

# Loving Discipline

*Editorial: Thomas R. Schreiner*

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup> 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.