

# A Disciplined Church

If you're anything like me, you have high hopes at New Years. You intend to replace old ways of lazing around and eating junk food with stricter discipline. You commit to exercise; you commit to diet. And the only negative connotation to this intended self-discipline is the pain of muscle tissue tearing (a necessity so it can regrow stronger) and the resulting sadness from lack of fats and sweets (allowing more room for healthful food).

So why does *church discipline* <sup>Primarily only have carry only</sup> carry a negative connotation in our minds?

Perhaps it is because we only discuss it in contexts related to sin. ~~Perhaps it is because we haven't looked closely enough at the relevant texts (Matthew 18:15-17, 1 Corinthians 5:9-13; 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15; Titus 3:9-11). Perhaps it is because we sit under controlling church leadership.~~ Perhaps it is because there is a disconnect between our spiritual <sup>lives</sup> life and other areas of our <sup>lives</sup> life. Perhaps it is because we aren't as passionate to fulfill the Great Commission as we claim with our lips.

~~You see, the reality is that we must reframe our understanding of church discipline. It should not be understood as a negative, punitive trial, but rather as a positive, formative practice.<sup>1</sup>~~

*Before diving into reasons to ~~emphasize~~ reform our understanding of church discipline, let's look at the primary reason why we've kept our current understanding so long.*

<sup>so</sup> ~~Because~~ discussions of this topic often rely on Matthew 18:15-17 and 1 Corinthians 5:9-13, it makes sense that we naturally understand church discipline as a punishment. The brother isn't repenting of his sin: consequences! However, it is important to note that the term "church discipline" doesn't occur in either of those texts. In fact, throughout the whole New Testament the terms "church" and "discipline" never occur within thirty words of each other. <sup>check!</sup> The only reason why Matthew 18 has been called "church discipline" is because the word "church" shows

<sup>1</sup> See Don Cox, "The Forgotten Side of Church Discipline," *SBJT* 4, no. 4 (2000): 44-58.

up in verse 17 and we've <sup>mis-</sup>understood the next clause ("let him be like an unbeliever and a tax collector to you") as a punishment. Matthew 18:15-17 is actually a practical outworking of the parable of the lost sheep in Matthew 18:12-14. "The son of man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10; cf. Matthew 18:11); he didn't come to leave the lost in their lostness. Even Paul's seemingly harsh treatment of the man in 1 Corinthians 5 should be balanced by the love, grace, and forgiveness he shows him in 2 Corinthians 2:5-11.

~~The church has tarnished its witness in the world. Church discipline—as it is popularly understood—has done nothing to help the church's witness; if anything, it has contributed to the "Christianity is a judgmental, anti-fun religion" party line. And in the dark corners of the church where those excommunicated are also shunned and treated as unclean by their former friends and fellow church members, it makes sense why we're seeing a swelling number of exvangelicals and deconverting Christians. What can be done?~~

~~I propose reframing our understanding of church discipline. While there is a time and a place for the punitive side, the whole of the Christian life should be formative church discipline.<sup>2</sup>~~

As Jeremy Kimble helpfully explains:

While many churches enact these kinds of practices, it is often not referred to as formative church discipline, though this may help to give a particular mindset to the life of the church. This type of discipline is exercised in the Christian community as the members express genuine concern for each other and become dynamically involved with one another in deep interpersonal relationships, recognizing that God holds all accountable for their stewardship of life. Thus, the purpose of formative discipline is to enlighten, encourage, support, and sustain

<sup>2</sup> "While formative discipline is a crucial component of the disciplinary process, this book will focus on the corrective [read: punitive] aspect of church discipline, which deals with the direct confrontation of sin" (Jeremy M. Kimble, *40 Questions about Church Membership and Discipline*, ed. Benjamin L. Merkle, 40 Questions Series [Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2017], 35.).



one another in the discipline under which they live and in the fulfillment of their divine mission.<sup>3</sup>

There are ~~three~~ <sup>five</sup> reasons to consider reframing our understanding of church discipline as an entirely formative process.

*We must reframe our understanding of church discipline because there is a difference between consequences and discipline.* A passage that often comes to mind at this point is Hebrews 12:5-13 about the discipline of the Lord. But even here, discipline does not have to mean punishment. Are we to understand suffering (verse 7) as a result of our own sin? No! Suffering produces endurance (James 1:2-4; Romans 5:3-5). Hebrews 12:11-13 reminds one of training for a marathon, requiring much discipline which is likely not enjoyable at first. But discipline is not the same as punishment. A punishment is the consequences—whether natural or external—of failing to discipline.

*We must reframe our understanding of church discipline because we regularly discipline ourselves for things we want.* Thus, the first reason naturally blends into the second. The church should desire the things Jesus desires: holiness, love, and unity (cf. John 17). And because we are a unity—whether we want to admit it or not—when one believer suffers or sins, it affects all of us. The words of Clement of Rome to the Corinthians, in the generation following Paul's apostleship are instructive here: <sup>black quote</sup> "Every sedition and every schism was abominable to you. Ye mourned over the transgressions of your neighbours: ye judged their shortcomings to be your own" (1 Clement 2.6).<sup>4</sup> These words probably refer to the immoral man, and if so it is very telling how the church at Corinth received Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 5; it was less about

---

<sup>3</sup> Jeremy M. Kimble, *That His Spirit May Be Saved: Church Discipline as a Means to Repentance and Perseverance* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 7.

<sup>4</sup> J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, *The Apostolic Fathers* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1891), 58.

punishing the immoral man and more about recognizing their own failure in the matter. They had been acting like an undisciplined church (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:27; the context immediately prior is comparable to Hebrews 12:11-13). If our churches took the attitude that Clement describes the Corinthians as having, there would be less need for corrective church discipline, because we would all be pursuing the same goal together.

*We must reframe our understanding of church discipline because it helps us carry out the Great Commission.* There are probably several specific applications at this point, but I'd like to focus on one. How many of us were encouraged to ditch our nonbelieving friends upon turning to Christ? I know I was. Why though? Because they would drag us back into sin and (probably not explicitly stated) result in our facing church discipline. So what ended up happening? We join a church, build relationships therein, grow in our faith, and never see our old friends again. It's almost as though we'd rather they go to hell than risk falling back into old, sinful patterns. But the reframing of church discipline <sup>leads us to</sup> views the church <sup>members</sup> as partners and encouragers with <sup>us</sup> you in your pursuit of your former friends, thus uniting the Greatest Commandment and the Great Commission.

#### Conclusion

A final reason— and I'll close with this — to reframe our understanding of church discipline is because Jesus said "It is finished" (text?). He was separated from God in our place, crying out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (text?). Kicking people out of our churches for their sins sends a blasphemous message that Christ's sacrifice was not enough. We must lovingly pursue, not wash our hands like Pilate in excommunication. Do we follow our Good Shepherd?