

# Biblical Church Discipline<sup>1</sup>

Mark Dever

**Mark Dever** is pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. A graduate of Cambridge University, Cambridge, England, he is the author of *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* and a recent book on Richard Sibbes. He is a contributing editor to *The Founders Journal*.

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

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

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

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

ourselves for and what we pray about.

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

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

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

## Is All Discipline Negative?

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

imagination.

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

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

### **What Is Church Discipline?**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### What Does the Bible Say about Church Discipline?

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

#### *Hebrews 12:1-14*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### ***Matthew 18:15-17***

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

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that "every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

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

### ***1 Corinthians 5:1-11***

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

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

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

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

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

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

### ***Galatians 6:1***

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

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

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

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

## **2 Thessalonians 3:6-15**

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

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

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

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

an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

## **1 Timothy 1:20**

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

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

## **1 Timothy 5:19-20**

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

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

## **Titus 3:9-11**

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

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

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

as a church should exercise discipline.

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

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

### **How Have Christians in the Past Handled Church Discipline?**

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

The abuse of discipline is reprehensible and destructive, but not more than the abandonment of discipline. Two generations ago the churches were applying discipline in a vindictive and arbitrary fashion that justly brought it into disrepute; today the pendulum has swung to the other

extreme—discipline is almost wholly neglected. It is time for a new generation of pastors to restore this important function of the church to its rightful significance and place in church life.<sup>11</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

As Wills explains further,

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

had grown weary of holding one another accountable.<sup>15</sup>

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

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

All evangelical Christians in the past tended to practice biblical church discipline. In fact, in 1561, Reformed Christians expressed their understanding of these matters in the words of the Belgic Confession:

The marks by which the true Church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if she maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as



instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin; in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church. Hereby the true Church may certainly be known, from which no man has a right to separate himself.<sup>16</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For any outward violations of the moral law.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

At the same meeting, a second disci-

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

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

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

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

### **Why Practice Church Discipline?**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### ***1. For the Good of the Person Disciplined***

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

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

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

### ***3. For the Health of the Church as a Whole***

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1 Cor 6:9-11).

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

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

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

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

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

### **So What If We Don't Practice Church Discipline?**

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **ENDNOTES**

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

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

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

<sup>4</sup>Daniel E. Wray, *Biblical Church Discipline* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1978).

<sup>5</sup>Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>6</sup>John L. Dagg, *Manual of Church Order* (Harrisonburg, VA: Gano, 1982).

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

<sup>8</sup>Jay E. Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986).

<sup>9</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993).

<sup>10</sup>All Scripture quotations are from the NIV.

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

<sup>12</sup>Wills, 32.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 9.

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

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

<sup>18</sup>Wills, 33.

<sup>19</sup>Dagg, 274.