

# “A CALL TO HARMS” IS CHURCH DISCIPLINE FOR TODAY?



Jacob A. Taggart, M.A.

*Mr. Taggart is Vice President for Risk Management at Mid America Bank, President of Concord Christian School, and Deacon at Concord Baptist Church in Jefferson City, Missouri, and is an M.A. in Theological Studies graduate of Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary*

## Introduction

If you see your neighbor sin, and you pass by and neglect to reprove him, it is just as cruel as if you should see his house on fire, and pass by and not warn him of it.

—Charles Finney, in his sermon, “Reproof, A Christian Duty.”<sup>1</sup>

Church discipline: the words alone cause many modern American evangelicals to shudder. For some, the term evokes images of archaic castigation sifted from a Nathaniel Hawthorne novel – a black eye of the church no more applicable to the modern era than the primitive means of Puritan living. Others, however, quietly lament the church’s abandoned expectations of holy living, as surely as the same God who commands us to “be holy; for I am holy” (Lev. 11:44 NKJV) would not permit His church to sacrifice such an exhortation on the altar of modernity for the mere comfort of its members. And still others, some at the other extreme end of the spectrum, would be all-too-desirous to act as the final arbiter of church discipline by aggressively excommunicating all who do not subscribe to their ecclesial views. With such divergent approaches, some may be understandably ignorant of the legitimacy of church discipline—particularly evangelicals who are generations removed. In this paper I will define church discipline, and examine the church’s historical views on the practice, the biblical underpinnings for church discipline, and the ways it can be applied. Upon conclusion, I will demonstrate why the practice of church discipline is a necessary component of biblical orthodoxy.

## What is Church Discipline?

For many contemporary evangelicals, the mere mention of invoking church discipline causes a visceral reaction among church members that often enacts a guard against any such affront to an individual’s freedom of choice. Over the last one hundred years, the American church has exhibited an embedded reaction that presupposes each individual’s “inalienable rights” of personal conduct. Undoubtedly, this “liberation” comes as a by-product of liberal philosophy

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<sup>1</sup>J. Carl Laney, “The Biblical Practice of Church Discipline,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (October-December 1986): 353-64.

now manifesting itself in a culture of postmodernism, sprouting from seeds sown during the Enlightenment period. In so doing, the inalienable rights of an individual have come not only to trump the standards and expectations imposed by corporate church membership, but also to subjugate the truths set forth by the very Creator of the universe. As a result, many modern evangelicals believe that not only should their personal behavior be compartmentalized from membership in the church, but even more striking is the implicit premise that personal conduct, regardless of how incongruent it may be with Scripture, is off-limits as a mark, or even a qualification of, church membership. The playbook response, replete with outrage, typically asks, “Who is the church to judge?” Though the real question should be, “Does this line of thought conform to orthodox doctrine?” Later I will search the Scriptures for an answer to that very question.

To answer what church discipline actually is, believers must first extinguish the above liberal treatise that attempts to sever standards (and consequences) imposed by the ecclesial realm from a Christian’s personal life. Mark Dever counters this non sequitor dualism with logic by noting, “If we can’t say what something is not, we can’t very well say what is.”<sup>2</sup> Surely, if the God who created the universe is sovereign and has provided a means for eternal fellowship with His creation, then His absolute standards as an infinite being must transcend the temporal standards of an oft stiff-necked, finite humanity. The same God who appeared in flesh as the incarnate Christ requires full lordship over our lives (Matt. 10:38). Therefore, claims suggesting a bifurcation of living standards—that one can live according to both God’s ideals and the ideals of the world—are easily dismissed. We are left then to live our lives as God instructs: as a holy people (1 Pet. 2:9). His jurisdiction extends to all facets of Christian living, not just when one walks through the threshold of the church foyer.

So what, then, is church discipline? If the behavior of Christians is wholly subject to God’s standards, logically church discipline exists as the corporate means of affecting and upholding those standards. Church discipline, in the simplest sense, is confrontational and corrective measures taken by an individual, church leaders, or the congregation, regarding a matter of sinful behavior in the life of a believer so as to produce conviction, sorrow, repentance, and restoration to “awaken people to their sin and assist them in returning to their former condition.”<sup>3</sup> Church discipline in its truest sense seeks to mimic God himself, bringing fallen believers back into full communion with Him. Church discipline, contrary to innate punitive connotations, is fundamentally rooted in God’s glorification and man’s restoration—a motif that follows the ultimate example of the work done at the cross. Discipline exacted without these core motives is flawed because it falls guilty either to idolatry (action that displaces God as the object of its honor) or vengeance (action lacking love, which substitutes God’s will for the will of the individual).

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<sup>2</sup>Mark Dever, “Biblical Church Discipline,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 29-44.

<sup>3</sup>Laney, 354.

Aside (but not apart) from reconciliation, church discipline exists to maintain the fidelity of doctrine and to protect the church's witness to the world. While born-again believers are unable to cease impetuous acts of sin entirely, states of sinful behavior are eschewed by repentance and the will of the "new man" to walk with God (1 John 2:6). Membership in the local church is meaningful, and as the Apostle Paul notes in 1 Cor. 5:9-10, reflective of true membership in the body of Christ.<sup>4</sup> Paul proceeded to indict the Corinthian church of corporate sin for tolerating the blatant sin of one of its members, which compromised the very testimony of the church in the eyes of the world it was trying to reach.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, if this sin is left unchecked, such cancer can spread throughout the entire body with the perception of tacit approval, thus contaminating with impurity the very fellowship of the church.<sup>6</sup> Most certainly the need for discipline as a means of ensuring unity of fellowship and efficacy of witness also extends to those creating division from within. In a day when the church pastorate is seeing a crescendo of unruly criticism, the debilitating result, as explained by Thom Rainer, is an impediment to the Great Commission.<sup>7</sup>

Related to repressing errant orthopraxy is the spill-over implications of orthodoxy, which can result in the church inadvertently propagating heresies if not addressed. Paul and Peter both staunchly charged the church to swiftly eradicate false doctrine that can subtly spring from unrighteous conduct (Gal. 1:8-9; 2 Pet. 2:1). Francis Schaeffer remarked of the early church, "... 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."<sup>8</sup> Capitulation to worldly ideals was not an option for early church members.

Church discipline is both formative and corrective. Formative church discipline is perpetual, and can be best aligned with modeling behavior. Teaching, reading the Bible, and availing oneself to positive instruction all represent means of formative discipline. Jesus offers examples of such with pithy retorts such as that to Martha in Luke 10:41-42, or to the man requesting intervention in the affairs of his inheritance in Luke 12:14-21. Corrective discipline is confronting a fellow brother or sister in love over the entrapment of sinful behavior shown in their life. The confrontation can be as innocuous as saying, "Because I love you, it concerns me that you may

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<sup>4</sup>Dever, 31.

<sup>5</sup>R. Albert Mohler, "Church Discipline: The Missing Mark," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 17-28.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Thom Rainer, "When People Criticize Church Leadership," *The Pathway* (The Official Newsjournal of the Missouri Baptist Convention), February 22, 2011, 5.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

not be attending regularly.” When dispensed with the desire of restoration, effective church discipline can/should be equated as a facet of discipleship, the logical corollary of evangelism.<sup>9</sup> Marlin Jeschke points out that “evangelism and mission seek to make disciples of people,” but questions the logic of bringing them into Christ’s way “if the church fails to make every effort consistent with the gospel to bring back into Christ’s way those who are straying from it.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, as Carl Laney noted, “if evangelism ministers to those outside the church who are in bondage to sin, then [confrontational] congregational discipline ministers to those within the church who are in bondage to sin.”<sup>11</sup> The ministering of those in the church should therefore be considered discipleship, as a disciple is one who voluntarily submits to the discipline of another. Formative and corrective discipline ultimately converge upon the universal form of discipline as expressed in Protestantism—preaching the Word of God, professed as one of the keys of Heaven (Matt. 16:19;18:18).<sup>12</sup>

Church discipline begins at an individual level. The Lord Himself, seeing the issue of future fractures within His church, prescribed in advance the remedy in addressing such matters. The paradigm starts at the individual level precluding any initial group involvement, or at worst, a corporate witch hunt. The church only gets involved when the offender refuses to cooperate. The burden of responsibility cuts both ways, as earnest believers know they are far from a finished product and seek to further their sanctification. Furthermore, initiating the process on an intimate one-on-one level avoids the public spectacle that can impair the church’s witness.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, church discipline is applicable only to Christians, and not the unsaved world. It takes place within the church body, where a direct relationship exists between the offender and offended parties.<sup>14</sup> While God designed the church to be a true family, in order to achieve family solidarity, discipline must exist.<sup>15</sup> Much like our earthly children, when love or discipline is

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<sup>9</sup>Laney, 353.

<sup>10</sup>Marlin Jeschke, “How Discipline Died,” *Christianity Today*, August 2005, 31-32.

<sup>11</sup>Laney, 353.

<sup>12</sup>L. R. DeKoster, “Church Discipline,” In *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2d ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 255-56.

<sup>13</sup>Mohler, 23.

<sup>14</sup>Ken Baker, “What Do You Do When Sin Seems Ignored?,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (July 2005): 338-44.

<sup>15</sup>Philip Mutetei, “The Proper Procedure for Discipline in the Church,” *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 18, no. 2 (1999): 107-28.

lacking, they will be greatly handicapped.<sup>16</sup> The proper approach of church discipline should be rooted in the context of ecclesial relationships, heeding Prov. 27:6, “Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.” Ultimately, church discipline is a substantive yet rehabilitative process, emanating out of love and holiness, resulting in the exaltation of God.

## A History of Church Discipline

Some Christians may be surprised that church discipline has a history that actually precedes even the church. While countless Old Testament examples can be found sanctioning disciplinary conduct among the people of Israel, the first New Testament pronouncement of church discipline is given by the very God who gave us His church. Matt. 18 represents the first prescriptive model set forth by Jesus in the use of church discipline. What is striking is that His use of the word “church”, *ekklesia* in the Greek, in verse 17 is actually anachronistic given the New Testament church had yet to be formed. *Ekklesia* in the original Greek meant, from a Hellenistic perspective, a public gathering of citizens called out from their homes. But to the Jew in ca. AD 30, it would be understood as an assembly of Israelites for the purpose of deliberation, often attributed to synagogal business.<sup>17</sup> By ca. AD 57, when the apostle Paul wrote his first letter to the church at Corinth, church discipline had developed into a formal practice. Evinced by his various letters to the Corinthians, to Timothy, to Titus, etc., methods of executing church discipline included loving counsel, private rebuke, consultation of witnesses, public rebuke, refusal of sacraments (particularly the Eucharist), and full excommunication.

The second generation of church fathers further developed ecclesial governance by which church discipline played a role. Ignatius of Antioch offered a glimpse into the ecclesiology and controversies of his time through letters he wrote on his road to martyrdom in AD 115.<sup>18</sup> Ignatius was known as the first advocate of the monoepiscopacy, and oversaw all of the Christian churches of his city. Clear from Ignatius’s writings is his incessant endeavor to promote unity in the church, particularly in light of the factions he was forced to encounter within his own church: Judaizers and Gnostics. Ignatius encouraged his friend and contemporary, Polycarp (a disciple of the Apostle John), to immerse himself in community life by meeting one-on-one with church members to establish an intimate rapport in order to affect unity in the church and bring the unruly under subjection.<sup>19</sup> The objects of his confrontation, in order to maintain the fidelity of doctrine (Christology) that we hold today, were those Judaizers and Gnostic Docetists.

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Blue Letter Bible, “church”; available at <http://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/Lexicon.cfm?strong=G1577>; accessed on 9 March 2011.

<sup>18</sup>Bryan M. Litfin, *Getting to Know The Church Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007), 42.

<sup>19</sup>David M. Reis, “Surveillance, Interrogation, and Discipline: Inside Ignatius’ Panopticon,” *Studia Patristica* 45 (2010): 373-77.

Ecclesial infrastructure continued to develop over the next several hundred years commensurate with the growth and influence of the church. A significant development, with ramifications felt over a thousand years thereafter, occurred in AD 325 at the council of Nicea. While Nicea is often remembered for the ecumenical triumph of orthodoxy over the Arians, perhaps its most enduring feature was the vanguard means utilized to secure the triumph: imperial involvement in church affairs.<sup>20</sup> Emperor Constantine consummated the fusion of church and state, and in so doing, anathematized Arius at Nicea setting a precedent for the future politicization of discipline. The Catholic Church would later evolve from the amalgamation of church and state, and with it, the penitential discipline practiced today.

Amid the spread of a melding state church set against the backdrop of the waning Roman Empire, a more moderate voice appeared, articulating a different view on church discipline. Augustine of Hippo, whose theological musings would fuel both Roman Catholics and the later Reformers, challenged the *status quo* in various facets. When Augustine published his masterwork, *City of God* in AD 426., he was reticent to submit to excommunication as a legitimate means, noting “if they [Donatists] see vices not diligently enough corrected by the council of elders, should not therefore at once depart from the church.”<sup>21</sup> Augustine professed a prevailing concern against disrupting the unity of the church by denying communion or by excommunicating members: “For advice to separate is vain, harmful, and sacrilegious, because it becomes impious and proud; and it disturbs weak good men more than it corrects bold bad ones.”<sup>22</sup> When dealing with a pandemic of drunkenness, Augustine asserted, “These things, in my judgment, are removed not roughly or harshly, or in any imperious manner; and more by teaching than by commanding, more by monishing than by menacing.”<sup>23</sup> Most certainly, one cannot discount the influence of Augustine’s prolonged dispute with the Donatists predisposing his view of church discipline, given the Donatist proclivity to separate from the Roman church. Nevertheless, Augustine’s more temperate approach would later shape the views held by the Protestant reformers over one thousand years later.

As the church entered the Middle Ages, the formulation of church discipline was shaped wholly by the Catholic Church. Excommunication from the church had become common practice, leaving the recipient of such action as a community *persona non grata*. Public humiliation and confession of sins were considered a “second plank” of salvation.<sup>24</sup> Penitential discipline was

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<sup>20</sup>Everett Ferguson, *Church History Volume 1: From Christ to Pre-Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 201.

<sup>21</sup>“John Calvin on Church Discipline,” available at <http://www.geftakyassemblies.com/Articles/BiblicalExposition/Church/Discipline.htm>; accessed 8 March 2011.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Ferguson, 250-251.

well-developed by this time, with a formalized gradation of classes of penitents: 1) mourners (who were prohibited from entering the church), 2) hearers of the Word (permitted to stand at the door to listen), 3) kneelers, 4) bystanders, and 5) restored ones.<sup>25</sup> Confession became the ritualistic practice for public discipline. Though systems of penitential discipline were long established, it was not systematically adopted as a sacrament until the twelfth century.

Eventually, the Reformation dawned in the sixteenth century, and with it sprang divergent views on the matter of church discipline, not only from the Catholic Church, but also amongst the Reformers themselves. Martin Luther, one of the fathers of the Reformation, espoused a certain Augustinian view on church discipline. Luther feared systemic church discipline would result in a form of Christian elitism that promoted spiritual pride and the judgment of neighbors.<sup>26</sup> Luther contested that accosting church members over matters of discipline would advance the idea that some Christians may consider themselves of a higher category than their fellow believers.<sup>27</sup> However, one must also consider whether Luther's own subconscious guilt, via obsession over his own sin that played out in bouts of self-flagellation, biased this view. Moreover, Luther also opposed systematic church discipline on jurisdictional grounds, noting "if the state did its job of dealing with offenders, the church wouldn't need to."<sup>28</sup>

Fellow reformer John Calvin also relied on the state to adjudicate discipline and morals by way of state authority in Geneva. But Calvin also embraced a view of church discipline that, though modest compared to the oft punitive fervency of the Anabaptists, brought a return to the approach more closely resembling the theology of the early church. To Calvin, the purpose of church discipline was threefold: 1) that they who lead a filthy and infamous life may not be called Christians, to the dishonor of God and his holy church," 2) to prevent corruption by bad company, and 3) to facilitate the process of repentance.<sup>29</sup> Calvin noted "all who desire to remove discipline or to hinder its restoration—whether they do this deliberately or out of ignorance—are surely contributing to the ultimate dissolution of the church."<sup>30</sup> Calvin opted to tread lightly and compassionately in the matter of church discipline. He advocated private admonition as the first entreaty before involving multiple parties, but did not preclude private and public rebuke nor excommunication. Calvin made distinctions between faults, crimes, and sins.

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Charles Edward White, "Concerning Earnest Christians: A newly discovered letter of Martin Luther," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 10, no. 5 (1983): 273-82.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Jeschke, 31.

<sup>29</sup>Reflections on Spiritual Abuse, "Church Discipline," available at <http://www.geftakysassembly.com/Articles/BiblicalExposition/ChurchDiscipline.htm>; accessed on 8 March 2011.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

The Anabaptist movement promoted more aggressive means both of church discipline, and in separating from the establishment because they felt that organizing the true church could not wait. Anabaptists, pejoratively termed “hasty Puritans” (undoubtedly for their expedient propensity to sever ties as well as to partake in disciplinary actions) held that discipline was “the very essence of the church” and utilized punitive means such as admonition, excommunication, and shunning.<sup>31</sup> Ultimately, the conglomeration of Reformist ideals percolated in the adoption of the Belgic Confession in 1561. This historic confession pronounced three marks of the true church: “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 administered by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin.”<sup>32</sup> The austerity ascribed to these three tenets would prevail for a season.

Over the next several hundred years, church discipline in American evangelical circles tended to manifest itself akin to the paradigms of the Reformers and the Belgic Confession. The Baptist Church of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries regularly exacted church discipline, often amid the dichotomy of overzealous, yet fruitful, results. Perhaps the most-followed didactic (apart from the Bible) during this time was a book entitled *The Summary of Church Discipline*, used by most American churches, but primarily Baptist churches in the South. The book prescribed strict guidelines for church membership, asserting, “Every well regulated society requires qualifications of its members; much more should a church of Jesus Christ be careful that none be admitted into its communion but... those [with] prerequisites pointed out in Scripture.”<sup>33</sup> Compliant churches were vigilant not to permit membership to unbelievers and graceless persons without control, and felt that the unregenerate should not be members of the church. To maintain control, the Baptist churches practiced three progressive forms of censure: 1) rebuke or admonition, 2) suspension, whereby those disciplined were allowed to attend church but barred from communion, and 3) excommunication which separated one from all church activities.<sup>34</sup> However, unlike the Catholic Church which severed ties eternally, excommunicated Baptists were re-admitted if they repented. In fact, members were implored to continue outreach efforts to restore fallen members who had been excommunicated.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, records of Baptist church meeting minutes illuminate the high reverence ascribed to the practice of church discipline. The typical protocol was one-on-one private confrontation. If a member was not first approached privately, the claim

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<sup>31</sup>Joe L. Coker, “Cast Out from Among the Saints: Church Discipline Among Anabaptists and English Separatists in Holland, 1590-1620,” *Reformation* (November 2006): 1-27.

<sup>32</sup>Dever, 33.

<sup>33</sup>Jim West, “Nineteenth-Century Baptists and Church Discipline: Case Studies from Georgia,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 45, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 80-90.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*



was dismissed.<sup>35</sup> Should private reproof yield no resolution, the allegations were typically brought to a church council, where members of an investigative committee were assigned to examine the charges. If the grounds warranted such, the offender would be summoned to appear before a larger council or the corporate church at a later date, at which time the offender would either be “acquitted” or restored and punished appropriately.

Some of the more prevalent infractions cataloged from the records of four Southern Baptist churches from 1865–1920 include: non-attendance, intemperance, adultery, fornication, remarriage after divorce, profanity, dancing, disputes, fighting, drunkenness, breaking civil laws, breaking church rules, et al.<sup>36</sup> Of the total membership in those churches, 29.3 percent had been charged with an offense at some point and 8.6 percent had been excommunicated. It is estimated that by the time of the Civil War, 40,000 people had been excommunicated by Baptist churches in Georgia alone.<sup>37</sup> Logic would suggest that such rigid discipline would impede the growth of these churches, but surprisingly, as Southern Baptist churches excommunicated 2 percent of their congregations annually, the church grew at an even faster rate.<sup>38</sup> By 1906, 25 percent of all Georgians were Baptist.

The fervency with which Southern Baptist churches practiced discipline eventually faded. The explosive growth fatigued the church. By 1900, it no longer had the stomach or the resolve to confront its members, opting instead to revel in its own growth. The church’s emphasis shifted to purifying society, and within that quest of reforming culture, forgot how to reform itself. It became infested with worldliness. With the boundaries separating the world and the church blurred, by 1920 the practice of church discipline in Southern Baptist churches was virtually gone.<sup>39</sup>

Vestiges of church discipline still appeared in pockets of evangelical churches during the twentieth century. Generally, most churches that continued to, at a minimum, institutionally recognize the matter were reformed churches. As an example, *The Polity of Churches* was first published in 1937 and reflected the binding decision of the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church. Later editions of the book were published, such as the third edition in 1947 that provided express instructions concerning church discipline, such as: the fact that it only applied to baptized members, when silent censure was appropriate, when the consistory should be

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Dever, 35.

<sup>39</sup>West, 84.

informed, enacting public censure, revoking communion, and excommunication.<sup>40</sup> By the latter half of the twentieth century, church discipline in evangelical circles was virtually extinct. Thus, as evidenced by the chronological history presented herein, the modern era likely represents the nadir of the practice of church discipline in the church's two thousand year history.

## Scriptural Foundations of Church Discipline

At this point, the essence of what church discipline actually is has been demonstrated, and clearly such discipline has been historically carried out in sundry manifestations. However, one may ask if there is a scriptural basis for church discipline—a basis that validates the practice as emanating from God's absolute truth. The following presentation will demonstrate that Scripture provides more than a sufficient foundation for the practice of church discipline.

Scholars may legitimately begin with the first biblical example of discipline, which ensued as a consequence of the first sin in the Genesis 3 account of the fall. Here, we see God not only discipline His people for unrighteous conduct by driving them from the garden and imposing a life of labor and certain death, but as one reads on, Scripture reveals God's hand of mercy at work to restore the relationship of man and his progeny with Him. Clearly then, God's love is shown to be mutually inclusive of his discipline.

Another excerpt from the Old Testament Pentateuch, Lev. 19:15-18, lays the groundwork for restorative reproof of a brother. Clearly, as the passage illustrates, an honorable blueprint of conflict mitigation is delineated. This paradigm forbids talking ill of another brother, but goes one step further requiring one to reprove a neighbor before the contention has the opportunity to take root into a full-fledged conflict. The Hebrew context of the word "neighbor" in verse 17 is identified as group, clan, or brother, as in a familial/communal setting.

Ezek. 3:20-21 commands the attention of believers for the corporate responsibility of preventing a fellow believer from wallowing in his or her sin. Essentially, God denotes that righteous behavior requires we be honest with our brothers and sisters so that they do not die in their sin. Upon doing so, the person's blood is no longer on the confronting believer's hands, but rather, leaves the erring member responsible for the consequences of his/her sin.

Matt. 18:15-17 serves as essentially the hallmark pronouncement concerning church discipline. Much deference to this passage is given due to the fact that the Lord Himself issues this guidance. The passage reads as follows:

"Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a

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<sup>40</sup>J. L. Schaver, *The Polity of the Churches*, vol. 2, 3d ed. (Chicago: Kregel, 1947), 180-84.

heathen and a tax collector. Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” (Matt. 18:15-17)

Though much has been written on this text, the basic precepts can be summarized as a four-step process consisting of: 1) private reproof (“reproof” in the Greek meaning to expose or show one their fault), 2) private conference, 3) public announcement, and 4) public exclusion.<sup>41</sup> Before this process is enacted, one would be prudent to review another relevant passage, Matt. 7:1-5, for preparation so that he or she would first approach the conflict prayerfully, and after sufficient self-examination be able to then discern if he is spiritually qualified for the task.

Several details of Matt. 18:15-17 merit further exegetical elaboration. First, the salient feature of verse 15 is the foremost objective of winning one’s brother. Second, the additional witnesses required in verse 16 can serve a threefold purpose: 1) to bring additional pressure to lead the fallen brother to repentance, 2) to establish the facts and veracity of the encounter should they need to testify before the church, and 3) to hear the evidence to determine if an offense has even been committed.<sup>42</sup> Third, the effect of excommunication, treating one as a heathen or tax collector, ultimately calls on the church to treat unrepentant sinners as outside the circle of God’s people, just as Gentiles and tax collectors were not even allowed beyond the outer court of the temple. The church should continue to reach out to these people as part of their witness, but not confer upon them membership in the body of Christ. Finally, verse 18 has strong roots in Jewish culture and would have been clearly recognized by its original Jewish audience. First century Jewish authorities would judge matters of scriptural precedent by either binding (restricting) or loosing (to liberate) the judgment. Calvin believed firmly that the object metaphor used by Christ was that the church was charged with binding (excommunicating) or loosing (receiving into membership) its congregation.<sup>43</sup>

Heb. 12:1-14 presents another significant New Testament text on the matter of church discipline. The text conveys, among other things, that discipline should be viewed positively as God treating and molding believers as His children. God expects us to discipline each other, and to receive discipline favorably with an uncritical heart. Should believers cease to be disciplined, they then risk becoming illegitimate children that God may give up to their own iniquity (Rom. 1:24).

1 Cor. 5:1-11 demonstrates the dangers of the church permitting sinful living to permeate its membership. Conspicuous within the passage is that the erring member did not commit *a* sin, but rather, was deliberately living in a *state* of sin – one so carnal that it was capable of even appalling the pagans the church was trying to reach. The gravity of the situation is exemplified given that Paul instructed the church to remove and hand the offender over to Satan in order to

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<sup>41</sup>Laney, 358.

<sup>42</sup>Mutetei, 118.

<sup>43</sup>Mohler, 24.

utterly convict him of his depravity in order to bring about salvation, and to prevent the sinful conduct from spoiling other members within the church. The text ends with Paul imploring the church to make a clear demarcation in living differently from the world. Similarly, Rom. 2:23-24 warns of portraying a negative witness of the church to the world. Upholding the purity of the church is likewise the focus of instruction in 2 Cor. 7:1, where the church is urged to purify itself of contaminants out of reverence for God.

The treatment in 1 Cor. 5:1-11 is consistent with Paul's other admonishments, such as 2 Cor. 6:14-18, where believers are instructed to not keep company with other believers living carnal lifestyles. Another parallel text is 2 Thess. 3:6-15, where Paul instructs the church to refrain from interactions with idle members. Those members not accepting the instructions were to be taken note of and members were not to associate with them, but were also not to treat them as an enemy but rather to consider them as a warned brother. The final instruction in verse 15 has a supporting parallel in Gal. 6:1, where Paul impresses upon the church the need to act with compassion and love in how a sinning brother is restored.

Finally, several New Testament passages provide instruction for specific situations with disciplinary implications. 1 Tim. 1:20 provides an example of a blasphemer being handed over to Satan for his own benefit. 1 Tim. 5:19-20 establishes protocol to follow when elders or pastoral staff stand accused of alleged misconduct, whereby the accuser must provide two to three witness, and if valid, a public rebuke is necessitated. Titus 3:10 provides sound instruction to preempt the compounding discord generated by those intent on creating division in the church. The text calls on members to avoid trivial arguments, such as those sadly played out before us in the contemporary dramas such as the proverbial "fighting over carpet colors" or where the coffee pot should be located. The text instructs the church, likely as a response to counter the divided house Jesus warned of in Matt. 12:25, to reprove the divisive member once, and if they still continue in their promotion of division within the body, the church is to have nothing more to do with them. This is both a personal remedy and a remedy to promote unity within the body. These grumblers and complainers that Jude foresaw (Jude 16) seemingly fit the profile that Thom Rainer warns has reached epidemic proportions that paralyze many pulpits today.<sup>44</sup>

## Applying Church Discipline

The exposition now moves from the realm of theology and theory to the realm of the practical and application of church discipline. In considering if church discipline is necessary today, most American evangelicals need only draw upon their own anecdotal experiences whereby many share the same observations: manipulative powerbrokers shredding churches from within, worldly ideals branding entire congregations as hypocrites, unfounded gossip that runs a pastor out of the church, etc. As discipline waned and standards became relaxed, the church ashamedly finds itself looking no different from the world. Such an indictment is supported by a number

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<sup>44</sup>Rainer, 5.

of recent studies from George Barna that conclude incidents of abortion, adultery, pornography, and divorce are as prevalent in the American church as they are in the world.<sup>45</sup> When American evangelicals are honest with themselves, they will concede what the church (or family) prefers not to discuss: that the lack of discipline today is the 800-pound gorilla in the room. The question then becomes more urgent: how can church discipline be applied today?

As God's absolute truth, inerrantly conveyed to man, the Bible should be the guide to modern Christians as to what means are available for church discipline. Disciplinary options available per Scripture, and practiced as a matter of orthodoxy in the early church (which implies the intent of restoration) include: private reproof by a layman, private reproof by a pastor, private conference among a group, private rebuke by a group, advisement not to partake in sacraments, advisement to step down from any ministry activities, required removal from any ministry activities, withholding sacraments (which pursuant to their original duties in the early church, deacons would, as a matter of orthodoxy, be the group responsible for deciding and initiating this action), and excommunication. All of such should be progressive.

Ideally and pragmatically, church discipline begins prior to a member's walking an aisle and joining. A church serious about church discipline is advised to codify the practice within its by-laws, constitution, and signed church covenant. For one reason, such a practice is a matter of honest communication, and rightfully informs prospective members of what to expect from their church should they fall into a situation requiring discipline. Furthermore, such informed consent absolves a church of liability when a formerly disciplined member seeks legal counsel. Finally, pastors would be remiss if they did not address a church's rationale and methods of discipline as part of a church's new membership program. The pastor should deliberately present the theology and benefits of church discipline, emphasizing how it works toward the spiritual well-being of the believer, the purity and witness of the church and its doctrines, and the testimony of God.<sup>46</sup>

A church desiring to implement a program of discipline should consider classifying the practice of discipline as "discipling" because church discipline rooted in restoration is a natural extension of a discipleship program. While many modern churches tend to embrace the idea of adding a formal discipline program to its arsenal of ministries, they should ask themselves if they are being selective in determining the content of such a program. As Philip Mutetei has astutely observed, "Any discipling process that fails to introduce the importance of discipline as a guide to spiritual maturity denies the new convert a very important truth about the Christian life."<sup>47</sup> The discipling process of restoring a fallen believer should be delicate not to exude a "holier than thou" approach,

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<sup>45</sup>Christine Wicker, "Dumbfounded by Divorce," available at [http://www.adherents.com/largecom/baptist\\_divorce.html](http://www.adherents.com/largecom/baptist_divorce.html); accessed on 9 March 2011.

<sup>46</sup>Mutetei, 127.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 121.

and emphasize per Rom. 7 that as long as a born-again believer is confined to a fallen fleshly body, impulsive acts of sin will occur. However, the distinction should be made between acts of sin and the state of sin, i.e., deliberate sinful behavior. The discipling Christian can then take the opportunity to turn the discourse to the truth of Ephesians chapter 4, “speaking the truth in love” in noting that now that we are alive in Christ, and Christ being the head of the body, we should no longer walk as the rest of the world. When characterized in this manner, David Neff’s simple syllogism is convicting: if we are in Christ, and it is “inconceivable that Christ should sin” and it is “inconceivable that Christ should be at war with himself,” then obviously sin should be removed.<sup>48</sup>

Should the church proceed with confronting a fallen member as an act of discipline, they would do well to consider some caveats. First, the individual initiating the discussion should be careful to express genuine concern, often using the form of a question, such as, “Do I understand this to be the case?”<sup>49</sup> The confronting member may wish to make an effort to say two positive things for any one item that can be construed as negative. It is not only wise, but also Scriptural (Gal. 5:16-24), that the one doing the confronting be spiritually mature and subjected to self-examination before the actual confrontation. Not all church members, especially those prone to temptation, volatility, or unforgiving, will be spiritually qualified. Finally, it is important, per the Lord’s directive in Matt. 18 that the confrontation takes place in person. Much damage can be done by the submission of letters or other forms of written communication whereby context is completely lacking and tone misunderstood.

The final alternatives in the process of church discipline—public announcement and excommunication—naturally entail the most risk for potential disharmony within the church. While the Greek word *ekklesia*, as described previously (to whom it should be told), is corroborated with Hebrew practice to mean the group, family, or body, the church would be well-advised to assess the appropriate venue and spokesman for any public announcements so as to mitigate discord. Should excommunication become an option, the church should operate with the implicit belief that corrective discipline is not a judgment of a person’s final destiny. Furthermore, it should be emphasized that with excommunication comes the Scriptural mandate for follow-up, per Paul’s instructions to forgive, comfort, and reaffirm love (2 Cor. 2:7-8). Effective revisitation can bring about healing to a congregation after a difficult but necessary decision. Efforts should be made to facilitate repentance and restore the fallen member back into the fold. Ultimately, one may ask, “Why would anyone tolerate such discipline and potential embarrassment when they can just go down the road and join another church?” Kevin Miller, assistant minister at Church of the Resurrection in Wheaton, Illinois, answers the question: “...we’ve found that almost never happens. Because what people want, in their heart of hearts, is to be loved so much that someone will say, ‘You need to change, God will help you, and I’ll walk with you.’”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>David Neff, “Healing the Body of Christ,” *Christianity Today*, August 2005, 35-6.

<sup>49</sup>Laney, 359.

<sup>50</sup>Kevin Miller, “Church Discipline for Repetitive Sin,” *Leadership* (Spring 2009): 39-41.

## Conclusion

The reality of administering church discipline as a standard practice of church polity would be considered unorthodox by most American evangelicals. Consequently, this exposition has demonstrated that the issue of church discipline should be considered anything but unorthodox. This paper has systematically enveloped the parameters of church discipline—defining what it is, providing historical data and foundational scriptural evidence—all of which when synthesized as a dialectic unequivocally suggest the practice of church discipline as a necessary component of Christian orthodoxy. Adopting such a practice of church discipline would likely not be (initially) received with a sanguine response. However, until the church musters the resolve to make some uncomfortable decisions in the direction of orthodoxy, it will continually struggle to appear and function as the body of Christ and miss the blessings thereto.

Regretfully, we live in a day when church membership means as little to some as the price of admission paid when they walked through the doors. American evangelicals enjoy standards of living with unprecedented levels of comfort—a comfort that has perhaps served as the accomplice to permitting spots in our love feasts. Regardless of whether the cause is comfort, or the mere self-concern over “judging” another, when the cleansing blood paid for the body of Christ is watered down, its vibrancy correspondingly dissipates. Discipline must be executed in love as L.R. Dekoster notes, “discipline due but ignored is not love but sentimentality, love’s counterfeit.”<sup>51</sup> Confronting a brother or sister with their sinful living is hard, but most assuredly, confronting the Lord with our complicity in subduing the testimony and efficacy of His church will be much harder as the church at Thyatira could attest. When American evangelicals honestly confront themselves with the universal, absolute truth that the doctrinal warrant for church discipline is a requirement, not an optional suggestion, then we can take the next step toward full submission to His lordship over our lives.

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<sup>51</sup>DeKoster, 256.