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Yearly subscription costs for four issues: \$20, individual inside the U. S.; \$30, individual outside the U. S.; \$35, institutional inside the U. S.; \$45, institutional outside the U. S. Opinions expressed in *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* are solely the responsibility of the authors and are not necessarily those of the editors, members of the Advisory Board, or The Forum. We encourage the submission of letters, suggestions and articles by our readers. Any article submissions should conform to the *Journal of Biblical Literature* stylistic guidelines.

This periodical is indexed in *Religion Index One: Periodicals*, the *Index to Book Reviews in Religions*, *Religion Indexes: Ten Year Subset on CD-ROM*, and the

ATLA Religion Database on CD-ROM, published by the American Theological Library Association, 250 S. Wacker Dr., 16th Fl., Chicago, IL 60606, E-mail: atla@atla.com, WWW: <http://atla.com/>.

THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY is published quarterly by The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2825 Lexington Road, Louisville, KY 40280. Winter 2000. Vol. 4, No. 4. Copyright © 2000 The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. ISSN 1520-7307. Second Class postage paid at Louisville, KY. Postmaster: Send address changes to: SBTS Box 2388, 2825 Lexington Road, Louisville, KY 40280.

Loving Discipline

Editorial: Thomas R. Schreiner

Thomas R. Schreiner is a professor of New Testament at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He has also taught New Testament at Azusa Pacific University and Bethel Theological Seminary. Recently, he completed a commentary on Romans in the Baker Exegetical Commentary Series. Currently, he is working on a theology of the apostle Paul and is co-authoring a work on perseverance and assurance (both due from InterVarsity Press). He is also serving as the preaching pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky.

We devote an issue of the journal to church discipline since it is often forgotten or overlooked in today's church, even in churches that claim to live according to the scriptures. What must be said at the outset is that discipline is not contrary to love but, an expression of love, when properly applied. Our culture is quick to use labels, such as, "mean-spirited," "harsh," and "proud" against those who exercise discipline. We are prone to confuse love with sentimentality, thinking that love is always accepting, soft, and tolerant. Some parents commit this error in raising their children, and so are reluctant to correct and admonish them. They shower their children with gifts and give them everything they desire, and then wonder why their children are self-absorbed. Genuine love, of course, expresses itself through both encouragement and admonishment, both acceptance and correction. In the same way, when the church is functioning in a healthy manner, the members are both comforted and corrected.

Censorious judgment of others is itself censured by Paul (Rom 2:1), but it does not follow from this that all evaluation and judgment of others is banned.¹ The judgment of unbelievers is to be left to God, for unbelievers are not part of the Christian community (1 Cor 5:12-13), but Paul specifically commands believers to judge one another in 1 Cor 5:12, "Should you not judge those inside the church?" The beauty of the church is preserved by mutual accountability and responsibility. Those who are tripped up by sin are to be restored by others in the community who

are walking in the Spirit (Gal 6:1). Discernment must be exercised to detect those who have fallen astray into sin. Does such judgment fall under the strictures of Romans 2:1 where Paul condemns those who judge others? Not if it is exercised "in a spirit of gentleness, looking to yourself lest you also be tempted" (Gal 6:1). Judging that is supercilious, censorious, and proud is castigated by Paul, but there is a kind of evaluation of others that is gentle but firm, loving but strict, humble but severe. Hatred should never co-exist with discipline. Associating with or even eating with a person under discipline is banned (1 Cor 5:9, 11), for such fellowship would communicate that nothing serious has happened. Relating to the person as usual would display a lack of love, betraying apathy about the person's salvation. If we see someone who is about to wander over a cliff and destroy himself, it is unloving to say nothing and watch that person plunge to destruction.

In this issue of the journal the biblical and theological foundations for church discipline are explored and defended. How did our Baptist forefathers view and practice church discipline? Greg Wills provides a historical perspective, opening a window into church discipline in the nineteenth century by contrasting it with the virtual abandonment of discipline in the twentieth century. How can churches practice church discipline in a litigious culture in which lawsuits are exceedingly common? Lawsuits may not be avoided, even by churches that are prudent. Churches can take some steps, however, to protect themselves, as Wayne

House explains in his practical article. Should pastors be restored who have sinned in a way that warrants their dismissal? This is a large question that is not examined in detail, but Don Carson helps us begin to sort through the issue in his insightful forum piece. Every article in this issue is instructive and challenging, but I will never forget the day I heard Hershael York's sermon on church discipline in the Southern Seminary Chapel. It is one of the most powerful sermons I have ever heard, and that sermon is included for the edification of our readers in this issue.

Finally, it should be noted that we are adding a new feature to the journal in this issue. Beginning with this issue we will regularly include reviews of significant books. Dr. Chad Brand, professor of theology at Boyce College, is our book review editor, and I am grateful for his assistance in this matter. No one has time to read all that is being written today, and book reviews provide a summary and critique of important works, helping us decide whether we should take the time to read the book under review. I am confident that the addition of book reviews will make *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* even more useful to our readers.

ENDNOTES

¹ Most of this paragraph is taken from my forthcoming book, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001). Used by permission.

Southern Baptists and Church Discipline

Gregory A. Wills

Gregory A. Wills is Assistant Professor of Church History at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is the author of the highly acclaimed *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900* (Oxford University Press, 1996).

For more than twenty years voting majorities at the annual meetings of the Southern Baptist Convention have endorsed a “conservative” platform based on a commitment to the inerrancy of the scriptures. They have rejected the “moderate” platform based on freedom and toleration. The argument was not theoretical. The question at stake was whether the convention had authority to establish doctrinal boundaries—to enforce doctrinal orthodoxy as a condition of service as a trustee or employee of the convention’s boards and seminaries. When convention majorities voted in favor of inerrancy, they asserted that the convention had authority to judge religious beliefs in its appointments.

In our churches, however, we demonstrate considerable ambivalence toward asserting such authority. We want to make certain that our missionaries and seminary professors are orthodox in faith and pure in behavior, but we tolerate much lower standards in our churches. Pastors, missionaries, and teachers are rightly held to higher standards. But our churches falter in enforcing New Testament standards of church membership. Once persons have prayed the sinner’s prayer and submitted to immersion, their membership is secure in most churches for as long as they wish to remain a member—usually longer.

Most of our churches do not wish to tolerate sin and heresy. In many churches immoral members receive attention from the pastor and other leaders. The leaders

put them through counseling and remove them from committees and public roles. But immorality and heresy rarely jeopardize membership. Churches in practice deny their authority to judge the belief and behavior of individual members. This was not always the case. Before the twentieth century Baptist churches in the South exercised strict authority over the behavior and belief of their individual members. They expressed this authority primarily in the practice of church discipline.

Baptist Church Discipline in the Nineteenth-Century South

In 1806 William Barnes became estranged from some of the members of the Savannah First Baptist Church and requested letters of dismissal in order that he and his family might join another church. The church believed that Barnes had neglected his religious duties and charged him with “continued absence from the church, and from the Table of the Lord, at our communion.” Pastor Henry Holcombe advised the church to deal with him gently and so they pronounced against him “the lowest censure of the church, to wit, rebuke.” Barnes ignored the action.¹

One month later, the church again cited him to answer for his absence. They interpreted his withdrawal as rebellion against their authority and grieved at “the apparent contempt with which Brother William B. Barnes has for a long time treated us, by his perpetual absence from our days of discipline, as well as from our

communion seasons, not partaking with us of the Lord's Supper."

When Henry Williams delivered the church's message, Barnes exploded in frustration. His attempts to cast off ecclesiastical control had failed. According to Williams's account, Barnes "appeared very angry, expressed dissatisfaction with some of the brethren, and at length swore profanely that he would not appear at any ecclesiastical court, for that he hated them, and always had hated them, etc." When Barnes did not appear as summoned, the church disbarred him from the privileges of membership, including the Lord's Supper, and resolved "that Brother William B. Barnes, not only for his repeated contempt of this church, but also for the horrid sin of profane swearing, be suspended."

The church's forbearance extended two months more. Then they excommunicated him.

Our beloved pastor [Henry Holcombe] stated to the church that it was long since the church had expected that our brother William B. Barnes would have been publicly expelled by excommunication from the special privileges of this church, that he however had thought proper to write to him, and had used every argument to induce his return to his duty and to order, hoping thereby to gain him by love, that he had also received letters from him, but that he was sorry to inform the church that there was no reason, from the spirit in which he wrote, to hope for his wished for restoration. The church, after expressing much sorrow, for the necessity which impelled them, unanimously resolved to excommunicate the offending brother from this church, but in order that the cup of forbearance should, as it were, be drained towards him, they agreed that his sentence should not be made public till next Lord's Day a week, that he

may have opportunity to seek restoration on gospel principles.

When the church informed Barnes, he "said he was willing they proceed to his excommunication." On Sunday, pastor Henry Holcombe, "towards the latter part of his forenoon sermon in a very moderate and delicate manner pronounced the church's act of excommunication against Mr. William B. Barnes." In the final action of this four-month drama, the Savannah Baptist Church demoted "Brother Barnes" to "Mr. Barnes."

If he did not know it before, Barnes discovered the hard way that Baptists accepted no opposition to the principle of ecclesiastical authority. To an antebellum Baptist, a church without discipline had little claim to be a church of Christ. For this reason Savannah Baptists refused to permit Barnes to absent himself from their "days of discipline." For the same reason, the church refused to allow Barnes's "contempt" to go unrebuked. Baptists installed discipline at the center of church life and required their members to submit to the church's authority.

Nineteenth-century Southern Baptists exercised church discipline on a remarkable scale. Because they believed that it was a divine ordinance instituted by the Head of the church, they exercised discipline with unremitting ardor. Year after year they repeated the Barnes affair throughout the South. By the time of the Civil War Southern Baptists had excommunicated more than forty thousand members in Georgia alone. Baptist churches in the southern states brought to trial between 3 and 4 percent of their membership every year. They excommunicated about half of those brought to trial, excluding between 1 and 2 percent of their membership annually.²

Churches attended to their discipline at their monthly church conferences. Most churches had worship only once per month. On the Saturday prior to the monthly service they held their conference. Here they dealt with all matters of fellowship, including discipline. The discipline sometimes began when an individual arose to accuse himself. "Brother Lovall accused himself of drinking too much spiritous liquor and of getting into a great rage of anger at the same time," or "brother Dread Wilder came forward and observed that he had lately gotten very angry, for which ordered that he be reproved by the Moderator which was done."³

More commonly one of the leaders of the congregation, usually a deacon, accused. For example, "Brother Jones from the Board of Deacons, preferred charges of profanity and unchristian conduct against Brother Oppenheim." The church then appointed a discipline committee, as in this case, to "investigate the matter, and cite Brother Oppenheim to appear before the church and answer said charges." Such committees reported their findings and recommended either guilt or innocence. The church sometimes rejected the report and charged the committee to do a better job. When they accepted the report, they could either follow the recommendation or not. If the church found the accused guilty, they moved on to the sentence.⁴

Accused members who denied their guilt gained acquittal almost half the time. But the accused confessed their guilt in more than 90 percent of cases. The churches generally sought to be fair and to discover the truth. The members generally submitted and acknowledged their crimes.⁵

Once the church convicted an offender, they imposed one of two sentences. Those offenders who were guilty of less serious offenses and who repented of them received "rebuke" or "censure" from the moderator of the conference. He explained the nature of the offense, why it was immoral according to the scriptures, and how it injured the glory of Christ and the soul of the offender. The church however retained in fellowship the member thus admonished.

Those offenders who did not repent received excommunication. So did those who committed serious offenses—whether they repented or not. Excommunication was exclusion from the fellowship of the church. It withdrew the privileges of membership. Excluded persons could not participate in the Lord's Supper, could not vote in conference, and no longer bore the title "brother" or "sister." This did not mean that they were not truly redeemed. It meant rather that the person's belief or behavior was incompatible with church membership.

In most churches pastors pronounced the sentence. When Newnan (Georgia) Baptist Church excluded Jeremiah Mulloy, the clerk's *et ceteras* indicated the use of a formula: "The sentence was immediately pronounced by the Moderator that Jere Mulloy was no more known as brother, etc. etc." One clerk left a detailed description of how William B. Johnson, pastor of Savannah Baptist Church and later the first president of the Southern Baptist Convention, addressed Elizabeth Jones:

Our pastor proceeded to the painful, solemn act of declaring to her in the presence of the church her expulsion from its fellowship and privileges. In doing this he opened to her view the dreadful nature and tendency of the crime she had so

habitually committed for a long time. He explained to her the nature of the obligations she had been brought under to abstain from all sin. He stated to her the guilt she had contracted in violation of these obligations by the commission of the crime for which she was excommunicated. The nature and design of the awful censure which she had incurred was explained also, and the whole enforced upon her heart and conscience with encouraging words to induce her to turn from the error of her ways to the Lord for mercy and pardon.

By such declarations of ecclesiastical authority churches expressed their confidence that they acted in obedience to the explicit commands of Christ and his apostles.⁶

The churches restored about one-third of excommunicants to membership. Excluded members who repented of the offense gained restoration. The churches judged the repentance. They expected penitents to attend the worship services regularly and to persevere in righteous behavior for three to twelve months after their exclusion. They then appeared before the church, confessed their sin, vindicated the church's action and authority, and pledged to lead a moral life. Churches judged such a repentance genuine and restored the excommunicate to membership.

Discipline sometimes troubled the church and divided the members into factions. Sometimes churches formally separated. But remarkably few persons resisted the church's authority. Most recognized the church's right to enforce standards of belief and behavior through discipline.

The churches practiced discipline democratically. In most churches every member voted. The majority of churches

permitted women members to vote, though some restricted this. In many churches the black members voted also. Church authority, they held, inhered in the congregation jointly.

Women made up the majority of the church membership in Southern Baptist churches in the nineteenth century, constituting between 60 and 65 percent of the membership. But the men kept the machinery going by providing a steady stream of offenders to the church conferences. Men were the offenders in 74 percent of cases. On average the churches hauled one out of every twelve white male members before the church every year.⁷

Baptists typically distinguished between grave and minor offences. Grave offenses intrinsically damaged the reputation of Christ and his church in the eyes of the world. They demanded immediate and decisive action. Churches generally excluded persons guilty of grave offenses whether they repented or not. Those guilty of lesser offenses generally retained their membership after confessing their sin and accepting a rebuke from the moderator.

The churches noticed a broad range of offences: drunkenness, absence from church, resisting the authority of the church, interpersonal hostility, slander, anger, quarreling, cursing, swearing, profanity, falsehood, adultery, fornication, fighting, abuse, theft, debt evasion, neglecting family, neglecting duty, Sabbath-breaking, dancing, horse-racing, and gambling. Baptist churches indicted members who did such things.

Purposes of Church Discipline

Church discipline was always difficult and unpleasant. The wonder is not that Baptists practiced it on a large scale but

that they practiced it at all. But Baptists persevered in church discipline because they believed that discipleship required it. Christ commanded his churches to exclude those who were immoral or who denied the doctrines of the gospel. They could not in good conscience call themselves Christians while ignoring a clear command of Christ.

Baptists drew encouragement in their practice however from reflecting on the benefits of discipline. The benefits, they felt, were basically three: discipline kept the churches pure and thereby glorified Christ; discipline aided the offenders themselves; and discipline fostered revival and the conversion of sinners.

Discipline kept the churches pure by expelling the wicked. It also exposed hypocrites and excised the old leaven. It also motivated the rest of the membership to pursue holiness. J. M. Chiles, a South Carolina pastor, described this benefit of church discipline in 1856:

“Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear.” Thus will it serve as a check upon sin, and an incentive to holiness. It will further benefit the church by increasing it[s] spirituality. Obedience to the divine command is always attended with the divine blessing, and the exclusion of unworthy members, will remove those who were as an incumbent [encumbrance] to the advancing prosperity of the body. It cannot be supposed that all who unite with the church are genuine Christians. Some are deceived mistaking partial awakenings for thorough convictions, and partial reformation for thorough conversion. Others act hypocritically and impose upon the church by a mere picture of piety to accomplish a selfish end.

Baptists exercised discipline for the benefit of the offender also. Baptists agreed

with Chiles that “the individual under censure will be benefited by strict and prompt discipline, being convinced that the law of Christ condemns his conduct, and that the church must enforce that law.” Discipline was a medicine of the soul for straying members.⁸

Baptists also believed that their strict discipline supported evangelism and the conversion of sinners. James P. Boyce, pastor of Columbia (South Carolina) Baptist Church and founding president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, urged this consideration in 1852:

Another reason to exercise church discipline is, that thus only can the church be led to perform the glorious work of evangelizing the world. Not only is it true that to none but a holy church will the Holy Spirit be given as an assistant, and as a consequence of this, it could have no success; but the want of obedience to Christ’s will in minor matters, and of conformity to his example in ordinary life, will prevent obedience to him with respect to those commands which require the exercise of self-denial, and the putting forth of earnest and continued effort, and conformity to an example so far above that which man can attain, without divine assistance, as to give of itself sufficient proof of the discipleship of him who thus conforms.

Both church discipline and personal evangelism went against the grain of personal comfort. If Christians did not exercise the self-denial requisite to keep up church discipline, they could not be expected to exercise the denial requisite for evangelism. Disobedience in one area could be expected to spread to the other.⁹

Baptists believed also that God poured out the blessings of the Holy Spirit upon churches that were strict and faithful in their discipline. In 1817 Georgia, an eyewitness recalled, “brother Lancaster,” a

member of the Powelton Baptist Church, “rendered himself obnoxious to discipline” by allowing the young people at his house to dance at his daughter’s wedding. The dancers conducted themselves with decorum and Lancaster saw no harm in celebrating the occasion with fiddling and dancing. The church saw the matter differently. On conference day, “after singing and prayer, the ecclesiastical court was opened, the Rev. Jesse Mercer, the pastor of said church, presiding as moderator.” A large crowd attended, some for and some against Lancaster. Mercer introduced the case to the congregation, explained the rules of “the judicatory,” and delineated the reasons why fiddling and dancing should be considered immoral: modern dancing was sensual and lascivious, and it would be impossible for Christians embarking upon a dance “to invoke the blessing of God by prayer.” He urged the church to settle the “vexed question” of dancing once and for all.¹⁰

Mercer, president of the Georgia Baptist Convention from 1822 to 1840, gained fame as a pastor, preacher, and denominational leader. His ability to manage discipline proceedings was reputedly without equal—he rarely failed to carry his point. The Lancaster trial was no exception. Lancaster rose from his seat and admitted that the accusation was true, “but never until now have I been prepared to confess its guilt.” Mercer’s “learned and lucid address” convinced him that he was a transgressor. Normally at this point in the trial, the offender would have requested forgiveness, and the church would have granted it, but now the accused turned accuser, and some of the members egged him on: “Let him go on! Let him go on!” Mercer thought Lancaster out of order, but agreed to allow it: “Let

us have a thorough winnowing of the wheat and get rid of the chaff.”

Lancaster charged that the church cried out against dancing and fiddling when more serious offenses passed without censure. Turning to the assembled members, he indicted them for Sabbath breaking, partiality, worldliness, and gossiping. The church stigmatized the tunes of five-dollar fiddles in the cabins of the poor as worldly, Lancaster insinuated, but blessed the notes of eight-hundred-dollar pianos in the mansions of the rich as an “innocent recreation.” The women of the church, his chief accusers, had refined away their piety, lavishing praise on the “frothy” discourses of important preachers, but showering contempt on the simple sermons of plain, rustic ministers.

When Lancaster’s courage failed, Mercer encouraged him to continue, saying that it was good “that our faults be exposed, and that we ought to submit to have them whipped in the proper spirit of charity.” The women likewise shouted “Go on! Go on! We want to know what it is that sticks in your throat.” When Lancaster finished, he asked forgiveness for the frolic. Mercer “rose in tears,” offering prayer that God would make the trial an “occasion of a gracious outpouring of his Spirit, of burying all animosities and ill feelings.” The church then “rose up to greet and shake hands with the offending brother, and to sing and rejoice together—and that was the commencement of the most signal revival ever had in that church.” According to Baptists like Mercer, “a thorough winnowing of the wheat” resulted in a harvest of souls and renewed devotion to God.

The Lapse of Church Discipline

In the 1870s the practice of church dis-

cipline in Southern Baptist churches began to subside. The trend accelerated in subsequent decades. By the 1930s discipline was quite rare—most reported exclusions were merely the cleaning of church rolls of names of members long inactive and forgotten. In the 1940s most associations stopped bothering to record exclusions.

No Baptist leaders opposed discipline. They on the contrary urged its recovery. Z. T. Cody, the talented and engaging editor of *South Carolina's Baptist Courier*, lamented the loss of discipline in 1921:

Our churches have practically no discipline. As to worldliness and minor offences, many of our churches do nothing. But what is far worse, our churches often allow the most serious moral transgressions to go unnoticed. Even at times, to save a disturbance in the church, they will grant a minister a letter who, as they know, has grossly violated, not only the proprieties of life, but the moral law of God. . . . What we dread today more than aught else is a disturbance in the "peace" of a church. . . . We do not know what is the remedy for this lapsed condition.

Victor Masters, George W. Truett, J. B. Gambrell, and other denominational leaders of the early twentieth century exhorted Southern Baptists to recover church discipline. But there was no recovery. Like an ebb tide it slipped away.¹¹

The causes are complex. Such factors as urbanization, faith in moral and social progress, civil religion, activism, and the search for church efficiency contributed. Commitment to an expansive individualism grew in response to such cultural trends and undermined the traditional Baptist commitment to the authority of the congregation. Belief in the authority of the congregation is foundational to discipline.

Its lapse meant the loss of discipline.

Twenty-First-Century Prospects

Southern Baptists have established their commitment to the inerrancy of the scriptures. These scriptures teach the obligation of the churches to protect their purity by church discipline. Yet most Southern Baptist churches manifest little zeal to obey the scripture here.

Recovery will not be easy should it ever occur. There are powerful trends running counter to all that discipline entails. Our local church ecclesiology is weak in theory and practice—that is, we can not find a scriptural ecclesiology, so we substitute whatever seems to promote conversion and denominational loyalty. We lack spirituality—we fear humans more than God. We are worldly. We surely have a large percentage of unregenerate church members. We do not trust God to accomplish his will in his way. We refuse to insist upon a scripture teaching that affects anyone other than ourselves. We do not have that confidence in interpretation that is willing to take responsibility for it.

Victor Masters, who edited Baptist papers in Virginia, South Carolina, and Kentucky, concluded that Baptists did not exercise church discipline because they nurtured a false sentimentality:

Sentimentality is an enemy of church discipline. Sentimentality is the love of man divorced from the love of truth. Under the specious guise of broadened sympathies it cloaks a big lot of hypocrisy and moral decay. The church sentimentalist is so kind to his fellow church member that he is willing to ignore the plain instructions of the Book of his faith rather than bring him to account for unchristian conduct. "Judge not that ye be not judged," he quotes, but he forgets to quote (1 Cor. 5:12, 13) "Do not ye judge them

that are within, whereas them that are without God judgeth.”¹²

The reasons that led to the decline of discipline are with us still. J. C. Hiden has summarized the problems:

While it is true that a Baptist church is, in theory, a body of regenerated, baptized believers, it can hardly be doubted that, in our wild scramble for numbers, we of this generation—preachers and people—are becoming less and less disposed to insist upon what our fathers used to call the marks of a genuine “grace experience” on the part of those who offer themselves as candidates for baptism and church membership. . . . If a long church-roll were any evidence of efficiency, or if large numbers were indication of large graces, it would be easy to understand this all prevailing anxiety for numbers. But when it is perfectly clear to the dullest apprehension among us, that such is not the case, it must be confessed that this wild desire for counting up our hosts is too highly suggestive of David’s sad sin in numbering Israel. Who, where, and of what value are the multitudinous hosts of Baptists that we put into the Associations and Conventions in the bounds of the Southern Baptist Convention?

He wrote this in 1877; it is truer now.¹³

And then there are the objections to discipline. Some will argue that it is contrary to scripture. Scripture says “Judge not lest ye be judged.” But this verse deals not with church discipline but with personal hypocrisy. Scripture on the contrary requires us to judge. For Christ commanded his churches in Matthew 18:15-17 to judge and expel the member who sinned against his brother but did not repent. Paul taught the same duty in 1 Corinthians 5:12. Many commands in the New Testament require the churches to judge the teaching and behavior of mem-

bers (e.g., 2 Thess 3:14; 1 Tim 5:20; Tit 3:10; 2 John 3:10). Jesus commends the church at Ephesus because they “cannot tolerate wicked men” (Rev 2:2) and he rebukes the churches at Pergamum and Thyatira for tolerating false teaching and false teachers (Rev 2:14-16, 20-23).

Some will object that discipline violates soul liberty. We have a right, they say, to serve God as we believe that he requires. I grant this. But, they say, church discipline will interfere with this right. This I reject. Discipline does not interfere with any member’s rights. It does not seek to coerce or constrain persons against their will, though it does seek to move the will. The church rightly replies that its members are free to do as they see fit, but they must grant the church the same freedom they claim for themselves. The church has a right to do what it believes God requires it to do. The church should not seek to coerce an immoral member. It merely says, “If you commit immorality and refuse repentance, we must exclude you from our fellowship.” The individual is as free as ever to pursue immorality. But he or she may no longer do so as a member of that church.

Nineteenth-century Baptists argued precisely this. In 1825 Georgia pastor Samuel Law argued that if the churches could not exercise discipline they would not be free but would be captive to immorality.

To deny the right of a church to take cognizance of the religious sentiments of its members would be to sacrifice the liberty of the society to the licentiousness of the individual. And [it would be] to say, no body of Christians have any right to determine that they will unite with those only who are nearly agreed in their religious sentiments. . . . For two cannot walk comfortably together

except they be agreed; nor can a Christian society flourish, where important truth is sacrificed to worldly policy, under the specious name of candor and liberality.

Baptists submitted both their behavior and their beliefs to the authority of the congregation.¹⁴

Some will object similarly that church discipline destroys our individual freedom to interpret the Bible for ourselves. As individuals we have freedom to interpret for ourselves. This now means something different from what it once meant however. It once meant that the state should leave persons free to interpret the scripture themselves, that it should establish no church by law and impose no creed by coercion.

The reason individuals had to be free to interpret was because God required them to hear his word and obey it. Christians are obligated to do God's will. To know our duty we must interpret his word. We will each have to give account before God for our actions. To plead that we disobeyed because the state commanded it is to say merely that we feared humans more than God. But state churches illegitimately punished those who obeyed. The state churches for example opposed believer's baptism. Baptists understood scripture to require this as a matter of obedience. Baptists suffered persecution at the urging or with the consent of state churches. They needed religious freedom in order to obey without state interference. The freedom served an obligation.

Churches as well as individuals are obliged to interpret the word of God. God imposes some duties on churches as churches. Church discipline is such a duty. Hence, the freedom of the individual to interpret the word can be no greater than

the freedom of the church to do the same. If the church is to obey God it must come to a corporate understanding of what the scripture declares to be its duties. Nineteenth-century Baptists did this.

They did not always come to consensus. Sometimes in fact the difference of opinion resulted in schism. Long Run Baptist Church in Kentucky divided in 1804 when they disagreed about whether it was sinful to tell a lie to save a life: "Suppose a man has five children. The Indians come and kill four of them, the fifth one being hidden near by. The savages then ask the father if he has another child. Would he be justifiable in telling them that he had not?" After impassioned debate the "lying party" withdrew and formed a new church. But regardless of the results, duty to God meant that they had to try.¹⁵

Disagreements did not discourage them. When differences emerged they investigated the scriptures and discussed and argued from the relevant texts. In 1816 the Columbia (South Carolina) First Baptist Church decided a dispute about working on Sunday: "The business of the church was then entered on; when it appeared that brother E. Arledge who had been engaged in butchering bears on the Sabbath days and had been spoken to on the subject by brother Wilkins, had appealed to the church for a decision on the case whether it was not admissible for him to continue in the practice. The church however decided that it was improper and that brother Arledge ought to desist from the practice, which brother Arledge agrees to do." The church arrived at a corporate interpretation. Individual members submitted to the church's decision.¹⁶

It is of course specious to argue that just because we can not always agree on the interpretation of our duties, we should not

enforce obedience by discipline. Perfect antisepsis in surgical operations is impossible, but that is no argument for neglecting to sterilize operating rooms. The persistence of a few germs is no reason to perform surgery in the sewer. The attempt at antisepsis improves the outcome considerably. So likewise the attempt to interpret our duties and discipline improves the results.

Some will object that discipline will injure the church. Our first concern however should be doing God's will. One of the earmarks of the Reformed Protestant piety with which English-speaking Baptists have traditionally identified is confidence in God's power. There is a kind of motto of this piety: "Attend to duty; leave the results to God." In the area of church discipline we do not trust his power or his word and effectively usurp his authority in the churches by refusing to do our known duty. In fact discipline will bring all the benefits that our nineteenth-century predecessors described.

Some will object that discipline will harm missions and evangelism. But obedience to God is no obstacle to conversion. We can not expect God's blessing upon churches in deliberate and indifferent disobedience to his plain command. God has blessed Southern Baptist churches in the twentieth century in spite of our disobedience. Evidence has been growing for at least a generation that God may be withdrawing his blessing.

In 1874 A. B. Woodfin, who was pastor of churches in Virginia, South Carolina, and Alabama, urged the churches to faithfulness:

I believe this [church discipline] is the most important subject that can engage the pulpit at this time. Until our churches purge out the old

leaven, it will be utterly vain to pray for conversion of souls. . . . An organization which has no corrective church discipline, whatever else it may be, is scarcely fit to be called a church of Jesus Christ; for the Lord has said, "Offences must needs come," "Put away from among yourselves that wicked person."

Woodfin's words ought to carry even greater conviction in our own day.¹⁷

ENDNOTES

¹ Church Book, Savannah First Baptist Church, Savannah, Ga., 2 May 1806-14 Sept. 1806, Special Collections, Main Library, Mercer University, Macon, Ga. This account of the Barnes case is closely adapted from my *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 11-12. In quotes from nineteenth-century sources, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation have been conformed to modern usage; some abbreviations have been spelled out.

² These statistics derive from the annual reports of more than 3,000 association meetings in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia.

³ Church Book, Powelton Baptist Church, Hancock Co., Ga., 4 Aug. 1798 (both), Special Collections, Main Library, Mercer University, Macon, Ga.

⁴ The example is from Church Book, Columbia First Baptist Church, Columbia, S.C., 4 June 1874, Baptist Historical Collection, James B. Duke Library, Furman University, Greenville, S.C., microfilm.

⁵ These statistics derive from an analysis of the minutes of thirty-seven Baptist churches in Georgia from 1785 to 1900,

for a total of 2,019 church-years. For more discussion of the usual procedures of church discipline, see Wills, 37-49.

⁶Church Book, Newnan First Baptist Church, Newnan, Ga., 26 Feb. 1831, Special Collections, Main Library, Mercer University, Macon, Ga.

⁷See Wills, 50-59.

⁸J. M. Chiles, "Circular Letter," in Edgefield (S.C.) Baptist Association, *Minutes*, 1856, 16.

⁹James P. Boyce, "Church Discipline—Its Importance," *Southern Baptist*, 18 Feb. 1852, 2.

¹⁰This account of the Lancaster case is from Wills, 26-28.

¹¹Z. T. Cody, "The Lapse of Church Discipline," *Baptist Courier*, 6 Oct. 1921, 4. See also Victor Masters, "The Decadence of Discipline," *Baptist Courier*, 17 July 1902, 2; George W. Truett, "Church Discipline," *Baptist Courier*, 23 Sept. 1915, 1-2; J. B. Gambrell, "Southern and Northern Baptists," *Christian Index*, 11 May 1893, 1.

¹²Victor Masters, "Church Discipline," *Baptist Courier*, 21 Aug. 1902, 1-2.

¹³J. C. Hiden, "Looseness of Discipline," *Working Christian*, 22 Mar. 1877, 2.

¹⁴Samuel Law, "Circular Letter," in Sunbury (Ga.) Baptist Association, *Minutes*, 1825, 11-12.

¹⁵J. H. Spencer, *A History of Kentucky Baptists from 1769-1885* (Cincinnati: J. H. Spencer, 1885), 1:355-356.

¹⁶Church Book, Columbia First Baptist Church, Columbia, S.C., 19 Oct. 1816, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, S.C.

¹⁷A. B. Woodfin, quoted in C. M.

McJunkin, untitled, *Working Christian*, 20 Apr. 1876, 2.

Church Discipline: The Missing Mark¹

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What is pure is corrupted much more quickly than what is corrupt is purified.

—John Cassian (A.D. 360-435)

The decline of church discipline is perhaps the most visible failure of the contemporary church. No longer concerned with maintaining purity of confession or lifestyle, the contemporary church sees itself as a voluntary association of autonomous members, with minimal moral accountability to God, much less to each other.

The absence of church discipline is no longer remarkable—it is generally not even noticed. Regulative and restorative church discipline is, to many church members, no longer a meaningful category, or even a memory. The present generation of both ministers and church members is virtually without experience of biblical church discipline.

As a matter of fact, most Christians introduced to the biblical teaching concerning church discipline confront the issue of church discipline as an idea they have never before encountered. At first hearing, the issue seems as antiquarian and foreign as the Spanish Inquisition and the Salem witch trials. Their only acquaintance with the disciplinary ministry of the church is often a literary invention such as *The Scarlet Letter*.

And yet, without a recovery of functional church discipline—firmly established upon the principles revealed in the Bible—the church will continue its slide into moral dissolution and relativism.

Evangelicals have long recognized discipline as the “third mark” of the authentic church.² Authentic biblical discipline is not an elective, but a necessary and integral mark of authentic Christianity.

How did this happen? How could the church so quickly and pervasively abandon one of its most essential functions and responsibilities? The answer is found in developments both internal and external to the church.

Put simply, the abandonment of church discipline is linked to American Christianity's creeping accommodation to American culture. As the twentieth century began, this accommodation became increasingly evident as the church acquiesced to a culture of moral individualism.

Though the nineteenth century was not a golden era for American evangelicals, the century did see the consolidation of evangelical theology and church patterns. Manuals of church discipline and congregational records indicate that discipline was regularly applied. Protestant congregations exercised discipline as a necessary and natural ministry to the members of the church, and as a means of protecting the doctrinal and moral integrity of the congregation.

As ardent congregationalists, the Baptists left a particularly instructive record of nineteenth-century discipline. Historian Gregory A. Wills aptly commented, “To an antebellum Baptist, a church without discipline would hardly have counted as a church.”³ Churches held regular “Days of Discipline” when the congregation

would gather to heal breaches of fellowship, admonish wayward members, rebuke the obstinate, and, if necessary, excommunicate those who resisted discipline. In so doing, congregations understood themselves to be following a biblical pattern laid down by Christ and the apostles for the protection and correction of disciples.

No sphere of life was considered outside the congregation's accountability. Members were to conduct their lives and witness in harmony with the Bible and with established moral principles. Depending on the denominational polity, discipline was codified in church covenants, books of discipline, congregational manuals, and confessions of faith. Discipline covered both doctrine and conduct. Members were disciplined for behavior that violated biblical principles or congregational covenants, but also for violations of doctrine and belief. Members were considered to be under the authority of the congregation and accountable to each other.

By the turn of the century, however, church discipline was already on the decline. In the wake of the Enlightenment, criticism of the Bible and of the doctrines of evangelical orthodoxy was widespread. Even the most conservative denominations began to show evidence of decreased attention to theological orthodoxy. At the same time, the larger culture moved toward the adoption of autonomous moral individualism. The result of these internal and external developments was the abandonment of church discipline as ever larger portions of the church member's life were considered off-limits to the congregation.

This great shift in church life followed the tremendous cultural transformations

of the early twentieth century—an era of “progressive” thought and moral liberalization. By the 1960s, only a minority of churches even pretended to practice regulative church discipline. Significantly, confessional accountability and moral discipline were generally abandoned together.

The theological category of sin has been replaced, in many circles, with the psychological concept of therapy. As Philip Reiff has argued, the “Triumph of the Therapeutic” is now a fixture of modern American culture.⁴ Church members may make poor choices, fail to live up to the expectations of an oppressive culture, or be inadequately self-actualized—but they no longer sin.

Individuals now claim an enormous zone of personal privacy and moral autonomy. The congregation—redefined as a mere voluntary association—has no right to intrude into this space. Many congregations have forfeited any responsibility to confront even the most public sins of their members. Consumed with pragmatic methods of church growth and congregational engineering, most churches leave moral matters to the domain of the individual conscience.

As Thomas Oden notes, the confession of sin is now passé and hopelessly outdated to many minds.

Naturalistic reductionism has invited us to reduce alleged individual sins to social influences for which individuals are not responsible. Narcissistic hedonism has demeaned any talk of sin or confession as ungratifying and dysfunctional. Autonomous individualism has divorced sin from a caring community. Absolute relativism has regarded moral values as so ambiguous that there is no measuring rod against which to assess anything as sin. Thus modernity, which is char-

acterized by the confluence of these four ideological streams, has presumed to do away with confession, and has in fact made confession an embarrassment to the accommodating church of modernity.⁵

The very notion of shame has been discarded by a generation for which shame is an unnecessary and repressive hindrance to personal fulfillment. Even secular observers have noted the shamelessness of modern culture. As James Twitchell comments:

We have in the last generation tried to push shame aside. The human-potential and recovered-memory movements in psychology; the moral relativism of audience-driven Christianity; the penalty-free, all-ideas-are-equally-good transformation in higher education; the rise of no-fault behavior before the law; the often outrageous distortions in the telling of history so that certain groups can feel better about themselves; and the “I’m shame-free, but you should be ashamed of yourself” tone of political discourse are just some of the instances wherein this can be seen.⁶

Twitchell sees the Christian church aiding and abetting this moral transformation and abandonment of shame—which is, after all, a natural product of sinful behavior. “Looking at the Christian Church today, you can only see a dim pentimento of what was once painted in the boldest of colors. Christianity has simply lost *it*. It no longer articulates the ideal. Sex is on the loose. Shame days are over. The Devil has absconded with sin.”⁷ As Twitchell laments, “Go and sin no more” has been replaced with “Judge not lest you be judged.”

Demonstration of this moral abandonment is seen in mainline Protestantism’s surrender to an ethic of sexual “libera-

tion.” Liberal Protestantism has lost any moral credibility in the sexual sphere. Homosexuality is not condemned, even though it is clearly condemned in the Bible. To the contrary, homosexuals get a special caucus at the denominational assembly and their own publications and special rights.

Evangelicals, though still claiming adherence to biblical standards of morality, have overwhelmingly capitulated to the divorce culture. Where are the evangelical congregations that hold married couples accountable for maintaining their marriage vows? To a great extent, evangelicals are just slightly behind liberal Protestantism in accommodating to the divorce culture and accepting what amounts to “serial monogamy”—faithfulness to one marital partner *at a time*. This, too, has been noted by secular observers. David Blankenhorn of the Institute for American Values remarked that “over the past three decades, many religious leaders . . . have largely abandoned marriage as a vital area of religious attention, essentially handing the entire matter over to opinion leaders and divorce lawyers in the secular society. Some members of the clergy seem to have lost interest in defending and strengthening marriage. Others report that they worry about offending members of their congregations who are divorced or unmarried.”⁸

Tied to this worry about offending church members is the rise of the “rights culture,” which understands society only in terms of individual rights rather than moral responsibility. Mary Ann Glendon of the Harvard Law School documents the substitution of “rights talk” for moral discourse.⁹ Unable or unwilling to deal with moral categories, modern men and women resort to the only moral language

they know and understand—the unembarrassed claim to “rights” that society has no authority to limit or deny. This “rights talk” is not limited to secular society, however. Church members are so committed to their own version of “rights talk” that some congregations accept almost any behavior, belief, or “lifestyle” as acceptable, or at least off-limits to congregational sanction.

The result of this is the loss of the biblical pattern for the church—and the impending collapse of authentic Christianity in this generation. As Carl Laney laments, “The church today is suffering from an infection which has been allowed to fester. . . . As an infection weakens the body by destroying its defense mechanisms, so the church has been weakened by this ugly sore. The church has lost its power and effectiveness in serving as a vehicle for social, moral, and spiritual change. This illness is due, at least in part, to a neglect of church discipline.”¹⁰

Holiness and the People of God

Throughout the Bible, the people of God are characterized by a distinctive purity. This moral purity is not their own achievement, but the work of God within their midst. As the Lord said to the children of Israel, “I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy” (Lev 11:44a).¹¹ Given that they have been chosen by a holy God as a people carrying His own name, God’s chosen people are to reflect His holiness by their way of living, worship, and beliefs.

The holiness code is central to the understanding of the Old Testament. As God’s chosen nation, Israel must live by God’s Word and law, which will set the children of Israel visibly apart from their pagan neighbors. As the Lord said

through Moses: “Be sure to keep the commands of the LORD your God and the stipulations and decrees he has given you. Do what is right and good in the LORD’s sight, so that it may go well with you and you may go in and take over the good land that the LORD promised on oath to your forefathers” (Deut 6:17-18).

The nation is reminded that it is now known by God’s name and is to reflect His holiness. “For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth” (Deut 7:6). God promised His covenant faithfulness to His people but expected them to obey His Word and follow His law. Israel’s judicial system was largely designed to protect the purity of the nation.

In the New Testament, the church is likewise described as the people of God who are visible to the world by their purity of life and integrity of testimony. As Peter instructed the church: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Pet 2:9-10).

Peter continued, “Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us” (1 Pet 2:11-12).

As the new people of God, the church is to see itself as an alien community in the midst of spiritual darkness—strangers to the world who must abstain from

the lusts and enticements of the world. The church is to be conspicuous in its purity and holiness and steadfast in its confession of the faith once for all delivered to the saints. Rather than capitulating to the moral (or immoral) environment, Christians are to be conspicuous by their good behavior. As Peter summarized, “Just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do” (1 Pet 1:15).

The apostle Paul clearly linked the holiness expected of believers to the completed work of Christ in redemption: “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation” (Col 1:21-22). Clearly, this holiness made complete in the believer is the work of God; holiness is the evidence of His redemptive work. To the Corinthian congregation Paul urged, “Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God” (2 Cor 7:1).

The identity of the church as the people of God is to be evident in its pure confession of Christ, its bold testimony to the Gospel, and its moral holiness before the watching world. Nothing less will mark the church as the true vessel of the Gospel.

Discipline in the Body

The first dimension of discipline in the church is that discipline exercised directly by God as He deals with believers. As the book of Hebrews warns, “You have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: ‘My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,

because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.’ Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?” (Heb 12:5-7). As the passage continues, the author warns that those who are without discipline “are illegitimate children and not true sons” (v. 8). The purpose of discipline, however, is righteousness. “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it” (v. 11).

This discipline is often evident in suffering—both individual and congregational. Persecution by the world has a purifying effect on the church. This persecution is not to be sought, but if the church is “tested by fire,” it must prove itself pure and genuine and receive this suffering as the Lord’s discipline, even as children receive the discipline of a father. The fact that this analogy is so foreign to many modern Christians points out the fact that discipline has disappeared in many families, as well as in the church. Children are treated as moral sovereigns in many households, and the social breakdown of the family has diminished its moral credibility. The loving discipline portrayed in this passage is as foreign to many families as it is to most congregations.

God’s loving discipline of His people is His sovereign right and is completely in keeping with His moral character—His own holiness. His fatherly discipline also establishes the authority and pattern for discipline in the church. Correction is for the greater purpose of restoration and the even higher purpose of reflecting the holiness of God.

The second dimension of discipline in the church is that disciplinary responsi-

bility addressed to the church itself. Like God's fatherly discipline of those He loves, the church is to exercise discipline as an integral part of its moral and theological responsibility. That the church can fall into moral disrepute is evident in the New Testament itself.

The apostle Paul confronted a case of gross moral failure in the Corinthian congregation that included "immorality of . . . a kind that does not occur even among pagans" (1 Cor 5:1). In this case, apparent incest was known to the congregation, and yet it had taken no action.

"And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?" Paul accused the Corinthian congregation (v. 2). He instructed them to act quickly and boldly to remove this stain from their fellowship. He also warned them, "Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are" (vv. 6-7a).

Paul was outraged that the Corinthian Christians would tolerate this horrible sin. Incest, though not literally unknown in the pagan world, was universally condemned and not tolerated. In this respect the Corinthian church had fallen beneath the moral standards of the pagan world to whom they were to witness. Paul was also exasperated with a congregation he had already warned. Mentioning an earlier letter unavailable to us, Paul scolds the Corinthians:

I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you

would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you" (vv. 9-13).

The moral outrage of a wounded apostle is evident in these pointed verses, which call the Corinthian church to action and the exercise of discipline. They have now fallen into corporate sin by tolerating the presence of such a bold and arrogant sinner in their midst. Their moral testimony is clouded, and their fellowship is impure. Their arrogance has blinded them to the offense they have committed before the Lord. The open sin in their midst is like a cancer that, left unchecked, will spread throughout the entire body.

In the second letter to the Thessalonians, Paul offers similar instruction, combining concern for moral purity and doctrinal orthodoxy: "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us" (2 Thess 3:6). Paul instructs the Thessalonians to follow his own example because "We were not idle when we were with you" (2 Thess 3:7).

The Pattern of Proper Discipline

How should the Corinthians have responded to this public sin? Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians of delivering this sinner unto Satan and removing him from fellowship. How is this to be done? To the Galatians Paul wrote that "if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual

should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted” (Gal 6:1). This teaching is clear, indicating that spiritual leaders of the church are to confront a sinning member with a spirit of humility and gentleness, and with the goal of restoration. But what are the precise steps to be taken?

The Lord Himself provided these instructions as He taught His disciples: “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).

The Lord instructed His disciples that they should first confront a sinning brother in private. “Show him his fault,” instructed the Lord. If the brother acknowledges the sin and repents, the brother has been won. The fact that the first step is a private confrontation is very important. This limits the injury caused by the sin and avoids a public spectacle, which would tarnish the witness of the church to the Gospel.

In the event the private confrontation does not lead to repentance, restoration, and reconciliation, the next step is to take witnesses. Jesus cited the Deuteronomic law which required multiple witnesses of a crime for conviction. Yet His purpose here seems larger than the mere establishment of the facts of the case. Jesus seems to intend for the witnesses to be an important presence in the *event* of the confrontation, thus adding corroborating testimony concerning the confrontation of

a sinning brother. The brother cannot claim that he was not confronted with his sin in a brotherly context.

If the brother does not listen even in the presence of one or two witnesses, this becomes a matter for the congregation. “Tell it to the church,” instructed Jesus, and the church is to judge the matter before the Lord and render a judgment that is binding upon the sinner. This step is extremely serious, and the congregation now bears a corporate responsibility. The church must render its judgment based upon the principles of God’s Word and the facts of the case. Again, the goal is the restoration of a sinning brother or sister—not a public spectacle.

Sadly, this congregational confrontation may not avail. If it does not, the only recourse is separation from the sinning brother. “Treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector,” instructed the Lord, indicating that the separation is to be real and public. The congregation is not to consider the former brother as a part of the church. This drastic and extreme act is to follow when a brother or sister will not submit to the discipline of the church. We should note that the church should still bear witness to this man, but not as brother to brother, until and unless repentance and restoration are evident.

The Power of the Keys

What is the church’s authority in church discipline? Jesus addressed this issue directly, even as He declared the establishment of the church after Peter’s great confession: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matt 16:19). This “power of the keys” is one of the critical

controversies between evangelicals and the Church of Rome. Roman Catholics believe that the pope, as Peter's successor, holds the keys, and thus the power of binding and loosing. Protestants, however, believe that the Lord granted the keys to the church. This interpretation is supported by the Lord's repetition of the matter in Matthew 18:18, "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Here the context reveals that the power of binding and loosing is held by the church.¹²

The terms *binding* and *loosing* were familiar terms used by rabbis in the first century to refer to the power of judging matters on the basis of the Bible. The Jewish authorities would determine how (or whether) the Scriptures applied in a specific situation and would render judgment by either binding, which meant to restrict, or loosing, which meant to liberate. The church still bears this responsibility and wields this power. John Calvin, the great Genevan Reformer, believed that the power of binding should be understood as excommunication, and loosing as reception into membership: "But the church binds him whom it excommunicates—not that it casts him into everlasting ruin and despair, but because it condemns his life and morals, and already warns him of his condemnation unless he should repent. It looses him when it receives into communion, for it makes him a sharer of the unity which is in Christ Jesus."¹³

Calvin's interpretation is fully in agreement at this point with Martin Luther, whose essay on "The Keys" (1530) is a massive refutation of papal claims and Roman Catholic tradition. Luther saw the keys as one of Christ's great gifts to the

church. "Both of these keys are extremely necessary in Christendom, so that we can never thank God enough for them."¹⁴ As a pastor and theologian, Luther saw the great need for the church to bear the keys, and he understood this ministry to be gracious in the recovery of sinning saints. As Luther reflected:

For the dear Man, the faithful Bishop of our souls, Jesus Christ, is well aware that His beloved Christians are frail, that the devil, the flesh, and the world would tempt them unceasingly and in many ways, and that at times they would fall into sin. Therefore, He has given us this remedy, the key which binds, so that we might not remain too confident in our sins, arrogant, barbarous, and without God, and the key which looses, that we should not despair in our sins.¹⁵

What about a church leader who sins? Paul instructed Timothy that a church leader—an elder—is to be considered "worthy of double honor" when he rules well (1 Tim 5:17). When an elder sins, however, that is a matter of great consequence. First, no accusation is to be received on the basis of only one uncorroborated witness. If a charge is substantiated by two or three witnesses, however, he is "to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning" (1 Tim 5:20). Clearly, leadership carries a higher burden, and the sins of an elder cause an even greater injury to the church. The public rebuke is necessary, for the elder sins against the entire congregation. As James warned, "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (Jas 3:1).

The scandals of moral failure on the part of church leaders have caused tremendous injury to the cause of Christ. The

stricter judgment should be a vivid warning to those who would violate the Word of God and lead others into sin by example. The failure of the contemporary church to apply consistent biblical church discipline has left most of these scandals unresolved on biblical grounds—and thus a continuing stain on the church.

The Bible reveals three main areas of danger requiring discipline. These are *fidelity of doctrine*, *purity of life*, and *unity of fellowship*. Each is of critical and vital importance to the health and integrity of the church.

Fidelity of Doctrine

The theological confusion and compromise that mark the modern church are directly traceable to the church's failure to separate itself from doctrinal error and heretics who teach it. On this matter the Bible is clear: "Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work" (2 John 9-11). The apostle Paul instructed the Galatians that "if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!" (Gal 1:8-9).

The letters of 2 Peter and Jude explicitly warn of the dangers presented to the church in the form of false prophets and heretics. Jude alerts the church that "certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped

in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord" (v. 4). Similarly, Peter warns, "There will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves" (2 Pet 2:1).

The church must separate itself from these heresies—and from the heretics! The permissive posture of the church in this century has allowed the most heinous heresies to grow unchecked—and heretics to be celebrated. Francis Schaeffer was among the most eloquent modern prophets who decried this doctrinal cowardice. Schaeffer emphatically denied that a church could be a true Christian fellowship and allow false doctrine. As he stated, "One cannot explain the explosive dynamite, the *dunamis*, of the early church apart from the fact that they practiced two things simultaneously: orthodoxy of doctrine and orthodoxy of community in the midst of the visible church, a community which the world can see. By the grace of God, therefore, the church must be known simultaneously for its purity of doctrine and the reality of its community."¹⁶

Purity of Life

The visible community of the true church is also to be evident in its moral purity. Christians are to live in obedience to the Word of God and to be exemplary in their conduct and untarnished in their testimony. A lack of attention to moral purity is a sure sign of congregational rebellion before the Lord.

Writing to the Corinthians, Paul chastised them severely:

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. 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 6:9-11).

When Christians sin, their sin is to be confronted by the church in accordance with the pattern revealed in Scripture. The goal is the restoration of a sister or a brother, not the creation of a public spectacle. The greatest moral danger to the church is the toleration of sin, public or private. Conversely, one of the greatest blessings to the church is the gift of biblical church discipline—the ministry of the keys.

Unity of Fellowship

The integrity of the church is also dependent upon the true unity of its fellowship. Indeed, one of the most repeated warnings found in the New Testament is the admonition against toleration of schismatics. The unity of the church is one of its most visible distinctives—and most precious gifts.

The warnings about this are severe: “I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people” (Rom 16:17-18). Writing to Titus, Paul instructed that the church should “Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time.

After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned” (Titus 3:10-11).

A breach in the unity of the church is a scandal in the body of Christ. The church is consistently exhorted to practice and preserve a true unity in true doctrine and biblical piety. This unity is not the false unity of a lowest-common-denominator Christianity, the “Gospel Lite” preached and taught in so many modern churches. Rather, it is found in the healthy and growing maturity of the congregation as it increases in grace and in its knowledge of the Word of God.

The ongoing function of church discipline is to be a part of individual self-examination and congregational reflection. The importance of maintaining integrity in personal relationships was made clear by our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount as He instructed the disciples that anger against a brother is a deadly sin. Reconciliation is a mandate, not a hypothetical goal. “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift” (Matt 5:23-24).

Similarly, Paul warned against participating in the Lord’s Supper amidst divisions. The Supper itself is a memorial of the broken body and shed blood of the Savior and must not be desecrated by the presence of divisions or controversies within the congregation, or by unconfessed sin on the part of individual believers.

For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. There-

fore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself (1 Cor 11:26-29).

The “discipline of the Table” is thus one of the most important disciplinary functions of the congregation. The Lord’s Supper is not to be served indiscriminately, but only to those baptized believers who are under the discipline of the church and in good standing with their congregation.

The Recovery of the Third Mark

The mandate of the church is to maintain true gospel doctrine and order. A church lacking these essential qualities is, biblically defined, not a true church. That is a hard thing to say, for it clearly indicts thousands of American congregations who long ago abandoned this essential mark and have accommodated themselves to the spirit of the age. Fearing lawsuits and lacking courage, these churches allow sin to go unopposed, and heresy to grow unchecked. Inevitably, the false unity they seek to preserve gives way to the factions that inevitably follow the gradual abandonment of biblical Christianity. They do not taste the true unity of a church grounded on the truth and exercising the ministry of the keys.

John Leadley Dagg, the author of a well-known and influential church manual of the nineteenth century, noted: “It has been remarked, that when discipline leaves a church, Christ goes with it.”¹⁷ If so, and I fear it is so, Christ has abandoned many churches who are blissfully unaware of His departure.

At the end of the twentieth century, the great task of the church is to prove itself to be the genuine church revealed in the New Testament—proving its authenticity by a demonstration of pure faith and authentic community. We must regain the New Testament concern for fidelity of doctrine, purity of life, and unity of fellowship. We must recover the missing mark.

ENDNOTES

¹“Church Discipline: The Missing Mark” by R. Albert Mohler, Jr., is from *The Compromised Church*, edited by John H. Armstrong, copyright 1998, pp. 171-187. Used by permission of Crossway Books, a division of Good News Publishers, Wheaton, Illinois 60187. Note that some minor editorial changes were made, especially changes to conform the piece to this journal’s format.

²The identification of proper discipline as the third mark of the true church goes back at least to the Belgic Confession [1561]: “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, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church. Hereby the true Church may certainly be known, from which no man has a right to separate himself.” “The Belgic Confession,” in *The Creeds of Christendom*, ed. Philip Schaff, rev. David S. Schaff, Vol. 3 (New York: Harper and Row, 1931) 419-420. Similarly, the *Abstract of Principles* of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (1858)

identifies the three essential marks as true order, discipline, and worship.

³Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South 1785-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 12.

⁴Philip Reiff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

⁵Thomas C. Oden, *Corrective Love: The Power of Communion Discipline* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1995) 56.

⁶James B. Twitchell, *For Shame: The Loss of Common Decency in American Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997) 35.

⁷*Ibid.*, 149.

⁸David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* (New York: Basic Books, 1995) 231.

⁹Mary Ann Glendon, *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

¹⁰J. Carl Laney, *A Guide to Church Discipline* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985) 12.

¹¹This verse is quoted in 1 Peter 1:16 and is addressed to the church. All Scripture quotations are from the NIV.

¹²The New American Standard Bible, revised edition, is correct in translating the Greek verb in the perfect tense. Any other translation of the verb tense confuses the meaning and can lead to a distorted understanding of Jesus' teaching. He is not stating that the church has the power to determine what shall later be decided in heaven. The verb

tense indicates that as the church functions on the authority of Scripture, what it determines shall have been already determined in heaven. For a complete consideration of this issue, see Julius Robert Mantey, "Distorted Translations in John 20:23; Matthew 16:18-19 and 18:18," *Review and Expositor* 78 (1981) 409-416.

¹³John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics, Vol. 20 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 1214.

¹⁴Martin Luther, "The Keys," in *Luther's Works* (American Edition), ed. Conrad Bergendoff, gen. ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, Vol. 40 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958) 373.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶Francis A. Schaeffer, "The Church Before the Watching World," in *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1970) 144.

¹⁷J. L. Dagg, *A Treatise on Church Order* (Charleston, SC: The Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1858) 274.

Biblical Church Discipline¹

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Emily Sullivan Oakey was born, educated, and then taught in Albany, New York. As with many other women of the mid-nineteenth century, she spent a good bit of time writing down her thoughts—sometimes as part of a journal, other times as part of articles, very often in poetry. She published many of her articles and poems in daily newspapers and in magazines. As a young woman of twenty-one, perhaps inspired by Jesus' Parable of the Sower, she wrote a poem about sowing and harvesting. Some twenty-five years later, in 1875, the poem was set to music by Philip Bliss and appeared in print for the first time under the title "What Shall the Harvest Be?"² The little group of Christians who formed what would become Capitol Hill Baptist Church selected that very song as the first song to be sung in their meetings together, in February of 1878:

Sowing the seed by the daylight fair,
Sowing the seed by the noonday glare,
Sowing the seed by the fading light,
Sowing the seed in the solemn night.
O, what shall the harvest be?
O, what shall the harvest be?

Very appropriate words to ring off the bare walls and bare floorboards of the building they met in. Those thirty people were planning to covenant to form a church: "What would the harvest be?"

In that same church, now more than a century later, we are still helping to determine what will be the harvest of their efforts. We are doing this by what we think and how we live, by whom we plan to see and what we plan to do, by what we feel and what we care about, what we give

ourselves for and what we pray about.

What has the harvest been, and what shall the harvest be? That gets to the very heart of our question in this article: Are we to live as Christians on our own? Or do we have some obligation to each other? Do our obligations to each other involve merely encouraging each other positively? Or do they possibly include a responsibility to speak honestly to each other of faults, shortcomings, departures from Scripture, or specific sin? Could our responsibilities before God also include sometimes making such matters public?

One vital aspect of a healthy church is church discipline. As we approach this subject, let's ask ourselves seven questions:

1. Is all discipline negative?
2. What is usually meant by "church discipline"? What does it involve?
3. Where does the Bible talk about church discipline? What does it say?
4. How have Christians in the past handled church discipline?
5. "Our local church would never do this, would we?"
6. Why practice church discipline?
7. What if we don't?

Is All Discipline Negative?

Church discipline sounds like a pretty negative topic, I admit. There isn't going to be much about this in "The Positive Bible," is there? When we hear of discipline, we tend to think of correction or of a spanking; we think of our parents when we were little. If we're particularly literate we have visions of Hester Prynne wearing her scarlet "A" around the nightmarish Puritan New England town of Nathaniel Hawthorne's misdirected

imagination.

We should all, without hesitation, admit our need for discipline, our need for shaping. None of us is perfect, finished projects. We may need to be inspired, nurtured, or healed; we may need to be corrected, challenged, even broken. Whatever the particular method of cure, let's at least admit the need for discipline. Let's not pretend or presume that you or I are just as we should be, as if God had finished His work with us.

Once we have come to that admission, however, notice that a large part of discipline is positive discipline, or as it is traditionally called, "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 comments on keeping your mouth closed when you're eating, or the regular exhortations to be careful about your words. It is the things that are simply shaping the person as he or she grows emotionally, physically, mentally, and spiritually. These are all examples of the basic shaping that takes place in our relationships, in our families, and also in our churches. We are taught by books at school, and by sermons and services and classes at church. All of this is part of discipline. It is positive, shaping, formative discipline. Every truth that you have ever heard someone talk about is part of formative discipline. This article is part of discipline in the broadest sense of teaching. So discipline is not only a negative matter.

What Is Church Discipline?

When we hear the term church discipline, we tend to think only of the negative aspects of discipline, such as correction. We may even become defensive

and say something like, "Didn't Jesus say 'Judge not, lest you be judged'?"

Certainly, in Matthew 7:1, Jesus did forbid judging in one sense, and we'll consider that later in the article. But for now, note that if you read through that same gospel of Matthew, you'll find that Jesus also clearly called us to rebuke others for sin, even rebuking them publicly if need be (Matt 18:15-17; cf. Luke 17:3). Whatever Jesus meant by not judging in Matthew 7, He didn't mean to rule out the kind of judging He mandated in Matthew 18.

Remember that God Himself is a Judge, and, in a lesser sense, God intends others to judge as well. He has given the state the responsibility to judge (Rom 13:1-7). In various places we are told to judge ourselves (1 Cor 11:28; 2 Cor 13:5; Heb 4; 2 Pet 1:5-10). We are also specifically told to judge one another within the church (though not in the final way that God judges); Jesus' words in Matthew 18, Paul's in 1 Corinthians 5-6, and other passages (which we'll turn to in just a moment) clearly show that the church is to exercise judgment within itself. If you think about it, it is not really surprising that a church should be instructed to judge. After all, if we cannot say how a Christian should not live, how can we say how a Christian should live?

A couple of years ago I was asked to lead a special seminar because our church had been growing numerically and other churches wanted to know how and why that was happening. In preparing for the seminar, I reviewed some of the church growth material coming from our denominational headquarters. One publication said that, in order to get our churches growing again, we should "open the front doors and close the back doors." The writer was saying that we need to

open the front doors in the sense of trying to make our churches more accessible by helping people to understand what we're doing. Then, the writer said, we need to close the back door, that is, make it more difficult for people just to flow through our churches, uncared-for and undisciplined.

These are valid criticisms of many of our churches, no doubt. But I have to say that, as I thought about it, I didn't think either of those were really the critical problems we face. What we actually need to do is to close the front door and open the back door! If we really want to see our churches grow, we need to make it harder to join and we need to be better about excluding people. We need to be able to show that there is a distinction between the church and the world—that it means something to be a Christian. If someone who claims to be a Christian refuses to live as a Christian should live, we need to follow what Paul said and, for the glory of God and for that person's own good, we need to exclude him or her from membership in the church.

The first place to reflect this kind of discipline should be in the way we take in new members. In 1 Corinthians 5, while dealing with a difficult situation in the church at Corinth, Paul makes an assumption that we need to consider. In verses 9-10, he says,

I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world.

Notice that Paul has a very clear distinction in his mind between the church and the world. Do we as Christians today

make the same distinction? Do we assume that the church is different from the world? Not that the church is full of perfect people and the world is full of sinners, but do we assume that there is to be some kind of difference between the lives of those in the church and those in the world? Paul draws a sharp contrast. Membership in a local church is to be reflective (as best we can tell) of true membership in the body of Christ.

So, when we're taking in new members, we have to consider whether those who are under consideration are known to be living Christ-honoring lives. Do we understand the seriousness of the commitment we are making to them when they join the church, and have we communicated to them the seriousness of the commitment that they are making to us? If we are more careful about how we recognize and receive new members, we will have less occasion to practice corrective church discipline later.

Let me suggest some books that may be helpful to you on this matter. Since this is a topic that hasn't been talked about very often in about a hundred years, you might like to know something beyond the bounds of this one article.

In *The Compromised Church*, edited by John Armstrong, there is an excellent article by R. Albert Mohler, Jr., president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. It is called "Church Discipline: The Missing Mark,"³ and is a great brief argument for the importance of church discipline. On the practical side, there is a little booklet called *Biblical Church Discipline*, by Daniel Wray, a pastor.⁴ For historical background, you could look at Greg Wills's book, *Democratic Religion*.⁵ He studied the practice of church discipline among Baptist churches in the South, particularly

in Georgia, in the nineteenth century. The book includes some good stories and some very shrewd observations. If you want a traditional manual of church order that talks about how you actually practice church discipline, look at John L. Dagg, *Manual of Church Polity*.⁶ This manual discusses what the Bible says about how churches are to be ordered and how to practically carry out our business. Then, there is a book that I edited, *Polity: How Christians Should Live Together in a Church*, a compendium of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century works on church discipline and polity, published by the Center for Church Reform. It includes introductions by Greg Wills and by me, and also includes the Mohler article mentioned above.⁷ If you want something more modern, the best guide that I've found is *the Handbook of Church Discipline* by Jay Adams.⁸ Finally, if you would like to see what should happen between Christians, portrayed in a series of good meditations, read Dietrich Bonhoeffer's little book, *Life Together*.⁹ Now on to question 3.

What Does the Bible Say about Church Discipline?

There are many Bible passages we could look at concerning discipline; let me draw your attention to eight of them:

Hebrews 12:1-14

The place to begin is in Hebrews 12, where we see that discipline is fundamentally a positive thing and that God Himself disciplines us:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the

author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons:

“My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline,
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,
because the Lord disciplines those he loves,
and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.”

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. “Make level paths for your feet,” so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.

Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.¹⁰

God Himself disciplines us and, as we will see, He commands us to do the same for each other. The local church congregation has a special responsibility and a special competence in this regard.

Matthew 18:15-17

In Matthew 18, we have one of the two passages (along with 1 Corinthians 5) most often cited in discussions of church discipline. How do you respond when someone sins against you? Do you sound off at them once and then refuse to talk to them anymore? Do you just build up resentment in your heart? Here's what the Lord Jesus taught His disciples to do in such situations:

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.

That, according to Jesus, is how we are to deal with disagreements and difficulties with fellow-believers. And that's exactly what the early Christians did, as we see in Paul's letters.

1 Corinthians 5:1-11

This is the longest and best-known passage in this regard. There was apparently someone in the Corinthian church who was living an immoral lifestyle. Paul says:

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. When you are assembled in the name of our Lord

Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.

Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are. For Christ, our Pass-over lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.

I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat.

Why does Paul say all that? Because he had come to hate the man? No, but because that man was deeply deceived. He thought he could be a Christian while deliberately disobeying the Lord. Or perhaps he thought—and the church allowed him to think—that there was nothing wrong with his having his father's wife. Paul says that such a person is deluded, and that in order truly to serve such a deluded person and to glorify God, you need to show him the falsity of his profession of faith in light of the way he is living. Elsewhere in his letters, Paul sheds more light on how such a process of loving confrontation should occur.

Galatians 6:1

This short verse is an important addition to our thinking on church discipline.

Here Paul describes how Christians are to restore someone who has been caught in sin:

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.

Paul is concerned not just with what is to be done in such a difficult situation but also with how it is to be done.

2 Thessalonians 3:6-15

In Thessalonica, it seems there were some people who were being lazy and not doing anything. To make matters worse, they were defending their inactivity, saying that it was God's will. Paul says it was not:

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat."

We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat. And as for you, brothers, never tire of doing what is right.

If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as

an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

1 Timothy 1:20

Writing to Timothy, pastor of the church in Ephesus, Paul refers to some who had made "shipwreck" of their faith. Look at what he says should be done with such people:

Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme.

1 Timothy 5:19-20

As he continues his letter to Timothy, Paul writes specifically about what to do with church leaders who are caught in sin:

Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning.

Titus 3:9-11

Apparently some people in the church where Titus pastored were causing divisions over issues that weren't that important. Paul writes,

But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless. Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.

Taking all of these passages together, we see that God cares about both our understanding of His truth and our living it out. He cares especially about how we live together as Christians. All kinds of situations mentioned in these passages are, according to the Bible, legitimate areas for our concern—areas in which we

as a church should exercise discipline.

One more thing: Did you notice the seriousness of the consequences Paul mandates in these descriptions of church discipline? “Put out of your fellowship . . .” (1 Cor 5:2); “hand this man over to Satan” (1 Cor 5:5); “. . . not to associate with . . . do not even eat . . . with such a man” (1 Cor 5:9, 11); “keep away from . . .” (2 Thess 3:6); “take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed” (2 Thess 3:14-15); “. . . handed over to Satan . . .” (1 Tim 5:20); “rebuked publicly” (1 Tim 5:20); “Have nothing to do with them” (2 Tim 3:5); “have nothing to do with him” (Titus 3:10).

Is Paul just an unusually severe kind of man? What did Jesus Himself say about the person who refused to listen even to the church? “If he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector” (Matt 18:17). This is what the Bible says about church discipline.

How Have Christians in the Past Handled Church Discipline?

In times past, Christians have actually done quite a bit about church discipline. You may be surprised to learn that disciplinary actions were a substantial part of the business at members’ meetings of Baptist churches in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Writing about fifty years ago, Greek scholar H. E. Dana observed that,

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.¹¹

Greg Wills, professor of church history at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, has brought to light a crucial change in this regard between the generations of our great-grandparents and our grandparents; what he finds is the virtual disappearance of corrective discipline from our churches. Wills’s book *Democratic Religion* offers a wealth of quotations reminding us that pastors of the early 1800s clearly considered their most important tasks to be faithfully preaching the Word and faithfully administering godly discipline. In fact, a great part of the historic Baptist commitment to religious liberty was motivated by a desire that churches be free to exercise church discipline without the interference of the state.¹²

Wills shows that in pre-Civil War days, “Southern Baptists excommunicated nearly 2 percent of their membership every year!”¹³ Incredible as it may seem, while they were doing that their churches grew! In fact, their churches grew at twice the rate of the general population growth! So the concern that a move to such biblical church discipline might be “anti-evangelistic” seems unfounded, to say the least. Jesus intended our lives to back up our words. If our lives don’t back up our words, the evangelistic task is injured, as we have seen so terribly this last century in America. Undisciplined churches have actually made it harder for people to hear the Good News of new life in Jesus Christ.

If that’s the case, what happened? Why did we stop practicing church discipline? We don’t really know, but Wills suggests

that, “This commitment to a holy corporate witness to the world declined as other things gained the attention of the Christians late in the last century and earlier in this one.” Wills writes:

In fact, the more the churches concerned themselves with social order, the less they exerted church discipline. From about 1850 to 1920, a period of expanding evangelical solicitude for the reformation of society, church discipline declined steadily. From temperance to Sabbatarian reform, evangelicals persuaded their communities to adopt the moral norms of the church for society at large. As Baptists learned to reform the larger society, they forgot how they had once reformed themselves. Church discipline presupposed a stark dichotomy between the norms of society and the kingdom of God. The more evangelicals purified the society, the less they felt the urgency of a discipline that separated the church from the world.¹⁴

As Wills explains further,

After the Civil War, . . . observers began to lament that church discipline was foundering, and it was. It declined partly because it became more burdensome in larger churches. Young Baptists refused in increasing numbers to submit to discipline for dancing, and the churches shrank from excluding them. Urban churches, pressed by the need for large buildings and the desire for refined music and preaching, subordinated church discipline to the task of keeping the church solvent. Many Baptists shared a new vision of the church, replacing the pursuit of purity with the quest for efficiency. They lost the resolve to purge their churches of straying members. No one publicly advocated the demise of discipline. No Baptist leader arose to call for an end to congregational censures. No theologians argued that discipline was unsound in principle or practice. . . . It simply faded away, as if Baptists

had grown weary of holding one another accountable.¹⁵

As Baptist churches of the nineteenth century retreated from church discipline, the work of the pastor was also changing. It had subtly though certainly become more public. Previously, it had been thought that the work of a pastor was to see that souls were mended by repeated private conferences with families or individuals. But what came to happen more and more were protracted series of meetings and entertainments and impassioned calls to immediate decision, with the pastor being called upon now and then to deal with only the most serious cases of church discipline. The church, increasingly, did not really have anything to do with such problems and, in fact, was not even aware of them. There was no longer a community that mutually covenanted together for accountability. Instead, the pastor alone was expected to deal with just a few cases—those that could cause the church the most public embarrassment.

In all of these changes, important boundaries were blurred. The pastor’s role was confused. Even more fundamentally, the distinction between the church and the world began to be lost. And this loss was to the great detriment of the churches’ evangelistic ministry—and to our own lives as Christians.

All evangelical Christians in the past tended to practice biblical church discipline. In fact, in 1561, Reformed Christians expressed their understanding of these matters in the words of 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, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church. Hereby the true Church may certainly be known, from which no man has a right to separate himself.¹⁶

It is clear that, in the past, churches intended to practice biblical discipline.

“Our Church Would Never Do This, Would We?”

The local church I pastor in Washington has from its earliest days recognized the importance of church discipline. When the group of Christians met together that first day and sang that hymn, they incorporated as a church. One of the first things they did that day, in February of 1878, was to adopt the following rules about the church censuring people either by admonition (warning) or by exclusion, which would happen after they had been warned. About admonishing a member, they said,

When one member of the church trespasses against another member, if the offence is not of a public character, it is the duty of the offended to seek an opportunity to converse privately with the offender, with a view to the reconciliation of the difficulty, according to the rule laid down in Matthew 18:15.

If the offender refuses to give satisfaction, it shall be the duty of the offended to select one or two members of the church, and with their aid to endeavor to reconcile the offender, according to the rule laid down in Matthew 18:16.

If these efforts fail to secure a satisfactory adjustment of the difficulty, it shall be the duty of the offended to lay the matter before the church, as directed in Matthew 18:17, and if, after the offender shall have been admonished, in a spirit of meekness

and forbearance, he or she shall continue obstinate and incorrigible, it shall be the duty of the church to investigate the case, and take such action as may be necessary.

Charges to be preferred against a member shall be in writing, and shall not be presented to the church without the previous knowledge of the Pastor and Deacons, nor until a copy shall have been presented to the offender.

They also discussed what was to happen if the erring member did not repent. The next step was exclusion. They said that exclusion

. . . is a judicial act of the church, passed upon an offender by the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, by which he or she is cut off from the membership and communion of the church, according to the rule . . . from Matthew 18:17.

No member shall be excluded until he or she shall have been notified to appear before the church, and has had the privilege of answering in person the charges which have been preferred, except in cases of notorious and flagrant immorality, when it shall be the duty of the church to vindicate the honor of its holy calling by proceeding to cut off such an offending member without delay.

What sin did they consider of sufficient seriousness to take such action? If you got upset at someone over picking the wrong hymn, or if someone dropped a hymn-book on your toe? Did they go to church discipline over this? What matters were so serious that they felt biblically required to respond with such strong measures? What matters are so serious that we today are called to these kinds of actions? What would warrant being so warned or even excluded from membership in the church? Here’s what they said:

Members shall be liable to the discipline of the church for the following causes:

For any outward violations of the moral law.

For pursuing any course which may, in the judgement of the church, be disreputable to it as a body.

For absenting themselves habitually without good reasons, from the church at the seasons set apart for public worship.

For holding and advocating doctrines opposed to those set forth in [the statement of faith].

For neglecting or refusing to contribute toward defraying the expenses of the church according to their several abilities.

For treating the acts and doings of the church contemptuously, or pursuing such a course as is calculated to produce discord.

For divulging to persons not interested, what is done in the meetings of the church.

For pursuing any course of conduct unbecoming good citizens and professing Christians.

So, if you were in our church 120 years ago, would you be warned by the church about something? I regularly see the names of our founding members. Their signatures are on the original church covenant that hangs prominently on a wall in our church. There on that church covenant, among those first thirty-one people who subscribed to it 120 years ago, I also find the very names of some of those involved in the first recorded cases of church discipline. I find that two members were excluded (out of about eighty total members of the church) in 1880. Who were they and what happened? We do not know much, but it seems that this difficult situation is what the church clerk referred to in an annual church letter. In his otherwise glowing report for 1879, we have this very brief note from Francis McLean, the church clerk:

One thing I must whisper softly: the thrifty growth and the dense foliage do not quite conceal a few apparently dead limbs on the tree. Here lies a responsibility—a care—let us act wisely and well.

It seems that one of those “dead limbs” was actually one of the people who had signed as a founding member of the church. His name was Charles L. Patten. He had served as secretary of the Sunday school. And yet, in the minutes for a meeting of the church on December 17, 1879, we find this brief note:

Pastor presented applications for letters of dismission from this Church to the First Baptist Church, this city, each dated Oct. 30, 1879, from Sister Alma C. Smith and Bro. Charles L. Patten. Pastor stated these letters had been withheld, in his discretion, and he now presented them for the action of the church. Bro. Williamson moved that Sister Smith be granted letters of dismission. Lost. On motion of Bro. Kingdon, a Committee was chosen, composed of the Pastor, Brethren C. W. Longan, and Ward Morgan, to consider this application of Bro. Patten, and that he be requested to appear before that committee, to state the reasons why he had separated from his wife.

That was in the public meeting of the church. They did not want it thought that Christians leave their wives. About a month later, at a church meeting on January 21, 1880, we read,

Pastor, on behalf of Committee to investigate case of Bro. Patten, reported that a letter had been written to him, to which he had responded in writing, but that further effort of Committee had failed to meet with any response. The Committee was considered as having reported progress and still retaining the matter in charge.

At the same meeting, a second disci-

plinary matter was raised in the case of yet another founding member of the congregation:

Clerk presented the following motion, which was adopted, viz: That a Committee, composed of the Pastor and Deacons, be and is hereby requested to take into consideration such facts in the case of Sister Lucretia E. Douglas, as may explain the reasons, if any, of her nonattendance at the meetings of the church for over a year past, and to recommend at the next Quarterly Meeting what they shall deem to be the wisest and best course in the matter on the part of this church.

Nonattendance, as in the case of Sister Douglas, was considered one of the most sinister of sins, because it usually veiled all the other sins. When someone was sinning, you would expect them to stop attending.

So, not only would Capitol Hill Baptist Church practice church discipline—we can and have! This was the regular business of the church. But, you may ask, why do something like this? That’s our sixth question.

Why Practice Church Discipline?

For what purpose does your church exist? How do you know if it is fulfilling its purpose? How do you know that things are going well in your church?

The Bible says that “love covers over a multitude of sins.” As pragmatic Americans, we sometimes seem to think that size covers over a multitude of sins. We often assume that if a church is large or at least is growing, then it must be a good church. Os Guinness writes about this mistake: “One Florida pastor with a seven-thousand member megachurch expressed the fallacy well: ‘I must be doing right or things wouldn’t be going so well.’”¹⁷

But imagine this church: It is huge and is still growing numerically. People like it. The music is good. Whole extended families can be found within its membership. The people are welcoming. There are many exciting programs, and people are quickly enlisted into their support. And yet, the church, in trying to look like the world in order to win the world, has done a better job than it may have intended. It does not display the distinctively holy characteristics taught in the New Testament. Imagine such an apparently vigorous church being truly spiritually sick, with no remaining immune system to check and guard against wrong teaching or wrong living. Imagine Christians, knee-deep in recovery groups and sermons on brokenness and grace, being comforted in their sin but never confronted. Imagine those people, made in the image of God, being lost to sin because no one corrects them. Can you imagine such a church? Apart from the size, have I not described many of our American churches?

It will not be easy for us to be faithful in this matter of church discipline when so many churches are unfaithful in this regard. It is hard enough to try to reestablish a culture of meaningful membership in a church. Personally, I have often become the focus of someone’s anger because they don’t appreciate the importance of having membership taken so seriously. But I see no other way that we can be faithful to the teaching of Jesus. We must try, praying for God’s Spirit to give us sufficient love and wisdom.

Let’s be honest. The state of churches in America today is not good. Even if the membership numbers of some groups look fine, as soon as you ask what the membership numbers actually stand for, you start finding the trouble. According

to Alan Redpath, the membership of the average American church looks like the following: 5 percent don't exist, 10 percent can't be found, 25 percent don't attend, 50 percent show up on Sunday, 75 percent don't attend the prayer meeting, 90 percent have no family worship, and 95 percent have never shared the Gospel with others.

There are, of course, some reasons not to practice church discipline. We certainly should not practice church discipline to be vindictive. Paul reminds the Roman Christians, "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord" (Rom 12:19). Corrective church discipline is never to be done out of meanness of spirit but only out of a love for the offending party and the individual members of the church, and ultimately out of our love for God Himself.

Nor should corrective church discipline ever take place out of the mistaken notion that we have the final word from God on a person's eternal fate. Corrective church discipline is never meant to be the final statement about a person's eternal destiny. We do not know that. Such a pronouncement is not our role. It is beyond our competence.

We are to practice church discipline because, with humility and love, we want to see good come from it. Earlier, we considered Jesus' words in Matthew 7:1: "Do not judge, or you too will be judged." He went on to say, "For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (v. 2). When any kind of church discipline, or even mere criticism, is mentioned today, many think of this verse. But it would seem that the essence of what Jesus forbids here is not simply being

critical; rather, it is doing that which is not in our authority to do. Personal revenge is wrong (see Matt 5:40), but final justice is right (see Matt 19:28). It is wrong to ask people to measure up to your whims and wishes, but it is completely appropriate for God to require His creatures to reflect His holy character. In ourselves, we do not have the right or the ability to condemn finally, but one day God will ask His followers to pronounce His judgments—awesome, wonderful, and terrible—upon His creation (see 1 Cor 6:2).

Some churches ask their members to covenant together to promote not only their own holiness but also the holiness of their brothers and sisters in Christ. Could it be that, in our day, a misunderstanding of Matthew 7:1 has been a shield for sin and has worked to prevent the kind of congregational life that was known by churches of an earlier day, and could be known by us again?

Certainly a "holier-than-thou," judgmental attitude indicates a heart ignorant of its debt to God's grace and mercy. Nevertheless, people who are unconcerned with sin in their own lives or in the lives of those they love are likewise not exhibiting the kind of holy love Jesus had and that He said would mark His disciples.

We do not exclude someone from fellowship in the church because we know their final state will be eternal separation from God. Rather, we exclude someone out of a concern that they are living in a way that displeases God. We do not discipline because we want to get back at someone. We discipline in humility and in love for God and for the person disciplined.

We should want to see discipline practiced in this way in our churches for other reasons as well, five of which we will consider briefly:

1. For the Good of the Person Disciplined

The man in Corinth (1 Cor 5:1-5) was lost in his sin, thinking God approved of his having an affair with his father's wife. The people in the churches in Galatia thought it was fine that they were trusting in their own works rather than in Christ alone (see Gal 6:1). Alexander and Hymenaeus (1 Tim 1:20) thought it was alright for them to blaspheme God. But none of these people was in good standing with God. Out of our love for such people, we want to see church discipline practiced. We do not want our church to encourage hypocrites who are hardened, confirmed, or lulled in their sins. We do not want to live that kind of life individually, or as a church.

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

Paul tells Timothy that if a leader sins he should be rebuked publicly (1 Tim 5:20). That doesn't mean that anytime I, as the pastor, do anything wrong, members of my church should stand up in the public service and say, "Hey, Mark, that was wrong." It means when there is a serious sin (particularly one that is not repented of) it needs to be brought up in public so that others take warning by seeing the serious nature of sin.

3. For the Health of the Church as a Whole

Paul pleads with the believers at Corinth, saying that they should not have boasted about having such toleration for sin in the church (1 Cor 5:6-8). He asks rhetorically, "Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough?" Yeast, of course represents the

unclean and spreading nature of sin. So, says Paul,

Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival [the Passover supper] not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.

For the Passover meal a lamb was slaughtered and unleavened bread was eaten. Paul tells the Corinthians that the lamb (Christ) had been slaughtered, and that they (the Corinthian church) were to be the unleavened bread. They were to have no leaven of sin in them. They, as a whole church, were to be an acceptable sacrifice.

Of course, none of this means that discipline is to be the focal point of the church. Discipline is no more the focal point of the church than medicine is the focal point of life. There may be times when you are necessarily consumed with discipline, but generally it should be no more than something that allows you to get on with your main task. It is certainly not the main task itself.

4. For the Corporate Witness of the Church (see Matthew 5:16; John 13:34-35; 1 Corinthians 5:1; 1 Peter 2:12)

Church discipline is a powerful tool in evangelism. People notice when our lives are different, especially when there's a whole community of people whose lives are different—not people whose lives are perfect, but whose lives are marked by genuinely trying to love God and love one another. When churches are seen as conforming to the world, it makes our evan-

gelistic task all the more difficult. As Nigel Lee of English InterVarsity once said, we become so like the unbelievers they have no questions they want to ask us. May we so live that people are made constructively curious. Finally, the most compelling reason to practice church discipline is,

5. For the Glory of God, as We Reflect His Holiness (see Ephesians 5:25-27; Hebrews 12:10-14; 1 Peter 1:15-16; 2:9-12; 1 John 3:2-3)

That's why we're alive! We humans were made to bear God's image, to carry His character to His creation (Gen 1:27). So it is no surprise that, throughout the Old Testament, as God fashioned a people to bear His image, He instructed them in holiness so that their character might better approximate His own (see Lev 11:44a; 19:2). This was the basis for correction and even exclusion in Old Testament times, as God fashioned a people for Himself; and it was the basis for shaping the New Testament church as well (see 2 Cor 6:14-7:1). As Christians, we are supposed to be conspicuously holy, not for our own reputation but for God's. We are to be the light of the world, so that when people see our good deeds they will glorify God (Matt 5:16). Peter says the same thing: "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (1 Pet 2:12). This is why God has called us and saved us and set us apart (Col 1:21-22).

What else should we look like, if we bear His name? Paul wrote to the church at Corinth,

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor

adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. 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 6:9-11).

From the very beginning, Jesus instructed His disciples to teach people to obey all that He had taught (Matt 28:19-20). God will have a holy people to reflect His character. The picture of the church at the end of the book of Revelation is of a glorious bride who reflects the character of Christ Himself, while, "Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood" (Rev 22:15).

Taking 1 Corinthians 5 as a model, churches have long recognized church discipline as one of the boundaries that gives meaning to church membership. The assumption is that church members are people who can appropriately take communion without bringing disgrace on the church, condemnation on themselves, or dishonor to God and His Gospel (see 1 Corinthians 11).

When we consider such passages, and the qualifications for leaders in the church, we see that we as Christians bear much more actively the responsibility to have a good name than do people in the world. In our secular courts we rightly maintain a very strict burden of proof on those who charge others with guilt. We presume innocence until one is proved guilty. But in the church, our responsibility is slightly, but vitally, different. Our lives are the storefront display of God's character in His world. We cannot finally determine what others think of us, and we know that

we are to expect such strong disapproval that we will even be persecuted for righteousness. But so far as it lies within us, we are to live lives that commend the Gospel to others. We actively bear a responsibility to live lives that will bring praise and glory to God, not ignominy and shame.

Our biblical theology may explain church discipline. Our teaching and preaching may instruct about it. Our church leaders may encourage it. But it is only the church that may and must finally enforce discipline. Biblical church discipline is simple obedience to God and a simple confession that we need help. We cannot live the Christian life alone. Our purpose in church discipline is positive for the individual disciplined, for other Christians as they see the real danger of sin, for the health of the church as a whole, and for the corporate witness of the church to those outside. Most of all, our holiness should reflect the holiness of God. It should mean something to be a member of a church, not for our pride's sake but for God's name's sake. Biblical church discipline is a mark of a healthy church.

So What If We Don't Practice Church Discipline?

We have to wonder what it means to be a church if our church will not practice church discipline. This is ultimately a question about the nature of our churches.

Greg Wills has written that, to many Christians in the past, "A church without discipline would hardly have counted as a church."¹⁸ John Dagg wrote that, "When discipline leaves a church, Christ goes with it."¹⁹ If we can't say what something is not, we can't very well say what it is.

We need to live lives that back up our professions of faith. We need to love each

other. We need to hold each other accountable because all of us will have times when our flesh wants to go in a way different from what God has revealed in Scripture. Part of the way we love each other is by being honest and establishing relationships with each other and speaking to one another in love. We need to love each other and we need to love those outside our church whom our witness affects; and we need to love God, who is holy, and who calls us not to bear His name in vain, but to be holy as He is holy. That's a tremendous privilege and a great responsibility.

If we would see our churches healthy, we must actively care for each other, even to the point of confrontation. When you get right down to it, all this talk about a church, new life, covenant, and committed relationships, is quite practical.

What shall the harvest be?
Sowing the seed by the wayside
high,
Sowing the seed on the rocks to die,
Sowing the seed where the thorns
will spoil,
Sowing the seed in the fertile soil:
Sowing the seed with an aching
heart,
Sowing the seed while the teardrops
start,
Sowing in hope till the reapers come
Gladly to gather the harvest home:
O, what shall the harvest be?

ENDNOTES

¹ From *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* by Mark Dever, copyright 2000, pp. 153-179. Used by permission of Crossway Books, a division of Good News Publishers, Wheaton, Illinois 60187. Note that some minor editorial changes were made, especially changes to conform the piece to this journal's format.

² Theron Brown and Hezekiah Butterworth, *The Story of Hymns and Tunes* (New York: George H. Doran, 1923) 434.

³R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "Church Discipline: The Missing Mark," in John H. Armstrong, ed., *The Compromised Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998) 171-187. This essay is also reprinted in the current journal.

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⁷Mark Dever, *Polity: How Christians Should Live Together in a Church* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001).

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¹⁰All Scripture quotations are from the NIV.

¹¹H. E. Dana, *Manuel of Ecclesiology* (Kansas City, KS: Central Seminary Press, 1944) 244.

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¹⁴*Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁶Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes*, rev. David S. Schaff (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983) 3:419-420.

¹⁷Os Guinness, *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 38.

¹⁸Wills, 33.

¹⁹Dagg, 274.

The Forgotten Side of Church Discipline

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A few years ago I attended a breakfast meeting for local Baptist ministers. Being a new pastor, I looked forward to meeting the men and engaging in fruitful discussion. In the midst of the friendly discourse the topic of church discipline emerged, and the tone of the conversation grew pointed. One older, retired pastor said, in essence, that church discipline should not be exercised today since it is divisive and leads to legalism. He was speaking of corrective church discipline, as addressed in other articles in this journal, and for him it had no place in contemporary ecclesiastical life.

Unfortunately, this type of hostile attitude towards church discipline is pervasive in North American Protestant churches. It is an attitude that reveals, among other things, a poor ecclesiology, a pitiful grasp of Scripture and the positive unifying purpose of corrective discipline taught therein, and a propensity to view church discipline in an extremely narrow fashion. This brief article is devoted to addressing this last problem—the propensity to view church discipline narrowly. My breakfast acquaintance only related church discipline to the subject of correction. He forgot that the church's task of discipline also involves providing a framework for spiritual formation. This forgotten side of discipline must also be reestablished in the churches, and such a reformation may prove to be the key step in helping churches extol the virtue of biblical discipline.

Church Discipline: A Binary Concept

To understand church discipline properly, we must first broaden our horizon concerning the subject. Church discipline is, in actuality, a binary concept rooted in Scripture that seeks to accomplish at least four goals. These goals are: (1) to build a regenerate church membership; (2) to mature believers in the faith; (3) to strengthen the church for evangelism and the engagement of culture; and (4) to protect the church from inner decay.¹

Writers who have addressed the subject from this broader perspective have thus spoken of church discipline by using two headings. Reformatory or corrective church discipline refers to discipline administered for the purpose of guiding an erring believer away from sin. If the believer willfully persists in sin, he should be removed from the church to protect the body from his detrimental influence. The goal of such discipline, even if removal becomes necessary, remains restorative; it is never punitive. Formative church discipline is broader than corrective discipline and refers to the nurture of believers through instruction and their shared life in the body. Findley Edge defines formative church discipline as follows:

Formative church discipline is that process of teaching and training by which the Christian is increasingly formed in the image of Christ. . . . In Christian nurture disciples subject themselves to the discipline of Christ. This process is lifelong in

scope and is not optional in nature. The purpose of this discipline is to equip individual [sic] to fulfill the missions for which they were called as Christians. Formative discipline is exercised in the Christian community as the members express genuine concern for one another and become dynamically involved with one another in deep interpersonal relationships, recognizing that all are held accountable by God for their stewardship of life. Its purpose is to enlighten, encourage, stimulate, support, and sustain one another and the group in the discipline under which they live and in the fulfillment of their divine mission.

In formative discipline both the individual and the church have a responsibility. The individual has a responsibility to enter into the transforming relationship with Christ in which the motive—the impelling desire—for growth is present. The church does not supply the individual with the desire to grow, but the church is responsible for seeking to provide those conditions in which the individual is encouraged to enter into a genuine encounter with Christ.²

Formative church discipline is related to the overall evangelism/discipleship ministry of the church. The church is called to make disciples, and that command encompasses not only proclaiming the gospel and leading persons to a commitment to Jesus Christ, but also baptizing them and teaching them to observe all things commanded by Christ, with a view toward their becoming fruit-bearing, reproducing disciples (Matt 28:18-20).³ To be a disciple of Jesus entails discipline, the words are related etymologically. Those who begin to follow Christ enter into a life of disciplined learning (Matt 11:28-30). Formative discipline relates to the educational framework established by the church to aid believers in this process of learning and maturation. When, therefore, the topic of church discipline is discussed

it should be done within this wholistic framework. Proper church discipline is both formative and reformative.

Two Areas of Implementation

In order to implement formative discipline effectively, churches must give attention to two areas. First, churches must incorporate formative discipline into the reception of new members and the initiation of new believers into the visible body of Christ. Second, attention must be given to building formative discipline into the overall, continuing discipleship/teaching ministry of the church.

Discipline at the Door

Events of recent decades have sparked renewed interest in implementing formative discipline at the front door of the church. In short, a growing number of congregations in the free church tradition,⁴ built through voluntary church membership, have become alarmed over the fact that large numbers of the volunteers are nowhere to be found. Nominality is rampant and the churches are plagued with an immense “backdoor” problem.⁵ Some churches and denominations have sought to address this problem by giving greater attention to the reception of applicants into the church membership. Such has been the case within the largest Protestant group in North America, the Southern Baptist Convention.⁶

Leaders in the SBC became increasingly alarmed at the backdoor problem in the churches in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The era was one of marked advance for the denomination as evidenced by the fact that during the decade 1945-1955, the convention’s churches grew five times more rapidly than the growth rate of the United States.⁷ On the other hand, the

convention's churches found themselves with massive numbers of nonresident and inactive members.⁸ Denominational leaders began to sound the alarm,⁹ and as a result, several actions were taken in the following decades. Most of those actions centered on formative discipline.

The convention encouraged churches to offer training to all new members after they joined or were baptized. For approximately a decade, the convention promoted a "pastor's class," which utilized a brief book for the pastors to teach new members. Then, from around 1965-1977, the convention promoted age-graded new church member training and produced two sets of material that could be taught in either four or thirteen weeks. From the late 1970s forward, more attention was given to working with individuals to help them establish spiritual disciplines in the first fifty days of their new life in Christ. Material was produced and strategies were developed to do a better job with persons at the point of commitment. Churches were encouraged to utilize material to train laypersons to serve as decision counselors. These counselors would take persons responding to a public invitation to a separate room in order to give them individual attention. Information was also made available to help churches train sponsors to work with new members for several weeks as they were assimilated into a local body of believers.¹⁰ In the 1980s and early 90s, a comprehensive plan was developed that sought to utilize the various materials developed by the convention for working with new believers and other new members.¹¹

While this activity was commendable, it ultimately did not result in marked improvement in the churches. As Chip Miller reported recently, 31.8 percent of

Southern Baptist church members can be considered nonresident. Furthermore, 20.7 percent of Southern Baptist church members who still live as residents in the community where their church membership lies are inactive. Thus, roughly 52.5 percent of Southern Baptist church members are inactive.¹²

Perhaps part of the reason for the ineffectiveness of this approach was that most of the material was intended to be taught at night in discipleship classes. Unfortunately, attendance was declining on Sunday evenings during much of this era, and multitudes who were baptized failed to attend the small groups for new members.¹³ The greater problem, however, was that the churches were captive to a methodology rooted in revivalism¹⁴ when it came to handling applicants for church membership. This method precluded the implementation of any genuine formative discipline, and it undermined the churches' ability to build a regenerate church membership.¹⁵

The ultimate impact of revivalism on SBC churches manifested itself in worship services and the time of commitment at the conclusion of the sermon. In most SBC congregations, a call for immediate response concluded the message.¹⁶ Persons who felt the need to respond or who desired to make a commitment "walked the aisle" and were greeted by the pastor. While not universally true, the person was usually counseled at the front of the auditorium, and if the pastor felt comfortable with their commitment, he would immediately present them to the congregation who would vote affirmatively to accept the candidate into membership. Baptism would follow for those professing faith in Christ, usually that evening or on the following Sunday. After accep-

tance into membership, the church, if it had training available, would encourage the new member to attend a class.¹⁷

This approach precluded effective formative discipline since initiates were received into membership without even knowing the expectations for church membership. Such expectations were often spelled out in church constitutions and covenants, but these were no longer consulted, and in most cases new members were unaware of their contents. Weak commitment to the church followed, since little commitment was expected upon entering the fold. This method also made it certain that the churches received many unregenerate people into membership. Despite the assurances of some denominational leaders, who stressed that careful attention was bestowed on applicants for membership, Southern Baptist practice was, in fact, shoddy. Individuals were baptized and received into membership on a verbal profession that often amounted to nothing more than nodding in the affirmative when the pastor queried them, asking them if they had “received Jesus into their hearts.”¹⁸

There were leaders in SBC life who criticized these practices. J. W. MacGorman, a professor at Southwestern Seminary, hurled some of the more colorful barbs. He referred to this practice as “credobaptism.” “Credobaptism,” rooted in the Latin word “credo,” meaning I believe, was, according to MacGorman, the practice of baptizing people upon the simple profession “I believe.”¹⁹ His contention was that through this practice, many unregenerate people were being added to the church rolls. No one should have been surprised, therefore, when these individuals quickly lost interest in the church or made no attempt to submit

themselves to new member training.²⁰

Unfortunately, this approach continues to be dominant in SBC churches. Readers can perhaps take heart, however, in the fact that a transition is apparently underway towards a model that takes greater care with persons applying for membership or responding to an invitation to become followers of Christ.²¹ Churches are recovering the forgotten side of church discipline, and whether they are aware of it or not, they are returning to a model with deep roots in church history. Again, within the Southern Baptist tradition, we find this model of higher requirement to be more consistent with historic Baptist ecclesiology.

Theologian James Leo Garrett joined a chorus of other voices in the past decades and raised concerns about how Southern Baptists were receiving new people into the churches. He noted that in the past, Baptists gave meticulous attention to their work with new believers coming into the church. He argued that, “Historically speaking, Anabaptist and early Baptist concern for the regeneracy of particular churches was focused upon two principal aspects of church life, namely, the admission of members to the congregation and the proper maintenance of the congregational membership.”²² Garrett brought forth sources to demonstrate his contention, the most noteworthy of which was the discipline adopted in 1773 by the Charleston Baptist Association—the first Baptist association in the south.²³

This document focused, in part, upon the reception of church members and contended that care and discretion should be exercised in this matter. In short, only those who evidenced regeneration were to be admitted. This requirement is clearly seen in statements such as, “None is fit

material of a gospel church without having first experienced an entire change of nature,” and “Let those look to it who make the Church of Christ a harlot by opening the door of admission so wide as to permit unbelievers, unconverted, and graceless persons to crowd into it without control.”²⁴ Churches were encouraged, in addition to this issue of regeneration, to pay attention to the candidate’s grasp of essential doctrines and character formation. Thus we find in chapter three of the discipline, regarding candidates for membership:

They should be persons of some competent knowledge of divine and spiritual things, who have not only knowledge of themselves, of their lost state by nature, and of the way of salvation by Christ, but have some degree of knowledge of God in his nature, perfection, and works; of Christ in his person as the Son of God, of his proper deity, of his incarnation, and of his offices as prophet, priest, and king; of justification by his righteousness, pardon by his blood, satisfaction by his sacrifice, and his prevalent intercession of the Spirit of God—his person, offices, and operations; and of the important truths of the gospel and the doctrines of grace. Or how otherwise should the church be the pillar and ground of truth?

Their lives and conversations ought to be such as “becometh the gospel of Christ” (Phil. 1:27); that is, holy, just, and upright (Psalm 15:1-2); if their practice contradicts their profession they are not to be admitted to church membership. Holiness is becoming the Lord’s house forever (Psalm 93:5).

These ought to be truly baptized in water, i.e., by immersion, upon a profession of their faith, agreeable to the ancient practice of John the Baptist and the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 3:6; John 3:23; Rom. 6:4; Acts 8: 36-38).²⁵

Baptists focused upon these three

issues (regeneration attested to by clear testimony, foundational doctrinal knowledge, and character formation) as they worked with new believers and other applicants for church membership. While certainly this approach was not ubiquitously practiced, and only partially employed in some locales, it reflected the ideal in the minds of the majority of Baptists. Persons applying for membership were expected to possess a testimony concerning how they had been converted. They were expected to have some grasp of Christian doctrine and to be striving after holiness.

Baptist literature is replete with examples of this approach. Ample support was available to aid Baptists in this task and to reinforce the concept of a regenerate church membership. Baptists produced church manuals or disciplines that were available to the churches. These disciplines were, according to Bobby Dale Compton, “treatises on church order which concisely discuss the nature of the church, its membership, ministry, and worship. They seek to provide a better understanding of Baptist polity and practice to lead churches in orderly conduct.”²⁶ These disciplines, like the one adopted by the Charleston Baptist Association, encouraged churches to retain high requirements for persons entering the church.²⁷

Baptists also utilized catechisms to instruct both children and adults. These catechisms were used specifically in evangelism and to train children.²⁸ While not used specifically to train converts awaiting baptism as in the early church, catechisms came to serve a similar purpose of training children.²⁹

Church covenants were also used to foster formative discipline in Baptist life.

Whereas church confessions of faith recorded the doctrines held dear by the churches, covenants focused more upon the ethical expectations of the congregations and what they required of the members.³⁰ Those being admitted into the churches were often required to sign the covenant, pledging to strive towards the ideals expressed therein.³¹

We can conclude that churches with high requirements are returning to the practices of their forefathers. Formative discipline began at the door of the church with high requirements and expectations.³² From the small churches on the American frontier,³³ to the great churches with deep roots in Baptist history, formative discipline was a key component in the process of working with new believers. Baptists found this method beneficial for both the convert and the church. This sentiment was clearly expressed in the discipline followed by the Metropolitan Tabernacle, pastored by Charles Haddon Spurgeon. In the late nineteenth century, this church was perhaps the most influential congregation in the world, and its shadow is cast to this day. Charles' brother J. A. Spurgeon who oversaw the daily ministry of the megachurch recorded their approach. He wrote:

All persons anxious to join our church are requested to apply personally upon any Wednesday evening, between six and nine o'clock, to the elders, two or more of whom attend in rotation every week for the purpose of seeing enquirers. When satisfied, the case is entered by the elder in one of a set of books provided for the purpose, and a card is given bearing a corresponding number to the page of the book in which particulars of the candidate's experience are recorded. Once a month, or oftener when required, the junior pastor appoints a day to see the persons thus

approved of by the elders. If the pastor is satisfied, he nominates an elder or church member as visitor, and at the next church meeting asks the church to send him to enquire as to the moral character and repute of the candidate. If the visitor be satisfied he requests the candidate to attend with him at the following or next convenient church meeting, to come before the church and reply to such questions as may be put from the chair, mainly with a view to elicit expressions of his trust in the Lord Jesus, and the hope of salvation through his blood, and any such facts of his spiritual history as may convince the church of the genuineness of the case. We have found this a means of grace and a rich blessing. None need apprehend that modesty is outraged, or timidity appalled by the test thus applied. We have never yet found it tend to keep members out of our midst, while we have known it of service of detecting a mistake or satisfying a doubt previously entertained. We deny that it keeps away any worth having. Surely if their Christianity cannot stand before a body of believers and speak amongst loving sympathising hearts it is as well to ask if it be the cross-bearing public confessing faith of the Bible? This is no matter of flesh and blood, but of faith and grace, and we should be sorry to give place to the weakness and shrinking of the flesh, so as to insult the omnipotence of grace, by deeming it unable to endure so much as the telling in the gates of Zion what great things God has done for the soul.³⁴

Contemporary churches desiring to implement formative discipline at the front door of the church can take heart in the fact that they are returning to the faith of their forefathers. May more find their way home in this area of ecclesiastical life.

Teaching Them To Observe All Things

As noted earlier in this article, formative discipline encompasses the entire

scope of Christian discipleship. It is, as Edge defined, a process that is “lifelong in scope and is not optional in nature.”³⁵ In essence, a church has an obligation to order its corporate life so that it teaches believers to observe all things commanded by Jesus (Matt 28:20). Unfortunately, many congregations give little thought to this matter. If it exists at all in the church’s corporate life, discipleship is implemented haphazardly and with little expectation for member involvement. Formative discipline needs to be applied in the life of the church in a systematic fashion so that a culture is created that fosters spiritual formation. This culture will be one in which spiritual growth can naturally occur within the planned corporate life of the congregation. Three areas thus deserve careful attention.

First, attention needs to be given to the weekly preaching ministry. The pastor must strive to preach the whole counsel of God. The most effective way to accomplish this task is through expository preaching through books of the Bible. Over time, therefore, the pastor should attempt to preach through every book of the Bible. The pastor should also preach in a manner that helps the congregation grasp the larger picture of the biblical narrative. Moreover, he must preach in a way that clarifies and explains the categories of systematic theology. His preaching must also apply the teaching to the contemporary situation of the listeners so that they can apply what they are taught, thus finding ownership of their evangelical faith.

Second, attention should be given to the entire teaching ministry of the church. The best models feature two essential ingredients. First is that members are required or expected to be involved in a

small group that is structured to aid in spiritual maturation. Second, a model is employed that provides incentives for the believer to press forward in their walk with Christ. In these models, classes are also offered that are sequenced to reflect further steps in discipleship.³⁶

Third, churches should deliberately think through their corporate existence. They must seek to build genuine Christian community where believers can “spur one another on to love and good deeds” (Heb 10:23), and where they can teach and encourage one another in the midst of a loving community. At this point, corrective church discipline enters to complete the picture of church discipline. Not only should it be restorative, its goal should be for the community to help the erring brother or sister to grow through the process.³⁷ Further, they simply should not tolerate members who are inactive or non-resident. How can the church fulfill its call to teach disciples to obey all things commanded when they are nowhere to be found?³⁸

While one can always find something to criticize in someone else’s model, churches that are seeking to move toward the ideals expressed in this article should be commended and emulated in a broad sense.

Areas of Concern

Pastors who desire to lead their congregations to employ a model rooted in formative discipline should be prepared to encounter three objections. One objection will be the fear that high requirements will drive people away. Actually, the evidence argues to the contrary. High requirements actually draw people, and in the long run will be a great aid to growth.³⁹

A second objection will arise from some who have experienced salvation through revivalism. For them, walking the aisle is a rite of passage, and they see this act as one's public profession of faith. While some minds will not be changed, congregations, moved by the large numbers of inactive people on their rolls, will perhaps find the courage to shift when informed from history and educated through the Word of God. Historically, as demonstrated in this brief article, some of the methods of revivalism are a deviation from historic practice. Congregations should be informed about how their forefathers worked with those entering the local church. Further, they can be taught that in the believer's church tradition, baptism is the place where one publicly declares his or her faith in Christ and enters into the visible community of faith.⁴⁰ Some congregations have introduced changes by addition rather than subtraction. They have kept the invitation approach, but they have added ways people can respond, such as completing a decision or commitment card in response to the message. Someone then contacts the person for spiritual counsel and to inform them of the subsequent steps to take.⁴¹

The third and strongest objection will come from those who oppose any waiting period or training before baptism. The objection will flow from the contention that in the New Testament, baptism appears to have been performed immediately upon profession of faith. Thus, to delay or to require training before baptism is to violate the Word of God. Through the years various responses have been offered to this objection. One offered by Findley Edge was to have a two-tiered membership. He wrote, "Professing members' would be those who have been received

on the basis of their 'profession of faith.' 'Full members' would have to demonstrate the reality of their profession by 'credible evidence.'"⁴² Others have suggested that baptism be viewed as a universal church ordinance and administered immediately upon profession, yet separated from church membership altogether. In my mind, both approaches are unnecessary.

The evidence is clear that the pattern followed in the Bible was one that did administer baptism relatively quickly.⁴³ The question we must raise, however, is did this practice continue, even in the New Testament era, as Christian patterns of worship became more established, and they gathered on the Lord's Day (Rev. 1:10; 1 Cor. 16.2)? On this point, the New Testament appears to be silent. While Stein gives the scenario of one being converted and baptized on the same day in response to a sermon, were not individuals led to Christ in other ways and on other days besides Sunday?⁴⁴ Were these individuals baptized right away when the church was not gathered, since, evidently, the pattern of daily gatherings in Acts passed away?⁴⁵ It would seem that perhaps a separation developed out of necessity in the conversion process, if baptism was to be utilized as a sign of initiation into the community. Further, we do know that by 100 A. D. baptism was not administered right away but was preceded by a period of training.⁴⁶

There is no easy answer to this issue. Certainly the New Testament knows nothing of unbaptized believers, and we are commanded to baptize and teach them. If we baptize quickly upon unverified profession, we fulfill neither command since most would exit out the back almost as quickly as they came through the front. I

would gingerly put forth the contention, being ready to stand corrected, that while the pattern in the New Testament was to baptize quickly, this approach is not prescribed in the New Testament.⁴⁷ While baptism should be administered soon after conversion,⁴⁸ I do not find preparing a person for baptism over a period of a few weeks unbiblical.⁴⁹ On the other hand, baptizing persons simply upon an unverified profession is unbiblical. There should be enough time between his or her “Lord, Lord” and baptism to see if there is evidence of genuine repentance. In most Baptist churches we wait at least a week before we baptize persons upon conversion, and I do not believe that we are in violation of the New Testament. If we allow ourselves to wait a week, is there some theological prohibition in waiting a bit more to see if this person truly desires to be initiated into the community of believers? Could we not present their baptism as the final initiation in their new walk with Christ, and help them prepare for a glorious time in which they share their testimony and what they have been learning since they started their journey with Jesus? My answers are obvious.

The Choice Before Us

This article has sought to set forth the necessity of congregations to return to a model that employs formative church discipline. It has shown that clear precedent is found for this practice in the history of the believer’s church. The article has further exposed the problem created through lax evangelistic and discipleship practices. Churches can continue to function in these unhealthy patterns or they can return to the practices of their forefathers and build congregations that are unified in doctrine, purpose, and ethical vision. If they will

return, these churches will retain more people and have a greater impact upon the world.

Findley Edge voiced the decision that lies before the churches some years ago. His words bear repeating as we enter a new millennium.

The churches today face a difficult question. Shall they continue the relatively easy type of religion which can be popular and thus appeal to the masses; or shall they submit themselves to the difficult and radical element of discipline and self-denial which was characteristic of the New Testament faith? Since the masses tend to avoid suffering, this way cannot be popular. The present generation has grown up in this popular, easy religion. Because this is all the religion they know, they tend to feel that this is what religion ought to be. But in more thoughtful moments there comes the haunting and disturbing thought that perhaps—just perhaps—the difficult way, the way of radical change, may be the only way to power, the only way to vital experiential religion.

Thus, the church today is called upon to go through the painful process of re-evaluating herself—her essential nature, her ministry and mission in the modern world. Because of the difficulties involved these changes will come about only when, and if, the leadership of the church comes to have a deeper and clearer understanding of what the church is and what the church should be about in today’s world.⁵⁰

That choice still lies before churches and leaders today. The question is what will you the reader choose to do with it?

ENDNOTES

¹Don R. Cox, “Church Discipline in Growing Churches,” *Strategies for Today’s Leader* 33, no. 2 (April-June 1996) 5.

²Findley Edge, *A Quest for Vitality in Religion: A Theological Approach to Religious*

Education, rev. ed. (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1994) 178-179. See also, Edwin Charles Dargan, *Ecclesiology: A Study of the Churches*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Charles T. Dearing, 1905) 551-560. Dargan refers to this process as the church giving attention to the "culture" of its membership. He is referring to the church aiding believers' growth in piety, doctrine, giving, service, and evangelism. Thus, he simply means formative discipline and uses that phrase at the end of the section devoted to these matters. *Ibid.*, 560. Elsewhere, I have defined formative church discipline as "that structure through which the church helps believers become fruit-bearing disciples. It is a ministry of teaching and training within the community of believers whereby Christians are aided in the maturation process. The church has a responsibility to provide the structure and environment for this to happen, and the believer has the obligation to submit to it." Cox, "Church Discipline in Growing Churches," 5-6.

³ Thus, it becomes apparent that the operating definition of evangelism being followed here is more in keeping with that of the Church Growth Movement. Evangelism does not take place until proclamation of the gospel occurs in some form or fashion, but evangelism is not complete unless it results in fruit-bearing disciples in a local church. For a discussion of the various ways evangelicals have defined evangelism see C. Peter Wagner, *Strategies for Church Growth*, with a foreword by

Ralph D. Winter (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1987) 113-131; J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1961); and David Barrett, *Evangelize: A Historical Survey of the Concept* (Birmingham, AL: New Hope, 1987).

⁴ See F. H. Littell, *The Free Church* (Boston: Starr King Press, 1957) and Paul Basden and David S. Dockery, eds., *The People of God: Essays on the Believers' Church* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1991).

⁵ The terms "frontdoor" and "backdoor" correspond to entrance into church membership and the inability of the church to retain said members respectively. See Joel D. Heck, *New Member Assimilation: Practical Prevention of Backdoor Loss through Frontdoor Care* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1988) for an example of the employment of the terms in this manner.

⁶ Henceforth, SBC.

⁷ Charles S. Kelley, Jr., *How Did They Do It? The Story of Southern Baptist Evangelism* (New Orleans: Insight Press, 1993) 35.

⁸ Nonresident members are those who are on the roll of a church but who are no longer residents of that community. Usually, they are no longer regular participants in any local body of believers as is demonstrated by the fact that they fail to move their membership. In 1950, nonresidents accounted for 26.2 percent of the total membership of SBC churches.

⁹ One early voice was that of prominent educator Gaines S. Dobbins who said, "As matters now stand,

if Southern Baptists should add one million new members to their rolls, they would at the same time add approximately six hundred thousand to the number of the unenlisted." Gaines S. Dobbins, "Achieving a Great Goal and Avoiding a Grave Danger," *Review and Expositor* 4, no. 4 (October 1944) 410.

¹⁰ See Don Randall Cox, "The Shifting Role of Formative Church Discipline in the Evangelistic Strategy of Southern Baptist Convention Churches, 1950-1995," (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1999) 26-104 for a detailed recounting of the content in this paragraph.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹² Mark Wingfield, "On Average, Half of Church Members Inactive," *Western Recorder* 172, no. 2 (January 13, 1998) 1.

¹³ For instance, the largest number of people reported in new member training during this time was in 1975. 135,099 persons reportedly submitted themselves to it. In the same year, however, 421,809 persons were received by baptism in convention churches. Cox, "Formative Church Discipline," 80.

¹⁴ A distinction should always be made between genuine biblical revival and what has come to be called revivalism. Richard Lovelace succinctly defined revival as "an outpouring of the Holy Spirit which restores the people of God to normal spiritual life after a period of corporate declension. Periods of spiritual decline occur in history because the gravity of indwelling sin keeps pulling believers first into

formal religion and then into open apostasy. Periods of awakening alternate with these as God graciously breathes new life into his people" (Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979] 40). Revivalism is the attempt to make revival routine in the life of the church through the right use of means. In much of American evangelicalism, this approach became institutionalized in the announced "revival meeting" held routinely in the churches. Although his overall thesis is awry, William G. McLoughlin captured the essence of the meaning intended here when he wrote: "Revivalism is the Protestant ritual (at first spontaneous, but, since 1830, routinized) in which charismatic evangelists convey 'the Word' of God to large masses of people who, under this influence, experience what Protestants call conversion, salvation, regeneration, or spiritual rebirth." William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakening, and Reform* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978) xiii. With the advent of Charles Finney, who understood revival as phenomenon that could be worked up through the right use of constituted means, revivalism became a standard approach in the churches. Elements such as the call for immediate response, walking down the aisle in response to the message, and an emphasis upon emotion became routine in the weekly practices of many churches. In Southern Baptist life, it is a staple. Thus, revivalism

continues to be a key method in SBC congregations, seen each week in the worship service, and in the "revivals" that are held on a regular basis in which a guest evangelist is employed to come in and draw the net. See Iain H. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism 1750-1858* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1994); Charles G. Finney, *Revival Lectures* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell); Thom S. Rainer, *Effective Evangelistic Churches* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996); and Kelley, *How Did They Do It?* for further insight into this matter.

¹⁵By regenerate church membership, the idea that the church is to be composed of genuine believers who have experienced regeneration and conversion is meant. See William H. Brackney, *The Baptists* (Westport, CT: Praeger Press, 1994) 37-39.

¹⁶Please let the reader understand that this article in no way seeks to quarrel with calling persons to immediate response to the gospel or to the use of a public invitation if it is handled correctly.

¹⁷T. A. Patterson, while pastoring the First Baptist Church of Beaumont, Texas, summarized the SBC approach in an article comparing Southern Baptist practice with that of Northern Baptists. He said: "Southern Baptist churches usually follow another method. They believe that new members should be received when they present themselves for membership. At the same time, they realize that these new people must be assimilated.

Consequently, they often have a 'follow-up' program in which they make an effort to become better acquainted with the new members." T. A. Patterson, "Probation of New Members," *Baptist Standard* 64, no. 15 (April 10, 1952) 17.

¹⁸C. E. Matthews penned a significant book that proves the point. For nine years, he served as evangelism secretary for the Home Mission Board, and was thus in charge of promoting evangelism in the SBC. His work, *The Southern Baptist Program of Evangelism*, which was in essence a blueprint for conducting the fall and spring "revival meetings," was made available to every Southern Baptist pastor. In this work, Matthews stated that he believed Southern Baptist churches were careful in how they received members and that the reason so many were inactive or nonresident was due to the fact that a better job needed to be done in the area of conservation (i.e., new member training after baptism). Proceeding through the book, however, one comes to see that his argument was faulty. Matthews proffered a couple of examples of proper procedures to be followed by pastor's receiving persons coming for salvation. One he recommended had been put forth by Henry G. Bennett, the late president of Oklahoma A & M College. Bennett suggested the following: "The clerk, or the pastor, should call the name and address so that all present can hear. In response to the name, the person should stand facing the pastor. To one coming for baptism, he can say: 'A few moments ago you assured

me that you were trusting Christ as Saviour. You have had this time to think it over as you sat there. The Bible says "Let the redeemed of the Lord say so." Now, before our church receives you for baptism, all these present want to hear your testimony for Jesus. Are you assured by your own experience that Jesus has saved you?" (Answer should be yes. If not the pastor says: 'We'll discuss this further following the benediction. Please be seated.') When the 'yes' is heard, respond by quoting 1 John 5: 10 'He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself.' Then, in an expectant voice, 'Is there any further word you want to say?' Sometimes heaven will burst forth through a new testimony. The applicant should then stand by the pastor, facing the congregation as the pastor welcomes him by name." C. E. Matthews, *The Southern Baptist Program of Evangelism*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Convention Press, 1956) 142. A further example, that is more disturbing, revolved around presenting a child to the church. "Then suppose a little girl has come forward and has made a clear-cut confession of Christ. Stand her up before the congregation and say something like this: 'Here is a little girl only nine years of age. Her little heart was touched by the love of Jesus. She has come forward. I asked, "How old are you?" "Nine," she answered. "What is it darling, that you want to do?" "I am trusting Jesus as my Saviour,"' was her answer. That is what Jesus wanted her to do, for he said, 'Suffer little children to come unto me and for-

bid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven.' If God's way of salvation is so simple that a little child can understand, surely you who are grown and mature would not offer excuses. 'A little child shall lead them.' Then start the music again." Ibid., 101.

¹⁹J. W. MacGorman, "Vanishing Baptist Distinctive," *The Christian Index* 136, no. 29 (July 18, 1957) 6. To him it was baptism on the basis of "unverified profession." Ibid., 7. MacGorman did not mince words with comments such as, "There ought to be enough time between his 'Lord, Lord,' and his baptism into the membership of the church to afford some basis for determining whether or not his profession is the kind that issues into the doing of the will of God. To do less is 'credobaptism,' baptism upon the basis of unverified profession, and it is no less treacherous than pedobaptism, the baptism of infants. In fact, it is entirely likely that the *Baptist preacher who baptizes a lost man has committed a more grievous error than the Roman Catholic priest who baptizes a safe infant*" (emphasis mine). He further noted, "I have no lack of appreciation for what is meant by 'drawing the net' but I do object most strenuously to the common procedure of baptizing everything that is found in the net. We Southern Baptists are far more adept at 'drawing the net' than we are at 'sorting the catch.' We baptize everything that comes in; catfish, carp, soft-shelled turtles, crawfish, crabs, and every once in a while a vicious, sharp-toothed gar

whom the devil maneuvers into places of leadership in our churches. Thus the practice of 'credobaptism' is another way of violating our historic principle." Ibid.

²⁰Ibid. MacGorman was right, and this reality surfaced from time to time in SBC literature. C. E. Matthews said more than perhaps he realized when he mentioned the benefit of the book developed for new believer training and utilized in the pastor's class during the 1950s and early 1960s. Regarding one particular chapter in that discipleship book, he said it was helpful because it served as "the stop-gap for disillusioned persons who *unite with the church without experiencing regeneration*. If and when such a thing occurs, the individual who studies and is taught this lesson will discover his mistake and will be shown how to rectify it" (emphasis mine). C. E. Matthews, "Conserving Results of Evangelism," *Southern Baptist Home Missions* 22, no. 3 (March 1951) 11. The book to which he was referring was James Sullivan's *Your Life and Your Church*. It was the key book for follow-up in SBC churches for about a decade. In the early editions of this work, one can see that the problem in SBC evangelistic practice was deeper than a poor methodology of receiving applicants for membership. Through a comment in the book, written by a leading pastor who would go on to head the Baptist Sunday School Board, one could surmise that "easy believism" was being proffered in Southern Baptist evangelism. In the first chapter of

the work, which was used for training persons who had been received into church membership and quickly baptized, Sullivan addressed the issue of Lordship. In essence he called new believers to submit to the Lordship of Christ, which should have been included in the gospel message. Sullivan wrote, "While Jesus is now your Saviour, he is not satisfied with that relationship alone. He wants also to be your Master and Lord. He wanted to save your soul, but he desires, too, to rule your life." James Sullivan, *Your Life and Your Church* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1951) 11. That comment was deleted in later editions.

²¹Comparing two studies of similar sample sizes demonstrates the validity of this statement. One study was conducted by the Sunday School Board of the SBC in the 1960s, and it examined how the churches were receiving and working with new members; the other study was recently crafted and administered by Thom Rainer and focuses on similar issues. In the earlier study, about 10 percent of SBC congregations could be labeled as "high requirement churches." These churches require a new member to receive some training before baptism, often require persons to sign the church covenant, and require them to express a salvation testimony in verbal or written form. In Rainer's study, the percentage of churches roughly following this approach reached 18.2 percent. Thus in the past thirty-five years there has been an increase in "high

requirement churches." See Martin B. Bradley, "A Research Report: Study of Opinion and Practices Concerning the Reception and Orientation of New Members in Southern Baptist Churches" (Nashville: The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1965) I-4 and Thom S. Rainer, *High Expectations: The Remarkable Secret for Keeping Your People in Your Church* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1999) 104. Elsewhere, I have argued that this approach is finding new legitimacy in Southern Baptist life due to the influence of the church pastored by Rick Warren. See Cox, "The Shifting Role of Formative Church Discipline," 159-166.

²²James Leo Garrett, "Seeking a Regenerate Church Membership," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 3 no. 2 (April 1961) 27.

²³H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987) 217. James Leo Garrett, Jr., *Baptist Church Discipline: A Historical Introduction To the Practices of Baptist Churches with Particular Attention To the Summary of Church Discipline Adopted by the Charleston Baptist Association* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1962) 16. The full title of the original discipline was *A Summary of Church Discipline: Shewing the Qualifications and Duties, of the Officers and Members, of a Gospel-Church. By the Baptist Association in Charleston, South Carolina*, *Ibid.*, 26-27.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 35-36.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 36. Note that baptism was to be administered after these three

issues—conversion, doctrine, and character formation were addressed.

²⁶Bobby Dale Compton, "Baptist Church Manuals," in *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists, Supplement A-Z*, ed. Davis Collier Wooley (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971) 3.

²⁷See Bobby Dale Compton, "Baptist Church Manuals in America: A Study in Baptist Polity and Practice," (Ph. D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1967) for an introduction to the more important manuals.

²⁸Tom J. Nettles, *Teaching Truth, Training Hearts: The Study of Catechisms in Baptist Life* (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press Publishing, 1998) 22-26. According to Nettles and other historians, catechisms have been used in Baptist life from their birth as a denomination. See Timothy George and Denise George, eds., *Baptist Confessions, Covenants, and Catechisms* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1996) 16.

²⁹See Nettles, 21-22 where he quotes an individual recounting her grandmother's catechetical training as a child under the ministry of Richard Furman. She spoke of the benefit of this training, which had prepared her to answer the questions of the church when being considered for baptism.

³⁰Charles William Deweese, "The Origin, Development, and Use of Church Covenants in Baptist History," (Ph. D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1973) 32. See also Charles William Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990).

³¹Deweese, "The Origin, Develop-

ment, and Use of Church Covenants," 157-159.

³²Deweese has argued that early Baptists had four ideals they pursued regarding church membership. He said, "They reached four basic conclusions: (1) admission standards for membership should be high; (2) believer's baptism is essential for membership and helps safeguard the regenerate nature of church life; (3) church members should consistently meet biblical requirements for doctrinal soundness, moral purity, spiritual growth, covenant relationship, and active ministry; (4) discipline should be administered for serious failures to meet the covenantal expectations of church membership." Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, VI.

³³See William Warren Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier: The Baptists 1783-1830, A Collection of Source Material*, with a general introduction by Shirley Jackson Case (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1931) 53, 272-416.

³⁴J. A. Spurgeon, "Discipline of the Church at the Metropolitan Tabernacle," *The Sword and the Trowel* 5 (1869) 53-54.

³⁵Edge, 178.

³⁶Some megachurches attempt to follow this model. In SBC life, the most familiar congregation to do so is the Saddleback Valley Community church in California. In the book penned by their pastor, he conveys this aspect of their strategy. This congregation utilizes a "life development process" that attempts to help people reach a certain level of spiritual maturity and then chal-

lenges them to press a bit farther in their relationship with and service to Christ. There is an expectation in the church that members will be active in a small group and that they will work in some area of ministry as they mature. The church utilizes various courses, and challenges believers to make deeper commitments over time through employing covenants. His approach can be summarized in the statement, "If it is the church's objective to develop disciples, then we must think through a process that will accomplish that goal." His book reveals that process and it is in keeping with the second aspect of formative discipline under consideration. See Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth without Compromising Your Message & Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 109.

³⁷As a matter of observation, I believe that most churches will have to begin by reinstating formative discipline before they can begin again to utilize corrective discipline. Churches may need to start over formally through adopting a new covenant and making membership standards clear. They should be specific regarding the fact that corrective discipline plays a role in the life of their congregation and they should be specific about when and how discipline will be administered. One clear reason for doing so is because of the danger of losing a court battle with a disgruntled member under discipline. While I am not an attorney, it does seem that courts do not punish churches for practicing discipline but rather for

not being consistent in how it is applied. Churches are vulnerable when they start practicing corrective discipline again, if they have not been employing it in a clear and consistent fashion. It is advisable to start over, in a sense, and make membership requirements clear, so that members know which practices warrant discipline. They should also be clear regarding how that discipline would be administered in keeping with the principles of the Bible. For advice on legal issues pertaining to church discipline, see the article by Wayne House in this issue.

³⁸This approach is also followed by Saddleback. Warren says, "Saddleback practices church discipline—something rarely heard of today. If you do not fulfill the membership covenant, you are dropped from our membership. We remove hundreds of names from our roll every year." Warren, 54.

³⁹As noted earlier, this was the experience in Spurgeon's church. Warren argues that the same is true in his congregation. He said, "I've discovered that challenging people to a serious commitment actually attracts people rather than repels them. The greater the commitment we ask for, the greater the response." Warren, 54. Thom Rainer, in his empirical study of churches with high expectations and requirements found that a church that begins to utilize a required new member's class "does typically see a reduction in new members added the first one or two years. But that decline is usually reversed after two years. The reten-

tion rate, however, is much higher in the church that requires the membership class." Rainer, *High Expectations*, 107. In essence, the thesis of Dean Kelley's well known work is true. It is the strict churches that grow and have the greatest aggregate impact on the world. See Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing: A Study in Sociology of Religion with a new Preface for the ROSE edition* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press) 1986.

⁴⁰See Robert H. Stein, "Baptism and Becoming a Christian in the New Testament," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1998) 14.

⁴¹Warren, 302-303, and Marv Knox, "Will Altar Calls Go the Way of Funeral-Home Fans?," *The Baptist Standard*, 110, no. 18 (May 6, 1998) 10.

⁴²Edge, 160.

⁴³Michael Green wrote, "In the early days of the Church, baptism was administered straight away on profession faith and repentance." Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 154. See also Stein, 6-17. Stein argues that it occurred on the same day at the same time (13-14).

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 12-13.

⁴⁵While Stein cites Acts 16:33 and Acts 8:26-40 to make the point that baptism could be administered at night and when no one else was present, and thus is more of a sign of initiation than of public profession, surely the normative pattern developed into one where the community was gathered, if it was indeed a sign

of initiation.

⁴⁶Historian Glenn Hinson wrote, that, "By 100 A. D. pre-baptismal indoctrination was probably almost universal. The erupting of various threats to the faith, such as Gnosticism, only confirmed the need for careful instruction to safeguard the life of the church." Glenn Hinson, "Christian Teaching in the Early Church," *Review and Expositor* 59 (July 1962) 268. Kenneth Scott Latourette agrees, "In the years when Christianity was spreading rapidly and thousands of converts were coming from paganism, baptism was preceded by a period of instruction and probation as a catechumen." Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953) 195.

⁴⁷This is essentially the argument put forth by Edge, 168.

⁴⁸Thus I would not argue for an extensive time of catechetical training for candidates awaiting baptism such as the three-year period followed by Hippolytus. See Hippolytus, *The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition of St Hippolytus of Rome*, ed. Gregory Dix (London: SPCK, 1968) 25.

⁴⁹There is much that needs to be said about the entire evangelistic process in American churches. If we would do a better job of helping persons understand genuine repentance and biblical faith, perhaps none of this discussion would be necessary.

⁵⁰Edge, 31.

Church Discipline and the Courts

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Concern abounds in the Christian community today in ways that would have been unheard of several decades ago in America. Until recent years churches had little to fear from the civil authorities, church members, or their local communities in regards to legal matters. The church was viewed as sacrosanct in American culture. The local church building was a place of refuge that provided safety for persons pursued by civil authorities. Other than a few instances regarding property disputes, parishioners, for the most part, would not consider taking their pastor, church board, or local church body to court. Clergy were highly respected members of the community and charges against them were viewed as highly suspect. If churches were careless in caring for the physical premises, they did not need to worry about being sued by members or visitors who happened to be injured. Churches that exacted discipline against its members had no reason to believe that the member would, in turn, sue them for such things as defamation, infliction of emotional distress, or invasion of privacy. None of these matters is the case any longer in America. Lawsuits against churches are on the rise and there appears to be no end in sight to their proliferation.¹

Church Discipline in the History of the Church

Jesus' Teaching on Discipline in the New Testament

The subject of church discipline first appears in the gospel according to St. Matthew in a conversation between Jesus and

His disciples. Jesus, having spoken earlier (Matt 16:17-19) of building a church,² then proceeds in 18:15-20 to explain what kind of discipline the church is to use when disruption occurs in the community of believers. Certainly the Jewish community from the time of Moses had judged issues and persons by the law,³ so this was not unfamiliar to the disciples of Jesus. The question for them would be whether Jesus had instituted a new order in this area.

Practice of Church Discipline in the New Testament

One may find only a few examples of church discipline in the New Testament.⁴ Paul and John both speak of the need to discipline members and leaders who seek by their teachings and actions to lead the faithful of God astray (3 John 9-10). Paul, in 1 Corinthians, sets forth several sins for which believers should be shunned by the Christian community, namely, immorality, covetousness, idolatry, reviling, drunkenness, and swindling.⁵ The contemporary church rarely practices discipline for such matters, and sexual immorality tends to be the cardinal, if not sole, spiritual offense sufficiently serious to incur this severe action. Such a position is out of harmony with the church in the New Testament, where disciplinary action might occur for violations in four different categories: private and personal offenses that violate Christian love, divisiveness and factions that destroy Christian unity, moral and ethical deviations that break Christian standards, and teaching false doctrine.⁶

The Relation Between Biblical Teaching and the Legality of Church Discipline Today

A local church that seeks to implement the biblical obligation of discipline should not do so haphazardly or ignorantly. It should know the necessity, purpose, causes, and methods employed in Holy Scripture, so that it may be in harmony with the commands of Christ and in concert with the historic perspectives of the church. Moreover, endeavoring to anchor one's practices in the biblical text at each juncture of the disciplinary action provides further protection when seeking to make a first amendment defense.

Necessity of Church Discipline

The practice of church discipline flows from the commands of the Lord and should not come from a personal or corporate desire for vengeance. Jay Quine pointedly says,

Many passages in Scripture call for discipline of erring church members. These passages lead to the inevitable conclusion that church discipline is as much the function of a local church as the preaching of the "pure doctrine of the gospel," and "the administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ." Discipline in the church is not optional but mandatory—it is an absolute necessity if we are . . . to be obedient to the Scriptures.

Matthew 18:15-20 and 1 Corinthians 5:1-5 clearly proclaim this necessity. In view of the procedure in Matthew 18:15-20 with the present imperative ("go"), church discipline is not merely suggested; it is required.⁷

Only with a sense of biblical justification and mandate may a church both properly and boldly maintain the loving discipline that will promote the purity of the body of Christ and bring honor to her

Lord. In the face of possible legal ramifications in our current litigious society, only a strongly held biblical conviction will spark and sustain courage to press on in this mark of a biblical church.

Purpose of Church Discipline

Contrary to what might be perceived by an ill-informed public, church discipline is not, by intent, a destructive act; grace is part and parcel of discipline. As Luis Palau indicates, church discipline "is not carried out in cruelty to destroy, but rather in love to produce conviction, sorrow, repentance, and restoration."⁸ Consequently, church discipline has as its goal the restoration of sinning church members to a spiritually healthy condition and back to the fellowship of the believing community, whose purity standards had been violated and whose good repute had been stained by their sin. Moreover, church discipline serves as a deterrent to other church members from falling into grievous sins.⁹

Causes of Church Discipline

The New Testament does not possess a comprehensive list of sins for which church discipline is to be performed. Both Jesus and Paul speak in general terms of sins warranting church discipline. At times, however, Paul does give certain specific sins that must be addressed by the church.¹⁰ Quine elucidates,

. . . it appears that to a great extent the application of the requirement for church discipline is up to the local church. Jesus mentioned only general causes, and the specific causes referred to by Paul are not specific as to quality, quantity, or seriousness. The local assembly is apparently given latitude to decide when discipline is necessary. This seems right, since it is they who will

know the seriousness, frequency, and potential hazard of the offense. However, the lack of specific parameters can make it difficult for a local church to demonstrate legally that there was no caprice or illegitimate motive involved. Since disciplined members have become more litigious, the fact that Scripture gives local churches broad power must be explained to all members.¹¹

Methods of Church Discipline

The Scripture provides some specific information concerning the method of church discipline. Following the biblical method is both faithful to Scripture and also provides better protection for the church practicing discipline. The church demonstrates sincerity of belief when it reveres and practices the teachings of Scripture.¹² Moreover, this *ordered* and *cautious* procedure demonstrates fairness by providing due process in which the accused is given adequate notice and hearing within the church body, similar to what is practiced in the courts of the land today. A court listening to a complaint from a litigating member should respond positively to such use of due process by a local church. The Bible outlines such a due process in Matthew 18 where it gives four separate steps for disciplining a member: (i) private correction; (ii) group correction; (iii) public correction; and (iv) public exclusion.¹³

Historical Perspectives of Church Discipline

Church discipline in the early days of the Christian church is especially observed in the Donatists, who required that church members be pure and unwavering in their commitment to Christ.¹⁴ Augustine responded to these perspectives with a doctrine of two churches, one in which the church was pure and invis-

ible and another that was visible and not entirely pure. By means of this view he brought some balance to discipline:

With this view of two churches, Augustine sought to provide some balance in discipline. The church would strive for purity, by excluding obvious and gross sinners, but would recognize that not all sins are known and that even known sins must be dealt with in a redemptive manner. This was considered possible through formulas for repentance, especially acts of penance.¹⁵

During the medieval period, it was common for membership in a church to be based on geographical considerations, rather than personal commitment to Jesus.¹⁶ This practice changed during the Reformation. Evangelical churches, following the Reformation's lead, made one's personal confession in Christ the basis for church membership.

After joining a church, members are generally held to certain doctrinal and moral standards to remain in "good standing." This standard may provide help to a local church exercising discipline on a "erring" member:

If it is understood from the beginning of membership that the discipline of a member may include public expulsion, the church is ethically and probably legally secure in the practice of discipline against anyone who complains or who brings litigation against the church.¹⁷

This general rule may be compromised through certain actions of the church, as discussed below.

Contemporary Legal Perspectives on Church Discipline *Governmental Non-Interference with Religion*

The intent of the structure of American government, and the first amendment in particular, is that neither the state nor the church should dominate the other. Though individuals who belong to religious entities have the right to influence the government, as an institution, a church is not to exercise any authority over the state. On the other hand, the government may exercise its authority over individuals in regards to taxes and the use of police power but the church is immune from governmental action.¹⁸ There are times, however, in which the institutions of government and church intersect; they were never intended to be absolutely non-communicative with each other, nor was there to be a high and impregnable wall dividing them, as defined by some earlier court decisions.¹⁹ The government may perform acts that benefit the church, if done in a non-preferential manner.²⁰ The church may encourage involvement in the political process by individual members as long as it does not seek to influence them toward particular candidates.²¹

General Manifestations of Prohibitions in Adjudication of Religious Matters

Until recently, these principles of church and state were relatively stable in American constitutional law. The courts tended to stay out of intra-church disputes due to the protection for religion found in the First Amendment, which provides for the free exercise of religion and prohibits the government from becoming entangled with the institutional church.²² In certain instances state courts have been willing to enter into disputes regarding church schisms, particularly in property disputes, but unwilling to intervene in matters concerning ecclesiastical ques-

tions.²³ The United States Supreme Court has consistently and assiduously avoided this collateral jurisdiction.²⁴ Such caution on the part of the Supreme Court protected the church from intrusion into its internal affairs, including discipline, by secular powers.

At least three lines of analysis have been offered in judicial cases relating to churches and the doctrine of ecclesiastical abstention. First, it has generally been recognized that the government, in any form, is prohibited from inquiring into the validity of a religious assertion or belief.²⁵ This is true regardless of how that inquiry is couched. It may not inquire into the matters of truth or falsity,²⁶ reasonableness,²⁷ verity,²⁸ correctness,²⁹ or worthiness³⁰ of religious claims. The court has been especially insistent that it has no jurisdiction in doctrinal disputes. This insistence is well-enshrined in the famous statement in *Watson v. Jones* that “[t]he law knows no heresy, and is committed to the support of no dogma, the establishment of no sect.”³¹

Second, a governmental entity may not pursue an independent interpretation of religious texts or tenets. At the very least, the government may not form an authoritative declaration or determination of their meaning.³² Courts have said that they are “not arbiters of scriptural interpretation,”³³ and that it is not the “province of government officials or courts to determine religious orthodoxy.”³⁴

The third prohibition has been called the ecclesiastical abstention doctrine.³⁵ Under this doctrine “the government may not inquire into or review the internal decision making or governance of religious entities, especially those of a hierarchical nature.”³⁶ As Carl Esbeck stated it: “The rule of judicial deference is that

civil courts are to do no more than determine the highest ecclesiastical tribunal with jurisdiction over the dispute, ascertain the decision of the tribunal, and defer to its resolution of the dispute.”³⁷

In an important decision at the end of the nineteenth century, in *Order of St. Benedict v. Steinhäuser*, the U.S. Supreme Court awarded a monk’s assets to the Order over against the claims of the executor of the monk’s estates because of the voluntary association of the monk within the Order and because such actions by the Order were not contrary to public policy.³⁸ Dean Kelley speaks of the court’s analysis,

Rather than leaving the matter here, the court went on to link this holding with [previous like decisions], cementing a firm recognition by the courts over a century of the rights of religious bodies to choose for themselves unconventional forms of organization and operation that—so long as voluntary—would not be disturbed by civil law.³⁹

In property disagreements the court tends to defer to the particular form of government generally exercised in American religious polity, namely, congregational or hierarchical government. It tends to let the respective ecclesiastical authorities settle the question, or the court may rule that the issue be sent back to these parties.⁴⁰

Consequently, as the above case law demonstrates, the issue of church discipline will receive a better hearing in a court of law if the discipline is firmly based on theological and biblical reasoning. This deference to the church, however, is dependent on whether the claimants can demonstrate invasion of privacy, defamation, or outrageous conduct, which are questions of considerable

importance in current law.

Theories of Law that May Imply Liability and Responses to Them

Recently, three different legal theories, namely, invasion of privacy, defamation of character, and infliction of emotional distress, have been used to strip the church of First Amendment and case law protections. Other causes of action, such as interference with contract or alienation of affection, could also be used when the circumstances warrant. Churches should be aware of these causes of action in order to exercise discipline in a wise manner that precludes successful litigation against them.

Invasion of Privacy

Richard Hammer provides a useful statement of the nature of invasion of privacy at law, when he says,

One who gives publicity to the private life of another is subject to liability for invasion of his privacy if the matter publicized is not of legitimate concern to the public. The key elements of this form of invasion of privacy are (1) publicity (2) of a highly objectionable kind (3) given to private facts about another. Publicity is defined as a communication to the public at large, or to so many persons that the matter is substantially certain to become one of public knowledge. Thus, it is not an invasion of privacy to communicate a fact concerning another’s private life to a single person or even to a small group of persons. But a statement made to a large audience, such as a church congregation, does constitute “publicity.”

The facts that are publicly disclosed must be private. There is no liability if one merely repeats something that is a matter of public record or has already been publicly disclosed. Thus, a minister who makes reference in a sermon to the prior marriage or prior criminal acts of a

particular church member has not invaded the member's privacy; such facts are matters of public record. Many other facts—such as, dates of birth, military service, divorce, licenses of various kinds, pleadings in a lawsuit, ownership of property, and various debts—are matters of public record. References to such facts will not invade another's privacy.⁴¹

Jay Quine gives a slightly different presentation of the nature of invasion of privacy: "To prove a legally culpable invasion of privacy the plaintiff must establish that (a) there was a public disclosure, (b) of private facts, (c) that were highly offensive to a reasonable person, and (d) that were of no legitimate concern to the public."⁴² Since the biblical text moves discipline beyond personal and small group confrontation to "tell it to the church," what occurs would qualify as an invasion of privacy under either Hammer's or Quine's definitions. But what about the elements of "offense" and "public disclosure"? Quine elucidates on this:

A plaintiff must also show that the public disclosure of private facts was "highly offensive to a reasonable person"—a culturally sensitive determination made by evaluating the content and environment in which the disclosure was made. It must further be shown that the disclosure was not of legitimate concern to those who heard. These determinations are made on a case-by-case basis, which gives rise to the possibility of defense against this claim.⁴³

Furthermore, the church may defend its actions by appealing to privileged communication against invasion of privacy:

The common interest of members of religious . . . associations, whether incorporated or unincorporated, is recognized as sufficient to support a privilege for communications

among themselves concerning the qualifications of the officers and members and their participation in the activities of the society. This is true whether the defamatory matter relates to alleged misconduct of some other member that makes him undesirable for continued membership, or the conduct of a prospective member.⁴⁴

Caution must be exercised in setting forth this privilege, as Quine says,

Though a church may utilize this privilege, it is limited to actions that are not a result of fraud (motivated by a secular purpose), or malice (motivated by personal vengeance). Only action resulting from religious conviction is within the scope of this defense.⁴⁵

One important defense to a disciplined member's lawsuit against a church is the contract theory of consent. The individual may waive the right of privacy explicitly or implicitly.⁴⁶ Under contract law, consent to discipline is either explicit (especially if a document expressing consent to submit to discipline is signed in joining) or implicit (by the very fact of knowingly entering into the relationship with the church) when a person joins a church. "By becoming a member an individual approves the rules provided by the government of the society and agrees to be governed by its usages and customs."⁴⁷ The reader must be aware, however, that the association with the church is voluntary, and the consent remains only as long as the member is willing to continue membership in the church. As I have explained elsewhere:

In the United States, no one is compelled to ally himself, or to remain identified, with any religious organization, but when he does join a church and becomes a member of that ecclesiastical body, he voluntar-

ily surrenders his individual freedom to that extent.⁴⁸ As a general rule, the rights and obligations of members of a religious society are governed by the laws of that society. Every person entering into a religious society impliedly, if not expressly, covenants to conform to its rule and to submit to its authority and discipline. Who are members of a religious society must be determined by reference to the rules, constitution, or by-laws of the society, and by reference to the statutes governing such bodies. The agreement of the parties determines the requirements of membership in a religious society. This includes financial support in some form where the religious society requires it, generally a profession of faith, adherence to the doctrines of the church, and a submission to its government.⁴⁹

In conclusion, whether a case qualifies as an invasion of privacy of a “highly objectionable kind” or is “highly offensive to a reasonable person” depends on how the leadership deals with the offending party under discipline and how it is presented to the church.⁵⁰ Whether infringement of privacy is involved also depends on how the information is given to the church body (how specific and how private are the facts) and whether the church membership (the public) has a legitimate right to know. When a person is excluded from church membership, it may not be possible to avoid appearing offensive. If the exclusion is carried out with due process and the right “spirit,” it may prevent a reasonable person from taking offense. Moreover, the biblical requirements to speak to the church (the public in the law since it is before more than a small group) puts one at risk of violating the element relating to “no legitimate concern to the public.” The risk will be lessened if the church is able to trust the leadership to know the specific details. The church need

only be given general information to decide whether to exclude a member. In addition, the vulnerability of the church may be limited, depending on what degree of consent was expressed or implied by the member in joining the church.

Defamation

Defamation is a legal term which covers either verbal (slander) or written (libel) unprivileged communication if “it tends to harm the reputation of another as to lower him in the estimation of the community or to deter third persons from associating or dealing with him.”⁵¹

Defamation cannot be successfully claimed if the communication is, in fact, true. No matter how horrible a statement is made against a person, if the statement is true, then there is no defamation. Truth is an absolute defense: “Truth of a defamatory statement of fact is a complete bar to recovery not only in an action for harm caused to another’s reputation, but also in an action for nominal damages only, for the purpose of vindicating the plaintiff’s reputation by a verdict that brands the defamatory matter as untrue.”⁵² As Quine explains,

Horrible statements made public cannot be held to be defamatory if true. Even false statements do not automatically result in a successful lawsuit, for a church and its leadership still have the privileged communication defense. Yet this defense is limited. . . . If malice is found, the defendant has gone beyond the privilege.⁵³

Infliction of Emotional Distress

“Infliction of emotional distress” or “outrage” is the newest of the three legal causes of action. Outrage is defined as “[o]ne who by extreme and outrageous conduct intentionally or recklessly causes

severe emotional distress to another is subject to liability for such emotional distress. . . .”⁵⁴ “Extreme and outrageous conduct” occurs

where conduct has been so outrageous in character, and so extreme in degree, as to go beyond all possible bounds of decency, and to be regarded as atrocious, and utterly intolerable in a civilized community. . . .

The liability clearly does not extend to mere insults, indignities, threats, annoyances, petty oppressions or other trivialities.⁵⁵

Not only must the conduct be outrageous but the plaintiff must also have suffered “emotional distress.” This has been defined in a number of ways, including “all highly unpleasant mental reactions such as fright, horror, grief, shame, humiliation, embarrassment, anger, chagrin, disappointment, worry, and nausea. It is only when it is extreme where liability arises.”⁵⁶

When a church is involved in the practice of discipline, care should be taken to avoid falling within the parameters of “outrage” as defined above. This may be accomplished by avoiding even the appearance of vindictiveness or unreasonableness. The unruly member must be treated gently and patiently (Gal 6:1).

The Constitutional Foundation for Ecclesiastical Immunity from Collateral Civil Jurisdiction in Inter-Church Disputes.

The most explicit constitutional basis that prohibits the intrusion of the civil courts into juridical acts of the church is the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. The pertinent part reads, “Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion or prohibit-

ing the free exercise thereof. . . .”⁵⁷ It is not within the scope of this article to discuss the meaning and implications of that important amendment in any depth.⁵⁸

The two clauses of the First Amendment are both intended to protect religious liberty. The first prevents the establishment of a state religion, similar to the Church of England, while the second protects an individual’s right to believe and practice his religion free from state interference. The establishment clause has been interpreted by one court to be an absolute bar to prosecution for church discipline unless the church’s activity is clearly a “threat to public safety, peace, and order,” or some “grav[e] abuse, endangering paramount interests, [which] give[s] occasion for permissible limitation.”⁵⁹ Another court applied that standard to a church discipline case involving shunning:

Harms caused by shunning (are) clearly not the type that would (require) the imposition of tort liability. Without society’s tolerance of offenses to sensibility, the protection of religious differences mandated by the First Amendment would be meaningless.⁶⁰

The free exercise clause allows the religious person the freedom to make statements that reflect religious values without intervention from the state. For example, one court said of this right of religious speech, “In the present case, this court would be violating defendant’s right to free exercise of religion if we were to find defendant’s statements actionable under state defamation law.”⁶¹

Moves Towards Lowering the Bar in Tort Cases Against Religious Entities

The generally serene situation enjoyed

by the church since its rooting in American soil has been considerably shaken. The church is now vulnerable in ways it has never been before. Due to increasing litigation against churches for a variety of alleged tort and contract violations, the mystique of the church has been lost. Judges, juries, and possible litigants have come to accept the notion that churches are as ripe for lawsuit liability as any other entity in society. The lack of reluctance to sue churches, pastors, leaders, and church members arose because churches have lost their revered status in today's culture. Idleman gives several reasons why this is so. He first comments,

Regardless of its origins, this new willingness to bring suit is important in at least two respects. First and most obvious, it increasingly places the relevant issues—such as reasonableness of conduct, potential liability, and deterrence—before the legal system, and specifically before judges and possibly juries. Second, it is self-generating: the perceived willingness of some victims to bring suit may prompt still others themselves to bring suit, especially if plaintiffs do periodically prevail.⁶²

The second reason mentioned by Idleman is that the media have been particularly interested in covering clergy and church failings. Instead of relegating them to the usual religion section of the papers, the media has placed them on the front page.⁶³

Third, the public has increasingly developed sympathy for victims of clergy exploitation. This bleeds over into perceived victimization of an individual whose morals or ideologies are called into question by a group of Christians. The relativistic culture does not concur with the church's moral and doctrinal standards. Instead, it views the church as

intolerant.⁶⁴

Last of all, there is the undervaluation of the significant First Amendment issues that attach to a tort action:

Few media reports address, with any sensitivity or sophistication at least, the many potential constitutional or theological aspects of such tort actions, focusing instead upon the grave, sometimes lurid nature of the allegedly inflicted or, where liability is imposed, upon the size or impact of the verdict. Concomitantly, organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union that normally might alert the media to the constitutional dimensions of legal controversies seem, for whatever reason, to be largely if not entirely absent from the picture. The result is that the public appears to remain unaware of, and in turn unconcerned about, the significant First Amendment principles implicated by the adjudication of certain tort actions against religious defendants.⁶⁵

Earlier Attempts

An early case for defamation was filed against a pastor in the mid-19th century because during a worship service he announced that a woman had violated the seventh commandment:

The church does now as always bear its solemn testimony against the sin of fornication and uncleanness, as an unfruitful work of darkness, eminently dishonorable to the God of purity and love; polluting to the souls of men and fearfully prejudicial to the welfare of society and the world.⁶⁶

The Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled that the pastor's public reading of his statement was privileged and dismissed the claim with these words: "Maintenance of church order and discipline are amongst the church's long recognized powers, including hearing

complaints of misconduct and administering punishment if found to be true.”⁶⁷ Chief Justice Shaw, continues in *Farnsworth*,

[E]stablished by long immemorial usage, churches have authority to deal with their members for immoral and scandalous conduct; and for that purpose to hear complaints, to take evidence and to decide; and, upon conviction, to administer proper punishment by way of rebuke, censure, suspension, and excommunication. To this jurisdiction, every member, by entering into this church covenant, submits, and is bound by his consent. . . . The proceedings of the church are quasi-judicial, and therefore those who complain, or give testimony, or act and vote, or pronounce the result, orally or in writing, . . . are protected by the law.⁶⁸

Recent Cases

Several cases have dealt with the limits of tort action against a church,⁶⁹ but only two recent cases that have reached different conclusions will be considered. First, we will examine the case of *Guinn v. Church of Christ of Collinsville*,⁷⁰ where the Oklahoma Supreme Court recognized some legitimacy to the charge that the church had violated privacy in a disciplinary action. Next we will look at *Paul v. Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York*, where the federal district court and appeals court both sided with a local church.

Guinn v. Church of Christ of Collinsville

The case of *Guinn v. Church of Christ of Collinsville*, in the late 1970s in Oklahoma, was a sensational trial balloon for the question of constitutional privilege. Ms. Guinn was discovered to be involved in immoral activity in contravention of the

moral standards of the Collinsville church. The plaintiff was aware of the church’s disciplinary practices, which it followed meticulously according to biblical standards as it understood them and according to guidelines it had established. Moreover, she had actually seen the disciplinary procedure used before. Nevertheless, at first she lied about the affair. Then, when approached by the elders of the church, she agreed to stop the sinful activity, but failed to do so. The church was left with no choice but to begin disciplinary action against her. She was then counseled by her attorney to send a letter to the church withdrawing her membership. The church responded by excommunicating her in a public meeting.

At trial, the elders and the church were charged with invasion of privacy and outrage. The church was found guilty. On appeal the Oklahoma Supreme Court dismissed the church’s claims of privilege and consent, denying judicial abstention: “Because the controversy in the instant case is concerned with the allegedly tortious nature of religiously-motivated acts and not with their orthodoxy vis-à-vis established church doctrine, the justification for judicial abstention is nonexistent and the theory does not apply.”⁷¹ It appears that the court was especially concerned that discipline occurred after she had terminated her membership:

When parishioner withdrew her membership from the Church of Christ and thereby withdrew her consent to participate in a spiritual relationship in which she had implicitly agreed to submit to ecclesiastical supervision, those disciplinary actions thereafter taken by the Elders against parishioner, which actively involved her in the church’s will and command, were outside the purview of the First Amendment

protection and were proper subject of state regulation.⁷²

Quine properly sees the potential ramifications from such legal reasoning:

If church discipline following biblical mandates, without malice on behalf of the church leadership, consistent with church policy, following prior incidents and policy, and with implied if not explicit prior consent by the disciplined member is not considered a doctrinal or ecclesiastical matter warranting constitutional privilege, then what action in church discipline matters will courts allow? If all a member about to be disciplined need do to sustain a lawsuit is state that he or she withdraws his or her membership, then the courts have essentially prohibited discipline by church and have effectively decided the ecclesiastical merits of discipline. The Oklahoma Supreme Court effectively decided that Matthew 18 and the other discipline passage cannot be practiced by church in its state.⁷³

Paul v. Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York

The important case of *Paul v. Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York*⁷⁴ in the state of Washington, which followed *Guinn*, provides some hope for better decisions on the matter of church discipline.⁷⁵ On appeal the Ninth Circuit Federal Court of Appeals agreed with the lower court in saying, "When the imposition of liability would result in the abridgement of the right to free exercise of religious beliefs, recovery in tort is barred."⁷⁶ The court then added,

Imposing tort liability for shunning on the church or its members would in the long run have the same effect as prohibiting the practice, and would compel the church to abandon part of its religious teachings. In sum, a state tort law directly restricts the free exercise of the

Jehovah's Witnesses' religious faith.⁷⁷

Quine observes, in reference to the reasoning of the court, "It is significant that this court also determined that this action of discipline by a church did 'not constitute a sufficient threat to the peace, safety, or morality of the community to warrant state intervention.'"⁷⁸

The Ninth Circuit court seemed to be in concert with the opinion of Justice Thorton, in *Chase v. Cheney*, where he said, "A church without discipline must become, if not already, a church without religion."⁷⁹

Conclusions from the Case Law

There are several other cases in which the courts have agreed or disagreed with *Guinn* and *Paul*.⁸⁰ The case law at present is not determinative of how the law is developing in regard to church discipline. Due to this, it is important that churches use care in exercising discipline. What follows are some suggestions on how a church might avoid litigation.

Suggestions to a Church Desiring to Practice Biblically Mandated Discipline Use a Biblical Approach

As discussed above, the way in which a member should be disciplined by a church is presented in the New Testament and should be followed carefully and with gentleness. A sin by a Christian should be kept as quiet as possible for the sake of the person's, as well as the church's, reputation. There is no so-called public's right to know in the Christian church. Only when there is no repentance, and thus no forsaking of sin, should it be pursued to the next level. Rashness and harshness do not further the cause of repentance or res-

toration. Longsuffering due process may succeed where a judgmental spirit may fail. When all means to bring the offending party to repentance have failed, however, the matter should go to the church for the maintenance of church purity. If discipline is pursued biblically, the ultimate purpose is restoration.

Prepare Church Documents to Maintain Biblical Fidelity

A church covenants together under biblical standards and the lordship of Christ; it is not merely a social club or society or weekly get-together. The moral and doctrinal purity of the church should be carefully, seriously, and prayerfully thought through and put into a clear, comprehensive form in church documents so that the views expressed are not mere preferences, but are, in fact, an attempt to be faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ. A sincerely held religious belief is the first test not only in a defense of free exercise of religion but is also the first test in one's fidelity to God.

Prepare Church Documents to Defend a Legal Challenge

The documents that govern a church, including procedures for disciplining a sinning member should be clear and understandable. Moreover, all members should be required to read and sign these documents. If this is so, the disciplined member cannot later plead ignorance. The documents should include, at minimum, the basic beliefs and doctrinal tenets of the church, and the basic lifestyle expected of the member.

Prepare Church Members for Church Discipline

All current members, and any new members added to the church, should

receive the documents. Moreover, all members, especially new members, should sign a statement indicating their understanding of the moral, governmental, and doctrinal positions of the church, that they agree with these positions, and that they will submit to the spiritual authority of the church and its leadership. This should be signed by the member and placed in the church files.

Minimize the Knowledge and Repercussions

Although the elders of the Collinsville church apparently desired to insure that Ms. Guinn would not attempt to join other Church of Christ congregations upon leaving their church under discipline, this pro-active approach is not the best course of action. The discipline should be restricted to the local church in which the offense occurs and the airing of the reasons for discipline should be as gentle and circumspect as possible. If possible, any specific details should occur in a small group of leadership and only general charges brought before the church. In this case, the church body will have to trust the maturity and discretion of the leadership, even if church members do not know all of the details of the facts.

Should the disciplined member attempt to move to another Christian church and the church is contacted about the member, the response must be cautious but truthful. Simply indicating that the member was under discipline or did not leave in good standing is sufficient; embellishment or negativism will backfire on the church. Too much detail may lead to successful litigation against the church.

Be Consistent

It is absolutely necessary that the

church be consistent in its application of discipline. If member A has committed the same sin as member B, then the discipline for A and B must be administered in the same way. Obviously there can be extenuating circumstances, but there must be consistency. If a church does not follow a consistent procedure, one can expect member A “to complain of inconsistency, arbitrariness, and unfairness and these are the types of allegations which will usually support a lawsuit.”⁸¹

Follow the Church's Standards Consistently

The church should practice what it preaches. If the members do not do so, an argument can be proffered that the church's lack of enforcement of a particular tenet or lifestyle is some form of an implied waiver. The church's consistent practice would avoid any type of acquiescence argument that a member under discipline might make.

Use Mediation and Binding Arbitration if Possible

As I have said elsewhere,

If consistent with the doctrines of the religion, adopt a procedure that allows for disputes to be settled only in the church through binding mediation or arbitration. Explain to new members why it is important that the church handle the disputes of members within the church, and not before a secular tribunal. As part of the membership process have the new members sign a written document agreeing that in any disputes, they agree to binding arbitration in lieu of a lawsuit. Be sure there is a process outlined in the written documents signed by the new member explaining how mediators and arbitrators will be picked, how many, and from what type of organization.⁸²

Be Up-Front and Honest

People can overlook a mistake but have little sympathy with cover-ups or lies. Never weaken or compromise your position by attempting to cover up an error. If a mistake is made, admit it, and then correct it. Be candid with church members who may be potential plaintiffs against the church; if a mistake occurred, explain what happened. However, do not expose yourself or the church to a lawsuit by admitting to a mistake that you personally did not make.⁸³ Remember, “A soft answer turns away wrath.”

Consult an Attorney

Although this is mentioned last in the list, it should be high in priority. As leaders in a local church, you should never presume to know the course of action in a matter in which you or the church may be culpable. Too often lawyers are consulted only after considerable, and often irreparable, damage is done to the case. If possible, the church should have an attorney on retainer who may be consulted about questionable issues and events. Be sure to provide the attorney all relevant documents of the church, such as by-laws, doctrinal statements, and particularly any documents giving disciplinary procedures. Before any oral or written communication is given to the member under discipline, the attorney should thoroughly review it.⁸⁴

ENDNOTES

¹ See my *Christian Ministries and the Law* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999) for chapters regarding such issues as the clergy and political activity, tort actions against churches, taxation questions, estate planning for the church, and whether Christians should sue other Christians.

²Matthew 16:19 may imply the kind of empowerment for church discipline that is later discussed explicitly in Matthew 18:15-20, when Jesus gives to Peter (and later to the remaining apostles) the keys of the kingdom. However, these keys may only refer to opening the kingdom to all peoples through the proclamation of the gospel (Jews in Acts 2; 3; Samaritans in Acts 8:14-17; Gentiles in Acts 10).

³Examples of community discipline within Israel includes Yahweh's discipline of Israel concerning the golden calf (Exod 32:19-29); the breaking of vows (Lev 26:14-46; Deut 17:2-7; 29:25-28; 31:16-17; Judg 2:20-23). This discipline related to the underlying principle of Yahweh's holiness enunciated in Leviticus 19:2. See Lynn R. Buzzard and Thomas S. Brandon, Jr., *Church Discipline and the Courts* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House., 1986) 37-38. Buzzard and Brandon's book is an excellent resource for the spectrum of questions on the issue of church discipline.

⁴The most notable and early example of discipline in the early Christian church is that of Ananias and Sapphira. God directly intervened and the believing community took no action, except that Peter, as the leader of that community at that period, unambiguously pronounced God's judgment on this husband and wife (Acts 5:1-11).

⁵See Ted G. Kitchens, "Perimeters of Corrective Church Discipline," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148 (April 1991) 203-204, where he seeks to establish a more expansive and regular exer-

cise of discipline within the church to maintain the spiritual mission and reputation of the church.

⁶Kitchens, 211-212.

⁷Jay A. Quine, "Court Involvement in Church Discipline," Part 1 *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 (Jan 1992) 60. The author would especially like to state appreciation to Jay Quine, a former student of mine at Dallas Seminary, for his two-part article on church discipline, which was most helpful in the preparation of this article.

⁸J. Carl Laney, "The Biblical Practice of Church Discipline," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 143 (Oct. 1986) 360-361, quoting Luis Palau, "Discipline in the Church," *Discipleship Journal* 3 (1983) 18.

⁹See Quine, 61-62 for fuller development of these purposes and Laney, 356-357 for an exegetical treatment of some biblical texts relating to the purposes of church discipline.

¹⁰See *ibid.*, 63-65 for a discussion of the general and specific reasons for which discipline is to be undertaken.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 65. "In the Reformation, Luther threatened to excommunicate a person who intended to sell a house for 400 guilders that he had purchased for 30. Luther suggested 150 guilders and labeled the offender as one in need of discipline because of unbridled greed." H. Newton Malony, Thomas L. Needham, and Samuel Southard, *Clergy Malpractice* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986) 201, quoting Ruth Gote, *Wie Luther Kirchengzucht Ubte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958) 110.

¹²A sincerely held religious belief is an important ingredient for free exercise claims on the part of a defendant and the first test used by a court in determining whether a free exercise defense is triggered. The other two tests relate to whether the state has a compelling interest in burdening this sincerely held belief, and whether the state has burdened that belief in the least drastic or restrictive manner. *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, 406 U.S. 205 (1972), *Sherbert v. Verner*, 374 U.S. 398 (1963). See John Eidsmoe, *The Christian Legal Advisor* (Milford, MI: Mott Media, 1984) 152-160.

¹³Laney labels these as private reproof, private conference, public announcement, and public exclusion. Laney, 358. See Laney, 358-362, and Quine, 65-67, for a fuller discussion of these steps of discipline.

¹⁴Malony, *et al* 80. See also for a discussion of early Donatism by Bengt Hägglund, *History of Theology*, trans. Gene J. Lund (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1968) 124-128, and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Historical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 63-64.

¹⁵Malony, *et al* 81.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁸See H. Wayne House, ed., *The Christian and American Law* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998) 109-174.

¹⁹H. Wayne House, "A Tale of Two Kingdoms: Can There be Peaceful Coexistence of Religion with the Secular State?" *Brigham Young University Journal of Public Law* 13 (1999) 264-271.

²⁰Robert L. Cord, "Church-State Sepa-

- ration: Restoring the 'No Preference' Doctrine of the First Amendment,' *Harvard Journal of Law & Public Policy* 9 (Winter 1986) 129-172; and, in general, *ibid.*, *Separation of Church and State: Historical Fact and Current Fiction* (New York: Lambeth Press, 1982).
- ²¹See House, *Christian Ministries and the Law*, 165-172.
- ²²House, "A Tale of Two Kingdoms," 251-264.
- ²³Robert T. Miller and Ronald B. Flowers, *Toward Benevolent Neutrality: Church, State, and the Supreme Court*, 5th ed. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 1996) 1:531.
- ²⁴*Watson v. Jones*, 80 U.S. (13 Wall.) 679 (1871).
- ²⁵Scott C. Idleman, "Tort Liability, Religious Entities, and the Decline of Constitutional Protection," *Indiana Law Journal* 75 (Winter, 2000) 219, 223.
- ²⁶*Sherbert v. Verner*, 374 U.S. 398, 407 (1963).
- ²⁷*Callahan v. Woods*, 658 F.2d 679, 685 (9th Cir. 1981).
- ²⁸*United States v. Ballard*, 322 U.S. 78, 86 (1944).
- ²⁹*Smith by Smith v. Board of Educ.*, 844 F.2d 90, 93 (2d Cir. 1988).
- ³⁰*Kaplan v. Hess*, 694 F.2d 847, 851 (D.C. Cir. 1988).
- ³¹*Watson v. Jones*, at 728.
- ³²Idleman, 223.
- ³³*Thomas v. Review Bd.*, 450 U.S. 707, 716 (1981).
- ³⁴*Teterud v. Burns*, 522 F.2d 357, 360 (8th Cir. 1975).
- ³⁵See Paul J. Morken, "Church Discipline and Civil Tort Claims: Should Ecclesiastical Tribunals Be Immune?" *Idaho Law Review* 28 (1991/1992) 93-165; also see *Jones v. Wolf*, 443 U.S. 595, 602 (1979).
- ³⁶Scott Idelman, 224.
- ³⁷Carl H. Esbeck, "A Restatement of the Supreme Court's Law of Religious Freedom: Coherence, Conflict, or Chaos?" *Notre Dame Law Review* 70 (1995) 581, 601, n. 75.
- ³⁸*Ibid.*, 533.
- ³⁹Dean M. Kelley, *The Law of Church and State in America: Historical Survey and Analysis* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, unpublished), quoted by Miller and Flowers, 1:534.
- ⁴⁰Another legal theory militating against government intrusion on inter-church judicial actions is judicial immunity, discussed at length at Morken, 137-153.
- ⁴¹Richard R. Hammar, *Pastor, Church & Law* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1983) 71.
- ⁴²Quine, Part 1, 68.
- ⁴³Quine, Part 1, 68.
- ⁴⁴Restatement (Second) of Torts, Common Interest, §596, comment e (1977).
- ⁴⁵Quine, Part 1, 69.
- ⁴⁶*Continental Optical Co. v. Reed*, 86 N.E. 2d 506, 119 Ind.App. 643 (1948), reh'g den, 88 N.E. 2d 55.
- ⁴⁷W. Torpey, *Judicial Doctrines of Religious Rights in America* (1948) at 126, cited in Quine, 70.
- ⁴⁸Trustees Pencader Presbyterian Church in *Pencader Hundred v. Gibson*, 22 A.2d 782 (1941).
- ⁴⁹House, *Christian Ministries and the Law* 72-73. For substantiation of these statements, see *Trustees Pencader Presbyterian Church in Pencader Hundred v. Gibson*, 22 A.2d 782 (1941); *Canovaro v. Brothers of Order of Hermits of St. Augustine*, 191 A. 140 (1937); *Linke v. Church of Christ of Latter Day Saints*, 71 Cal.App.2d 667 (1967); and *Kubilius v. Hawes Unitarian Congregational Church*, 79 N.E.2d 5 (1948).
- ⁵⁰See Quine, 70-73 for further discussion of privilege by consent.
- ⁵¹Restatement (Second) of Torts, Defamatory Communications, §559 (1977).
- ⁵²Restatement (Second) of Torts, §581A, comment d (1977).
- ⁵³Quine, Part 1, 70.
- ⁵⁴Restatement (Second) of Torts, §46 (1977).
- ⁵⁵Restatement (Second) of Torts, §46, comment d (1977).
- ⁵⁶Restatement (Second) of Torts, §46j (1977), quoted in Quine, Part 1, 70.
- ⁵⁷U.S. Const. amend. I
- ⁵⁸For a more detailed explanation of these religion clauses, see Eidsmoe, 130-164.
- ⁵⁹*Sherbert v. Verner*, U.S. 398, 403, 406 (1963), cited in Quine, Part 1:73.
- ⁶⁰*Paul v. Watchtower Bible Society*, 819 F.2d 875, 883 (1987).
- ⁶¹*Rasmussen v. Bennett*, 741 P.2d 755 (Mont. 1987).
- ⁶²Idleman, 231-232.
- ⁶³*Ibid.*, 232-233.
- ⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 233.
- ⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 233-234.
- ⁶⁶*Farnsworth v. Storrs*, 59 Mass. (5 Cush.) 412, 413 (1850).
- ⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 413.
- ⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 415-16.
- ⁶⁹For a discussion of these cases, see Jay Quine, "Part 2: Court Involvement in Church Discipline," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 (Apr 1992) 228-229.
- ⁷⁰See further House, *Christian Ministries and the Law*, 69-76, 253-254.
- ⁷¹*Guinn v. Church of Christ of Collins-*

ville, 775 P.2d, 766, 773 (Okla. 1989).
⁷²Ibid., 776-777. Since *Guinn*, the courts have followed the Oklahoma Supreme Court and held that “a church can discipline individuals without fear of judicial intervention” only while “the complaining individual was a member at the time of the disciplinary action.” *Smith v. Calvary Christian Church*, — N.W.2d —, 1998 WL 842259 (Mich. Ct. App. 1998). As the Michigan Court of Appeals framed the rule: “Where the plaintiff is a member of the church at the time of the defendant church’s alleged tortious activity . . . ‘the church has authority to prescribe and follow disciplinary ordinances without fear of interference by the state.’” *Smith*, supra (quoting *Guinn*, 775 P.2d at 773-774; and citing *Hadnot v. Shaw*, 826 P.2d 978, 987-88 (Okla. 1992); see also *Hester v. Barnett*, 723 S.W.2d 544, 559-560 (Mo. 1987) (if plaintiffs were members of the church, “they presumptively consented to religiously motivated discipline practiced in good faith”). But this absolute privilege from judicial intervention applies only if the discipline “does not pose a substantial threat to public safety, peace or order.” *Guinn*, 775 P.2d at 779.

⁷³Quine, Part 2:228. See also David K. Ratcliff, “Constitutional Law: *Guinn v. Collinsville Church of Christ*: Balancing an Individual’s Right to Tort Compensation and the First Amendment’s Religion Clauses,” *Oklahoma Law Review* 42 (Winter 1989) 627-645.

⁷⁴*Paul v. Watchtower Bible Society*, 819 F.2d 875 (1987).

⁷⁵Idleman is concerned about the direction of cases that have eroded the historic position on church and state in the question of judicial abstention. See Idleman, 248-251.

⁷⁶*Paul v. Watchtower Bible Society*, 880.

⁷⁷Ibid., 881.

⁷⁸Quine, Part 2:229.

⁷⁹*Chase v. Cheney*, 58 Ill. 509, 533 (1871) (Thorton, J.).

⁸⁰See Quine, Part 2:228-229, and House, *Christian Ministries and the Law* 253-254 for discussion of these various cases.

⁸¹House, *Christian Ministries and the Law* 76.

⁸²Ibid., 77. Small stylistic adjustments have been made to the original statement written by the author.

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Ibid., 76.

Sermon: The Compassion of Confrontation

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Introduction

In 1974 I was fourteen years old and at that vulnerable, easily impressionable stage of adolescence. Prior to that time, my life was tranquil. I enjoyed a happy home and a wonderful relationship with my Christian parents. But then a man came into my life who heaped all kinds of abuse on me every day. Every day after school I would go see this man before I went home, and he would subject me to the most intense forms of physical torture and verbal abuse imaginable. I would leave with my body wracked with pain and indescribable feelings of inferiority because of the verbal abuse he inflicted upon me. Yet, strange as it may seem, I always went back to him. That man was my wrestling coach; and he helped me understand that if I went through this kind of physical torture, if I learned to negotiate the rigors of his practices, then I would ultimately be a better wrestler. I would be disciplined.

I invite you now to a different scene in my life. I am no longer fourteen, but forty, married to a wonderful wife and blessed to be the father of two teenage sons. If you could be an unseen guest in our home, you might see us sitting at the table around a meal and engaging in happy banter or relational repartee; sometimes finding ourselves lost in laughter, sometimes sharing one of those moments that seems insignificant yet defines the direction of one's life or home. You might witness one of those times when we delight in one another more than words could possibly

describe. On the other hand, you might happen to glance in and see us when things are tense, when my sons have violated the will of their father and they are experiencing the tough side of love. Maybe they are being grounded or being lectured to. When they were younger, perhaps they were being—dare I say it?—even spanked. But, if you stayed long enough, you would eventually notice that the rare times when we administer discipline liberate and free our home for the peace, harmony, and mutual delight that usually reigns.

Like every father I love my sons. There has never been a time when I have enjoyed disciplining them (contrary to what I make them believe). I have never said to them “This hurts me more than it hurts you.” I tell them, “It is going to hurt you a lot more than it hurts me.” That is, after all, the point! But recently I received a card from one of my sons that read: “You took center stage in my thoughts today and my heart gave you a standing ovation. I appreciate you so much. Dad, I love you so, so much that not a day goes by when I don't thank God for your wonderful heart for God and your desire to raise Michael and myself to be great people. I know it's no special occasion or anything, but you're a special dad so I just wanted to say thanks. I love you and mom bunches. Seth.” Some might be incredulous that a son whom I have spanked and grounded, lectured and rebuked would write me a card like that, but these two things are connected.

And that is not only true in my physical family, but it is true in God's family as well. It is the discipline He imposes on us that keeps our hearts close to His and in fellowship with Him. The correction that He offers us through the body of Christ, through our fellow believers and church members—keeps us in love with His people, in love with His heart, and in love with His way.

1 Corinthians 5

The Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth about an occasion where discipline was necessary because a brother was involved in sexual sin. Paul wrote them, beginning in verse one of 1 Corinthians 5:

It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife. You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst. For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present. In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, *I have decided* to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump *of dough*? Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are *in fact* unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; *I did* not at all *mean* with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idola-

ters, for then you would have to go out of the world.

But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within *the church*? But those who are outside, God judges. Remove the wicked man from among yourselves.

Two Errors

Individuals and churches usually commit one of two errors when they think about discipline. On the one hand, some say, "Well, this is such a private matter, we have no business interfering in people's lives. After all, we are all sinners. Who are we to judge one sin as worse than another?" and therefore, they exercise no discipline. But where there is no discipline, there is no security, and ultimately there is no fellowship. On the other hand, there are some that take it to the opposite extreme and think that the purpose of discipline is merely to censor, to be harsh, and to keep the church rolls clean. They ignore or forget the redemptive purpose of discipline and settle for an enforced conformity that never penetrates to the heart.

Fortunately, the Bible teaches us the proper way to practice discipline. One cannot argue against something based on its abuse. Otherwise, we would have to argue against marriage because some men beat their wives. We would have to oppose disciplining our children because some people abuse theirs. No, the proper argument is against the abuse of the thing and not the thing itself. Clearly in Scripture, in this chapter, we see unequivocally that discipline is commanded in the Church of the Lord Jesus. The apostle makes it obligatory, not optional.

I speak not as a theoretician, not an academician, but as a pastor. In each of the two churches I served, I taught this principle and led them to begin to practice scriptural, biblical, loving church discipline. Paul, as well as the Lord Jesus Himself, prescribed the procedure. As we work through the text, let us see how to implement biblical church discipline because it is my belief that every child of God ought to believe in the value of church discipline and that every church of the Lord Jesus Christ ought to be obedient to the Lord in this matter.

Identify the Impact of Sin

Paul says in verses one through five that we need to identify the impact of sin. This requires a look at three different areas. First, notice sin's impact on the world. In verse one Paul notes that the church tolerated a kind of immorality that even the world considered gross and sinful. Even the world knows that Christians do not condone incest.

Paul lays out a principle here: not every sin makes a church member subject to discipline. What qualities, therefore, make this sin worthy of such an extraordinary step? First, notice that this sin is public—it is “commonly reported among you.” Second, notice that it is gross immorality. Even unbelievers find it inconsistent with professing Christian faith. Do not ever forget that the Lord gives the world the right to judge the church, though He does not give the church the right to judge the world. Remember that Jesus said, “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). He gave the world the right to judge us by our love for one another. In this passage, the Apostle gives the world the right

to judge us by our commitment to holiness. Even the world knows that there are certain things Christians do not do.

Other categories of sin worthy of discipline are mentioned in scripture besides the particular sin mentioned in this passage. In Romans 16:17-20, Paul says that doctrinal heresy is a ground for biblical church discipline. If someone teaches something that is contrary to the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, they must be dealt with.

Once in the church I pastored a member became convinced of universalism, the belief that everybody was going to heaven, that a loving God could not condemn anyone to hell. He believed, therefore, that we were wasting our money on missions, and that we were wasting our efforts in evangelism since everyone was going to heaven anyway. I privately talked about it with him, and I told him, “You are in dangerous error. That is contrary to the Word of God and I warn you that if you attempt to propagate this teaching, the church will need to take action.” Unfortunately, he took that as a challenge and placed tracts that he wrote on all the cars in our parking areas. I confronted him and called on him to repent; I talked with him privately, but he refused to recant. I took some men with me and we confronted him again but he would not repent. Then we brought it before the church for a time of prayer that he might repent of his doctrinal heresy. When he refused to do so, we removed him from the fellowship of the church with tears and with prayers that one day he would recant his heretical beliefs, so that he might be restored to the fellowship of our church. Like gross immorality, doctrinal heresy is grounds for church discipline.

We are also told in Titus 3:9-10 that cre-

ating division is grounds for church discipline. Paul writes, "But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and strife and disputes about the Law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. Reject a factious man after a first and second warning." Paul, following the instructions of Jesus in Matthew 18, says, "Go to him once, and then go to him again. If he will not hear you on either occasion, if he will not repent, then he should be rejected and put out of the fellowship of the church." There is also a special case in Scripture—if an elder, one of the leaders of the church, sins, he should be rebuked publicly before all so that others may fear (1 Tim 5:21). We must identify sin's impact on the world. The world is watching us. The world is waiting to see if we really believe what we say; if we really walk the talk. They are watching. It is up to the church to confront sin.

Identify Sin's Impact in the Church

In verse two Paul goes on to say that we need to identify sin's impact in the church. Paul laments that rather than mourning over this, they are proud. What does he mean by "proud"? How could they be proud about a man having a sexual relationship with either his mother or his stepmother? They prided themselves, not in the fact that he was in sin, but in their tolerance, that they could leave this as a private matter between him and God. They thought they were doing the right thing. Paul says, "No, you have not mourned over this," and unless you confront it, you become desensitized to sin.

Why should we go to such great lengths to deal with sin in the church? First of all, the Bible is clear on this matter. God in His Word commands that it be dealt with. Believe me, in the short term, it is

much easier to sweep sin under the rug and ignore it. But when we do so, the church preaches the subtle message that sin is not so serious, and that the rules are arbitrary. Furthermore, we avoid any incentive for repentance. Perhaps some do not know how to repent. Maybe they do not realize they are in error. When a church tries to take the shame out of sin, they are engaging in a dangerous enterprise. God wants sin to be shameful.

I ask you a question—who is more afraid of dirt? A mechanic in a pair of greasy old overalls or a man immaculately dressed in a white suit? Which of those two is going to do all he can to avoid dirt? When we uphold the standard of holiness in our churches and say, "This is the way, walk in it," when we preach and live in a holy manner, then we abhor sin. We love sinners, but we hate sin. That is God's standard.

Identify the Church's Impact on Sin

Third, he says we need to identify the church's impact on sin. We can sum up what Paul says in verses 3-5 as follows. "The result of your mourning should be obvious. The one who has done these things should be removed from the church." Now, in this specific text, Paul does not explicitly mention anything about forgiveness. Based on other passages where we are told that the point of discipline is always forgiveness and restoration, we can conclude that this brother was unrepentant, that he was persisting in this sin, and that opportunity for repentance had been refused.

In Matthew chapter 18, Jesus Himself laid out the procedure. If a brother is in sin he should, first of all, be privately confronted. Often as a pastor, people would come into my office and say, "I need to

tell you what brother so and so has done to me.” Inevitably I would say to them, “Have you talked to him about it? You have no business, you have no right, talking to me about it until you have first talked to him about it.” Go to that brother. Then if he does not listen to you, then two or three—perhaps some of the elders of the church—should go and confront him. If he continues to be stubborn, the entire church must be told, and the church needs to call him to repentance. If he still refuses to repent, then both Paul and Jesus make it clear that the brother is to be, as Paul puts it, “turned over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh.”

Pastors must follow the procedure exactly as Jesus laid it out. You dare not skip a step. We must not begin with public confrontation. We do not begin by taking two or three with us. We begin with private confrontation to spare the brother and to give him opportunity to repent. I remember as a boy my father told me he was going to confront a woman in the church, a widow who had allowed a man to move in with her. My dad went to her privately and said, “I just want to read to you a passage of scripture,” and he read to her Psalm 51, David’s great prayer of confession. He said, “I just want you to think about what I have said.” She said, “Just a minute, Pastor. As you read that, God convicted my heart. I know I am in sin and I am going to get out of this.” You see, she was given the opportunity in private to confess that sin, to repent, to cease the sin, and God wonderfully restored her.

In the case recorded in 1 Corinthians 5 Paul says, “I have already made a judgment here. I do not have to make a case by case decision. Whenever someone persists in sin, whenever gross immorality is continually engaged in without repen-

tance, then a brother has to be judged.” Wonderfully, people often repent when they are first confronted. If they do not, and if they persist, the matter must go before the church, Paul says they need to be “turned over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh.” What does that mean?

The key is to understand the principle of authority that exists in the Lord’s church. When we are under authority and are properly submitted to the authority over us, we enjoy a supernatural protection that Satan cannot penetrate. But when someone is removed from the church; when they are excommunicated because of sin, then Satan has freedom to torment them. One of two things will result: Either they will hurt so badly that they repent; or, they will demonstrate that their claim to be a believer is false, for their persistence in sin will show that their faith is not genuine. Paul says turn them over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh in the hope that their spirit may eventually be saved by their repentance and restoration.

Notice how closely Paul’s words match the words of Jesus in Matthew 18:20 when Jesus says, “For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.” Though this verse of Scripture is often misquoted, misused, and misapplied, the context is in the realm of church discipline. Jesus says, “Whenever you need to make this judgment regarding a brother who will not repent, I am in your midst. I am with you in making that judgment.” Paul says much the same thing here. “Even though I am away from you in body, I am present with you in spirit.” As an apostle, he encourages them to consider him a partner in this decision and to deal with the brother error. Paul counsels that we must always treat sin as sin will treat you. Sin will be ruthless with

you. Sin will be merciless with you and that is the way you should treat sin—not the sinner—but the sin. We hate it. We have to identify the impact of sin and recognize it as deadly serious. Sin influences both the one who commits it and the church as well. Therefore, Paul not only identifies sin’s effect, but he also tells us to identify the attitude of the church.

Now in verse 6-8, Paul begins to peel back another layer of the onion. Even more significant than this brother who is in error is the impact his sin has on the whole church. He says in verse 6, “Your boasting is not good. Don’t you know this principle, that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?” Their great problem was that they did not see the seriousness of sin. Paul says, “Don’t treat sin lightly.” They thought that a little sin would not be a great problem. Paul reminds them that just a little leaven leavens the whole lump. When there is just a little sin, it results in members who are just a little guilty, and unmarried girls who are just a little pregnant, and bigots who are just a little bit racist, and men who just commit a little adultery, and churches who have very little impact.

We must do some spiritual house cleaning. Purge out the old leaven. Positive church discipline begins with positive personal discipline. We must stop viewing church discipline as a negative. We must see it as a loving act of confrontation. I say to you pastors—do not back down. On one occasion we had to discipline a man in our congregation who had abandoned his wife and his child to move in with his homosexual lover. He would not repent; he would not make it right. We publicly disciplined him. When we did this, we wrote in the minutes of the meeting that the discipline was imposed

with tears and sorrow, with prayerful anticipation of the day when the sin would be forsaken, so that we could welcome back the sinner with open arms. Restoration was our goal and our hope. Not long after that event I received a letter from a lawyer representing this man. She wrote, “I would like a letter from you telling me the membership status of Mr. So and So.” Knowing that her letter was merely an attempt to frighten and intimidate, I wrote back to her and quoted from 1 Corinthians chapter 6. I said, “The Bible absolutely forbids me from discussing with you any internal matters of this church. But just so you know, I am a man of conviction and this church is a church of conviction and we will always obey God rather than man.” That ended any further attempt to scare us out of obedience to God.

We should administer discipline in a way that is loving, consistent, and impartial. No one receives special favors. Then the world will realize that we are serious about sin. When we treat sin lightly, we are in effect treating the atonement lightly. Do you see this in the text? Why does he put that little phrase in there, “for Christ is our Passover?” He informs us that since our Passover Lamb has already been sacrificed, we should live in a perpetual feast of unleavened bread. Our Passover Lamb has been sacrificed—not once a year, but once for all. And therefore, we are always enjoying the feast of unleavened bread. When the feast was implemented, according to the book of Exodus, they were not only forbidden to have any leaven in their meals, but they also were required to remove it from their houses. Leaven was a type or picture of sin. God wanted his people to see the necessity of purity. Since our Passover Lamb has given Himself and

suffered as the sacrifice for our sins, we must respond by getting rid of any leaven in our lives. The atonement demands our holiness. We are not holy to earn atonement, we are holy because we have atonement. Put out the leaven; the atonement has been made! First the sacrifice, then the purging. We must get rid of the leaven of malice and evil. We eat the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

Identify the Church's Ministry

The final movement in the passage is in verses 9-13 where Paul says we must identify the church's ministry. It is a ministry of biblical separation. He says, "You folks have it backwards. You are trying to separate from the sinners of the world. You cannot do it that way. You have no ministry." Biblical separation is not from the sinners but from sin. Like Jesus, we should be a friend to sinners. But when it comes to one who is called a brother, the situation is different. When a brother will not repent of sin, we respond by removing him from the fellowship. Paul says we must not even eat with him. We wonder if he refers to eating a meal with him or whether he refers to eating the Lord's Supper, but in either case it is clear that the brother must now be shunned.

The church has a ministry of biblical separation but not of judging the world; judging the world is God's prerogative. Too often we preach the wrong message. We preach against the wrong sin. It is easy to stand in the pulpit and talk about the sin in Washington D.C. and the problems with the National Organization of Women or the ACLU. We are not to judge the world. Don't ever get mad at the world for acting like the world. What else are they going to do? That is who they are. We need to confront the sin that is within

the walls of our churches, within the lives of our people. That is our ministry, that is the message we preach. He speaks not of judging the world, but of judging within the church. Here Paul says, "Is it not your responsibility to judge those within?" He asks the question in Greek in such a way that the answer is clearly, "Yes." He assumes that this is so widely known as to be indisputable. I think if he were writing this to churches today, he would explain what he means in more detail since many Christians mistakenly think that we should not judge those within our fellowship.

I have obtained permission to share a personal story with you that serves as an example of how confrontation works. Some years ago I received a letter from a lady member of the first church I pastored. She told me that Bob, who had been my chairman of deacons and my closest friend in the church, had left his wife and was living with another woman. I could not believe it. It was as shocking to me as if you told me that one of my beloved colleagues at Southern Seminary had done that. I called Doreen, his wife, and asked her to tell me what had happened. Confirming my worst fears she said, "It is true. He has left me. We are not divorced but he is already living with another woman." I said, "Give me the phone number at the house where he is staying." She gave it to me and I called. Bob's illicit lover answered and I asked for Bob. She said, "Yes, may I tell him who is calling?" I said, "Yes, tell him this is his friend and former pastor, Hershael York." As I heard her relay those words to him I could hear a gurgling, choking sound coming from his throat as he decided whether or not to even take the phone.

"Hello," he managed to say sheepishly.

My voice betraying the fervency of my disappointment and my righteous indignation, I said, "Bob, what are you doing? What are you thinking?" Mustering his defense, he answered, "Well, I just got tired of being the only one making the effort. What do you do when you give and give and get nothing in return? What do you do when you try to express love and she will not? What do you do when you give everything you've got and she never even says thank you?" In a moment of insight supplied by the Holy Spirit I said, "Here's what you do Bob. You make a cold, hard, rational decision to obey God anyway. That's exactly what you do."

When the hard truth I offered received no further excuses, I continued, "Now you listen to me—I want you to pack your things right now. I want you to go home to your wife. I want you to get her and I want the two of you to drive all the way up here to Lexington, Kentucky, and I want you to spend the weekend with Tanya and me."

I cannot explain exactly what happened. Either God gave me the boldness to confront him like that, or, gave him the grace to be compliant, but he did exactly what I told him to do. He went home, got her, and they came up to our house and that whole weekend Tanya and I just ministered to them from the Word. Three days later they went back home and said they were going to try and make a go of it. Three weeks later they came back to Lexington with their two children and said, "We want you to marry us again. We want to repeat our vows and start fresh and new." Last night I called and asked, "Doreen, how is it going?" With her voice cracking from grateful emotion she answered, "If anyone had ever told me marriage and life could be this good, I

would have never have believed it."

Do me a favor. If you find me in sin, confront me. Love me that much. Do not let me go and think you have done me a favor. "*Weep o'er the erring one. Lift up the fallen. Snatch them in pity from sin and the grave.*" Jesus found me in my sins and He loved me, but He loved me too much to leave me there.

The *SBJT* Forum: Perspectives on Church Discipline

Editor's Note: Readers should be aware of the forum's format. William G. Travis, Bruce A. Ware, D. A. Carson, and C. Ben Mitchell have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: What does the reformation teach us about church discipline?

William Travis: When sixteenth century Anabaptists were baptized, the act was seen as more than an outward testimony to inward faith (though, of course, it was that) and obedience to a New Testament command. In addition, the newly baptized person pledged to live in newness of life in the believing community, placing himself voluntarily under its authority. Baptized believers constituted a holy brotherhood, in which members were subject to discipline by the local congregation.

The model for such discipline was Matthew 18:15-18, where Jesus laid out a three-step sequence of seeking to win over the erring person. If no change occurred after these efforts, the last resort was to treat the offender as a Gentile and a tax-collector, i.e., as someone outside the believing community. The erring person must be put under the "ban" (excommunicated) and shunned by all others in the church. Menno Simons (1492-1559) saw the whole process as an attempt to heal, not to amputate: the congregation issued its judgment in a spirit of compassion, and welcomed the repentant person back in a spirit of grace. He even suggested that the congregation should wait patiently, hop-

ing for repentance, before invoking the ban—up to two years. The shunning was not unrelievedly harsh, especially inside the family, but it was important to let the sinning person know that he was not in fellowship with other believers.

Balthasar Hubmaier (c. 1485-1528) agreed with Menno, and went so far as to argue "no discipline, no church." Even if adult baptism and the Lord's Supper are observed in the congregation, without discipline there is no real church. One of the debates of the sixteenth century centered on what the distinctive marks of the church were. Both Luther and Calvin contended for two marks: the Word of God correctly preached, and the sacraments rightly administered. Hubmaier added discipline as a third mark: discipline is *esse*, foundational, to the church's very being.

The ban was a church matter—related to issues of religion, morality, and church fellowship—not a civil matter. The Anabaptists did not contend for political punishments such as exile or imprisonment; discipline was only internal to the congregation. By contrast, Martin Bucer (1491-1551), reformer in Strasbourg, placed discipline ultimately in the hands of the magistrates. While some matters

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could be handled by the congregations, he had the common sixteenth century belief that the church and the state in a given city were roughly coterminous. In contrast to the Anabaptist belief that one was banished from the church (the believing community) to the commonwealth (the unbelieving community), Bucer saw expulsion from the commonwealth as one of the forms of discipline.

John Calvin (1509-1564) argued that while discipline is not *esse* to the church, it is nonetheless *bene esse*, essential to the church's well-being. Word and sacrament are better able to do their work when discipline is in place. Discipline brings honor to God, prevents the corruption of other members of the church, and can be the means of bringing the erring person back to the fold. When discipline is not present, the churches run the risk of representing a deformed gospel to the world. The Matthew 18 passage is the primary basis for discipline, but 1 Corinthians 5 with its telling "expel the immoral brother" was applied by both Menno and Calvin to egregious cases of sinning: some situations are so public and odious that the congregation moves immediately to excommunicate (though even here there is the hope for a repentant return to a holy life).

While agreeing with Menno on the need for excommunication and shunning, Calvin is somewhat more restrained in both regards here. Excommunication in Geneva commonly took the form of barring from the Lord's Supper, and that usually temporarily, and shunning was done in mild forms. Calvin used an oil and vinegar analogy to describe his approach: the vinegar of punishment should be accompanied by the oil of a gentle spirit; discipline punishes the sins committed

and holds out the hope of a renewed life.

Calvin placed discipline in the hands of the consistory, a group of elders both lay and clergy, with authority over the churches. This turned out to be a mix of state and church, because in Geneva the town council nominated members to the consistory. The Anabaptists saw Christian society as consisting of Christian societies, local groups of believers, whereas Bucer and Calvin saw Christian society as the whole Christianized order. Thus, while the magistrates in Geneva did not mete out punishments based on Matthew 18, they did engage in some attempts at controlling the society in general according to biblical concepts.

The seventeenth century Puritans in both Britain and America continued the Reformed tradition by emphasizing the need for discipline in the church. On the one hand, they agreed with Anabaptist Hubmaier by virtually making discipline a mark of the church. On the other hand, they agreed with Calvin in contending that the social order should be Christianized through legislation based on biblical concepts. The famous Two Tables debate between Roger Williams and John Cotton in the 1630s illustrates this view, since Cotton contended (contra Williams) that First Table commandments (the first four of the Ten) could be enforced by legislation in the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Appeal to the state to aid in church discipline stopped after the new nation was founded in 1789, but the Reformation insistence on discipline as a part of church life did not end with the Puritans. In *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Discipline in the Baptist South*, Gregory Wills makes clear that the practice of discipline continued well into the nineteenth century. Baptists, like other Protestants,

included discipline in congregational life as a matter of course. The Baptist example is particularly telling because of the emphasis on freedom among Baptists—presumably the most freedom-conscious of all Protestants. But the egalitarian implications of an emphasis on freedom (so-called “soul competence”) was coupled with an equally strong emphasis on authority and discipline; democracy and authority were not opposites, democracy was carried out within the lines of authority. Wills’s evidence is compelling: until after the Civil War, discipline was a common feature of Protestant ecclesiology.

Both cultural and theological changes led to the gradual diminishing of the use of discipline in most American churches beginning in the late nineteenth century. But it need not stay that way. Whether *esse* or *bene esse*, the end result of the use of discipline is a purer church, both in its general constituency—the whole congregation—and in particular individuals (erring persons might be brought back to fellowship). Calvin was right: preaching, prayer, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and discipline are means God uses to edify and to sanctify the body of believers.

Suggested Reading:

Davis, Kenneth R. “No Discipline, No Church: An Anabaptist Contribution to the Reformed Tradition.” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 13:4 (Winter 1982) 43-57.

White, Robert. “Oil and Vinegar: Calvin on Church Discipline.” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 38 (1985) 25-40.

Wills, Gregory A. *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

SBJT: Why do many churches find church discipline difficult and seldom, if ever, practice it? And what, theologically, may give impetus to a revival of the practice of a healthy church discipline?

Bruce Ware: I heard a comment recently that sounded plausible: “While John 3:16 was once the most well-known Bible verse in America, now that honor goes instead to Matthew 7:1, ‘Do not judge lest you be judged.’” Just try to raise the issue of holding someone accountable for misconduct, and watch how quickly the defenses come up: “Do not judge lest you be judged.” There is no doubt that our cultural drift toward postmodern relativism has rendered serious, judicious, and hard-nosed evaluation of another’s alleged misbehavior into a sort of moral wrong that is itself worthy of instant and judicious rejection. As is often said now, the only “sin” that is not tolerated is intolerance—a contradiction, to be sure, but more importantly, it is a reality of life at the beginning of the 21st century.

Just as the church is prone to absorb cultural values in other areas, so too is it here. How pious it can sound for people to cite Bible passages like Matthew 7:1, or Jesus’ words in John 8:7 (“he who is without sin, let him cast the first stone”) to legitimate non-action in the face of grievous violations of God’s standards of righteousness. How susceptible the church is to accepting all kinds of worldliness and immorality, all behind a veil of false but pious-sounding expressions of tolerance. Recognition of our *common sinfulness* becomes the new paradigm within which *common acceptance* is given to a greater variety and extent of this sinful expression.

In all of this one important truth is often lost: the standard by which each of

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us is to evaluate our lives is nothing less than the perfect holiness of God himself (Matt 5:48; Rom 8:29; Eph 1:4; 1 Pet 1:15-16). Because this is true, the church must be a community in which we constantly call one another to grow, by God's grace, to higher and more consistent levels of conduct befitting that standard of holiness. But to do this, we must call one another to account when growth is stunted and violations are egregious. Community accountability is the backbone of a vibrant theology of church discipline, and our common pursuit of holiness is what drives both community accountability and corporate discipline.

Jesus himself expected just such interpersonal accountability to occur. Consider again the oft-cited text in Matthew 7:1-6. After Jesus says what is commonly quoted ("do not judge lest you be judged"), he proceeds with instructions precisely about how properly to bring an erring brother to account. Recall that he warns to "take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye" (7:5). What is often missed in this is that once the log is removed, one has the obligation then to help remove the speck from his brother's eye. In other words, Jesus expects us to be used in the lives of others to help them advance in holiness, just as they may be used likewise in our lives to help us to grow. Church discipline is, most essentially, the formal structure that grows out of a healthy practice of corporate accountability.

The bottom line is this: where a sense of common sinfulness breeds common *acceptance of sin*, accountability and discipline will seem foreign, even "un-Christlike." After all, it is thought, we must be more understanding of our com-

mon difficulties and thereby avoid any "judgmental" attitudes toward one another. But, on the other hand, where *zeal for holiness* prevails, we see our common sinfulness as an occasion for community accountability, all for the purpose of growing more and more like Christ. When community accountability becomes the norm, a healthy church discipline naturally takes shape. Therefore, as with so much else, we pray that God would work mightily within us, and within our churches, to give us the longing to pursue "the sanctification [i.e., holiness] without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb 12:13).

SBJT: Do you think that a fallen Christian leader can ever be restored? If not, why not? But if so, under what conditions?

D. A. Carson: This question has become increasingly pressing, owing in no small part to the number of Christian leaders who have fallen into publicly acknowledged sin, often (but certainly not always) of a sexual nature. Substantial books have been written on the subject; I am certainly not going to resolve all the difficulties in a thousand words or so. But perhaps I can set out what some of the crucial issues are, in four points.

(1) The question posed is sometimes ambiguous, or even tendentious. "Do you think that a Christian leader can ever be restored?" The first response must be: "Restored to what?" Suppose the sin is sexual. Does the restoration mean "restored to this family"? That will depend on the spouse, and what the spouse's reaction will be turns on many factors. More commonly "restored" in the questioner's mind really means "restored to the Lord." The obvious answer is a joyous "Yes!"—for however grievous the

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sexual conduct, it is not in itself the unforgivable sin. But that does not necessarily mean that the Christian leader who has been restored to the Lord, and perhaps restored to church membership and participation at the Lord's Table (if we assume that he or she has been excommunicated) should also be restored to Christian leadership. Not every Christian in good standing in the church is qualified for every office in the church. So if someone has been removed from office for a biblically justifiable reason, the question about restoration *to that office* now turns on whether or not that person *now* meets the biblically mandated requirements of that office.

(2) Whether or not the person in question meets the biblically mandated requirements of that office now turns on two related matters. To give the discussion concrete form, let us suppose we are dealing with a former pastor who has been disciplined for adultery, but who has repented, put himself under the care of the elders (pastors) of the church, and has been restored to church membership (assuming he was removed). Now the question arises as to whether or not he can be restored to pastoral office. The two related matters to be explored are these: (a) Is he in danger of committing the sin again? This requires pastoral judgment as to the measure of the repentance, the degree of his spiritual restoration, the nature of the resolve and the accountability that he will display in the future. Let us be quite frank: the number of people (including pastors) who offend in this area *and then offend again* is extremely high. Quite apart from the moral obligation of the elders to protect the flock from a predatory pastor (and in this litigious society, that obligation has many dimensions to it!), there is an obligation to come

to consensus on whether or not the offender has been restored to the kind of moral resolve that makes recidivism unlikely. In biblical terms, the leaders must determine if the former pastor is now truly "self-controlled" (1 Tim 3:2), and someone who knows well how to manage his own family (1 Tim 3:4). For these are among the domains where his adultery has proved him unqualified to be an overseer, a pastor. (b) To what extent has his moral failure destroyed his credibility, both among the faithful and with outsiders?

(3) It is the second of these two questions that calls for further reflection. When the fallen pastor's supporters accuse the elders or the church of being unloving and unforgiving if they do not restore him to leadership, and loudly remind everyone that adultery is not the unforgivable sin, it is profoundly important to point out that such arguments are nothing more than red herrings. The real issue is public credibility. Paul insists that "the overseer must be above reproach" (1 Tim 3:2) and "must also have a good reputation with the outsiders" (1 Tim 3:7). The "above reproach" category does not demand sinless perfection. Rather, what is demanded is that the candidate have no moral flaw for which many people "reproach" him. Moreover, the fact that this pastor must have "a good reputation *with outsiders*" is surely worth thinking about. Sometimes a church is so sentimentally attached to its pastor that even when he falls into grievous sin, many in the church, perhaps even the majority, will be happy to let him remain in pastoral office, provided he shows adequate signs of repentance. But what about the outsiders? Do they look at his adultery, nod knowingly, and smirk? Is Christ's name

debased, not only because the pastor has committed adultery but also because the church has indicated it does not mind being led by a man who cannot keep his zipper up? Has this pastor so lost his credibility that when he preaches on anything to do with morality and integrity, a surfeit of polite sighs will escape from either the believers or the unbelievers or from both?

(4) In this light, then, the elders must ask tough questions not only about how this fallen pastor is doing in himself, but also about how his credibility has been affected, both with the church and outside. If they are satisfied with the pastor's improvement in the former domain, they must nevertheless ask the hard questions in the latter domain. At this juncture the prospect of the fallen pastor being restored to active pastoral leadership is nothing more than the question of how (or if) he can regain public credibility.

At this juncture I break with some hardliners, who insist that restoration to public office must be ruled out, precisely because this sort of public credibility is forever forfeit. I am not so sure. I am quite certain that the kind of three month, self-imposed withdrawal of Jimmy Swaggart, followed by his self-declared fitness for return to pastoral office, is a sad joke. In theory, however, I cannot see why a man could not regain credibility by starting over again, beginning at the bottom, proving faithful in small things. Perhaps he begins by cleaning the building, by parking cars for the elderly in the church lot, by attending the prayer meetings. Perhaps after some years his participation in a house group is of such humility and of such quality that he is occasionally asked to address the group. Perhaps with time he becomes a faithful deacon, and after

some years the integrity of his home life coupled with the depth of his biblical knowledge convince more and more people that he can be trusted with more. Perhaps he begins to preach once in a while. And so, over a long period of time, he may regain a great deal of public confidence, and be restored to some measure of spiritual leadership.

But this sort of path to restoration to pastoral office implicitly means two things. First, it is doubtful if this man will ever regain the authority he had before his fall. Too many people will know what has happened, and they will never be able entirely to forget it. Even if they agree that the man has regained substantial credibility, when he deals with certain themes they will inevitably remember his own egregious failure. And second, this model of restoration presupposes that the more prominent the pastor before the fall, the more unlikely is his full restoration to public trust after the fall. His very prominence means that more people will be devastated by this tumble, and more outsiders will make snide comments, ensuring that his restoration will take longer, be more difficult, and perhaps prove impossible.

SBJT: Why must churches be cautious and careful in restoring the practice of church discipline?

C. Ben Mitchell: Along with the current revival of interest in ecclesiology among Baptists and other evangelicals, there has been a revival of interest in church discipline. Recent works by Southern Baptists have included important discussions of the doctrine. Gregory Wills examines church discipline in the antebellum south in his exacting study, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline*

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in the Baptist South, 1785-1900 (Oxford University Press, 1996). Wills argues that the influence of American individualism essentially eviscerated effective church discipline. By the 1920s, church discipline virtually disappeared from Baptist churches in the South.

Donald Whitney briefly takes up the subject of church discipline in a volume meant to encourage church members, *Spiritual Disciplines Within the Church* (Moody Press, 1996). Whitney maintains that church membership only makes sense in a context in which church discipline is practiced.

Most recently, Mark Dever, has contributed to the discussion on the role of church discipline in his volume, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Crossway, 2000). One of the leading indicators of the health of a local congregation is its commitment to the "regular practice of church discipline." Interestingly, none of these books were published by the denominational publishing company, Broadman & Holman Press.

This renewed interest in church discipline, while welcomed, also warrants several cautionary observations. First, corrective church discipline is not the only form of church discipline. Patrick Hues Mell (1814-1888), president of the Southern Baptist Convention for over seventeen years, published his own examination of the biblical doctrine of church discipline under the title, *Corrective Church Discipline* in 1860. Mell begins by dividing the topic into two major categories: formative church discipline and corrective church discipline. Formative church discipline includes the preaching, teaching, and discipleship ministries of the church. These ways of "disciplining" believers are foundational and primary to corrective church discipline. Churches wishing to return to

a biblical pattern of church discipline would do well to pay attention to this distinction and to place a great deal of emphasis on the formation of biblical Christians. To attempt corrective discipline, without first seeking to form disciples, is a sure recipe for disaster. Without attention to formative discipline, corrective discipline either will seem capricious or will consist of calling disciples back to practices they did not know were normative for Christian faith and practice. Especially in an age such as ours, new converts cannot be expected to know what counts as normative Christian behavior. For example, some new Christians may not know that premarital cohabitation is wrong. Pastors and their churches must, in this post-Christian era, spend more time and energy on Christian discipleship than in previous eras in which Christendom shaped social practices more pervasively.

Furthermore, because church discipline has been so little practiced in American churches in the past century, pastors must be patient with their churches as they try to bring them into conformity with biblical patterns of ecclesiology. More than one eager pastor, seeking to institute church discipline in a congregation unprepared to deal with the subject, has found himself unemployed and looking for another congregation. Dever is right. Church discipline is one of the marks of a healthy church, but, frankly, it may be one of the latter marks to appear in the process of church reformation.

Second, caution is due because of a history of abusive church discipline. One reason church discipline ceased among evangelical churches was American individualism. Another reason churches stopped disciplining their members was because of arbitrary or extrabiblical ration-

ales for discipline. Legalism sometimes dictated the reasons for discipline rather than the biblical witness. We must be certain, therefore, that corrective church discipline is reserved for the clearest and most obvious of infractions of normative Christianity. Appropriate corrective discipline always aims to restore disciples to the way of the Lord Jesus. Abusive power games and the flexing of theological muscles have no place in church discipline.

This means, in practice, that corrective discipline should be reserved for rebellion against clear commands of God revealed in scripture. For instance, violations of the Ten Commandments would constitute grounds for corrective discipline. Having other gods than the one true God, making idols, lying, thievery, adultery, etc., would be sins worthy of discipline. Yet even here there is a problem. Many evangelicals would not be strict sabbatarians. To create categories for corrective church discipline around matters of Christian liberty would wrongly bind the conscience of another believer. Furthermore, church leaders must remind themselves constantly that the goal is correction and restoration, not retaliation and vengeance against the fallen party. The apostle Paul, after all, reminds the Galatians that a spirit of meekness is to permeate appropriate discipline: "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted" (Galatians 6:1 RSV).

As we face the challenges of the future, churches that practice discipline will be increasingly tempted to exercise it in dubious cases. I have been asked recently whether corrective discipline is warranted in a case where a woman sold her ova for \$80,000. In another case, a woman served

as a surrogate mother for her sister. While I have very serious reservations about both practices, neither of them rise to the level of corrective discipline. Why not? First, it is not clear that either woman sinned. Christian churches and denominations are still in the process of developing ethical guidelines to inform these kinds of decisions. There remains great diversity in the churches as to whether these kinds of reproductive relationships are sinful or merely imprudent. Second, in most churches, there has been little or no formative discipline aimed at the new reproductive technologies like egg donation and surrogacy. In fact, while there are increasing numbers of infertile couples utilizing these technologies, most churches are silent on these issues. Sadly, we have few formative resources to offer couples who are considering these arrangements and technologies. Until churches begin to examine and teach what the Bible says about procreation, marriage, and family and the relationship between them, we dare not discipline members for disobeying what they could not have known. Someone once said, "You can never go back to where you've never been." Christians cannot obey what they do not know. Church discipline, therefore, must include both formative and corrective components—in that order.

Book Reviews

A Hill on Which to Die: One Southern Baptist's Journey by Judge Paul Pressler. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999, xi + 362, \$24.99.

Whether it is Teddy Roosevelt's famous assault on San Juan Hill or the infinitely more costly battle of Mount Suribachi on Iwo Jima, the picture of a battle staged on a prominent outcropping for a compelling cause is inevitably a memorable event. Paul Pressler's memoirs of his own experiences of the last twenty years is thus entitled *A Hill on Which to Die*. There are at least four applications of the title that arise naturally out of the reading of the book.

First, the title suggests a certain importance void of triviality. The issues over which the Southern Baptist Convention struggled for the past twenty years were, in fact, the very issues about which other denominations had struggled much earlier. The health of those denominations was inevitably determined by the outcome of those crucial conflicts. In the earliest centuries of Christian history, the struggle was primarily Christological—the question of defining who Jesus Christ of Nazareth is. The conflict of the Reformation was essentially a question of salvation—How exactly do we come to know Christ? The question of the period beginning with the Enlightenment has been the epistemological question—How do we know that what we say in Theology is true? And this question of how to know the truth is the question that defined the hill on which Judge Pressler staked his life and reputation.

A second intention of the title is that it suggests an uncertainty of outcome. If an

assault is to be made on a hill, it will, like Iwo Jima, almost always be costly to all participants. At the beginning of the ascent there is no way for the army on the offensive to know whether it can or will win. One may very well “die” on the mountain to be climbed. At the outset of the struggle for the return of the Southern Baptist Convention to the faith of its fathers, the outcome was anything but certain, and the possibility of paying a very high personal price loomed large.

A third meaning of the title highlights the fact that even in victory an enormous cost will almost inevitably be paid in such an effort. This subtitle of the book is “One Southern Baptist's Journey.” That subtitle introduces the reader to the cost and the sorrows of heart involved in one man's experience on the slopes of the “Southern Baptist mountain.”

Finally, the title *A Hill on Which to Die* suggests specific focus in a conflict. Every knowledgeable participant in the Southern Baptist conflict, on whatever side he found himself, knew that the conflict involved a great many issues—some theological, some moral and some political. However, for the conservative movement to be successful in climbing a mountain, while the odds were all arrayed uniformly against it, there was a recognition that the focus needed to be kept on just one mountain—namely, the inerrancy of Holy Scripture.

The title of the book itself was suggested to Judge Pressler as he, like many of us, heard Dr. Adrian Rogers, pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church, Memphis, Tennessee, often saying of other excursions to hills that someone felt important at the

time, “Now, brothers, are we sure that is a hill on which we are prepared to die?” This poignant reminder in turn helped to keep the movement and its participants focused and also to keep one issue before the people. Whatever the Press or any opponent might say, the issue was *truth*, the question of God’s inerrant Word.

The early part of the book includes information that is important to understand the credentials and the training of a freedom fighter. Judge Pressler is able to trace his family tree all the way back to the city of Breslau in Germany, the home of his ancestors. One by the name of Christopher even moved to Wittenberg to become a professor of law at Luther’s University of Wittenberg. Pressler further chronicles wide ranging connections that he has sustained across the years with the general evangelical world, and then especially focuses on Southern Baptist Convention and Baptist General Convention of Texas connections. This is a particularly interesting portion of this book, since in the early days of the conservative reformation among Southern Baptists Pressler’s Baptist background and heritage were almost continually misrepresented and fiercely assaulted.

Next, Judge Pressler sets the stage with those events that transpired to make him a freedom fighter for belief in the inerrancy of Scripture. His experiences as a student at Exeter Preparatory School in New Hampshire, as well as at Princeton University, underscore and begin to develop an awakening in a young man who had, until that time, been reared to believe that to be a Baptist was to affirm that everything God said was true. Events that transpired both at Exeter and at Princeton taught him that there were many Baptists who did not see the Bible

as a document of unquestioned authority. These chapters also reveal the influence of programs like “The Old Fashioned Revival Hour” with Charles E. Fuller and other strong evangelical influences, which gave Pressler further confidence that the Bible was reliable.

The book then moves naturally into his adult years and explains further the relationships that developed and the influences that impacted his life. This portion of the book demonstrates the multidimensional, wide-ranging character of Judge Pressler’s life engagement. Although he could certainly focus on the one hill of the inerrancy of Scripture, few people have actually been as consistently effective in personal evangelism as Judge Pressler. It is not uncommon to encounter people who inquire about Judge Pressler and upon further conversation learn that they themselves were led to Christ by him. In addition, Pressler’s wide ranging mission endeavors have taken him all over Europe and Russia. Because Pressler assiduously avoids anything that sounds boastful, one has to look carefully to note these events, but they are nonetheless there in the book. Furthermore, Judge Pressler’s continuing interest in young people can be observed like shadows throughout the book. Hundreds of people in some way received either financial or mentoring assistance from Judge Pressler. The vast majority of those have remained faithful to him and view him with awe as though he were their father. Their stories are not prominent in the volume, but if one watches carefully he will see them appearing in the natural flow.

Of course, the more familiar episodes of the developing conflict in Southern Baptist life are there also. For example, deacon Bill Price of Second Baptist Church

in Houston ends up playing an interesting role. While Judge Pressler and others were attempting to assist students in Southern Baptist seminaries who were committed to the inerrancy of the Bible, Bill Price mentioned that Pressler, when he was in New Orleans, should become acquainted with Paige Patterson. This suggestion brought the now well known meeting at the Café du Monde in which Pressler and Patterson became acquainted and found common ground almost instantly.

The battle for the hill now in full progress, Pressler's chapter on "How the Liberals Fought the Battle" is one of the most interesting and perceptive chapters in the book. Naturally, there may be moderates who would take issue with some of it, but, in fact, its careful documentation makes it difficult to debunk the presentation. The revealing information concerning layman Johnny Baugh and his long term embrace of liberalism and intense disdain for Pressler will help readers understand the careless vituperation which comes from Baugh, as well as his willingness to underwrite much of the liberal effort monetarily.

One of the most interesting aspects of the book concerns a dream that the Judge repeatedly experienced in 1978 and early 1979. As mentioned above, the very title *A Hill on Which to Die* suggests uncertainty as to outcome. But as a result of Pressler's recurring dream, he always had a great deal more confidence in the outcome of the situation than most of the rest of those associated with him. The author of this review confesses that he was often pessimistic about the outcome. Knowing the Southern Baptist hierarchy as I did and realizing that there were few weapons in the conservative arsenal by comparison to

those of the moderates, who had every state Baptist paper but one in full tow, I really never believed that conservatives would prevail. I suspect that most of the leaders felt the same way. But Pressler's vision of a long line of people marching through the streets of Houston singing, "We're Marching to Zion" gave him a quiet confident faith in the Lord that the truth, in fact, would prevail among Baptists. That story also is chronicled in the book.

Judge Pressler also addresses the matter of the media. Going into the conflict, Pressler probably knew better than most of his compatriots something of what they were facing with the secular media. His experience in the political arena had taught him well, but even he was in some ways not fully prepared for the treatment that he received at the hands of many. As just one example of that, the incredible television misrepresentation of the movement and of Paul Pressler personally presented by former Baptist Bill Moyers marked one of the really low points in the confrontation. On the other hand, the now famous appearance of Judge Pressler on "The Phil Donahue Show," together with Ken Chafin, has to be considered one of the turning points of the entire convention struggle. This event occurred in 1985 and featured Dr. Chafin, who had more of a knack for the media spotlight and making the most of it for his cause than just about any of the moderates. Dr. Chafin, it seemed to many of us, was ubiquitous on radio and television and was certainly formidable. But Pressler chronicles the way in which, on this unforgettable night, Chafin, faced with the necessity of drawing a conclusion about his Jewish rabbi friend if the latter refused to trust Christ, replied that he was confi-

dent that the rabbi would be in heaven regardless of his acceptance of Christ in his life. While Donahue and most of his audience applauded the statement, Southern Baptists watching their televisions gasped; and many for the first time understood the issues. It was the *de facto* end of Dr. Chafin's influence in Southern Baptist life since not even the moderates themselves could afford to identify with those sentiments publicly, whatever they may have believed in their hearts.

Of course, the sorrows arising out of the conflict were many. Those are openly and honestly admitted by Pressler, although the depths of some of those sorrows could scarcely be plumbed in any written form. Early in the controversy the striking down of Pressler's son Paul with a disease, though still not fully diagnosed, from which he suffers until this very day, unleashed the greatest agony on Judge and Mrs. Pressler. There were times, especially during the Kansas City convention when little Paul was in the hospital at death's door. All of these agonies of spirit constituted enormous tests for Judge Pressler, raising repeatedly the question in his own heart as to whether he absolutely could trust the providence of God. More hurt was on its way when the Committee on Nominations wished to nominate Judge Pressler for service on the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention. Many of those who had been a part of the conservative movement opposed such a move, apparently feeling convinced that to elect a leader in the conservative movement who had been so pilloried and calumniated to such an important position was too inflammatory. Some failed to support the effort; others openly opposed it. Pressler's ultimate election to the Executive Committee and

his subsequent extensive influence during that tenure of service was a wonderful reward to be sure but never could take away the hurt of being, to some degree, abandoned by fellow warriors in the midst of a battle for one segment of the hill.

So, how would I evaluate one Southern Baptist's journey as rehearsed in *A Hill on Which to Die*? Well, first, I should confess that the present evaluator has both an asset and a liability in the assignment given me. The liability is that for me to have worked so closely with Judge Pressler across the twenty years traversed by this monograph could raise some question about my objectivity. On the other hand, certainly it could be argued that probably no one, other than Nancy Pressler and her children, has been any closer to the Judge and to the events that transpired than I. Therefore, it is by that perspective that I give my evaluation.

First, the book is a great read! The last few chapters of the book are probably a little less scintillating because Judge Pressler of necessity had to deal with technical matters and detailed situations, particularly in his evaluation of the Executive Committee. For the historian, however, those insights will be interesting and necessary, and for any reader the rest of the book is nothing short of riveting.

Second, even though the book is testimonial in nature, it is nevertheless highly accurate. There are some circumstances that I remember a little differently from the way they are portrayed in the book. In those few instances one of us is not right, but the truth is that I tend to trust the Judge's near photographic memory and his extensive and consistent notes more than I trust my own fluctuating memory. Therefore, I can say without hesi-

tancy that the book is highly accurate. The limitations on that accuracy arise only at a few points where the Judge may have had no opportunity actually to know what was happening or else in some cases is perhaps influenced as one would expect in a testimony from his own perspective.

The book has another tremendous asset. The monograph tells the story of a spiritual and theological conflict that, unfortunately, will almost certainly not be the last one of its kind in history. Consequently, the book is a veritable instruction manual for all future conflicts.

Finally, *A Hill on Which to Die* is also a fabulous testimony of a godly layman who was willing to suffer endless calumny in order to stand for the truth. There are times in the book when the tone sounds a bit defensive, when as a clear victor one should probably avoid dwelling much on injustices suffered, but these intrude into the text rarely and always understandably. Certainly they do not mar the overwhelming accuracy of the presentation or dim in any way the critical importance of the story that is told here.

As I read the book, I could not help but be impressed with a new vision of the weapons employed in the taking of this hill. The two sides battled—conservatives making use primarily of spiritual tear gas, the liberals making primary use of smoke bombs. Conservatives lobbed in canister after canister of tear gas in an attempt to smoke out in the open the liberals in the denominational structure, particularly in the seminaries and colleges. The liberals, on the other hand, tirelessly hurled smoke bombs in the direction of the conservatives in order to attempt to obscure what the conservatives' concerns were. They would make all sorts of allegations against the conservatives in order to confuse the

general public, and especially Southern Baptists, so that they could not see clearly what the conservative leaders were saying and doing. Whatever the case, one thing remains absolutely certain. One should never begin the reading of Judge Paul Pressler's book *A Hill on Which to Die* unless he has time to finish it. Once you begin, you will discover that its pages are compelling, and you will relive one of the great theological engagements of all of history as though you were there for every moment of the conflict. As I came to the end of the book, I read his last paragraph,

The citadel of liberalism was charged and the hill on which to die was captured, but not without great cost. God has given the victory in an amazing way. I praise Him for it. I pray that His people will preserve this victory to His glory until He comes again.

I bowed my head and uttered this simple prayer to God, "God grant me to do my part to guarantee that Judge Pressler's efforts and the sacrifices of so many 'unknown' soldiers will not have been in vain."

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Lethal Harvest. By William Cutrer, M.D. and Sandra Glahn. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2000, 407 pp., \$10.99 paper.

This novel engages with the complexity of bioethical issues by setting them in the context of a gripping story. The specific issues that arise in this work relate to human embryology, cloning, and stem cell research. Yet the story raises more general moral issues as well, inviting the reader to think about the purpose of medical

research and treatment, the importance of means as well as ends, and the potential for good or evil that scientific advance brings.

The form of this treatment of contemporary ethical issues sets it apart from many other works. As we witness a staggering proliferation of medical research and potential treatments, many books seek to explain the research, what it promises, and the ethical issues that are raised. The problem is that the research is so specialized and the explanations so technical, that many readers simply cannot keep up with the issues. Cutrer and Glahn seek to bring those issues to a wider audience by raising them, without burdensome technicality, in the context of a story. This is a welcome contribution, since we dare not leave the moral discussion to those who are experts on either the scientific or the moral issues involved. The fact is, many people who would never read a textbook in bioethics will read this book, and be awakened to significant issues in medical ethics.

The authors indicate at the start that while they have taken some liberty with creating a disease and some technology, it nonetheless accurately depicts both current and potential research and treatment possibilities. Some readers might find the techniques and medical treatments portrayed to be unlikely and seemingly impossible. Perhaps they are—every bit as unlikely and seemingly impossible as actual research and proposals for research that are underway today. Indeed, what is truly alarming is that those who follow advances in medical research will not find the plot of the story to be a great stretch.

The story line is filled with intrigue, and even romance. Moral issues are raised, and both the potential for good and

the problematic means of certain types of medical research are brought out. Unlike some books on bioethics that simply argue for what is morally right or wrong, *Lethal Harvest* causes the reader to think carefully and critically about the moral questions, without providing direct answers. Yet the authors are careful to affirm the significance of human life, and thus the need to protect it at all stages, as well as the problem with pursuing noble goals at the expense of proper means. In addition, the message of the gospel, of hope and forgiveness in Jesus Christ, is presented clearly and realistically: some respond and some do not, and lives are affected for eternity.

The strength of the genre of this book is not merely that it will hold the reader's interest. Novels can also be powerful communicators of moral truth, values and perspectives. As the saying goes, some things are better caught than taught. Indeed, what very often persuades people concerning what is right and wrong is not so much moral argument as stories that convey the issues in life situations. Thus, there is a great need for more authors who are able to communicate truth in the form of a story. This book should prompt reflection and discussion of contemporary issues in bioethics, and should be read by all who are interested in the issues and who are looking for a good book to read.

K. T. Magnuson

The Letters of John. PNTC. By Colin G. Kruse. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000, 255 pp., \$28.00.

This commentary is an excellent addition to the many fine works already available on the Letters of John. Kruse makes his

own unique contributions to the Johannine literature and they are insightful and helpful, especially for the expositor.

There is a superb balance of scholarship and practical handling of the text. A six-page bibliography is located in the front, and Kruse's awareness of the journal material on John is evident. The commentary dodges no crucial issues which surface in the letters of John, but it does not bog down in discussing them. Additional materials for further research are almost always available in the footnotes. Throughout the commentary, which is marked by careful exposition, are "notes" which deal with relevant theological themes and issues. These include "The Language of Sense Perception," "From the Beginning," "Light and Darkness," "Truth," "Hilasmus," "Antichrist," "God's Seed," "Sinless Perfection," "Monogenes," "The Son's Preexistence," "Eternal Life," "Sins That Do and Do Not Lead to Death," "Bases of Assurance," and "Hospitality." These "notes" are invaluable and enhance the fine treatment of the text. The note on "Hospitality" is the finest I have come across in putting the issue in its historical context.

The real strength of Kruse's work is the economy of words. A New Testament scholar will be pleased with what he discovers. A careful expositor of the Word will be thrilled. The commentary is clear and concise. In the day of "mega commentaries" (Raymond Brown was ahead of his time and did this for us in 1982!), Kruse's thoughtful and judicious exegesis is a breath of fresh air. For the busy pastor, it is a must addition to his library. This book should take its place rightly alongside the works of Brown, Burdick, Hiebert, Marshall, and Smalley in the field of Johannine commentaries.

Daniel L. Akin

Making Sense of the Trinity: Three Crucial Questions. By Millard J. Erickson. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000, 108 pp., \$11.99 paper.

Here is yet another Ericksonian digest of a major Christian doctrine. While there are several portions repeated here from *God in Three Persons* (Baker, 1995), nevertheless, this book makes a genuine contribution to the kingdom since it was written primarily with laymen in mind (page 9). The book has three chapters, each of which answers a crucial question: Is the doctrine of the Trinity biblical? Does the doctrine make sense? Does the doctrine make any difference?

Readers will not be surprised to find in the first chapter the standard treatment of evidences for the Triunity of God from both the Old and New Testaments. In a more unique section worth noting, "The Structure of Pauline Writings," Erickson shows that even the broad outline of the Book of Romans reflects that Paul "thought of the Godhead in terms of a triadic pattern" (p. 37). The chapter ends with a very helpful introduction to the Trinity in the Gospel of John.

The second chapter briefly surveys Adoptionism, Modalism, and Arianism and is a user-friendly introduction to the development of the doctrine. There is a concern, however, with the second half of this chapter in which Erickson proposes a model for understanding the Godhead based on the idea of *perichoresis* (Gk.). The concept of *perichoresis*, "that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are bound together in such a close unity that the life of each flows through each of the others" (p. 57), is indeed an ingenious Trinitarian proposal offered as early as the Cappadocian Fathers. The problem, however, is that Erickson makes it appear incompatible

with the equally important doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son (pp. 62, 85-87). The Cappadocians did not see the concepts of co-inherence and generation (or procession for the Spirit) as mutually exclusive. In fact, holding to both concepts at the same time seems to be the basis for their proposal. The idea of *perichoresis*, then, along with the eternal generation of the Son may in fact be a better model than the model of “mutual subordination” that Erickson proposes (p. 86).

In the final chapter, Erickson does well to disagree with Immanuel Kant’s claim that nothing practical can be gained from the doctrine of the Trinity. The concept of Trinity helps Christians to understand the problem of evil and suffering (since God is not aloof or indifferent to suffering), to distinguish Christianity from the other religions of our pluralistic society, and directly relates to such matters as prayer and worship (rejecting a “Father only” view).

The last section of the book, “The Believer’s Relationships,” explains the importance of God’s Triunity for the believer’s relationships with other people. Unfortunately, this section seems to betray more of a concern to promote “relational egalitarianism” (although this phrase is not used) and “mutual subordination” (p. 86) than a biblical model for human relations based on an intra-Trinitarian dynamic.

Pete Schemm

Southeastern College at Wake Forest

The Urim and Thummim: A Means of Revelation in Ancient Israel. By Cornelis Van Dam. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997, xxiv + 296pp., \$34.50.

It is remarkable how much can be written

about two words, which appear together only twelve times in the entire Bible (Urim 7x; Thummim 5x). But this book answers one of the most frequent questions I am asked: What were the Urim and Thummim? The volume represents a revision of a doctoral dissertation submitted to the Theologische Universiteit in Kampen, The Netherlands, in 1996. Although Van Dam has published summary statements of his research in several places (ISBE, rev. ed., 4.957-59; NIDOTTE 1.329-331), readers will thank James Eisenbraun for making the full study available to wide readership.

This is a major and truly exhaustive study of a physically “minor” issue: [apparently] two small stones carried in the pouch of Israel’s High Priest and used in determining the will of God on behalf of Israel. Like an expert jeweler, Van Dam examines these enigmatic stones from every conceivable angle. The study divides into three major parts: a survey of the history of interpretation of these stones (pp.9-106), an examination of the biblical evidence (pp.107-258), a survey of theological implications of his findings (pp.259-74). Part one subdivides further into four parts: a topical survey of how these stones have been understood in the past, and examination of analogues from the ancient Near East, a history of how the words Urim and Thummim have been translated, and a chronological summary of interpretation. Part two presents the heart of Van Dam’s argument as he examines successively: revelation and divination in ancient Israel, terms and garments associated with the Urim and Thummim, the role of the High Priest in the manipulation of the Urim and Thummim. Part three provides an overview of the importance of these stones in God’s rule of

Israel and in the history of divine revelation.

Most readers of this review will be interested in Van Dam's answers to the questions they ask concerning the Urim and Thummim. Although Van Dam acknowledges the uncertainties regarding the nature and use of these stones throughout the volume, despite his painstaking work, for the most part the conclusions he arrives at appear sound. The author concurs with tradition in explaining the words etymologically as meaning "lights" and "perfections." But he departs from tradition by interpreting "Urim and Thummim" as hendiadys, that is two words conjoined to express a single notion, in this case, "perfect illumination," and arguing for a single stone rather than two. Rejecting the common view that these stones manipulate like lots, Van Dam suggests that when the Urim and Thummim were consulted, the message from God was learned through an oracular revelation to the High Priest, which was then confirmed by a miraculous light (*'ur*) that emanated from the precious stone.

This conclusion is not only eminently reasonable, it provides a welcome challenge to the widely held view first developed by Julius Wellhausen, that the priesthood and prophecy in Israel were fundamentally opposed. By Van Dam's interpretation, by putting the Urim and Thummim into the hands of the High Priest, priesthood and prophecy are combined. The stone represents for Israel a gracious provision by God of access to his mind and will in critical situations.

Van Dam offers a brief but interesting discussion of the origins and the demise of the Urim and Thummim. Since Exodus fails to describe or report the crafting of

this item, he concludes that the Urim and Thummim were used to determine the mind of God by Israelites prior to the construction of the Tabernacle or the ordination of Aaron as High Priest. This may be so, but equally striking is the fact that the Old Testament never mentions the Urim and Thummim after 2 Samuel 5 (though he suggests it may have been used in 2 Sam 21:1). While some have linked this development with Yahweh's fulfillment of his promise to provide rest [from war] to Israel (cf. 2 Sam 7:1), one may argue with equal force that it is linked with Yahweh's definitive relation to David through Nathan in 2 Samuel 7, that he and his descendants would have eternal title to the throne of Israel. For some unknown reason, once David the Messiah (anointed one) had been confirmed as permanent agent of divine rule in Israel, there was no more need for the Urim and Thummim. Alternatively one might speculate that the Urim and Thummim were linked to the priesthood of Abiathar. Because Abiathar was a descendant of Eli, hence doomed to elimination (1 Sam 2:27-36), access to the will of God through the Urim and Thummim died with him. Significantly the Old Testament never associates this object with the Zadokite priesthood.

While many questions concerning the nature and use of the Urim and Thummim remain, in this volume Van Dam has amassed all the available data that have a bearing on the issue. His style is redundant at times, but readers will thank him for making the details of his expert research available in digestible form. This volume answers many issues raised by his summary articles in the publications cited above. This reviewer commends the volume highly to all who are interested in this enigmatic element of ancient Israelite

religious practice.

Daniel I. Block

William Louis Poteat: A Leader of the Progressive-Era South. By Randal L. Hall. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000, ix + 262 pp., \$34.95.

William L. Poteat (1856-1938), president of Wake Forest College from 1905 to 1927, was the most prominent representative of theological modernism in Southern Baptist life in the first third of the twentieth century. Randal Hall discusses modernism as one aspect of Poteat's broader vision of reform in southern society. Hall's thesis is that most southerners rejected Poteat's top-down progressivism and preferred local control to that of professional elites.

Hall rightly avoids interpreting Poteat as a hero of southern progress who opened the southern mind to light and truth. Hall's treatment is more even-handed. He portrays Poteat as a generally noble figure whose program for a moral social order was rooted in the agrarian values of "hierarchy and moral conformity" (62). Poteat advocated "harmony, efficiency, paternalism, and educated leadership" as the basis of those "progressive" reforms which would promote the general welfare (156).

Poteat's vision of society revolved about individual morality and good-natured cooperation among the different classes, races, and economic interests. He sought justice for blacks and an end to racial violence through cooperation and dialogue, but he opposed integration. He advocated prohibition and was one of the most important North Carolina leaders of the movement. He urged the adoption of scientific eugenics to prevent "defective"

persons from producing offspring. He directed denominational and civic commissions for social service and for racial cooperation. But by the 1930s most southerners had rejected such social programs. Poteat promoted Darwinism and liberal Christianity in the 1920s and precipitated considerable controversy among North Carolina's Southern Baptists. Poteat and other liberals wanted to mediate a transformation of the denominations from uncritical conservatism to enlightened progressivism. When Poteat faced accusations of heresy, he evaded the issue by affirming the main points of Christianity in the most general terms. In the 1920s, for example, he affirmed the atonement but refused to define what it meant. This was probably an evasion, for he had subscribed to the moral influence theory of the atonement in a formal address in 1900. The 1922 North Carolina Baptist Convention sustained Poteat after he spoke eloquently of the Christian mission to rescue the world from anarchy and chaos. Division would injure the mission. Even some of Poteat's supporters objected to such evasions and claimed that he overcame the opposition "by chloroforming his enemies" when he should have corrected their bigotry and ignorance (145).

Although the book's thesis should be better integrated with the discussion, this is an important and well-researched contribution to the history of Southern Baptists and southern culture.

Gregory A. Wills

The Dictionary of Historical Theology. Trevor Hart, general editor. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000, xx + 599 pp., \$49.99.

The age of dictionaries is upon us in evan-

gical life, with IVP publishing eight new contributions since 1990, and Eerdmans weighing in with four or five new titles (depending on how you count them) in the past eighteen months, including this book on historical theology. The volume is something of a hybrid, crossing the lines between dictionaries of theology (such as NDT and EDT) and church history (ODCC and NIDCC). As such it might have a difficult time justifying itself as establishing a bona fide new sub-genre of reference literature. The focus of the work is indicated in the Preface: The work concentrates “deliberately on figures, schools of thought and significant texts in the development of Christian theology. Contributors have been urged to include biographical and wider historical material only in so far as this is germane to the task of locating subjects within their theological contexts” (xix). How well does it do in carrying out this plan?

There are 314 entries in the dictionary. This is a relatively small number, which allows the articles to be long enough to carry some substance. Many of them are very well written and provide real help to readers at virtually all levels. This reviewer has looked over about a third of the expositions and has found in nearly every one of them some substantial material. Since the book assays to provide historical development of ideas and locates subjects within their historical/theological contexts, it often does survey the territory in a manner slightly different from the other kinds of dictionaries listed above. The article on “Amyraldianism,” for instance, positions the Saumur school’s position on the atonement over against Calvin and the Reformed scholastics by detailing the distinction between the two covenants which

are both in the covenant of grace that is endemic to the Amyraldian position. The essay on Thomas Aquinas links Thomas to previous Catholic theology, and then gives an exposition of his major ideas expressed mainly in his two *Summae*. These kinds of discussions are somewhat different from what a student would find in NDT or the ODCC.

There are, however, some problems with the volume, primarily related to selection of topics. One finds here a disproportionately large number of articles on Scottish and English theologians in comparison to American or even continental thinkers. Liberals are also given precedence over evangelicals, even important evangelicals. Likewise, there are virtually no Baptists featured. David Cairns, A. B. Bruce, Sidney Cave, John Scott Lidgett, and John Whale all have articles devoted to them, but there is nothing here on Charles Hodge, B. B. Warfield, or J. Gresham Machen (or even the Princeton School as a whole). The only Baptist treated, as far as this reviewer could tell, is Rauschenbusch, which means that John Gill, Augustus H. Strong, and E. Y. Mullins have been left out. “Devotional theologians” the Blumhardts are included, but John Bunyan is not. Since three of the five editors are from the British Isles, it may be that their prejudices dictated such a line-up for the featured thinkers of the last two centuries.

Still, the volume is very nicely done, and the articles on Patristic, Medieval, and Reformed theology and theologians are generally pretty good, space limitations considered. This volume will become a standard reference tool for instructors, students, and theologically-inclined pastors (may their tribe increase). For those of us who are admitted *compendiaphiles*, this

new dictionary will likely take an honored, if not exalted, place on the bookshelf that is nearest to the writing desk.

Chad Brand

The Claims of Truth: John Owen's Trinitarian Theology. By Carl R. Trueman. Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 1998, xii + 267 pp., \$26.99 paper.

Twenty-five years ago the study of Reformation theology underwent a reformation in its own right as historians such as Heiko Oberman positioned Luther, Calvin, and the other Magisterial Reformers in the context of medieval Catholic scholarship in a way previously unspecified. They showed that the Reformers were not upstarts, nor were they lone voices finally resurrecting the theological corpse of an Augustine forgotten for over a thousand years. Rather these men were continuing and amplifying a theological tradition that was present in the high Middle Ages in the theology of such individuals as Gregory of Rimini and John Wycliffe. This insight has sent scores of scholars scurrying on their way to work out the implications of this view in doctoral dissertations and monographs on the subject, so that a veritable cottage industry has formed in attempt to understand the *schola Augustiniana moderna*.

In the last decade or so a new generation of theologians has turned its gaze on the Protestant scholastics. Long maligned as distorters of the tradition of Calvin and Luther (see especially Basil Hall's famous essay, "Calvin against the Calvinists"), the Protestant scholastics are now getting a new look, one that is slowly overturning previous vilification. R. D. Preus led out in this defense of Protestant scholasticism

with his two-volume work on post-Reformation Lutheran theology. More recently Richard Muller, Joel Beeke, and Sinclair Ferguson have all weighed in to rewrite the book on Scholasticism, and have shown that previous characterizations were little more than caricatures. Carl Trueman of the University of Nottingham can be numbered among those who are taking a new look at post-Reformation theology.

Trueman takes on a formidable task—to see if he can draw a happy face on the theology of John Owen. Owen has long been considered little more than a defender of limited atonement by his detractors (and sometimes by his defenders), a theologian whose work is more philosophical than biblical. Trueman makes several major points. Critics of the scholastics often contrast John Owen with one of his contemporaries, Richard Baxter, arguing that Baxter was a pious man who, though he had great intellectual gifts, did not fall prey to the Aristotelian spirit, but was instead a biblicist. Trueman shows that the opposite is the case, for while Owen's systematic theology was structured around the contour of the biblical narrative (in modern parlance, a "biblical theology"), Baxter's theological works were explicitly patterned along the lines of traditional (*via moderna*) Catholic scholastic methodology.

Trinity is central to Owen's entire theological project. It drives his doctrine of God's attributes, his soteriology, and his Christology. Trueman argues that this enforced Trinitarianism prevents Owen from falling into sterile philosophical aridity in his discussions of the nature of God and of providence. The English divine did, of course, make extensive use of scholastic categories, but primarily as a tool to

keep his theology evangelical, avoiding the danger of falling prey to the Scylla of Arminianism or the Charybdis of Socinianism. Careful attention to Thomistic and Scotist distinctions enabled him to walk the tightrope between heresies. Soteriological considerations, not philosophical profundity, were the driving force in Owen's sometimes tortuous discourses on providence and election.

The older view that the Protestant scholastics were terrorists ravaging the Reformation heritage is no longer tenable.

As I was going up the stair,
I met a man who wasn't there
He wasn't there again today.
Oh, How I wish he'd go away.

Trueman quotes this quatrain as a parting shot to indicate that the common way in which these theologians are portrayed by modern (especially post-Neoorthodox critics) is simply not tenable—the men depicted in such caricatures are “not there” in the seventeenth century. Mencken's definition of Puritanism, then, as a “haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy,” is simply a myth. It is a fact that people believe myths, and often find comfort in them, but they are myths nonetheless. Part of the minister's task is to dispel those myths and to tell the truth. This book will not only help us to tell the truth about others in the body of Christ, but will also give us insight into the faith once delivered.

Chad Brand

Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism and the Final Examination of Jesus: A Philological-Historical Study of the Key Jewish Themes Impacting Mark 14:61-64. By Darrell L. Bock. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul

Siebeck), 1998, xiv + 285 pp., n. p. Reprint, *Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism: The Charge Against Jesus in Mark 14:53-65.* Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000, 300 pp., \$26.99.

Darrell Bock is research professor of NT at Dallas Theological Seminary, and has published significantly in the arena of gospel studies, including a mammoth two volume commentary on Luke and his dissertation on prophecy and proclamation in Luke. In this study Bock examines the charge of blasphemy that was raised against Jesus of Nazareth according to Mark 14:61-64. He inquires as to why the words Jesus pronounced before the Sanhedrin were considered to be worthy of death, and he also considers whether the account is historically credible. Chapter one consists of a survey of scholarship since the work of Hans Lietzmann in 1931. The work of Paul Winter, Josef Blinzler, David Catchpole, August Strobel, Otto Betz, E. P. Sanders, Martin Hengel, Robert Gundry, Raymond Brown, J. C. O'Neill, and C. E. Evans is surveyed. This chapter helpfully acquaints the readers with the parameters of the discussion and sets the stage for Bock's own contribution.

Chapter two is the most extensive in the book. Here blasphemy in Judaism is investigated, beginning with the OT and concluding with the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds. Bock also examines all other relevant Jewish literature between these two points. The use of God's name constituted blasphemy according to Judaism. Bock shows, however, that blasphemy cannot be limited to the utterance of God's name. People were also guilty of blasphemy if they were idolators, manifested disrespect towards God, and insulted his chosen leaders. What Bock demonstrates here is that the Jewish back-

ground does not support the idea that Jesus would have been condemned only if he pronounced the divine name (cf. *m. Sanh.* 7:5). Other offenses could also count as blasphemy, especially comparing oneself to God, and hence the accuracy of the Markan account should not be disputed on the grounds that Jesus did not utter God's sacred name. Incidentally, Robert Gundry argues that Jesus did pronounce God's name, but Bock rightly questions that thesis, and notes that even if Jesus pronounced God's name in citing Ps 110:1 it is not clear that this would have been grounds for blasphemy.

The third chapter explores exalted figures in Judaism since Jesus claimed that he would sit at God's right hand and return with glory on the clouds. In recent scholarship the Jewish antecedents to NT christology have been the subject of intense study. One thinks here of Larry Hurtado's, *One God, One Lord*. Bock considers both human and angelic figures in this chapter. Most of the human figures were honored by God and hence received revelations about what would occur in the future. A few honored men do sit in God's presence, including Moses, David, and Enoch. Adam and Abraham sit to witness the final judgment, and Abel sits when the last judgment commences. The most exalted figure is Enoch in *1 Enoch* 37-71. He is honored as the Son of Man who will conduct the end time judgment. Angels on the whole do not share the exalted position of the few human beings bestowed with honor. Only Gabriel among the angels sits in God's presence and in this instance he serves merely as Enoch's escort. Further, Bock shows that the high honor bestowed on Enoch and Enoch-Metatron led to criticism of his stature in some circles, showing that some

Jewish writers feared that the uniqueness of God was threatened.

The concluding chapter examines the text in Mark 14:61-64 where Jesus is charged with blasphemy. It is here that Bock pulls together the threads of his study. He argues that the examination of Jesus before the Sanhedrin was not intended to be a capital trial, and hence the fact that the trial does not accord with the rules of the Mishnah is irrelevant. I think Bock rightly argues that we have a preliminary hearing by which the Jews were attempting to find grounds to hand Jesus over to the Romans. Bock also contends that a number of sources for the trial exist, including Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, and even Saul. I would like to add that the resurrected Lord himself may have communicated to his disciples what occurred during the trial scene. Scholars rarely consider this possibility, but evangelicals who uphold the truth of the resurrection may legitimately list Jesus himself as a possible source of the events at the trial. Bock argues that Jesus' appeal to Ps 110:1 and Dan 7:13 was considered to be blasphemy. Indeed, in claiming to ride on the clouds of heaven Jesus claims for himself something that was true only of God (Exod 14:20; Num 10:34; Ps 104:3; Isa 19:1). Bock goes on to say that Jesus' claim to be the end time judge was not blasphemy per se to the Jewish leaders (given the tradition of Enoch as Son of Man), but what they objected to was Jesus' arrogation of this role. But I wonder if Bock's own evidence points beyond this, in that Jesus was claiming divine authority as one riding upon the clouds. In any case, Bock is correct that the startling directness with which the earthly Jesus claims such authority would scandalize the religious leaders. Those honored in the

past might have been considered worthy of such a role, though even here, as Bock shows, some Jews were nervous about Enoch's reputed status. Assigning divine authority to Jesus, as a teacher from Galilee, was, however, unthinkable. I think Bock is correct here, but he could have strengthened his thesis by pointing out particular issues that made Jesus' objectionable to the Jewish leaders. In other words, they found it difficult to believe that Jesus of Nazareth could have divine authority and contravene the sabbath, hold suspicious views on the Torah, associate with tax collectors and sinners, promise the destruction of the temple, and engage in a fierce critique of the religious leaders. Bock also shows that Jesus also implicitly claimed to be the future judge of the religious leaders, which they believed violated Exod 22:27. Bock concludes his study by saying that the events and the sayings have a strong claim to historical reliability. We can be thankful for the reverent scholarship informing this work, one which is informed by a sound and rigorous historical method and one in which the supernatural character of early Christianity is maintained.

Thomas R. Schreiner

Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period: 450 B.C.E. to 600 C.E. Edited by Jacob Neusner and William Scott Green. Peabody, Mass." Hendrickson, 1999, xxv + 693 pp., \$59.95.

Readers not well acquainted with Judaism are in need of a tool that can assist them when encountering unfamiliar words, institutions, practices, events, and persons. This dictionary, first published by

Macmillan in 1996 and now republished by Hendrickson, fills such a need. The scholars contributing to the volume are acknowledged experts in the field, and so the novice in Judaism can be confident of instruction by trusted guides. The entries on the whole are short and clearly written. The editors intended the work to be a *dictionary*, not an encyclopedia, which explains why the entries are concise. Bibliographies are not included, though I must confess that I think brief bibliographies would have been helpful, and yet they would have increased the size and presumably the expense of the work.

The dictionary is ideal for students and pastors who need a definition of "mikveh" or who wonder who the "Boethusians" are. The brevity of the work is apparent when the article on the Pharisees is restricted to about one and one-half columns, and yet the entry is an excellent introduction to the Pharisees. The dictionary does not restrict itself only to matters Jewish, but also includes matters that affected Judaism from 450 B.C. to A.D. 600. Hence, there are entries on Constantine, writers like Diodorus Siculus, Gnosticism, Pythagoreanism, the Chionites (a non-Jewish people), and Egypt. The dictionary also has some entries on Christianity, including John the Baptist, Tertullian, Jesus of Nazareth, Jerome, and even *ex opera operato!* The standard critical view is adopted, so that in the case of Jesus it is argued that reconstructing his teaching is difficult since the gospels are later theological accounts. Some theological topics are also explored, and some of these receive a more lengthy treatment. For instance, there are entries on predestination, salvation, scripture, inspiration, etc.

The dictionary's value does not lie in its discussion of Christianity or its refer-

ence to things Roman, since most students have access to these matters in other sources. Most Christian students, though, have difficulty identifying the names of Jewish tractates in books like the Mishnah, and the dictionary translates the title and gives a brief survey of contents. For that matter some students may not know what the Mishnah or Tosefta or Talmud are, and hence it immensely helpful for the novice. It is also interesting to read entries on matters like “self-righteousness” to receive a Jewish perspective on such matters (although many of the scholars who contributed are not themselves Jewish). I recommend the dictionary as a lucid and scholarly tool for students. It will be especially useful to busy pastors who need help in finding brief definitions in matters that are outside their usual frame of reference.

Thomas R. Schreiner