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## CHURCH DISCIPLINE

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# THE DISAPPEARANCE OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

**T**HE 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<sup>1</sup> 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<sup>2</sup> and foreign as the Spanish Inquisition<sup>3</sup> and the Salem witch trials.<sup>4</sup> Their only acquaintance with the disciplinary ministry of the church is often a literary invention such as *The Scarlet Letter*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> and relativism.<sup>7</sup> Evangelicals have long recognized discipline as the “third mark” of the authentic church.<sup>8</sup> Authentic biblical discipline is not an elective, but a necessary and integral<sup>9</sup> 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<sup>10</sup> 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,<sup>11</sup> the Baptists left a particularly instructive record of nineteenth-century discipline. Historian Gregory A. Wills aptly commented, “To an antebellum Baptist, a church without

<sup>1</sup> **regulative** – bringing into conformity with Scripture.

<sup>2</sup> **antiquarian** – ancient.

<sup>3</sup> **Spanish Inquisition** – a court established in Roman Catholic Spain in 1478 for the investigation and punishment of those it considered heretics, whom it suppressed with unusual cruelty and severity; its notorious persecution included Protestants.

<sup>4</sup> **Salem witch trials** – a series of hearings and prosecutions of people accused of witchcraft in colonial Massachusetts between February 1692 and May 1693.

<sup>5</sup> ***The Scarlet Letter*** – Nathaniel Hawthorne’s 1850 book; a fictionalized story, set in Boston, New England, concerning a young adulteress charged by the court to wear a scarlet-colored letter A on her clothing, which is considered an example of Puritan severity.

<sup>6</sup> **dissolution** – disintegration.

<sup>7</sup> **relativism** – the idea that knowledge, truth, and morality exist in relation to culture, society, or historical context, and are not absolute.

<sup>8</sup> The identification of proper discipline as the third mark of the true church goes back at least to the Belgic confession (1561)...(see “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.

<sup>9</sup> **integral** – necessary to make a whole complete.

<sup>10</sup> **acquiesced** – accepted reluctantly, but without protest; gave in.

discipline would hardly have counted as a church.”<sup>12</sup> Churches held regular “Days of Discipline” when the congregation would gather to heal breaches of fellowship, admonish wayward members, rebuke the obstinate,<sup>13</sup> and, if necessary, excommunicate<sup>14</sup> 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<sup>15</sup> 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,<sup>16</sup> 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<sup>17</sup> has argued, the “Triumph of the Therapeutic” is now a fixture of modern American culture. 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.<sup>18</sup> 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<sup>19</sup> methods of church growth and congregational engineering, most churches leave moral matters to the domain of the individual conscience...

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

<sup>11</sup> **congregationalists** – those who believe that individual local churches are self-governing under Christ’s headship.

<sup>12</sup> **Gregory A. Wills**, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South 1785-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 12; Professor of Church History at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY.

<sup>13</sup> **obstinate** – stubbornly persistent in wrongdoing.

<sup>14</sup> **excommunicate** – to exclude an unrepentant member from the fellowship and privileges of membership; instituted by Christ (Mat 18:15, 18); practiced by His apostles (1Co 5:11; 1Ti 1:20; Ti 3:10).

<sup>15</sup> **codified** – arranged according to a system.

<sup>16</sup> **Enlightenment** – European intellectual movement of the late 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, emphasizing reason, individualism, and human progress rather than the authority of divine revelation; known as “The Age of Reason,” it was in reality rebellion against God.

<sup>17</sup> **Philip Reiff**, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966); Reiff (1922-2006) was an American sociologist and author.

<sup>18</sup> **autonomy** – freedom from external control; independence.

<sup>19</sup> **pragmatic** – more concerned with practical results than with principle.

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.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> 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<sup>22</sup> with sin.” 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 “liberation.” Liberal Protestantism has lost any moral credibility in the sexual sphere. Homo- sexuality is not condemned, even though it is clearly condemned in the Bible. To the contrary, homosexuals get a special caucus<sup>23</sup> 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...

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<sup>24</sup> of the Harvard Law School documents the substitution of “rights talk” for moral discourse. 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.”<sup>25</sup>

From *The Disappearance of Church Discipline—How Can We Recover?*, Parts 1-4; used by permission of the author; www.albertmohler.com.

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**R. Albert Mohler, Jr.:** American theologian, author, and ninth president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY; born in Lakeland, FL.




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<sup>20</sup> **James B. Twitchell**, *For Shame: The Loss of Common Decency in American Culture* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 35; a professor at University of Florida.

<sup>21</sup> **pentimento** – a visible trace of earlier painting beneath the layers of paint on a canvas.

<sup>22</sup> **absconded** – left hurriedly and secretly.

<sup>23</sup> **caucus** – any small group that acts as an autonomous body within a larger group or organization, especially one that is excessively influential.

<sup>24</sup> **Mary Ann Glendon**, *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse* (New York: Free Press, 1991); the Learned Hand Professor of Law at Harvard Law School.

<sup>25</sup> **J. Carl Laney**, *A Guide to Church Discipline* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985), 12; an author and a Bible teacher at Western Seminary in Portland, OR.

## CHURCH DISCIPLINE DEFINED

Hezekiah Harvey (1821-1893)

**D**ISCIPLINE includes all those processes by which a church, as entrusted with the care of souls, educates its members for heaven, such as their public and private instruction in the gospel, the maintenance of social meetings for their edification and comfort, and, in general, the cultivation of a spirit adapted to awaken and cherish the Christian life. In this lies the chief power of a church. A pure and healthful tone of religious life in the body, an all-pervasive spirit of love and loyalty to Christ and the church are the most effective means of securing a pure life in the individual members; for the church is then a spiritual magnet to draw and hold souls to Christ and to itself. But discipline, in a *narrower* sense, denotes the action of the church, whether as individuals or as a body, in reference to offences committed against the laws of Christ. In this sense, it includes,

**THE MUTUAL WATCH-CARE OF THE MEMBERS BY ENCOURAGEMENT, COUNSEL, ADMONITION,<sup>26</sup> AND REBUKE.** This is individual, private, and a preventive of offences. Were this done, and done in the tender, loving, earnest spirit of religion, few instances of further discipline would be required. A true Christian watch-care, or mutual helpfulness in the members, is the highest development of church-life. David said, "Let the righteous smite me; it shall be a kindness: and let him reprove me; it shall be an excellent oil, which shall not break my head" (Psa 141:5). And the gospel enjoins, "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted" (Gal 6:1). "Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness" (Col 3:12-14). Wherever the church-life approximates to this grand ideal, the spiritual atmosphere is charged with such vitalizing forces that every soul within it is girt about<sup>27</sup> with spiritual power and is inspired to higher and holier living.

**THE ADJUSTMENT OF PRIVATE PERSONAL GRIEVANCES.** The following directions are here given by Christ: "Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican<sup>28</sup>" (Mat 18:15-17). Here mark: (1) The aggrieved<sup>29</sup> party, if the other does not, is to take the initiative in seeking an interview. The subject and the interview are to be strictly private. The object of it is not altercation,<sup>30</sup> but to *gain* an offending brother. (2) If this fails, and the offence is susceptible<sup>31</sup> of proof, then one or two judicious<sup>32</sup> fellow-members are to be chosen as witnesses and mediators, and the whole case is to be considered before them. (3) If this fails, the case, after due notification of the parties, is to be laid before the church, the proof adduced,<sup>33</sup> and opportunity given for defense. If the offence is proven, the offender is to be required to make reparation<sup>34</sup> or be excluded.

<sup>26</sup> **admonition** – a firm warning; cautionary advice against neglect of duty.

<sup>27</sup> **girt about** – encircled as with a belt.

<sup>28</sup> **publican** – tax-collectors, who were, as a class, detested not only by the Jews but by other nations also because of their employment and of their harshness, greed, and deception.

<sup>29</sup> **aggrieved** – feeling resentment at having been unfairly treated.

<sup>30</sup> **altercation** – a noisy argument or disagreement, especially in public.

<sup>31</sup> **susceptible** – capable or admitting of.

<sup>32</sup> **judicious** – having sound judgment; wise.

<sup>33</sup> **adduced** – brought forward for consideration.

<sup>34</sup> **reparation** – something given to or done for someone in recognition for doing wrong.

Several further points are to be noted: (1) The aggrieved person has no discretion whether to take this course or bear the wrong. It is obligatory,<sup>35</sup> and he becomes an offender if he fails to do so. For this law is *imperative*, and even the Mosaic Law enjoined, “Thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him” (Lev 19:17). (2) If in the private interview the offence is denied, and there are no witnesses of the offence, the second step cannot be taken. For in that case, the complaining party would become an offender, having published a charge that is without proof. In the absence of proof, he has no resource but in private admonition and the patient committal of the matter to Providence. (3) If the “one or two more” before whom, in the second step, the case is laid regard the grievance as not real or as satisfactorily removed, the aggrieved party, though unsatisfied, cannot take the third step. For the offender has “heard them,” and the accuser ought to be satisfied with the judgment of brethren selected by himself. (4) It is plain that if this great law of Christ were perfectly executed, there could be no personal feuds in the church. Its simple provisions completely banish them, and wherever [internal] strifes are found destroying the life of a church, they only attest *the disastrous results of disregarding the words of the Head of the Church*.

**THE ADJUSTMENT OF DIFFERENCES AFFECTING WORLDLY AFFAIRS.** The Christian law, as given in 1 Corinthians 6:1-11, enjoins that differences among members be not carried before worldly courts, but be referred to the judgment of judicious members of the church. It has been objected that this course was required in the midst of a heathen civilization, but cannot be regarded as obligatory in a Christian land, and under laws and courts formed by a Christian civilization. But the passage gives no intimation of the limitation of the rule to heathen countries. On the contrary, the reasons it assigns for the law are in their nature not transient<sup>36</sup> and local, but permanent and universal. These are (1) that Christians, who are ultimately to judge the world, and even angels, are better qualified to adjudicate<sup>37</sup> these differences than worldly tribunals, and (2) that the appearance<sup>38</sup> of members of the church as litigants<sup>38</sup> before a worldly court is itself unseemly and inconsistent with their professed relations and hopes as members of Christ’s body. These reasons are of permanent force. Differences among men are often decided in human law not according to equity, but by legal technicalities. This rule was intended to secure a judgment according to equity and the spirit of Christianity.

**PROCEDURE IN CASES OF PUBLIC OFFENCE, EMBRACING ALL OFFENCES AGAINST THE FAITH AND LIFE REQUIRED IN A CHURCH MEMBER,** such as immoralities, heresy, covetousness, the making of divisions, habitual neglect of covenanted duties, and persistent violation of church order: In the apostolic churches the elders, as overseers—rulers—of the flock, had the special responsibility of maintaining the discipline of the church. This is implied in Paul’s address to the elders of Ephesus (Act 20) and in the qualification for the eldership stated in 1 Timothy 3:4-5: “One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; (For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?).” The method of procedure indicated (Mat 18:15-17), though there applied only to cases of personal grievance, is doubtless in spirit to be observed in all cases. For, in Titus 3:10, it is directed that the heretic be excluded only “after the first and second admonition.” The process, then, would be substantially this: (1) The officers, becoming aware of reports implicating a member, would proceed privately to investigate them and, if found true, would endeavor to reclaim. This is the most important step, since, if taken tenderly and privately, it is generally effectual. (2) The first effort failing, another would be made with every additional [application] that Christian fidelity and kindness could suggest. (3) This also failing, they would bring the case before the church with all the evidence; and if their statement of the case was controverted, the accused would have full opportunity for defense. The church would then decide, and, if adversely to the accused, they would require reparation or would proceed to exclusion.<sup>39</sup>

**Exclusion is the final act of church power.** It is the solemn withdrawal of fellowship from the offender by which he ceases to be a member and is placed back in the world. Its effect on reputation, however, is modified by the nature of the offence requiring it. Hence, a distinction is sometimes made in the form of the act. In cases of vital error or immorality, involving the forfeiture of Christian character, the hand of *Christian*

<sup>35</sup> **obligatory** – required by a legal or moral rule.

<sup>36</sup> **transient** – lasting only a short time.

<sup>37</sup> **adjudicate** – make an official decision about who is right in a disagreement.

<sup>38</sup> **litigants** – persons involved in a lawsuit.

<sup>39</sup> **exclusion** – excommunication.

fellowship is withdrawn, while in cases of the violation of church order and of other offences, where the substance of Christian character may remain unimpeached, the hand of *church* fellowship is withdrawn. This, however, is a matter of mere custom. In any case, the formal relation of the excluded person as a member of the church is terminated...

**A scriptural discipline, administered with tenderness and fidelity, is of the highest moment for the welfare of the church.** It is an urgent necessity alike for the help of individual souls and for the purity, peace, and moral power of the body. Disorderly, inconsistent life in the church paralyzes the power of the pulpit. No other cause, probably, is as potent for evil in the churches as the general neglect of a true church discipline.

From *The Church: Its Polity and Ordinances*, Backus Book Publishers, www.backusbooks.com.

**Hezekiah Harvey (1821-1893):** Baptist theologian; held pastorates in New York and Ohio; born in Hulver, Suffolk, England.



## CHRIST INSTITUTED DISCIPLINE

**James Bannerman (1807-1868)**

**T**HE exercise of Church authority that respects discipline may be held to be directed to two grand objects, which are essentially necessary for the order and well-being of the Christian society.<sup>40</sup>

In the *first* place, its aim is to carry into effect the institutions of Christ regarding the *admission* and *exclusion* of members in connection with the Christian society. There are certain principles laid down in His Word that sufficiently indicate the terms of membership that Christ has enacted for His Church and the character and qualifications of those entitled to be received into the Christian society or to remain in it as its members...Accordingly, the *second* object that this branch of Church power contemplates is to promote and secure both the *obedience* and the *edification* of the members of the Church...

Speaking generally [then], these are the two grand aims of that exercise of spiritual authority in the Church that relates to discipline. It provides for the execution of the laws of Christ as these have been revealed in connection with, *first*, the admission of parties into or their exclusion from the Christian society, and *second*, the obedience and edification of Church members.

Such being the general nature and design of that power of discipline claimed by the Church, the question that meets us at the outset of the discussion [regards] the *ground* on which this claim rests. It will not be difficult to show that the right to exercise such a power is one that belongs to the Christian Church...by the law of Christ, as revealed in *His Word*...

**The power of discipline is a right conferred on the Church by positive Divine appointment...**There is a spiritual efficacy<sup>41</sup> in this power of discipline. And there are spiritual results flowing from it, which no mere natural right belonging to any society can confer, and which nothing but the authority and virtue of a Divine institution can give. It binds the conscience with an obligation and carries with it a supernatural blessing or judgment, which no power or act of any voluntary human society can confer. [It] can only be explained on the principle of an authority and virtue bound up in the ordinance by the positive appointment of God...

**We have the direct institution of Church discipline and ecclesiastical censures<sup>42</sup> by Christ Himself.** I do not stop to inquire into the nature and exercise of this ordinance under the Old Testament Church, as it would require a lengthened discussion in order to do justice to the subject...The subject is discussed with

<sup>40</sup> **Christian society** – in this context, Christian society means a local church.

<sup>41</sup> **efficacy** – the ability to produce the intended result.

<sup>42</sup> **ecclesiastical censures** – formal punishments or statements of severe disapproval by a church upon an unrepentant church member.

great learning and force of argument in Gillespie's *Aaron's Rod Blossoming*.<sup>43</sup> But, passing by the case of the Jewish Church, we have abundant evidence that the ordinance of discipline was the institution of Christ Himself in the New Testament Church...There are three occasions more especially on which we find our Lord intimating the grant of such power to His Church.

**First, on the occasion of the remarkable confession made by Peter, our Savior declares to him,** "And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom<sup>44</sup> of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound<sup>45</sup> in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Mat 16:18-19).

**Next, when speaking of the treatment of offences, our Lord, on another occasion, declares to all the Apostles:** "If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Mat 18:15-18).

**A third time, and after His resurrection, we find our Lord conferring on His Apostles the same authority in connection with their commission as Apostles:** "Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained" (Joh 20:21-23)...

It is plain, on an examination and comparison of these statements of Scripture that our Lord did convey in them to His Church a permanent gift of authority and power in the way of discipline that was long to outlast the ministry of the Apostles. The passages I have quoted are evidently parallel, and each helps to interpret the other. The phrase, "the keys of the kingdom of heaven," occurring in the first passage, is parallel to the power of "binding and loosing," spoken of in the second. Each of these two is equivalent to the authority to "remit and retain sins," mentioned in the third passage. The expression *the kingdom of heaven* used in the grant to Peter of "the keys" is according to a very common New Testament use of the words. [It is] to be understood of the visible Church of Christ; and the power of the keys is the power of opening or closing the door of that Church in the case of parties seeking *admission* or meriting *exclusion*.

Exactly equivalent to this power of the keys is the authority to bind and to loose, or the authority to bind upon men their sins, so that they shall be shut out from the Church or to loose them from their sins, so that they shall be entitled to admission.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> **George Gillespie** (1613-1648), *Aaron's Rod Blossoming*, Bk.1, ch. 4-13 (available from Sprinkle Publications); Bk. 3, ch. 2-3; *Miscellaneous Questions*, ch. 19; Samuel Rutherford (1600?-1661), *Divine Right of Church Government and Excommunication* (London, 1646), 241 ff.; 270-275, etc. Theodore Beza (1519-1605), *De vera excommunicatione et Christiano presbyterio*, (Geneva, 1590), 37-49, 55-63, 83-92.

<sup>44</sup> **keys of the kingdom** – "A spiritual authority to preach the gospel and exercise church discipline on earth. The phrase occurs only once in Scripture...The keys of the kingdom of heaven therefore represent at least the authority to preach the gospel of Christ (cf. Mat 16:16) and thus to open the door of the kingdom of heaven and allow people to enter." (Walter Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 654-655) "The word *key* does not refer to sovereign power, for it is undeniably true that Christ alone possesses such power. 'I...have the keys of hell and of death' (Rev 1:18). Rather, it refers to *ministerial authority*, whereby a servant of God is thus authorized to open the door to those whom Christ has commanded to give entrance and to close the door for those whom Christ has commanded to keep out or cast out. This means to proclaim the forgiveness of sin to repentant sinners in Christ's Name and to declare to the unrepentant, in Christ's Name and on Christ's behalf, that they still are and remain in their sins." (Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, Vol. 2, 112)

<sup>45</sup> **shall be bound...shall be loosed** – both Matthew 16:19 and Matthew 18:18 use an unusual Greek verb construction (*periphrastic future perfect*), which can be translated "shall have been bound in heaven...shall have been loosed." "Thus, Jesus is teaching that church discipline will have heavenly sanction. But it is not as if the church must wait for God to endorse its actions; rather, whenever it enacts discipline it can be confident that God has already begun the process spiritually. Whenever it releases from discipline, forgives the sinner, and restores personal relationships, it can be confident that God has already begun the restoration spiritually (cf. John 20:23). Earthly church discipline involves the awesome certainty that corresponding heavenly discipline has already begun." (Walter Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 654-655)

<sup>46</sup> **binding and loosing** – Jesus completes the promise about the keys with a statement about "binding" and "loosing." Although the rabbinic literature often used the words *bind* and *loose* for forbidding and permitting various kinds of conduct, a much closer parallel in language, grammar, and authorship is Matthew 18:18, where "binding" and "loosing" mean placing under church discipline and releasing from church discipline (see Mat 18:15-17). This sense is also suitable in the context of Matthew 16:19; after promising to build His church, Jesus also promises



In the same sense and to the same effect are we to understand the third form of expression, used by our Lord to the representatives of His Church when He gave them [the] right to “retain and remit sin.” [This] language [is] not to be interpreted literally as a power from Christ to forgive guilt or to visit it with everlasting condemnation, vested in His Church. [It is] to be understood as conferring authority on the Church only in reference to those external privileges and punishments of transgression, which, as a visible society, it has a title to award and to remove.

The three passages in which our Lord commits to the Church this remarkable power are to be interpreted in connection with each other. While they afford, when rightly understood, no countenance to the idea of a power to pardon sin or absolve from its eternal consequences, they furnish a most satisfactory proof of the authority of the Church to exercise a power of discipline in judicially inflicting and removing ecclesiastical censures in the case of its members.

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www.solid-ground-books.com.

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**James Bannerman (1807-1868):** Scottish theologian; Professor of Apologetics and Pastoral Theology, New College, Edinburgh; born in Cargill, Perthshire, Scotland.



## ADMISSION AND EXCLUSION

John Gill (1697-1771)

**F**IRST, the rules concerning the comings in or admission of members into a gospel church: The doors of it are not to be set wide open for anyone to come in at pleasure. Porters<sup>47</sup> were set at the gates of the house of the Lord, [so that] no unclean person should enter in. In Ezekiel’s temple—a figure of the gospel church in the latter day—orders are given that no stranger, uncircumcised in heart and flesh, should enter into the sanctuary of the Lord. No materials were admitted to be laid in Solomon’s temple, but what were hewn and squared before brought thither.

**Persons should voluntarily propose themselves to the church for communion with it.** For this should be a free act of their own and not by the force or persuasion of others. Or they should be proposed by the minister or elder with whom a previous conversation should be had and an inquiry made of their experience and knowledge of divine things. So Saul, when converted “assayed to join himself to the disciples”; that is, he tried, he attempted, he proposed himself to them, to become a member of them, and to have communion with them as one of them (Act 9:26).

**In order to admission to communion, satisfaction must be given as to a work of grace upon the soul.** When Saul desired communion with the church, “They were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a

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to give not only the authority to open the door of entrance into the kingdom, but also some administrative authority to regulate the conduct of people once they are inside.” (Walter Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 654-655)

“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 him into communion, for it makes him a sharer of the unity which is in Christ Jesus.” (R. Albert Mohler, Jr., *The Disappearance of Church Discipline*, Part 3)

<sup>47</sup> **porters** – those who guard a door or gate, especially at the entrance of a large building.

disciple” (Act 9:26), a real converted person, a true believer in Christ because he had been so lately a persecutor of the saints. [They believed not] until it was declared to them how he had seen the Lord in the way, that He had spoken to him, and how boldly he had preached in His name. Then he was admitted and was with them coming in and going out. It is but fit and proper that such should give a reason of the hope that is in them, to the satisfaction of those with whom they desire to walk in fellowship. It was an early practice of the saints to tell one another what God had done for their souls. The poor man whom Christ had dispossessed of a legion of devils was bid to go home to his friends and tell them how great things the Lord had done for him and had had compassion on him. This is best done by a man himself, than by the report of others, and better by a verbal declaration than by writing. For though the former may be made in a broken manner, yet it may best discover the true affection of the heart, the savoriness<sup>48</sup> of a man’s spirit, and tend more to knit and unite the hearts of the Lord’s people to him.

**The way of entrance into a church is by a profession of faith in Christ.** For as with the heart man believes unto righteousness, so with the mouth confession is made unto salvation (Rom 10:10). The church is the sheepfold, and Christ is the door into it. Whoever climbs up another way than by faith in Him and profession of it is a thief and a robber (Joh 10:1). The three thousand converts first professed repentance of their sins, faith in Christ for the [forgiveness] of them, and their joyful reception of the gospel; then [they] were baptized and added to the church (Act 2:41).

**It is necessary that such who enter into a church state should have knowledge of the truths of the gospel, confess them, and be not ashamed of Christ and His words before men.** Their soundness in the doctrine of faith should be inquired into, and this [should] be testified by their assent<sup>49</sup> to the articles of faith held and maintained by the church: “Open ye the gates, that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter in” (Isa 26:2).

**Allowances should be made for weaknesses and infirmities of men, both in their gracious experiences and in their gospel light and knowledge.** The day of small things is not to be despised (Zec 4:10). The bruised reed is not to be broken nor the smoking flax to be quenched (Mat 12:20). The tender lambs are gathered into Christ’s arms and carried in His bosom (Isa 40:11). The weak in faith are to be received, and not to doubtful disputations<sup>50</sup> (Rom 14:1).

**Testimony should be given of their becoming<sup>51</sup> life and conversation.<sup>52</sup>** When the disciples demurred<sup>53</sup> upon receiving Saul because of his former conduct and behavior, Barnabas informed them of the change that was in him; and [that, although he had been] a violent persecutor, he was become a bold and zealous preacher of the gospel. [Then] they gladly received him.

**The reception of a member into church communion must be by mutual consent.** The person received must give up himself or herself to walk with the church in holy fellowship; and the church must readily receive such in the Lord. It must be a voluntary act on both sides. If there is a pastor, the person must be received by him in the name and with the consent of the church; if not, by a brother appointed by the church for that purpose, the token of which is by giving the right hand of fellowship (Gal 2:9). I proceed,

**Secondly, [let us] consider the ordinances, laws, and rules to be kept and observed by those who are admitted into the church.** There are ordinances they are directed to [observe]. Show them “all the ordinances” of the house that they may “do” them: so Christ ordered His disciples to teach those they baptized to observe all things whatsoever He commanded them (Mat 28:20). Besides the ordinance of baptism, which is preparatory to church communion, there are the ordinances of public prayer, praise, and the public ministry of the Word, which are constantly to be attended on. It is very unbecoming members of churches to forsake the assembling of themselves together for public worship (Heb 10:25). It is observed, to the honor of the [earliest] Christians, that “they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine,” in a constant attendance on the ministration of it; in holy “fellowship” with one another; “in prayer,” in public prayers put

<sup>48</sup> **savoriness** – spiritual delightfulness; the spiritual “fragrance” or “tastiness” of holiness.

<sup>49</sup> **assent** – the agreement of one’s will.

<sup>50</sup> **doubtful disputations** – arguments over doubtful things.

<sup>51</sup> **becoming** – suitable; having a graceful fitness.

<sup>52</sup> **conversation** – lifestyle; behavior.

<sup>53</sup> **demurred** – paused with uncertainty; hesitated.

up to God by the minister as the mouth of the church; and particularly in “breaking of bread,” or in the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper (Act 2:42), which is to be frequently administered. “As often as ye eat this bread, etc.” (1Co 11:26), which shows it is to be often done; and as often as it is, it should be attended on...

**There are also “the laws of” the house, which are to be shown to members of churches and to be observed by them.** Christ is Lawgiver in it; and His commands are to be kept from a principle of love to Him, even *all* that He has commanded. There is the Moral Law, which is still in force and binding upon Christians. For Christ came not to destroy it, but to fulfill it (Mat 5:17); and His people are under the Law to Him and should be obedient to it (1Co 9:21). Such who [disregard] morality are not fit to be members of churches and are not to be continued in them. There is likewise the law of Christ, which is the law of love, the new commandment Christ has given to His disciples (Joh 13:34), by the observance of which it is known that they are His disciples. There are, moreover, various duties to be performed by members of churches, mutually towards each other. They are to submit themselves to one another in the fear of the Lord (Eph 5:21). [They are] to have the same love one for another (Phi 2:2), both with respect to things temporal and spiritual and to watch over one another in the Lord...

**There are certain rules respecting private admonitions of church members that deserve special regard.** Both such as are given by ministers and elders of churches, who have not only power of admonishing those they have the rule over and of rebuking *publicly* and with authority; but also in a *private* manner, as they go from house to house and as they see occasion for it. [Such] private admonitions are not to be slighted, [nor] those given by members, who are to admonish and rebuke one another in a private manner, as there may be a necessity for it. The rule in Matthew 18:15-17—“If thy brother shall trespass against thee...”—is an excellent one and may be...accommodated to any difference between one member of a church and another...[This] rule must be observed in case of a private trespass known *only* to them—a secret fault that they are only privy to—and not a public sin, known to the whole church and to the world. For then another method must be taken. It must be a “trespass,” a sin, that the offender is guilty of; yet not a sin of infirmity, common to human nature, and that all are encompassed with. A man is not to be made an offender for a word, a small trifling thing. Yet it must not be a very [shockingly wicked] and public one, which requires more than admonition, even excommunication at once, such as the sin of the incestuous person (1Co 5). [It must be] a sin of a lesser nature, yet a fault, and which gives just cause of offence. In such a case, the offended brother must give the offending one private reproof [and] tell him his fault between themselves alone. If he can bring him to an acknowledgment of his fault and he declares his sorrow for it, then the brother is gained. [He] is restored from the error he has been guilty of, it is to be buried in oblivion and no more said of it to anyone. But if not, he must take another brother or two with him and admonish him again. If he pays no regard to it, as strengthened by the conjunction of the brethren with him, then the direction is, “Tell the church”...

**Thirdly, the next thing to be inquired into is what concerns “the goings out of” the house or church of God, and what may be meant by them.** There are but two ways of going out of a church: either by a dismissal<sup>54</sup> from it or by an excommunication out of it. There are, indeed, letters of recommendation, which are wanting in some cases, though the apostle needed them not (2Co 3:1), such as were given to Apollos (Act 18:27), to Phebe (Rom 16:1-2), and to Marcus (Col 4:10). But these do not give membership: only transient communion. The person recommended still remains a member from whence he is recommended. The design of such letters is only to certify that the person whose name is mentioned in them is a member in full communion with the church that recommends him and may be safely admitted to transient communion with the church to which he is recommended. But such letters ought not to continue long: if a person takes up his residence in a place where he is in providence brought, he should send for his dismissal and be received upon it into full communion. A letter of dismissal, when approved of and the person dismissed is received, [makes him] in all respects a member. Then his membership ceases in the church by which he is dismissed and not before. There are cases in which a man may desire his dismissal to another church—as distance of habitation, non-edification, and when a church is become corrupt in doctrine and practice that he cannot conscientiously abide with them. The other way of going out of a church is excommunication, concerning which it will be necessary to consider various things.

<sup>54</sup> **dismissal** – the act of sending away or allowing to go.

**Excommunication is no other than a removal of a man from the communion of the church and from all privileges dependent upon it.** It is a disfranchising<sup>55</sup> him from all the immunities of a fellow citizen with the saints and taking from him a place and a name in the house of God; for a church can take no more from him than what it first gave him...

**The glory of God is the ultimate end of excommunication.** For as His name is dishonored by the evil practices or principles of church members, so this is the most open and most effectual way of removing that dishonor that is brought upon it. This ought to be always the chief aim and the sincere view in the administration of it.

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**John Gill (1697-1771):** Baptist minister, theologian, and biblical scholar; born in Kettering, Northamptonshire, England.



## VISIBLE PURITY; THE PURPOSE OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

**T**HROUGHOUT 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, “For I am the LORD your God: ye shall therefore sanctify yourselves, and ye shall be holy; for I am holy” (Lev 11:44a). 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, “Ye shall diligently keep the commandments of the LORD your God, and his testimonies, and his statutes, which he hath commanded thee. And thou shalt do that which is right and good in the sight of the LORD: that it may be well with thee, and that thou mayest go in and possess the good land which the LORD sware unto thy fathers” (Deu 6:17-18).

The nation is reminded that it is now known by God’s name and is to reflect His holiness. “For thou art a holy people unto the LORD thy God: the LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth” (Deu 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 ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light: Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy” (1Pe 2:9-10).

Peter continued, “Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul; Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak

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<sup>55</sup> **disfranchising** – depriving of privileges or of voting rights.

against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation” (1Pe 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<sup>56</sup> in its purity and holiness and steadfast in its confession of the faith once for all delivered to the saints. Rath-er than capitulating<sup>57</sup> to the moral (or immoral) environment, Christians are to be conspicuous by their good behavior. As Peter summarized, “But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation” (1Pe 1:15).

The Apostle Paul clearly linked the holiness expected of believers to the completed work of Christ in redemption: “And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled in the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unreprouvable in his sight” (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 cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2Co 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, “And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?” (Heb 12:5-7). As the passage continues, the author warns that those who are without discipline “are ye bastards, and not sons” (v. 8). The purpose of discipline, however, is *righteousness*. “Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby” (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 responsibility 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 [disgrace] is evident in the New Testament itself.

The Apostle Paul confronted a case of gross moral failure in the Corinthian congregation that included “fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles” (1Co 5:1). In this case, apparent incest was known to the congregation, and yet it had taken no action. “And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you,” Paul accused the Corinthian congregation (v. 2). He instructed them to act quickly and boldly to remove this stain from their

<sup>56</sup> conspicuous – clearly visible.

<sup>57</sup> capitulating – surrendering, especially on certain stated condition.

fellowship. He also warned them, “Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened” (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 wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world. But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer,<sup>58</sup> or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat. For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person” (5:9-13).

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: “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walk-eth disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us” (2Th 3:6). Paul instructs the Thessalonians to follow his own example because “we behaved not ourselves disorderly among you” (2Th 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: “Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican” (Mat 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 that 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<sup>59</sup> testimony concerning the confrontation of a sinning brother. The brother cannot claim that he was not confronted with his sin in a brotherly context.

<sup>58</sup> **railer** – one who utters abusive language.

<sup>59</sup> **corroborating** – supporting; additional confirmation.

If the brother does not listen even in the presence of one or two witnesses, this becomes a matter for the congregation.<sup>60</sup> “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. “Let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican,” 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...

**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 (1Ti 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, [Paul says,] “Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear” (1Ti 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, “My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation” (Jam 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.

From *The Disappearance of Church Discipline—How Can We Recover?* Parts 1-4.



## THE NECESSITY OF DISCIPLINE

Daniel E. Wray

**I**T is necessary in our hardened and apostate age for the church to be called back to the New Testament doctrine of church discipline. In our day, the church has become tolerant of sin even when it is found in her own people. This warrants the wrath of God upon the church’s indifference to His holiness. The modern church seems more willing to ignore sin than to denounce it and more ready to compromise God’s Law than to proclaim it. It is a mournful fact that many churches refuse to take sin seriously. We have no

<sup>60</sup> By whom is excommunication actually performed? *Not by a member himself.* No man has a right to cut off himself...As a man cannot come into a church without the consent of it, so neither can he go out of it without its consent. For a man to depart of himself is not standing fast in one spirit, but is a cowardly running away from a church. To go without giving a reason, without asking leave, or desiring a dismissal...is a rude and unmannerly way of departure...Such men are covenant breakers with a church, which is a great evil, and breakers up of churches...for what one member may do, others may. Yea, if a member may leave a church at pleasure, a pastor may do the same: in a word, notwithstanding such departure, such persons may be proceeded against by direct excommunication; or, which amounts to much the same, should be declared by a vote of the church, non-members, and no longer under its watch and care; which is by some called indirect excommunication. *Nor is it to be performed by any single person of himself, whether an ordinary or an extraordinary minister...* It is a punishment inflicted by many. *Nor is it to be done by the elders of a church separately...* but by the elders of churches with the consent of the members of them...The power of it originally lies in the church; the authority of executing it lies in the elders with the consent and by the order of the church; as the directions to the churches concerning this matter testify. (John Gill, *A Body of Practical Divinity*, 651)

right to *dialogue* about sin. That was Eve's mistake. The tempter's suggestions should have been promptly rebuked; but instead, they were discussed (Gen 3:1-5). That discussion was compromise and sin. The church cannot stand before her enemies while ignoring sin in her own ranks (*cf.* Jos 7:1-26).

Today, the church faces a moral crisis within her own ranks. Her failure to take a strong stand against evil (even in her own midst), and her tendency to be more concerned about what is expedient<sup>61</sup> than what is right, has robbed the church of biblical integrity and power. It is true that, historically, the church has sometimes erred in this matter of discipline; but today the problem is one of outright neglect. It would be difficult to show another area of Christian life that is more commonly ignored by the modern evangelical church than church discipline.

It is ironic that this rejection is often justified in the name of love. When the Apostle John wrote that we should "love one another," he also wrote, "And this is love, that we walk after his commandments" (2Jo 5-6). As we shall see, the exercise of church discipline is a command from the Lord of the church. When it is properly carried out, it is a *profound* display of Christian love. To put it another way, true Christian love dare not ignore the use of the various forms of discipline wherever they are applicable. Love necessarily challenges sin in us and in our brethren. It is no more love for a Christian to watch a brother in Christ pursue a course of sin unchallenged than it is love for a parent to watch his child walk unhindered into disaster. If we look for God's blessing in our churches, it is essential that we conduct ourselves according to God's Word. He tells us how to conduct ourselves in "the house of God" (1Ti 3:15). We must not look to the world for such guidance. If we are to practice Christian love, *we must practice church discipline*. On the other hand, it will do the church no good if we practice the proper forms of discipline without the spirit of love and humility that characterizes disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. We do not intend to suggest that church discipline is a cure-all for the ills of the contemporary church; nor that discipline is the only or the chief way in which we ought to display our love for one another. Rather we advocate that this is part of the reform *necessary* in the church today. The way to reform in the church always lies along the road of biblical revelation. The purpose of this [article], therefore, is simply to point the way back to the biblical practice of church discipline...

**The Necessity and Purpose of Church Discipline:** Just as the church applies biblical principles in admitting persons to membership, so too must she apply biblical principles in the governing of the membership and, if necessary, in removal from membership. Jesus prescribed principles to follow that make all Christians to some extent responsible for each other's behavior, and He included disciplinary procedures (Mat 18:15-17). It is in this context that He gave the church the responsibility to pronounce His forgiveness and His judgments. "Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Mat 18:18). Of course, the ratification in heaven of what the church does on earth is contingent<sup>62</sup> upon the church acting in obedience to Christ and His principles without hypocrisy or favoritism. As Matthew Poole<sup>63</sup> puts it, this text is "to assure stubborn and impenitent sinners that He would ratify what His church did, according to the rule He had given them to act by. It is therefore a terrible text to those who are justly and duly cut off from the communion of the church." Poole wisely adds, "The church is not by this text made infallible, nor is the holy God by it engaged to defend their errors." The only fact to be established at this point, however, is simply that the Lord Jesus Christ *does* indeed intend His church to govern its members even to the extent of disciplinary measures when these become necessary. Let us not think that this is simply an optional power to act, for all of the Lord's instructions are given in the imperative. The church does not have the right to ignore persistent sinful behavior among its members. Our Lord has not left that option open to us.

The necessity and purpose of church discipline can be readily exhibited in six particulars:

**1. To glorify God by obedience to His instructions for the maintenance of proper church government.** God's Word makes it plain that He intends discipline of various types to be part of church life (Mat 18:15-20; Rom 16:17; 1Co 5:1-13; 1Th 5:14; 2Th 3:6-15; 1Ti 5:20; 6:3; Ti 1:13; 2:15; 3:10; Rev 2:2, 14-15, 20). It is always

<sup>61</sup> **expedient** – useful as opposed to right; advisable on practical rather than moral grounds.

<sup>62</sup> **contingent** – dependent.

<sup>63</sup> **Matthew Poole** (1624-1679) – English Nonconformist theologian and author of *English Annotations on the Holy Bible*, aka, *Matthew Poole's Commentary on the Holy Bible*.



glorifying to God when we obey His Word rather than cater for our own ease and expediency. Let us not be as those in Jeremiah's day, of whom it is written: "Behold, the word of the LORD is unto them a reproach; they have no delight in it" (Jer 6:10).

**2. To reclaim offenders.** The goal in every type of discipline, whether it be gentle correction, admonition, rebuke, or excommunication, is always the restoration of the offender (Mat 18:15; 1Co 5:5; Gal 6:1). None of the biblical instructions in this matter *promise* that restoration will result. Nevertheless, God's wise directions as to how a sinner is to be brought to repentance are to be respected and obeyed. Thus, while we might be inclined simply to pray about the matter, God commands action to accompany our prayers. The apostle's instructions concerning an offender, "count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother" (2Th 3:15), set the tone for this grievous work. As Calvin observes: "Although excommunication also punishes the man, it does so in such a way that, by forewarning him of his future condemnation, it may call him back to salvation" (*Institutes*, Book IV, Chapter 12, Section 10).

**3. To maintain the purity of the church and her worship (1Co 5:6-8) and to avoid profaning the [ordinance]<sup>64</sup> of the Lord's Supper (1Co 11:27).** We shall never be able to keep the visible church in perfect purity since we are but fallible men. Our inability to achieve perfection in this matter, however, is no excuse for giving up the attempt. We must maintain the purity of Christ's visible church to the full extent of our knowledge and power. This is all the more evident once we recognize that false doctrine and bad conduct are *infectious*. If these are tolerated in the church, all members will receive hurt (*cf.* 1Co 5:6).

**4. To vindicate the integrity and honor of Christ and His religion by exhibiting fidelity to His principles (2Co 2:9, 17).** The church that refuses to exercise discipline can command neither the world's respect nor the confidence of its own members.

**5. To deter others from sin (*cf.* 1Ti 5:20).** By the faithful practice of discipline, "vice is repressed and virtue nourished" (*The Scots Confession*, 1560, Chapter XVIII).

**6. To prevent giving cause for God to set Himself against a local church (*see* Rev 2:14-25).** Since the church is bound to give full allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ, and this means to love Him and keep His commandments (Joh 14:15, 23-24; 15:10, 14), it is evident that the church's honesty of heart is tested when confronted with the choice between obedience and disobedience in this matter of the discipline of its members. It is just as necessary for the church to exercise proper discipline, as it is to preach the Word and properly administer the [ordinances]. This is why the *Belgic Confession*, Chapter XXIX (1561), which grew out of Reformation soil, says, "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 [ordinances] as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing 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."

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www.solid-ground-books.com.

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**Daniel E. Wray:** Congregationalist pastor and author; served as pastor of the Congregational Church in Limington, Maine, in 1975.




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<sup>64</sup> [Editor's Note]: For the sake of avoiding confusion among our very broad range of readers, the word *ordinance* will appear bracketed in place of the word *sacrament*.

## THREE AREAS REQUIRING DISCIPLINE

R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

**T**HE 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: "Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds" (2Jo 9-11). The apostle Paul instructed the Galatians that [if] "we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed" (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 crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness,<sup>65</sup> and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 4). Similarly, Peter warns, "There shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction" (2Pe 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<sup>66</sup> 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."<sup>67</sup>

**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: "Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God" (1Co 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

<sup>65</sup> **lasciviousness** – lack of moral restraint, especially outrageous sexual behavior.

<sup>66</sup> **heinous** – extremely or outrageously wicked.

<sup>67</sup> **Francis Schaeffer**, *The Church before the Watching World* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1971), 62; Schaeffer (1912-1984) was an evangelical author, theologian, apologist, and philosopher.

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: “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple” (Rom 16:17-18). Writing to Titus, Paul instructed...the church, “A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject; Knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself” (Ti 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, but rather 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 thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift” (Mat 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 as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come. Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body” (1Co 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.

From *The Disappearance of Church Discipline—How Can We Recover?* Parts 1-4.



## MODES OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Daniel E. Wray

**T**HE modes or types of church discipline vary from the mild to the severe. The following are biblical: 1. **Admonition**—either private or public (Rom 15:14; Col 3:16; 1Th 5:14; 2Th 3:14-15; Ti 3:10-11). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *admonish* as “to put (one) in mind to do a duty; to charge

authoritatively, to exhort, to urge (always with a tacit<sup>68</sup> reference to the danger or the penalty of failure).” The Scripture itself is a form of admonition (1Co 10:11). Christians ought to admonish and encourage one another, for example, to do good works and to attend the meetings of the church (Heb 10:24-25).

**2. Reproof, rebuke, convince, convict<sup>69</sup>** (Mat 18:15; Eph 5:11; 1Ti 5:20; 2Ti 4:2; Ti 1:9, 13; 2:15). The Greek word *elencho*, which is used in the passages just cited, is a rich word that means “...to rebuke another with such effectual wielding of the victorious arms of the truth, as to bring him, if not always to a confession, yet at least to a conviction, of his sin...”<sup>70</sup> This word is also used of the Holy Spirit’s work in John 16:8 and is found on the lips of the enthroned Christ in Revelation 3:19, where He says: “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent.” Thus, proper rebuke is an act of love. The only proper guide in such matters is the Word of God written, which we are told is “profitable...for reproof” (2Ti 3:16).

It is important that all Christians practice loving admonition and rebuke in their relationships one with another. Many a Christian has been prevented from more serious misbehavior or error by the gentle rebuke of a brother in Christ. If Christians would conscientiously apply admonition and rebuke, there would be less need for excommunication. Knowing this, the faithful Christian is eager to help turn sinners to repentance<sup>71</sup> before excommunication becomes necessary. Furthermore, Christians will help one another “grow up into him in all things” if they will obey the apostle’s admonition to be “speaking the truth in love” (Eph 4:15).

As each Christian gives thought to his responsibility here, let it always be remembered that the only proper source of admonitions and rebukes is the Word of God. This does not mean that we must always quote Scripture to one another, but it certainly does mean that the substance of all admonitions and rebukes must be soundly and clearly scriptural. We are not to offer one another human ideas, but rather, are to speak with the authority of “Thus saith the Lord.” This should be done in humility, remembering that we ourselves are nothing but sinners saved by grace. Furthermore, repentance and faith constitute the way of salvation for all Christians. Thus, we attempt to lead the sinner on the same path that we ourselves must tread. We do not stand over them as superiors, but beside them as brothers (Gal 6:1-3; 2Th 3:15).

**3. Excommunication.<sup>72</sup>** The descriptions given by our Lord Jesus Christ and the Apostle Paul define this final form of discipline: “But if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican” (Mat 18:17). “But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an

<sup>68</sup> **tacit** – implied but not expressed.

<sup>69</sup> Rebuke or admonition, the lowest degree of church censure, is reproofing an offender, pointing out the offense, charging it upon the conscience, advising and exhorting him to repentance, watchfulness, and new obedience, and praying for him that he may be reclaimed (Ti 1:13). This, and all other church censures, must be administered in love and tenderness (Rev 3:19) with Christian prudence (1Ti 1:2), in a sincere aim to save the soul from death (Jam 5:19-20; 2Co 13:10; Gal 6:1); without partiality (1Ti 5:21); and as a caution to others (1Ti 5:20).

A member becomes worthy of rebuke (1) when, by the use of things in themselves indifferent, he wounds the conscience of a weak brother (1Co 8:11-12); (2) when he exposes to others the infirmities of a brother (1Pe 4:8); (3) when he disquiets the peace of the brethren about matters of indifference (Rom 14:19-22); (4) when he, without a just cause, indulges anger against a brother (Mat 5:22); (5) when he is contentious about unscriptural forms and fashions, as if they were necessary to be used in the church or among the members (1Co 11:16); (6) when he neglects privately to admonish or reprove a brother whom he knows to be guilty of sin (Lev 19:17); (7) when he neglects to attend church meetings for business (Act 6:2); and (8) when he attends other places of worship to the neglect of his own (Heb 10:25). (James Leo Garrett, Jr., “A Summary of Church-Discipline” in *Baptist Church Discipline*, 49-50)

<sup>70</sup> R. C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament*, 12.

<sup>71</sup> See FGB 203, *Repentance*, available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

<sup>72</sup> [EDITOR’S NOTE]: Some believe that *suspension* is a biblical category of discipline. John Owen, John Gill, and others rejected suspension, seeing rebuke and excommunication as the only legitimate and biblical categories. Nevertheless, others have adopted it as a viable position, so we include a brief presentation in this note: “Suspension, considered as a church censure, is that act of a church whereby an offending member, being found guilty, is set aside from office, from the Lord’s Table, and from the liberty of judging or voting in any case... Since this censure does not cut off from union, but only from communion with the church, the suspended member is not to be accounted an enemy, but admonished as a brother (2Th 3:15); and upon a credible profession of repentance the censure is to be taken off and the delinquent restored to all the privileges of the church. This censure is to be administered in case of crimes which do not amount so high as to deserve excommunication, as (1) when a member breaks the peace of the church by janglings and disputings (1Ti 1:6; 6:5); (2) when he withdraws from the church on account of its wholesome discipline, notwithstanding loving admonitions given him (Joh 6:66); (3) of another member with whom he is offended and neglects to do his duty by him as directed (Mat 18:15); (4) when he broaches unsound, heretical principles (Ti 3:10); (5) when he is a busy tattler and backbiter (Psa 50:19-21); (6) when he through sloth neglects the necessary duties of life (1Ti 5:8); (7) when he has committed a gross crime but gives some tokens of repentance, he is to be suspended that the church may have time to judge of his sincerity (1Jo 4:1); (8) when a party of members, like Korah and his company, break through their covenant obligations and attempt to set up for themselves, in an irregular manner and in opposition to all the loving persuasions of the majority, being “trucebreakers” and “despisers of those that are good” (2Ti 3:3). In a word, all practices that in their own nature and tendency are destructive of the reputation, peace, and prosperity of the church and yet appear not to be past remedy merit this censure.” (James Leo Garrett, Jr., “A Summary of Church-Discipline” in *Baptist Church Discipline*, 50-51)

one no not to eat...Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person” (1Co 5:11, 13). Thus, this most severe of the forms of discipline excludes the offender from the church and from all the privileges of membership. However, while the person must certainly be excluded from the Lord’s Supper, he is not excluded from attendance upon the ministry of the Word preached and taught, for even non-believers are welcome to the public assemblies (1Co 14:23-25). That this form of discipline is unpleasant and a cause for mourning (1Co 5:2) none would doubt. Nevertheless, this practice has associated with it in the New Testament Christ’s own direct sanction (Mat 18:18-19). Paul claims this sanction when he writes concerning the Corinthians situation that the man is to be delivered to Satan (i.e., put back into the world, which is Satan’s domain), “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” and “with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1Co 5:4). He could hardly state more clearly and decisively that our Lord Jesus Himself is the authority behind all true excommunication.

It is not to be thought that excommunication is irreversible, for the person who repents of his sin and seeks God’s cleansing and pardon is to be welcomed back into the fellowship of the church (2Co 2:6-8). Indeed, it is the responsibility of God’s people to continue to pray for any persons thus removed from fellowship that God will bring them to repentance. On the other hand, so long as they remain unrepentant, they remain excommunicated. We recognize, of course, that in this day and age, the offender will often seek out another church to attend in order to avoid repenting and submitting to the church that loved him enough to discipline him. In such cases, the offender and the other church must answer to God. The disciplining church, if it has done its duty well, will be vindicated by the Lord in His own time.

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www.solid-ground-books.com.



## THE NATURE OF EXCOMMUNICATION

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)

*“But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat.”—1 Corinthians 5:11*

I shall say something of the *nature* of excommunication. It is a punishment executed in the name and according to the will of Christ, whereby a person who hath heretofore enjoyed the privileges of a member of the visible church of Christ is cast out of the church and delivered unto Satan.

It is a punishment inflicted. It is expressly called a punishment by the apostle in 2 Corinthians 2:6. Speaking of the excommunicated Corinthian, he says, “Sufficient to such a man is this punishment.” For though it be not designed by man for the destruction of the person, but for his correction—and so is of the nature of a castigatory<sup>73</sup> punishment at least so far as it is inflicted by men—yet it is in itself a great and dreadful calamity. [It is] the most severe punishment that Christ hath appointed in the visible church. Although in it, the church is to seek only the good of the person and his recovery from sin—there appearing upon proper trial no reason to hope for his recovery by gentler means—yet it is at God’s sovereign disposal whether it shall issue in his humiliation and repentance or in his dreadful and eternal destruction. It always doth issue in the one or the other...

<sup>73</sup> castigatory – corrective by means of severe rebuke.

First, I would show wherein this punishment *consists*. It is observable that there is in it something *privative*<sup>74</sup> and something *positive*.<sup>75</sup>

**First, there is something *privative* in excommunication, which consists in being deprived of a benefit heretofore<sup>76</sup> enjoyed.** In the Jewish church, this part of the punishment was called *putting out of the synagogue* (John 16:2). The word *synagogue* is of the same signification as the word *church*. So this punishment in the Christian church is called *casting out of the church*. The Apostle John, blaming Diotrephes for inflicting this punishment without cause, says, “He casteth them out of the church” (3Jo 10). It is sometimes expressed by the church’s *withdrawing* from a member, “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, that ye *withdraw* yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly” (2Th 3:6).

The privative part of excommunication consists in being *cut off* from the enjoyment of the privileges of God’s visible people. The whole world of mankind is divided into these two sorts: those that are God’s visible people, and those that are of the visible kingdom of Satan. Now it is a great privilege to be *within* the visible church of Christ. On the other hand, it is very doleful<sup>77</sup> to be *without* this visible kingdom, to be cut off from its privileges, treated as belonging to the visible kingdom of Satan. For,

**1. They are cut off from being the objects of that *charity*<sup>78</sup> of God’s people that is due to Christian brethren.** They are not indeed cut off from *all* the charity of God’s people, for all men ought to be the objects of their love. But I speak of the brotherly charity due to visible saints.

Charity, as the apostle represents it, is the bond by which the several members of the church of Christ are united together. Therefore, he calls it the bond of perfectness: “Put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness” (Col 3:14). But when a person is justly excommunicated, it is like a physician’s cutting off a diseased member from the body: then the bond that before united it to the body is cut or broken... This implies that the church disapproves the person as a Christian. It cannot any longer charitably look upon him as a saint or fellow-worshipper of God and can do no other than, on the contrary, esteem him an enemy of God. So [it] doth openly withdraw its charity from him, ceasing to acknowledge him as a fellow-Christian any more than the heathens. He is also cut off from that honor that is due to brethren and fellow-Christians. To be a visible Christian is an honorable character; but excommunicated persons forfeit this honor. Christians ought not to pay that honor and respect to them that they pay to others; but should treat them as unworthy of such honor that they may be ashamed. Christ tells us, they should be unto us as heathen men and publicans (Mat 18:17.) [This] implies a withdrawing from them that common respect that we pay to others. We ought to treat them [in order] to let them plainly see that we do not count them worthy of it to put them to shame.

Much love and complacency<sup>79</sup> are due to those whom we are obliged in charity to receive as saints because they are visible Christians. But excommunicated persons forfeit this complacency. We should still wish well to them and seek their good. Excommunication itself is to be performed as an act of benevolence. We should seek their good by it; and it is to be used as a means of their eternal salvation. But complacency and delight in them as visible Christians are to be withdrawn. On the contrary, they are to be the objects of displacency,<sup>80</sup> as visibly and apparently wicked. We are to cast them out as an unclean thing that defiles the Church of God.

In this sense, the psalmist professes a hatred of those who were the visible enemies of God. “Do not I hate them, O LORD, that hate thee? and am not I grieved with those that rise up against thee? I hate them with perfect hatred: I count them mine enemies” (Psa 139:21-22). Not that he hated them with a hatred of malice or ill-will, but with displacency and abhorrence of their wickedness. In this respect, we ought to be the children of our Father Who is in heaven, Who, though He loves many wicked men with a love of

<sup>74</sup> **privative** – having the quality of depriving or taking away.

<sup>75</sup> **positive** – formally laid down or imposed.

<sup>76</sup> **heretofore** – before now; formerly.

<sup>77</sup> **doleful** – expressing sorrow; mournful.

<sup>78</sup> **charity** – love.

<sup>79</sup> **complacency** – the state of being pleased or satisfied with a person.

<sup>80</sup> **displacency** – the state of being displeased or dissatisfied with a person.

benevolence,<sup>81</sup> yet cannot love them with a love of complacency. Thus, excommunicated persons are cut off from the charity of the church.

**2. They are cut off also from the *society* that Christians have together as brethren.** Thus, we are commanded to *withdraw* from such (2Th 3:6). To *avoid* them (Rom 16:17). To *have no company* with them (2Th 3:14). And to *treat them as heathens and publicans* (Mat 18:17). The people of God are, as much as may be, to withdraw from them as to that common society that is proper to subsist among Christians. Not that they should avoid speaking to them on any occasion—all manner and all degrees of society are not forbidden, but all unnecessary society or such as is wont<sup>82</sup> to be among those who delight in the company of each other. We should not associate ourselves with them [in order] to make them our companions. Yea, there ought to be such an avoiding of their company as may show great dislike.

Particularly, we are forbidden such a degree of associating ourselves with them as there is in making them *our guests* at our tables or in being *their guests* at their tables. [This] is manifest in the text, where we are commanded to have no company with them, *no not to eat*. That this respects not eating with them at the Lord's Supper, but a common eating, is evident by the words. The eating here forbidden is one of the *lowest degrees* of keeping company, which are forbidden. "Keep no company with such an one," saith the apostle, "*no not to eat*." [This is] as much as to say, "No, not in so low a degree as to eat with him"...Saith he, "If any man that is called a *brother* be a fornicator...With *such* an one keep no company, *no not to eat*." This makes it most apparent that the apostle doth not mean eating at the Lord's Table...Here naturally arise two questions:

**QUESTION 1.** How far is the church to treat excommunicated persons as they would those who never have been of the visible church? I answer, they are to treat them as heathens, excepting in these two things, in which there is a difference to be observed.

**1. They are to have a greater concern for their welfare still, than if they never had been brethren, and therefore ought to take more pains by admonitions and otherwise to reclaim and save them, than they are obliged to take towards those who have been always heathens.** This seems manifest by that of the apostle: "And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother" (2Th 3:14-15). The consideration that he hath been a brother heretofore and that we have not finally cast him off from that relation, but that we are still hoping and using means for his recovery, obliges us to concern ourselves more for the good of his soul than for those with whom we never had any such connection. [Because of this, we] pray for him and take pains by admonishing him. The very reason of the thing shows the same. For this very ordinance of excommunication is used for this end, that we may thereby obtain the good of the person excommunicated. Surely, we should be more concerned for the good of those who have been our brethren and who are now under the operation of means used by us for their good, than for those with whom we never had any special connection...

**2. On the other hand, as to what relates to the love of complacency, they ought to be treated with greater displacency and disrespect than the heathen.** This is plain by the text and context. For the apostle plainly doth not require of us to avoid the company of the heathen or the fornicators of the world, but expressly requires us to avoid the company of any brother who shall be guilty of any of the vices pointed out in the text or any other like them.

This is also plain by the reason of the thing. For those who have once been visible Christians and have apostatized<sup>83</sup> and cast off that visibility, deserve to be treated with more abhorrence than those who have never made any pretensions to Christianity. The sin of such, in apostatizing from their profession, is more aggravated than the sin of those who never made any profession...

**QUESTION 2.** What kindness and respect may and ought to be shown to such persons? I answer, There are some things by which the members of the church are obliged to show kindness to them. These things are chiefly, to *pray* for them and to *admonish* them. The common duties and offices of humanity ought to be

<sup>81</sup> **benevolence** – goodwill.

<sup>82</sup> **wont** – customary.

<sup>83</sup> See FGB 205, *Apostasy*, available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

performed towards them: relieving them when they are sick or under any other distress; allowing them those benefits of human society and that help, which are needful for the support and defense of their lives and property. The duties of natural and civil relations are still to be performed towards them. Excommunication doth not release children from the obligation of duty to their parents nor parents from parental affection and care toward their children. Nor are husbands and wives released from the duties proper to their relation. And so [it is] of all other less relations, whether natural, domestic, or civil.

**3. They are cut off from the *fellowship* of the Christian church.** The true notion of the *visible church* of Christ is that part of mankind, which, as His people, is united in upholding His appointed worship. The notion of a *particular* visible church of Christ is a particular society of worshippers or of visible saints, united for the social worship of God according to His institutions or ordinances. One great and main privilege then, which the members of such a church enjoy, is fellowship in the worship that God hath appointed in His church. But they that are excommunicated are cut off from this privilege: they have no fellowship, no communion with the people of God in any part of their worship.

He who is the mouth of the worshipping congregation in offering up public prayers is the mouth only of the worshipping society; but the excommunicated are cast out of that society. The church may and ought to pray *for* such, but they cannot have fellowship *with* such in prayer...as was observed before, excommunicated persons are in this respect cast out of the charity of the church, and it looks upon them as wicked men and enemies of God, [treating] them as such.

So when a congregation of visible saints joins in singing the praises of God, as the psalmist says, “Let us exalt his name together” (Psa 34:3), they do it only as joining with those who are, in their charitable estimation, fellow-servants and fellow-worshippers of God. They do it not as joining with heathens; nor do the people of God say to the open enemies of God, remaining such, “Come, let us exalt his name together,” but they say it to their brethren in God’s service. If we ought not to *join* with excommunicated persons in familiar society, much less ought we to hold *fellowship* with them in solemn worship, though they may be present.

**4. There are privileges of a more *internal* nature, which those who are members of the visible church enjoy, from which excommunicated persons are cut off.** Being God’s covenant people, they are in the way of covenant-blessings and therefore have more encouragement to come to God by prayer for any mercy they need. The visible church is the people among whom God hath set His tabernacle and among whom He is wont to bestow His blessings. But the excommunicated are, in a sense, cast out of God’s sight into a land of banishment, as Cain was, though not debarred<sup>84</sup> from common means (Gen 4:14, 16)...Thus far, I have considered the *privative* part of the punishment of excommunication. I now proceed,

***Secondly*, to the *positive* part, which is expressed by being “delivered to Satan” in verse 5.** By which two things seem to be signified:

**1. A being delivered over to the *calamities* to which they are subject, who belong to the visible kingdom of the devil.** As they who are excommunicated are thrust out from among the visible people of God, so they are to be looked upon, in most respects at least, as being in the miserable, deplorable circumstances in which those are who are under the visible tyranny of the devil, as the heathens are. In many respects, they doubtless suffer the cruel tyranny of the devil in a manner agreeable to their condition, being cast out into his visible kingdom.

**2. It is reasonable to suppose that God is wont to make the devil the *instrument* of those peculiar, severe chastisements<sup>85</sup> that their apostasy deserves.** As they deserve more severe chastisement than the heathens and are delivered to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so we may well suppose either that God is [accustomed] to let Satan loose, sorely to molest them outwardly or inwardly by such severe means to destroy the flesh and to humble them, or that he suffers the devil to take possession of them dreadfully to harden them and so to destroy them forever. For although what men are to aim at is only the destruction of the flesh,

<sup>84</sup> debarred – excluded; shut out.

<sup>85</sup> chastisements – authoritative corrections of one who is in fault; corrective punishments.



yet whether it shall prove the destruction of the flesh or the eternal and more dreadful destruction of themselves is at God's sovereign disposal...I come to show *by whom* the punishment is to be inflicted:

1. **When it is regularly and duly inflicted, it is to be looked upon as done by *Christ Himself*.** That is imported<sup>86</sup> in the definition: it is *according to His will* and to the directions of His Word. Therefore, He is to be looked upon as *principal* in it, and we ought to esteem it as really and truly from Him, as if He were on earth personally inflicting it.

2. **As it is inflicted by men, it is only done *ministerially*.** They do not act of themselves in this, any more than in preaching the Word. When the Word is preached, it is the Word of Christ that is spoken, as the preacher speaks in the name of Christ as His ambassador. So when a church excommunicates a member, the church acts in the name of Christ and by His authority, not by its own. It is governed by His will, not by its own. Indeed, it is only a particular application of the Word of Christ. Therefore, it is promised that when it is duly done, it shall be confirmed in heaven, *i.e.*, Christ will confirm it by acknowledging it to be His own act. In His future providence, He will have regard to what is done thus as done by Himself: He will look on the person and treat him as cast out and delivered to Satan by Himself. If he repent not, [Christ] will forever reject him: "Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth, shall be bound in heaven" (Mat 18:18). "Whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained" (Joh 20:23).

From "The Nature and End of Excommunication" in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 2, 118-21, The Banner of Truth Trust, [www.banneroftruth.com](http://www.banneroftruth.com).

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**Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758):** American Congregational preacher; well known for his preaching in the Great Awakening along with George Whitefield; born in East Windsor, Connecticut Colony.



## OBJECTIONS TO DISCIPLINE

Daniel E. Wray

**W**HENEVER the Church attempts to be faithful to the biblical directions concerning discipline, a multitude of objections is sure to arise. John Calvin was well aware of this when he wrote in the sixteenth century, "But because some persons, in their hatred of discipline, recoil from its very name, let them understand this: if no society, indeed, no house which has even a small family, can be kept in proper condition without discipline, it is much more necessary in the church, whose condition should be as ordered as possible. Accordingly, as the saving doctrine of Christ is the soul of the church, so does discipline serve as its sinews, through which the members of the body hold together, each in its own place. Therefore, 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. For what will happen if each is allowed to do what he pleases? Yet that would happen, if to the preaching of doctrine there were not added private admonitions, corrections, and other aids of the sort that sustain doctrine and do not let it remain idle" (*Institutes*, Book IV, Chapter XII, Section I).

Many people mistakenly think that once a biblical teaching is established, they need only raise a few objections against it to overthrow it. This is not the case. The only objections that can overthrow a doctrine are those that overthrow the facts on which it is based. None of the following objections can do that.

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<sup>86</sup> imported – indicated.

Nevertheless, many Christians encounter genuine problems in the realm of church discipline. Therefore, as a help to the sincere questioner, we offer the following answers to some common objections and questions:

**OBJECTION: “The practice of church discipline could cause divisions.”** *Answer:* Yes, it could; but so could preaching the Bible consistently (*cf.* Luk 12:51-53)! The fact is that obedience to Christ and His Word is more important than an artificial “unity” built on disobedience and compromise. If discipline is carried on decently and in order, with the church acting through its duly appointed officers, divisions should be kept to a minimum.

**OBJECTION: “To discipline someone would be ‘judging’ them.”** *Answer:* If guilt is clearly established (as is essential), then the person has judged himself. As long as he refuses to repent, he continues to pronounce himself guilty. In discipline, the church does not *determine* a judgment, but only *pronounces* the judgment of Christ upon the person who insists on bearing his own guilt. Paul rebukes the Corinthians for failing to do this (1Co 5:1-2) and the Lord Jesus similarly rebukes the church in Thyatira (Rev 2:20). There is a great difference between the right act of judging of 1 Corinthians 5:3-4 and the wrong act of judging of Matthew 7:1-5.

**OBJECTION: “We are all sinners ourselves, so how can we condemn another?”** *Answer:* Yes, we are all sinners ourselves, sinning every day in thought, word, and deed. If we were persisting in open sin without repentance, remorse, or desire to change, we would be subjects for discipline also. Again, the point is that we ourselves condemn nobody. We only pronounce Christ’s judgment upon those who bring this censure upon themselves by persisting in sin without repenting. Such impenitence is inconsistent with a Christian profession of faith...

**OBJECTION: “Does not the phrase ‘against you’ (Mat 18:15) limit disciplinary procedures to be followed to the one who is sinned against?”** *Answer:* By no means, because

a. Every sin, if persisted in without repentance, is a sin first against Christ and then against His church, as well as against any specific individuals involved. Therefore, more is at stake than the feelings of the one currently sinned against (*cf.* Psa 51:4).

b. To limit Christ’s message in the way suggested would be to turn His teachings here into an absurdity. For if *only* the one sinned against is entitled to pursue discipline, then if persons outside the church are sinned against there is no recourse because a non-believer would not be allowed to pursue a disciplinary process within God’s church. Thus, whenever a brother sinned against his non-Christian neighbor, the church could do nothing about it, since no one within the church was sinned “against.” What a dishonor that would be to the church’s Lord!

c. If pastors and elders are to “rule” God’s Church (1Ti 3:5; 5:12; Heb 13:7, 17, 24), they must be entrusted with certain disciplinary powers. Ought a pastor to serve communion to a person who is known to be living in sin? Certainly not! But if the pastor has no right to proceed with discipline simply because he personally was not sinned against, then his hands are tied in such a way as to render him unable to fulfill his God-appointed responsibility to govern the church and guard the flock of God...If the angels of the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3 are pastors, as many think, then they are especially rebuked for failing to lead in the exercise of discipline.

d. The power of binding and loosing is given to the church (Mat 18:18), not to the individuals sinned against. The church must pronounce God’s judgment faithfully even though it hurts the feelings of the offender. The integrity and purity of God’s church demand it.

e. Comparing Matthew 18:15 with other Scriptures we find that in no other text is the right to exercise discipline limited to offended persons. Is the offended one mentioned in Romans 16:17, 1 Corinthians 5, or 2 Thessalonians 3:14?

f. Persons sinned against may or may not be mature Christians, and may or may not be leaders in the church. If they are not mature in Christ or adequately instructed in the Scriptures, they may (in keeping with the spirit of the age) fail to see the necessity of discipline. The integrity of the church in its obedience to

Christ must, in such cases, be maintained by those appointed to rule who ought to know the Scriptures and thus the value and necessity of discipline.

g. If we are to conclude that the one sinned against is the only one who can pursue the disciplinary process, then we would also have to conclude that this person would be under divine mandate to follow-through with discipline, since the instructions in Matthew 18:15-17 are in the form of a command and not of option.

**OBJECTION:** “Who is to decide how much time is to be allowed between each of the steps prescribed in Matthew 18:15-17?”

*Answer:* The obvious fact is that somebody *must* decide. Jesus gives no prescription as to how much time is to be allowed between each step. Hence, we must assume that those closely involved in the disciplinary process must trust the Spirit of Christ to lead them. However, to prevent extreme subjectivity, their chief criterion must be the presence or absence of *visible* progress, or *visible* responsiveness to admonition and rebuke. In other words, they must ask what visible effect the Word of God is having on the offender. Does he show signs of hardening or softening as God’s Word is applied to him? Church officers cannot make critical decisions based on what is not visible, therefore they must proceed beyond admonition and rebuke when these produce no visible results.

**OBJECTION:** “Why proceed with public censures if the offending member decides to pull out of the church in order to avoid them?”

*Answer:* a. A man should not be allowed to lessen the judgment against himself for his course of sin by committing another sin (i.e. leaving the church without proper cause and becoming a schismatic) to minimize the force of such a judgment.

b. The integrity of Christ’s Church must be maintained both against *internal* and *external* criticisms for winking at sin. To allow a quiet withdrawal can only be construed as “sweeping sin under the carpet.” This does not honor the Lord of the Church.

c. Discipline, according to biblical revelation, is necessary for the benefit of the offender because being followed by loving admonition and prayers of the whole congregation, it may lead him to repentance. Christ and the apostles clearly attribute an efficacy or power to the church acts of discipline (Mat 18:18; 1Co 5:4-5). The failure to administer discipline is equivalent to a tacit admission that there is no spiritual power or authority in the act, but simply a breaking of outward ties.

d. Excommunication forewarns of the future and final judgment of God upon the unrepentant person, a judgment that none can escape by quiet withdrawal. (This further serves to deter others from sin.)

e. To allow a quiet withdrawal would be to seek peace through compromise rather than obedience. This is a worthless type of peace.

f. A church has the duty to other Christian churches not to allow a person to leave its membership in apparently good standing when it is known that that person is living in sin. This might not have been a problem in first-century Corinth, but it is a very real one today. No Christian church has the right to forsake its responsibilities to other Christian churches. If another church, knowing that a certain person is under discipline, proceeds to receive that person into fellowship, their sin will be upon their own heads. On the other hand, if one church allows an unrepentant sinner to withdraw quietly, and then that person joins another church, the first church (which failed to discipline) is responsible for allowing the corruption of another church, when it might have been prevented by the proper action of the first church...

Love “beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things” (1Co 13:7). Where discipline is undertaken in love, restoration will follow in like manner.



## KEEPING CHRIST'S CHURCH PURE

Charles H. Spurgeon (1834-1892)

*“Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: Therefore let us keep the feast...with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.”—1 Corinthians 5:6-8*

**T**HE very least degree of sin is obnoxious to God. We cannot [express] how much God hates sin. With the entire intensity of His infinite nature, He loathes it! He cannot look upon iniquity: it is *detestable* to Him. The fire of His wrath will burn forever against it because sin is infinitely loathsome to His pure and holy nature. He calls it *leaven*, then, because of its sourness. Leaven is, moreover, the offspring of a sort of corruption and tends towards further corruption. Sin is a corruption: it dissolves the very fabric of society. It dissolves the constitution of man. Wherever it gets into our nature, it puts it out of order, disjoins it, destroys its excellence, and poisons its purity. Leaven is also very *spreading*. No matter how great the measure of flour, the leaven will work its way. There is no saying, “Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further” (Job 38:11). A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump. Even thus it is with sin. When that leaven had place among angels, it brought a multitude of them down to hell. One woman sinned, and the whole human race was leavened by her fault. One sin drops into the nature, and it becomes entirely depraved, corrupt through and through, by the leavening influence.

**Now, according to the apostle, if the leaven of evil is permitted in a church, it will work its way through the whole of it.** In the Christian Church, a little false doctrine is sure to pave the way for greater departures from truth, so that no one can predict the end and result of the first false teaching. You cannot say, “I will be so far unorthodox.” You might as well break the dykes of Holland and bid the sea be moderate in its encroachments.<sup>87</sup> The doctrines of the gospel have such a close relation to one another that if you snap a link, you have broken the whole chain. We may say of the system of truth what is written concerning the Law: He that offendeth in one point is guilty of all (Jam 2:10). The renunciation of one truth almost necessarily leads to the giving up of another; and before a man is half-aware of it himself, he has let go the gospel. I greatly fear that the denial of the eternity of future punishment is but one wave of an incoming sea of [unbelief]. Deny the awful character of the desert of sin,<sup>88</sup> and the substitutionary work of Christ will soon follow. Indeed, we have living proofs of this at this day; and we shall see many more before long. The new teaching eats as doth a [cancer]. It speaks fair; but in its heart, there is a deadly enmity to the gospel itself. The sooner it is seen to be so, the better for the church of God.

**The leaven of evil living, too, is equally obnoxious in the church.** Tolerated in one, it will soon be excused in another; and a lower tone of thought with regard to sin will rule the church. The toleration of sin in the church soon leads to the excusing of it, to the free indulgence of it, and to the bringing in of other sins yet more foul. Sin is like the [bundle] of goods that came from the east to this city in the olden time, which brought the [plague] in it. Probably it was but a small [bundle], but it contained in it the deaths of hundreds of the inhabitants of London. In those days, one piece of rag carried the infection into a whole town. So, if you permit one sin or false doctrine in a church knowingly and wittingly, none can tell the extent to which that evil may ultimately go. The church, therefore, is to be purged of practical and doctrinal evil as diligently as possible. That sour and corrupting thing that God abhors must be purged out. It is to be the business of the Christian minister and of all his fellow helpers to keep the church free from it...Note well, we do not urge you to purge out sin in order that you may *save* yourselves: for Christ our Passover is slain, and our salvation

<sup>87</sup> **encroachments** – intrusions on a person's territory.

<sup>88</sup> **desert of sin** – punishment sin deserves.

is secured. But that being done in order that we may keep the feast and unbrokenly possess the joy of salvation, we are to purge out the leaven of sin...

If I know that I feed upon Christ day by day, Who has been sacrificed for me, the happiness I feel leads me to say, "Yet it was dearly purchased; my sins slew my Savior, and therefore will I slay my sins." Every taste you get of redeeming love makes you feel that sin is a cruel and detestable thing, and therefore you will destroy it... "Has Christ loved me and died for me? Then I am His; and if I am His, I cannot live in sin. If I am redeemed, how can I continue a slave? If I belong to Jesus, I cannot serve the devil. I must be rid of sin"...

How quiet doth the soul become when the man feels, "I have done that which was right, I have given up that which was evil." I grant you that the deep peace of the believer arises from the sprinkled blood, but it is enjoyed by purging out the leaven. You question yourself and say, "Can I believe in Christ if I am living in sin?" and you get back the comfortable sense that Jesus is yours when you can honestly feel that you by the Holy Spirit have renounced your old sins. Purging out the leaven clears your evidences, and so enables you to keep the feast (1Co 5:8). You were safe enough through the blood, but now you find happiness in a sense of security, a happiness that would have been taken from you had you fallen into sin. My brethren, how can we expect to enjoy communion with Jesus Christ while we indulge in sin? ...My dear brother, if you do not walk in the light as Christ is in the light, it is not because He is not willing that you should walk in His light, it is because you keep at a distance from Him, and so walk in darkness.

**Jesus will not commune with neglecters of His will.** Jesus will have no leaven where He is. If you tolerate that which is nauseous to Him, expect not a comfortable word from Him. If you walk contrary to Him, He will walk contrary to you. "Can two walk together, except they be agreed?" (Amo 3:3). I would with much affection press these considerations upon you, for I have pressed them upon my own heart. I fear we shall not enjoy the blessing we have had as a church *unless there is more jealousy for holiness among us*. I am afraid some of us are barren of spiritual usefulness because we do not watch against sin. O keep your conscience tender! Beware of getting it seared. It is like the pond in the winter: a very thin scale of ice is formed at first, but afterwards the whole surface becomes hard enough to bear half a town. Beware of the thin scale over your conscience. Keep your heart tender before God, ready to be moved by the faintest breath of His Spirit. Ask to be like sensitive plants that you may shrivel up at the touch of sin and only open out in the presence of your Lord and Master. God grant it to you. God grant it for Jesus' sake.

From a sermon delivered on Lord's Day morning, December 11, 1870,  
at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington.

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**Charles H. Spurgeon (1834-1892):** Influential English Baptist preacher; history's most widely read preacher (apart from those found in Scripture); born at Kelvedon, Essex, England.



It has been remarked that when discipline leaves a church,  
Christ goes with it.—*J. L. Dagg*

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.—*R. Albert Mohler, Jr.*

The Lord Jesus is the Head of the Church, which is composed of all His true disciples,  
and in Him is invested supremely all power for its government. According to His  
commandment, Christians are to associate themselves into particular societies  
or churches; and to each of these churches He hath given needful authority  
for administering that order, discipline, and worship which  
He hath appointed.—*James Petigru Boyce*

The third mark of the Church, and the one I am most anxious to emphasize because it is so sadly neglected, is the  
exercise of discipline... There is no doubt at all but that this doctrine is grievously neglected. Indeed, if I were  
asked to explain why it is that things are as they are in the Church; if I were asked to explain why statistics  
show the dwindling numbers, the lack of power, and the lack of influence upon men and women... if I  
were asked to explain why it is that the Church is in such a perilous condition, I should have to say  
that the ultimate cause is the failure to exercise discipline.—*David Martyn Lloyd-Jones*

It is impossible to deny... that church discipline is according to the mind of  
Christ; and when wisely exercised, [it] is calculated to promote a  
church's health and well-being.—*J. C. Ryle*