

The Doctrine of the Church (Church Discipline)

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was initially intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions, please contact Pastor Derek at dberry@calvarybaptist.church.

We are a people prone to extremes. Instead of moderation, we swing the pendulum to either the far left or the far right. This certainly appears to be the case with church discipline within our local assemblies. Written almost eighty years ago, Greek scholar H.E. Dana rightly states,

“The abuse of discipline is reprehensible and destructive, but not more than the abandonment of discipline. Two generations ago, the churches were applying discipline in a vindictive and arbitrary fashion that justly brought it into disrepute; today, the pendulum has swung to the other extreme-discipline is almost wholly neglected. It is time for a new generation of pastors to restore this important function of the church to its rightful significance and place in church life.”[1]

So, an influx in the abuse of the keys of the kingdom, namely the authority to loose members, and the ubiquity of an over-sentimentalization of love has led many churches to jettison the biblical doctrine of Church Discipline. Al Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, once said, “The absence of church discipline is no longer remarkable-it is generally not even noticed.”[2] And unfortunately, such is the case. Therefore, we must be cautious not to allow our experiences to be authoritative in matters of the Church, but we must instead let Scripture be the guide that transcends time and experience. And since our faith isn’t novel, I find it helpful to consider that churches in past generations regularly engaged in church discipline.

It's interesting what would make an average churchgoer in our day and age respond with, “Our church would never do this, would we?” It was considered necessary for a church to be regarded as a true gospel-preaching church throughout much of church history. In 1561, Reformed Christians expressed their understanding of these matters in the Belgic Confession:

“The marks by which the true Church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if she maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; *if church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin*; in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God...”[3]

So, when Protestant Christians sought to reform from the heretical Catholic teachings and thereby define a faithful local church, they included the regular practice of church discipline. What's virtually absent in many churches today was considered necessary for a church to be authentic throughout much of church history. To be clear, history and tradition are not authoritative. As Protestants, we're the product of reformers who pushed back against the idea that tradition held a superior or equal role with Scripture. However, we must also remember that we have a cloud of many witnesses; therefore, there's value in considering the normative beliefs and practices throughout church history.

Greg Wills, professor of church history at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, records the history of the corrective discipline in Baptist churches in the 1800s. Here are some interesting statistics. In pre-Civil War days, "Southern Baptists excommunicated nearly 2 percent of their membership every year!"[4] However, their churches continued to grow at twice the population growth rate. So, this idea that practicing church discipline will stunt church growth seems unfounded. To be clear, even with this example, these churches had many issues with membership and discipline. Churches were accepting into membership slaveholders in a way that we'd find scandalous today, as we should. Also, members who were caught dancing would experience church discipline. So, by no means am I seeking to over-romanticize these churches. I only lament the pendulum's swinging to what we see in your average church today.

Before we consider what the Bible says on this subject, allow me to provide a gospel framework for understanding church discipline. Without this framework, church discipline won't make much sense. Chances are you'll categorize this biblical command as cruel and therefore have no desire to practice it. Or you may even think of circumstances you've been in at other churches that lead you to say, "If that's church discipline, I want nothing to do with it!" Much, if not all, of this framework will be me reviewing past sermons. With that said, let's briefly review the following:

1. The Gospel
2. The Christian
3. The Local Church
4. The Membership

What is the gospel message? Chances are, if you've been a believer for a fair amount of time, you've heard the gospel message proclaimed at several different churches. There's often a subtle difference in how that gospel message is proclaimed based on the pastor's understanding of the gospel and our response. Typically, the message itself is very closely aligned. God is holy, meaning he's set apart from his creation and cannot tolerate sin in his presence. We, as humanity, have all sinned, which results in death. There's nothing that we can offer God to be accepted. But because God is love, he sent his Son to live a perfect life, die on behalf of sinners, and rise from the dead. This is the good news of the gospel! And here's the fork in the road. In response to the

gospel, one may say everyone who believes and prays this prayer will have eternal life. An unconditionally loving God will take you as you are, believe.

Another more faithful presentation of our response to the gospel will say that anyone who repents and believes can have eternal life. That eternal life begins today and stretches into eternity; therefore, salvation transforms you in the here and now. We're justified by faith alone, but faith is never alone. And that's because, at the point of repentance and faith, the Holy Spirit indwells you and causes you to walk in obedience to God's word, albeit imperfectly. God not only reconciles you to himself but also to his church.

Do you see? The first version will have no place for church discipline. As a response to an unrepentant professing believer, the first gospel says, "Stop being judgmental! Once saved, always saved. This sounds a lot like legalism! God's love is unconditional!" However, the second version has trained a congregation to understand that the bible teaches to count the cost of following Jesus. They've heard that according to John 15:2, the Father will cut off every branch of Christ's vine that doesn't bear fruit because the gospel changes people. The second congregation won't shrug their shoulders when a believer is in unrepentant sin but will do all they can to call him to repentance. And ultimately, they'll understand how church discipline fits within this gospel framework.

Secondly, the Christian. What is a Christian? There are several ways to describe what a Christian is. However, I think some of our definitions can be deficient and lead to confusion in other areas, particularly regarding church discipline. For starters, a Christian is one who places their hope and trust in the finished work of Jesus. Amen. But there's so much more to it. A Christian is, by definition, a corporate identity. A Christian has been placed into a universal body and is now an ambassador or representative of Jesus here on earth. This full-orbed understanding of the Christian is foundational.

Thirdly, the local church. What is a local church? It's not ten Christians meeting in a park. Jesus has authorized local churches to exercise the keys of the kingdom, thereby deciding whose in and whose out within a local church. Much like Matthew 16, Jesus has given local churches the authority to stand before a confessor and make an announcement on behalf of heaven. Ten random Christians meeting in a park don't have this authority. However, churches are to determine whether one is a true confessor and whether they have the right confession. In God's design, individuals aren't authorized to stand before the nations and declare themselves as Christians on their own. If your passport expires while traveling in a foreign country, you apply to your country's embassy to have your passport renewed. The embassy has authority you, as an individual citizen, do not have. However, the embassy doesn't *make* you a citizen. It does declare your citizenship to this foreign nation. In like matter, the church does not *make* someone a citizen of Christ's kingdom. However, a local church does what an individual Christian is not authorized

to do: declare someone a kingdom citizen. This doesn't mean local churches will exercise the keys perfectly. Nevertheless, they've been given this authority by Jesus. Think of parents. We make mistakes, but that doesn't mean we are without an authoritative mandate from God.

Lastly, church membership. What is church membership? For time's sake, I'll simply remind you of Jonathan Leeman's definition, which I believe is Biblical and insightful.

“Church membership is a formal relationship between a church and a Christian characterized by the church's affirmation and oversight of a Christian's discipleship and the Christian's submission to living out his or her discipleship in the care of the church.”[5]

After considering this gospel framework, I'm confident the doctrine of Church discipline will fit right in. But before diving into the church discipline texts, I have one more preliminary point. According to the Bible, discipline is an act of love, not hate. Our culture teaches otherwise, but we must allow God's Word to shape our worldview. To be clear, these passages aren't referring to church discipline per se, but I think it'll be helpful for us to reorient our minds regarding the idea of discipline in general. Consider a few passages.

6 *For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.”***7** *It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?* **8** *If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.* **9** *Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live?* **10** *For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.* **11** *For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.* -Hebrews 12:6-11

¹⁹ *Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent.* -Revelation 3:19

¹² *for the Lord reproveth him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.* -Proverbs 3:12

I like what Thomas White says, “Most churches would not claim to understand love better than God or to ignore the commands of Scripture, but our actions speak louder than words. The absence of church discipline demonstrates a lack of biblical love in churches.”[6] Let us not think we can outdo God in love. We can't! If we maneuver in a way that opposes Scripture, no matter how loving we think it is, it isn't!

Without further ado, let's discuss church discipline. Historically, Christians have considered church discipline in formative and corrective terms. Let's first deal with the former. Mark Dever provides a compelling illustration and definition of formative discipline.

“It is the stake that helps the tree grow in the right direction, the braces on the teeth, the extra set of wheels on the bicycle. It is the repeated instruction to keep your mouth closed when you're eating, or the regular exhortation to be careful about your words. Every truth that you have ever heard someone talk about is a part of formative discipline.”[7]

In other words, formative discipline is always taking place. It takes place during the preaching of a sermon; it took place this morning in our adult and children's Sunday school classes. It takes place Wednesday evenings whenever there's a brief exhortation given after Scripture reading or even within a prayer. Formative discipline is present when members come together to read Scripture. It occurs when a seasoned believer teaches a young husband how to love his wife or an older woman teaches a young lady how to honor God and her husband. James 3:2 reminds us that “we all stumble in many ways,” therefore, we're all in need. In other words, formative discipline is discipleship. It's what we see in Acts 18.

²⁶ He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. -Acts 18:26

Here's another way of looking at it. Formative discipline is like eating right and exercising, while corrective discipline is like surgery. The regular rhythm of life will include going to the gym and eating a balanced diet. And hopefully, this will preempt even needing to have any surgery. Nevertheless, we can't completely control when we may require surgery. And no one likes going under the knife, but sometimes that knife saves your life. We'll lack maturity if we don't engage in the intentional formative discipline. And this is how we sustain a healthy and biblical culture of corrective discipline; by first ensuring that we are lovingly engaging in each other's lives. Now let's hone in on corrective discipline. Leeman gives a good definition of church discipline that I'll lean on.

“To define it more specifically, corrective church discipline occurs any time sin is corrected within the church body, and it occurs most fully when the church body announces that the covenant between church and member is already broken because the member has proven to be unsubmitive in his or her discipleship to Christ. By this token, the church withdraws its affirmation of the individual's faith, announces that it will cease giving oversight, and releases the individual back into the world.”[8]

Let's consider the biblical texts that teach corrective church discipline, also known as ex-communication, which is the final step of corrective church discipline. First, consider the

precedent set for church discipline in the Old Testament. Consider what God commands Israel concerning the man caught worshipping a foreign deity.

⁶ On the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses the one who is to die shall be put to death; a person shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness. ⁷ The hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people. So you shall purge the evil from your midst. -Deut 17:6-7

Now to the New Testament texts. I'll read them all, providing brief commentary on the journey. And then, we'll take a look at the 1 Corinthians 5 example of church discipline in greater detail.

***15** "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. **16** But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. **17** If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. -Matthew 18:15-17*

Brothers,^[a] if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. -Galatians 6:1

Here we see Paul wasn't just concerned with what was to be done in these situations, but also with how it was to be done.

¹⁴ If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. ¹⁵ Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother. -2 Thessalonians 3:14-15

Clearly, we see that not associating with someone is part of the essence of church discipline.

²⁰ among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme. -1 Timothy 1:20

⁹ But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. ¹⁰ As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, ¹¹ knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned. -Titus 3:9-11

Combining all of these passages, you see that God cares about local churches seeking to practice regenerate membership. By definition, the church is the assembly of the redeemed. Therefore,

the local church has a job to do in not only affirming gospel citizens but also removing those who professed to be a citizen but have the wrong gospel or lifestyle.

When should we practice church discipline? This certainly demands wisdom from both pastors and congregations. Although the Scriptures provide a few lists of sins that warrant discipline, none are exhaustive. Combining 1 Corinthians 5:11; 6:9-10 and 2 Timothy 3:1-5, the following list is provided: sexual immorality, adultery, homosexuality, theft, greed, coveting, wickedness, deceit, envy, slander, pride, murder, idolatry, reviling, drunkenness, swindling, divisiveness, arrogance, abusiveness, ungratefulness, and blasphemy. Other sins could be added because the point is not to create a set of sins in which we automatically pull the trigger. Corrective church discipline is ultimately driven by whether a church can continue publicly affirming a person's profession of faith as credible. In this sense, there's a difference between an ordinary lie told by a Christian that's repented of; this should be expected of Christians who still have an "old man," and a lie that a person builds a life on and refuses to relinquish. Because, based on Scripture, Christians don't build their lives on unrepentant sin.

So, this is what local churches are looking to ascertain, "does this individual have a life that matches their confession?" Let's look at Matthew 18 once more before we plant ourselves in the case study of 1 Corinthians 5.

15 "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. -Matthew 18:15-17

Notice how Jesus uses the principle of Deuteronomy 19 regarding two or three witnesses. That Old Testament passage centered around judges hearing witnesses and then making a judgmental pronouncement regarding the individual in question. And as we'll see in 1 Corinthians 5, Paul says he's already judged the individual who refuses to repent his sin. Well, out goes the idea that Christians aren't supposed to judge! Please get your theology from the Bible and not Tupac lyrics. Although he does forbid self-righteousness, Jesus does instruct the local church to exercise judgment on the professing Christian who fails to repent.

Jonathan Leeman provides a good framework for when local churches should exercise corrective church discipline when sin is *outward, serious, and unrepentant*.

The sin must have an outward manifestation instead of some accusation of a member being greedy or prideful without any actual evidence of such behavior. The sin must be serious, and therefore we shouldn't be looking to pursue every sin to the utmost. The Bible also commands

that we overlook offenses, so there's the wisdom needed. And most importantly, the sin must be unrepented of. If the person confronted repents of their sin, praise God that you've gained your brother or sister. The aim of corrective church discipline is not punitive in nature. Beware of churches and leaders who recommend disciplining a repentant member so they can feel the weight of their mistake. Punishment is not the goal, but instead, it's restoration. We see an example of this in 1 Corinthians 5. Let's look at that passage now.

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. ² And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.³ For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. ⁴ When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵ you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. ⁶ Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? ⁷ Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. ⁸ Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. ⁹ I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—¹⁰ not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.¹¹ But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. ¹² For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? ¹³ God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."

So here we see a culmination of what I've laid out throughout this message. Also, notice that Paul bypasses the first three steps with this man. He goes straight to ex-communication. This is probably because this man's sin was already so public and because this man had become characterized and defined by this particular sin. So as stated earlier, prudence is needed in these matters so churches can decide how long a corrective church discipline case may take. Perhaps it may take a church a few months to determine whether or not an individual is unrepentant of sin. And for others, it may take a few weeks. Each situation will be different and must be handled uniquely regarding timelines.

Based on these verses, let's consider five reasons we should practice church discipline.[9]

1. For the Good of the Person Disciplined.

Notice what Paul says in verse 5. The aim is restoration. This individual believed that his relationship with God was in no jeopardy, even amid his unrepentant sexual sin. And his local church tolerated it! Perhaps their excuse was, "Only God can judge him; we must love him." Wrong! They were harming him by contributing to his self-deception. Anyone who believes they

can live in unrepentant sin as a Christian is deceived. Paul says, *Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?* Beloved, believe the Bible and not our culture; you are called to judge! Often times we judge the wrong people. But this discipline has a redemptive purpose. D.A. Carson, when commenting on the Matthew 18 passage, says,

“The aim is not to score points over him but to win him over because all discipline, even this private kind, must begin with redemptive purposes.[10]

So, we don't celebrate when someone is excommunicated. We mourn, as it's a heartbreaking reality. But we also realize that this is precisely what the doctor ordered, that this individual may repent of their sins. And also, ex-communication doesn't mean we treat the individual poorly. Anabaptists in the past often went too far by treating the ex-communicated worse than unbelievers. We do want these individuals in the church services so they may hear the gospel and repent of their sins. However, our relationship with them has changed. For one, they're to be excluded from membership and the Lord's Table. Secondly, although we don't treat them poorly, there should be a change in relationships. If you're still casually watching basketball games with an individual who has been ex-communicated, this is relaying the wrong message that everything is fine and dandy. Listen again to what Paul says.

“But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one.

I like what Andrew Fuller has to say about this:

“If individual members act contrary to this rule, and carry it freely toward an offender, as if nothing had taken place, it will render the censure of the church of no effect. Those persons also who behave in this manner will be considered by the party as his friends, and others who stand aloof as his enemies, or at least as being unreasonably severe; which will work confusion, and render void the best and most wholesome discipline. We must act in concert, or we may as well do nothing. Members who violate this rule are partakers of other men's sins, and deserve the rebukes of the church for counteracting its measures.[11]

2. For the Good of Other Christians, as They See the Danger of Sin.

These believers at Corinth hadn't come to grasp the gravity of the reality of sin. Sin is destructive. It will actually ruin your life. Therefore, when believers witness an ex-communication, it's a wake-up call to stay alert. We see this reality in the book of Acts when a unique ex-communication occurs.

⁹ But Peter said to her, “How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.” ¹⁰ Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹ And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things. -Acts 5:9-11

After corrective discipline takes place, we should always ask, “Where in my life has the enemy gotten a foothold?” What sins must I repent of today? Lest I fall into the same situation.

3. For the Health of the Church as a Whole

Consider what Paul says in this passage:

⁶ Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? ⁷ Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened.

Yeast represents the unclean and spreading nature of sin. And lest we’re not careful, unrepentant sin will spread like gangrene in a local church, and the next thing you know, many are swept up into unrepentant sin. If you know your Bible, you know multiple examples of this in the Old Testament with Israel.

4. For the Corporate Witness of the Church

When churches conform to the world, our evangelistic task becomes all the more difficult. We reflect the world in a way that they have reason to refer to us as hypocrites. So there’s an evangelistic function connected to church discipline as well.

¹² Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. -1 Peter 2:12

5. For the Glory of God

Lastly, we do this for the glory of God. We practice church discipline because we love God more than man and desire to put that on full display with our actions.

¹⁵ “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. -John 14:15

Ultimately, we do it because Jesus commands it. It’s that simple. But what’s beautiful is when an individual is restored. Some believe it is this same individual whom Paul instructs the Corinthian church to restore due to his repentance in his second letter.

6 For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, 7 so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. 8 So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. -2 Corinthians 2:6-7

We should trust God's plan of restoration for the sinner. As a matter of fact, if we were to take a Biblical Theology journey on the topic of church discipline, we would see the very first case in the garden of Eden in Genesis 3! Adam and Eve sin against God; therefore, he puts them out of his temple. However, he puts them out with restoration as his end goal. He planned to ultimately bring humanity back into his presence through the work of his Son. Therefore, church discipline is redemptive and is a way to model the gospel in our churches.

Let's pray.

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- [1] H.E. Dana, *A Manual of Ecclesiology* (Kansas City, KS: Central Seminary Press, 1944), 244.
- [2] R. Albert Mogler Jr. "Church Discipline: The Missing Mark," in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark E Dever (Washington, DC: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 43
- [3] Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), 419-20.
- [4] Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South 1785-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 32.
- [5] Jonathan Leeman, *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* (Wheaton, Illinois, 2012), 64.
- [6] Thomas White "The Why, How, and When of Church Discipline" in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age* ed. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Publishing Group 2015) 202.
- [7] Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton Illinois 2021), 149
- [8] Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*, 220.
- [9] List can be found in Dever's word, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*. 165-167
- [10] D.A. Carson, *Matthew*, Expositor's Bible Commentary, ed. Tremper Longman and Donald Garland, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 402.
- [11] Andrew Fuller, *Andrew Fuller Works*, vol. 3, 334-35