

Biblical Thinking for Building Healthy Churches

Winter 2017

# IX 9Marks Journal

## CHURCH DISCIPLINE



MEDICINE FOR THE BODY



Biblical Thinking for Building Healthy Churches



# 9Marks Journal

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# Editor's Note



Jonathan Leeman

If you have children, you have probably felt that leaden thud in the gut—“ugh”—when you realize it’s time to discipline one of your kids. You let her explain any extenuating circumstances. You have second-guessed whether your instructions were clear. But now the facts overtake you like a foul stench: she is guilty. Your precious, heart-enrapturing little Cinderella flagrantly disobeyed you. Or lied. Or nailed her sister in the face. And now love requires you to discipline her. Ugh.

For the LORD disciplines the one He loves,  
just as a father, the son he delights in. (Prov. 3:12)

The one who will not use the rod hates his son,  
but the one who loves him disciplines him diligently (Prov. 13:24)

Discipline your children, for in that there is hope;  
do not be a willing party to their death. (Prov. 19:18, NIV)

Striking verses, no? Failing to discipline our children is hating them. It is forsaking hope for them. It is being a willing party to their death. Love disciplines. And it’s our job as parents to discipline. We do it for love and life.

For a command is a lamp, teaching is a light, and corrective discipline is the way to life. (Prov. 6:23)

Just as it is a parent's job to discipline his or her children, so it is your job, Christian, to participate in the discipline of your church. Did you know that? This is as basic to being a Christian and a church member as it is for a parent to discipline a child. It is part and parcel of following Jesus: "If your brother sins against you, go and rebuke him in private. (Matt. 18:15).

This may be hard to hear. Maybe Matthew 18 elicits an "ugh" of its own. But this is what it means to be a true friend.

The wounds of a friend are trustworthy, but the kisses of an enemy are excessive. Prov. 27:6

What is church discipline? The broad answer is to say it is correcting sin in the church. The final answer is removing someone from membership in the church for unrepentant sin—sin they refuse to let go of.

Why do we discipline? The Bible, that counter-intuitive and counter-cultural book of ours, contests that God disciplines us "for our benefit, so that we can share His holiness." It continues: "No discipline seems enjoyable at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it yields the fruit of peace and righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Heb. 12:10b-11).

Do you want the fruit of peace and righteousness for yourself and your church? If not, never mind discipline.

Lord, happy is the man You discipline and teach from Your law. (Psalm 94:12)

I remember the first time I took a pair of trimmers to a rose bush in my front yard. It didn't feel right. It made me nervous. "Am I really supposed to cut these branches off? Won't this hurt



the plant?” But I went ahead and trimmed—on faith. A year later—lo and behold—the bush overflowed with blossoms.

So we discipline for the sake of love, holiness, health, and growth. But we also discipline for the sake of our witness. What good is salt if it loses its saltiness, Jesus asks, or a light that’s hidden under a basket (Matt. 5:13-16)?

Western culture increasingly pushes against Christianity. Nominal Christianity is withering. Christians need to know who “they” are. And the world needs to know who “we” are. Discipline helps to draw the line between church and world. It clarifies the witness of the church and its power as a distinct society and counter culture.

The purpose of this Journal is to help you grab hold of this job responsibility of yours, whether you are a church leader or member. The practice can be abused. Move very slowly. Take every case on its own. Be sure to only act in love. Err toward grace. But move forward in obedience, knowing that all the ways of the Lord are righteous and good.

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This has been adapted from the introduction of Jonathan Leeman, *Understanding Church Discipline* (Nashville: B&H, 2016), 1-2,4,5,8.

# A Biblical Theology of Church Discipline



**Bobby Jamieson**

**T**o some Christians, church discipline seems to contradict the whole shape of the Bible's story. Isn't the gospel all about Jesus welcoming tax collectors and sinners? Aren't we turning back the clock and putting believers back under the law if we start excluding people from the church for certain sins?

In this piece I want to uproot that intuition as gently and fully as I can, by showing how God's discipline of his people is an integral part of the Bible's entire storyline, from Eden to the new creation. We will consider this story in six steps, and close with three conclusions.

## **1. EDEN AND POINTS EAST**

In the beginning, God's people were right where God wanted them, and were just what God wanted them to be. God created Adam and Eve. He brought her to him and united them. He put them in the garden he had made for them. He walked with them and talked with them face to face (Gen 1:26–28; 2:4–25).

But it didn't last. Adam and Eve sinned, and God imposed on them a capital sentence and banished them. He drove them away

east, out of his garden and away from his presence (Gen 3:1–24).

East of Eden, all of humanity sank so deep into sin that God destroyed the entire race by flood, save only one family (Gen 6–8). After the flood and humanity's new beginning, humanity's collective pride vaulted so high that God scrambled their tongues and scattered them over the earth (Gen 10–11).

## **2. DISCIPLINE IN THE DESERT**

To begin to set things right, God called Abram. God covenanted to him a nation and a name, promising to bless all nations through him (Gen 12:1–3). And God kept his promises, though not always in the most obvious ways. He did grant Abram offspring and multiply those offspring, warranting Abram's new name, Abraham (Gen 17:5). But then he sent those offspring famine, and then to Egypt, and finally let them slip into slavery. At this point, they'd been so fruitful and multiplied so greatly that they filled the land (Exod 1:7).

When God freed Abraham's offspring from slavery, he judged their captors with unrelenting strictness. He plagued their land, executed their firstborn, and drowned their army (Exod 3–14). But then God's people themselves needed discipline. Despite the staggering works God performed before their eyes, they disbelieved and complained. They refused to trust that the God who broke their chains could fill their stomachs (Exod 16–17; Num 11). They refused to trust that the God who bested Pharaoh could handle the enemies before them (Num 14).

So God taught them and rebuked them. He provided for them and punished them. He gave them bread that would spoil if hoarded, so they would learn to trust him for daily bread (Exod 16:13–30). He condemned that generation to die in the wilderness, allowing only their children to enter the Promised Land—the very children the Israelites thought God couldn't protect from their enemies (Num 14:13–38).

On the cusp of the Promised Land, Moses summed up the lessons they were meant to draw from this divine discipline in the Exodus and the desert:

You shall therefore love the Lord your God and keep his charge, his statutes, his rules, and his commandments always. And consider today (since I am not speaking to your children who have not known or seen it), consider the discipline of the Lord your God, his greatness, his mighty hand and his outstretched arm, his signs and his deeds that he did in Egypt to Pharaoh the king of Egypt and to all his land, and what he did to the army of Egypt, to their horses and to their chariots, how he made the water of the Red Sea flow over them as they pursued after you, and how the Lord has destroyed them to this day, and what he did to you in the wilderness, until you came to this place, and what he did to Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, son of Reuben, how the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households, their tents, and every living thing that followed them, in the midst of all Israel. For your eyes have seen all the great work of the Lord that he did. (Deut 11:1–7)

God disciplined both Egypt and Israel, but note the difference: God's discipline for Egypt resulted in their destruction; his discipline for Israel resulted in their instruction. God punished individuals in Israel to purge evil from Israel. God also punished the whole people, but through that discipline he taught them to trust and obey. God spoke to them his ten commandments to “discipline” them, to conform their lives to his will (Deut 4:36). He tested them in the wilderness, providing for them as only he could, so they would trust only in him (Deut 8:1–4). The lesson? “Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, the Lord your God disciplines you” (Deut 8:5).

God disciplines his people so that they learn not to rely on themselves and run after other gods, but to seek all and find all in him.

### 3. THE MOSAIC COVENANT: DISCIPLINE TO AVERT DESTRUCTION

God led his people to the Promised Land, drove out their enemies, and established them there. In the covenant God made with Israel through Moses at Sinai, he made them not only a people but a nation (Exod 19:5–6). He gave them a law that was meant not only to secure their obedience but to govern their society. Under the Mosaic covenant, God held Israel accountable to this law, and he authorized the human government of Israel to inflict fitting sanctions for covenant defection. False prophets were to be put to death (Deut 13:1–5), as were idolaters (Deut 13:6–18; 17:2–7). God’s goal in authorizing the people to execute idolaters was to “purge the evil [or “evil person”] from your midst.” God ordered Israel to surgically remove the cancer of idolatry so that it would not metastasize and prove fatal.

In the Mosaic covenant God also employed other means of discipline. If the people failed to obey, he threatened disease and defeat (Lev 26:14–17). If they failed to repent, God promised the further “discipline” of blighting their land and breaking their strength (Lev 26:18–20). And other, more horrific consequences lay in wait if the people persisted in rebellion (Lev 26:21–39; see “discipline” in vv. 23, 28).

All this discipline was designed to avert the disaster of exile. God disciplined his people in order to offer them a lifeline out of a still greater judgment.

To sum up where Israel stood under the Mosaic covenant: God gathered his people together. He brought them to a place he had prepared for them and planted them there (Exod 15:17). He dwelled among them in his tabernacle, and later in his temple (Exod 29:45–46; 40:34–38; 1 Kgs 8:10–12). He walked among them (Lev 26:12).

Sound familiar? It should. Israel was a new Adam, in a new Eden, with a new shot at obedience and lasting, intimate fellowship with God.

#### 4. EXILE: DISCIPLINE AS RETRIBUTION, FOR RESTORATION

But Israel missed their shot. Over the course of hundreds of years, over the warnings of dozens of prophets, the people persistently rejected God and refused his will. So God eventually enforced the sanctions of the covenant, first on Israel in the north, then Judah in the south (see Lev 26; Deut 28; 2 Kgs 17:1–23; 25:1–21).

Because Israel refused to trust and worship and obey God, God imposed on them a kind of capital sentence (Lev 28:38; Deut 4:27). He banished them. He drove them away east, out of his land and away from his presence.

The prophet Jeremiah describes the punishment of exile as discipline. This punishment is retributive, yes, but it also aims at recovery:

Then fear not, O Jacob my servant, declares the Lord, nor be dismayed, O Israel; for behold, I will save you from far away, and your offspring from the land of their captivity. Jacob shall return and have quiet and ease, and none shall make him afraid. For I am with you to save you, declares the Lord; I will make a full end of all the nations among whom I scattered you, but of you I will not make a full end. I will discipline you in just measure, and I will by no means leave you unpunished. (Jer 30:10–11; cf. 46:28)

Israel and Judah's exile is punishment, just and measured (cf. Hos 7:12; 10:10). Yet its aim is not destruction, but restoration. God will devastate the nations that hosted his scattered people, but his own people still have this hope: "I am with you to save you." Like God cast down Pharaoh yet both redeemed and chastised his people, here God promises destruction for the nations yet deliverance through discipline for his people.

Ephraim cries out in exile, "You have disciplined me, and I was disciplined, like an untrained calf; bring me back that I may be restored, for you are the Lord my God" (Jer 31:18). And God will answer that prayer.

God promises full and final destruction to the nations that disregard him. Yet God disciplines his people with the devastation of exile in order to restore them again to fellowship with him, to repentance, to holiness. But how?

## **5. NEW COVENANT, NEW POWER, NEW DISCIPLINE**

The Mosaic covenant demanded obedience but did not provide the power to obey. The new covenant would:

Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. (Jer 31:31–34; cf. 32:37–41; Isa 54:13; Ezek 11:16–20; 36:22–36; 37:15–28; 39:25–29)

What the law couldn’t do, the new covenant will: ensure the wholehearted obedience of God’s whole people.

How is this new covenant enacted? Through the atoning death of Christ, the resurrection of Christ, and the life-giving gift of the Spirit at Pentecost. The new covenant gives new power. God’s people are now a new people, reborn and indwelt by the empowering Holy Spirit. God’s people now genuinely and characteristically, albeit imperfectly, reflect God’s glory to the nations.

This new covenant with new power also comes with new discipline. God still disciplines his people through persecution and hard providences, weaning us from the world and tightening our

grip on his promises (Heb 12:5–11). God still chastises his people for sin, even to the point of inflicting death (Acts 5:1–11; 1 Cor 11:27–31). The purpose, as before, is that by heeding God’s discipline now we will ultimately escape judgment then: “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).

But he also provides new means for preserving his people’s purity. In addition to the internal supply of the Spirit, God provides the external support of the church’s accountability. Now, those who claim to be God’s people but whose lives contradict that claim are warned, entreated, pleaded with, and, if necessary, excluded from membership in the church (Matt 18:15–17; 1 Cor 5:1–13; 2 Cor 2:5–8; Tit 3:10–11).

Under the new covenant, idolaters aren’t executed but excluded. The church wields the power of the keys, not the sword. And, as with God’s discipline of Israel in the desert, in their land, and in the exile, the goal is not destruction but repentance and restoration. Paul does call exclusion from the church a “punishment” (2 Cor 2:6). But this punishment aims at transformation: renewed repentance and therefore renewed fellowship with God and God’s people.

We should not miss the connection between the newness of the covenant and this new form of discipline. The New Testament teaching on church discipline presupposes that the members of the church profess faith in Christ, and that their lives typically bear out that claim. When someone’s life fundamentally undermines their profession, the New Testament answer isn’t, “Well, the church is a mixed body. Believers and unbelievers will be in the church together, like the wheat and the tares, until the final judgment.”

The field in which believers and unbelievers remain together until judgment is not the church but the world (Matt 13:38). Church discipline doesn’t simply protect the purity of



the church; it *presupposes* the purity of the church. That is, the New Testament's teaching on discipline presupposes that the church is to be composed of those who credibly profess faith in Christ: those who say they trust in Jesus and whose lives, to the best of our ability to discern, confirm rather than contradict that claim.

## **6. CONSUMMATION: NO MORE DISCIPLINE, BUT A FINAL DIVIDE**

Until Christ returns, we live in the in-between. God's people are empowered by his new covenant to trust his promises and obey his commands—but not yet perfectly. God's churches should be composed of people who credibly confess Christ—and yet some professors prove false (1 John 2:19).

But on that final day, God's people will need no more discipline. We will see Christ face to face, and we will be like him (1 John 3:1–2). God's discipline of his people now—whether the formative discipline of teaching and training, the corrective discipline of rebuke or exclusion, or the providential discipline of persecution and hardship—all aims at our conformity to Christ, which will one day be perfected. God's discipline of his people throughout history has always aimed at their restoration and transformation, and one day that transformation will be complete.

But on that day God will also enact a final division. He will effect an irreversible exclusion. Just as Adam and Eve were banished from Eden, just as Israel was exiled from their land, so all who do not trust in and follow Christ, all who persist in sin, will be excluded from God's new creation, forever:

Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood. (Rev 22:14–15)

## LESSONS LEARNED

What does this story of God's disciplinary dealings with his people teach us? Of many lessons that could be drawn I select three.

First, on this side of final judgment, every act of divine discipline is intended to reform and renew his people. This side of final judgment, no judgment is final.

Throughout God's long and twisting history with his often-wayward people, he has often deployed discipline in an effort to stun us out of sinful stupor. The goal every time was repentance and spiritual renovation. Similarly, when we exclude someone from church membership we are not pronouncing their final fate, but warning them of what it could be. To exclude someone from membership is not to pronounce their final condemnation but to seek to avert it. When we exclude someone, we must continue to work and pray and hope for their repentance, renewal, and restoration.

Second, even in disciplining his people, God distinguishes between them and the world. In Jeremiah God promises the nations a full end; he promises his people a new beginning. That's a temporal forecast of eternal destinies. All who oppose God will meet the "full end" of eternal punishment; all who trust in Christ will experience the eternal new beginning of the new creation.

Third, God "disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness" (Heb 12:10). God's discipline is good for us; it aims at a good far greater than what we often settle for. We constantly need reminding that hard providences do not mean God has a hard heart. If God uses hard measures, we should look to our hard hearts as the targets, not accuse God. Only a jackhammer will split concrete.

Love is not always nice, kindness is not always indulgent, and tolerance is not always a virtue. "No" is often the most loving thing a parent or pastor or church can say. And if that no goes unheeded, then it is not cruel but loving to follow God's own example,

and obey God's own instructions, by disciplining someone now, in hope that they may be saved on the last day.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Bobby Jamieson is an associate pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC. He is the author, most recently, of Understanding Baptism and Understanding the Lord's Supper.*

# A Testimony of Restoration

John Jones

**M**any years ago, I was excommunicated from my church, and I'm thankful to God for it.

You probably wouldn't expect to hear that reaction. But if the church had not honored God's Word, I'm afraid to even wonder what the state of my life—and more importantly, my soul—might be in today. My removal from church membership directly led to God's restorative work in my life. So now, I'm a cheerleader for church discipline. As you consider my testimony, be encouraged to appropriately exercise loving, biblical church discipline when a fellow church member is no longer walking in step with his confession.

## MY STORY

My story is like so many others. I grew up in a faithful Christian home. I attended a gospel-preaching church. In every way, I looked and acted the part of a good Christian kid. I confessed my faith in Christ at an early age and was baptized a few years later. I was a popular member of our youth group and played on the worship team. I even would have affirmed the gospel and my own conversion.

But in a state of cognitive dissonance that only the deception of sin can explain, I was simultaneously pursuing pleasures of the world. What started as an obsession with pornography and masturbation led to increasing degrees of immorality and fornication.

But the double life was exhausting, and eventually my transgressions were exposed. At first, I manufactured remorse when I was confronted by other Christians in an attempt to convince them that I was repentant. But as I continued to pursue my lusts, my heart became more hardened, and I no longer bothered to cover my sin. My hypocritical life was known to many members of my church, and I didn't want or know how to change.

Here I was, claiming to be a Christian, faithfully attending church, and continually fornicating with little hope of repentance. The elders, many of whom had known me for most of my life, patiently loved and pleaded with me. But I continued to embrace my sin, and my church made the hard, biblical decision purge the evil person from their flock (1 Cr 5:13).

The next six or seven years were sad. I tried to find my satisfaction in the approval of others and physical pleasure. However, after my father died, I accepted an invitation to attend a gospel-centered church where membership and discipline were practiced with fidelity.

When I started attending this new church I was quick to disclose the fact that I was still technically under discipline at my old church. The elders of both churches conferred and my new church agreed to take on the stewardship of my soul. Both churches modeled Paul's exhortation in 2 Corinthians 13 to aim for restoration. I was reading my Bible, attending service, and trying to pray. I moved in with two brothers from the church.

Still, I never thought I would be able to say no to the sin that had ruled my thoughts and body for so long. Even when it had been months since my last dalliance, I was terrified. I thought it was inevitable that I would return to my sins of the past. I've never been addicted to drugs or drink, but the compelling urge to be intimate with a woman, any woman, was a cruel master. And yet, for the first time in a decade, I didn't have sex. Weeks of celibacy turned into months—and I trudged ahead. As though against my

will, I stayed on track. That narrow path was hedged by loving friends and elders. Even after 10 months of outward repentance, I wasn't convinced my heart had actually changed. I *claimed* that I wanted to love Christ more than my sin but years of falling taught me to doubt myself.

My eventual membership interview was a turning point. The presiding elder listened to my rambling, defeatist story and then had a simple observation that still rings in my ears: "Brother, what you're describing is called repentance. I'm going to recommend you for membership." These words fell with the effect of a grace bomb. Doubts diminished, and hope flooded my heart. I could see so clearly my efforts that would never save me. In fact, God had been at work in spite of me.

By God's grace, I continued to turn from my sin and my new church affirmed fruit in keeping with repentance. I was voted into membership and began to serve and thrive. A few months later, I was invited to my old church to share on a Sunday morning. I'll never forget the moment that I was publicly invited to share the Lord's Supper with them. This was a picture of the restoration Paul celebrates in 2 Corinthians.

My experience of church discipline leaves me with a few observations and exhortations:

### **For Church Leaders**

Church leaders, honor God's Word. Expel the immoral brother. You have to give an account (Heb. 13:17) and you do not want to be a shepherd who allows a wolf to live and feed among your flock. Teach your congregation to regard God's Word as holy, regardless of how uncomfortable or unpopular church discipline is. Show them that in order to have gospel unity, we must also be willing to part with those who are walking in ways that bring dishonor to Christ.

## For Church Members

Church members, honor God's Word. Expel the immoral brother. But don't wash your hands of them.

I remember a moment not long after my excommunication. I ran into my friend Rebecca in the middle of the student union. We had been friends in church for years. Youth group, retreats, college ministry, we were old pals. But this time was different. Instead of a typically familiar conversation, she asked me about my soul. Somehow, she graciously and quickly broached questions about my belief in the gospel of Jesus Christ. About repenting of my sin. It was strange. But it was loving and biblical. I felt loved by her even as I recognized the nature of our friendship was fundamentally different because I was no longer her "brother."

## PRACTICAL MATTERS

Briefly, here's how to love someone under discipline:

- Speak the truth.
- Be clear that your love for the friend has not diminished, but that love is now focused on one thing: the preservation of their eternal soul.
- Invite them to dinner but not to parties.
- Don't call them "brother" or "sister."
- Welcome them, but make it clear that only believers "belong"

Looking back, it strikes me how church discipline benefits not only the unrepentant believer, but also the faithful church. It's good for Christians when the Word of God is revered and obeyed, even when it's hard and unpopular.

By nature, Christ's true church is for blood-bought followers of Christ. Even though church discipline has been painted as heartless and divisive, it actually cultivates unity because it clarifies who's on what "team."

To this day, I don't know if I was a backslidden convert or if I was a deceived non-Christian.. Either way, church discipline served to expose my hypocrisy. It forced me to deal with the claims of Christ. God used membership and exclusion to show me that life in the world without God is miserable, and my only hope is Christ.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

John Jones is, by God's grace, faithfully walking with the Lord.



# A Historical Survey of Church Discipline



Jeremy Kimble

**T**hroughout church history the practice of church discipline has been largely affirmed, though at certain periods, only sporadically applied.<sup>1</sup> In looking at historical trajectories one can note the ways in which the church remained faithful to biblical teaching on the subject or veered sharply away from such principles. As such, while history is not ultimately determinative for understanding and applying discipline in our churches—Scripture possesses that role—history offers both helpful and harmful models from which to learn.

## PATRISTIC ERA (AD 100–500)

While disciplinary action within the church had its controversial and contentious moments, it appears that for the first several centuries the church consistently sought to apply disciplinary measures according to the biblical witness. Indeed, the early church disciplined members both for the propagation of false doctrine and lack of moral purity. It was common practice in the early days of the church to announce disciplinary judgments on Sunday in

<sup>1</sup> Portions of this article come from Jeremy M. Kimble, *40 Questions About Church Membership and Discipline* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2017), 167–72.

the context of the church service. Tertullian, describing this event, states, “For judgment is passed, and it carries great weight, as it must among men certain that God sees them; and it is a notable foretaste of judgment to come, if any man has so sinned to be banished from all share in our prayer, our assembly, and all holy intercourse.”<sup>2</sup> Tertullian, as well as other church fathers,<sup>3</sup> recognized the seriousness of the disciplinary process.

Most churches recognized two kinds of repentance: a one-time repentance accompanied by faith in Jesus Christ for salvation and a continual repentance of sin throughout one’s life.<sup>4</sup> Christians who sinned had to confess their sin before the church if they wished to be restored to fellowship. Eventually, by the third and fourth centuries, restoration to the church became rather difficult. Undergoing “penitential discipline,” those seeking repentance were first required to come to the place where they met for church services, but not enter the place of worship. They were to beg for the prayers of those going inside, and after a period of time they were allowed inside to listen to the service in a designated area. The penitents would eventually be allowed to remain during the entire service, though without partaking of communion. Only after these steps were taken could an individual be restored to full membership. This kind of penitential action, along with the continued peace the church experienced after the reign of Constantine, contributed to a shift in ecclesial discipline.

## MEDIEVAL ERA (AD 500–1500)

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2 Tertullian, *Apology*, 39.4, ed. Gerald Henry Rendall and Walter Charles Alan Kerr, trans. T. R. Glover, Loeb Classical Library 250 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 175.

3 See, for example, Augustine, “Letter 185.3.13, The Correction of the Donatists,” in Augustine, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn: New City, 1990), 187; Clement of Rome, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 1:20; Justin Martyr, *The First Apology*, in *ibid.*, 1:185.

4 See Gregory A. Wills, “A Historical Analysis of Church Discipline,” in *Those Who Must Give an Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline*, ed. John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2012), 132–39.

Church discipline was a difficult practice to keep consistently due to the many challenges the church faced, but dedication to its implementation was strong at first. According to Greg Wills, however, the practice of church discipline eventually declined in the early centuries of the church. He claims,

After the fourth century, the system of public confession, exclusion, and penitential rigor fell into disuse. Nectarius, bishop of Constantinople from 381 to 398, apparently played an important role in the change. Since the third century Constantinople and other churches had adopted the practice of appointing a special presbyter in charge of administering the church's penitential discipline. When the public discipline of a deacon at Constantinople for sexual immorality brought considerable public scandal upon the church, Nectarius abolished the office of the penitential presbyter and largely abandoned efforts to administer church discipline among the laity. Nectarius did not repudiate the strict public discipline in principle but he abandoned it in practice. . . . The process of strict public discipline withered in the Latin-speaking churches of the West just as it did in the churches of the Greek-speaking East. In its place emerged a system of private confession and individual penance.<sup>5</sup>

This eventual emphasis on penance transformed church discipline largely into a private affair between the priest and layperson, and as such the communal role of church discipline dissipated. Thus, church discipline was largely dispelled, and instead private confession and works of merit were common fare in the days leading up to the Reformation.

## **REFORMATION ERA (AD 1500-1750)**

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5 Wills, "A Historical Analysis of Church Discipline," 140. See also Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.19, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Second Series, vol. 2 (New York: Christian Publishing Company, 1886), 128; Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, 7.16, in *ibid.*, 386–387.

Martin Luther, a key figure in the Reformation, is known in the early part of his career as one who had experienced the weight of the penitential system and thus questioned much of its validity, particularly in the issuing of indulgences. His criticism of these practices as substitutes for true repentance and contrition was a catalyst in precipitating the Reformation. This also allowed for a more biblical comprehension and application of church discipline by Luther, as well as others such as John Calvin, the Anabaptists, and later figures like Jonathan Edwards.

Luther wrote three key documents regarding the nature and practice of church discipline.<sup>6</sup> From these three documents one can observe his commitment to ecclesial discipline. Unlike the Catholic Church, Luther advocated for the keys of the kingdom to be exercised by the church, rather than by the Pope solely. While seeking to correct what he deemed as errors made by the Catholic Church, Luther maintained the seriousness of the ban and emphasized that those who come under discipline were warned of potential eschatological judgment should they not repent. Repentance, however, was the point for Luther, as he viewed church discipline as restorative in nature. He also intended for this measure of discipline to serve as a deterrent to sin for others, in hopes that they would persevere in their faith.

John Calvin also advocated for ecclesial discipline in Geneva. He asserted three aims in the use of discipline in his *Institutes*.<sup>7</sup> First, discipline was necessary in local churches so that the high honor of God's holy name would not be blasphemed, especially at the Lord's Supper. Second, Calvin advocated for discipline in the church to preserve purity and holiness amongst God's people.

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6 Martin Luther, "A Sermon on the Ban," in *Church and Ministry I*, LW 39, ed. Eric W. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 3–22; idem, "The Keys," in *Church and Ministry II*, LW 40, ed. Helmut H. Lehman (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958), 321–77; idem, "On the Councils and the Church," in *Church and Ministry III*, LW 41, ed. Eric W. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 3–178.

7 For an overview of the details of Calvin's views of discipline, see especially John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 4.12.1–28.

And finally, Calvin viewed discipline as a corrective so that those under discipline might come to a place of repentance. While much more detail regarding Calvin's views could be elucidated, these are the main purposes for discipline, as he saw it.

The Anabaptists, contemporaries to Luther and Calvin, also protested the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church, particularly regarding penance and indulgences, but went further in seeking to implement what they believed to be biblical reforms. They believed the church, not the state, should handle matters of ecclesial discipline, and they tightly tied their view of discipline to their convictions regarding the ordinances and regenerate church membership. With their clear ecclesiology, it could be argued that Anabaptists most successfully and consistently upheld discipline in the church and saw the greatest degree of application by their followers. Balthasar Hubmaier, a well-known Anabaptist, wrote several key works on this matter.<sup>8</sup>

One final figure to consider from this era is Jonathan Edwards, an eighteenth-century pastor in Northampton, Massachusetts. Dealing with one particular case in his own church, Edwards detailed the purposes of church discipline.

*First.* That the church may be kept pure and God's ordinances not defiled. This end is mentioned in the context: that the other members themselves may not be defiled. 'Tis necessary that they thus bear a testimony against sin. *Second.* That others may be deterred from wickedness. That others may fear. *Third.* That they may be reclaimed, [that their] souls may be saved. [After] other, more gentle, means have been used in vain, then we are to use severe means to bring 'em to conviction and shame and humiliation, by being rejected and avoided by the church, treated with disrespect, disowned by God,

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Balthasar Hubmaier, "On Fraternal Admonition," in *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism*, ed. H. Wayne Pipkin and John Howard Yoder, Classics of the Radical Reformation 5 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989), 372–85; idem, "On the Christian Ban," in *ibid.*, 409–25.

delivered to Satan, his being made the instrument of chastising them. This is the last means, with concomitant admonitions, that the church is to use for the reclaiming those members of the church that become visibly wicked; which, if it be'n't effectual, what is next to be expected is destruction without remedy.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, Edwards has the good of the church and of the one under discipline in mind when he considers and practices excommunication. He notes the themes of purity, warning, and reclamation of the erring individual. Edwards's hope in this difficult practice of church discipline is that sinners would be turned from the error of their ways while under judgment and repent, and that others may be deterred from sin and persevere in their faith.

## **MODERN ERA (1750–PRESENT)**

One can note the trajectory of a strong commitment to discipline in the patristic era, giving way to a lax view that dealt more in terms of individual penance. The Reformation brought the biblical teaching of church discipline back to its rightful place. In the early modern era, a strong emphasis on discipline continued. However, in many denominations, as Enlightenment convictions ascended, including a keen sense of individualism and the inherent goodness of humanity, the practice of discipline generally slipped into decline.<sup>10</sup> Decline in the practice of church discipline can also be directly tied to a lax attitude in the realm of regenerate church membership. With neither the desire nor the process to identify church members, maintain current rolls, and closely guard the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper, it's no surprise this

9 Jonathan Edwards, "The Means and Ends of Excommunication," in *Sermons and Discourses, 1739–1742*, ed. Harry S. Stout and Nathan O. Hatch, WJE 22 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 78–79.

10 For a specific portrayal of the decline of discipline among Southern Baptist Churches, for example, see Stephen M. Haines, "Southern Baptist Church Discipline, 1880–1939," *Baptist History and Heritage* 20, no. 2 (1985): 14–27; Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785–1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

decline happened. While seemingly mundane, these labors all relate directly to church membership and discipline, and thus are essential to the health of the church. There were exceptions to this general trend in the decline of discipline, but in comparison to the rest of church history, the last two centuries showed a significant decrease.

However, this trend of the decline of church discipline has turned around significantly in recent years. A number of factors can be attributed to this resurgence, but there has been a definite renaissance in teaching about and practicing church discipline (as well as regenerate church membership). It must be noted that the ministry of Capitol Hill Baptist Church and 9Marks has played a significant role in this resurgence.<sup>11</sup> Also, a number of well-written works on ecclesiology have been penned in recent years, pointing believers back to the importance of this doctrine for the Christian life.<sup>12</sup> It is because of such a recovery we can be hope-filled as we look to the future of the church. History has much to teach us, and we will do well to follow the New Testament pattern of taking church discipline seriously for the health of our local churches and the glory of God in our midst.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeremy M. Kimble is Assistant Professor of Theological Studies at Cedarville University in Cedarville, Ohio, and a member of Grace Baptist Church.

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11 See especially Mark Dever, *9 Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004).

12 Many could be named, but see for example, Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, Foundation in Evangelical Theology (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012); John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005).

# Why Calvin Thought Church Discipline is Essential to the Health of the Church



Matthew Tuininga

Soon after John Calvin was appointed as a pastor of the Genevan church, having only recently arrived as a refugee fleeing persecution in his native France, one of his first actions was to petition the city government for the establishment of church discipline. It was a hard sell. In no other Reformed city had the civil magistrates given clergy such authority. The reformers Zwingli and Bullinger maintained that overseeing the moral lives of Christians was a task for the civil magistrate. Most Reformed theologians and magistrates associated ecclesiastical discipline with papal tyranny.

Calvin acknowledged that the Roman church had grievously abused discipline by wielding it tyrannically to accomplish all manner of church goals. To prevent this evil, he called the magistrates “to ordain and elect certain persons of good life and witness from among the faithful” to shepherd the people on behalf of the



church as a whole. These elders, along with the pastors, would bind themselves to the procedure laid out by Jesus in Matthew 18, by which professing Christians were to be held accountable to one another in the life of Christian discipleship.

### **CALVIN AND HIS CONSISTORY**

While the city council granted the pastors' request in principle, it soon became evident that there was little agreement in practice. Calvin found himself banished from the city. Within three years, however, the city asked him to come back. Though he was reluctant, he agreed to return under the condition that church discipline be established. The city relented, though nearly 15 years of conflict remained before the consistory—the body of pastors and elders charged with the ministry of church discipline—could rest secure from political interference.

Calvin's consistory disciplined members of the Genevan church for a wide range of sins including idolatry, violence, sexual immorality, marital problems, and interpersonal conflict. They disciplined men who abused their wives and children, sons who refused to care for their aging parents, landowners who exploited their tenants, doctors who failed to care properly for the sick, merchants who practiced price gouging or sought to prevent economic competition, and employers who exploited or mistreated their workers. While many people were brought before the consistory, temporarily barred from the Lord's Supper, and required to express public repentance or reconciliation, very few were permanently excommunicated (i.e., banished from participation in the sacraments).

### **DISCIPLINE: AN EXTENSION OF THE WORD**

Calvin viewed discipline as a necessary extension of the

church's ministry of word and sacrament. While he did not identify it as a *mark* of the church, he did insist that discipline is essential to the spiritual *health* of a church, without which a church cannot long endure.

Discipline was necessary to preserve the honor of God and the integrity of the Lord's Supper, to protect the members of the church from being led astray by other members, and to call those who were straying to repentance.

### **DISCIPLINE & THE LORD'S SUPPER**

At the heart of Calvin's passion for the exercise of church discipline was his concern that the Lord's Supper not devolve into a mere ceremony of hypocrisy. The Lord's Supper is not simply a celebration of the forgiveness of sins, he argued, but a communion of brothers and sisters in "love, peace, and concord." Calvin again: "None of the brethren can be injured, despised, rejected, abused, or in any way offended by us, without at the same time injuring, despising, and abusing Christ by the wrongs we do; that we cannot disagree with our brethren without at the same time disagreeing with Christ; that we cannot love Christ without loving him in the brethren; that we ought to take the same care of our brethren's bodies as we take of our own; for they are members of our body; and that, as no part of our body is touched by any feeling of pain which is not spread among all the rest, so we ought not to allow a brother to be affected by any evil, without being touched with compassion for him" (*Institutes*, 4.17.38).

In short, when Christians celebrated the Lord's Supper while exploiting, oppressing, or abusing one another, they made a mockery of it.

### **DISCIPLINE: SPIRITUAL, NOT POLITICAL**

Calvin insisted that discipline is not an expression of political power but of spiritual power. It is not coercive but pastoral.

To be sure, when wielded arbitrarily, church discipline devolved into mere tyranny. But Calvin insisted that a person could only be disciplined for conduct that was clearly and manifestly sinful according to Scripture, and only as long as the person refused to repent of that conduct.

Furthermore, where sin was so obvious, notorious, and persistent, the elders and pastors of a church exercising church discipline would merely be proclaiming the truth of God's Word as it applied to an unrepentant individual. As such, like preaching, discipline was one of what Jesus called the keys of the kingdom of heaven, opening the kingdom to the repentant through the proclamation of the gospel and closing it to those who refused to repent.

As Calvin puts it: "The Lord testifies that such judgment by believers is nothing but the proclamation of his own sentence, and that whatever they have done on earth is ratified in heaven. For they have the word of God with which to condemn the perverse; they have the word with which to receive the repentant into grace. They cannot err or disagree with God's judgment, for they judge solely according to God's law, which is no uncertain or earthly opinion but God's holy will and heavenly oracle" (*Institutes*, 4.11.2).

## **DISCIPLINE & THE GOAL OF SALVATION**

What was crucial for Calvin was that the ultimate purpose of discipline is not vengeance but salvation. He rejected the practices of ongoing penance or ritual humiliation, warning that "zeal for discipline" often leads to "pharisaical rigor" that "hurries on the miserable offender to ruin, instead of curing him" (his commentary on 2 Corinthians 2:11). As soon as a disciplined person repented, he or she was to be immediately welcomed into full communion.

When conducted graciously and according to Christ's word, discipline ensured that the church did not proclaim a false and

empty gospel of cheap grace but a gospel with power to draw human beings into genuine communion with God and one another. Calvin: “[E]xcommunication does not tend to drive men from the Lord’s flock but rather to bring them back when wandering and going astray” (Commentary on 2 Thessalonians 3:15).

For Calvin, discipline expressed the love of a father who does not allow his children to go astray to their own hurt or death but uses restraint and correction where necessary to ensure their flourishing. It’s necessary to the health and survival of a church because it ensures that the religion we practice is not the religion of hypocrisy but of grace that leads to righteousness and life.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Matthew J. Tuininga is the assistant professor of moral theology at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He is the author of Calvin’s Political Theology and the Public Engagement of the Church: Christ’s Two Kingdoms (Cambridge University Press, 2017). He blogs at [www.matthewtuininga.wordpress.com](http://www.matthewtuininga.wordpress.com).*

# A Step-by-Step Primer for Church Discipline



Geoff Chang

Church discipline makes sense when you understand what the church is. If the church were a building, then discipline might involve better property management. If the church were just an institution, then discipline might be about organizational restructuring. If the church were merely a weekly show, then discipline might require better event planning.

While those things play into our experience of church, the New Testament is clear that the church is fundamentally a people, a congregation marked by their commitment to Christ and to one another. Therefore, when the Bible talks about church discipline, it involves the spiritual care of *people*. It's the process by which members of a church guard one another from the deceitfulness of sin and uphold the truth of the gospel.

Church discipline largely takes place informally, as Christians speak the truth in love to one another and point each other to the grace of the gospel. However, in this fallen world, there will be times when informal discipline will not be enough; there will be times when those who belong to the church refuse to repent and continue down the path of sin. It's for these situations that Jesus provides instructions for church discipline:

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that “every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.” If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. (Matt. 18:15–17)

Every single step of this process is an expression of Christ’s loving and wise rule over his church, and therefore every step ought to be followed.

### **STEP #1: HAVE A PRIVATE CONVERSATION.**

It all begins with private confrontation (Matt. 18:15). As mentioned above, this happens regularly in the life of the church in all kinds of contexts. The member who knows of unrepentant sin is to go to the one who has sinned and, in love, call him to repentance. Rather than fostering gossip and division, Jesus commands his people to speak privately first, “just between the two of [them].” And in God’s grace, so often this is the means by which God works repentance among his people.

But what happens if that initial confrontation is rejected? What does it look like once we get beyond that informal step? Though details will vary depending on the church and the circumstances, below are five steps that church leaders should generally take in the process of church discipline:

### **STEP #2: TAKE ONE OR TWO OTHERS ALONG (MATT. 18:16).**

The next step widens the circle of involvement, while not yet involving the church as a whole. Jesus instructs the members to take one or two others along to confront the one caught in sin. If the elders have already been notified, it might be appropriate for one of the elders to go along with the member making the charge. It’s also worth considering whether there might be another member of the church—perhaps a trusted friend—to speak into his life. Ideally,

this step would happen in a personal meeting, but in certain situations, a phone call, voicemail, or perhaps even written correspondence may have to suffice.

Those involved up to this point should evaluate the response of the one caught in sin and determine if there's evidence of genuine, lasting repentance. Of course, the goal isn't perfection but rather a heart that's broken over sin and clinging to Christ, evidenced by humility and a willingness to follow wise counsel. In many cases, this step may take weeks, or months, or even longer. Often, it's here that God brings about repentance and reconciliation. But in some cases, it will become evident to those involved that there's no genuine repentance and, in obedience to Christ's instructions, the church should proceed to the next step.

### **STEP #3: INVOLVE LEADERS OR ELDERS BY INFORMING THEM OF THE SITUATION.**

Somewhere around step 2, maybe before, maybe after, a Christian should consider involving a few elders or other leaders of the church (like a small group leader). This might begin with a conversation, but eventually the elders should have a way of formally receiving charges (for example, the elders might require that the charges be made in writing or they might invite the person to meet with one or two of them). Jesus does not speak of the involvement of elders in Matthew 18, but given the responsibility over the church that the apostles assign to them in other passages, it makes sense that elders would be involved in the process of church discipline at some point. In more difficult situations, the elders will need to be involved sooner rather than later.

Here, the leadership has the responsibility to consider the nature of the charges. Is the sin concrete and serious enough to warrant taking the next steps of church discipline? Are there extenuating circumstances that the member might not know? Are there other members who might better speak to the one caught

in sin? How do we care for those who have been wronged? The leaders of the church will need to think through these and other important questions, and prayerfully shepherd those involved in the following steps.

#### **STEP #4: GIVE ADEQUATE NOTICE TO THE ONE CAUGHT IN SIN.**

Before making the matter public, the elders will want to make formal contact with the one caught in sin. This is especially in cases where there has been minimal contact with the elders, as when communication has been rejected or most of the information has been communicated secondhand. The goal of this contact is to explain the charges and express their love and concern. If the person remains unrepentant, then it's necessary to notify them of when this will be shared with the congregation. Given the need for clarity and precision in communication, the initial contact should probably be some form of written communication, followed up by a phone call or a personal meeting.

If none of the elders have met with the one being confronted, they should make clear that they want a chance to hear his side of the story. If meeting with all the elders is too intimidating, they can offer to send a smaller group of the elders. The goal in this step is to give the unrepentant member a chance to meet with the leaders personally and make sure there is no misunderstanding.

If after this step it's clear there's no misunderstanding and there's still no repentance, then the elders should proceed to the next step.

#### **STEP #5: TELL IT TO THE CHURCH (MATT. 18:17).**

At this point, Jesus commands the member to “tell it to the church.” Though “church” has been interpreted in many different ways, Jesus seems to understand the church to be a gathering of disciples in his name (Matt. 18:20, see 1 Cor. 5:4). The church is



the congregation. In this step, the elders will communicate what's taken place to the congregation.

Given the sensitive nature, it makes sense that the elders would present this at a regularly scheduled members' meeting, rather than a public worship service. The elders need to think through carefully what and how much to communicate about to the congregation. They want to communicate enough so that the congregation understands what has taken place and the need for church discipline. However, they should not communicate so much that it makes returning upon repentance difficult because of public shame, embarrasses family members, or causes weaker sheep to stumble.

Given the need for carefulness and precision, it's generally wise for the elders to craft a letter to be read at the meeting, rather than trying to explain it extemporaneously. In some cases, the elders may want to involve the member who initially brought the charges in crafting the letter. After the elders read the letter, they should allow for questions from the congregation, and invite people to talk to them privately if they have further questions. In more difficult cases, the elders might consider holding a forum for members of the church to bring questions.

Having been apprised of the situation, the congregation should be instructed to pray. Those in the church who have a personal relationship with the one caught in sin should be encouraged to reach out prayerfully. The elders will want to give the congregation enough time to participate in the process of confrontation.

This period may be the time until the next members' meeting, or longer if needed. However, in certain cases, the church may need to act more quickly, perhaps even right away, if the church feels confident about a lack of repentance (1 Cor. 5:1-5).

#### **STEP #6: REMOVE THE UNREPENTANT PERSON FROM MEMBERSHIP (MATT. 18:17).**

After following all the previous steps, if the individual continues

to refuse to listen “even to the church,” then the elders should update the congregation on the situation, and bring a formal motion for the congregation to remove him from the membership of the church. If the vote passes, then the church needs to understand that they no longer affirm this person’s profession of faith. They are to relate to him no longer as one who belongs to the church but to the world, like “a pagan or tax collector.”

Following the removal, the elders should instruct the congregation on how to interact with the individual. As someone under discipline, the goal is *not* to shun him or to cut off all relationship. Rather, members should relate to him as someone in need of the gospel, yet who is self-deceived. In that sense, interactions are more complex than relating with non-Christian friends who know they are non-Christians. Any interactions should be used to call the person to repentance and to remind him of the hope of the gospel. Members should encourage him to attend the services of the church and to sit under the preaching of the Word. And yet, at the same time, they must avoid relating to him casually as if nothing has changed.

After the meeting, the elders should send a written communication to the individual, informing him of the act of discipline, and expressing their love for him and their desire for his repentance and restoration. The elders should also continue to follow up with the congregation in different settings (Sunday School classes, small groups, etc) to see if there are any concerns or questions about what has taken place. Church discipline can be a difficult time in the life of a church, and yet it can also be used by God to bring about maturity and growth. Elders should shepherd the congregation wisely both throughout the process and after.

## CONCLUSION

Church discipline would be easier if the church wasn’t made up

of people. But Jesus didn't come for buildings or institutions or events. He came to save a people for himself, sinners like you and me.

It's this reality that makes church discipline a wonderful gift. The church is a gathering of those who through repentance and faith have received the hope of Christ's salvation and are helping each other persevere in that hope. To neglect church discipline is to fail to love one another in that way. So, as we labor to follow Christ's instructions for the purity of the church, we cling to the hope of the gospel both for ourselves and for those around us.

#### **AUTHOR'S NOTE:**

*For more detail on these questions, consult Jonathan Leeman's Church Discipline: How the Church Protects the Name of Jesus.*

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Geoff Chang is a pastor of Hinson Baptist Church in Portland, Oregon.

# Why Church Discipline Goes Awry—And How to Avoid It



Jonathan Leeman

**C**hurches should work hard against the possibility of abusive church discipline, and we should act quickly against it. In my writing and speaking on this topic, most of the churches I address suffer from complacency and laxity in discipline. A few, however, approach it too stridently.

## **CHARACTERISTICS AND CAUSES OF CHURCHES THAT ABUSE DISCIPLINE**

Anecdotally, most (or all?) of the unfortunate cases of church discipline I have heard about in recent years have occurred in non-congregational churches, where the elders are free to impose their will on the congregation. I'm sure congregational churches have failed in this area as well. But the mere fact that a group of elders or pastors in a congregational church must sit in a small elders' meeting before the big congregational meeting, scratch their heads, and ask themselves, "How are we going to explain this to the church?" tends by itself to moderate their decision-making. It

slows them down. A group of well-meaning but tired elders might get hijacked by a bad strain of thinking in their meeting at 10 p.m. on a Thursday night. But Sunday's congregational meeting will serve as a useful reality check.

In my observations, wrong approaches to discipline can occur in large churches when the sheer size impels them to rely on regulated processes instead of personal pastoral care. The need for economies of scale is met with consistent and tidy procedures and precise codes of conduct. Treating each case uniquely and thoughtfully becomes difficult. Yet just as a wise parent treats each child individually, so wise discipline treats each member individually. From personal experience, I can say that disciplining and training my children is slow, inefficient work that consumes hours. And so is the work of disciplining and training our fellow members.

Abuse seems more common among churches and church leaders who are uncomfortable with theological and practical tensions, tensions that I believe are inevitable in a fallen world. A fundamentalist mindset, I've remarked in other writings, prefers things in black and white. It takes one principle and makes it ultimate, instead of letting that one principle be tempered by competing principles. For instance, there's a tension between not gossiping and getting outside counsel before confronting someone.

An egregious example of the fundamentalist error occurs in churches with a strong concept of male headship and parental authority. These are biblical principles that I entirely affirm. Yet I've been angered to hear of churches where the elders, in the name of respecting headship, condone or at least overlook reports of husbands who are harsh, severe, and demanding with their wives. They've let one principle become too dominant, uninformed by other biblical principles.

In general, you should be leery of joining a church where the leaders play favorites, punish those who disagree, have a temper, use the silent treatment, must always have the last word, cannot

be wrong, emphasize external conformity, are consistently dogmatic on both the big and small issues, seldom if ever admit they are wrong, have difficulty giving authority to others, only promote their closest friends or family members, and generally need control. You can probably think of more yellow flags. You might even look for a few in yourself. Personally, I like to have the last word. That's not a good sign for my use of authority. I better trust the authority of the man who is willing to give another person the last word. He's less concerned about appearances or forcing outcomes. Speaking of which . . .

It's commonplace that abusive authority roots in pride. But another way of putting this, I think, is to say that abusive authority and discipline root in "fear of man." A person who fears God more than anything is less likely to abuse God's subjects. But a person who fears man cares too much about appearances. He or she needs control over the façade of things.

The most tyrannical rulers in the home, state, or church are the insecure and fearful ones. Please do not place me under a leader who lives in fear.

A man or a church who says, "He must increase, but I must decrease," is far less likely to abuse authority and discipline. The man or the church who is always trying to "increase" is more likely to abuse it.

Perhaps the most vivid and damnable form of a spiritual abuse on the pages of the New Testament, besides the false teachers who would mislead a flock, is the legalistic religion of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. They impose laws where God imposes none. They condemn others for the sake of their own gain. They lord it over others so that they might be honored. And finally they are willing to kill God himself for the sake of maintaining control.

## **CULTIVATING THE RIGHT CULTURE**

The best way to avoid an abusive church culture where discipline

is pursued harshly is nothing other than working to cultivate a gospel culture.

I once had the opportunity to address a number of the elders of a church who handled a terribly complex case of church discipline piously but poorly. The media had picked up on the story, and a number of writers, Christian and non-Christian, charged the church with abusiveness. In fact, I know the church and its leaders, and it is a gospel-centered and healthy church. The brothers made a mistake in complicated situation, a mistake for which they quickly apologized and altered course.

Good churches will make mistakes, just like good parents and good presidents will make mistakes. Name one leader famous leader in the Bible who didn't—Abraham? Moses? David? Solomon? Jesus knows this. And he knew it when he granted each of these institutions meditating authority. The fact that even our best leaders make mistakes helps us to put our final hope in Christ, the only mistake-less leader.

So let's assume that mistakes, even sinful mistakes, will happen. The question is, what's the best environment for absorbing the harmful effects of those mistakes, like a paper towel absorbing grape juice in a mid-day television commercial? And what's the best environment for preventing mistakes? The answer must be, a gospel environment. The brothers in the church just mentioned were able to apologize and reverse course as quickly as they did because they know and live by the gospel. They have no image to defend, no life or decision-making pattern to justify. They are justified in Christ, which frees them to apologize quickly.

And, ironically, I think the healthier church just might be the one where the leaders make mistakes and apologize for them than the church where the leaders seem to never make mistakes and never apologize.

This is a lesson I have had to learn in parenting. Suppose you have two parents: the parent who maintains excellent external appearan-

ces and so never perceives his or her need to ask for forgiveness, and the parent who sins, both against the children and otherwise, but who is quick to ask for forgiveness and live transparently in the gospel. Which is the better parent? Which parent will do a better job of shepherding his or her children down a gospel path?

In the early years of parenting, I was more the first parent. I generally kept up good appearances, and I found it difficult to apologize or admit mistakes to my daughters when my conscience suggested I might. After all, I wanted to give them a good model to look up to. I didn't want to spoil their image of me by admitting weakness. And at times—tragically—they said that they thought I never sinned. What an anti-gospel lesson I had been teaching! Oh, girls, if you only knew the pride and selfishness of your father's heart.

Churches and their leaders, too, must learn to live transparently in the gospel, meaning we confess our sins to one another and rejoice in the grace that God gives. The witness of these embassies of Christ's kingdom does not depend upon our moral perfection. How attractive is a building full of Pharisees? Rather, our international witness depends upon our gospel love and forgiveness amidst the sin that remains.

I give you a new command: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you must also 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)

What does it mean to love one another as Christ has loved us? It means loving mercifully and forgivingly. And of course doing that means confessing our sin to one another so that we can be forgiven. This is how you live transparently in the gospel. And it's this kind of corporate life together that shows the world that we are his disciples.

Notice then who it is that churches excommunicate: they excommunicate the Pharisees. Pharisees are the ones who never ac-



knowledge their sin as sin, and so never repent of it. Of course I'm using the word Pharisees a little more broadly than you might be accustomed to. You're probably thinking of the Pharisees whom we read about in the Gospels who kept the law "perfectly." What I'm saying here is, they are of the same breed as the so-called wayward sinner who refuses to let go of his sin. Neither is poor in spirit. Neither will confess. Both will justify themselves to the very end. Both, in other words, are legalists. And the successful legalist and the failed legalist are both legalists, both "Pharisees." Church discipline, done wisely, is nothing other than a device for striking against Phariseeism in the church. Not only do the Pharisees refuse to see the planks in their own eyes, they refuse to let others point out the specks.

Ironically, it's the people who eschew all church discipline that might be the biggest Pharisees of all, because they cannot imagine themselves being self-deceived or in need of correction: "How dare you call out the speck in my eye!" The poor in spirit, the meek, and the lovers of the gospel, however, both acknowledge their planks and welcome those who might point out the specks.

Don't rebuke a mocker, or he will hate you; rebuke a wise man, and he will love you. (Prov. 9:8)

Which home or church would you prefer to live in—the one where everyone is "perfect"? Or the one where people confess their sin and live trusting in the vicarious righteousness of Christ? If the latter, do you take the initiative, not in correcting others, but in confessing your sin? If not, could it be that *you* are the one who is more likely to pursue church discipline abusively?

Moving forward, know that confession is a necessary prerequisite for correction, and that the person who cannot be corrected probably doesn't know how to confess either.

#### **EDITOR'S NOTE:**

*This article is an excerpt from Jonathan Leeman's book *Understan-**

ding Church Discipline, *from the forthcoming B&H Church Basics series. Reprinted by permission*

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Jonathan Leeman is the Editorial Director of 9Marks, and an elder at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D. C. You can find him on Twitter at @JonathanDLeeman.

# Putting People Before Policies in Church Discipline



Nate Pickowicz

In recent years, the number of churches committed to exercising biblical church discipline seems to be increasing. This is a good thing! However, in the process of implementing policies and revising bylaws, it's easy to forget that *people* are both involved and affected. In the end, if we don't put God's *people* before our church *policies*, we may do irreparable harm to the body of Christ.

## THE HEART OF THE MATTER: LOVING RESTORATION

While there are several passages having to do with corrective church discipline, the most prominent is Matthew 18:15–17. The Lord Jesus provides a process of confronting sin with a view to godly restoration. Often seen as “the church discipline passage,” Matthew 18 outlines four steps<sup>13</sup> toward the restoration of a sinning brother or sister. However, the context of the passage helps us understand more than the *process* of engaging in church discipline; we see the *heart* behind it all.

<sup>13</sup> In his helpful book, *Handbook of Church Discipline*, Jay E. Adams notes that there are five steps in church discipline, the first being “self-discipline.” (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 27–30.

It's important to remember that Jesus' words on church discipline come immediately after the Parable of the Lost Sheep (vv. 10–14). This is the set-up for what will come in verses 15–17. In the parable, the Lord describes a shepherd leaving his 99 sheep in search for the one that strayed. The story ends on a high note, with the sheep being recovered, and the shepherd rejoicing. Jesus concludes: "So it is not the will of My Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish" (v. 14). His very next words bring the parable to life in the realm of the church. The four steps listed in verses 15–17 are seated in the context of lost sheep who are now restored.

However, some churches have failed to understand the true purpose of church discipline. It's not meant to be a three-strike rule for expelling sinful members; rather, it's a process of increasing severity with a view to recovery. John MacArthur notes,

The goal of church discipline is not to throw people out, embarrass them, be self-righteous, play God, or exercise authority and power in some unbiblical manner. The purpose of church discipline is to bring people back into a pure relationship with God and with others in the assembly.<sup>14</sup>

To add the words of Stephen Davey,

[T]he main objective of church discipline is the restoration of the unrepentant believer to the blessed, productive lifestyle of godly obedience and intimacy with Jesus Christ.<sup>15</sup>

If we continually remind ourselves of Jesus' goal for church discipline, then our policies and procedures will reflect that end.

## PEOPLE OVER POLICIES

Once a church commits itself to obeying Scripture's teaching on

<sup>14</sup> John MacArthur, *The Master's Plan for the Church* (Chicago: Moody, 2008), 267.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Davey, *In Pursuit of Prodigals: A Primer on Church Discipline and Reconciliation* (The Woodlands, TX: Kress, 2010), 12.

church discipline, it can become very easy to see Matthew 18 as “just another process.” But as we seek to honor Christ in church discipline, we ought to be mindful of individuals *before* adhering to a specific process or policy.

Churches have policies to help guide them along, but we’re not slaves to them. That was the Pharisees’ problem in Matthew 23. While adhering to the minutiae of their rules, they woefully neglected the weightier matters in dealing with people: showing justice, mercy, and faithfulness (v. 23). And so, in considering how we might elevate believers over bylaws, allow me to offer a few exhortations:

***First, speak the truth in love.***

In dealing with church discipline, honesty is paramount. We aren’t afforded the luxury of being diplomatic when it comes to drawing attention to sin in believers. In fact, minimizing or deflecting will only make the problem worse; sin will go unrepented of and will surely compound. However, in calling for recognition, repentance, and subsequent restoration, we ought to be “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15; cf. v. 25; Col. 3:9). Our tactic should be above-board honesty wrapped in grace and compassion.

***Second, be humble and gentle.***

In Paul’s letter to the churches in Galatia, he gives instruction for how to restore a sinning brother. He exhorts them: “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness” (Gal. 6:1). How do we measure who is spiritual? How gentle should we be? Paul doesn’t say. However, the imperative remains. We’re to humble ourselves, and work to gently restore the sinning brother or sister. He then adds, “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (v. 2). In the end, spiritually mature believers working to admonish and restore those in sin is a blessed task;

it fulfills “the law of Christ,” which is “the law of love” (cf. John 15:12; Rom. 13:10).

***Third, treat others the way you would want to be treated.***

It’s easy to look down on others who are caught in sinful patterns without realizing that we, too, have been freed from slavery to sin (Rom. 6:15–22; 1 Cor. 6:9–11). Even in the realm of church discipline, we should still consider others as more important than ourselves (Phil. 2:3), even placing ourselves in their shoes. How would I respond if I were being treated this way? In considering others, we ought to be treating them as we would want to be treated (Matt. 6:12). Remember, it’s not just about the witness and reputation of the church, but also about the spiritual wellbeing of the individual. Minister to them in such a way that they’ll thank you in the end (Prov. 27:6).

***Fourth, be patient.***

While strict adherence to church policies might dictate timelines, we ought to remember that not everyone responds and reacts in the same way. John MacArthur says, “How long should the church keep encouraging someone to repent? Perhaps until you sense that his or her heart is getting harder and harder, and they absolutely refuse to stop sinning. The Spirit of God has to give you that sort of subjective wisdom. I think it’s usually a shorter time than we often think, because God wants a response.”<sup>16</sup> Not all spiritual fruit—including repentance—grows at the same pace. Without dragging your feet in discipline, resolve to be patient with others (1 Cor. 13:4; Gal. 5:22; Eph. 4:2).

**“GO GET HIM IN LOVE!”**

What’s the hopeful outcome of putting people before policies? The following is a true story told by a church member:

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<sup>16</sup> MacArthur, *The Master’s Plan for the Church*, 274.

One Sunday morning, our pastor asked the members to stay after service to discuss an issue. The elders assembled on the stage and told us they had been dealing with a matter of church discipline. Sam, a long standing member of the church, had “gone outside of his marriage.”

The elders read Matthew 18 and described the steps they had taken to try and persuade Sam to repent and return to his wife. They explained how they had met with Sam one-on-one numerous times, counseling him with Scripture, but to no avail. They told us they had warned Sam that his infidelity would be brought before the church and that he had gotten angry and threatened legal action.

As they addressed us all, we were counseled not to gossip about this matter, but to “*go get him in love.*” The elders stressed that our concern was for his repentance and restoration.

The congregation was in shock. However, we asked what could be done to help Sam’s wife and what should we do to if we run into Sam. Regarding Sam, we were told to love him, pray for him, and call him to repentance for the sake of his soul. Regarding Sam’s wife, those who were close to her were told to comfort her. Above all, we were all asked to pray for her. There was little said as the church dispersed, just sadness and, on our part, amazement at how well the situation was handled. It was clear the elders were unified and had done all they could do, and that they were following Scripture.

Many months passed. Sam’s wife continued to come to church. We all prayed. Then one Sunday, at the end of the service, we were asked to stay. The elders assembled on the stage and Sam came out and joined them. They explained that Sam had repented, reconciled with his wife, and was being restored to the congregation. Sam stepped forward and conveyed his sorrow in having sinned against God and his wife. He asked for our forgiveness and thanked us for our prayers and love. The

church erupted in applause and tears of joy. A sheep who had been lost was found and returned to the flock.

While Sam could not return to all of his ministries immediately, the elders continued to counsel Sam and his wife. There was no gossip, no prying into details, just rejoicing. It's been 10 years since the Sunday we were told, and today, Sam and his wife are happily married, and continue to attend the same church.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Nate Pickowicz is the pastor of Harvest Bible Church in Gilman-ton Iron Works, New Hampshire. He is the author of *Reviving New England: The Key to Revitalizing Post-Christian America* and *Why We're Protestant: An Introduction to the Five Solas of the Reformation*. He also serves as the general editor for the American Puritans Series. He and his wife, Jessica, have two children.



# Church Discipline Starts with *You*



Whitney Woollard

**W**hat comes to mind when you think of church discipline? If you're like me, you immediately go to high-profile cases that necessitate robust measures from church leaders. You think of the "big sins" and how the "big guns" respond (i.e., elders/pastors or church leaders).

Church discipline may involve the whole church and its leaders. But church discipline actually starts, and by God's grace ends, with you and me. "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you" (Matt. 18:15, NIV).

In love, you confront sin in hopes of growing together in godliness. And you do it over and over again throughout the ordinary course of discipleship, much like a grassroots movement. Plain and simple, right?

Yes and no. It is simple but it *feels* so scary! I struggle with fear when confronting someone. I question and focus too much on myself (Who am *I* to judge them? Or, what if they reject *me*?). In fact, I'd do almost anything to get out of an uncomfortable and inconvenient conversation.

But Jesus' teaching is clear—church discipline starts with you. So, we need to take it seriously and work toward cultivating an at-

mosphere in which discipline is a healthy part of the discipleship process.

I once heard an elder say that we need to put the “disciple” back into discipline. Amen! The emphasis of discipline should always be on growing as disciples of Jesus. As we put the proper weight on discipleship, discipline will become less “scary” and more natural. That said, here are five things I’ve learned in my discipling relationships that can apply broadly to both men and women.

## **1. BUILD MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS**

You need to be in real relationship with others in your local church, close enough that you come across others’ sin from time to time. You don’t need to be “besties” with everyone or become an extrovert. But you know each other’s stories, lives, and families. You spend time together, share meals, enter into one another’s joys and sorrows. You do all the stuff of life that makes for a meaningful relationship, including fighting sin together. Within this context, a gentle rebuke to or from a friend isn’t so earth-shattering. It’s the norm. But it starts with developing a real relationship with at least one person from your church.

## **2. SET THE TONE**

Set a redemptive tone for the entire relationship. Talk about Jesus...a lot! Meditate on his grace together, read the Bible together, talk about how the Spirit is working in your life. Choose to be transparent and vulnerable, confessing your own sin and temptations on a regular basis. Ask for discipline from those close to you. Let them know your chief desire is to become more like Jesus and you need their help to do this. My husband and I set this tone for our marriage over a decade ago. We committed to each other’s sanctification above all else, which means we’re routinely disciplining one another. Just last week I asked Neal about his priorities because I hadn’t seen him in the Word. Yesterday he called me out

on wanting accolades for an idea that I didn't need. Do we always love this? No way! But do we love Jesus more than we did ten years ago? Absolutely. That's the *gift* of discipline.

### 3. MAKE FREQUENT DEPOSITS

This is relationship 101. Make ten life-giving deposits for every one withdrawal. Look for evidences of grace and growth in other people's lives and then go out of your way to share it with them. Have you noticed your friend being softer toward his kids? Or a young mother fighting for time in the Word? If so, tell them! Build relational capital by giving consistent encouragement so when the time comes to make a "discipline withdrawal" it won't empty their account. I'm much more quick to receive instruction from someone I know is in my corner and unconditionally for me. When *that* person says, "Whitney, you've been too critical lately" I'm all ears. Frequent deposits tell that person you love them and are for them.

### 4. ASK GOOD QUESTIONS (AND LISTEN!)

One good question goes further than ten accusations. Questions help you better understand the situation and disarm the other person's defense mechanism, making the conversation more fruitful. Better to come alongside a sister and say, "I've noticed you've been talking *about* so-and-so lately. Why haven't you gone *to* her?" than to sit her down and say, "You are a total gossip and here are the ten times I've caught you doing it." By asking a question you're not only illuminating the sin of gossip, you're drawing out reasons why she might be prone to gossip, like insecurity or fear of man, which also needs to be addressed in the context of loving discipleship. It's like a "twofer." You confront them but also seek to understand where they are and what they need in this season of life. Leading with questions rather than pre-determined judgments allows for the complexity of life and the layers of a situation.

## 5. CHOOSE YOUR BATTLES

We want to exercise discipline on a regular basis, but let's not become a community that's always hunting for sin. I've been a part of a sin-hunting church, and it's disheartening, not to mention weird! I felt like I had to fabricate sin just to fit in. This isn't the heart of Matthew 18. True discipleship is knowing when to confront sin and when to cover it. Peter reminds us that above all we're to love each other deeply "because love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Pet. 4:8). Some days you'll see sin and just need to keep quiet until another time. This doesn't mean we cover up sin (sin is *always* to be taken seriously); rather, we cover over it to protect and love that person. If you call out every sin you see, it will create a culture of anxiety, as people break beneath the burden of your scrutiny. So, with much prayer and Spirit-led wisdom, choose your battles.

Incorporating these points will go a long way in building a culture where discipline is a natural piece of discipleship. However, because this is a touchy topic, I'd be remiss if I didn't address one more area.

## CHECK YOURSELF BEFORE YOU WRECK YOURSELF—AND YOUR RELATIONSHIPS!

The cat's out of the bag—I'm a hip hop, rap, and R&B junkie. I was raised on it and the funk still runs deep in my veins. So when I think about concluding thoughts on church discipline, I can't help but hear Ice Cube's timeless words, "Check yo self before you wreck yo self." There's wisdom here. When left to our own devices, humans have a way of wrecking a good thing.

Church discipline is no different. It can become a good thing gone bad if we're not careful. That's why we need to put personal "checks" in place so that we don't end up doing more damage than discipleship. No one will approach discipline "perfectly," but we can all do it *humbly*, checking ourselves to make sure we're loving, serving, and protecting the person(s) involved:

### **1. Check your life.**

You won't be sinless before you confront someone else's sin, but don't ignore the plank in your own eye. Ask yourself, "Is there any hidden or habitual sin in my life I need to confess?" You may have to begin the confrontation by confessing *your sin* before addressing the other person's.

### **2. Check your heart.**

Discipline is motivated by genuine love for someone. If you're more concerned about "winning" the conversation or proving your point, then you don't have their best interest in mind. There's no room for personal vendettas or nursed grudges in godly confrontation. If you can't rebuke someone in love, then let someone who *can* do the rebuking.

### **3. Check your emotions.**

If you're particularly heated over an offense, I'd suggest waiting until you calm down before you confront. You don't need to be emotionless, but you want to be in control of your emotions. Often when we point out sin in the heat of our anger or frustration, we end up sinning ourselves. Better to wait and collect yourself than to say something you can't take back.

### **4. Check your words.**

Words matter. Careless words spoken, even with good intentions, can cause a world of hurt. Your words should be clear and firm, while also being gentle and restorative. If you need to jot a few things down beforehand to make sure you're not too casual or too abrasive, by all means, do it!

### **5. Check your goal.**

The goal of discipline is *always* repentance, restoration, and reconciliation, if necessary. Like Jesus, who laid down his life so you

could be reconciled to the Father, you're seeking the welfare of another, even if it comes at your own expense. Always ask, "Why am I doing this?" If it's about anything other than repentance and restoration, wait and pray until your goals are in check.

With all of those "helps" in hand, I urge you to be bold in church discipline as it's a vital means of grace. A loving church will be a disciplining church. And the burden of that discipline rests primarily us "ordinary Christians" who make up the discipleship community. May we love one another enough to confront sin and call each other to repentance so we can move toward Jesus together.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Whitney Woollard earned her M.A. from Western Seminary, where she's currently pursuing further theological training. She is a speaker and a writer for Gospel Centered Discipleship and the YouVersion Bible App. She's also part of the women's ministry teaching team in her local church. She and her husband Neal live in Portland, Oregon, where they are members of Hinson Baptist Church.

# Teaching Church Discipline in a Church Plant



John Onwuchekwa

**S**in doesn't ruin churches. Unconfessed and unaddressed sin does.

Every church is full of people in the pews that are in a lifelong struggle with sin. We will wrongly admit false converts. And true converts we get caught up in sin. Basically, your churches will have both Judases and Peters on its membership roster.

I've never been a part of a church that hasn't *needed* to practice church discipline, but I've also been a part of very few that have. All of them *should*.

Church discipline is like home exercise equipment. Everyone has it lying around. But few actually use it. When several families and I planted a church in 2015, we didn't want to let any equipment God gave us for strengthening his church go unused. Knowing that church discipline was going to be a tool we'd have to use, we wanted to make sure we were prepared to use it.

Here are five simple things we did to lay the groundwork in our church plant.

## 1. LAY THE RIGHT FOUNDATION BY CONNECTING THE GOSPEL TO THE LOCAL CHURCH.

If authentic Christianity isn't understood in terms of faith *and* repentance, church discipline will not make sense. It will feel cruel, mean, or unloving. With repentance, however, church discipline begins to make sense. It doesn't make it easy, but it begins to make sense.

Furthermore, Christians view the local church like the “g” in lasagna. No one really knows why it's there; we just know it should be there. This is why many Christians don't understand church membership is a necessary component for Christianity. Pastors must therefore connect the dots of repentance, faith, and the church for them. Then discipline begins to make sense.

**What we did:** Our first team meetings (every Wednesday night from August through December 2015) were spent in a living room unpacking the gospel. We sought to understand Christ's work for us. I taught people that faith and repentance were the means by which we take hold of that work for us. Then, we did a deep dive into the doctrine of the local church. You'd be surprised how many “one another” verses are written in the context of local church involvement.

## 2. SLOW DOWN THE MEMBERSHIP PROCESS.

I've found that you should treat your membership process like you're taking someone skydiving for the first time. If someone was skydiving for the first time, would you be comfortable throwing them out of a plane if all they did to prepare was come forward, sign a waiver, and put on a parachute? Of course not. Why? Because their lives are in your hands.

Spiritually speaking, the same is true when it comes to joining a church. People are putting their lives into the care of others, and we should make sure they know what they're getting into.

A good membership process isn't about trying to find *mature* Christians, it's about creating *informed* Christians. We should in-



form people about anything that might make them feel uncomfortable, or things Satan may use to tempt them to abandon the commitment they made to Christ.

“How is this loving? What about grace? Aren’t we supposed to forgive?” These are questions that people will ask when they encounter discipline for the first time.

Maybe they’ve read about it in the Bible, but they’ll be caught off guard because they’ve never seen it done or done well. They’ll be confused, unable to reconcile it with the call to love.

**What we did:** We were explicit about discipline and left plenty of times for Q&A in our membership class. Then we had a one-on-one meeting with the prospective members before they join, in which we’d ask how they were processing our teaching on discipline. We want to treat our membership process like leading a caravan of cars: drive slow enough to make sure everyone is keeping up; constantly check on people who are lagging behind.

### **3. PREACH HOPE NOT MERELY WHAT SHOULD HAPPEN NEXT.**

It’s easy to go to Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5 and find yourself preaching about a process—about what should happen when unrepentant sin is exposed in your church. This leaves people thinking, “Okay, first I should go to them, then take a few people with me, and then take it before the church. Got it.”

These points of process are important, but they’re not the only thing that’s important.

Matthew 18 is about *winning your brother*. That’s the goal. That’s what we’re after. We want to see him turn and repent. We pursue the process to *win our brother*.

Even 1 Corinthians 5 is laced with hope. This chapter is all about hope and joy. Hope for the straying member (as we pray he’ll meet the end of himself and turn to Jesus), and joy for those

who remain (as we see an increasingly pure church and realize the purity of the church is the priority of the church).

**What we did:** When we talked about discipline, we never talk about what *happens next* without talking about *what we hope* will happen. If you only preach process, people will lack the courage and motivation to do the hard work of discipline. But if you preach hope, it won't make the task any easier, but it will give people the courage to know their obedience isn't in vain.

#### **4. DON'T APOLOGIZE FOR HAVING TO PRACTICE DISCIPLINE.**

When we apologize for obeying God's commands, we undermine his authority, wisdom, and compassion. We try to make ourselves appear more authoritative, wise, and compassionate than he is. Now, there are plenty of things we can apologize for. We can apologize for our own negligence, laziness, miscommunication, harshness, passivity, or even cowardice in addressing sin. But we should never apologize for obeying God's commands.

This is the easiest way to get a bunch of people to begrudgingly obey, treating God as the coach who's making us run sprints. We wish we could replace him, but he's in charge so we just have to deal with it. That's not what this is at all; instead, it's an opportunity to experience the freedom of relying on God for help.

**What we did:** We constantly remind our church that God calls us to hold people *accountable*, not to hold them *hostage*.

#### **5. PRAY FOR COURAGE AND PRACTICE REPENTANCE AS A CHURCH.**

The best way to lay a foundation of church discipline is to actually practice it. No one learns to ride a bike by reading a book; they have to get on. No one learns the hope of church discipline without being obedient and trusting God for the results.

There's always going to be *more* you could have done. *We just need one more meeting. We just need to call him one more time. Someone just needs to make sure they see it this way.* There are always reasons to put off what needs to be done. Sometimes, a delay is wise and cautious, but quite often it's us holding on to our cowardice.

Pastors, lead out in practicing church discipline. Call your people to obedience in your preaching and discipling. Be courageous, and trust God for results.

**What we did:** In practicing discipline in the life of our church, we always make it a point to debrief afterwards—especially with people who seem to be the most bothered (remember, we're leading a caravan of people, and we want to go slow enough to check on the struggling). Not only do we debrief, but we pray continually to make sure we're being consistent in order to avoid perceptions of partiality. Where apparent contradictions exist, it's important to be forthright in our communication.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

John Onwuchekwa is the lead pastor of Cornerstone Church in Atlanta, Georgia. You can find him on Twitter at @JawnO.

# Too Big to Discipline?

## How a Mega-Church Practices Matthew 18



Mark Vroegop

**“W**e’re committed to being small because we believe in shepherding.”

I was meeting with some leaders of a small church as they searched for their next pastor, and I asked about their vision for ministry. Their blunt connection between size and shepherding not only struck me as an odd thing to say, I also struggled not being offended. After all, my church isn’t small, and the comment implied that large churches don’t believe in shepherding.

At one level, I get it.

There are too many examples of mega-churches who’ve given up on elders caring for the congregation at a personal level. The number of people and the scale of the ministry seem to make it impossible to know the struggles of members. In these churches, elders function more like a board of directors. The church feels corporate. Knowing the spiritual state of people is delegated to voluntary small groups.

When it comes to church discipline, there's a familiar refrain: "The mega-church is just too big to discipline."

But does it have to be this way?

I sure hope not. In fact, our church is trying to navigate our way through these challenges as we lead the 2,402 members who call College Park Church home.

In fact, we believe we're too big *not* to discipline.

How does shepherding and discipline work in a large church? It involves conviction, care and celebration.

## CONVICTION

Practicing church discipline in any church—but especially large churches—must come from a conviction about spiritual growth, the role of elders, and the authority of the Word.

Spiritual growth is a community project. While people are converted individually, their spiritual growth is connected to a community of believers that both helps and reflects their maturity. A believer is part of the body, a group of people whose spiritual vitality is interconnected. Our conviction about the Christian-life-as-community requires us to be concerned for each other's spiritual success or failure. As I've heard Mark Dever say before, "Your spiritual life is other people's business."

When it comes to elders, we believe shepherding the flock of God is their primary responsibility (1 Pet. 5:2). Elders will give an account for the souls of people (Heb. 13:17). While we value the role of governance, we don't allow the shepherding function (knowing, feeding, leading and protecting) to be pushed aside or delegated to others. Elders must be shepherds.

When it comes to practicing church discipline, this also requires a biblical conviction. We believe that Matthew 18 is a God-given mandate. Since our church's founding in the 1980s there was a strong commitment live out this text. As the church grew from 40

to 4,000, the question was never *if* we would practice discipline; it was only *how*.

Our convictions made church discipline a non-negotiable, and that's where every church must start, even mega-churches.

## CARE

Convictions, however, only get you so far. If there isn't a wise and creative process, it's easy to allow the hurdles of a large church to become barriers. Therefore, there are a number of wise steps we take.

First, we have a formal membership process and a visible church covenant. Every person must walk through our membership class, and they must be interviewed by an elder. We want to be certain they understand who we are as a church, what we believe, our vision for spiritual growth, and our commitment to practice restorative church discipline. To insure all of this is clear, every person signs a document prior to membership affirming his or her understanding of these convictions.

We also work hard to create a culture of mutual concern for one another. We talk about church discipline; we teach on it. Our small group leader training includes instruction on various levels of spiritual care. Their handbook includes a section on how Matthew 18 is applied at our church. Our small group leaders are connected to our elders through a coaching structure that provides a pathway for engaging an elder when needed.

Third, we have an active Discipline Committee. They serve as the practical stewards of our church-wide discipline process. If a two-on-one conversation has not been successful, this group of godly leaders is engaged. They meet with the parties involved and prayerfully design a path forward. They monitor the status of people who are under their care, and they make recommendations to the elders regarding next steps when needed.

Finally, our Elders receive the recommendations from the committee and vote to bring the matter to our members during a con-

gregational meeting. Our first public step is to bring the issue as a matter of prayer (“tell it to the church”). In this somber moment, we remind our members about the necessity of church discipline, share the name of the church member, and identify in general terms the nature of the concern. We invite the church to help bring about repentance in the member as we give the brother or sister time to listen.

If this proves unsuccessful, the elders pursue the final public step: a recommendation for removal (“let him be to you as a Gentile or a tax collector”). We invite the church to vote, seeking their affirmation of this final step.

This multi-step process is ongoing with people constantly moving in and out of the purview of the discipline committee. We rejoice that far more people are helped and restored in the process than removed. But the official action of removal is a part of the body life of our church.

## **CELEBRATION**

You might think it odd to include celebration in this discussion. But it’s important to remember that the goal of discipline is always restoration. Therefore, when restoration happens, we rejoice.

Some of our most memorable congregational meetings have been the restoration of previously disciplined members. As the Lord has brought repentance and as our elders have affirmed the time-tested genuineness of the person’s transformation, we invite the church to welcome the brother or sister back into the church family. There’s no vote more enthusiastic and redemptive. And I’ll often have people comment, “This is what it means to be the church.”

They’re right.

Is practicing church discipline in a mega-church hard? Absolutely! Navigating the complexity and creating a functional process is a lot of effort.

But it's possible. And it's worth it.

A church doesn't have to be small to shepherd its people. It just has to be convinced that when it comes to church discipline, size is no excuse. There is no church too big to discipline.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Mark Vroegop is the Lead Pastor of College Park Church in Indianapolis, Indiana.



# Good and Bad Excuses Not to Practice Church Discipline



Brad Wheeler

It's not often that churches find themselves in the national news. Yet in recent memory, a number of prominent congregations have found themselves in controversies covered by the *The Washington Post*, *Slate*, and *The New York Times*. And in each, it was about a case of church discipline gone wrong.

Such stories should grieve us. They're tragic. Tragic for how they reflect shepherds who abuse their sheep thus misrepresent Christ, tragic also for how they can discourage other churches from practicing what Jesus (cf. Mt 18.15–18) and Paul (1 Cor. 5) so clearly command.

With that in mind, what are some good and bad excuses *not* to practice church discipline?

Let's start with the good.

## 1. MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUND.

Due either to lack of practice or poor examples, church discipline is often misunderstood. Some view it as a form of public “sha-

ming” or “shunning.” Some see it as a power-play by leaders to silence opposition within the body. Therefore, before any church exercises church discipline, deliberate and thorough instruction is imperative. If the congregation is confused, if they view church discipline as retributive and not restorative, if it’s all about legalism as opposed to love—then keep teaching. It’s far better to risk waiting too long to begin the practice than to rush in too early and cause irreparable harm.

## **2. GOVERNING DOCUMENTS DON’T ADDRESS IT.**

Both in church practice and in a court of law, clear governing documents are critical. If your church constitution and church covenant don’t address what church discipline is and how it’s to be handled, then you’re inviting confusion and criticism. Churches can’t hold congregants to standards without articulating what those standards are.

## **3. THE MEMBERSHIP IS ILL-DEFINED.**

Churches can’t put people out of the body who aren’t first in the body. Thus, a church’s membership must be clear, and discipline only ought to be pursued on those who “bear the name of brother/sister” (1 Cor. 5:11). Churches don’t discipline those whom the church hasn’t affirmed as believers. They may call themselves a believer; they might even be a faithful attender. But if your church hasn’t affirmed that profession through membership, you don’t discipline them—in fact, you can’t. This is why the responsibilities and duties between the leadership and the body ought to be clearly communicated in new member classes.

## **4. THE SIN IN QUESTION ISN’T DEMONSTRABLE, SERIOUS, AND UNREPENTANT.**

A member may have a problem with jealousy, envy, or pride. They may have recurring unwholesome thoughts. They may lack faith,

or persistence in prayer. While those are sins, and serious sins depending on degree, they're not exactly clear and demonstrable, such as drunkenness or an unbiblical divorce.

How much pride is too much? These aren't matters that discipline, as an admittedly blunt instrument, can best address. Since church discipline is the church removing the affirmation of one's profession, the sin must be obvious and clear, it must be serious, and most importantly, it must be unrepentant.

## **5. THERE'S A HISTORY OF AUTHORITARIAN RULE AND ABUSE.**

If a church has suffered under authoritarian leaders who lorded over the sheep as opposed to love them, then it might be wise to delay church discipline for a season. If previous leaders abused the sheep—instead of patiently instructing, guarding, and caring for them—then church discipline will likely be misunderstood, which returns us to Good Reason #1 above. It's better to give time for the culture to turn, and for the leadership to win over the trust of the flock, than to proceed and possibly bring further harm to the body.

## **6. THE PASTOR IS THE SOLE LEADER, OR HE'S ACTING WITHOUT THE SUPPORT OF HIS LEADERS.**

If the pastor alone is bringing the charge to the congregation, or bringing it without the support of his leaders, it could look like a personal vendetta against an individual. It's best to have a plurality of elders who are united and act together before bringing an individual before the body.

And finally, the church must recognize that while a pastor or set of leaders may bring a case of discipline forward, the final authority to act on such a case resides only with the assembled congregation. Churches remove members, not pastors (Mt. 18:17, 1 Cor. 5:2, 4, 13).

## 7. THE FIRST CASE IS PARTICULARLY CONTENTIOUS OR UNCLEAR.

If the church isn't accustomed to thinking through discipline together, then having a first case that's highly charged or open to "various interpretations" won't be helpful. It's best to begin with cases where the facts are clear, indisputable, and thus minimize risks to the body's unity.

So, there are seven *good* reasons for not practicing church discipline. Now let's get to seven *bad* reasons. Have you heard any of these before, or perhaps used them yourself?

### 1. THE CONGREGATION WILL NEVER COME AROUND.

Church discipline can appear cold. It can play into our sinful fear of man. It can feel like our congregations will never come around. Perhaps they've "never done it this way before."

But we're guided not by tradition, but divine revelation. We don't get to edit Jesus. It's not up to us to decide which parts of the Bible our congregation should obey, and which parts they can ignore. So we trust the power of the Spirit to conform our wills to his Word. And in the meantime, we teach, correcting our opponents with gentleness, so that God might lead them to the knowledge of the truth (2 Tim. 2:25).

### 2. DISCIPLINE ISN'T LOVING.

Discipline can be *exercised* in unloving ways, but Hebrews reminds us that discipline is in fact a mark of God's love (Heb. 12). It will be difficult, uncomfortable, and even painful at times. But failing to discipline lies about God. Failing to discipline might seem humble and kind, but it's actually proud, for it suggests we know better than God. Not only that, it fails to *truly* love because it abandons professing believers on a sinking ship without warning them of their error or pointing them toward the way of escape.

### 3. THE SINS OF OTHERS AREN'T OUR BUSINESS.

If we mean the sins of those *outside* the body, that's true: "God judges those outside" (1 Cor. 5:12). But for those inside, God says *we* are to judge (5:11–13). In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul censures *the church* for appearing to condone what even the pagans find contemptible.

Simply put, Christianity knows nothing of private religion. According to Christ, your so-called "private" business *is* the church's business. The whole church is endangered by the congregation's indifference to the man's sin. Why? Because the sin that no one deals with may eventually become sin that everyone has to deal with.

### 4. IT WILL ENCOURAGE LEGALISM AND DISCOURAGE TRANSPARENCY.

This is only a risk if discipline is understood to apply to any sin, as opposed to those that are demonstrable, serious, and unrepentant. It's only a risk if leadership isn't trusted, but perceived to be out on a witch-hunt. It's only a risk when the gospel is more about *my* performance, rather than Christ's sinless perfection. We don't finally combat legalism by ignoring discipline, but by teaching on true conversion.

### 5. WE MAY LOSE PEOPLE.

Those who want to follow Jesus on their terms, and not his terms, may not like church discipline. There will possibly even be those who leave your church as a result. And while few pastors rejoice in shrinking congregations, when that happens we can take heart because we know we will finally be judged by our faithfulness to his Word and not the size of our worship gatherings.

### 6. THE PERSON IN QUESTION IS TOO POWERFUL, OR TOO CONNECTED TO THOSE WHO ARE POWERFUL WITHIN THE CHURCH.

"Don't bite the hand that feeds you" isn't a new temptation. In fact,

it's what plagued Corinth. Paul rebukes the church for their favoritism in chapters 1–4 (cf. 1 Cor. 4:6). It seems they were boasting (5:6) of this man among them, and in their arrogance (5:2) they chose to ignore the sinful actions of this prominent man rather than lose his favor (and perhaps his purse!). We will ignore the indiscretions of some if we cower to the power and position of our congregants more than we treasure the purity of Christ's church.

## **7. WE MAY BECOME UNPOPULAR IN THE COMMUNITY.**

As we practice church discipline, we will become unpopular in our secular community, and perhaps even in our surrounding church community. But Christians regularly risk being unpopular in order to be faithful. For an example in this, we need only look to Jesus. After all, we finally answer to him, not the opinion polls of our community or other churches.

We'll all make mistakes as leaders. We'll be criticized and often misunderstood. But if we remain humble and patient, careful and prayerful, then our shepherding will increasingly model the Chief Shepherd himself.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Brad Wheeler is the senior pastor of University Baptist Church in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

# Should You Excommunicate Someone Who Joins an “Open & Affirming” Congregation?



Andy Johnson

**J**enny had been a member of your church for a short while. She quickly showed herself to be a bright, friendly, and sensitive woman. Still, even as you tried to welcome her into the church family, there always seemed an edge of discomfort. She loved the caring community, the intentionality, and the quality of the teaching.

But the clarity of some doctrinal lines seemed to make her uncomfortable. So it really didn't come as a surprise when you got an email from her one day, saying she'd decided to resign and join another church in town. Her email was kind. She'd been visiting there for a while, she wrote, and felt it was more her kind of church—more welcoming and inclusive.

But here's the trouble: you know it's an “open and affirming” church, that it teaches Christians can engage in unrepentant sin, particularly homosexual sin, and still inherit the kingdom of God.

And it gets even more complicated. In a follow-up email, while admitting to some growing confusion, Jenny still says she personally thinks that active sexual sin, including homosexual practice, is unbiblical. But she feels this is a point on which she and others in the church can “agree to disagree.” It’s not like there’s anything in their official church documents about it either way. After all, there are so many other good things about the congregation, and they do hold to the basics of the gospel in their statement of faith.

### **WHAT SHOULD WE DO?**

So what’s the problem? Can’t you just let her resign, if not with your full blessing, at least without comment? Isn’t that the wise, tolerant, and loving thing to do? Wouldn’t it be judgmental if you did anything else?

Some of the hardest choices a pastor will make involve knowing when to lead in the hard and loving direction, even though you know you may be widely misunderstood and even misrepresented. Dealing faithfully with a departing member intending to join a gay-affirming congregation may be one of the most striking examples of this. I can think of few scenarios that will put our courage to love to a greater test. And if our culture continues in a similar direction, then it’s a challenge more and more of us will likely face.

### **NOT JUST HOMOSEXUAL SIN**

To be sure, this would be a problem any time a congregation affirms any sin and encourages their members not to repent of it. However, in this article I’m focusing on homosexual practice—not because Bible-believing Christians are fixated on it, but because Bible-denying congregations are strangely obsessed with encouraging it.

There are so many *other* sins to which we could apply these principles. But I’m not aware of any significant groups calling



themselves Christian churches that encourage members that it's okay to worship pagan idols, or to commit adultery, or to steal from others, or to be greedy, or even to get drunk (1 Cor. 1:9–10). If they did, then we could talk about those matters too, and all these same arguments would apply. But alas, we have to deal with reality as it comes to us, and encouraging homosexual sin is the main way Bible-denying churches openly contradict God's moral teaching while still wanting to claim the name of Christ followers.

So we face the task given to us, needing to mentally tar the ark of our resolve before the flood comes. If we really love this departing member, and if we intend to love those whom she would mislead, our way forward will often be both clear and difficult. I'm not saying there's a single right approach. There will be mitigating circumstances based on the maturity of your congregation, the maturity of the departing member, and other factors. Nonetheless, as pastors we need to say and do something.

So, what should you say to Jenny? Two points in particular seem important to stress.

**1. If you join a congregation that approves of homosexual practice, you will help to deceive others about who will and will not inherit the kingdom of God.**

*Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Corinthians 6:9–10)*

Joining a local congregation connects us to others in a lot of ways. One of those involves our entering into a corporate affirmation of our fellow members' professions of faith. In essence, bringing a person into membership means we're telling him or her: "based on what we see of your repentance and faith, we be-

lieve you're going to inherit the kingdom of heaven and be with God forever."

Furthermore, by joining a church, we formally declare our agreement with a church's doctrine and practice. We are saying, "What this church teaches is true!"

Certainly, our knowledge is imperfect, but when based on Scripture, this corporate affirmation of individuals can be a powerful encouragement for each of them to persevere. Likewise, by adding our signature (so to speak) to a church's statement of faith, we strengthen its corporate witness.

But what if God, in his Word, declares unambiguously that someone intent to live a certain way *will not* inherit eternal life, yet we willfully tell them they will? What if we insist someone is on the road to heaven, when God explicitly says they're on the road to hell? What could be more evil and unloving than encouraging someone to continue ignorantly toward their soul's eternal destruction?

Imagine a fork in a mountain road. The road to the left leads to safety. The one on the right leads to a sudden curve onto a broken bridge, over a massive gorge, and a certain plunge to destruction. But some kind person had put up a large warning sign—"Danger! Wrong way! Bridge out ahead! Take the left-hand road ONLY!" Now imagine joining a group of friends to remove that sign, and replace it with one that read, "Both roads go the same way. Pick either, and enjoy your drive!"

You could say that you personally still prefer the road to the left. You might even take it yourself. But by joining with the group who removed the warning you'd be luring people to destruction. This is what someone does when he or she joins a congregation that affirms members in their sin. Like the unfaithful watchman of Ezekiel 33:6, that person will share the blame for teaching lies and when other members fall.

**2. If you join a congregation that approves of homosexual practice, your encouraging approval may be worse than “merely” committing the sin yourself. (Romans 1:32)**

Most of us naturally assume that doing something sinful is worse than “just” approving of other people doing it. But God’s Word presents a different picture. Yes, to sin oneself is wrong. But to encourage others in sin may be even worse.

Perhaps a simple illustration will make this obvious. Consider a person whose life has been wrecked by drug abuse. They’re given over to getting high and have lost their job, family, and joy—and they know it. So they tell as many people as they can, “Stay away from this stuff. Don’t you see what it’s done to me? Don’t touch drugs.” This man or woman may still be sinning in their own intoxicated self-destruction. And yet, we see a spark of common grace in their heart-felt warning.

But what if that person sees the emptiness of their way of life and doesn’t warn anyone? What if, instead, they try to entice others to join in? That’s much worse, isn’t it? They want company in their sin, and they sinfully want others to join their flood of dissipation. Such a state is worse than our first example, but there’s a worse case still.

Imagine a person who has seen the devastation of drugs and has no taste for it. They wouldn’t dream of touching the stuff. But whether from malice or moral confusion, or even (God help us) simply to avoid the ire of their drug-dealing neighbors, they encourage a child to plunge into a life of sin they themselves would never entertain. They encourage the child on down the road, they cheer them on to destruction, while themselves standing at a safe distance—or so they think.

Isn’t this the worst case of all? To approve and encourage other people’s sin is a low moral state indeed. The theologian Charles Hodge described this with chilling sobriety: “This is the lowest point of degradation. To sin, even in the heat of passion, is evil;

but to delight in the sins of others, shows that men are of set purpose and fixed preference, wicked.”

There’s nothing morally “mere” about affirming someone else in their sin. Such an action is a near total failure of love, an evil of satanic proportion. The old British pastor, William Gurnall, describes this danger well: “O take heed of soliciting others to sin. Thou takest the devil’s office, as I may say, out of his hand. Let him do it himself if he will. Make not thyself so like him. To tempt another is worse than to sin thyself.”

In short, that’s what our fictional church member, Jenny, is in danger of doing. Jenny doesn’t have to be openly recruiting for iniquity to be an agent of temptation. She approves of sin by joining a church that approves of sin. She gives *her* assent to *their* agreed-upon understanding of what constitutes the kind of life that reflects both true conversion and the fruit in keeping with repentance. When the lifestyles in view are biblical, this encourages others to walk in a certain direction for their good. But when the lifestyle flies in the face of Christian repentance and faithfulness, we become cheerleaders for damnation.

As is so often the case, it’s finally from the lips of Jesus himself that we receive the most bracing teaching on this matter. Gentle Jesus, so meek and mild, does not mince words about the danger to those who encourage others in their sin.

And he said to his disciples, “Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin.” (Luke 17:1–2)

This is a serious matter because Jesus our Lord takes it so seriously. After all, Jesus loves all his children, and if we love our church members, we’ll never let them march unwarned toward such a dreadful fate.

Jenny may genuinely fail to understand the danger. Jenny may really not see that by joining a congregation that affirms homosexual sin she is actively encouraging members caught up in sin *not* to repent. So if we love her, we will instruct, implore, and warn her. We will, in love, use all the means God has placed at our disposal to wake her to their danger and warn her against becoming one through whom temptation to sin comes. We will do this even if it means finally excommunicating her from our church, rather than allowing her to resign to such a fate in good standing.

### **NOT HARSHNESS, BUT LOVE & HOPE**

And we approach all of this not with harshness, but with love and hope. We have the gospel hope that the Apostle Paul highlights so clearly in 1 Corinthians 6. After listing examples of those who won't inherit God's kingdom (including those given over to homosexual practice), he continues with a wonderful note of grace: "And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:11).

No sinner is beyond Christ's grace—we weren't, and neither is anyone else. Such were some of *us*.

Far from standing in judgment, we stand with the biblical writers as fellow refugees fleeing the sexual lies of a fallen world, inviting fellow sinners to forgiveness and safety in Christ. Many of us as pastors get to shepherd men and women who have left the emptiness of homosexual sin and found joy and forgiveness in Christ. Because we love them, and everyone who might join them in Christ, we don't want anything or anyone to hinder conviction and repentance. And so it's this love that compels us to speak honestly and deal resolutely with a member who would hide the hope found in Christ by lying about the need for repentance.

## CONCLUSION

Let me be candid: what I just said will almost certainly be misunderstood in light of the wider culture's present confusion about love and tolerance. And if we pursue this action, we must certainly be especially kind and careful, wise and patient.

Plus, I am not recommending a one-size-fits-all policy. Every such situation must be handled on its own merits.

But Jesus loves his children—and he is jealous to keep them. So as we act with faithful love to warn and protect our members, we do so in confidence of Christ's love and protection for our own flock. Even as others may berate us as unloving, we can press on in confident hope of our true master's final vindication and approval. What else, after all, is a faithful watchman to do?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andy Johnson is an associate pastor at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC.

# Why Churches Should Excommunicate Longstanding Non-Attendees



Alex Duke

A few years back, I heard about a church that had grown concerned about their bloated membership. After years of lackadaisical accounting, the number had become unwieldy, even disingenuous. Their “official” membership tallied more than twice the average attendance—doubtlessly inflated by the dead, the derelict, and the well-intentioned-but-never-there.

This discrepancy obscured the church’s identity.

So they came up with an idea: let’s just zero out the membership and, over the course of time, let those who are still around re-up their commitment and re-join the church.

This approach, they thought, would slay two giants with one smooth stone: first, it would enable the church to reach out to everyone on their list and hopefully reanimate for some the desire to gather with God and God’s people. Second, they’d finally know the souls over which they were to keep watch, the individuals for whom they would one day be held accountable.

So over the course of a few months, they reached out to everyone and let them know of a date in the future when all who were willing would re-dedicate their spiritual oversight to this specific church. For many, this was a no-brainer; they'd never stopped attending. For others, God used the correspondence to pry them out of their apathy and into the pew.

But for some, the letters were returned to sender (or were ignored), the emails bounced (or were ignored), and the pleas for reunion fell on deaf ears, if they fell on any ears at all.

And so, before long, their covenant with this church was deleted with a keystroke.

### THE GOOD NEWS

Though full of good intentions, I submit that what happened at the church above is pastoral malpractice. It flips Jesus' "Lost Sheep" parable in Matthew 18 upside-down: "If a man has 100 sheep, and 95 of them have come back, does he not stay with the 95 where they are and leave the five alone?"

It's good to have a more accurate membership roll. But it's best to pursue these non-attenders toward a specific end: removal if they're attending another gospel-preaching church, restoration if they're happy to return, and excommunication if they're either unwilling to attend church anywhere or unable to be found.

In fact, I want to up the ante a bit: pursuing longstanding non-attenders—I don't mean *inconsistent* attenders, but those who have been wholly absent for several months or even years—and excommunicating those they can't find is a mark of a healthy church. Of course such pursuits can be done poorly and with a heavy hand. But this abuse should make us cautious and careful, not convinced the better choice is to do nothing.

Again, pursuing non-attenders—assuming it's approached with all the requisite patience and clarity and humility—is a mark of a healthy church and, furthermore, it's entirely in accord with



the Bible's teaching on what a church is, what a pastor is, and what biblical love is. Even if the non-attender has no clue any pursuit or eventual discipline is underway, the church's act appropriately warns those who *are* present about the dangers of pursuing the Christian life outside a local church.

## **BIBLICAL PRECEDENT**

With feathers sufficiently ruffled, let me provide a biblical rationale.

### ***Text #1: Matthew 18:10–35***

It's crucial to understand the context of Jesus' foundational teaching on church discipline in Matthew 18:15–20. As one pastor put it, "In the Bible, church discipline is a rescue operation."

What precedes this bulk of teaching is the parable of the lost sheep. Jesus wants to put us in the sandals of a shepherd with 100 sheep in order to illustrate God's pursuing love for his people. And yet, the parable raises a question: what do we do if a stubborn sheep obstinately refuses to come back?

The answer to this question comes in the next block of teaching: we pursue him, and if he persists in his departure, then we cast him out, treating him like a pagan and a tax collector. In other words, our relationship to the departing sheep essentially changes.

Excommunicating someone who has completely stopped attending is, in effect, giving them what they've asked for. It's letting go of the rope they're trying to pull out of our hands. It's not forcing them to remain bound when they don't want to be. At the same time, it's also refusing to let them force us to declare them a "Christian in good standing" when, in good conscience, we don't feel like we can.

For those reading closely, this raises another question: what if the sheep comes back? Jesus seems to answer that question with another parable, this one concerning an unforgiving servant

(18:21–35). The point here is simple: we forgive those who have sinned against us. Why? Because we’ve been forgiven by the God whom we’ve sinned against, an offense far more severe than whatever slights we’ve endured from our fellow sheep.

In other words, pastors—no, in other words, *churches*—we quickly and gladly and wholly forgive returning and repentant sheep because we know we ourselves have strayed and, if not for God’s tether on us, we’d stray again and again, farther and farther. Mirroring David in Psalm 23, the hymn-writer describes the lot of us when he wrote:

Perverse and foolish oft  
I strayed,  
But yet in love He sought me,  
And on His shoulder gently laid,  
And home rejoicing brought me.

—“The King of Love My Shepherd Is” (Henry Williams Baker, 1868)

In summary, Matthew 18 teaches us both the foundation and trajectory of church discipline: we pursue straying church members because God pursues his lost sheep, even if it’s “just” 1 of 99. Sadly, this will occasionally result in exclusion because some lost sheep intend to stay lost. We will give them what they ask for and let them go, but we will insist on speaking honestly as they do.

Happily, however, lost sheep have a way of coming back—and when they do, we should forgive them swiftly and completely because God in Christ has forgiven us swiftly and completely.

### ***Text #2: Hebrews 10:23–25<sup>17</sup>***

Here are the verses in question:

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17 On “meeting together” see Sam Allberry’s *Why Bother With Church?* or Mark Dever’s talk “[Reasons to Join a Church](#),” currently available on Ligonier’s website for \$2.

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

The author of Hebrews has two commands for us here. The first is in verse 23: hold fast to the confession of our hope, a confession he's just elucidated for us by extolling what Christ accomplished for us as our high priest. This command is rooted in the faithfulness of God (verse 23).

The second command—stir up one another to love and good words—is thankfully accompanied by an immediate application. How do we do this? Simple: we keep on meeting together. Why? Because we can't encourage someone we never see. Again, the author roots this command and its application in a promise; we gather and encourage and spur on because we see Judgment Day drawing near, when our faithful, promise-keeping God will return and we will gather with him, forever.

Though he wrote nearly two millennia ago, the author of Hebrews seems familiar with our modern predicament. Did you notice? “Not neglecting to meet together, *as is the habit of some*.”

It is indeed the habit of some Christians to neglect meeting together with their brothers and sisters. In doing so, they miss out on encouragement; they miss out on being spurred on to love and good works. But that's not all: their vantage point on God's work in the Christian life shrinks, their confidence in their confession of hope wanes, their memory of God keeping his promises fades, and their once clear-eyed vision of the coming Day of the Lord blurs to black.

Speaking of, did you notice how severe this warning is? The Day of Judgment? Explain to me, then, how removing someone from membership is too severe. Imagine a non-attending “church member” arrives at Judgment Day and is told eternal judgment awaits.

At this moment, how loving will that church who did nothing or who quietly deleted his name from a computer seem? Will he not be right to be angry at that church: “Why didn’t you warn me?”

In fact, our small, two-dimensional pictures of removal *now* may be the most loving thing we can do because they warn people of the potential *permanent* reality of removal to come.

These verses in Hebrews let us pursue non-attending members with our Bibles open to a chapter and verse, rather than a list of well-intentioned, thought-through suggestions. We can point not only to a violation of a biblical command, but also to the God-ordained benefits they’re missing.

### ***Text #3: Hebrews 13:17 (Acts 20:28)***

As he approaches the coda of his correspondence, the author of Hebrews exhorts his audience:

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

A few verses earlier, in verse 7, these leaders are described as those who “spoke to you the word of God.” There, we’re told to imitate these leaders’ faith, and consider the outcome of their way of life.

One implication of these verses is that church leaders (pastors, elders, etc.) are to live amidst their people such that the ways and outcomes of their lives can be considered and therefore imitated. Any elder who lives in an ivory tower, above and away from his people, is living below his station. Thundering commands and exhortations from the clouds, this so-called elder doesn’t realize his people can’t even hear him. He’s talking to himself.

This is instructive. A church member who only hears from their pastors when they’ve done something wrong—like, say, not

attend church for a year—offers a reasonable (though not fool-proof) objection when they ask, “Well, where were you when the stuff that caused me to leave happened?” It’s simultaneously easier and more effective to pastor someone on their way out the door rather than someone who’s already left.

Though important, let’s not discuss the command to obey our leaders and instead focus on why we’re told to do this. We’re to obey our leaders—again, granting that they’re joyful and not grumbling, qualified and amidst their people—because one day they will give an account for *us*.

This is an elder’s unique calling. On the Last Day, they will give an account for every member placed under their care as undershepherds of the Lord’s flock. To state the specifics of everything this means would state too much; we just don’t know. But at the very least, if you’re an elder at a church whose membership roll has no bearing in the reality, then you should wonder what this means for you. If you’re leading a church that has assured, through baptism and/or membership, hundreds or even thousands of people that they’ll spend eternity with Jesus when they die, but you’ve absolutely no idea where they are, then you should wonder what this means for you—and perhaps start to worry.

Paul’s words to the Ephesian elders come to mind: “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28).

There’s never a moment when an elder can say about a current church member: *oh, he’s not my responsibility anymore*. Why? Because our Lord charges them with paying careful attention to *all* the flock—whether they’re there or not, whether they want to be cared for or not.

The church—by which I mean every single member of any local church—should be precious to its leaders because it’s precious

to its God. We shouldn't be surprised by this. After all, look at her purchase price.

## **PRACTICAL STEPS**

The biblical case is clear: we pursue absent church members for at least three reasons:

- God pursues straying sheep.
- We're told not to forsake gathering with our brothers in sisters. This is not an optional command.
- Our elders will give account to God for every single person placed under their care. There are no exceptions.

But who cares what the Bible says if there's nothing in the life of a church to make this course of action plausible? In an effort to fix this, I've listed a few plausibility-building steps below.

### ***1. In your church covenant, add a line or two that mentions what to do when members leave.***

My former church used this line: "We will, when we move from this place, as soon as possible, unite with some other church where we can carry out the spirit of this covenant and the principles of God's Word." Brief, general, and to-the-point—that should be the goal.

Of course, the words in your church covenant won't matter if it just gathers dust. So use it: in membership classes, when you take the Lord's Supper, before you begin members' meetings, periodically in your sermon application.

### ***2. Teach your members about their God-given authority and responsibility.***

Church discipline both begins and ends with individual members exercising their God-given authority and responsibility. Thankfully, the process usually stops after Step #1, when Member

A gently confronts Member B and Member B responds in gratitude and repentance.

But on those unfortunate occasions when a sinning member remains unrepentant, it's important to note the whole church's involvement yet again. A steady diet of teaching on this will help people see that, similar to an elder, there's no reason for them to ever say a church member is no longer their concern. The reclamation of an absent member is a congregational project, not just for those who are paid or elected to care.

### ***3. Don't be territorial.***

I've often heard that excommunicating non-attending members is spiritually abusive, evidence of a territorial ungodliness and a lust for market control. This is perhaps true in some cases, but not necessarily so.

In fact, a charge like this simply won't stick to churches and pastors that are known for their big-heartedness.<sup>18</sup> So, regularly send members to help other churches. Share your pulpit. Plant churches without your particular branding or ecclesiological imprimatur. Pray for other churches publicly. Don't be a denominational shill. Build cooperative friendships across racial and theological lines.

### ***4. Forget good intentions; depend on specific policies and processes.***

As Don Carson once said, "No one drifts toward holiness." Similarly, no church drifts toward health. This is why we need extra-biblical structures and processes that attempt to reflect and enact biblical teaching.

Membership classes, lists of members, a defined length of absence before someone is pursued—none of this is in the Bible. Instead, they're attempts to distill the wisdom of the Bible into prudential processes.

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<sup>18</sup> It will still convince those who have no desire to be unconvinced.

It doesn't matter how much you care about this in your heart of hearts if there aren't any practices to back your conviction up. In pastoral ministry, there will *always* be something more pressing than, "Reach out to Member X whom we haven't seen in six months."

Issues like these are categorically non-urgent, but that doesn't mean they're unimportant. So think through policies and best practices that will aid in this endeavor. Modify them to fit your context, and trust the Lord will bless your preparation.

### ***5. Teach on the derivative authority of the church.***

Your church and its members have real, God-given authority, which means we must exercise it soberly and carefully. Passages like Matthew 18:15–20 and 1 Corinthians 5 are clear: the decisions we make when we gather *mean something*.

But we must never forget: our authority, though derived from the Lord, is not analogous to his. To miss this is to make the mistake of the Roman Catholic Church. Instead, when we teach on the church's authority, we must stress that it's real, but it's also derivative and limited and errant.

Perhaps that member you can't find and haven't heard from moved last-minute and, as we all do, forgot to tell anyone. Perhaps they're gladly serving in another church across the country. I'd guess these situations will be the minority, but they will happen, which is why we must constantly teach both ourselves and our people that an excommunication for non-attendance is *not* a declaration that Member X has been cut off from the Lord. It's simply a declaration that, despite our best efforts, we don't know where he or she is, and therefore must withdraw our affirmation of membership.

## **CONCLUSION**

I've never met a growing and mature Christian who doesn't regularly attend a gospel-preaching church.



On the other hand, I've met dozens and dozens of professing Christians who never (or sparingly) attend church. Their lives are an experiment in spiritual subsistence farming. They're not living in open immorality, but their confidence in their own profession of faith wavers by the day, as their last time regularly in church and under the preaching of the Word floats further and further away. They'd likely never admit it, but they're becoming incredulous even at themselves.

I suppose I should have said something earlier, but I used to be a member of that church I mentioned at the beginning. Years later, I remain deeply grateful for it, as God saved me there and disciplined me under its faithful ministry.

And yet, I struggle not to be frustrated. As I type this, so many faces flicker in my mind, faces of friends who attended church with me. We went to youth group together, to summer camp together, to accountability group together. We were young and mischievous and stupid, but we were also trying to be serious, mindful, and genuine Christians.

Then college came, and our lives meandered apart. Some went here; others went there; still others went nowhere. Sure, they started at one church, and then another, and then another. But after a while, their erratic commitment became non-commitment, and their non-commitment became lethargy, and their lethargy became paralysis, and their paralysis eventually started to look like death—that flicker of mindfulness snuffed out through well-intentioned inattention. I wish I'd said more about this to them over the years.

Once upon a time, these friends' names were on a list that said they'd spend eternity with Jesus. More than a decade later, this fact might seem incidental, detached from any substantive evidence, dismissable on a technicality or the expiration of the statute of limitations.

But that's wrong. Its presence was on purpose—every single name the result of a sober-minded decision that Jesus is indeed

the Christ, the Son of the Living God, their Lord and Savior, every decision then followed by a baptism in the name of the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I don't know if any of these guys got a letter or an email, and if they did I don't know if they ignored it. But I do know what happened next: their covenant was deleted with a keystroke.

Oh, how I wish someone had warned them what that meant.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Alex Duke is the editorial manager of 9Marks. He lives in Louisville, Kentucky with his wife, Melanie. You can find him on Twitter at @evanalexduke.

# “Don’t do it!!” Why You Shouldn’t Practice Church Discipline



Mark Dever

“Don’t do it.” That’s the first thing I tell pastors when they discover church discipline is in the Bible. I say, “Don’t do it, at least not yet.” Why this advice?

Let’s think about what happens in the process of discovery. When pastors first hear of church discipline, they often think the idea is ridiculous. It sounds unloving, counter-evangelistic, weird, controlling, legalistic, and judgmental. It certainly seems unwor-kable. They even wonder if it’s illegal.

## THEY OPEN THEIR BIBLES

Then, when no one is looking, they look back at their Bible. They come across passages like 2 Thessalonians 3:6, or Galatians 6:1, or the classic text on discipline—1 Corinthians 5. They consider the Old Testament background of excommunication, and they recall that God has always purposed for his people to be a picture of his own holiness (Deut. 17:7; Lev. 19:2; Isa. 52:11; 1 Peter 1:16).

Then, somehow, they turn to Jesus’ own teaching, and discover that, in the same chapter in which Jesus condemns judgmentalism

(see Matt. 7:1), he also warns the disciples to be on their guard against false prophets and against those who claim to follow him but do not obey his Word (Matt. 7:15-20; 21-23). Finally, Matthew 18 comes up, where Jesus instructs his followers to exclude the unrepentant sinner in certain situations (Matt. 18:17). Maybe churches *should* practice discipline?

What finally sends these otherwise nice, normal, well-adjusted, previously popular pastors over the edge is their discovery that some churches do, in fact, practice church discipline. Not strange, maladjusted churches, but happy, growing, large, grace-oriented churches like Grace Community in Sun Valley, California, or Tenth Presbyterian in Philadelphia, or First Baptist in Durham, North Carolina, or the Village Church near Dallas.

Now these pastors are in trouble. They realize they need to be obedient. They feel compelled by the biblical picture of a holy, loving, united church, a church that reflects the one, holy, loving God. They understand their failure to practice discipline hurts their church and its witness to the world.

It's at this point that a sullen resolve often seems to set in. "I will lead this congregation to be biblical at this point if it's the last thing I do!" And, too often, it is.

### **LIKE A BOLT OUT OF A CLEAR BLUE SKY**

Into the peaceful, well-meaning life of an innocent, Bible-believing congregation, the lightning bolt of church discipline strikes! It may be in a sermon. It may be in a conversation between the pastor and a deacon. It may be in a hastily arranged motion at a members meeting. But somewhere it hits, usually accompanied by great earnestness and a torrent of Scriptural citations.

Then, the sincere action is taken.

Then, the response comes: misunderstanding and hurt feelings result. Counter charges are made. Sin is attacked and defended.

Names are called. Acrimony abounds! The symphony of the local congregation transposes into a cacophony of arguments and accusations. People cry out, “Where will this stop?!” and “So do you think *you’re* perfect?”

### **CHURCH DISCIPLINE: DON'T DO IT! AT LEAST NOT YET**

What's the pastor to do? My advice would be, “Don't get yourself into this situation in the first place. Once you've discovered that corrective church discipline is biblical, hold off on practicing it for a while.” (Church discipline is both corrective and formative, the latter referring to the church's work of teaching or forming Christians.)

Now at this point maybe you're thinking, “Mark, are you telling us to disobey the Bible?!”

In fact, I'm not. I'm trying to help you do what Jesus instructed his disciples to do (see Luke 14:25-33): count the cost before you begin. Make sure your congregation sufficiently understands and accepts this biblical teaching. Your goal is not immediate compliance followed by an explosion, but rather a congregation being reformed by the Word of God. You want them going in the right direction. And that requires patient shepherding.

### **HOW TO SHEPHERD YOUR CHURCH TOWARD DISCIPLINE**

First, *encourage humility*. Help people to see that they may be mistaken about their own spiritual state. Consider the example of the man in 1 Corinthians 5 as well as Paul's exhortation to the Corinthian Christians more broadly in 2 Corinthians 13:5. Paul charges us to examine ourselves to see if we're in the faith. Do your church members recognize that they are to help one another do that?

Second, *make sure that your congregation has a biblical understanding of church membership*. People don't understand discipline because they don't understand membership. Membership is a congregational relationship. It is not created, sustained, or ended merely by the act of an individual; an individual can-

not join a church unilaterally without the congregation's consent. Likewise, an individual cannot continue in membership, or leave the membership of a particular congregation without the congregation's explicit or implicit approval (except by death). That's a mouthful, but what I'm basically saying is that it is a church's business to decide who its members are. And members cannot simply leave when they're in unrepentant sin. (See Jonathan Leeman's article, "The Preemptive Resignation—A Get Out of Jail Free Card?" for a fuller discussion of this matter.)

Such a vision of membership, however, must first be positively presented. Understand what the Bible teaches about church membership. Make sure that you've familiarized yourself with several crucial points and passages that you can remind members of when they ask. Look for opportunities in your sermons to teach on the distinction between the church and the world, and how that distinction is important for the nature and mission of the church. Help your congregation to assemble such a picture of God's plan for his church that the outlines of discipline begin to become conspicuous by their absence from your church's practice. Remember that the members must understand membership and discipline because they're the ones who must carry it out.

Third, *pray that God would help you to model ministry* to other Christians in your church by your public teaching and your private work with families and individuals. Work toward creating a "culture of discipleship" and accountability in your church, where Christians understand that a basic part of their following Jesus is helping others to follow Jesus (both through evangelism and discipling other Christians). Help them to understand the special responsibilities they have toward other members of their particular congregation. Teach them that the Christian life is personal, but not private.

Fourth, *prepare your congregation's written constitution and covenant*. Consult Ken Sande's article on the 9Marks website, for

some general legal advice. Begin teaching pre-membership classes in which matters touching membership and discipline are explicitly taught.

Fifth, and finally, in your pulpit ministry, *never tire of teaching what a Christian is*. Regularly define the gospel and conversion. Explicitly teach that a church is intended to be composed of repenting sinners who are trusting in Christ alone, and who give credible professions of that trust. Pray that you would be centered on the gospel. Resolve that, with God's help, you will slowly but steadily lead your congregation to change. Pray that, rather than being a church where it's strange to ask people how they're doing spiritually, you would become a church where it would begin to seem strange if someone *didn't* ask about your life.

### **YOU KNOW YOU'RE READY WHEN...**

You know your congregation is ready to practice church discipline when:

- Your leaders understand it, agree with it, and perceive its importance (mature leadership shared among several elders is the most consistent with Scripture and very helpful for leading a church through potentially volatile discussions);
- Your congregation is united in understanding that such discipline is biblical;
- Your membership consists largely of people who regularly hear your sermons;
- A particularly clear case comes along in which your members would fairly unitedly perceive that excommunication is the correct action (for example, excommunication for adultery is more likely to yield agreement among your members than excommunication for non-attendance.)

So, my pastor friend, though you may have once thought that the idea of church discipline is ridiculous, I pray that God will help you to lead your congregation to see that it is a loving, provocative, attractive, distinct, respectful, gracious act of obedience and mercy, and that it helps to build a church that brings glory to God.

But remember, when you first become convinced of the biblical case for church discipline, your first step in an established congregation is probably to begin by *not* practicing discipline, so that someday you can.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Mark Dever is the senior pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D. C., and the President of 9Marks. You can find him on Twitter at @MarkDever.



# How Should Christians Relate to Excommunicated Family Members?



Michael Lawrence

**H**ow should Christians relate to family members who have been excommunicated from a church?

I want to suggest that Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 5:11 are not intended to rupture relations within the biological family, though that is precisely what they are intended to do within the spiritual family. Two scriptural lines of thought are relevant.

First, throughout the New Testament, Jesus' call to a family-transcending loyalty notwithstanding, the overarching concern is to preserve the integrity and peace of the natural family for the sake of the gospel. To take just one example: the believing spouse is urged to remain with the unbelieving spouse if possible, for the sake of the unbeliever's salvation. (1 Cor 7:12-14; 1 Pet 3:1-2). The context of 1 Corinthians 7 makes clear that this "living with" includes sexual intimacy, which by anyone's standards

surpasses the intimacy of a shared meal. Typically we read these verses assuming the unbeliever has never professed faith, but there's nothing in the text that demands that assumption. Paul's instruction is equally applicable to the believer who's spouse has apostasized. It just doesn't make sense to read Paul to teach in that situation that they can have sex, but not a meal.

We could look at other examples, like Paul's condemnation of those who don't provide for their families, regardless of their status as believers, or the enduring obligation of children to honor their parents, regardless of their status as believers. The point remains the same. In the context of the biological family, such actions of love commend the gospel.

The second line of thought concerns the distinction the New Testament makes between the biological family and the spiritual family. Here, Jesus' question about who is my mother and brother and sister is supremely relevant (Mk 3:33-35). In the Old Covenant, the biological and spiritual families were one and the same, at least to external observation. In the New Covenant, as Jeremiah prophesied (Jer 31:29-34), the automatic, generational link between the biological and spiritual families is severed. Now, as Jesus points out, inclusion in the spiritual family of God is based on spiritual regeneration that produces repentance and faith. This produced all sorts of changes within the administration of the covenant that I don't need to explain to my fellow Baptist Church Matters bloggers.

But one area that perhaps we have not considered fully is the biological family and discipline. In the Old Covenant, if a spouse or child sought to entice you to idolatry, not only were they to be stoned, but you were to cast the first one (Deut. 13:6-12). Originally, it was the father who circumcised his sons (Gen. 17). But in the New Covenant, it is not the biological family that baptizes or exercises church discipline, it's the spiritual family, because spiritual relations are in view.

What does this mean for the wife whose husband has been excommunicated? Unlike most everyone else in their church, sharing a meal with him is not primarily an expression of Christian fellowship, but of familial love and duty. She should certainly not treat him as if he were a Christian. But neither of them ever thought toast and coffee in the morning was about that anyway. On the other hand, she should now pray for him, not with him, and she should focus her concern and conversation on his repentance. But surely even that looks different when you're with someone every day than it would for the pastor who bumps into him on the street. Isn't this precisely what Paul and Peter were both getting at? Far from invalidating your marriage or requiring you to engage in 24/7 evangelistic conversation, unbelief in the home and marriage is a unique opportunity for the patient display of love and grace up close and personal.

If I were a particular kind of Presbyterian, who held to a highly objective structure for the covenant family, I could see arguing against table fellowship with an excommunicate inside the family. But as a Baptist and congregationalist, that sort of overlay is precisely what I want to avoid. Not so that I can keep the church out of my living room. But rather to make clear that my living room is not the church. I have obligations to both my biological family and my spiritual family. Sometimes, the same person will be a member of both families, sometimes not. But the obligations endure, and in both cases, they do so for the sake of the gospel.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Michael Lawrence is the senior pastor of Hinson Baptist Church in Portland, Oregon. You can find him on Twitter at @pdxtml.

# Before You Discipline, Teach This First



Greg Gilbert

**P**astor: “So, because of all that, it’s with great sadness that I move that we as a church remove Joe from membership as an act of discipline. Is there any discussion?”

*Sister Sue:* “Pastor, I have some discussion. I don’t see how we can do this. What right do we have to say whether Joe’s a Christian? Only God can say that!”

*Pastor:* “Yes, of course that’s true. But First Corin- . . .”

*Brother Bill:* “Oh come on! I agree with Sue. I believe in the Bible and everything, Pastor, but a lot of that just isn’t going to work now.”

*Deacon Doug:* “And we’re all sinners. Why should we single Joe out?”

*Pastor:* “[Sigh.] Alright. All those in favor, say ‘aye.’” [the sound of crickets chirping]

*Pastor:* “Those opposed?”

*Everyone:* “**NAY!!!**”

[After the meeting] *Chairman Charlie:* “Pastor, the deacons want to meet with you tomorrow night. We have some concerns. . .”

That scenario or something like it has played itself out in far too many churches. Pastors with an admirable love of Scripture

and their congregations, but with a lamentable lack of foresight and wisdom, find themselves in trouble because their people just aren't ready to take the step of practicing church discipline—even after they've been taught about it.

Most every pastor knows that he'll have to do a good deal of teaching about church discipline before his congregation is ready for it. What might not be so obvious, though, is that he will have to teach the church about more than just church discipline before they're ready for discipline. In fact, a biblical understanding of church discipline—what it is, what it aims for, and how it functions—has to be built on a solid understanding of other Christian doctrines.

To put it another way, there are certain things you have to teach in your church long before you even broach the subject of church discipline. It's really that simple. You have to teach a child to walk before you teach him to climb a mountain.

Let me list just a few things that a church needs to understand and embrace before it will be in a position to carry out church discipline.

## **1. THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE**

This, of course, is where it all begins. If your church is not convinced of Scripture's authority over them—over their own lives and over the life and practice of the church—you will not be able to bring them to a biblical understanding of church discipline. Our authority, right, and responsibility to practice discipline are given solely by the Word of God.

If you don't teach your congregation to look to and submit to Scripture in everything, the "We've never done this, pastor" argument will devastate any attempt to practice discipline. So will the "We don't have the right to do this" argument. And the "This is mean" argument. And on and on and on.

## 2. WHAT A CHRISTIAN IS

If the idea of church discipline is to make any sense at all, your congregation must understand what it means to be a Christian in the first place. They're going to have to understand the gospel. They'll have to grasp the fact that being a Christian is not just about making a decision, but rather about ongoing faith in Jesus and repentance from sin.

They need to know that the church is for *Christians*, not just nice people, and they need you, pastor, to teach them the difference.

## 3. THE REALITY AND MEANING OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Your church won't be willing to put someone *out* of the church unless they understand that there is an *in* and an *out*. The Bible is very clear about that fact. There are those who are "members" of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27) and those who are "outsiders" (1 Cor. 5:12). Your church needs to understand that, too, or the idea of putting someone "out" of something which has no "in" will quite understandably sound ridiculous.

Not only so, but your church needs to understand that church membership involves more than being a well-liked member of the community, or being a member of a certain family in town. Church membership means publicly affirming both someone's profession of faith in Jesus as well as their decision to submit to the oversight of the church. When your church begins to understand that, the idea of church discipline will start to make a lot more sense.

## 4. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD

God intends his people to look different from the world. He intends them to live holy lives and to war against sin. That's what it means to repent. Repentance does not mean that a person has stopped sinning, but it does mean that he has declared war against sin. Your

church must understand this before you can expect them to understand discipline.

Of course, there is a world of nuance to be talked about here—the difference between unrepentant and repentant sin, or the difference between scandalous sin and private sin, just to name a couple. Those are important conversations to have, but they’ll only make sense within an understanding of the basic fact that God intends his church to be different from the world.

## 5. THE CHURCH’S RESPONSIBILITY TO JUDGE

Many pastors run into opposition to church discipline in the form of a church member quoting Matthew 7:1, “Judge not, lest ye be judged.” It’s an uncomfortable topic in our hyper-tolerant age, but pastors need to teach their congregations that, while Jesus *does not give* his church the right to determine who is to be in or out of heaven, he *does give* them the right to determine who is to be in or out of the church. That’s what Jesus meant by giving to the church “the keys of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 16:19; 18:17). It’s also what Paul meant when he asked, “Are you not to judge those inside [the church]?” (1 Cor. 5:12). Your church must understand and accept its responsibility to discipline before it will be able to exercise it.

Those are just a few examples of truths a pastor will need to teach his congregation before he gets to the particular subject of church discipline. I’m sure you could think of many others. I hope, however, that just meditating a bit on this topic will remind you that the job of the pastor is one of patient longsuffering. You don’t want to drive the sheep to the field of church discipline. You want to lead them there, step by step, correcting, rebuking, and encouraging with great patience and careful instruction (2 Tim. 4:2).

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Greg Gilbert is the Senior Pastor of Third Avenue Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky. You can find him on Twitter at @greg-gilbert.



# The Preemptive Resignation—A Get Out of Jail Free Card?



Jonathan Leeman

**C**hurch leaders often ask how they should respond when a person who is being disciplined by the church resigns before the process of discipline is complete. Should they accept the resignation or continue moving toward excommunication?

Suppose a man decides to leave his wife for another woman. Other members of the church ask the man to repent and return to his wife. He doesn't. They ask again, but this time they also warn him about the possibility of excommunication. So he resigns his membership. Case closed. He's now immune. Or at least that's what the adulterous man is saying. Is that correct?

## THE CASE FOR ALLOWING PREEMPTIVE RESIGNATIONS

A civic case for allowing preemptive resignations would argue that local churches, in the context of a democratic civic society, are “voluntary organizations,” just like the Boy Scouts, a women's soccer league, or a gardening club. You can choose to join;

you can choose to leave. And no one gives a church the right to say otherwise. In a liberal civic context, the individual reigns supreme.

Now add a theological layer to the argument for preemptive resignation. Human beings do not ultimately depend on their families, their churches, their nations, or their parish priests for a relationship with God. They must depend on Christ. He alone is the mediator between God and man. This means that churches must not deny individuals the ability to act according to their consciences, which includes letting them leave church membership whenever they want to leave. Otherwise, the church effectively denies soul competency and wrongly places itself in between the individual and the individual's Savior. Right?

### **THE CASE AGAINST ALLOWING PREEMPTIVE RESIGNATIONS**

In fact, both the civic and the theological objections depend on a reductionistic idea about what the church on earth is. The church on earth does not exist *just* because a number of individuals have freely decided to associate together in an area of common interest to them, as with the Boy Scouts. It does not exist *just* as an aid to our sanctification as believers, as an over-inflated concept of soul competency would have us believe.

Rather, the church exists because Christ came to establish his kingdom, and he means for a marked off group of people to represent his heavenly rule on earth (see Matt. 3:2; 4:7; 5:3,5; 6:10,19-20; 13:11). The church exists not simply for its own sanctification's sake or even finally for the world's sake. It exists to accomplish the task originally given to Adam and Israel but fulfilled finally in Christ, the task of imaging or representing the glorious rule of God on earth.

The problem is, many hypocrites will claim to belong to the kingdom based on family ties or righteous deeds (e.g. Matt. 3:9;

6:1, 2–3, 5–6, 16–17; 8:11–12; 13:47–50), and many will come claiming the name of Christ and saying “Lord, Lord” (Matt. 7:21–23; cf. 24:5). But the kingdom does not belong to any and all professors; it belongs only to those who produce the fruit of the kingdom in keeping with repentance (Matt. 3:8; 5:3–12; 7:15–20, 7:24–27; 18:3–4). “Watch out that no one deceives you,” said Jesus, anticipating such false professors (Matt. 24:4).

As such, Jesus gave local churches, who are outposts of this kingdom, the authority to bind and loose, which includes the ability to excommunicate (Matt. 16:19; 18:17–19). Excommunication, then, is one aspect of the authority that Christ gives to the local church for the sake of guarding Christ’s name and reputation on earth (Matt. 18:15–20). It’s a way of saying that someone no longer belongs to the kingdom of Christ, but to the kingdom of Satan (1 Cor. 5:5). Just as baptism functions as a church’s way of publicly affirming an individual’s profession of faith (see Matt. 28:19), so excommunication functions as the church’s way of publicly removing its corporate affirmation from an individual’s profession because that profession appears fraudulent.

Keep in mind what church membership is from the church’s side: it’s the church’s formal affirmation of your profession of faith, together with its commitment to oversee your discipleship. Without discipline, that affirmation and oversight is meaningless, which is to say, membership is meaningless. If a church cannot withdraw its affirmation, what good is the affirmation? For that affirmation and oversight to mean anything, the church needs to be able to “correct the record.” Which is what excommunication is: the church saying to the community, “We previously affirmed this person’s profession, but we can no longer do that.” So the individual might not like it, but the church has its own public relations problem to resolve when the individual under discipline tries to resign. In fact, an individual attempting to resign while under discipline is trying to coerce the who-

le church to make a public statement about the individual the church doesn't believe.

With all this in mind, consider again the example of the man who leaves his wife for another woman. The man continues to profess faith in Christ, but his profession now appears fraudulent, because his life does not produce fruit in keeping with repentance (Matt. 3:8). He has been asked to repent, but he will not. Given a choice between his sin and the commands of his so-called Lord, he chooses his sin. Precisely for such occasions, Jesus has given the local church the authority to excommunicate, the authority to remove its public affirmation of the man's profession. Once upon a time, the church had publicly affirmed the man's profession by accepting him into membership and by sharing baptism and the Lord's Supper with him; it had said to the on-looking world, "Yes, we affirm that this man is a Christ-follower." But now the church does not want the world to be deceived by the man's apparently false profession. Therefore, it acts through church discipline to clarify this man's state for its own members and for the watching world.

In so doing, it effectively says, "No, this is not what a Christ-follower looks like. We cannot affirm his profession, and we cannot identify him with us any longer, because to identify him with us is to identify him with our Lord. And our Lord would never abandon his wife."

Yes, individuals are ultimately accountable to God and not to their churches. Yes, individuals should choose God's side rather than the church's side whenever a church requires its members to go against the Word of God. Yes, the church is a "voluntary organization" insofar as the church cannot conscript members as with an army draft, or keep them from leaving, as with a slave. We're justified by faith alone. Still, Christ has given the corporate gathering of believers an authority he has not given to the lone individual: the authority, we might call it, of guarding the borders

of the kingdom by making public statements on behalf of Christ. It's the authority of the White House press secretary to speak officially for the president, or of an embassy to speak officially for its government. The individual who attempts to preempt this process by resigning before the church enacts formal discipline is guilty of usurping the church's apostolic authority to speak in this manner. In so doing, he compounds his guilt, like the criminal charged with "resisting arrest."

### **PRACTICAL STEPS**

Does a church put itself at legal risk by denying a preemptive resignation and proceeding with discipline? It can, but that risk is ameliorated, if not altogether relieved, by taking two practical steps:

1. Include a statement concerning church discipline in the official church documents, whether a constitution or by-laws.
2. Clearly teach about the possibility of church discipline to all incoming members, and include this teaching in the standard curriculum for prospective members.

Should churches discipline members who explicitly renounce the faith? I don't believe so. Rather, the church should do what it does when someone dies—acknowledge the fact and delete the name from the church's membership directory. That's all it can do. Christ has not given the church authority over the dead or over those who do not name his name. In each case, the church covenant is simply rendered moot. It's worth observing that two of the most important passages on church discipline (Matt. 18:15-17 and 1 Cor. 5) both instruct the church in how to respond to someone who claims to be a brother.

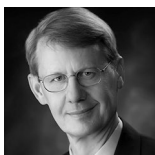
## **CONCLUSION**

To state the argument here in a single paragraph, we can say that ending one's membership in a church requires the consent of both parties. We join a church by the consent of the church, and we leave a church by the consent of the church, because it's the local church that has the authority to publicly represent Christ on earth, as an embassy does its home government. Christ gave the church the authority to bind and loose, not the individual Christian. The man who continues to call himself a Christian and yet attempts to avoid the church's act of discipline is guilty of usurping the power of the keys. Christ has made the church his proxy on earth exactly for such occasions, lest heretics and hypocrites presume to continue speaking for Christ.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Jonathan Leeman is the Editorial Director of 9Marks, and an elder at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D. C. You can find him on Twitter at @JonathanDLeeman.

# Informed Consent: Biblical and Legal Protection for Church Discipline



Ken Sande

America is one of the most litigious countries in the world. Therefore, when a church begins the process of exercising formal, biblical discipline, it will often receive a letter from the member's attorney threatening to sue the church for defamation, invasion of privacy, and intentional infliction of emotional distress. Many church leaders who would not back down have found themselves forced into court, subjected to days of humiliating cross-examination, and shocked to see juries penalize their churches with six-figure damages awards. This trend was triggered by the *Guinn* case in 1984, which resulted in a \$400,000 judgment against a church and its leaders, and has continued to grow for twenty-five years.

Many of these judgments occur because churches have not clearly established and communicated how they will minister to members who are caught in conflict and sin. As a re-

sult, unrepentant members are able to persuade juries that the church's actions were unreasonable and offensive, which is not difficult to do in a culture that prizes autonomy and despises accountability.

Even when a church wins in court, it usually pays an enormous price in terms of legal fees, lost time and energy, damaged witness, distraction from ministry, and congregational confusion and dissension. Therefore, it is not good enough for a church to behave so well that it will *prevail* in a lawsuit. Instead, churches must act with such wisdom and integrity that they will *prevent* lawsuits from being filed in the first place.

One of the most effective ways to prevent such lawsuits is to adopt explicit biblical policies that comprehensively describe how your church will exercise discipline over unrepentant members. These policies will provide your church with one of the most effective defenses to any lawsuit: informed consent. To secure this defense, a church needs to be able to prove to a court that the person complaining of a wrong was in fact fully aware of the church's policies and procedures and knowingly agreed to be bound by them.

Although most churches have provisions in their bylaws about "exercising discipline pursuant to Matthew 18," this kind of general statement is usually insufficient for today's individualistic and anti-church legal climate. Therefore, it is essential that churches update their governing documents by adding language that preserves the church's right to shepherd its flock and rescue wayward members from sin. This added language should address specific challenges that may arise, such as continuing discipline after a member attempts to leave the church or informing your members of your disciplinary actions in order to protect others from harm (e.g., when someone is defrauding senior members through misleading investment schemes).



Based on its experience in mediating and arbitrating lawsuits against churches, Peacemaker Ministries has developed model “Relational Commitments.” These are designed so that churches can clearly establish their own Scripture-based policies on conflict resolution, divorce, counseling methodology, confidentiality, and church discipline (see a sample document at [www.Peacemaker.net/Risk\\_Management](http://www.Peacemaker.net/Risk_Management)).<sup>19</sup>

By updating your governing documents with these kinds of provisions, you can strengthen your ability to obey God’s command to restore straying sheep, while simultaneously reducing your church’s exposure to legal threats.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Ken Sande is the founder of Peacemaker Ministries and president of a new ministry, Relational Wisdom 360.

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<sup>19</sup> Here is a sample provision from one of our model relational commitments: “We realize that our natural human response to correction often is to hide or run away from accountability (Gen. 3:8-10). To avoid falling into this age-old trap and to strengthen our church’s ability to rescue us if we are caught in sin, we agree not to run away from this church to avoid corrective discipline. Therefore, we waive our right to withdraw from membership or accountability if discipline is pending against us. Although we are free to stop attending the church at any time, we agree that a withdrawal while discipline is pending will not be given effect until the church has fulfilled its God-given responsibilities to encourage our repentance and restoration, and to bring the disciplinary process to an orderly conclusion (Matt. 18:12-14; Gal. 6:1; Heb. 13:17).”

