“I’ve never heard that before.”

“Yeah, lots of people haven’t, but it’s in there. So are you saying we should love like that?”

“Well, yeah, if that’s what it says.”

“And what about after that where Jesus says, ‘But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.’”

“I haven’t heard that either.”

“It’s likely you haven’t. We tend to read those parts of the Bible that are comfortable to us, but that’s in there too. So do you think we should love like that?”

“Well, if that’s what Jesus says, then, yes, that is how we should love.”

“But what about after that verse when Jesus says, ‘If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.’”

“Are you sure you have that right?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure, you can read it right here in Matthew 18:15–17.”

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“Well, I don’t think that sounds right. In fact, it doesn’t sound very . . . well . . . loving.”

“No doubt. It doesn’t sound loving because our culture has defined love as passion, as affirmation, as permissiveness, as sentimentalism. So this kind of thing goes against the grain of what we call love.”

“I guess maybe you’re right. Still, it sounds so hard.”

“Maybe it does, but you said we were to love as Jesus loves. And Jesus apparently thought that this was somehow the very nature of love, to go and seek to win those who have turned away from Him, even if, in the process of seeking and winning them, we must use hard love.”

“I don’t know. I don’t think that churches will really go for that kind of thing.”

“Maybe not, but if what you said was true, and if churches are to love as Jesus loves, and if a church will never fully be a church if it does not love as Jesus loves, and if Jesus says that these hard things are also a part of love, then shouldn’t we try to call them back to this?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t know.”

## Church Discipline Defined

The preceding conversation could happen in any congregation in America today. Most American evangelical Christians are committed to the idea of a congregation that loves with the love of Jesus but really haven’t thought through what that means. We have come to define love as passion, as affirmation, as permissiveness, as sentimentalism. In 1902, Victor Masters spoke eloquently of the decaying effects of this kind of sentimentality on church life: “Sentimentality is an enemy of church discipline. Sentimentality is the love of man divorced from love of truth. Under the specious guise of broadened sympathies it cloaks a big lot of hypocrisy and moral decay. The church sentimentalist is so kind to his fellow church member that he is willing to ignore the plain instructions of the Book of his faith rather than bring him to account for unchristian conduct.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Wills, “Southern Baptists and Church Discipline,” 10–11.

### *A Conversation and a Plea*

This is not the love of which Jesus spoke. This is a false love, one that masquerades as the authentic item but whose fruit does not compare to that of true love. We have turned our backs on that type of love that Jesus called for, the love that not only says, “I love you. You’re great!” but also, “I love you. You’re wrong.”

Many of our forefathers had a name for this kind of love. They called it “church discipline.”

## The Most Important Word

In defining what church discipline is, it is necessary to begin with the first word: “church.” In fact, this first word is the most important of the two, because if “church” is not defined correctly, then all discussion of the word “discipline” is bound to be misguided. In truth, any attempt to define or practice “discipline” outside of a proper definition or practice of “church” is not only unwise, but is bound to harm people and weaken the witness of the church.

To begin with, this word “church” tells us the setting for church discipline. It is to be practiced among people who have given their lives to Jesus Christ and who have committed to following Him. It is, in a sense, a family ministry. Christians cannot attempt to practice church discipline among people who are of the world because church discipline is a ministry that belongs uniquely to the church which, while *in* the world, is not *of* the world (John 15:19).

This fact helps us understand what the Apostle Paul means in 1 Cor 5:9–13. In the entire chapter of 1 Corinthians 5, Paul has been instructing the church on how to respond to a very scandalous situation. After telling the church what they should do in response to a church member who was involved in an inappropriate relationship with his father’s wife, Paul says:

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one. *For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges.* Remove the wicked man from among yourselves.

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In reading these verses, some general principles of church discipline begin to emerge.

They suggest, first of all, that church discipline is a ministry between brothers, or brothers “so-called.” In other words it is a ministry between those who claim to be in the family of God (“ . . . I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person . . .” v.11). Secondly, they show that church discipline involves a type of judgment in the church (“Do you not judge those who are in the church?” v.12). And, finally, they reveal that God brings another type of judgment on those who are not in the church (“But those who are outside, God judges.” v.13).

The “church” in “church discipline” helps us define the setting of this ministry, but it also helps us define the quality of this ministry. This is because the word “church” not only means a body of people who believe in Jesus, but also a body of people who love each other with the love of Jesus. Jesus said: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34). He also said, “This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you” (John 15:12).

So the church (the setting for church discipline) is a body of people committed to following Jesus Christ who act towards one another with unbelievable love (the quality of church discipline). If church discipline is a ministry to be practiced in the church, and if the church is a body characterized by the love of Jesus, then this means that church discipline, done correctly, is an act of love.

Not only does this word “church” define the quality and setting of church discipline, but it defines the authority behind this act as well. Implicit in the act of communal discipline is the idea that the church has the authority to act thus. The church’s Lord granted this authority to the church, when, in Matt 18:17–18, Jesus said, “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.” This power of binding and loosing will be discussed in greater detail later on, but suffice it to say for the present that outside of the granted authority to hold one another accountable and to bind and to loose, church discipline would be nothing more than an exercise in mass hubris and collective hypoc-

ris. The church's authority is therefore crucial to the legitimacy of the church's discipline.

"Church," then, communicates a setting for the act (i.e., among God's people), a quality of the act (i.e., a manifestation of the love of God's people), and an authority behind the act (i.e., the church's authority to "bind" and to "loose"). In other words, whatever church discipline is, it is only truly biblical and healthy when it is practiced among disciples and followers of Jesus Christ who have committed themselves to loving one another with the love of Jesus and who speak with the authority of Heaven.

### The Three Levels of Discipline

There are three senses in which the words "church discipline" can be used. We might choose to think of these three senses as three levels. They are all interconnected, and they move from very wide (at the top) to very specific (at the bottom).

The uppermost level of the words "church discipline" refers to God's discipline of His children, the church. Scripture is very clear regarding this aspect of the Lord's love for His people. Deut 8:5 is indicative: "Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the Lord your God disciplines you."<sup>5</sup> Church discipline refers, therefore, to God's discipline of His church. This is the top level.

The second or middle level refers to all of the ministries of the church that assist her in the process of becoming like Jesus. In other words, church discipline includes the teaching ministry of the church, the preaching ministry of the church, and the discipleship ministry of the church. In this sense, church discipline is, in the words of John White and Ken Blue, "the training of the church by the church. . . Church discipline is anything the body of Christ does to train Christians in holiness, calling them to follow their Lord more closely."<sup>6</sup> All of these things are aspects of church discipline in the sense that they discipline the church and assist her in her sanctification.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See also Prov 3:11–12, 1 Cor 11:32, Heb 12:7–9 and Rev 3:19–20.

<sup>6</sup> John White and Ken Blue, *Healing the Wounded* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 18–19.

<sup>7</sup> Southern Baptist theologian James Leo Garrett, Jr., has noted the didactic nature of the term "discipline" by providing a helpful etymology for this broader understanding of the word. "The word 'discipline,'" he notes, "which is derived from the Latin *disciplina*, and the word 'discipleship,' derived from the Latin *discipulus*, have a common rootage

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The third and most specific meaning is what is called “corrective church discipline.” Corrective church discipline refers to the church’s response to those within the body of Christ who decide to embrace a lifestyle of rebellion against God and His church. It is the church’s attempt to call a wayward brother or sister away from behavior that, if not abandoned, will wreck their own relationship with the Lord, cause others to sin, dishonor the Lord, and weaken the witness and ministry of the Lord’s church. Corrective church discipline includes everything from a private one-on-one appeal, to an appeal with two or three witnesses, to an appeal by an entire church body, to the act of excommunication, and ultimately to the act of restoration upon repentance.

Many people mistakenly think that church discipline refers only to corrective church discipline. It also has the two broader meanings mentioned above. Corrective church discipline is properly situated beneath the overall disciplining ministry of the church which itself sits beneath God’s discipline of His people. The table below illustrates where corrective church discipline stands in relation to the other meanings of discipline.

### *3 Levels of Church Discipline*

Level 1: God’s Discipline of His People

Level 2: The Church’s Overall Ministry  
(teaching, preaching, discipleship, corrective church discipline)

Level 3: Corrective Church Discipline  
(one-on-one appeal, appeal with witnesses, church appeal, excommunication, restoration)

All three of these levels are important and all of them help the church understand what church discipline is. While it is a mistake to think that “church discipline” only means “corrective church discipline,” the term “church discipline” can be used, and frequently is used, to refer to this third level. In this book, the phrase “church discipline” will be used to refer to “corrective church discipline.”

in the Latin verb *discere*, ‘to learn.’” Garrett, *Baptist Church Discipline*, 4. On this second level, then, “discipline” is about instruction. It is an aspect of sanctification, both individually and corporately. We discipline our own selves and we assist one another in the disciplines as well.

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What, then, is church discipline? Church discipline is a church's authoritative, God-honored, and loving attempt to call a wayward brother or sister away from a life of rebellion against God and His church. It sits within, and is dependent upon, the church's overall ministry to believers and, above all, God's loving discipline of His people.

### Difficult, but Unavoidable

The words "church discipline" sound ominous, and we might associate it with all kinds of dark images: inquisitions, cults, legalism, the Pharisees, abuse. There can be no doubting the reason why we would think of these things. The truth is that the Christian church, under the banner of church discipline, has often done some very, very bad and abusive things. Because of this, lots of Christians and lots of churches don't want to think, much less talk, about church discipline.

"It's been abused too much. Better to just leave it alone," many will say. But it could be that the great Christian writer John Owen had a point when he wrote about this reaction to church discipline: "But this neither is nor ever will be a way to reduce religion, nor any thing in it, unto its primitive order and purity. To deny the being of anything because it hath been abused, when there could have been no abuse of it but upon a supposition of its being, is not a rational way to reprove and convince that abuse."<sup>8</sup>

Church discipline does not fit nicely into any well-defined theological corner. It is an ecclesiological issue in that it greatly impacts not only how the church is defined but furthermore what she is to look like and what her responsibilities are to her members. Within ecclesiological considerations, it also touches specifically upon issues of polity and governance. It delves deeply into hamatology in that it involves the church's reaction to sin, the effects of sin upon the life of the individual believer and the church at large, and the role of the church in the act of repentance. It is in many ways bathed in eschatology, for church discipline anticipates and seeks to honor and actualize that day when "He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing" (Eph 5:27). It presents, of course, tremendous hermeneutical and exegetical issues as it challenges the church to think through its interpretation and application of the Bible in modern times. It involves the ever-vexing question of the church and the culture,

<sup>8</sup> Owen, *The Church and the Bible*, 153–154.

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not only as it refers to the church's witness in the culture, but also as it involves the relationship between the church and the civil authorities in cases in which actions of an illegal nature have been committed by a church member. It also forces Christians to think through issues of authority and the question of the keys. That is, it forces the church to ask, and to answer, "Upon what basis might believers call each other to right living?"

Church discipline, then, cannot be ignored for the simple fact that it is involved in too many aspects of the church's life. It cannot be turned away from for the simple fact that its challenges are bound to be present, felt, and seen in whatever direction one chooses to look. We can't just wish the topic away. In fact, if we are to stay true to our conviction that the church should be characterized by the love of Jesus, and if, as this book hopes to show, the love of Jesus includes church discipline, then we are faced with more fundamental questions of integrity. Questions like: Are we really willing to follow the instructions of Jesus when those instructions make us uncomfortable? Will we allow our cultural understanding of love to shape our reading of the Bible or will we allow the teachings of the Bible to shape our understanding of love? Is the church to make decisions on the basis of what it thinks will work (i.e., pragmatism) or on the basis of what it knows to be right (i.e., principle)? When our cultural definition of love collides with Jesus' definition of love, which should win out?

### Why This?

Why ask these questions? Why bring up such awkward subjects? Why ask a church to consider church discipline? It certainly cuts against the grain of much of our "I'm-ok-you're-ok" church life. And it's so unpleasant. Why can't we just smile and move on? There are eight reasons why we cannot do this and why, instead, we should once again visit this topic of loving church discipline:

1. *It is a simple matter of obedience.* The New Testament picture of the church includes loving, balanced, redemptive church discipline. I hope to show that Jesus clearly instructed His disciples in the matter, thereby making our adherence to it a simple matter of obedience.
2. *We now see the harmful results of ignoring church discipline.* Even if the New Testament were not so clear on the matter, any casual ob-



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server of the health of the evangelical church would conclude that most churches are suffering in the area of interpersonal relationships and loving accountability. We lost a great deal when we abandoned church discipline.

3. *Love demands it.* Simply put, to refuse to call your brother back to obedience when he has strayed, and to abandon him to his rebellion for fear of confronting him, is to refuse to love your brother. Furthermore, to refuse church discipline is to deny your fellow Christian the dignity they deserve as a follower of Jesus.
4. *False teachings are ravaging the American church.* One has to wonder how many cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith have to be trampled on, how many foundational tenets of our faith have to be denied, and how many heresies are going to be taught under the banner of “the Christian church” before many congregations say, “Enough!” When the church abandons discipline, it abandons its only means of dealing with those who teach false teachings.
5. *The church, in many quarters, is now indistinguishable from the world.* Many churches are coming to realize that the reason the culture does not take its claims seriously is because the church looks exactly like the culture. There seems to be no difference. When the church abandons discipline, she abandons the only real means of defining who she is and who she is not, thereby removing any distinction between herself and the world. Church discipline aids the church in her journey towards holiness.
6. *Membership in the average evangelical church has come to mean almost nothing.* Membership in anything is meaningless unless it is possible to violate its terms. There can be no meaningful “in membership” if there is no meaningful “out of membership.” There can be no meaningful “in fellowship” if there is no meaningful “out of fellowship.” “Let’s be honest,” writes Mark Dever, “The state of churches in America today is not good. Even if the membership numbers of some groups look okay, as soon as you ask what the membership numbers actually stand for, you start finding trouble. Alan Redpath has said about the membership of the average American church that 5 percent don’t exist, 10 percent can’t be found, 25 percent don’t attend, 50 percent show up on Sunday, 75 percent don’t attend the prayer meeting, 90 percent

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have no family worship, and 95 percent have never shared the Gospel with others.”<sup>9</sup> This is a tragedy that church discipline will address.

7. *Respect for our forefathers and for God’s hand in the history of the church demands that we at least think about what they considered to be crucial.* It is perhaps the height of human arrogance that modern churches would so cavalierly disregard and discard what so many of our forefathers thought was essential to the very definition of the word “church”. We may, on any issue, say that our forefathers were wrong, but we have no right to dismiss them as irrelevant. We may argue with them, but we have no right to ignore them.<sup>10</sup>
8. *Fear of God calls for church discipline.* This will no doubt sound strange to modern ears, but it does so only because we have forgotten the power of His Word, the might of His right hand, and the awesomeness of His name. If church discipline is, in fact, taught in God’s word, and if our Lord did, in fact, clearly lay down guidelines for His church concerning the matter, and if God has truly said that this ought to be, then how can we simply turn away? If we do not love Him enough to be motivated towards obedience in this matter, one would hope that we would tremble enough before Him to be too afraid to disregard it. With simple but compelling logic, L. S. Walker and E. C. Gillentine have stressed just this point: “There are times when some churches would exercise their authority in church discipline were it not for fear of offending some one. On this point let us reason together a little. What about offending God and His church? Is it all right to offend the Lord? Is it all right to offend His church?”<sup>11</sup>

## The Matter at Hand

So we find ourselves now standing at a crossroads. Perhaps you feel a little afraid, as if we are thinking of tossing hand-grenades around the

<sup>9</sup> Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 173.

<sup>10</sup> “Virtually every Baptist confession of faith,” writes John S. Hammett, “mentions church discipline as one of the proper exercises of this church power.” Hammett, *Biblical Foundations For Baptist Churches*, 106. For further consideration of the historic stance of Protestants concerning church discipline, consult Daniel Wray’s appendix, “What Our Protestant Forefathers Taught Concerning Church Discipline,” in his *Biblical Church Discipline*, 19–26. Concerning discipline in Baptist church life see Norman, *The Baptist Way*, 69–71. Also see Gregory Wills’ *Democratic Religion*.

<sup>11</sup> Walker and Gillentine, *Church Discipline*, 4–5.

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room. If you do feel this way, take heart: Jesus would never instruct His Bride to do anything that would harm her. All of His teachings are for our good and for our sanctification. If Christ has instructed His church to exercise loving church discipline, He has only done so because He knows that this is what we need.

Let us return again to the question at hand: Are we to love as Jesus loved? If the answer to the question is “Yes,” then it is incumbent upon us, crucial even, to study to see just how, in fact, He loved. And if His love includes loving church discipline, then why would we want to shrink from it?

We must also and ever keep in mind that the Lord’s call for us to “encourage one another day after day” was not given to us merely so that we might be a stronger body, but also because the church’s failure to have this kind of encouragement will result in a corrosive weakening of the church that will itself result in many believers having “an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God” (Heb 3:13). In other words, much is at stake here! To ignore church discipline is to invite catastrophe and spiritual ruin into the body of Christ. It is to remove one of the primary means by which we are encouraged and assisted to remain faithful and it is also to close off one of God’s avenues for bringing His body into greater conformity with Himself.

Today’s Christian must realize that studying the Bible and listening to sermons is simply not enough. The church was not designed to be a loose gathering of isolated individuals who gather periodically to affirm certain abstract truths. Such a skewed understanding of the church will always result in Christians who are cut off from the supportive assistance and love that God has built into the church by definition. So crucial is the matter at hand that Christians who come to understand God’s design for the church will not have to have church discipline imposed on them. Rather, they will seek it and desire it for their own sakes and for the sakes of others.

Though the topic may be frightening to some of us, and though we might even find it unpleasant, we will find comfort in the fact that we are only striving to be what our Lord has called us to be. We are only seeking to love as He has loved, even if, in doing so, it takes us into difficult places.



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“I am going to make a strong statement here that I believe can be substantiated biblically. A church that does not practice discipline of its members is not yet functioning properly as a church, just as a family that does not discipline is not a fully functioning family.” —Tony Evans<sup>1</sup>

“Church discipline is on the wane in most circles, if not ignored outright, because of confusion concerning the nature of the church. This is not the only reason, but it is the chief reason . . . I fear the church of Jesus Christ means too little to its members for it to discipline them—at least the church in modern North America.” —Ben Patterson<sup>2</sup>

### Ecclesiology

**T**O UNDERSTAND what Jesus said about church discipline we must first understand the nature of the church. When we talk about the nature of the church we are talking about ecclesiology. Our ecclesiology always determines our practice. What we think the church is determines how we do church.

I strongly disagree with John White and Ken Blue in their assertion that “the practice of corrective church discipline does not demand, and cannot wait for, an adequate ecclesiology.”<sup>3</sup> On the contrary, church discipline is doomed to fail unless it rests on an adequate ecclesiology. We need not wait for a perfect ecclesiology, to be sure, but an adequate ecclesiology must be in place. We could no more expect to have church

<sup>1</sup> Evans, *God’s Glorious Church*, 222.

<sup>2</sup> Patterson, “Discipline: The Backbone of the Church,” 109–110.

<sup>3</sup> White and Blue, *Healing the Wounded*, 41.

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discipline restored without an adequate ecclesiology than we could expect to see a ship built without measurements and plans. An insufficient ecclesiology will always short circuit biblical church life.

Consider the case of Daniel Hawthorn, pastor of the Belhevie Church in Aberdeenshire, Scotland. After Pastor Hawthorn observed that about one-third of his six hundred church members attended services regularly, he sent a letter to all six hundred members asking that they “reflect upon member vows” and decide whether or not they wanted to be a part of the church. He continued by saying that the church would “rather have a smaller roll of people who take their membership and Christian faith seriously than a larger one made up of those who do not.” Many members responded with outrage. The response of one outraged parishioner in particular is illuminating: “Surely,” the member said, “this goes against everything the church stands for.”<sup>4</sup>

“Everything the church stands for” is an ecclesiological assertion. It presumes to know what the church is and how she operates. Begging this member’s pardon, I must say that it was precisely because Pastor Hawthorn understood the nature of the church that he sent the letter. What we see in this situation, then, are conflicting ecclesiologies. It is simply naïve to think that such a member as the one quoted here could begin to understand something like church discipline given the faulty ecclesiology that he or she has so obviously adopted.

In their study of church discipline, White and Blue made this astounding and insightful assertion: “A sociologist studying the average Christian church would see no essential difference in the quality of its human relationships and those of some local club, say a community service group or a country club.”<sup>5</sup>

This statement is admittedly disturbing, but I would suggest to you that there is a great deal of truth in it when it comes to many churches. Many, if not most, churches look like and operate along the same lines as a country club. Many churches tend to include people of similar or

<sup>4</sup> “The Church in Absentia,” 19.

<sup>5</sup> White and Blue, *Healing the Wounded*, 55. Stephen Mathonnet-Vanderwell has likewise echoed this sentiment well: “In the name of being relevant, contemporary, and user-friendly, we have gladly accepted the seemingly innocuous assumptions of our self-exiled society, which have diluted our churches into voluntary associations where discussions of church discipline are all but impossible.” Mathonnet-Vanderwell, “Virtue in the Covenant Community: Can Virtue Ethics Revive Reformed Church Discipline?,” 205.

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close social classes and circles, people of similar races and ethnic make-ups, and people who have similar outlooks and cultural experiences. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule, but, as a rule, you can go into most towns in the United States and be told which church is the “blue collar” church, which church is the “white collar” church, which church is the “money” church, etc., whether such labels are fair or not.

Now, to be fair, there is nothing wrong *per se* with attending church with your peers. It is human nature to want to be with people who are like us. The problem comes, however, when our spoken or unspoken desires for “people like us” and our desire for “club comfort” cause us to abandon a biblical ecclesiology of the church and embrace a cultural ecclesiology of the club instead. “The church of Jesus Christ,” writes Beverly Gaventa, “is not a therapeutic community, although healing can and does happen within it. The church of Jesus Christ is not a social club, although it sustains profound social relations. The church of Jesus Christ gathers in His name and with His presence. For that reason, conflicts, hurts, pains must be examined, discussed and addressed and healing prayed for. Not because the church is ours, but because it is His.”<sup>6</sup>

When our comfort as a club causes us to abandon our mission as a church, then we have allowed our cultural desires to overthrow our church responsibilities.<sup>7</sup> Put another way, while we may look like a club (by virtue of the fact that the majority of a congregation happen to be of a like social standing) we must never act like a club (put the comfort of the group over the mission of the church). Jesus did not come to found a club. He came to create the church.

<sup>6</sup> Gaventa, “Costly Confrontation,” 773.

<sup>7</sup> “That the church has difficulty being a disciplined community, or even cannot conceive what it would mean to be a disciplined community, is not surprising given the church’s social position in developed economies. The church exists in a buyer’s or consumer’s market, so any suggestion that in order to be a member of a church you must be transformed by opening your life to certain kinds of discipline is almost impossible to maintain. The called church has become the voluntary church, whose primary characteristic is that the congregation is friendly. Of course, that is a kind of discipline, because you cannot belong to the church unless you are friendly, but it’s very unclear how such friendliness contributes to the growth of God’s church meant to witness to the kingdom of God.” Hauerwas, “Discipleship as a Craft, Church as a Disciplined Community,” 881.

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Congregations must evaluate the often-unspoken cultural assumptions of its makeup and ask themselves whether or not it has abandoned certain church responsibilities in order to “keep up the club.” We must ask ourselves these questions:

What is our operational ecclesiology?

Is our ecclesiology determined more by the culture or the Bible?

What “club habits” and assumptions have we brought into the church?

Are there things that Jesus is asking us to do that we are ignoring because they conflict with our hidden desires for and assumptions about the church?

## Three Convictions

I would like to propose three convictions that will be foundational to this book:

1. Church discipline has largely disappeared in American churches today because our ecclesiology has been defined more by the culture than by the Bible.
2. Consequently, many churches are more concerned today with the comfort of the club than with the obedience of the church.
3. Therefore, churches must return to a biblical ecclesiology even when that ecclesiology brings us into conflict with our cultural desires.

## Toward a Biblical Ecclesiology

Since our understanding of the church determines our operation of the church, it is crucial that we make sure our ecclesiology is thoroughly and utterly biblical. So let us take some time and see what the Bible says about the church.

Below are a number of verses that inform our ecclesiology. Beneath them are a number of basic ecclesiological conclusions. Again, without a proper ecclesiological foundation, our approach to and understanding of the church will forever be stifled.



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1. Jesus will build the church. “Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” (Matt 16:13–18)
2. Jesus has given the keys of the kingdom to the church. “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”<sup>8</sup> (Matt 16:19)
3. Christ is the head of the church. “For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.” (Eph 5:23)
4. The church is to submit to Christ. “Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.” (Eph 5:24)
5. Christ loves the church and gave Himself for the church. “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her . . .” (Eph 5:25)
6. Christ desires for His church to be holy and without blemish. “. . . that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.” (Eph 5:26–27)

<sup>8</sup> Concerning “the keys”, John Owen writes that “the power expressed therein is not merely *doctrinal* and declarative, as is the preaching of the gospel . . . but it is *disciplinary* also, as it is appropriated unto the house, whose keys are committed unto the stewards of it.” Owen, *The Church and the Bible*, 159. I personally feel that many Protestant churches in the free-church tradition have a woefully inadequate understanding of this “stewardship,” as Owen puts it, and of the authority given to the Church. Perhaps this is a result of an over-emphasis on local church autonomy to the exclusion of the Church universal. Perhaps it is also a result of the influence of hyper-individualism to the exclusion the community. Protestant free churches must learn once again to say “we” and not always and only “I.”

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7. The early church devoted itself to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching . . ." (Acts 2:42)
8. When a church member falls into open, unrepentant rebellion and sin, the church should mourn. "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you." (1 Cor 5:1–2)
9. The church is also to bring a type of judgment against members who fall into open sin. "But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?" (1 Cor 5:11–13)
10. While the church should bring judgment against those who openly rebel against the Lord and His church, it should beware of being too severe and should be always ready to forgive and comfort those who turn away. "Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. What I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs." (2 Cor 2:5–11)
11. When a brother or sister falls into sin, we should desire to see him or her restored. "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him . . ." (Gal 6:1a)
12. We should treat each other with gentleness. ". . . in a spirit of gentleness." (Gal 6:1b)
13. Whenever we hold each other accountable, we should always be aware of our own walks with Christ. "Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be

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tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."  
(Gal 6:1c)

14. The church is to love with the love of Jesus.

Through these snapshots of the church, we begin to get a sense of what God desires His body and His bride to be. The church is to be a body of believers who are committed to the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Christ on Calvary as well as to the daily process of becoming the pure and holy bride that Christ wants us to be. In that process of becoming, we will walk together, help each other, love each other, pray for each other, and, when necessary, gently but clearly call each other back from rebellion and from sin. Furthermore, we see that the church has authority. She has been given the keys of the kingdom, and when she speaks in harmony with Heaven, she speaks with the authority of Heaven. This means that the church is to reflect on earth the reality of Heaven, the will of God, and the way of the Kingdom.

A biblical ecclesiology, then, has no room for a club mentality. The church is not to be a country club or a society or folks who happen to get along. It is to be, in the words of Peter in 1 Pet 2:9–10, "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light."

## Contrasting Ecclesiologies

When once we begin to move towards a thoroughly biblical ecclesiology the contradictions of our cultural ecclesiology begin to rise to the surface. While the culture calls for lives of isolated individualism, the Bible calls for loving fellowship. While the culture calls for never telling another they're wrong, the Bible calls for loving accountability. While the culture calls for believing whatever you want, the Bible calls for conviction (the doctrines of God's Word). While the culture calls for cheap membership, the Bible calls for meaningful membership.

Or, put another way, here are some tenets of a cultural ecclesiology:

1. Doctrine is a matter of personal opinion.
2. Churches should operate on the basis of what works.

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3. A Christian is never, under any circumstance, to judge another Christian.
4. Churches should never remove a member from membership.
5. Love means never telling somebody that they are wrong.
6. Christians are to mind their own business.

In contrast, here are some tenets of a biblical ecclesiology:

1. Doctrine must be in accord with the apostles' teaching that they received from Jesus. (Gal 1:6–9; Matt 28:20)
2. Churches should operate on the basis of what Jesus has instructed. (Matt 28:20)
3. A Christian is sometimes, in certain circumstances, to judge another Christian. (1 Cor 5:12–13)
4. Churches should sometimes (i.e., in cases of open, unrepentant rebellion) remove a person from membership. (1 Cor 5:2, Matt 18:17)
5. Love means being willing to tell somebody that they are wrong. (Jas 5:19–20)
6. Christians are to help one another and hold one another accountable.

These are but a few of the distinctions between the culture's view of the church and God's view of the church. We must be sufficiently convinced of the eroding influence of modern culture upon the church if we are to go about the difficult business of handing her operation back over to God. But when we do this, the rewards are incalculable. Consider the words of Mark Lutherbach:

When a church moves toward this expression of being the body of Christ, the effects are astounding. Lives are changed. Reality overcomes pretense. Humility grows and pride is put to death.

The church is not ours to make into what we wish. She is Christ's. Her purpose, her function, her gifts are determined by him. The church, empowered by the Spirit, is transforming. Pastors must faithfully minister the Gospel and engage with people's lives as physicians of the soul. Members must merge their lives in covenant and love and mutual encouragement in

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the pursuit of holiness. This is our role in our dying cultures – to be outposts of the heavenly people of God in the midst of the inhabitants of the earth. We are to be a taste of the kingdom.”<sup>9</sup>

## Historical Case Study

The First Baptist Church of Dawson, Georgia, was not unlike most other Baptist churches in Georgia in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. A perusal of the minutes from this time period reflect a church that was vigorous in its obedience to Christ’s call to church discipline. They were also vigorous in their obedience to Christ’s instructions that we should forgive as often as our brother or sister asks us for forgiveness.

Case in point is Hiram Wadsworth, who joined the First Baptist Church of Dawson on the first Saturday of November, 1849, by transfer of letter. Mr. Wadsworth apparently struggled with alcohol and was repeatedly summoned before the church to answer for his behavior in the community.

In fact, Hiram Wadsworth was called to stand before the church and answer for his conduct on February 1852, November 1852, May 3, 1856, and March 1857. These repeated summons to Mr. Wadsworth will sound alien to our foreign ears, and we might think that such actions were harsh on behalf of the church. However, in the minds of these Baptist Christians from long ago, the name of Christ and the witness of the church was at stake when a member lived an ungodly life. Furthermore, the church’s intentions become clear when we read on and see the verdict of the church once Mr. Wadsworth repented of his actions:

### *Disciplinary Action Against Hiram Wadsworth*

Date	Offense	Offender’s Response	Church’s Response
Feb. 1852	intoxication	repentance	“forgiven”
Nov. 1852	intoxication	repentance	“forgiven”
May 1856	intoxication	repentance	“forgiven”
Mar. 1857	intoxication	repentance	“forgiven”

<sup>9</sup> Lauterbach, *The Transforming Community*, 42–43.

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“Forgiven, forgiven, forgiven, forgiven!” What a beautiful site! Do we desire our fellow believer’s forgiveness as much as we desire our own comfort?

## What It Means to Be the Church

“How much better it could be if the penal conceptions of church discipline would yield to the imagery of the emergency room of a hospital. No one resents a hospital for having an emergency-room service to take care of those who need immediate and urgent care. Admittedly church discipline regarded as punishment is well-served by the penal categories, but church discipline regarded as reclaim or restoration to wholeness of the offender is admirably served by the hospital imagery.” —J. W. MacGorman<sup>1</sup>

### The Church as a Hospital

**T**HE CHURCH has often been called “a hospital for sinners” and, rightly defined, this is true.<sup>2</sup> After all, when the Pharisees went to Jesus’ disciples and questioned them about his eating with “tax collectors and sinners,” Jesus responded, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not a sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Matt 9:10–13). So it is clear that the church, in a sense, is a hospital since (a) Jesus went to those who were “sick” and (b) the church is the body of Christ.

Unfortunately, though, the image of the church as “a hospital for sinners” has often been used as an argument against church discipline.

<sup>1</sup> MacGorman, “The Discipline of the Church,” 81.

<sup>2</sup> White and Blue make an interesting point when they write that many churches are, in fact, very bad hospitals: “Churches have become hospitals where sin-sick souls are given aspirin and entertainment to distract them from the diseases of their souls. God forgive us, we are more concerned with numbers than with holiness.” White and Blue, *Healing the Church*, 34.

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The reasoning goes like this: “If we were to remove people from our fellowship, or risk having them grow angry with us and leave, we would be removing them from the one place where they can get well. The church is a hospital for sinners. It seems odd, then, to be speaking of removing them in their time of greatest need.” This is a thoughtful and serious assertion, though I believe it is flawed in several key areas and assumptions.

A hospital, technically speaking, is not a place for sick people *per se*. It is actually a place for sick people who are seeking to be well, willing to cooperate, within reason, to the treatments administered to them there, and who are not disruptive to others seeking to be well. But what would a hospital do if a patient decided to destroy the hospital from the inside out? What would it do, for instance, if a patient with a contagious disease decided to run from room to room and infect the other patients trying to get well? What would the hospital do if a patient decided that his or her own personal ideas of how to run a hospital should hold sway, and that he or she was going to storm the medicine cabinets, emergency rooms, and surgeon’s tools and take over the hospital for himself or herself? What would a hospital do then?

It is possible that the hospital would say this to such a person: “You are sick. You desperately need to let us help you and we desperately want to help you. But you are making it impossible for us to do so. We have no choice, unless you stop and let us help you, but to ask you to leave. And when you leave the hospital, you are very likely to get even more sick and rethink the importance of what it is we do here. When that happens, we want you to know that we are ready at any moment to take you back in and help you.” That is likely what a hospital would say. It is also, tragically, what churches must sometimes say in similar circumstances. This is the nature of church discipline.

### The “Already/Not Yet” Church

Perhaps at this point something is gnawing at you. “All of this talk of purity and holiness and sanctification is good in theory,” you think to yourself, “but the fact is we’re all sinners and the church will never be finally pure until Christ returns.”

It is understandable that you would think that, and there is much truth to be found in those words, but we must keep a number of things in mind:



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1. God often asks us to do things that we will not be able to do with perfection until we have entered into His presence for eternity. In fact, there is nothing that God asks us to do on earth that can be done perfectly! That, however, does not free us from the responsibility of seeking to do those things.
2. God often asks us to be things that we will not be able to be with perfection until we have entered into His presence for eternity. In fact, there is nothing that God asks us to be on earth that we can be perfectly! That however, does not free us from the responsibility of seeking to be those things.
3. If the church were to decide that it would refuse to do those things that it cannot do perfectly, it would not do anything at all.

The truth is that the Christian church is what we might call an “already/not yet” church. We are “already” redeemed by the blood of Christ, yet we have “not yet” entered into our ultimate redemption, we have not ultimately received the inheritance that awaits us. We are “already” the bride of Christ, yet we have “not yet” stood before our Lord without “spot, wrinkle, or any such thing.” Our sins have “already” been washed white as snow, yet we have “not yet” attained that final moment when the struggle with the flesh will finally be over.

We live between the “already” and the “not yet.” The “already” means that we have the authority and the commission to exercise loving church discipline in accordance with the instructions of Jesus. The “not yet” means we do so with fear and trembling and with an eye towards our own weaknesses and failings. The “already” means that we can stand with broken hearts and announce that a believer in Christ has placed himself outside of the fellowship by his rebellious behavior. The “not yet” means that we are ever ready to fall on his neck with hugs and with joy and say, as sinners to a sinner, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!”

“Within the framework of the Body of Christ,” writes Gilbert Rugh, “the Bible says it is important for us to maintain the purity of the body and to manifest accurately and correctly the character of Jesus Christ. Since we are His Body, we are to be an accurate representation and manifestation of His character, holiness, and purity. To maintain that purity and holiness, discipline is often a necessity. One of the motivating factors in discipline in the local church is to maintain the purity

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of the Body of Jesus Christ.”<sup>3</sup> This is the goal of the “already/not yet” church, the church that stands in a fallen world but walks with a perfect Savior. In this sense, church discipline is seeking to “realize eschatology,” it is seeking to be faithful to the “then” . . . now.

### Membership: The Death of an Idea

Sometimes when churches decide to drag out their Constitution and Bylaws they find under the “Membership” section language that sounds very odd. They find words like “membership committees” and “applications for membership” and “membership interviews.” It becomes readily apparent at these times that our forefathers thought differently about membership than we do. To put it bluntly, they seemed to think that membership was very important! Some early Baptist churches required membership interviews between prospective members and the pastor or a membership committee. Some churches required prospective members to verbally share their testimony and take questions from the congregation before they could become members.

The point here is not that we must do exactly as our forefathers did in these situations, or even that they were necessarily right in all they did. It could be, after all, that they were perhaps too hard in some of these matters.<sup>4</sup> The point is that our forefathers took membership so seriously and loved the church so deeply and were so jealous of the church’s honor and good name that they were willing to take their time before admitting members into the church. Consequently, our forefathers also thought that members who trampled on the name of Christ and His church forfeited their membership.

We must wonder, then, what has become of membership in many modern evangelical churches? How is it that a complete stranger, whose testimony might be unknown to everybody in the entire church, can walk the aisle of a church, shake the hand of a pastor, and be proclaimed

<sup>3</sup> Rugh, *Church Discipline: An Evidence of Love*, 8.

<sup>4</sup> In truth, though, the burden for proving that they were wrong is squarely on our shoulders. We should show more respect for our ancestors. G.K. Chesterton once famously defined tradition as “the democracy of the dead.” It is, in other words, a way of allowing our ancestors to have a vote in our own decisions. There is fascinating work being done in the whole area of Baptists and tradition. I would encourage you to consider the works of D.H. Williams, Steve Harmon, and Roger Olson in this regard. For a non-Baptist Protestant approach to tradition, consider the works of Methodist theologian Thomas C. Oden and his proposal of “paleo-orthodoxy.”

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a member by a majority “Aye?” Why are we so afraid to ask something of those who come to join as well as those who have already done so?

The great Congregationalist, John Owen, pointed out the obvious so many years ago. Every society necessarily has some concept of membership: “And to this end we may observe . . . that all *lawful societies*, constituted such by voluntary confederation, according unto peculiar laws and rules of their own choice, unto especial duties and ends, have a right and power, by the light of nature, to receive into their society those that are willing and meet, engaging themselves to observe the rules, laws, and ends of the society, and to expel them out of it who willfully deviate from those rules. This is the life and form of every lawful society or community of men in the world, without which they can neither coalesce nor subsist.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, the church fails to have an adequate understanding of membership, it is violating even what is known by the fallen world: that all societies must have membership if the society is to last and have meaning and cohesion.

Where there is no meaningful membership, there will be no meaningful church discipline, for where is the burden in being released from a body when your membership in that body came with absolutely no responsibilities, no accountability, and no expectations whatsoever? The simple truth is that we grieve over the violation of community standards that we never have had the courage to ask people to adhere to in the first place for fear that they would not come.

It is evident that the issue of church discipline must take one step back and discuss the very nature of church membership. For it is not until this happens that the stage can be set for the restorative gospel ministry of biblical loving discipline to be administered at all.

How then should churches take in members? To be sure, there is no clear biblical instruction in the matter, but it is significant that early on in the church’s history she came to understand the importance of being very careful in this matter. It is refreshing to see that many modern churches, frustrated with meaningless membership, are taking steps to remedy this problem. Time and again, churches that take the time to rethink how to make membership more meaningful are finding that people really wanted meaningful membership all along!

Just think about it: would you take more pride in being a member of a body in which something was asked of you, in which the stan-

<sup>5</sup> Owen, *The True Nature of a Gospel Church*, 154.

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dards of that body were clearly communicated to you, and in which each member of that body had been asked to commit themselves to a very clear purpose, even to the point of holding those accountable who forsake that purpose? Or would you take more pride in being a member of a body in which there was really no difference between your being a member and your not being a member except for the fact that, as a member, you were allowed to vote on matters?

Here are just some of the options that many churches are considering today towards making membership more meaningful:

1. New member orientation classes
2. Asking members to sign church covenants
3. Having churches recite church covenants together
4. Membership vows between new members and the church

“Candidates for church membership,” writes J. Carl Laney, “need to be carefully instructed that joining a church is quite different from joining a country club. When people join a church they become members of a spiritual family. They must commit themselves to diligently participate in the church’s ministries and to support the rest of the body. Church discipline will accomplish its objective only when Christians are committed to one another and to those giving leadership in this area.”<sup>6</sup> Laney is right, but caution and care need to be taken when attempting to establish a more meaningful membership process. A tremendous recent guide that will assist churches in carefully considering these matters is Chuck Lawless’ *Membership Matters: Insights From Effective Churches on New Member Classes and Assimilation*.<sup>7</sup>

To be sure, in attempting to restore meaningful church membership, churches must make sure that they do not fall into the other extreme and create a kind of legalistic series of hoops through which people must jump before they are proclaimed “in.” After all, membership in the church is due to the shed blood of Jesus, freely given for the sins of the world! We dare not dishonor the grace of God that has been freely given.

<sup>6</sup> Laney, *A Guide to Church Discipline*, 40.

<sup>7</sup> Lawless, *Membership Matters: Insights From Effective Churches on New Member Classes and Assimilation*.

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On the other hand, we can dishonor it as well by cheapening it to the point of meaninglessness. Therefore, whatever churches decide to do in their efforts to restore meaning to church membership, the process ought to be approached in a spirit of joy and celebration. We are not thinking of ways of making it harder for people to “get in,” we are thinking of ways to highlight the wonder of the fact that any of us can get in at all! We are thinking of ways of making the joy of membership more substantive and more wondrous.

### The Siren Song of Pragmatism

We Americans are a pragmatic lot. “What’s the bottom line? Will it work? Will they come if we do this?” These questions are serious, but they must be put into proper perspective. The church needs to reach a point where it refuses to allow pragmatism (“Will it work?”) to trump conviction (“Is it right?”). I suspect there are few who would disagree with the idea that church membership needs to be more meaningful. But when it comes right down to it, we are scared. The “church growth movement” and our cultural fixation with “largeness” (which we perhaps ought to distinguish from “growth”) have duped us into thinking that the really important thing with churches is keeping the numbers up. That just happens to be a very bad idea. The really important thing with churches is this: obeying our Lord and the New Testament vision for the church.

That being said, let us still indulge the question, “But will they come?” because the answer is very illuminating. Will they come if we take steps to make membership more meaningful? Simply put, yes, they will. Perhaps there might be an initial period of decline, but likely not. In the end, the fears of the “easy-membership-church” are unfounded. Ironically, it is beginning to appear as if the opposite has been true all along. Churches with meaningless membership make it that much easier for people to leave, thereby slowing their growth. But churches that ask for members to invest their lives in the church breed commitment and staying power among their members.

And then there is the matter of God’s blessing. God will be honored if we begin to honor His church again. God will be honored if we abandon cheap grace and embrace substantive membership. God will bless the church that is willing to take the time to nurture people in

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membership more than He will bless the church that simply has a lust for a big church roll.

Consequently, more meaningful church membership would serve the purpose of making church discipline *less* necessary. Mark Dever asks, “Do we understand the seriousness of the commitment we are making to them when they join the church, and have we communicated to them the seriousness of the commitment that they are making to us? If we are more careful about how we recognize and receive new members, we will have less occasion to practice corrective church discipline later.”<sup>8</sup>

Our commitment to them? There’s a concept we would do well to consider. We owe these dear people something. We owe them a congregation of mutual love and accountability, membership of meaning and depth, and a nurturing atmosphere in which we all walk together, helping each other along the way, towards our final home. So will they come? Yes, they will come, and, if these steps are taken, their coming will have more meaning than we ever could have imagined.

<sup>8</sup> Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 157.

## The Hermeneutics of Integrity

“The moment the phrase “church discipline” is mentioned, some people hold up their hands in horror. But the exercise of church discipline is never questioned by people who know what the Word of God teaches on the subject and who are willing to obey that Word.” —Paul R. Van Gorder<sup>1</sup>

“When another Christian falls into obvious sin, an admonition is imperative, because God’s Word demands it.” —Dietrich Bonhoeffer<sup>2</sup>

### The Word We Trust

THE BIBLE is God’s Word. It has been given to the church for her edification, her sanctification, her instruction, and her operation. Evangelical Christians place a high priority on the Bible and rightly seek to combat those forces that would denigrate the Word as “a mere book” or as a collection of fairy tales. In truth, there are few issues that raise the ire of evangelical Christians more than an assault on the Bible! We are people of the book and believe it to be the infallible Word of the living God.

That being said, it is all the more amazing that evangelical Christians would turn so easily away from a doctrine as foundational and as widely attested to in the Bible as that of church discipline. Concerning their book *Church Discipline* (in which they call upon churches to return to church discipline), L. S. Walker and E. C. Gillentine write that “we have no apologies to offer for its contents. No one need *apologize* for writing, speaking or teaching the truth. ‘God’s Word is Truth’ . . . On this par-

<sup>1</sup> Paul R. Van Gorder, *The Call for Church Discipline*, 9.

<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together-Prayer Book of the Bible*, 105.

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ticular doctrine we have sinned and some have almost come to the point of outright contempt for God's Word."<sup>3</sup>

Walker and Gillentine's forthrightness is refreshing. Were the arguments for church discipline related to some few obscure words in the New Testament, then we would have more sympathy for this neglect and would chalk this dismissal of church discipline up to the ambiguity of the Bible on the subject. But this is not at all the case when it comes to church discipline. In fact, the Bible speaks often and clearly on the topic of church discipline. Take a moment and slowly read the following verses:

"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence 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, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (Matt 18:15–18)

"It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed . . . For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. 'Purge the evil person from among you.'" (1 Cor 5:1–7, 12–13)

<sup>3</sup> Walker and Gillentine, *Church Discipline*, 2,7.



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“For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.” (2 Cor 2:6–8)

“Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” (Gal 6:1–5)

“Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us . . . For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.” (2 Thess 3:6,10)

“If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.” (2 Thess 3:14)

“By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.” (1 Tim 1:19b–20)

“Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality.” (1 Tim 5:19–21)

“But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.” (Titus 3:9–11)

It is very important to realize, as I said at the beginning of this book, that church discipline is rooted in the love of God and is a reflection of His character. Church discipline is simply the church loving as Jesus loves. If our Lord disciplines us because He loves us, and if we are to be His body on the earth, why would we refuse the loving minis-

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try of church discipline to ourselves and others? Consider the following verses:

“Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the Lord your God disciplines you.” (Deut 8:5)

“My son, do not despise the Lord’s discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the Lord reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.” (Prov 3:11-12)

“But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.” (1 Cor 11:32)

“It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who discipline us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live?” (Heb 12:7-9)

“Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.” (Rev 3:19-20)

It appears that God not only speaks of church discipline in His Word, but that He does so (a) very extensively and clearly and (b) because loving discipline is rooted in His very character and nature. So clear is this that George Davis asks, “Can a local church conscientiously claim to be following a NT pattern if it knowingly ignores the biblical mandate for church discipline? Obviously, the scriptural answer is “no.”<sup>4</sup> What then are believers to do? The simple answer is that we should obey what God has said in His book.

Let us conclude our overview of the biblical teachings concerning church discipline by making some summary observations: The New Testament picture of the church includes church discipline. This discipline flows from and is consistent with the nature and character of God. Therefore, if a church desires to love as God loves, it should be willing to exercise church discipline when necessary. There is no contradiction

<sup>4</sup> Davis “Whatever Happened to Church Discipline?” 345.

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between Christ's words against self-righteous judgment and His call for church discipline. The practice of church discipline, therefore, is a matter of biblical integrity.

By highlighting the biblical teachings on church discipline and showing how those instructions flow from the very nature of God it is hoped that the obstacles behind which too many Christians are hiding in their attempt to avoid this subject have been removed. Indeed, it is hoped that the picture is becoming very clear and very simple: churches need to determine whether or not they desire to be truly New Testament in their practices.

Indeed, so simple is the matter and so complete is the biblical witness concerning it, that I confidently echo here the words of Daniel E. Wray: "If any are still contentious against this biblical practice we can only say, as Moses did to Israel, 'Your murmurings are not against us, but against the Lord' (Exod 16:8)."<sup>5</sup>

## Historical Case Study

On October 22, 1735, the congregation of the 1<sup>st</sup> Church of Braintree, Massachusetts, met in the home of the pastor to hear the response of a church member, Benjamin Owen, to the church's call for repentance because of "his late offense behavior." Mr. Owen made his confession, which was rejected by the congregation.

While the church, for some reason, was displeased with Mr. Owen's confession, they did not give up on him. In fact, they actually voted to approve a statement of confession that would be more in line with true repentance and offered it to Mr. Owen in hopes of his compliance. Here is the statement that the church drafted for Mr. Owen.

Whereas I have been left to fall into a sinful strife and quarrel with my brother Joseph Owen, I acknowledge I am greatly to blame that I met my brother in anger and strove with him, to the dishonor of God, and thereby also have offended my Christian brethren. I desire to be humbled before God, and to ask God's forgiveness: I desire to be at peace with my brother, and to be restored to the charity of this church, and your prayers to God for me.

<sup>5</sup> Wray, *Biblical Church Discipline*, 26.

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What a beautiful sight: a church helping a fallen brother in his repentance so that all question of his sincerity would be removed. This is a prime example of a church desirous of a brother's right standing with the Lord and with the Lord's church.

## Interpreter and Interpretation

“The fact is that American religiosity is more or less gnostic. Americans are religion-inventors, each person picking and choosing from among the traditions to construct his or her own religious system. That automatically lowers commitment to the authority of a community of faith or denomination. Our tendency is not to stand and fight over an issue that existentially concerns us but, like the schismatics attacked in the First Letter of John, to secede and form a like-minded group (which is why American religion produces so many denominations). The more Americanized we become, the less likely we are to engage in doctrine-honing, community-disciplining processes like heresy trials. On the other hand, a trial or two just might generate some excitement that we do mean to stand for something besides ‘inclusiveness.’ It might even project a vision of what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ in which beliefs matter because they have eternal consequences.” —F.C.S.<sup>1</sup>

### Interpreting Ourselves

**H**ERE IS a word we would all do well to learn and understand: presuppositions. The word “presuppositions” refers to all of the assumptions and prejudgments that we bring to anything that we read, including the Bible. Many of our presuppositions are culturally inherited, and they all affect our reading and understanding of the Bible.

We all have presuppositions, some good and some bad. It is important, therefore, that we examine ourselves before we begin to examine the Bible. We must ask these types of questions:

<sup>1</sup> F.C.S., “Doctrinal Aberration and Heresy Trials,” 165.

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Given my background and upbringing, what am I likely to want the Bible to say?

What assumptions am I bringing with me to the Bible?

Am I allowing the Bible to shape my assumptions or am I allowing my assumptions to shape the Bible?

Are there any presuppositions that I need to rid myself of?

What do I do when the Bible seems to be clearly conflicting with my presuppositions?

Yes, it is true that we must be willing to interpret ourselves before we can interpret the Bible. This is a painful and exhilarating process. Learning to let the Bible say what it says, instead of what I want it to say, is very rewarding! Here are some current presuppositions that many modern evangelicals may fall prey to:

1. Relativism—Truth is subjective and whatever we want it to be.
2. Autonomous individualism—What is really important is the individual (their feelings and desires) and not the body as a whole.
3. Hyper-permissiveness—It is wrong to tell somebody that they are wrong.

These presuppositions, and others, are deeply engrained in the American mindset and have played a large role in the disappearance of church discipline from the modern church.

## Of Exegesis and Eisegesis

Two more words will help us get at the difficulty of removing our own desires from the process of reading the Bible. These words are exegesis and eisegesis.

We will first define exegesis. Put simply, exegesis is the act of drawing the original meaning of a verse out of the Bible. When you exegete a passage, you draw the substance and meaning of the passage out into the open.

This means that when you consult your Bible dictionary, your commentary, your grammar text, your word study, and when you wrestle with and pray over a verse or a number of verses to arrive at the meaning

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of those verses, you can be said to be *exegeting* a passage of Scripture. When you do these things, you are acting as an exegete.

We're all exegetes and we all exegete the Bible. That is how we arrive at the meaning of a verse or of a group of verses. But there is another word, the opposite of exegesis. This word is eisegesis.

Whereas exegesis involves drawing a meaning out of a text by various tools and methods, eisegesis involves putting a meaning into a text by allowing our presuppositions and assumptions to shape our reading of the Bible. Exegesis is an honest task. Eisegesis is often deceptive and shaped by our own desires. There is a key truth we need never to forget: Exegesis must take precedence over eisegesis.

Our task is not to approach the Bible and put meaning into it, to make it say what we want it to say. Our task is to approach the Bible and see the meaning that is already there, whether that meaning conflicts with our own desires for the text or not.

It is a sad but true fact that most of us tend to do more eisegesis than exegesis. It is sometimes difficult to let the Bible say what it says. This is especially true when it comes to culturally unpopular or difficult teachings like church discipline.

Here is the question for the moment: Are you an exegete or an eisegete? It is difficult not to believe that evangelicals largely practice an eisegetical hermeneutic in this matter of church discipline. That is, we read into the text our own presuppositions. Therefore, as children of a pluralistic, hyper-permissive, and overly-tolerant society, we bring these things with us to the task of interpretation. In this way, our culturally-inherited presuppositions rule out, *a priori*, the possibility of church discipline, regardless of what the text actually says.

## Letting the Word Speak

Unless we believe that *we* wrote the Bible, we can reasonably expect to find passages in our reading of the Bible that make us uncomfortable and that we find challenging. Can we not agree that this is a good thing? After all, what kind of Bible would it be if it never challenged us, never convicted us, never pushed us out of our areas of comfort.

When we find ourselves in these situations and we are suddenly sitting there, staring some challenging passage of Scripture in the face, and we simply and honestly reach the conclusion that it says what it says, what, then, do we do? Do we shut our Bibles and walk out? Some do.

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Do we take the text and twist it by the force of our own will to make it say what we want it to say? Many do. Do we ignore it, perhaps quickly move on to the next passage of Scripture and pretend we didn't see what we just saw? That happens frequently among Christians. Or do we take the higher road and make a more noble decision? Do we decide that we will trust that God's clear instructions are more valuable than our deceptive opinions? Do we decide that we would rather be uncomfortable and walk in the truth or maintain our own desires and distort the truth?

John MacArthur, Jr., is a popular and dearly loved Christian pastor with a worldwide ministry. He writes movingly about the commitment he made early on in his ministry to be obedient to God's Word, regardless of what the Word asked of him:

Through the years at Grace Church, we have always believed very strongly in the purity of the church. We've always believed very strongly in the holiness of God's redeemed people. Purity of life is the goal that God has in bringing us to Himself. One cannot read the Scripture, Old or New Testament, without being overwhelmingly convinced that God seeks the holiness of His people, not being content with disobedience of any kind. First Peter 1:16 sums up God's desire for our holiness when Peter quotes God as having said, ". . . *Be ye holy; for I am holy.*"

Now from the start of my ministry here, I was aware of that. And I endeavored in my own heart to commit myself to the Lord to prayerfully carry out His will the best way I knew how. Whenever I found any principles in the Bible that needed to be put into practice, I would do everything within my power to live it in my own life and to make sure the church lived it in its life as well. In other words, I've never been able to separate biblical truth from life, because that would demand that I live with a lack of integrity. If it says it in the Word of God, it must be lived out. And if God is so greatly concerned about the holiness of His people for the sake of His holy reputation and for the sake of the blessedness of His people, then I must be equally concerned about that as His representative. No church can preach a message it doesn't live and have any integrity at all before God, or for that matter, before the world.<sup>32</sup>

That's the sort of commitment that makes men and women into honest readers of the Bible. Can you say that you've made the same commitment today?



## Matthew 7:1

Nowhere are the eisegetical tendencies of many evangelicals more obvious than in their handling of Matt 7:1, “Judge not, that you be not judged.” It is widely assumed that this verse rules out the very possibility of church discipline, for church discipline, at least in some sense, involves judgment.

Yet it is undeniable that we are eisegeting into the text our own cultural assumptions of “tolerance.” In contrast to this cultural reading of the text, consider these points:

1. It is interesting that Jesus condemns judging another in Matt 7:1, but, in Matt 7:5, just four verses later, says, “You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.” It is the hypocrisy of judging someone when you yourself are doing the same thing as that person that is so reprehensible. But it must be clearly seen here that it is the quality of judging (i.e., hypocritical judging), not judging itself, that is condemned. It is the audacity of hypocritical judgment, of judging when you yourself are under judgment, that Christ condemns, not the act of judgment *per se*.
2. Loving, biblical, broken-hearted judgment doesn’t speak from the vantage point of moral or spiritual superiority at all. Loving judgment simply proclaims the judgment of God on certain behaviors. It is simply a pronouncement below of what is true above, not a personal act of self-deification here on earth.
3. There is also a distinct difference in the goal of hypocritical judgment and loving, biblical judgment. Hypocritical judgment always makes the judge feel superior, smug, “super holy,” we might say. The hypocritical judge has as his goal his own exaltation and his own feelings of worth. Loving, biblical judgment recognizes that there is only one Judge of Heaven and earth and it hopes only that the person who has turned away from the Lord will turn back and be restored.
4. No passage of Scripture should be interpreted in a vacuum. It must be allowed to stand within the whole biblical witness. That means that Matt 7:1 must be defined more precisely by 1 Cor 5:12-13 and the other biblical passages on the topic of judgment. If we are to be truly biblical Christians, and not merely Christians who enjoy a few hand-

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picked verses, we must care enough to take the time to get the whole Bible's opinion on the matter at hand.

It is therefore not so easy as simply saying that Matt 7:1 rules out any and all acts of judgment. Bob and Gretchen Passantino make some insightful observations about judgment that are consistent with the above-mentioned points: "Christians who voice these protests fail their own test—they criticize and judge other Christians for criticizing and judging other Christians. Furthermore, these critics fail to understand that without such scrutiny, Christians are misled into heresy and duped by those whose public ministries promote false teachings and/or hide private immoral behavior. Careful, biblical criticism expresses true Christian love and affords essential safeguards to faith."<sup>2</sup>

### John 8:7

Along with Matthew 7, the woman caught in adultery (John 8) is oftentimes appealed to by those who disagree with church discipline. The key phrase in the argument seems to be Jesus' words in John 8:7, "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone." These words are appealed to because they point out the sinfulness of all human beings. It is then assumed, once the sinfulness of all human beings has been highlighted, that nobody would dare point out the sin of others. So when this verse is appealed to, the underlying assertion is: "You too are a sinner, therefore you have no right to condemn the sin of another."

But this, again, seems to be an example of a true principle used to buttress an untrue conclusion. Jesus *was* pointing out to this woman's persecutors their own sinfulness. And Jesus *would* have us recognize our own. We should not say this lightly. Our own sinfulness, our own weakness, our own frailty, must ever be before our own eyes. In many ways, Jesus is communicating here much the same point that He communicated in Matt 7:1. He is saying that if we judge when we ourselves are guilty, we become hypocrites and fall under the same judgment with which we were judging.

But that is not all that is happening in this story of the woman caught in adultery. Jesus is here concerned with the hypocrisy of this woman's accusers. He knows their hearts and their motives and their goals. But it must be understood that church discipline is very distinct

<sup>2</sup> Passantino, "Christians Criticizing Christians: Can It Be Biblical?" 39.

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from what these men were doing. Church discipline does not raise stones in hands of hypocritical self-righteousness with spirits of giddiness and blood-lust. On the contrary, church discipline merely proclaims that a person has been stoning themselves, that they have placed themselves under judgment, and then it calls them back, with calls of love and of earnest desire for that person's restoration. Church discipline is long-suffering and it trembles before the holiness of God.

But church discipline realizes that sometimes a person must be placed outside the fold so that they will once again desire the peace and protection of the family of faith. Church discipline does pronounce judgment, but it pronounces the judgment of God so as to call a wayward brother home, not the judgment of a self-inflated ego hoping to boost one's own opinion of oneself. "The fact is," write Ken and Joy Gage, "a believer cannot go through life without judging and making judgments. Nor is he expected to do so. Just as surely as the Bible commands believers to refrain from judging in certain situations, so it requires believers to judge in others. Confusion can only be dispelled by familiarizing oneself with all the Scriptures that pertain to the subject."<sup>3</sup>

The Gages are correct. Confusion can only be dispelled by familiarizing ourselves with all the scriptures that pertain to the subject. We simply must ask for a fair and honest reading of the text. We simply must ask that we honestly and forthrightly reconsider our loopholes to obedience in this very important area of church life and Christian discipleship. A hermeneutic of integrity and solid exegesis will lead us back into the will of God for His church.

Consider the example of Don Baker, the author of *Beyond Forgiveness: The Healing Touch of Church Discipline*. Baker's entire book is a case study concerning his church's actions towards a staff member who fell into scandalous, habitual sin. Speaking of his fear of the topic of church discipline and his fear of having to deal with the staff member, Greg, Baker writes: "Whatever reluctance we as a staff felt regarding our responsibility to Greg, Hinson [the church], and to ourselves, was cast aside in the light of these biblical admonitions."<sup>4</sup> This is an admirable example of one who was willing to allow the text of scripture to take primacy over his own internal reservations.

<sup>3</sup> Gage, *Restoring Fellowship: Judgment and Church Discipline*, 14–15.

<sup>4</sup> Baker, *Beyond Forgiveness: The Healing Touch of Church Discipline*, 34.

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Baker's example is significant. He intentionally rejected the siren song of eisegesis and allowed, instead, the Bible to say what the Bible says. As a result, his church was richly blessed. So shall we be if we commit ourselves to the honest interpretation of Scripture.

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“If we see someone who is about to wander over a cliff and destroy himself, it is unloving to say nothing and watch that person plunge to destruction.” —Thomas R. Schreiner<sup>1</sup>

“Nothing can be more cruel than that leniency which abandons others to their sin. Nothing can be more compassionate than that severe reprimand which calls another Christian in one’s community back from the path of sin.” —Dietrich Bonhoeffer<sup>2</sup>

### Locus Classicus

HAVING ESTABLISHED a clear ecclesiology and biblical basis for church discipline, we now move to the process of church discipline itself. If we are to love as Christ loves, and to follow and obey His instructions concerning church discipline, we must know what those instructions are. Our foundational text for this study of church discipline will be the words of Jesus in Matt 18:15–18. This text is widely regarded as the most succinct, thorough, and systematic teaching on the subject of church discipline in the entire New Testament:

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence 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, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound

<sup>1</sup> Schreiner, “Loving Discipline,” 2.

<sup>2</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 105.

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in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (Matt 18:15–18) When we say “the five steps of church discipline,” we mean the five movements of love that a church embarks upon when it becomes necessary for that church to call a wayward brother or sister back home, out of the rebellion in which they have fallen. It is worth repeating again that we are technically speaking here of “corrective church discipline.” Remember that corrective church discipline is actually just one component of the overall general ministry of church discipline that includes all the actions a church takes to build and nurture the body in the ways and discipline of Christ. For the purposes of this study, we have been using the term “church discipline” to mean “corrective church discipline,” though we are aware of its broader definition.

I want to make it clear that I am not suggesting that Matthew 18 provides an exhaustive formula that takes into account every foreseeable situation. I agree with Ralph D. Mawdsley’s contention that “Matthew 18:15–17 leaves much interpretive latitude to individual churches.”<sup>3</sup> However, that latitude must never allow us to violate the spirit of the steps that Christ has laid out. Stuart Murray wisely notes: “We must be careful. Flexibility is important, but so is the framework. Normally the steps outlined by Jesus should be taken one by one. The principles are clear and consistent throughout the New Testament, even if their practical application requires wisdom and sensitivity to each situation.”<sup>4</sup> An exception to this would be the situation in Corinth that Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians 5, a situation by that time so public and so scandalous that private admonition would have been almost meaningless.

Michael E. Phillips, while correct in his recognition of the occasional need for creativity in this process (“For every clear-cut discipline decision, however, there may be ten fuzzy problems crying out for creativity, diversity, and grace.”), seems to misunderstand Christ’s instructions when he writes, “The Bible advocates confronting a backslidden believer one-on-one. The one-on-one approach generally helps the person being confronted to overcome any natural embarrassment or defensiveness. In the case of more serious sin, especially when the con-

<sup>3</sup> Mawdsley, “The Modus Operandi of Church Discipline,” 22.

<sup>4</sup> Murray, *Church Discipline*, 52.

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sequences of discipline may be quite unpleasant, it is better to confront with two people. The presence of another person lends a stabilizing factor to a potentially explosive meeting, and the additional person can act as a corroborating witness in the event of future counteraccusations (or even lawsuit).<sup>5</sup> Quite simply, this seems to disregard the wisdom of the first step of Matthew 18, private admonition.

The process is a norm. We must avoid the Scylla and Charybdis of legalistic rigidity, on the one hand, and taking reductionist liberties with the text on the other. In this matter, the witness of the Holy Spirit, the prayerful consideration of the church and her leadership, and pastoral sensitivity and care need to be appealed to and cautioned.

## Delineating the Steps

Let us look at the five steps of discipline:

### *The 5 Steps of Church Discipline*

Step 1: A personal and private appeal. (Matt 18:15)

Step 2: An appeal with two or three witnesses. (Matt 18:16)

Step 3: Asking the church to appeal to the member. (Matt 18:17a)

Step 4: Placing the member outside of the fold. (Matt 18:17b)

Step 5: Restoration and forgiveness upon repentance. (2 Cor 2:6–8)

It needs to be pointed out that these steps would likely have sounded somewhat familiar to many in Jesus' original audience. Robert Mounce has noted that aspects of these first four steps from Matthew 18 harmonize with both Qumranic and Mosaic legislation.<sup>6</sup> Craig S. Keener has shown that they are consistent with rabbinic tradition.<sup>7</sup> This consistency is understandable, for the presence of witnesses to establish guilt, for instance, is crucial in any sort of disciplinary or punitive action.

Yet these points of similarity do not mean that Christ was merely rearticulating common law or extending Mosaic legislation into the life of the church. On the contrary, the rule of Christ is seen in the New

<sup>5</sup> Phillips, "Church Discipline," 244.

<sup>6</sup> Mounce, *Matthew*, 176.

<sup>7</sup> Keener, *Matthew*, 288.

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Testament as the unique and radical manifestation of the love of God dwelling among His covenant people in the light of Christ's redemptive work. Church discipline never appears in the New Testament as a purely punitive act, but rather as a restorative act of family love and concern. The presence and nature of these steps should be seen not in a cold or mechanical light, but rather as steps of progressively greater expressions of love and concern, each with an eye toward the wayward member's ultimate restoration to God and the family of believers.

Systematization too often leads to legalistic mechanization in the life of a congregation. The inherent human desire for order and practical steps must not give way to a cold application of church discipline. John Owen rightly eschewed the "manner of some, to run over the words, 'I admonish you a first, second, and third time,' so immediately to make way for the sentence of excommunication" as being "that wherein men are greatly to be pitied, for their ignorance of the nature of those things which they take on themselves to act, order, and dispose of . . ." <sup>8</sup> This is what must be avoided at all costs. Nonetheless, this organization of the steps is legitimate because this formatting of Matt 18:15–18 does not do injury to the words of Christ or to the spirit in which He offered them and also because doing so allows for an easier examination of what is, in truth, a multi-faceted and delicate process. That being said, the goal of love must not be lost in the seductive simplicity of the steps.

By listing the steps of discipline, we are not suggesting that church discipline is like learning to dance: step 1, step 2, foot here, foot there. Not at all! Not only are these human beings we are talking about, they are fellow Christians, brothers and sisters in Christ for whom Christ died. Anybody who would carry a clipboard around and check off steps cannot possibly be grieving for their brother or sister in Christ. The first four steps are heartbroken steps. They are steps of great heaviness and of great love. They are four steps of appeal, four steps of calling a brother or sister back from the brink, and they must be characterized by the love of Christ.

If church discipline is to be the process of love that Jesus envisioned it to be, then each step must be preceded by, operated with, and followed by prayer. If church discipline is to model the love of Christ, then the prayer, purpose, and hope of each step must be redemption and not punishment. If church discipline is to adequately represent the love of

<sup>8</sup> Owen, *The Church and the Bible*, 178.



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Calvary, the love that is willing to die for another, then we must be long-suffering and hopeful before, during, and after each step. If “church discipline” means discipline infused with, surrounded by, and conducted under the banner of incarnate agape love, then such a mechanical approach to the steps is ruled out from the very beginning.

It must be repeated, time and time again, that love is the *sine qua non* of church discipline. We must not be rushed or hurried unless a brother’s or sister’s actions demand an immediate decision. If we are to avoid legalistic harshness and a cold, mechanical approach to church discipline, we must give the Holy Spirit time and room to work in the life of our Christian brother and sister. Each “step” is therefore a loving and heartbroken step, a step bathed in tears and burdened by grief. “Likewise when some in the visible church become apostate,” writes Thomas C. Oden, “we weep as we call for reformation of apostolic discipline.”<sup>9</sup> This is the spirit of the steps. This is the foundation of church discipline.

<sup>9</sup> Oden, *Corrective Love: The Power of Communion Discipline*, 40.



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### Step 1: A Personal and Private Appeal

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.” (Matt 18:15)

**T**HIS FIRST step of church discipline involves two components: (1) the recognition of sin and (2) our initial response to sin. Corrective church discipline begins when we see our brother and sister fall into sin. It begins when we become aware that they are harming themselves and the body. This recognition does not mean that we are to become “the sin police,” waiting and watching to catch somebody in sin. Philip Yancey has captured the essence of “the sin police” idea very well: “Now I worry that the prevailing image of Christians has changed from that of a perfume atomizer to a different spray apparatus: the kind used by insect exterminators. *There’s a roach!* Pump, spray, pump, spray. *There’s a spot of evil!* Pump, spray, pump, spray. Some Christians I know have taken on the task of “moral exterminator” for the evil-infested society around them.”<sup>1</sup> No, this is not what “the recognition of sin” means. It does not mean that we are to start watching each other with self-righteous attitudes. It does not mean that we are now to become preoccupied with each other’s sin.

All of these things are legalistic parodies of what Jesus meant by, “If your brother sins against you.” There can be no doubt that many churches have made serious and damaging missteps at just this point. In the name of church discipline they create controlling, cult-like atmospheres of fear. They begin witch-hunts and an oppressive legalism hangs in the air like a sickening fume. In fact, as C. J. Dyck has observed, it is

<sup>1</sup> Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*, 158. I heartily recommend this book as a wonderful expose on legalism in the modern church.

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actually our failure to follow this initial step that creates oppression: “It is unfortunate that the first steps of the procedure outlined by Christ are so frequently omitted from our thinking concerning church discipline. This error has led to a very primitive concept of church discipline as the “big stick” method in the minds of superficial Bible readers and has corrupted the beauty and redemptive power of Christ’s own method of education and winning love.”<sup>2</sup> If we will be more faithful in this first step, we will not make mistakes in the others, and church discipline will “stay on track” as the ministry of grace that it was designed to be.

Christ has created us for joy and for freedom. We are to have life and have it abundantly. Churches that become pressure cookers of harsh self-righteousness violate the joy that we have been given in Christ. Who wants to be a part of such a body?

No, this is certainly not what Christ had in mind. Church discipline, lovingly and biblically adhered to, does not create oppressive fear and an environment of coldness. Rightly done, church discipline actually creates freedom and joy and love, for it is the cry of a concerned friend for a hurting friend, it is a church rescue attempt for a member hanging from a cliff.

What, then, does Jesus mean when He says, “If your brother sins against you”? It means that we are to love each other so strongly and walk together so faithfully that when we see our brother or sister fall we can begin the process of calling them back.

### An Objection Considered

It is occasionally objected at this point that since Jesus says we are to go to a brother “if your brother sins *against you*,” we are not responsible for holding a friend accountable who does not sin directly against us. This objection, however, does not stand up to scrutiny.

In Luke 17:3–4, Jesus says, “Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.” Notice here (a) that Jesus also calls for this process when “your brother sins” and (b) that Jesus does not seem to have in mind some great distinction between “if your brother sins” and “if he sins against you.” This is likely why some older manuscripts

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Poettcker, “The New Testament Community,” 22.

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actually omit the words “against you” from Matt 18:15. J. Carl Laney explains:

Bible students debate whether the words “against you” are part of the original Greek text. These words are absent from several important manuscripts (Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus). Possibly the words “against me” in verse 21 led a scribe or copyist to personalize the matter in verse 15. On the other hand the omission may have been deliberate in order to render the passage applicable to sin in general. While some important texts lack the words “against you,” Gundry points out evidence for their originality. The words “in private” and the next section, which speaks about forgiving a brother who has sinned against a brother (Matt 18:21–35), favor the originality of “against you.” However, Gal 6:1 indicates that believers have a duty to confront sin in general, not just when it is an offense against one’s own person.<sup>3</sup>

Estella Horning’s words are likewise very insightful at this point. She seems to suggest that the *ipsissima vox* of “the rule of Christ” speaks against an overly narrow reading that would limit it to only personal offenses: “Regardless of which was the original text of Matthew,” she writes, “or which were the precise words of Jesus, the understanding that limits a believer’s responsibility only to personal offenses against one’s self violates the spirit of the context. Every Christian is to be concerned for the safety and well-being of every other Christian brother or sister. Therefore, if we hear about someone who sins, or if we observe sinful behavior, we are responsible to confront the person and seek to restore that person to the right path of self-discipline and humility. The goal is not to accuse, prove guilt, or to punish, but to set the brother or sister back on the right track of healing and wholeness.”<sup>4</sup>

### Internal Cohesiveness

It is generally agreed that in Matthew 18 we find “the rule of Christ” that provides the framework in which all church discipline operates. No New Testament text on discipline conflicts with the spirit and teachings of Matthew 18, even when, in cases such as those dealt with by Paul in Corinth, the nature of some sins and the public knowledge of those sins

<sup>3</sup> Laney, “The Biblical Practice of Church Discipline,” 358.

<sup>4</sup> Horning, “The Rule of Christ: An Exposition on Matthew 18:15–20,” 71.

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requires, by necessity, an immediate move to public admonition. On the contrary, all of the New Testament examples of discipline bear evidence of being aware of the rule of Christ and of seeking to honor its principles and guidelines.

When Paul called on the church in 1 Corinthians 5 to remove from their midst the man who was sleeping with his father's wife, he was calling them to respond to a sin that had not been committed against them in an immediate sense.

Victor Pfitzner has written of the relationship between Matt 18:15–17 and 1 Cor 5. “Despite the differences noted . . . between our two texts,” he writes, “they should not be seen as outlining two completely different approaches to the treatment of the unrepentant sinner. Even the basis of the church's judgment, the presence of the Lord himself (Matt 18:20) and the presence of the Spirit's power (1 Cor 5:4) are not unrelated. A church may lack the immediate prophetic voice of the prophet to announce a “sentence of divine law,” but it still has the mediated voice of the Lord through which the Spirit speaks.”<sup>5</sup>

Laney has likewise highlighted the cohesiveness of “the rule of Christ” in the New Testament:

Like Jesus, Paul presents some very helpful instruction regarding the matter of church discipline. He acknowledges the same essential steps that Jesus presents in Matt 18:15–17 and provides some further details regarding the last step of discipline—excommunication . . . The word “reprove” is the same word that Jesus uses in Matt 18:15 as He gives directions regarding the first step in dealing with a sinning brother . . . In accordance with the instructions given by Jesus, the Apostle Paul recognizes the need for witnesses in bringing a charge or accusation against a church elder . . . Paul is undoubtedly drawing upon the teaching of Jesus regarding church discipline and making a specific application of the principles in dealing with elders. He clearly has borrowed from Jesus' teaching regarding the need for witnesses in the process of confronting and correcting a sinning saint . . . If the preliminary step of church discipline fails to accomplish its objective, Paul recognizes that, according to the instructions of Jesus, the matter must go before the church (cf. Matt 18:17).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Pfitzner, “Purified Community-Purified Sinner: Expulsion From the Community According to Matthew 18:15–18 and 1 Corinthians 5:1–5,” 49.

<sup>6</sup> Laney, *A Guide To Church Discipline*, 60–62. Also, D.B. Garlington: “Without actually saying so, it is not unlikely that Paul was aware of the teaching of our Lord as preserved

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Furthermore, in Titus 3:9-11 Paul echoes the words of Jesus concerning those who stir up divisions in the church. When a brother dishonors the name of Christ and His bride, he hinders and hurts the mission of the church at large, thereby sinning against the church.<sup>7</sup>

## For Which Sins?

It is next important to consider the nature of the sin that has been committed. Did Christ have in mind a kind of over-sensitive, quick-on-the-draw approach to church discipline whereby if one member, in a fit of frustration, hurts another member's feelings, that member should begin some formal process of church discipline? Certainly not! While the principle of the first step should be binding on us whenever we feel that we have been sinned against, we must allow it to be tempered by understanding, forbearance, and by long-suffering love. That being said, we must not sit idly by and watch a brother or sister in Christ destroy himself or herself and hurt the body of Christ.

In discussing the nature of the sins and situations in the New Testament against which this process of church discipline was begun, William Lytle has made some interesting observations:

The offender was displaying a lack of love and respect for the church and their fellow believers.

The sin had become habitual. That is, it had come to dominate the person's life and characterize who they were. (It wasn't a momentary lapse in judgment or a solitary, foolish act committed in a moment of bad temper.)

The sin had become disruptive to the Body of Christ.

The sin had distorted true doctrine (i.e., heresy).<sup>8</sup>

in Matt 18:15–17. In fact, the probability of this is increased when we consider that, as argued by a number of scholars, “the law of Christ” to be fulfilled by Christians is rooted in the sayings of Jesus as preserved in the gospel tradition.” Garlington, “Burden Bearing and the Recovery of Offending Christians,” 163–164.

<sup>7</sup> Douglas R. A. Hare has said that the idea that Christ meant sin in general and not only sins committed against the person initiating the process is “entirely possible . . . in view of other New Testament texts that make Christians responsible for correcting sinners (see Gal. 6:1).” Hare, *Matthew*, 213. Hare's point is valid, and it might also be argued that, given the truthfulness of the claim that the rule of Christ is a cohesive framework recognized throughout the New Testament and not a separate set of instructions, the apostolic application of the rule of Christ elsewhere in the New Testament does not support limiting the word “sin” to the idea of “sin against you.”

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Poettcker, “The New Testament Community,” 28. R. Stanton Norman has

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This list is not exhaustive and behavior warranting church discipline may not necessarily include all of these characteristics (i.e., it may not, for instance, be doctrinal). I am not trying here to construct a rigid framework for church discipline, for no framework could adequately capture the complexity of life itself.

“Because the punishment is so severe,” Hare contends, “we must infer that the transgressions here envisioned are serious offenses that affect the spiritual health of the congregation as a whole.”<sup>9</sup> This is a reasonable inference. It would certainly violate the words of Christ to think that He was here envisioning a type of license whereby members of the body of faith could legalistically, obsessively, and coldly micromanage each other’s affairs. Nothing in the rule of Christ suggests that patience, forbearance, and gentle care are to be abandoned. On the contrary, it is best to view the rule of Christ as a kind of “emergency room” ministry, initiated and pursued only after all other avenues have been exhausted, and applied only to those sins that threaten to consume the believer and the body if left unaddressed.

Poettcker offers a valid caution concerning the question of the nature of sins requiring discipline when he points out that “if we understand discipline correctly, as the training and guiding of people ‘to the cultivation of mind and morals,’ then such a question is quite out of place. It is the “formative” aspect which stands uppermost and thus *everything* is taken seriously, not just a flagrant case of adultery. Here are “no hard and fast distinctions between gross sins and small sins,” for in the brotherhood *every* action is to serve the spiritual upbuilding of the body, and thus the edification of its Head, Christ Jesus.”<sup>10</sup>

“A list,” observes Ted Kitchens, “in itself useful enough, can nevertheless become a rulebook that quickly replaces the Word and Spirit of

some helpful insights concerning the nature of the sins that call for church discipline: “The New Testament does not explicitly state the criteria for determining which offenses are worthy of discipline or what sins could trigger the process . . . The common theme that seems to tie together the instances of church discipline in the New Testament are those sins that have a harmful, public effect upon the congregation in some way . . . Without being too simplistic, we can cluster all of these various sins that are the occasion for church discipline into three main categories. These are fidelity to orthodox doctrine, purity and holiness of life, and unity of the fellowship. Each of these three areas is vitally important for the health and integrity of the faith and practice of the church.” Norman, *The Baptist Way*, 71–73.

<sup>9</sup> Hare, 213.

<sup>10</sup> Poettcker, “The New Testament Community,” 28.



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God for needed guidance in matters of church discipline. Lists can engender legalism and can also produce blind spots, that is, preoccupation with some sin while others go unattended. As Jeschke observes, ‘When seventy-five percent of a church’s list of excommunications has to do with clothes, there is something woefully wrong.’<sup>11</sup>

That being said, I agree with Lytle’s conclusions concerning the nature of the sins against which church discipline was brought in the New Testament. We are not speaking here of micro-managing each other’s lives. We are speaking here of responding in love to somebody who has decided to destroy themselves and, in so doing, damage the Body as well. When this happens, when our brother or sister turns from the way of truth and embraces sin, Jesus says that we are to “go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.”

This is always difficult, but this is the very nature of love: to desire another’s salvation, sanctification, peace, hope, and joy and to be willing to give yourself so that they can attain it! How cruel it is, how unloving it is, how uncaring it is to watch our fellow Christian turn from the joy, peace, and hope of Christ and to never say a word for fear that we will offend.

## Summary Considerations

Let us observe some principles concerning this first step of church discipline:

1. We are to go to our brother or sister alone.
2. We are not to gossip about their behavior with others.
3. Our ultimate hope and prayer is that nobody will have to know.
4. This first step seems to honor the person’s dignity in Christ.
5. We should go in gentleness.
6. We should inquire before we accuse.
7. We should seek to understand, not to condemn.

<sup>11</sup> Quote in Kitchens, “Perimeters of Corrective Church Discipline,” 202. I highly recommend Kitchens’ entire article.

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8. We should clearly and lovingly call our brother or sister away from the destruction they've embraced if it becomes clear that they have embraced destruction.

"Admonition," observes Thomas C. Oden, "must be candid and truthful, not truculent or vitriolic or aimed inordinately at casting blame. Admonition must be offered at the right time, not unseasonably, with empathy and kindly care, not in personal anger. It must be accurately and sincerely expressed, not overstated or emotionally charged or hysteric. Gentle admonition and fair-minded reproof rightly come before any thought is entertained of any withholding act of Eucharistic discipline, which is typically viewed as a drastic recourse when all other efforts have failed."<sup>12</sup>

Think how many tragedies could be avoided, how much hurt and pain could be averted, and how many lives could be restored if the church were full of Christians who loved each other enough to gently and discreetly call each other back from the brink! Think how strong our churches would become if we loved each other enough to lovingly and privately admonish instead of crassly gossiping, if we went to the person involved instead of picking up the phone to call somebody else about the matter, if we learned to weep over each other instead of deriving secret pleasure from another's fall.

This is church discipline, this is the life to which we have been called.

<sup>12</sup> Oden, *Corrective Love: The Power of Communion Discipline*, 45–46.

## Rightly Viewed, Rightly Handled

“The Bible distinguishes between the sins that we all commit and a lifestyle of persistent spiritual rebellion . . . But in the case of open rebellion and known sin, the church’s job is to bring the sin to light and deal with it.” —Tony Evans<sup>1</sup>

“The difference, however, is that though we are all sinners, sinning daily, yet we are also daily bringing those same sins into judgment, acknowledging them, and experiencing forgiveness for them. If we were not doing this, then we would not be eligible to participate in an experience of church discipline, and we ourselves would be proper subjects for corrective action.” —Don Baker<sup>2</sup>

### But Who Am I?

IT IS not uncommon, during discussions on topics like church discipline, for somebody to point out the fact that all of us are sinners. And it is not uncommon, when once a church responds to persistent rebellion in the life of another, that they are accused of hypocrisy since all of us are sinners.

To be sure, these are serious charges, and they are tragically too often true. Woe be unto any person or any church that would hypocritically judge another. And woe be unto anybody who would use the process of church discipline with rebellious hands.

It would seem, however, that this truth of the sinfulness of mankind is often used as an argument against *any* Christian and *any* church *ever* exercising church discipline. This, however, is not a valid protest.

<sup>1</sup> Evans, *God’s Glorious Church*, 227.

<sup>2</sup> Baker, *Beyond Forgiveness*, 29.

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Church discipline is to be brought against stubborn, rebellious, recognized, and embraced sins of persistence that have become ingrained in our lives. Church discipline is brought, then, against a certain type of sin: the type that has enslaved a believer and has been embraced by that believer. The type that thumbs its nose at God and man and the Body of Christ and says, “I will do what I want!”

Furthermore, it must be kept in mind that Jesus recognized the sinfulness of mankind but still instructed us to be about the business of church discipline when necessary. In other words, Jesus apparently felt that struggling human beings could rightly chasten their brothers and sisters when such fell into open and unrepentant rebellion.

Finally, this idea paints itself into a corner. For if sin is defined as disobedience to God, and if God’s Word instructs us clearly in the matter of church discipline, then refusing to exercise church discipline is itself a sin. Thus, refusing to exercise church discipline since we are all sinners is the same as saying, “We should sin since we are all sinners.” Surely this is not what we want to say.

The truth of our sinfulness should lead us to conclude that we all need to be more diligent in watching over our own lives, more careful in cultivating godliness in our own hearts, and more diligent in disciplining ourselves. It should not lead us to conclude that we should never call another away from their sins, even using church discipline in the process.

## The Silent Treatment

Jesus is emphatic that the initial step in church discipline is that “you should go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.” This can only work if a radical change happens in the life of the average evangelical church. Simply put, we must put a “CLOSED” sign on the gossip mill! Church discipline cannot work among a gossiping people.

It must be realized that gossip is subtle and pervasive. In Christian circles, it often does not take the obvious form of blatant slander. On the contrary, Christians have devised numerous and subtle forms of gossip:

1. Prayer gossip—the slandering of another under the guise of prayer. (i.e., “I think we need to pray for \_\_\_\_\_, I heard that he and his wife are having lots of problems.”)

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The Proper Response: “Let’s do pray for him. And while we’re at it, let’s pray for your tongue as well, that it will refrain from gossip.”

2. Advice gossip—the slandering of another under the guise of a need for advice. (i.e., “I’m not trying to talk bad about \_\_\_\_\_. I’m just struggling with what I should do and how I should approach him.”)

The Proper Response: “I would advise you not to go to anybody else for advice. Go directly to him instead and ask him if this is true.”

3. “Just kidding” gossip—the slandering of another followed by an assurance that you were only just kidding. (i.e., “Ole \_\_\_\_\_ is a real alcoholic! Ha! I’m just kidding!”)

The Proper Response: “You may be just kidding, but it’s not funny. That’s a person’s name you’re talking about. Please don’t joke like that around me.”

Yes, in all of its subtle forms, gossip must stop for church discipline to be effective!

## What God Wants You To Win

The words of Jesus at the end of Step 1 are very interesting: “If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.” (Matt 18:15b). The same thought was expressed by James as well: “. . .whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.” (Jas 5:20) There are high stakes involved with church discipline. If we are faithful in obeying loving church discipline, this is what we stand to win:

Your brother

His spiritual peace and well-being

Forgiveness

Your personal relationship

The person’s relationship with the church

The person’s witness

The church’s witness

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Honor for the name of Christ

Honor for the church of Christ

The joy of personal obedience to Christ

If we turn from this calling, however, we stand to lose all of these things. It is amazing how much we are willing to risk losing simply because we do not want the momentary awkwardness of having to go to a brother or sister in need and speak a word of love.

Is church discipline worth it? Is the spiritual peace, health, and well-being of a single person worth it? Is the name and honor of Christ worth it? Is the witness and ministry of the church in its community worth it? Is obedience worth it? Is love for God and each other worth it? The answer to all of these questions is a strong and resounding yes!

We stand to win a lot if we love enough and have enough courage to return to church discipline. We stand to lose a lot if we bow at the altar of compromise and turn our faces away from what Christ has asked of His church!

## Historical Case Study

*Christianity Today* reports that, in August of 1985, several members of Chicago's Moody Church confronted a member of the church, a doctor, concerning rumors that he was performing abortions. The doctor, in turn, sent a letter to the church executive committee asking to be removed from the membership roll. The executive committee removed the doctor from the church roll while the pastor, Dr. Erwin Lutzer, was out of town. Lutzer, however, knew of the abortion allegations while the rest of the executive committee did not, and, upon his return, voiced his objection.

Dr. Lutzer, feeling that the member had requested to be removed from the church's membership in an attempt to avoid church discipline, confronted the member, at which time the member confirmed that he had, in fact, been performing abortions. Lutzer responded by beginning the process of calling on the church to plead with the offending member to stop his abortion practice. While some felt that this was inappropriate, since the doctor was no longer a member, many felt that it was necessary, especially since the executive committee said that it would not have honored the doctor's request had they known of the allegations.

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After the doctor admitted to Lutzer that he did perform abortions, the Moody Church was publicly informed of the matter and they were asked to contact the doctor and plead with him to stop the practice. Dr. Lutzer explained why he called on the church to appeal to the former member: “Even though technically \_\_\_\_\_ was no longer a member, we felt that for someone who had been so much a part of the body of Christ here . . . we couldn’t just let it go.”<sup>3</sup>

This historical case study raises some interesting issues concerning the dynamics between formal church membership and church discipline. Should a church member be allowed to “short-circuit” church discipline by leaving a church after the first steps of discipline have been taken? Should a church grant a letter in an effort to avoid having to deal with church discipline? What if a church body grants a letter of dismissal because it is unaware that the process of church discipline has begun and would not have granted the letter had it known of the process?

These are issues that churches must grapple with in the light of God’s Word. This much we can say: the Moody Church obviously has a high view of membership and a great commitment to trying to obey the Lord.

<sup>3</sup> “Chicago Church Acts Against a Former Member Who Performs Abortions,” 63, 66.





## The Raising of the Stakes

“To me, this has always been the ideal method of corrective church discipline. “Discipline behind closed doors,” I call it. This is the sort of discipline Jesus used when He rebuked or corrected His disciples. A discipline done in private—away from the crowds—away from the trauma of embarrassment.” —Don Baker<sup>1</sup>

### Step 2: An Appeal With 2 or 3 Witnesses

“But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.” (Matt 18:16)

**I**F OUR fellow Christian admits that he has fallen but decides that he desires to stay in his state of rebellion, and if sufficient time has been given to that person for him to turn back to the truth, and if that person chooses open and stubborn rebellion, Christ instructs us to “take one or two others along with you that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.”

Gilbert W. Rugh sees two purposes in bringing the witnesses: “One, they join with you in testifying against his conduct. Secondly, if he does not accept the admonition, they will be testimonies against him as the process continues.”<sup>2</sup> This is true, but they serve more purposes than Rugh suggests. The witnesses are also present to confirm the allegations, to provide objective accountability to both the brother or sister in question and the one bringing the charge, to potentially confront

<sup>1</sup> Baker, *Beyond Forgiveness*, 29.

<sup>2</sup> Rugh, *Church Discipline: An Evidence of Love*, 8.

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the one bringing the allegation if it is shown that he is forcing an issue where there is none, and to communicate the growing seriousness of the member's refusal to repent if indeed he is guilty of the accusations. This need for witnesses was recognized by Paul in 1 Cor 13:1 and 1 Tim 5:19–20.

A very important principle must be kept in mind before you proceed to this next step: As long as there is a reasonable hope of the person's repentance, time and space should be given to them before the next step is taken. We take the next step in church discipline only when it has become very clear that he is not going to respond to the first step.

### The “One or Two More”

When Christ instructs us to “take one or two others along,” whom is He asking us to take? While there is no clear-cut answer to the question, perhaps we can list some general principles concerning the type of person or people you should take.

It should be someone who has influence in the person's life, though not somebody who would be personally injured by knowing the situation. It should be somebody with a strong Christian character. It should be somebody who agrees with the biblical teachings on church discipline and who will uphold the biblical process. It should be somebody who is in good standing with the person you are going to so that the person you are going to will not be distracted by their presence or feel that they have personal motives in coming. It should possibly be somebody who will have a continuing role in the process of discipline should it proceed to the next step or steps. It should be a person who is open enough with you to tell you that you are misunderstanding the situation if that happens to be the case. They should be objective. It should be a person of prayer. It should be a person who can honor confidence. It should be a gentle person. It should be a bold person.

The witnesses are crucial to the process of church discipline. You cannot simply ask whomever. You must ask a person who will honor the ministry of loving church discipline.

And notice the nature of this visit: “. . . that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.” The witnesses are there to verify, not to accuse. The witnesses provide accountability to the one who has approached the erring brother or sister. The presence of the witnesses also shows the growing seriousness of the actions of the one

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who has fallen. The presence of the witnesses also reveals that the process is taking on ever-widening circles of involvement. If the brother or sister persists in his or her rebellion after the “charge has been established” they should plead with their fellow believer for his or her repentance.

Again, as in the first step, time, room, and hope should be granted to the erring brother or sister in hopes for their return. The situation must be prayerfully and carefully assessed to see if there is some reasonable hope of return before the next step is taken. At this point, for encouragement and perspective, it would be good for us to re-read Jas 5:19-20. Read these words carefully and thoughtfully:

“My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.”

## Historical Case Study

In his Ph.D. dissertation, *Presbyterian Church Discipline in Ohio, 1865–1965*, Bigelow Ernest Noe has recounted a fascinating episode that occurred in the Presbyterian Findlay Session of Ohio in the late 1870’s. In this particular instance, a female member of the church, Miss J. R., carried on an inappropriate six to eight month relationship with a Mr. W. H. and then left town with him. The church clerk wrote to Miss J. R. and informed her that she was being charged. In the meantime, she and Mr. W. H. married each other. Shortly thereafter, Mr. W. H. came back to town and informed the Session that Miss J. R., now Mrs. J. H., was deeply sorry for her past sins and wanted the church’s forgiveness. When the pastor called on Mrs. J. H., she expressed her deep shame and repentance and asked for forgiveness.

The response of the Session in this instance is very interesting. Because of her sincere repentance, they desired to forgive Mrs. J. H. Yet, because of the severity of her sin, they wanted to make it very clear that it was only because of her genuine repentance that they were, indeed, forgiving her, and that they were not, as a Session, taking this matter lightly. Thus, the Session drafted the following resolution of forgiveness:

Whereas, the Word of God clearly and emphatically denounces fornication as one of the most flagrant and heinous of sins and

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Whereas, Mrs. J. H., a member of this church, has upon her own confession been guilty of said sin, but has been led by the Holy Spirit, as we trust, to look upon her conduct in its true light before her God and Savior, and, as it appears, has been brought to sincere repentance and humble confession.

Therefore in view of all the circumstances of the case, and remembering the injunction of our Compassionate Redeemer to “forgive as we would be forgiven” be it resolved that the spirit of confession expressed by Mrs. J. H. justifies the session in granting her request for forgiveness and continuance of her membership in this church.<sup>3</sup>

Here is an example of a body of believers taking both sin and forgiveness very seriously. What do you think of their resolution of forgiveness? Do you believe that they responded in an appropriate manner? Why or why not?

<sup>3</sup> Noe, “Presbyterian Church Discipline in Ohio, 1865–1965,” 87–88.

## Five Objections

**L**ET US stop now and consider some common objections to the practice of church discipline that you have likely heard or that you may be thinking yourself at this very moment.

### Objection 1

“God may have intended church discipline for the first century church, but He did not intend it for the church today.”

Here is the assumption behind this rejection: Certain parts of the Bible were intended for the original hearers that are not intended for us.

I agree that some parts of the Bible are culturally conditioned and are therefore not literally applicable to the modern day. We may think, for instance, of the instructions given in the New Testament concerning head coverings and hair length (1 Cor 11:1–10) as well as of the Jerusalem Councils’ instructions to the early Gentile believers that they abstain from what had been sacrificed to idols, “what has been strangled, and from blood” (Acts 15:19–20). These issues, and others, contain cultural elements that make a literal adherence to them in modern times impossible.

That being said, certain cautions need to be kept in mind. While certain culturally-conditioned parts of the Bible cannot and should not be followed in their particulars (since our foreign cultural setting would make such adherence nonsensical and impossible), even these passages contain timeless principles that should be applied. *Therefore, no passage of scripture is irrelevant or can simply be dismissed as antiquated and outdated.* In other words, the truth of this assumption does not mean that such passages are irrelevant, only that they need to be principally applied instead of literally applied.

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In any case, we should simply deny that the instructions on church discipline belong to this class of culturally-conditioned instructions. On the contrary, church discipline has to do with such timeless, trans-generational, trans-continental constants as (a) the need to build each other up in love, (b) the witness of the body of Christ before the watching world, (c) the name and honor of Christ, (d) the sanctification of the church, (e) the need to call one another away from destructive behavior, (f) the ecclesiological necessity of the church reflecting the attributes of Her Lord, and (g) the destructive tendencies of the unchecked rebellion of one member on the whole body. No, these instructions on church discipline are qualitatively different than the culturally-conditioned instructions concerning, say, head coverings.

Furthermore, were we to conclude that these instructions are simply irrelevant to the modern church, we would be (and apparently have already become) the first generation in two millennia of Christian experience to do so with such a consensus. Church discipline has always had its opponents (it apparently did in Corinth), but never has there been such a wholesale abandonment of this practice among conservative, Bible-believing believers as we find today.

### Objection 2

“That might have worked in the first century, but it will not work today.”

Here is the assumption behind this rejection: Pragmatism (“Will it work?”) is more important than adherence to clearly taught doctrines.

We should reject this assumption outright, and we do so for a number of reasons. To begin with, all considerations of whether or not it “will work” must be placed beneath the consideration of whether or not God has asked us to do something in His Word. Secondly, we reject the first part of this assumption: “That might have worked in the first century . . .” This is historically naïve. Paul certainly would not have had to rebuke the Corinthian believers for their failure to practice church discipline if it worked so well in the first century. The church has always struggled with church discipline.

Thirdly, we should reject the second part of this assumption: “. . . but it will not work today.” This is also naïve. Despite the fact that this is no justification for disobedience, it simply is wrong. There are churches that have practiced and do practice church discipline as it is

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biblically prescribed and attest to the powerful things that God has done through it in their churches. To quickly name a few, we may think of Dr. Mark Dever and the Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., of Dr. Tony Evans and the Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship in Dallas, TX, and of Dr. John MacArthur, Jr., and the Grace Community Church in Panorama City, CA. All of these, and others, are thriving, healthy churches that have committed themselves to loving, biblical church discipline. Furthermore, I have personally seen the power of church discipline in practice and can attest to its relevance for today.

Consider Stephen Mathonnet-Vanderwell's observation: "Yet it is interesting that congregations which in various ways intentionally emphasize mentoring, catechesis, service, and communal accountability seem to enjoy both influence and growth."<sup>1</sup> Likewise, Murray:

With regard to the first issue, it may be hard for a declining church to accept, but exercising discipline may have a positive effect on church growth. Evidence from many cultures suggests this is the case. A church that is prepared to show that it takes discipleship seriously may be surprisingly attractive. Churches that care enough for their members to confront them when necessary and exercise church discipline rather than allowing relationships to be soured and issues unresolved have a distinctive testimony that may be counter-cultural but is much closer to the radical Christianity of the New Testament. This Christianity may be offensive to religious consumers but it has always attracted those who are serious about following Jesus."<sup>2</sup>

It would appear, then, that it is not quite so easy to simply say that church discipline "will not work today." This objection romanticizes the past and misunderstands the present. People have always been people, sin has always been sin, and church discipline has always been difficult. Churches have always struggled over it (though, again, modern Evangelicalism is shocking in its brazen disregard for this teaching), people have always resisted it, and God has always blessed those churches that dared to love enough to practice it.

<sup>1</sup> Mathonnet-Vanderwell, "Virtue in the Covenant Community: Can Virtue Ethics Revive Reformed Church Discipline?" 205.

<sup>2</sup> Murray, 16.

### Objection 3

“The first century church had the Apostles present with them to oversee the practice of church discipline. We do not.”

Here is the assumption behind this rejection: The Apostles’ bodily presence is required for our adherence to their instructions.

We should simply disagree with this assumption. To begin with, these instructions were first voiced by Jesus in Matthew 18, who later instructed all of us as part of the timeless Great Commission “to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20). Secondly, one of the great hallmarks of the early church was Her devotion to “the apostle’s teaching” (Acts 2:42). Thirdly, this assumption has little regard for the Holy Spirit who was given as a Helper to lead the church in all matters of obedience and instruction (John 16:4-15).

### Objection 4

“Times have changed. People would not stand for this kind of thing today.”

Here is the assumption behind this rejection: The application of God’s Word needs to be shaped by our assumptions concerning how people will respond to it.

This is another shade of pragmatism. While it is wise and biblical to speak the truth of God strategically in the cultural environment in which we find ourselves (i.e., see Paul in Athens in Acts 17:16–34), we must realize that some truths are inherently offensive to people in every age. Nobody wants to be held accountable. Church discipline is one of those doctrines that simply cannot wait for a receptive public. It will never have it.

Times have not changed in terms of sin and the need for the church to respond lovingly to it. The reactions we find about church discipline today are the same we see in the first century. In reality, some would accept church discipline and some would reject it, just as they did in the first century and in every century since.

Ultimately, the church needs to ask itself why it is that many Christians would not tolerate the reinstatement of church discipline and what blame the church has for creating this environment in the first place. When modern Christians shun biblical church discipline, they are oftentimes simply dancing to the tune of accommodation and compro-



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mise that the church has been playing for some time. In large measure, the church created this problem and the church, through the power of the Spirit, will have to remedy it.

## Objection 5

“But Jesus said, “Judge not, that you be not judged” (Matt 7:1–5), and He also stopped those men from stoning the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1–11). So, really, church discipline seems *unbiblical* to me.”

Here is the assumption behind this rejection: If we find a verse that seems to contradict a verse we find difficult, we can pick which one we like.

This is an extremely common objection to church discipline. It also stands on one of the most elementary mistakes we can make in the act of interpretation. We ought never to interpret Scripture in such a way as to make one passage contradict another passage. When we use the words of Jesus to argue against the words of Jesus, we are suggesting that He contradicted Himself or that He was untruthful in one of the two teachings. Neither Jesus’ instructions concerning judging others (Matt 7:1–5) nor His behavior towards the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1–11) contradict a church following Christ’s own instructions concerning holding one another accountable.

The fact that the Holy Spirit led Paul to write that we *are* to judge one another in the church (1 Cor 5:12) simply means that there are nuances in the text and in the way that the New Testament uses the word “judge.” Clearly God condemns haughty, self-righteous judgment in Matt 7:1–5 but calls for humble, broken-hearted judgment in 1 Cor 5:12. The idea that there is a conflict in the Bible over the issue of judgment is simply a mistaken notion. There is a sense in which we ought not judge and a sense in which we should. The Holy Spirit leads us in all these matters, and our motivations and assumptions are what determine whether or not our judging is sinful.

Apart from the many specific hermeneutical arguments that could be made concerning the purpose, context, and intent of Christ’s words, it is alarming to note that the rule of non-contradiction can be so easily and unknowingly ignored by laity and clergy alike. Leaving aside all specific arguments, it must be asked what it means when the words of Jesus are used to argue against the words of Jesus. This observation reminds Christians of the need to be “whole-Bible theologians,” to read the Word

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carefully, and to avoid elementary errors. If it can be shown on exegetical and hermeneutical grounds that the rule of Christ, for instance, does not have that particular meaning that has been asserted in this project, then that is well and good. It must in that case be redefined. But if, as has been argued, Christ is calling for communal accountability and does offer us the framework in which to practice that accountability, then it becomes inappropriate to simply pit Christ against Christ.

Mark Dever has wisely written that “whatever Jesus meant by judging in Matthew 7, He didn’t mean to rule out the kind of judging He mandated in Matthew 18.”<sup>3</sup> Gregory Wills has drawn further attention to the distinctions between these two types of judging: “Some will argue that it is contrary to scripture. Scripture says “Judge not lest ye be judged.” But this verse deals not with church discipline but with personal hypocrisy. Scripture on the contrary requires us to judge. For Christ commanded his churches in Matt 18:15–17 to judge and expel the member who sinned against his brother but did not repent. Paul taught the same duty in 1 Corinthians 5:12.”<sup>4</sup> This distinction is very important to understand. The words of Christ in Matt 7:1–5 have been made into a cheap mantra to ward off the sometimes unpleasant business of accountability. Those who use these words in this manner need to understand the violence that they are committing against the text of Holy Scripture.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 156.

<sup>4</sup> Wills, 11.

<sup>5</sup> There are other objections to church discipline beyond these five that simply do not warrant a great deal of attention. William Barclay, for instance, speaking of Matt 18:15–18 declared that, “It is not possible that Jesus said it in its present form. It is far too legalistic to be a saying of Jesus; it might well be the saying of any Jewish Rabbi.” Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 206. To be fair, Barclay does not simply abandon the passage. He admits that it must refer to something Jesus actually did say. He then proceeds to dismantle the passage and reduce it to terms that fit nicely within the schema of liberal tolerance. Barclay presents us with an example of a man who shapes the text (in this instance) into harmony with his perceived Christology, a Christology that precludes, obviously, the clear meaning of the text as it is presented here. His simplistic misunderstanding of Matt 18:15–18 is baffling and he seems to interpret it in the most skeptical and negative light possible. Specifically, he does not act like a “whole Bible theologian” in his handling of this text. It is regrettable.

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“What is always the purpose of discipline? Restoration. So what do you tell the church? “Church, go after him to win him back. An individual went—no response. Two or three went—no response. Now we’ll all go and drown him in our concern.” Wouldn’t that be wonderful?” —John MacArthur, Jr.<sup>1</sup>

### Step 3: Asking the Church to Appeal to the Member

“If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.” (Matt 18:17a)

**W**HAT IS to be done, however, if you have given sufficient time and prayer and admonition to a wayward friend, and have gone both by yourself and with witnesses, and the friend makes it clear that he wishes to remain in his rebellion? Scripture says that you are then to appeal to the church and ask them to help in the recovery of a fallen friend.

At this point, some believers and some churches refuse to be obedient. It is almost as if Jesus has “crossed a line” in his instructions at this point. But it is important to remember that this is “a line” that we have allowed our culture of permissiveness to draw. It is not a line drawn by Scripture. Let us again hear the Word:

“If he refuses to listen to them, *tell it to the church.*” (Matt 18:17a)

“*When you are assembled* in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to

<sup>1</sup> MacArthur, *The Elements of Church Discipline*, 26.

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deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.” (1 Cor 5:4-5)

“For such a one, *this punishment by the majority* is enough . . .” (2 Cor 2:6)

“As for those who persist in sin, *rebuke them in the presence of all*, so that the rest may stand in fear. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality.” (1 Tim 5:21)

Before we discuss why this is to be done publicly, it is important for us to remember certain truths about the nature of an act that would deserve such a drastic step. Go back to Chapter 8 and briefly review the discussion concerning the nature of the sins against which disciplinary action is called for. Our goal in giving the nature of these sins is not to create a legalistic code of sins that do and do not deserve public action or to allow us an easy way out of the hard love of congregational action against sin. Rather, it is simply to remind us that this drastic action is to be undertaken when a believer has turned away in absolute rebellion and defiance of the Lord’s calling, the believer’s walk, and the church’s mission in the world. It is reserved for those times when a believer firmly plants himself or herself on the path of destruction and defiantly thumbs his or her nose at the loving, careful, and deliberate warnings of his or her brothers and sisters.

## Ekklesia

What did Jesus mean when He said that we ought to “tell it to the church”? Who is “the church”? A couple of observations need to be made concerning this point. To begin with, John White and Ken Blue have offered an interesting observation about the first century church:

First-century churches were largely small house churches. Numbers were probably small by modern standards. People almost always knew one another well. Thus the church Jesus referred to was the small unit where everything would probably be known anyway. In such a setting a disciplinary matter that is resisted is *de facto* a community matter. Therefore it would seem best to interpret Christ’s words “to the church” to refer to the particular subgroup with which the offender associates most, if

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such a group exists. This would avoid exposing the offender to unnecessary humiliation.<sup>2</sup>

This is helpful, and it potentially opens the door for more localized church discipline (i.e., by a Sunday School class, a discipleship group, or a “Church Court”). However, it is questionable whether or not we can legitimately draw a direct analogy between a first century house church and a modern congregation in terms of their organizational and group dynamics. In other words, it is somewhat problematic to suggest that a “subgroup” within a modern congregation is analogous to a first century house church. There are, in fact, many reasons why we should be cautious about thinking that such a subgroup fulfills the definition of “the church.”

Below are three considerations worthy of our attention:

1. The nature of most modern evangelical churches will make such small-group discipline impractical. In the average church of 100 to 200 members, for instance, such an action would almost certainly be known by the body at large and would very likely cause further division, thereby necessitating an action by the larger body.
2. In many evangelical churches, there are very few small groups that have the level of commitment necessary to bring the proper pressure to bear on the person to help them in their repentance. There are very few small groups in the average evangelical church that a person could not just walk out of and maintain their membership in good standing in the church at large.
3. It may be more helpful to think of such small-group admonition as a last-ditch effort before going to the church at large and not as an ultimate fulfillment of Christ’s instructions that we “tell it to the church.”

It must be noted that whatever Christ’s words “the church” mean for the practice of church discipline today, the New Testament calls for public action to be brought to the assembled body of believers (1 Cor 5:4) (i.e., the same assembly that gathers for the Lord’s Supper ((1 Cor 11:18)) and gathers for worship), to a gathering of believers large enough to possibly cause the offending member to feel sorrow and the weight of their offense (2 Cor 2:7), to the “majority” (2 Cor 2:6), and to

<sup>2</sup> White and Blue, 128.

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a body larger than two or three (Matt 18:16-17). In most cases, when a situation reaches this point, “tell it to the church” will mean telling it to the entire congregation.

And what is the purpose of this initial informing of the church? It is so that the church can appeal to the believer as a body. This step must precede excommunication. It is hoped that the believer will listen to the church and turn from their rebellion. “There are three reasons for taking such drastic measures,” writes Don Baker, “One, the nature of the sin and its persistence demands radical attention . . . Two, the sin is public information and requires public action. Three, and finally, the Scriptures tell us to do it this way.”<sup>3</sup>

### Summary Considerations of Telling the Church

Nothing should be told to the church that has not been verified as true. The church should be told in the context of its assembled worship, since church discipline is a church ministry prescribed by Christ. Members of the church should be cautioned to search their own hearts before their involvement in this process. This can be a great time of congregational renewal and repentance! The telling should be done only in the midst of members of the church. Visitors should be asked to leave. The church is to be asked to appeal to the wayward brother for his or her repentance and restoration. The church should appeal to the brother or sister by formally expressing its love for the member, formally calling on them to repent, formally committing itself to prayer for the brother, formally communicating to the wayward member the time-frame in which he or she needs to respond, and formally communicating to the wayward member the results of his or her failure to repent.

While John Owen is certainly correct that “The nature of the thing itself requires a considerable season or *space of time* between solemn admonition and excommunication,” there should not be an excessive amount of time given at this time so as not to allow Satan an opportunity to cause dissension in the church.<sup>4</sup> One or two weeks is usually more than sufficient at this point in the process.

It is important, since the issue has now become public, that the person’s repentance be public as well. When once the believer returns and genuinely repents, the process is over and restoration begins.

<sup>3</sup> Baker, *Beyond Forgiveness*, 57.

<sup>4</sup> Owen, *The True Nature of a Gospel Church*, 178.

## Must It be Public?

“Tell it to the church” (Matt 18:17a). “When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.” (1 Cor 5:4-5) The very thought of it makes a shiver run down our spines. At this point, some Christians and some churches simply draw a line and say, “No!” Some will even go so far as to say that there is no circumstance at all that would make them stand before a church and mention the sin of another.<sup>5</sup>

It is at this point when we must once more give consideration to the cultural assumptions and mindset that creep into our churches and subtly direct our actions. The reason that many absolutely refuse the idea of public church discipline is that they fear the almost certain reaction of many who would find such an act appalling. But we must take a number of things into consideration:

1. The instructions concerning public church discipline, should it reach this point, are from Jesus. Let me repeat: our Lord has asked us to do this. It is a simple matter of obedience.
2. Public discipline ought to be very rare and is a drastic measure. It will be made more rare by our faithful adherence to it.
3. If we reach this point in the process, and are confronted with a defiant member living in open rebellion against God, we ought to be moved

<sup>5</sup> I have explored the challenges of public discipline in congregational settings in an article published by the *Southwestern Journal of Theology* in the Fall of 2004. Specifically, I consider “the challenge of preparedness,” “the challenge of unity” and “the challenge of consistency.” I there conclude that, “It is possible for the rule of Christ to be practiced within the context of congregational polity. It is not possible for it to be practiced amidst a congregation unprepared to think biblically and redemptively about church discipline. As such, the burden will fall on the leaders of the church, especially the pastor, to commit themselves to teach and practice the whole counsel of God, to have the wisdom to bring the practice back into the life of the church carefully and strategically, and to trust that Christ has not given us his instructions for the church in vain. He is faithful to walk with all who seek to dwell in his counsel.” Richardson, “The Rule of Christ and Congregational Polity: A Unique Challenge And Opportunity,” 53.

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more by our love for that person than by our fear of those who would oppose us.

4. This fear is unfounded. Yes, it is difficult. Yes, there will be those who oppose it. But churches that take the time to clearly and lovingly explain what is happening might find that there are many who understand completely and feel too that obedience in this area is very important, no matter how difficult.
5. Public church discipline will help define the church along biblical terms and will quite possibly cause those who do not desire to be part of a New Testament church to rethink their own standing.
6. A recognition of the tremendous potential for revival and church renewal inherent in such actions as public church discipline should comfort those who have to pursue it.
7. Finally, our fear of the reaction of the church shifts the focus away from the hurting member who needs this ministry and onto our own selves. But this isn't about us. It is about winning back our brother or sister.

## The Forgotten Step

If we are not careful, we will miss a step in the process of church discipline. Listen to Matt 18:17: "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And *if he refuses to listen even to the church*, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

We see, then, that the church is to speak to the one being disciplined before they are to be removed. This means that the person will need the opportunity to hear what the church is saying and then to respond to the church. This might take the form of a "church plea" in which a church formally votes to approve a statement pleading with the person, by name, to turn from his or her rebellion and return to the fold. It is a tremendous opportunity for the church at large to communicate its love for the person and to explain its motives.

Think of the power of a church plea! It is easy to dismiss one person. It is slightly more difficult, but still easy enough to dismiss three. But how would you feel if a church sent you a letter in which the body as a whole expressed their deep love for you, their great sadness that you had abandoned the life, call, and mission of the Body, and their intense



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desire for you to return? How would you feel if a church took the time as a body, as a congregation, to plead with you for your repentance?

The church plea is a tremendous opportunity for a church to show its love and for a church to consider its own motives in church discipline.

Practically speaking, this means that a church should never (a) hear about a matter of church discipline, (b) discuss the matter, and (c) vote to remove a person from the fellowship all in one meeting. That is inappropriate, to say the least. There needs to be a step in between “b” and “c” with a suitable amount of time for the person to respond. That step is the church’s prayerful plea with the person to repent and return.

Who can imagine the power of the body calling out to a member together?

## So What?

Some might feel the urge to respond to this study by saying, “So what? That’s your opinion! Who cares!?” To this we would answer and say that if the principles of this study are true, and if God has truly prescribed church discipline for His body, dare we turn away? Do we truly dare to ask:

So what that God has called on His people to obey Him in this area?

So what that Jesus has left us clear instructions on this issue?

So what that church discipline stems from the very character of God?

So what that by turning from this call we are refusing to model the fullness of God’s love for us?

So what that the world is scorning the church for her brazen hypocrisy in many quarters?

So what that we are refusing to love our fellow Christian by denying them this ministry of love?

So what that Christians are suffering and collapsing under the weight of sin and spiritual oppression because we are too afraid to call on them?

So what that young people are leaving our churches because they sense a radical disconnect between our creed and our character?

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So what that our forefathers felt this ministry to be crucial?

So what that the entire New Testament witness concerning the church includes this practice?

So what that lives have been changed, relationships have been restored, and families have been put back together when churches have dared to institute loving church discipline?

So what that churches continue to split and splinter because nobody will seek to deal with problems in the body?

So what?! So what indeed! It is time to see the seriousness of what is at stake. It is time to realize the high cost of our disregard. Speaking of the original disciples, Stuart Murray has noted that, “For those who took Jesus seriously, there was no avoiding the connection between discipleship and church discipline. And the rest of the New Testament confirms that the disciples realized this and taught the churches they planted to exercise church discipline.”<sup>6</sup> Church discipline is therefore organic to the very definition of the word disciple. To avoid it or neglect it is to avoid what the early church would have understood was a necessary *de facto* aspect of following Christ.

I would dare ask that you consider the pressing urgency of the situation at hand. Jay Adams captured this urgency well when he wrote, “Let me urge you to consider again, if you or your congregation hesitates to obey Christ in using church discipline: Can you really do without it?”<sup>7</sup> We do indeed face a high cost if we do nothing. If we do not obey, we risk the removal of God’s blessing from the Body, the consequences of disobedience and rebellion, the disciplining hand of God on the church at large, the further damaging of more believers’ lives by our neglect, the ruin of the church’s witness in the world, the compromising of the gospel, and the causing of others to disobey those parts of the Bible *they* don’t like

On and on the list might go. Yes, the cost of our doing nothing is very high! And so we only ask for this: that the principles of God’s Word be rejected or that they be obeyed. We ask that the church no longer ignore what Her Lord has asked of her.

We might ask this of those churches that simply decide they will not obey in this area: declare yourself. If we are to turn from the simple

<sup>6</sup> Murray, *Explaining Church Discipline*, 31.

<sup>7</sup> Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline*, 114–115.

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and clear instructions of the Word, let us have the integrity and the courage to hoist a banner in front of our buildings that says this: “We are a partial church. We believe the Word partially. We obey partially. We choose what we like and reject what we dislike. We care only for those portions of God’s Word which allow us to maintain our cultural comfort and our surface peace.”

We should not think that this is too much to ask. It is simply a call for honesty. It is simply a plea for integrity. At least this would allow those who commit themselves to the Word in its totality to avoid confusion.

### The Church Before the Watching World

On September 8, 1735, the First Church of Christ in Braintree, Massachusetts, recorded the following entry into their book of minutes:

At a meeting of the First Church of Christ in Braintree at the house of the Pastor, September the 8<sup>th</sup> 1735, after prayer— Voted, That it is the duty of this Church to examine the proofs of an unhappy quarrel between Benjamin Owen and Joseph Owen, member in full communion with this Church on May 30<sup>th</sup> 1735, whereby God has been dishonored and religion reproached.<sup>8</sup>

This last phrase is intriguing: “whereby God has been dishonored and religion reproached.”

How did Benjamin Owen and Joseph Owen having a quarrel dishonor God and bring reproach upon religion? It did so because the First Church of Christ in Braintree understood that the church operates before a watching world, and the failure of the Body of Christ ultimately reflects upon the God we claim to follow. This is a harrowing thought!

The world knows a good show when it sees one. Americans spend untold millions on movies each year. And they go for essentially the same reasons: to escape reality for a couple of hours, to be entertained, and to be able to observe something spectacular without having the content actually threaten their lives.

One suspects that the world now views the church as putting on a show. Many churches, it would seem, are offering a once-a-week escape

<sup>8</sup> Adams, *Some Phases of Sexual Morality and Church Discipline*, 15.

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from reality, a chance to be entertained, and a chance to observe something spectacular that will never actually threaten real life. The world knows that many churches are doing this. We are the only ones who have failed to catch on.

We might legitimately wonder if the church in America truly gets the point that the world really is not convinced that we mean what we say! They think we are playing a game, putting on a show, amusing ourselves. Why? Because the life of the church seems woefully disconnected from the message of the church. When people who are living in absolute, open, unrepentant rebellion are simply allowed to hold on to their rebellion and maintain their membership in good standing at the same time, it says to the world that we really do not mean what we say, that we are, when it comes right down to it, just playing around.

Churches need to understand the painful reality that the world will never be drawn by our message if we do not live it in our lives. Church discipline is one step towards ending this disconnect between a church's message and a church's life. It is a means of putting a "STOP" sign in front of shallow, superficial "churchianity" and of encouraging a real, substantive, robust Christianity.

No revival in the history of the world has come without the church being willing to confront surface Christianity whenever it rears its head. The call for church discipline is a call for truth, for integrity, for substance, for commitment, for continuity in who we say we are and who we actually are.

The world is watching. Let us make sure that they are not watching an empty show.

"You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." (Matt 5:13-16)

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“The administration of any solemn ordinance of the gospel without prayer is a horrible profanation of it; and the neglect or contempt hereof, in any who take upon them to excommunicate others, is an open proclamation of the nullity of their act and sentence . . . In brief, without prayer, neither is the ordinance itself sanctified unto the church, nor are any meet to administer it, nor is the authority of Christ either owned or engaged, nor divine assistance obtained, neither is what is done any more excommunication than any rash curse is; so that many [such] proceed inordinately out of the mouths of men.” —John Owen<sup>1</sup>

### Step 4: Placing the Member Outside of the Fold

“And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”(Matt 18:17b)

**I**F THE church appeals to a wayward member and the member does not respond, what is the church to do? “And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matt 18:17). This step is known as excommunication. Excommunication is a church’s formal recognition and affirmation of the fact that a member has placed himself out of the fellowship by consistent rebellion against God and His church.

Practically speaking, this might mean the removal of the offending believer’s name from the church roll by a majority vote of the church (and a loss of all privileges and rights related to membership), the body’s refusal to socially interact with the believer as if nothing has happened, (Matt 18:17; 2 Thess 3:6, 14; Titus 3:10b), and the consistent appealing

<sup>1</sup> Owen, *The True Nature of a Gospel Church*, 169–170.

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of the body to the offending member for him to repent and come home.<sup>2</sup> This does not mean that the person under discipline cannot attend the worship service. On the contrary, it is hoped that they will continue to place themselves under the preaching of the Word. But they are no longer members in good standing and have essentially placed themselves in the position of being an outsider in a state of rebellion.

Estella B. Horning offers some wise counsel concerning the practical implications of viewing an erring brother or sister as a “Gentile” or “tax collector”:

We can only think rightly about Gentiles and tax collectors if we think about the way Jesus treated them. Jesus invited Levi (Matthew), a tax collector, to become a disciple. He accepted the invitation of Zaccheus and made it an opportunity to bring him to salvation. Ordinarily, there would be little intimate contact with outsiders, except for the purpose of evangelization. But when a brother or sister becomes an outsider, we are advised to remember here the parable of the sheep going astray, and the concern of the Father that not one of these “little ones” should be lost.<sup>3</sup>

### Why Excommunication?

The church is to act towards this member “as a Gentile and a tax collector” because the church is thereby recognizing and confirming the spiritual reality that the member has already brought about by his or her rebellion (i.e., Titus 3:11—“knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.”). The church is thereby seeking to highlight to the member the breaking of fellowship that the member has brought about by his or her rebellion. The church is hoping that the removal of the spiritual protection and nurturing of the body and the

<sup>2</sup> J. Carl Laney’s observations in this regard are worthy of consideration: “Clearly, the avoidance involves communication of some sort. The communication would not be of the warm, friendly, “buddy-buddy” type, but it would be cordial. It would be a statement to the offender that he or she is standing outside of the fellowship of the church and is urged to repent. Biblical avoidance must communicate that the offender has forsaken the way of Christian discipleship. At the same time it must communicate the message that full restoration is offered on the basis of confession and repentance.” Laney, *A Guide to Church Discipline*, 67.

<sup>3</sup> Horning, “The Rule of Christ: An Exposition of Matthew 18:15–20”, 75.

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subsequent handing of the person over to the domain of Satan (1 Cor 5:5) will lead the person to repentance.

There can be no doubt that Satan has often perverted this act of excommunication into a monstrous caricature of the act of love that God intends it to be. An interesting example of this kind of caricature can be found in the Reverend Mr. Collins' letter to Mr. Bennet after his daughter, Lydia, scandalously ran off with Wickham in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*:

My Dear Sir—I feel myself called upon, by our relationship, and my situation in life, to condole with you on the grievous affliction you are now suffering under, of which we were yesterday informed by a letter from Hertfordshire. Be assured, my dear sire, that Mrs. Collins and myself sincerely sympathise with you, and all your respectable family, in your present distress, which must be of the bitterest kind, because proceeding from a cause which no time can remove. No arguments shall be wanting on my part, that can alleviate so severe a misfortune; or that may comfort you, under a circumstance that must be of all others most afflicting to a parent's mind. The death of your daughter would have been a blessing in comparison to this . . . Let me advise you then, my dear Sir, to console yourself as much as possible, to throw off your unworthy child from your affection for ever, and leave her to reap the fruits of her own heinous offence. I am, dear Sir, [Mr. Collins]<sup>4</sup>

Such cold-heartedness has no place in the process of church discipline. Remember, we are excommunicating only because we hope that in so doing we may cause the offending brother to feel isolation, shame, and a desire for Christian fellowship. As Victor C. Pfitzner notes:

Consequently the final act of declaring the man a manifest sinner and thus cut off from the fellowship of the community is not an act of high-handed, ecclesiastical authoritarianism. It simply ratifies an obvious fact: the sinner has cut himself off from the fellowship of the church, which is a fellowship of forgiveness. Up to this final point the only binding rule which has been applied is the rule of love. Yet even the sinner's exclusion from the church, in the form of a pronouncement by it, has a positive goal, without this having to be stated in so many words. He is to be brought to a realization of his sin and to a longing for forgive-

<sup>4</sup> Austin. *Pride and Prejudice*, 367–368.

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ness and restoration. Since love is the ruling force in the whole procedure, not cold, formal principles of justice, the restoration of the sinner is its final goal. Matthew reflects a gospel concern, rather than interest in preserving the church as a community of the pure in a cultic sense.<sup>5</sup>

It is their redemption, their spiritual peace, and the wholeness and health of the church that we have in mind. There are several cautions we must recognize at this point. The church should exhibit no sadistic joy in this breaking of fellowship. This is a time of deep mourning. The church must ever be hopeful of the person's restoration.

While the church is not to have unrestrained fellowship with a "Gentile" or "tax collector," it is to maintain an evangelistic outreach to them (2 Thess 3:15: "Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother."). Legalistic extremities that pervert the gospel and the nature of church discipline need to be avoided.

## Communion Discipline

One way in which churches have historically sought to exercise church discipline is through communion discipline or "table discipline." Communion discipline is an act of church discipline whereby a member is forbidden access to the Lord's Supper in an effort to demonstrate their broken fellowship with the Lord and His church and to prompt repentance in their lives.

Communion discipline is founded on (1) God's clear pronouncement that taking the Lord's Supper while in a state of open rebellion against God causes one to "be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Cor 11:27) and (2) the need for one to have a repentant and introspective spirit while taking the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:28–29). Communion discipline is also an act of great mercy and protection on behalf of the church, for the Lord is not hesitant to deal with those who make a mockery of His holy supper (1 Cor 11:30). Furthermore, the Lord's Supper is that place where we visibly and dramatically illustrate and assert our unity together as believers and our unity as a body with the Lord. For a church to knowingly allow a person who has defied both God and His church to partake of Holy Communion is to make the entire church culpable and a participant in that person's sin.

<sup>5</sup> Pfitzner, "Purified Community-Purified Sinner," 39–40.



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Communion discipline is a part of excommunication. Whereas some churches have attempted to use communion discipline as a precursor or final call for repentance before excommunication, it is best understood as a component of full excommunication. Stuart Murray has wisely pointed out the dangers of using communion discipline as a precursor to full excommunication:

One practice that has sometimes been used at this stage, or as an intermediate stage before expulsion, is excluding the person from taking part in communion, but from no other aspect of church life. This is a very unhelpful practice that conveys a mixed message to the person concerned and is a misuse of communion. If practiced extensively it would result in two-tier churches of communicants and non-communicants and communion would be regarded as a reward for holy living. Either someone is in fellowship with the community or not. If they are in fellowship, they should not be treated as second-class citizens. If not, full exclusion is needed rather than this partial measure that fudges the issue.<sup>6</sup>

Murray makes a point here, but, in his scenario, the person has been excluded from the Lord's Table and from nothing else. But what if they are excluded from the Lord's Table as well as from all ministry positions, leadership roles, etc? If such a scenario were actualized for a very brief time as a precursor to excommunication, it would perhaps be legitimate. On this point, churches need to wisely and prayerfully ask how they can honor the spirit and words of "the rule of Christ."

### When and How?

If a church reaches the point of having to excommunicate a church member, and if all of the other avenues have been completely exhausted it is best to handle the matter in front of as many church members as possible.

Let me explain. If a church excommunicates a member by public vote, it suddenly becomes public knowledge. In the vast majority of churches, that means that people will hear about it either by having observed it firsthand or by second or thirdhand gossip. By pronouncing the excommunication in front of as much of the church as you can, you shut the door on a tremendous amount of gossip, cause more people

<sup>6</sup> Murray, *Explaining Church Discipline*, 31.

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to see and experience the spirit in which the action was taken (thereby eliminating a great deal of confusion about the way in which it was handled), open up the ministry aspects of excommunication to a greater percentage of the church (by allowing more people to feel and experience the heartbreak, conviction, and awe of such a moment), are able to give clearer instructions to a larger percentage of the church about what this action means and how the church is now to react, make it more of a full-church action and less of a small-group action, and increase the intensity of the call for repentance on the wayward brother or sister by having more people make the call.

The desire to operate “under cover of darkness” at this point is very damaging. If it has reached this point, it is soon to become known to all. If it is soon to become known to all, better to set the stage yourself and minimize the damage.

This much is clear: it ought to be done in front of church members only and it ought to be done in a setting that will honor the immensity of what is happening (i.e., following a worship service).

Most churches have instructions in their bylaws concerning when and how. Perhaps it would be a good idea to revisit these and see if they are fitting to the spirit, tone, and tenor of loving, biblical, church discipline.

### “Gentiles and Tax Collectors”

“And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matt 18:17). What does it mean that he is to be to us as a Gentile and a tax collector? Gentiles and tax collectors were considered to be people outside of the covenant mercies of God due to their sinful rejection of God’s covenant offer of grace. They were lost people, people of the world, as distinct from the people of God. The tax collectors were especially egregious because they were betraying their own people, the children of Israel, by assisting Rome in its occupation of Israel. They were especially despised. This is how the church, then, is to view those who have chosen the course of the “Gentile” and the “tax collector.”

This teaching sounds odd to us. Are we really to look upon a fellow believer in Christ as the Jews looked upon Gentiles and tax collectors? Jesus apparently felt that this was to be the case. The idea is not that we just suddenly decide, on our own, to act towards them as if they were

### *Excommunication*

Gentiles and tax collectors, but rather that we sorrowfully recognize that we must respond to them in this way since they have adopted the life of the Gentile and tax collector. In other words, this is more a call to reaction than to action. We are treating them thus because, through their decisions and actions, this is what they have decided to be.

It is important to realize as well that by treating them as Gentiles and tax collectors we are merely stating a reality out loud. We are acknowledging what has unfortunately become a fact. We are dragging a spiritual reality out into the light of day in the hope that the ugliness of that reality will move our brother or sister to repentance.

This is actually a beautiful picture from the vantage point of the New Testament. It was, after all, to Gentiles and tax collectors, to unworthy people, that the hope of the gospel was offered in Christ. So we now are to treat our fallen brother as a missionary would treat one who had not heard. We are to explain the gospel to them, reintroduce them to what it means to be a Christian, and plead with them for their return.

## The Results of Excommunication

The Bible lists a number of results that excommunication can and should have on the individual who is being excommunicated as well as on the church body at large.

Consider the effects of excommunication on the person upon whom church discipline is being brought to bear: they are led to repent and restore their fellowship with Christ and His church (1 Cor 5:5: “you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.”), they are “taught not to blaspheme” (1 Tim 1:19b–20: “By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.”), they regain a sense of shame for their sins. (2 Thess 3:14b: “. . . take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed.”), and they gain a fresh and new understanding of the importance of the church and her mission.

Consider also the effects that church discipline has on the church. It guards the church against the corrosive powers of sin (1 Cor 5:6–7: “Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new

## WALKING TOGETHER

lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed.”), encourages the other members of the church to consider their own walks with Christ (1 Tim 5:20: “As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.”), and strengthens the church’s witness to the world.

We see, then, that excommunication is an act of extreme love in the face of extreme rebellion. It certainly goes against the easy and cheap membership practices to which too many churches have fallen prey. We must ask ourselves which church is the more loving: the church that turns a blind eye to another’s self destruction, or the church that loves enough to call and plead with a brother to return, even being willing to place them outside of the protection of the church in the process?

### Handing Him Over: A Parable

Imagine with me that a lady is walking down the sidewalk with her child. It is raining and they are both walking under the same umbrella. The child is in a bad mood and keeps trying to stab at the umbrella with a stick. The lady admonishes the child to stop and tells him that he is going to hurt the umbrella and end up getting both of them soaked with rain. The child then picks up a small rock and throws it up at the umbrella. The child’s mother warns him one more time. Then imagine that the child begins jumping up and punching at the lining of the umbrella with his fist.

Truthfully, many of us would have dealt with this situation after the first time the child jabbed at the umbrella with a stick! But let us imagine that the mother, after the child’s third attempt to hurt the umbrella, simply puts the umbrella in her other hand, placing herself just under the edge of it and leaves the child in the soaking rain.

The child pretends that he doesn’t care at first, but then he gets cold and wet and wants to get back under the umbrella. “Mommy, let me back under the umbrella, I’m cold and wet! I’m getting soaked!” “I’m sorry,” the mother responds, “but had I not put you outside of the protection of the umbrella, you would have torn it and we both would be soaked. After all, if you would have succeeded with your stick and your rock and your punching, we would have ended up cold and wet anyway, so, in a sense, I’ve just given you what you wanted without letting you cause any more damage.”

“But I’m cold, mommy!”

### *Excommunication*

“I’m sure you are,” the lady responds. “It’s cold and wet outside of the umbrella’s protection.”

“Can I come back in, mommy?”

“Well that’s up to you, sweetie, isn’t it? I never wanted you in the rain in the first place! I just wanted us to walk together under the umbrella. If you’re willing to respect the umbrella, of course you can come back in. I just wanted you to spend a little time outside so that your bad behavior could get washed out of you!”

“I won’t try to destroy the umbrella anymore, mommy. Please let me in!”

“Here you go, sweetie. Stay close to me and I’ll keep you warm.”

This is what the New Testament means when it refers to handing somebody over to Satan for the destruction of their flesh (1 Cor 5:5). It is a way of acknowledging the end results of a person’s actions so that they can see the misery of the course they’ve chosen. It’s a way of letting them feel the rain so that they will once more see the joy of the umbrella! It’s a way of putting them in a place so that their pride and rebellion (their “flesh”) can be destroyed under the relentless agony of being in Satan’s back yard. Sometimes we have to spend a little time there before we’re ready to return to the protection of the house!

## Historical Case Study

In *Democratic Religion*, Gregory A. Wills’ magisterial study on church discipline among Georgia Baptist churches from 1785 to 1900, Dr. Wills recounts an episode of church discipline undertaken by the Savannah First Baptist Church against a church member, William Barnes, in 1806. Mr. Barnes was “estranged” from some of the members of the church and was seeking his letter so that he could leave and attend a church elsewhere. The church instead charged Mr. Barnes with “continued absence from the Church, and from the Table of the Lord, at our communion.” They then proceeded to censure and rebuke Mr. Barnes.

After the period of one month, when it was clear that Mr. Barnes intended to ignore the pronouncement of the church, they asked him to answer for his poor attendance. This summons only caused Barnes to act with anger and contempt towards the church. The church responded by removing from him all of the privileges of membership, barring him from the Lord’s Supper, and suspending him from membership. At this point, “the horrid sin of profane swearing” was also laid on his account.

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Two months later, after continued defiance by Mr. Barnes, the church voted to excommunicate Barnes one week later unless he repented of his behavior. Mr. Barnes, in turn, informed the church that excommunication was fine with him. The following Sunday, in a very solemn service, the church voted with much sorrow to excommunicate Barnes, changing his title from “Brother Barnes” to “Mr. Barnes.”<sup>7</sup>

This episode reveals the seriousness with which early Baptists took attendance. In their minds, to fail to attend your church, and to refuse the opportunity to come to the Lord’s Table, damaged the witness of the church in the community, hindered the believer’s walk with Christ, and put a stumbling block before others.

How different this is from the way we view membership! What might we learn from our forefathers and foremothers concerning membership and participation in the church?

<sup>7</sup> Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 11–12.

## The Returning Prodigal, the Rejoicing Church

“Then Peter came up and said to him, ‘Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.’” (Matt 18:21–22)

“Only those who take sin seriously take forgiveness seriously.”  
—Thomas C. Oden<sup>1</sup>

### Step 5: Restoration and Forgiveness Upon Repentance

“For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.” (2 Cor 2:6–8)

**P**ERHAPS IT happened after the initial step of private admonition. Perhaps it happened after private admonition in the presence of one or two witnesses. Perhaps it happened after the church called for repentance. Perhaps it happened after the church sorrowfully confirms the brother or sister’s removal from the midst of the family of faith by excommunicating him or her.

Regardless of when and at what point it happened, the prodigal came home, the offending brother or sister gave way under the pressure of God’s love working through the body of Christ, and the church is suddenly faced with a choice. Should she slam the door shut? Should

<sup>1</sup> Oden, *Corrective Love: The Power of Communion Discipline*, 47.

## WALKING TOGETHER

she crack the door open and peer out with a scowl? Or should she do something else? Should she turn the keys of which she has become a steward<sup>2</sup>, throw open the door, and embrace the returning member with joy and with tears? Of course, the answer is “C”! It is celebration time! It is restoration time! It is a time to rejoice!

Consider this real-life scene that Tony Evans has related for our encouragement:

One brother who went into wild living, divorced his wife, and refused to repent was removed from the church. His life fell apart, and after three years he called the church and said, “I want to repent and come home.” We met with him to examine his life and look for fruits of repentance, since we can’t read people’s hearts. When he demonstrated his repentance, he was brought back to church on a Sunday morning. He stood before the church and apologized to the people. He also said that if his wife would have him back, he would like to come home to her and make up for the years that had been wasted. The man’s wife had been praying for him those three years and had not given up hope. I called her forward on this Sunday morning, and performed the wedding right there in the middle of the service, amid a lot of crying and cheering.<sup>3</sup>

That’s it! That is church discipline at work! That is the love of the church rewarded with the repentance of a rebellious member. That is what it’s all about!

<sup>2</sup> The notion of the keys has been too-often left unexplored by free-church Protestantism, yet it is crucial to our understanding and application of church discipline. Who can tell what damage has been wrought in the church by this Protestant neglect of a full theology of the keys? The biblical idea is that the church speaks with the authority of heaven when the church speaks in harmony with heaven. The church, therefore, does not hold its authority in and of itself. It rather has authority granted to its proclamations only insofar as those proclamations speak in accord with God’s proclamations. Nonetheless, when the church speaks thus, it does authoritatively speak a word of forgiveness or a word of condemnation, a word of loosing or of binding. As was stated before, we dare not discuss “discipline” until we discuss “church.” It is precisely this neglect of a full theology of the church that has led to the disappearance of “discipline.” Owen has spoken of the church as the “steward” of the keys. (Owen, 159). For a very helpful essay, see also the late Anabaptist theologian, John Howard Yoder’s “Binding And Loosing” which is appended in White and Blue, *Healing the Wounded*, 211–234. For a Baptist perspective see Hammett, *Biblical Foundations For Baptist Churches*, 106.

<sup>3</sup> Evans, *God’s Glorious Church*, 234.



## A Word of Caution Concerning Repentance

It is unfortunately necessary to offer a word of caution at this point concerning repentance. The repentance must be sincere. The church must guard against two extremes concerning repentance: a naïve acceptance of shallow repentance on the one hand and a harsh, skeptical, and legalistic demand for excessive repentance on the other hand.<sup>4</sup> We must look to the Holy Spirit for guidance. We cannot see into the heart of any man or woman, so repentance must not be doubted unless there is obvious reason to do so. Accepting the repentance of a believer does not conflict with the church's prescribing of counseling and further accountability in cases of habitual sin. These steps must not be seen as legalistic *proofs* of a person's repentance, but rather as ministries of assistance in helping a wayward and fallen friend become better equipped to deal with besetting temptations in the future.

Repentance is necessary for restoration. The church must uphold the call of the gospel for the offending member to repent. And if he or she does so, then he or she is to be welcomed home. But what do we mean when we speak of "restoration." We mean the restoration of the member to the Lord and the restoration of the member to the Lord's church. Of course, there are sadly times when the stubborn rebellion of a fallen brother or sister keeps restoration from becoming possible. In these cases the church is to continue in its call to and love of the wayward member. The church is never to forsake the hope of restoration.

Repentance ought to be sincere, complete, and contrite. Restoration ought to be careful, sincere, complete, immediate, celebratory, trusting, and hopeful. Forgiveness and restoration should be marked by reasonable care and overwhelming grace. If we are to err at this point, let us err in favor of grace. Unless there is some obvious and overwhelming reason to question the validity of a person's repentance (which, unfortunately, is sometimes the case) let us move into a time of celebration and of love!

<sup>4</sup> We must avoid any sort of unreasonable demand for a particular emotional response. Not all genuine repentance involves tears, though it always involves a broken heart (often in the form of tears). We must prayerfully look instead for a sincere spirit and sense of contrition.

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## Historical Case Study

The following excerpt from the 1683 minutes of the Braintree North Precinct Church in Massachusetts shows a church's reaction to a less than sincere attempt at repentance.

May 4, 1683—the Braintree North Precinct Church—  
Massachusetts:

“Isaac Theer, (the son of Brother Thomas Theer) being a member of this Church but not in full communion, having been convicted of notorious scandalous thefts multiplied, as stealing pewter from Johanna Livingstone, stealing from John Penniman cheese, &c., and others, and stealing an horse at Bridgewater, for which he suffered the law, after much laboring with him in private and especially by the officers of the church, to bring [him] to a thorough sight and free an ingenuous confession of his sin; as also for his abominably lying, changing his name, &c., was called forth in public, moved pathetically to acknowledge his sin and publish his repentance, who came down and stood against the lower end of the foreseat after he had been prevented (by our shutting the east door) from going out; stood impudently, and said indeed he owned his sin of stealing, was heartily sorry for it, begged pardon of God and men, and hoped he would do so no more, which was all he could be brought unto, saying his sin was already known, and that there was no need to mention it in particular, all with a remise voice, so that but few could hear him. The church at length gave their judgment against him, that he was a notorious, scandalous sinner, and obstinately impenitent. And when I was proceeding to spread before him his sin and wickedness, he (as 't is probably), guessing what was like to follow, turned about to goe out, and being desired and charged to tarry and hear what the church had to say to him, he flung out of doors, with an insolent manner though silent. Therefore the Pastor applied himself to the congregation, and having spread before them his sin, partly to vindicated the church's proceeding against him, and partly to warn others; sentence was declared against him according to Matthew 18, 17.<sup>5</sup>

Mr. Theer's demeanor, his resistance, his desire to leave, and his curtness all combined to make this church understandably skeptical of

<sup>5</sup> Adams, *Some Phases of Sexual Morality and Church Discipline*, 9–10.

### *The Returning Prodigal, the Rejoicing Church*

his repentance. They therefore decided to proceed with the act of excommunication.

Do you believe that the church acted reasonably given the evidence? What did Mr. Theer do to make the church so skeptical? On a personal level, how do we appear when we repent of our sins?

## Keeping and Eye on the Goal

Imagine the joy of seeing a prodigal child come home!<sup>6</sup> Imagine the thrill of seeing one who defied God, His church, and his or her fellow believer come back and say, “I never should have left!” Imagine the unspeakable joy of repentance and restoration.

Churches that are too afraid to follow the Lord down this road need to think of the blessing that they are missing. Christ has given His church a tool, a means, a method of showing radical love to one another when we begin to fall. He has given us the opportunity to be involved in each other’s sanctification! He has equipped us so that we need not stand idly by and watch loved ones wreck their lives.

It is a hard love, a difficult love, a love that our cultural conditioning kicks against and hates, but it is love nonetheless. It is a struggle, at times. It is a hard journey. But we as a people of God must do what all people on hard journeys do. We must keep our eye on the goal.

The goal is the restoration of the wayward, the obedience of the faithful, the glorification of the Father, the imitation of Jesus, the combating of Satan, the strengthening of the Body, the purifying of the people, and the building up of each other. With these lofty goals, dare we shrink from the journey? Dare we turn from the calling? The world waits with bated breath to see a community of people that love each other so completely as this.

## Grief: The Cure for Legalism

“But if we were to do this, if we were to commit ourselves to obedience in this area, if we were to become a truly New Testament church, we would be opening a door for all kinds of legalistic abuses.” It’s a valid concern, and one that has the backing of history on its side. The church’s

<sup>6</sup> Some have advocated such literal celebratory expressions as a “Welcome Home” dinners or socials, when erring members come home. There is undoubtedly a great deal of room granted us in the Bible in our expressions of celebration, and one would think that such literal expressions would grant further concreteness to the restoration.

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track record with church discipline has truly been dismal in many ages and at many times.

James Leo Garrett, Jr., has correctly called attention to the danger of legalism in this effort towards the recovery of church discipline:

Probably the greatest problem in the recovery is the avoidance of a neo-Pharisaic legalism. There must be no code of sins externally conceived, and sin must be viewed in its depth and its manifold expressions. Stated affirmatively, church discipline must be redemptive in purpose and not merely punitive. Grace and forgiveness must always be operative. The restoration of the offending brother must be of equal importance with the purity of the church. Anything less cannot be squared with our Lord and the New Testament.<sup>7</sup>

What, then, is our safeguard against this “neo-Pharisaic legalism”? How shall we keep ourselves from reviving the ugly, destructive, and soul-destroying legalisms that have haunted every age of the church?

The answer, quite simply, is grief.

The church that is not grieving over the lost and the wayward has no business fooling with church discipline. Better to disobey the Lord’s teachings on church discipline outright than to pervert it into something diabolical. On the one hand, we simply ignore. On the other, we make that which God has called “good” into something hideous. In either case, we are in gross error, and we may plan on answering to God for either our avoidance or our perversion of this ministry. We may be thankful, then, that there is another way: we can grieve.

When we discipline out of loving grief for the person who has fallen, church discipline cannot become a legalistic hammer. When we see it as a desperate ministry of love and mercy, as a hard call for a wayward brother or sister to come home, we will not let it become a mechanical, wooden machine of personality-execution and spiritual oppression.

Church discipline demands tears. It demands sorrow. It demands broken hearts. Either it has these things or it is not discipline at all. So the church that grieves can call the wayward home by means of church discipline. Grief, founded on love and fueled by conviction, is the very heart of church discipline.

<sup>7</sup> Garrett, *Baptist Church Discipline*, 25.

## It's Not Over Until It's Over

Any person who believes that church discipline has ended when a church votes to remove a person from the fellowship has seriously misunderstood the nature of this ministry. Not only has church discipline *not* ended at this point, it is truly at the most undesirable point for it to end!

Let us be abundantly clear on this fact: corrective church discipline is not over until the wayward brother or sister is home. It doesn't matter if they left under excommunication ten years ago. The case is still open, the call is still there, and the church should still desire the person's restoration.

We begin to understand, then, that church discipline is not like building a shed. It's not always quick and easy. It is relational, and, like all things relational, it involves the giving of ourselves to another. It only ends with restoration. There is no statute of limitations on church discipline.

This is not an effort to be hard or obsessive. Rather, church discipline deals with spiritual truths and matters of the soul. It is not a matter of paperwork and files, of motions, votes, and discussions. On the contrary, it is a matter of a body that has been broken and needs to be made whole.

We all long for the end of corrective discipline. It is an unpleasant business. But there is only one way: restoration on the basis of repentance. So let us be careful in our fast-food society of wanting to throw a drive-through on everything we do. If the church is to be the church, she must commit herself once more to the wonderful and unending joy of walking together.

## Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound!

Some speak of church discipline as if it were incompatible with grace. "Our church believes in grace," a person might say. "We would never consider something like church discipline." The problem with this is that it reveals a tremendous misunderstanding of grace. Grace means mercy freely given to an undeserving person. Grace is at the very heart of the gospel! But grace does *not* mean overlooking a friend with a gun to their head. On the contrary, that is cruelty. To abandon church discipline in the name of grace is to commit the double error of distorting the true nature of church discipline and distorting the meaning of grace.

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In truth, every step of church discipline is bathed in grace. After all, church discipline, rightly done, is merely a means of calling a person back to grace! Grace is not thrust upon those who do not desire it against their will. Grace is freely given and freely received! Church discipline is merely the call of grace to a person who has turned their back on it. It is a church's efforts to convince a person that they need to receive again God's grace.

When we listen to people today talk about grace, it sometimes seems like they see grace as a license that you can put on any action to shield it from scrutiny. Some put the banner of grace over the person who is destroying themselves and others and forbid anybody to say that they are in error. But this is perverse.

Grace is for those who turn. It is not to be worn like a "Media Pass" at a football game. It does not get you a quick ticket to whatever sideline you want to go to. No, grace is for those who have fallen on their knees and are calling out for mercy. Grace cannot be received by those whose fists are clenched in defiance.

So how does the church show grace? By turning a blind eye? By leaving well enough alone? By pretending it doesn't know? By refusing to step into the occasionally chaotic realm of true relationships? No, that's not how it shows grace. That's how it shows cowardice and a desire to avoid closeness.

Churches show grace by calling on those who have abandoned it to return again to its shores. Churches that are big on grace are churches that are big on seeing that people stay in a place to enjoy the benefits and peace of grace. Church discipline is about grace, for only church discipline dares to tell another that they are turning away from grace with their lives.

## Celebration!

What is the church to do when a person under discipline comes home?

What did the shepherd do after he found his lost and wandering sheep?

"And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." (Luke 15:6-7)

*The Returning Prodigal, the Rejoicing Church*

What did the woman do after she found her lost coin?

“And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” (Luke 15:9–10)

What did the father do when his prodigal son returned to him?

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.” (Luke 15:20–24)

They all celebrated! Church discipline begins with grief and it is hoped that it can end with joy! To be sure, we must have an accurate understanding of what this celebration means. “Note here that the call to *celebration* is contingent upon the demand for *cleansing*,” writes J.W. MacGorman, “No church can celebrate the deliverance from sin that Christ has made possible through His sacrificial death on the cross while sheltering or condoning evil in its midst. It is no less true today than it was in ancient Corinth.”<sup>8</sup> But once the threat of evil in the midst of the church has been dealt with, then celebration is not only necessary, it is natural.

There is no hesitancy when it comes to celebrating one who has come home. On the contrary, there is urgency! There is a bold reassurance that their forgiveness is complete. Churches that would institute some type of probationary period for a returning brother, or that would hold up numerous hoops through which that person would have to jump, do not truly understand biblical restoration.<sup>9</sup> The return of a

<sup>8</sup> MacGorman, “The Discipline of the Church,” 79.

<sup>9</sup> This may not necessarily mean the immediate reassuming of previous ministry positions in the case of ministers who are placed under church discipline. The question of reinstating pastors, for instance, who fall into gross, habitual sin is a proverbial “tough nut.” We will content ourselves, for the purposes of this study, with this observation: there are times, given the nature and dynamics involved in certain ministry positions, in which a period of time is necessary to rebuild the bridges of trust between the offending

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prodigal member to his or her church, just as the return of the prodigal son in the Bible, calls for grand overtures of love and grace.

To be sure, genuine repentance is necessary, but once one has repented before the Lord, why would we dare say, “No!” to them? To be sure, the nature of some actions might have lingering consequences that need to be dealt with, but if one who has rebelled comes home, why would we dare shut a door in his or her face? To be sure, habitual sins might reasonably need ongoing counseling or other safeguards to help the person in their battle, but if one has recognized his or her captivity why would we dare refuse that person?

Have joy. Celebrate, when one who was lost becomes found!

member and the congregation. We do not see this as conflicting with immediate forgiveness and restoration. There are times when restoration, while immediate in its pronouncement and intentions, must be worked out in a period of reconstruction.



## Conclusion

“Once the congregation takes this commission seriously, it will find that it will grow and mature in its knowledge of and relationship with Christ. It will experience in a new way what it means to be the church in the world.” —David Schroeder<sup>1</sup>

**T**HERE IS a weakness in much of our speaking and thinking about church discipline. The tone of our discussion somehow sounds too reticent, too miserable, too afraid. This is understandable. Admonition, discipline, and accountability are difficult issues, and, as has been said, grief and heartbreak are at the very core of corrective church discipline. But let us consider something else: the great privilege of our high calling!

My brother and my sister in Christ, is it not a joy to be obedient, even when our obedience brings tears? Is it not a great privilege to be able to do the work of God on Earth? Is it not a high calling to be a steward of this grand responsibility? Is it not a wonder that He has called upon us to hold each other with such high regard, to love each other with such steadfast love, and to care for each other with such unbending care? Is it not merciful of our great God that He would entrust to us the means of calling each other back from the brink? Is it not holy of our great God that He would desire the purity of His bride? Is it not protective of our great God that He would equip us to combat Satan’s influence in the church? Is it not foreshadowing of our great God that He would even now give us a means to anticipate that wondrous day when He will “present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:27).

Is this discussion awful? No. It is serious. It is painful even. But it is also wonderful. We are discussing the things of God!

*Is it not an honor to be the church?* If so, then let us be the church. Let us be the church that Christ founded, the church that Christ is

<sup>1</sup> Schroeder, “Discerning What Is Bound: Loosing and Binding,” 73.

*Conclusion*

building, and the church that Christ instructed. Let us be the church indwelt and filled with the Holy Spirit. Let us be the church that loves with the love of Jesus.

To be able to love with the love of Jesus. That is truly a great privilege and a high calling. We dare settle for nothing less.

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