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How Discipline Died

The church should stop taking its cues from the state.

by Marlin Jeschke | posted 07/22/2005 09:00 a.m.

The Protestant reformers named three "marks by which the true church is known": the preaching of the pure doctrine of the gospel, the pure administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline to correct faults. Today, church discipline is feared as the mark of a false church, bringing to mind images of witch trials, scarlet letters, public humiliations, and damning excommunications. Does discipline itself need correction and redemption in order to be readmitted into the body of Christ? We have asked several experts from different (and sometimes contrasting) professional and theological backgrounds to explain how church discipline fell into disrepair and how it can be revived, so that the true church can fully embody the pure doctrine of the gospel once again.

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Who killed church discipline? As in any good mystery story, fingers point everywhere.

It's tempting to finger the megachurch as the prime suspect, if only for its size. In such settings, it is hard to keep track of the membership rolls, let alone members' personal lives. Congregants from the 9:30 service rarely meet those who attend the 11:00 service, even if they may be committed to biblical mandates to help a fellow church member in spiritual or moral trouble. But how can one even tell a member? Many people attending these churches may be church hoppers or perennial visitors, considering themselves free-floating Christians without accountability—and they like it that way.

But so do those attending tiny congregations; the culprit is not size. Many Protestant churches, especially evangelical ones, have long disconnected salvation and church membership: a consequence of the enduring tradition of evangelism and revivalism centered in itinerants' parachurch organizations. The revivalist tradition has fostered the view that people might be members of a church without being saved. Despite the efforts of responsible evangelists from John Wesley to Billy Graham to engage converts with local congregations, converts accept salvation at some stadium and only secondarily get to a church, suggesting—contrary to the teaching of the New Testament—that salvation is separable from accountable membership in a congregation.

Parachurch-focused revivalism, however, is merely an accomplice. The real killer of church discipline today is none other than Emperor Constantine—or rather the long shadow of Constantinianism and its product, the state church. All of the major Protestant reformers kept the state-church arrangement and used the powers of the state to correct problems in the church, either deliberately or by default. Luther, for example, never instituted an order for church discipline, saying that if the state did its job of dealing with offenders, the church wouldn't need to. Calvin used the authority of the state to deal with both morals in Geneva and the doctrinal heresies of Michael Servetus.

This legacy is with us today in two forms, despite our formal separation of church and state. One is to continue to assume (or to hope?) that the criminal justice system will take care of many offenders, relieving the church of that responsibility. Of course, the state is most willing to accept this task, continually adding laws on all levels of society—federal, state, municipal, and county. Too often, however, the church tends to go along with the state's

valuation of what's important. Shoplifting must be prosecuted, but adultery is a nonissue for the state. Both are sins, but which may hurt society more in the end?

The other form of the state-church legacy is the church's copying of the state's pattern of dealing with offenders through legalistic machinery: filing charges, setting up courts, holding trials—in short, engaging in casuistry that obscures the spirit of the gospel.

When I was still teaching at Goshen College, the dean of students reported that some students disliked being called into his office to discuss the spiritual and moral significance of their infraction of some college rule—smoking or alcohol use on campus, for example. "Can't you just tell us what the penalty is for the first, second, and third violations?" they asked. They had internalized well our American society's mentality, so that when the office of student affairs wanted to deal with them in a Christian way, the way of achieving righteousness through grace, they preferred the way of the law.

Warning About 'Winning'

A sense of the importance of church discipline has a lot to do with the church's sense of separation from the world, something state-church Christianity lost sight of. Three generations ago, many evangelicals still possessed it (for instance, Christian colleges' old student pledge not to attend movies or dance). In conflict with liberals or "modernists," many evangelicals withdrew from mainline churches. Today, evangelicals (the new mainline) are passionate about "Christianizing" society through legislation and the judicial system. Constantine still rules.

The church's history of dealing with problem persons in legalistic fashion is responsible in large part, I believe, for the present distaste for the term *church discipline*. *Discipline* is still the watchword of high-school basketball or children's music lessons, but has become objectionable in the church lexicon. For that reason, I have resorted to the term *disciplining*. Evangelism and mission seek to make disciples of people, bringing them into Christ's way. But it doesn't make much sense to bring people into Christ's way in the first place if the church then fails to make every effort consistent with the gospel to bring back into Christ's way those who are straying from it.

In fact, every society on the face of the earth, past and present, has its codes of conduct, identifying behaviors it will not tolerate. The only questions are: first, who or what defines that code of conduct; and, second, how are violators of that code dealt with.

Modeling these decisions on societal mores and practices, rather than on the teaching of Scripture (especially that of the New Testament), leads rather ironically to both laxity and legalism. The church is a body of love, compassion, and honesty, preaching the power of God for salvation.

*Marlin Jeschke is professor emeritus of philosophy and religion at Goshen College. His book *Disciplining in the Church* (Herald Press) is the preeminent contemporary text on church discipline.*

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Shaping Holy Disciples

Mark Dever says church discipline is not about punishment or self-help.

Interview by Mark Galli | posted 07/25/2005 09:00 a.m.

The Protestant reformers named three "marks by which the true church is known": the preaching of the pure doctrine of the gospel, the pure administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline to correct faults. Today, church discipline is feared as the mark of a false church, bringing to mind images of witch trials, scarlet letters, public humiliations, and damning excommunications. Does discipline itself need correction and redemption in order to be readmitted into the body of Christ? We have asked several experts from different (and sometimes contrasting) professional and theological backgrounds to explain how church discipline fell into disrepair and how it can be revived, so that the true church can fully embody the pure doctrine of the gospel once again.

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Mark Dever is senior pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist in Washington D.C., where he has been intentional about deepening the meaning of church membership and thus church discipline. He is the author of *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Crossway). (For more on these topics see ninemarks.com.) Managing editor Mark Galli interviewed him.

What is church discipline?

When we talk about church discipline historically, we talk about formative church discipline and corrective church discipline. Formative discipline is all the teaching we do—the positive statements, the modeling, the instruction and sermons and Bible studies and books that we pass out.

Corrective church discipline is where we have to say, "Hey, Tom, I think you're wrong there." Or, "Sally, we need to switch groups because you're being destructive to that person." Or even finally, according to Jesus' teaching, "Mona, I know that you are claiming to be a Christian, but we've got to treat you like a non-Christian, because you won't stop lying. We love you, but you may not take the Lord's Supper because you're not following Jesus, as far as we can tell, and we beg you to repent."

You say in your book, "We need to be able to show that there's a difference between the church and the world." Some argue that the church is different not due to its holiness but because we accept each other's brokenness.

What's being said there could either be the essence of the gospel—in which case, I want to defend the gospel over against moralistic legalism. Or it could be an absolute dissolution of the church and its corporate witness. In that case, it's just an evil, evil thing to say. The fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5 doesn't mainly talk about accepting each other's brokenness. We have the challenging tasks of being clear about grace—and the implications of grace in our lives.

Some people think the word *discipline* is the problem. But why do people react against church discipline yet seek the spiritual disciplines?

Spiritual disciplines can seem like a human-potential wellness campaign, only expressed in spiritual terms. Church discipline sounds like excommunication, which sounds judgmental. Many want their antinomian liberty, their freedom to have a life that's not known by others. They don't want to be open and honest with others; they don't want people inquiring about their lives. It's not just our modern, affluent, individualistic American culture; it's the sinful

human heart. We desire to discipline ourselves only for those ends that we like. And we do not want other people to have that kind of authority in our lives.

So you don't think the problem is the individualistic or pluralistic nature of American culture?

I think everybody is pretty much just like Adam and Eve, whether you are black, rich, or from Thailand. In America, we've seen urbanization, the number of churches grow, a carnal increase of emphasis on numbers, budgetary demands like the need to continue to service the pipe organ or the number of staff or programs—all of this makes for naturally difficult soil for discipline. But in East Asian cultures, you find the concern about loss of face, which seems to be very helpful for church discipline. But even that has its own set of problems for a biblical, godly practice of church discipline. So you're not going to find a fallen culture that's going to be real friendly to following Christ.

What is the difference between biblical church discipline and voluntary accountability, like what many people practice in a twelve-step group or Weight Watchers?

Accountability is one aspect of church discipline. Church discipline is both formative and corrective, and it gives testimony to the authority of God and to our humility. It's a lot more than two 19-year-olds trying to make sure they don't view pornography.

In those rare cases when an active member must be expelled, why does it usually hinge on things like marital unfaithfulness? Aren't there other sins that are equally destructive that should be disciplined?

You have to consider what is provable, publicly demonstrable. You may deeply struggle with pride, which may be before God a far stronger issue. Your local church could help you deal with that. But other than a close friend pointing this out to you, there isn't something that can be brought before a church meeting.

In our church, non-attendance is the usual behavior that would get somebody excluded. You need something demonstrable.

When it comes to most sins, formative discipline is key. Hopefully we model holiness in our lives. Or we challenge people in little ways like, "Bob, I think you care too much which school you're getting into. What's going on with that?" Or, "Mary, why do you care so much what she is saying about you?" That kind of church discipline should be going on all of the time on all issues.

If a church wants to start taking church discipline seriously, what would you suggest?

My basic advice is not to do it—that is, do not do church discipline until your church membership is meaningful.

With most evangelical churches today, the membership is fairly meaningless. And it would be weird to have two deacons turn up on your front doorstep to confront you about adultery or gossip, because there's been no natural conversation about your spiritual life. Not only should we be talking about football and the weather after worship, but also about our own self-denial or lack thereof, our response to the Word just preached, the way we choked up at that older member's testimony, how we've cared for a distressed family, about our concern to evangelize Muslims in the area, and so on.

When it's natural to have serious conversations about real life with each other, that's when you can start practicing corrective discipline. And once you start doing these other things, once you see the culture of the congregation changed where it really is the shape of your discipleship and the center of your life, church discipline is as natural as can be.

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Spheres of Accountability

The dynamics of discipline in the megachurch.

by John Ortberg | posted 07/26/2005 09:00 a.m.

The Protestant reformers named three "marks by which the true church is known": the preaching of the pure doctrine of the gospel, the pure administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline to correct faults. Today, church discipline is feared as the mark of a false church, bringing to mind images of witch trials, scarlet letters, public humiliations, and damning excommunications. Does discipline itself need correction and redemption in order to be readmitted into the body of Christ? We have asked several experts from different (and sometimes contrasting) professional and theological backgrounds to explain how church discipline fell into disrepair and how it can be revived, so that the true church can fully embody the pure doctrine of the gospel once again.

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Maybe the most fundamental dynamic in church discipline is also the simplest: Sin happens. It happens in big churches, it happens in little churches. It probably happens at roughly the same per capita rate no matter what the congregation's size. It should sadden everyone, but it shouldn't shock anyone. So the question is not how to respond *if* it happens. The question is how to respond *when* it happens.

A second dynamic is also a constant across congregations regardless of size: In any biblically authentic community, sin is confronted, not ignored.

I believe churches try to cover up sin even more than people outside the church do, and larger churches are more prone to this temptation than smaller ones. Maybe it's because we are apt to confuse "bigger" with "more blessed," and mistakenly confer spiritual maturity. Maybe it's because we erroneously think that covering up sin in a highly visible ministry will protect the reputation of the gospel.

But God does not cover up the embarrassing misbehavior of his leaders. From Adam and Eve's sin to Noah's drunkenness to Abraham's lying to David's adultery and murder, the writers of Scripture are brutally honest. "Judgment," Peter says, "begins with the family of God." We ought to set the standard for coming clean. Ironically, when people see the church voluntarily coming clean, confessing sin, truly repenting, it *creates* credibility. And heightened visibility only increases this responsibility.

Correction and discipline are necessary for all believers, but in the large church we tend to give particular attention to church leaders because of their unique potential to seriously weaken the church's spiritual health and witness.

Restoring Trust

Facing sin honestly is about more than reputation. As Paul wrote to Timothy: "Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning" (1 Tim. 5:20).

At first glance, this verse looks daunting, especially for large churches. If every sin committed during the week by every member were rebuked at every service, it would create a new format: All rebuke, all the time.

But Paul's statement comes in a section on how to handle accusations of sin against elders. The principle seems to be that leaders who break trust can be restored only after an appropriately open response.

Sometimes it takes pain to get it right. I think of one large church where a powerful pastor had faced rumors of sexual misconduct for some time. Church elders never investigated—they didn't want to know. When the reality of the misconduct became inescapable, the pastor was allowed to announce his resignation without any real explanation. He got a standing ovation, and rumors circulated that he had been treated unfairly. The elders had to start over with themselves, the pastor, and the church. This time, an appropriate public explanation was given, the ex-pastor went through a denominationally supervised repentance/reconciliation process, and the end result was an exercise in redemption.

The general principle is that confessing and seeking forgiveness must extend to the community that has been directly damaged by the sin. If I sin against my wife, I need to confess to my wife. If that sin has damaged the small group I lead, I need to speak to them as well.

Make no mistake: For those who teach or lead, breaking trust with anyone (especially one's spouse) means breaking trust with all those who trust you. Such misbehavior, then, requires confession to all those we lead and teach. I had a chance to watch this principle lived out firsthand when I was on staff at Willow Creek Community Church. It wouldn't be appropriate to share specific stories, but I saw adventures in redemption from the small-group sphere, to the staff level, to congregation. They led to moments of sheer beauty.

This doesn't mean that everyone who violates a leadership position should return to their old position. Some experts in the field distinguish between wanderers (like David) whose fall was not premeditated, and predators (like Eli's sons) who may go through repentance and reconciliation but not re-installation.

Church discipline is really about the spiritual health of the whole body. In larger churches, people can start to think of it simply as scandal avoidance. But the lack of appropriate administration is really a failure of love and a compounding of sin: "Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt" (Lev. 19:17). Discipline does not merely protect the church from contamination: It builds and strengthens the bonds of love.

Another word for church discipline, then, is simply *accountability*. One of the best forms of this is ensuring that someone always knows where you are. While it sounds simple, I've noticed over the years that one of the first yellow flags for trouble is a staff member spending significant time off campus when no one knows where he or she is.

Larger churches can sometimes forget they are communities, not corporations. Therefore, church discipline is not an obstacle to the mission of the church; it is foundational to the mission. "The practice of discipline in the community of faith begins with friends who are close to each other," Bonhoeffer wrote. "Words of admonition and reproach must be risked."

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Keeping the Lawyers at Bay

How to correct members while staying out of court.

by Ken Sande | posted 07/27/2005 09:00 a.m.

The Protestant reformers named three "marks by which the true church is known": the preaching of the pure doctrine of the gospel, the pure administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline to correct faults. Today, church discipline is feared as the mark of a false church, bringing to mind images of witch trials, scarlet letters, public humiliations, and damning excommunications. Does discipline itself need correction and redemption in order to be readmitted into the body of Christ? We have asked several experts from different (and sometimes contrasting) professional and theological backgrounds to explain how church discipline fell into disrepair and how it can be revived, so that the true church can fully embody the pure doctrine of the gospel once again.

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Wolves love to prey on sheep. First Church learned this lesson the hard way. A respected member persuaded other members to invest thousands of dollars in a business venture. When the venture stalled and he refused to return their money, they complained to the pastor. The businessman rebuffed the pastor's inquiries, so the elders mentioned the possibility of church discipline. A threatening call from an attorney successfully intimidated them, however, so they simply asked the businessman to find a new church.

The wolf found a new flock to prey on, but he also continued to bilk other members of First Church out of thousands of additional dollars. When those investors later discovered that their leaders had known of the businessman's schemes and did nothing to warn them, *they* threatened to sue the church! The shepherds were discredited, the flock was ravaged, and the wolf continued to prowl.

Contrast this debacle with the outcome of a virtually identical situation involving another businessman at Second Church. (Both stories are true but disguised.) When the elders confronted him about misleading investors, he also wanted to duck the issue. But since the church had previously obtained "informed consent" from him and all its members to practice redemptive biblical discipline, the businessman did not even call an attorney. Nor did he cut and run to another church, because he knew that his membership covenant gave his pastor permission to contact any church he fled to and ask its leaders to address his behavior.

Unable to flee from discipline, he resentfully submitted to it. Eventually he softened under the loving admonishment of his elders, realizing that they were trying to free him from the grip of greed and deceitfulness. Three weeks later, he had returned all of the money to the investors. Since his conduct and the resulting gossip had affected many people, the businessman offered to make a public confession in a Sunday morning service. When he finished, one of the investors came forward and gave a heartfelt confession of her own sins of bitterness and gossip. The gospel wasn't just preached that Sunday; it was lived out before the entire congregation and several amazed visitors.

Church discipline can have major legal repercussions. The disciplined member may file suit against the church for defamation, invasion of privacy, and infliction of emotional distress.

Getting Your House in Order

That's why you should obtain "informed consent" from your congregation for your disciplinary practices. (This article is not intended to provide legal advice. Consult independent counsel familiar with biblical church discipline.) This requires that all members be fully informed of your disciplinary policies and agree to submit to those policies. This involves several key steps:

Provide your members with thorough preaching and teaching on the biblical basis and process for church discipline.

Revise your bylaws and membership guidelines so they explicitly set forth your church's commitment to carry out biblical church discipline. In particular, specify whether you will inform members of the problem, whether you will continue with the disciplinary process even if someone attempts to resign from the church, and whether you will contact another church to which someone flees and seek its assistance in promoting repentance and restoration.

Gain support for and consent to these revisions through a careful educational process, open discussions, and congregational meetings.

Ask all members to sign a written covenant that makes reference to your disciplinary commitments. Although a written agreement is not required, it makes proving informed consent easier, and gives you something to fax to a threatening attorney to show him that this is a case he probably can't win.

Refresh your congregation's understanding of and commitment to these policies on a regular basis through an annual "Reconciliation Sunday."

A church that has done its work both biblically and legally will not have to look over its shoulder fearfully as it seeks to restore wandering sheep. Instead, it will be able to minister confidently and boldly as it works to guard its people not only from predatory wolves, but also from the plague of division and divorce that so often cripples our witness for Christ.

Ken Sande is an attorney who serves as president of Peacemaker Ministries. Resources for the educational and risk management steps mentioned in this article are available in the Church PeacePack, available at Peacemaker.net after September 15.

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Healing the Body of Christ

Church discipline is as much about God as it is about erring believers.

by **David Neff** | posted 07/28/2005 09:00 a.m.

The Protestant reformers named three "marks by which the true church is known": the preaching of the pure doctrine of the gospel, the pure administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline to correct faults. Today, church discipline is feared as the mark of a false church, bringing to mind images of witch trials, scarlet letters, public humiliations, and damning excommunications. Does discipline itself need correction and redemption in order to be readmitted into the body of Christ? We have asked several

experts from different (and sometimes contrasting) professional and theological backgrounds to explain how church discipline fell into disrepair and how it can be revived, so that the true church can fully embody the pure doctrine of the gospel once again.

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All of the offerings in this special section presume one particular truth: that church discipline hinges on a high-demand understanding of what makes the church the church.

In *For the Glory of God*, Baylor sociologist of religion Rodney Stark discusses the dynamics of high-intensity religious movements. High-intensity religion is often created by reformations, he says, by attempts to restore religious belief and practice in existing organizations to a more demanding level. When such attempts fail, reformers are pushed out of the existing structures and create "high-intensity religious alternatives." That is what happened in the 16th-century magisterial and radical reformations, as well as in later movements such as Methodism, Puritanism, Quakerism, and the Salvation Army.

In economic terms, high-intensity religion demands a high price. But, Stark points out, people will pay a high price to obtain a product of high value. And high-demand evangelical religion indeed offers great value: transformed lives, support and motivation for moral reform, a deep sense of connection to a community of believers, intimacy with God, and ultimately, salvation.

Evangelicalism sprang to life in the ministries of John Wesley and George Whitefield. Methodism, in both its Wesleyan and Calvinistic forms, expected a reorientation of the affections from worldly pursuits to godly goals. Rigorous moral, financial, spiritual, and practical disciplines have long been part and parcel of evangelical religion.

But over the past few decades, evangelicalism's eagerness to reach the lost has taken a cue from a different economic model: discount retailing, where prices are low and the customer is king. In some corners, a radically abstracted doctrine of justification by faith has been used to marginalize any concern for renewed and reoriented lives. Dietrich Bonhoeffer called this "cheap grace."

In the beginning, things were not so. The religion of Yahweh was distinct from other religions of the ancient Near East because it emphasized the ethical imitation of its god: "Be holy, because I am holy" (Lev. 11:44, Cf. Lev. 19:2, 1 Pet. 1:15-16). The prophet Moses taught that choosing and living the right and good leads to health for individuals, families, and society. Choosing the wrong and corrupt leads to death. These themes run through the final chapters of Deuteronomy and come to a climax in 30:15ff: "See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. ... This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life..."

The followers of Jesus understood their calling in similar terms. They called their movement "The Way." And *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, one of the earliest and most highly esteemed Christian documents that almost made it into the New Testament (and written while some of the apostles were still alive), begins, "There are two ways, one of life and one of death, but a great difference between the two ways." The book goes on to exhort readers to love God and neighbor, forgive enemies, and avoid adultery, fornication, and idolatry.

Reconciling the Brother

This early ethical focus arose from the theological. God's saving action brought with it the

demand that our lives mirror his character. Church discipline was (and is) one of the key ways of manifesting the intersection of the horizontal and vertical dimensions of our faith.

The classic text for discussing church discipline is Matthew 18:15-20. Despite the way we often use the text, it is not about procedure. Jesus is teaching first about reconciliation between "brothers"—that is, fellow followers of Jesus. "If your brother sins against you," Jesus begins, "go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over." Reconciliation is the goal. The church gets involved only when the offending brother refuses to reconcile. And if that brother remains unrepentant, the church should "treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector."

Though the focus is on the horizontal, Matthew does not omit the vertical dimension. For Jesus concludes by saying, "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." God affirms the results of both failure and success in reconciliation. (*Heaven* was often used as a metonym for *God*.)

Likewise, when in the same chapter Jesus tells Peter to forgive "seventy times seven," seemingly without limit, he adds a warning in the form of a parable. He tells about a servant who begged his king to cancel his debts, but who then turned around and threw another man who owed him money into debtor's prison. "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you," Jesus said, "unless you forgive your brother from your heart." This is a matter of simple congruity: Receiving forgiveness from God requires giving forgiveness to brothers and sisters.

We see the vertical and the horizontal intersect in Romans 6, as well. Paul categorically rejects the idea that God's grace abounding unto sinners means that we may continue in sin. "By no means!" he exclaims. To continue in sin would be incongruous.

He writes in startling terms: "We have been buried with [Christ] by baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." He goes on to unpack these ideas: Our old selves were crucified so that we might be freed from our enslavement to sin and made alive to God, just as the resurrected Christ is alive to God. We no longer "present our members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity," but we "now present [our] members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification."

The Divine Family

All of this turns on the idea that we are "in Christ." We are made "alive to God *in Christ Jesus*." In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul teaches us to think of Christ as the second Adam, that is, the head of a new human race. And as reborn people, we belong to that new humanity of which Christ Jesus is the head.

So when we talk about the church, we are not talking about a voluntary society of people who share compatible religious views or similar religious experiences. We are instead talking about those who are *related* by (re)birth into a new family. We are talking about the body parts of Christ. Our relationships to each other (the horizontal) do not exist apart from our relationship with God in Christ (the vertical). Indeed, it is our vertical relationship with Christ that makes possible our horizontal relationships with each other. The vertical constitutes the horizontal.

Now we are ready to understand why alienation and sin in the church must be dealt with, why accountability is essential, why reconciliation is not optional. It is inconceivable that Christ should be at war with himself. Alienation between followers of Jesus is tantamount to

slicing open the body of Christ. Reconciliation between followers is the healing of that wound.

It is also inconceivable that Christ should sin. That is why Paul recommends that a flagrant sinner be separated from the church and handed over to Satan "so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord" (1 Cor. 5:5). Christ cannot ignore the sin or division in his body any more than you or I can ignore a growing, cancerous tumor.

Then again, reconciliation between followers or restoration of a sinner is as if a wound is healed, a cancer cured, and full health and vitality restored to the body, Christ's body.

High demand, indeed. High reward, especially.

David Neff is editor of Christianity Today.

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Our Uniquely Undisciplined Moment

Formal accountability has been a core part of church life from its earliest days.

by Thomas C. Oden | [posted 07/29/2005 09:30 a.m.](#)

The Protestant reformers named three "marks by which the true church is known": the preaching of the pure doctrine of the gospel, the pure administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline to correct faults. Today, church discipline is feared as the mark of a false church, bringing to mind images of witch trials, scarlet letters, public humiliations, and damning excommunications. Does discipline itself need correction and redemption in order to be readmitted into the body of Christ? We have asked several experts from different (and sometimes contrasting) professional and theological backgrounds to explain how church discipline fell into disrepair and how it can be revived, so that the true church can fully embody the pure doctrine of the gospel once again.

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Among American Catholics, the collapse of church discipline is symbolized by [empty confessionals](#) and [more than \\$1 billion](#) in settlements for clergy sexual abuses. Mainline liberal Protestants present the fool's gold standard of church discipline on every count: the hemorrhage in [church membership](#), the closure of churches, the dilution of doctrinal and moral integrity, the absence of confession in worship, hyper-optimistic ecumenical romanticism, the avid neglect of Scripture, and knee-jerk politics. American Episcopalians [maintain stubborn resistance](#) to warnings by the world Anglican Communion that they have [recklessly broken fellowship](#). American evangelicals also avoid church discipline as they acclimate to client-driven church strategies, desperately popular preaching, the health-and-wealth gospel, and the appetite to be really okay within modern culture.

Meanwhile, the attempts to revive church discipline are strewn with a long series of either ambiguous victories or utter defeats: the oft-ignored [Mandatum](#) on strengthening Catholic teaching in higher education, the epic struggle within the [Evangelical Theological Society](#) to resist openness theology, the thwarted efforts of the [Judicial Council of the United Methodist Church](#) to enforce the discipline on sexuality and doctrinal issues, and the basket case of the [United Church of Canada](#). Like grade inflation in academia, the lowering of standards for the Christian life seems to have invaded every level of the Christian aspiration to accommodate neatly to modernity. Just try to enforce church law and see what happens.

Whenever laity or clergy are disciplined, it seems to modern eyes, and especially to the secular press, like overbearing legalism, moral insensitivity, and exclusivism. If any constraints are put on reception of Communion, it appears undemocratic. When church trials have sought to call voluntary believers to accountability to their own voluntary decisions and commitments, the press paints a picture of social injustice. Any attempt at accountability, even for the worst abuses, looks to modernity like oppression. Believers understandably wonder: How can meaningful church discipline be recovered in a culture that prefers no accountability at all?

It's true that at times some have been oppressive in their exercise of church discipline, but we must recall that the historical norm for church discipline has held reasonably firm for 18 centuries, from Irenaeus to Athanasius to Augustine to Thomas Aquinas to the Reformers to the Evangelical Revival and finally up to the reckless phase of accommodation to modernity. Then it comes to a full stop. The last century has seen discipline grow increasingly relativistic, flabby, ambiguous, or altogether disappear. Only our contemporaries regard a precipitous drop of standards for baptism and Communion as acceptable and inevitable—maybe even normative and healthy.

Now we delight in our supposed freedom to baptize without catechizing, and to receive communicants without repentance. If it sounds modern, it is. Such things were seldom heard before modernity among either Catholics or Protestants.

Historical examples

During a time of bloody persecution in 3rd-century Carthage, many believers were tempted to lapse into evasive acts of idolatry. Cyprian, their caring and courageous bishop, painstakingly and compassionately brought them back to a strong community of confession. He carried out this work even amid continued persecution by rigorous discipling and by allowing those who showed thorough evidences of sincere repentance that they were ready to re-enter the community of faith.

Cyprian set the bar assessing those evidences high. Those who wanted to return to the Christian community but spurned the grace that enables godly living were not cast away entirely from the pastoral care of the church. But neither were they allowed to return cheaply into full communion until evidencing a meaningful repentance with acts of reparation. Cyprian himself was willing to die for his faith, and later did.

Martin Luther, in guiding the 16th-century church back to the apostolic teaching of salvation by grace through faith active in love, was aware that the gospel of grace is so freeing that it might become an excuse for licentious behavior. Like Paul, he was ready to answer the question: "Shall we sin that grace may abound?"

Many of his time were ignorant of the meaning of their baptism. Under his reform, every Lutheran communicant was called upon to learn the deeper personal meaning of each of the Ten Commandments in the light of grace, to ask for the grace of repentance through the Lord's Prayer, and to understand each article of the Apostles' Creed as a summary of faith.

Among other significant models of historic church discipline, we see Ignatius nurturing the continuity of the apostolic witness, and Nicaea challenging Arius. The distortions of the Marcionites, Gnostics, and Montanists were carefully examined under the criteria of apostolic testimony. The lapsed were allowed to return, but only with repentance. Efforts to bring the Donatists back into full communion continued for centuries.

Later, Calvin worked tirelessly to tame both the Genevan church and society. Bunyan sought to keep Christian on the narrow path to the celestial city. Spener and Franke sought

to transcend conventional, nominal Christianity. Especially Richard Baxter provided Protestants with a rich and thoroughgoing model of lay and clergy church discipline.

We can challenge each of these examples as to its adverse effects, but the point is that Protestant discipline succeeded early patristic, monastic, and medieval forms of discipline with a grace-grounded discipline of faith active in love. The church did not exempt its own orders from the same discipline it taught to the baptized. This is what the church is doing when it is following the Lord's call to the disciplined life in a disciplined community.

John Wesley, in resisting the laxness and hyper-tolerance and relativism of his 18th century Anglican culture, provides a prototype. He tended his vineyard by carefully bringing together small intensive groups to study Scripture, pray, and seek mutual accountability. The only requirement for persons entering these small groups was sincere readiness for repentance—acknowledging how their own decisions had put them at a great distance from the holiness of God ("flee from the wrath to come," in 18th-century language). Grace-forming rules provided boundaries so that, if a participant persistently flaunted, he could not continue until demonstrating a readiness for repentance. Faith by grace was looking for practical means of better reflecting the holiness of God.

How to restore church discipline

Why did these time-tested Christian efforts succeed more fully in nurturing Christian accountability than recent failed attempts? The short answer is that we have neglected the powerful biblical teachings of confession, repentance, faith, and the holy life. The longer, practical answer requires more unpacking.

The American church must now relearn from the world church and the historic church the vitality of gentle admonition grounded in love. This requires restating clearly and grasping plausibly the basic purpose of church discipline:

- to lead each believer toward full participation in the benefits of life in Christ,
- to respond to the holiness of God,
- to warn neglectful communicants of the serious character and eternal consequences of sin,
- to restore to full fellowship believers who may have fallen or are tempted to fall into sinful actions harmful to others, and
- to embody so far as possible the integrity of the church.

The goal of the Christian life is to be reshaped daily by God's own incarnate love, to reflect the image of Christ in actual behavior. The Christian life noticeably differs from the life of the world. When the church understands that, the Spirit blesses it.

The reasonable restoration of discipline requires a renewed vision of the very purpose and mission of the church. Nothing important will happen without doctrinal renewal. As the young and immature Christian requires constant nurture and care, so does the lapsed church. As the delinquent desperately struggles to test set boundaries, so does the apostate or apostatizing church. The grateful believer already hungers for discipling toward righteousness, and deserves from church leadership that guidance. God witnesses to himself in creation and the human conscience, but these witnesses are not complete without

the revelation of God in Christ and the actual community that receives it. God's mission to the world is most fully made known in the Father's sending of the Son into the world to become its Savior and in the Son's sending the church into the world to spread the gospel, enabling works of love and justice, and seeking to bring into full maturity all who have received new birth in Christ.

The community life that preaches the Cross must itself be marked by the Cross. Those who fittingly proclaim the messianic servant seek to exemplify their proclamation in a life of holiness and love; otherwise their testimony loses credibility. The church may itself become the first obstacle to belief when it fails to show forth the gospel in actual behavior—when it lacks works of love, clear identity, or moral integrity. God calls the faithful to act in a manner worthy of the gospel, and even to adorn it, enhancing its beauty by their grace-enabled choice to live the holy life insofar as possible. They know that their message rings true only if they can embody the love and forgiveness they talk about. The risen Lord becomes more recognizable to others insofar as the new creature in faith shows some plausible evidences of having died to selfish ambition, dishonesty, and covetousness, and of walking on the way toward a life of integrity and generosity.

The people of God are called simply to be God's redeemed community, to worship the true God who has made himself known in history, to reverence him in confession, prayer, and praise, to proclaim the gospel of God's redemptive love to the ends of the earth by word and deed, to care for all of God's creatures, actively seeking the good of each one, especially the poor and needy. Yet the church remains keenly aware that it continues to fall short and so needs to pray daily for grace. God intends the church to be a lively sign of his governance in the actual world. It lives to provide a convincing indication of what human community looks like when it comes under God's rule of righteousness, justice, and peace.

No serious readers of Scripture can pretend not to know that those redeemed by God have profound obligations. They are called by grace to make apparent the grace that saved them. They look to reshape their behavior in whatever ways their faith enables and requires. Similarly, the worshiping community is called to make evident the presence of Christ in the fallen world. Christians live under the promise that the Holy Spirit will assist them in this, indwell in them, and equip them to embrace new life in Christ. The Spirit enables the people of God to refract the holy life in worship, witness, prayer, discipleship, and acts of compassion and justice.

Today the church suffers from the neglect of biblically grounded discipline on one hand, and an excess of undisciplined narcissistic license on the other. It is sick from pursuing a pretended absolute religiosity instead of living out the biblical understanding of a true humanity released from bondage to sin and being renewed by the Holy Spirit. The corrective love found in living Christian communities seeks to grasp by faith the full measure of Christ's sanctifying work, grounded in unmerited forgiveness, offering personal freedom from the guilt and power of sin, and newness of life through the outpouring of his Spirit. This is how church discipline will be gradually recovered. And it is happening. It will take time, but the Spirit has plenty of time.

The recovery of church discipline will not happen without prayer, grace, and obedience to the Word. God expects every believer to live a life responsive to grace, in which every area of one's life comes under the lordship of Jesus Christ and the fruit of the Spirit becomes increasingly evident.

Never is the social process so far gone that it is beyond the grace of repentance. Even today, with the gross loss of discipline, the Spirit is at work to turn around church discipline. Disciplinary procedures long established through hard-won Christian experience can be

taken seriously once again. The path to baptism can be set forth with the rigor it deserves. The Communion table can be a place of celebration of life in Christ rather than merely life in an egalitarian community of toleration. The ordained leaders who promise to draw the church toward the truth must be willing to submit themselves to the power of apostolic teaching.

The disciplined community is once again being born. It is being taught by God the Father that his Word and Spirit are at work to give birth to and nurture the one holy catholic and apostolic church. Broken people from broken families and political orders all over the world are being called into fellowship with Christ. The Spirit is guiding and preserving through time that redeemed humanity, which is being formed in every culture and is spiritually at one with the unnamed faithful people of God in all ages.

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The Evangelical Scandal

Ron Sider says the movement is riddled with hypocrisy, and that it's time for serious change.

Interview by Stan Guthrie | posted 04/13/2005 09:00 a.m.

Ron Sider has been a burr in the ethical saddle of the evangelical world for decades. His 1977 book, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, took fellow believers to task for materialism in the face of desperate global needs. Sider, who is professor of theology, holistic ministry, and public policy at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, has just released a new jeremiad: *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience* (Baker Books, 2005). In it, Sider plays off Mark Noll's critique of American evangelicalism's anti-intellectualism in *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. Sider says the current crisis encompasses both mind and heart. Stan Guthrie, *Christianity Today's* senior associate news editor, interviewed Sider.

What troubles you the most about evangelicals today?

The heart of the matter is the scandalous failure to live what we preach. The tragedy is that poll after poll by Gallup and Barna show that evangelicals live just like the world. Contrast that with what the New Testament says about what happens when people come to living faith in Christ. There's supposed to be radical transformation in the power of the Holy Spirit. The disconnect between our biblical beliefs and our practice is just, I think, heart-rending.

I'm a deeply committed evangelical. I've been committed to evangelical beliefs and to renewing the evangelical church all of my life. And the stats just break my heart. They make me weep. And somehow we must face that reality and change it.

You have often spoken about evangelical failures in society, for example, in *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*. This latest critique covers not only social justice issues but also issues of personal morality. Was that intentional?

I've always been concerned with a whole range of biblical things. My commitment is to be biblically faithful, not to pick out one issue. But a good bit of my writing has dealt with the social issues that have called evangelicals to be more engaged, for example, with questions of poverty here and abroad. But you're right. This book is talking about a range of things that we evangelicals all agree are biblical demands.

Evangelical Christians and born-again Christians get divorced just as often, if not a little more, than the general population. And Barna has discovered that 90 percent of the born-again Christians who are divorced got divorced after they accepted Christ. On sexual promiscuity, we're probably doing a little better than the general population. Josh McDowell has estimated that maybe our evangelical youth are 10 percent better, Lord help us.

So at least it's a measurable difference.

Well it is measurable, although there's not so much hard [data] on that question as with some of the others. John Green, one of the best evangelical pollsters, says that about a third of all evangelicals say that premarital sex is okay. And about 15 percent say that adultery is okay.

Take the issue of racism. A Gallup study discovered that when they asked the question, "Do you object if a black neighbor moves in next door?" the least prejudiced were Catholics and non-evangelicals. The next group, in terms of prejudice, was mainline Protestants. Evangelicals and Southern Baptists were the worst.

Several studies find that physical and sexual abuse in theologically conservative homes is about the same as elsewhere. A large study of the Christian Reformed Church, a member of the nae, discovered that the frequency of physical and sexual abuse in this evangelical denomination was about the same as in the general population. One recent study, though, suggests that evangelical men who attend church regularly are less likely than the general population to commit domestic violence.

Materialism continues to be an incredible scandal. The average church member [from across the denominations] today gives about 2.6 percent of his or her income—a quarter of a tithe—to the church. Evangelicals used to be quite a lot better [in giving] than mainline denominations. But their giving has declined every year for several decades, and they're now getting very close to the norm. The average evangelical giving is about 4.2 percent—about two-fifths of a tithe.

Six percent of the "born-again" people tithe; nine percent of evangelicals do. Our income has gone up fabulously over the last 30-plus years. The average household income now in the U.S. is \$42,000-plus. If the average American Christian tithed, we'd have another \$143 billion.

In an era in which people holding to traditional values appear to be returning to center stage in politics, your book says that all is not well with our day-to-day choices in the private realm. In effect, you're accusing evangelicals of hypocrisy. Is that a fair conclusion?

I'm not doing that gladly. I'm doing that with tears in my eyes. We have to face the reality. It strikes me as being incredibly tragic and, yes, hypocritical for the evidence to show that precisely at a time when evangelicals have more political power to raise the issue of moral values in this society than they've had in a long time, the hard statistics on their own living show that they don't live what they're talking about. And sure, I'm afraid that's hypocrisy. So we have to set our own house in order before we're going to have either any integrity or any effectiveness in terms of helping the larger society recover wholesome two-parent families.

Has there ever been a time when the typical church has lived out the faith much better than now? Some might argue that this is just the nature of a sinful church before the Second Coming.

We don't have polling data from the 1860s or the 1700s, so it's hard to answer that question with precision. But as we look back over church history, we see that there has

been ebb and flow, and that at times the church was especially unfaithful and full of disobedience and hypocrisy. At other times there was powerful renewal, and large groups of Christians were wonderfully transformed. There are stories from the Welsh Revival in which the prisons were essentially empty and not too many people went to pubs because there had been a radical transformation of large numbers of people.

To what historical era would you compare our own time?

If the question is evangelical obedience, then we're certainly not in a time of revival.

How do we turn the ship around?

We need to rethink our theology. We need to ask, "Are we really biblical?" Cheap grace is right at the core of the problem. Cheap grace results when we reduce the gospel to forgiveness of sins only; when we limit salvation to personal fire insurance against hell; when we misunderstand persons as primarily souls; when we at best grasp only half of what the Bible says about sin; when we embrace the individualism and materialism and relativism of our current culture. We also lack a biblical understanding and practice of the church.

I would think that evangelicals would want to get biblical and define the gospel the way Jesus did—which is that it's the Good News of the kingdom. Then we see that it means that the way to get into this kingdom is through unconditional grace because Jesus died for us. But it also means there's now a new kingdom community of Jesus' disciples, and that embracing Jesus means not just getting fire insurance so that one doesn't go to hell, but it means embracing Jesus as Lord as well as Savior. And it means beginning to live as a part of his new community where everything is being transformed.

You're pinning at least a good chunk of the blame on American individualism.

There's no question that that's at the core of it. We tend to reduce salvation to just forgiveness of sins. And in the New Testament, salvation means that, thank God, but it also means the new transformed life that's possible in the power of the Spirit. And it means the new communal existence of the body of believers.

One of my favorite examples is the story of Zacchaeus. He is involved in social sin as a wicked tax collector. When he comes to Jesus, he gives away half his goods and pays back everything that he's taken wrongly. Jesus says at the end of the story, "Today salvation has come to this house." There's not a word in the text about forgiveness of sins. Now, I'm sure Jesus forgave the rascal's sins; he clearly needed it. But what the text talks about is the new transformed economic relationships that happen when Zacchaeus comes to Jesus.

Salvation is a lot more than just a new right relationship with God through forgiveness of sins. It's a new, transformed lifestyle that you can see visible in the body of believers.

Obviously to be a disciple means there's discipline. Do you see the neglect of church discipline in our day as a factor in this moral crisis?

It's part of the larger question of recovering the New Testament understanding of the church. This culture is radically individualistic and relativistic. Whatever feels right for me *is* right for me; whatever feels right to you *is* right for you. That's the dominant value. It's considered outrageous for somebody to say somebody else is wrong.

But historic biblical faith understood the church as a new community. The basic New Testament images of the church are of the body of Christ, the people of God, and the family of God. All these stress the fact that we're talking about a new community—a new, visible social order. That new community in the New Testament was living so differently from the world that people would say, "Wow, what's going on here?" Jews were accepting Gentiles. The rich were accepting the poor and sharing with the poor. Men were accepting women as

equals. It just astonished people because the church was so different from the world. It was countercultural.

Furthermore, [the New Testament church] understood that being a member of the body of Christ meant that you were accountable to each other. If one suffered, you all suffered. If one rejoiced, you all rejoiced. There was dramatic economic sharing in the New Testament, and there was church discipline. Jesus talked explicitly about church discipline in Matthew 18. Paul clearly had his churches live that out. All of the great traditions at the core of American evangelicalism, whether the Reformed tradition, the Wesleyan Methodist tradition, or the Anabaptist tradition, understood church discipline when they were strong and thriving. But very few evangelical churches these days have any serious appropriation and practice of church discipline.

Isn't that at least in part because church discipline has been abused or become legalistic and mean-spirited?

Sure, that's a part of it. But we don't give up on marriage just because a lot of people have messed it up so badly. And we shouldn't give up on church discipline just because we've so often done it in a legalistic way. We have to recover the New Testament understanding. John Wesley put it wonderfully when he said church discipline is watching over one another in love.

Today, when so many congregations are abandoning biblical truth, you say in the book that all congregations need to be connected to a denomination. Are you serious?

Absolutely. It's simply wrong for a local congregation to have no accountability to a larger body. Now I'm not saying it has to be one of the current denominations. There can be new structures of accountability. Any congregations that feel they must break away from older denominations that are no longer faithful theologically or in terms of moral practice should be a part of some new denominational, organizational structure so they're not isolated lone rangers. They need to have a larger structure of accountability. It is flatly unbiblical and heretical for an individual congregation to say, "We'll just be by ourselves and not be accountable to anybody."

What is the church doing right?

The small-group movement is a hopeful sign. One of the most important ways we develop mutual accountability in the local congregation is through small groups. It's almost impossible to follow Jesus either in [matters of] sex and marriage or in money and helping the poor by yourself. You need the strong support of brothers and sisters. While the whole congregation should be like that, we need small groups to struggle with the specifics and talk about our struggles and get encouragement and prayer support. I wish every person in all of our churches with more than 50 members were in a small group.

What other things are contemporary evangelicals doing well?

Over the last 30 years, we've made significant progress in understanding that the mission of the church is both to do evangelism and to do social ministry. There's also growing understanding that we can't have a one-issue agenda as we get involved in public life. The recent National Association of Evangelicals declaration, "For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility," explicitly rejects one-issue politics and says faithful evangelical political engagement will be based on a biblically balanced agenda. That means, yes, by all means, a concern with the sanctity of human life and with the renewal of the family. But it will also mean a concern for justice for the poor. It will mean concern for creation care, for human rights, and for peacemaking. We simply can't allow right-wing or left-wing politics to provide the political agenda.

What areas are you personally working on?

Over the years I've needed to continue to work at making sure that my personal spiritual life is solid in terms of time for prayer and devotions regularly. That continues to be an ongoing challenge. I really, passionately want every corner of my life to be submitted to Jesus Christ and biblical truth. Living that out in terms of my money continues to be a challenge. Nothing is easy. But if we make that our resolve and ask the Spirit to transform us, I think wonderful things can happen.

Are you hopeful about the matters that you've written about? Or are you ready to give up?

I'm personally, by nature, something of an optimist. That may not come through clearly in this book, but I think it's true. I'm genuinely enthusiastic by the renewal of the evangelical world in the last 50 years. It's been a tremendous movement of change and growth since Carl Henry wrote *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*. There has been fabulous growth of evangelical colleges and seminaries, evangelical scholarship, evangelical churches. I pointed to the way that we've grown, I think, in understanding the mission of the church as being both evangelism and social ministry.

We've grown certainly in the number of evangelical agencies working with the poor. Fifty years ago World Vision was a Korean orphan's choir. Now it's a huge agency, and there are dozens of other evangelical multi-million-dollar relief-and-development agencies.

On some days I'm discouraged, and other days I think, *Wow, the next few decades could be just fabulous*. But what I'm sure about is that we won't get close to the promise and the fulfillment of what's possible unless we face head-on the scandalous way that we're currently not living what we're preaching.

Is it going to be the end of the evangelical movement if we don't do something about these problems?

The Lord doesn't take hypocrisy and disobedience lightly. He punishes, and there's an inevitable kind of decline that sets in if you are hypocritical and don't practice what you preach. It won't happen instantly; our institutions are strong. But over a period of time it certainly will mean major decline.

I find it incredibly ironic that in the last few months, the importance of political life nurturing moral values and wholesome families and so on is center stage. And then you have this astonishing data that evangelicals live just like the world in terms of divorce. And it's incredibly ironic that one of the issues—and one I agree vigorously with—is concerned with how public life affects marriage. I'm in favor of the marriage amendment. But at precisely a point in time when our political rhetoric as evangelicals has focused on that, we have to face the fact that we're not any different from the world. And that's just incredible hypocrisy and it undercuts our message to the larger society in a terrible way.

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Taking Church Membership Seriously

Why it's time to raise the bar.

An interview with Ken Sande

Membership is not all that important at our church, about a third of respondents to a recent *Leadership Weekly* poll said. While 38 percent said attenders were frequently urged to join, and 34 percent said the membership appeal was occasionally given, the remainder said their church placed little or no emphasis on membership. That trend, according to many experts, is a mistake, the costly result of a casual, come-as-you-are attitude.

The church should be less like a cruise ship and more like a battleship, says Ken Sande of Peacemaker Ministries. Rather than emphasizing their casual atmosphere and fun activities, Sande says it's time for churches to raise the bar, to focus on a serious mission, and ensure that every person aboard serves a vital function. To make the shift, Sande says we must recapture the importance and meaning of church membership. If nothing else, emphasizing membership can protect the church from the growing threat of lawsuits.

Can you give an example of how deemphasizing membership can be perilous for a church?

I counseled a church where an attender used his relationships within the church to persuade people to invest over \$2 million with him. The money was never returned to the investors. The church leadership struggled to respond because the man was not a member. If they said something publicly and warned the congregation about his actions, they risked a lawsuit for slander and defamation of character.

The church leaders finally asked the man to leave, but said nothing to the congregation. As a result he continued to scam people in the church for another year. When the victimized members discovered that church leaders knew about the man's actions but failed to publicly warn the congregation, they in turn threatened to sue the church for failing to protect them.

Several courts have ruled that churches may not discipline people who have not specifically consented to discipline. In this case, church leaders could not publicly warn the congregation about the man's actions without threat of a lawsuit because he was not a member, and had not consented to discipline. By not emphasizing membership, the leaders were prevented from fulfilling one of their most important biblical tasks—protecting the flock.

Why are more churches no longer emphasizing the importance of membership?

First, we've given in to our culture's antagonism toward commitment and accountability. Like parents who are afraid to discipline their teenagers, church leaders are afraid they will be unpopular for emphasizing commitment and accountability.

Secondly, there is a concern that if we create a barrier at the front door to the church, not as many people will enter, and the pressure leaders feel to grow the church is enormous today. But what we don't realize is that by not emphasizing membership we may have a wide-open front door, but we also have a wide-open back door. Numerical growth is really not helped by deemphasizing membership.

Many see membership in the church as similar to membership in other community organizations. How do we help people see it differently?

It requires very good teaching, and we need to use the terminology found in the Bible rather than our culture. The Bible speaks of the church as a family, or the household of God. If we emphasize this family language it will help people see that church membership is not like joining a country club, it is about joining an organic family.

The concept of the Body is also very helpful. The church is called the Body of Christ in the New Testament, and you don't just casually amputate a thumb. In fact, if the thumb is hurting the whole body goes to its aid. This metaphor shows the commitment, the accountability, and the interdependence of the church. Church leaders need to draw these concepts from scripture and clearly teach them.

How can leaders ensure that they have protected the church legally through a membership process?

You must achieve what lawyers call "informed consent." If you can show your people know what your church's disciplinary practices are, and that they have consented to them, that is a virtually ironclad defense against lawsuits.

You can achieve informed consent in a few ways. First, maintaining an attendance for the membership class so you can prove who has received the teaching. Second, a higher level of proof is to have new members stand before the church and actually verbalize membership vows and commitments. A third level, which gives you the best protection, is a signed membership covenant.

What should be included in a membership covenant?

The covenant itself can be kept fairly simple. A statement as basic as, "I have received a copy of the church's policies of redemptive discipline, and I consent to be bound by them" is sufficient. The church needs to have their disciplinary policies outlined somewhere and accessible to members, but the covenant only needs to refer to this other document to secure informed consent.

Apart from securing legal protection, what else is vital to include in a membership process?

At my church we have a twelve-week membership course, and our first priority is making sure a person has a credible profession of faith and understands the gospel. We also cover the theology of the church, our polity, our vision, how we handle conflicts, and an understanding of church discipline. Finally, it is helpful to discuss expectations for members regarding giving, respecting leadership, and serving in the community.

The membership process will be different in every church, but it is important to treat it as a significant event. When we treat it casually it sends the message that membership is casual. We highlight membership by having a special service, a membership Sunday. It is a serious ceremony that communicates the importance of membership.

What about retrofitting? How do churches with loose membership expectations, or none at all, begin to change and achieve informed consent?

Retrofitting requires a process that may take one to three years of educating the church to think more biblically about membership. I recommend preaching from Deuteronomy where there is a restatement of the Law.

Our church did this. We said to the congregation, "Times have changed from years ago when you could have a loose relationship with the church. Our society and our laws have changed. It's time for us to renew and tighten up the covenant."

Our people were very responsive to that because we took the time to educate them. We held a congregational meeting where revised bylaws and policies were presented, along with new procedures for accountability and conflict resolution. We met in small groups to talk personally, and over several months there was a lot of dialogue. That culminated in a church meeting where the new policies and bylaws were accepted. At that time we handed out a new membership covenant to be signed.

The last thing we did, to make sure we had informed consent, was send out a letter to everyone who did not sign the covenant. It said, even though we have not received a written covenant from you, we will interpret your continued attendance at our church, beyond a specified date, as your affirmation and consent to these policies. We didn't have a single family leave the church.

An attorney and engineer, Ken Sande is founder of Peacemaker ministries, a mediation and counseling service for churches and couples. www.hispeace.org

Do you have a question for Ken? Write to us at Newsletter@LeadershipJournal.net.

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April 18, 2005

Church Discipline Really Works (pt. 1)

When you make it loving and redemptive.

An interview with Ken Sande of Peacemaker Ministries.

(Ed. note: Ken Sande says publicly disciplining sinful and wanton church members is good for the church, and it's good for the one disciplined. Then why do so few church practice discipline today? Here is the first part of our interview.)

How do churches need to think differently about church discipline?

The word "discipline" describes two aspects of church life. First there is formative discipline. This is the idea of bringing people to maturity in Christ the way a football coach disciplines his team through daily practices. This includes encouragement, practice, instruction, and showing them what is right and good. This is what a church does through its ministries.

The second category is corrective discipline. This occurs when someone swerves off the path. When a football player is not paying attention, when he is proud or defiant, the coach will make the player run laps. In the church when a brother or sister gets off track we use corrective discipline to restore and redeem them, to set them back on course.

How is this most effectively done?

Both formative and corrective discipline are best done on a personal level in relationship. A small group is an ideal place. Small groups can uncover problems before they get out of hand, and relationships built on love and respect can help a brother or sister remedy a situation early.

I have an example from early in my marriage. A friend took me out to lunch and gently confronted me about a joke I had told about my wife on Sunday. He was concerned that the joke hurt her. I promised to go home and ask my wife about it. When I did she broke into tears. I would probably still be telling that joke today if a brother had not lovingly confronted me with something he thought was hurting my marriage.

When we are in close relationships with others we can detect dangerous patterns earlier, and in a small group we have two or three others who can look into our lives. Only later, in higher levels of discipline, should the ecclesiastical order come into play.

What happens when a disciplinary issue involves more of the church? What should guide leaders?

Leaders need to understand the three motives for discipline. First, discipline is meant to restore someone caught in sin. Discipline should be a redemptive process not a punitive

process. Unfortunately most churches don't employ formal discipline until offenses are so terrible, relationships so shattered, and patterns so engrained, that the chances of restoring someone are very small.

Secondly, discipline is used to protect the rest of the body. One church I was helping had a deacon involved in some immoral behavior. Nothing was done, people looked the other way because they didn't want to be judgmental. Pretty soon another person was involved, and eventually the pastor was caught up in the sin. Sin is like a cancer. Many churches are like a doctor that waits too long to do surgery and the cancer continues to spread.

The third purpose of discipline is to guard the honor of God's name. When the church knows of sin, and does nothing about it, people will not only mock the church, they will also mock God.

Can you give an example of a church that approached discipline with these three principles?

I know of a situation where a man was abusing the trust he had established with other believers. He was persuading elderly people in the church to invest in a risky business deal. After receiving thousands of dollars from them he was unable to deliver a return on the investment.

Church leaders approached him, and at first they were very understanding and patient. But they later saw he was stringing them along as well. Finally they put some pressure on him to return the money or face formal discipline. Eventually he did return the money.

But the more powerful outcome came through the disciplinary action of the elders, their counsel and teaching, and prayer. The man finally came to repentance and he uncovered his lifelong habit of seeking wealth by putting other people's money at risk. God convicted him and he requested to go before the whole congregation on Sunday and confess his sin.

Do you recommend public confession on a Sunday morning where visitors may be present?

On this Sunday, after his confession, one of the women who had been most vocal in her anger toward him walked to the front of the church and said, "I'm the one who needs forgiveness more than he does. I have been murdering him in my heart." She turned to him and said, "I forgive you, will you please forgive me?"

That is a Sunday you want visitors present. They are seeing the gospel lived out in a powerful way. In this case the sinner was restored, the body was protected, and God was honored.

Church Discipline Really Works (pt. 2)

How to find courage (and avoid lawsuits) when confronting sinning believers.
An interview with Ken Sande of Peacemaker Ministries.

(Ed. note: Pastors who lead their churches to discipline members for sinful actions hope for biblical resolution, but they also face legal complications. In part two of our interview, Ken Sande advises that despite the liability questions, church discipline can be carried out successfully.

Ken offered encouraging examples in part one. [Click here](#) to read: Church Discipline Really Works, part one.)

Why are some churches reluctant to employ church discipline today?

Clearly our culture is seeping into the church. This includes a general breakdown in respect for authority, and the embracing of individualism, the attitude that says nobody can tell me what to do. And even the democratic perspective in our country has entered many churches, so people believe everything should be done in a democratic way.

Some think issues of discipline should be brought before the whole congregation. I have rarely seen that turn out in a restorative way. Most congregations have a wide spectrum of maturity: some very soft hearted who don't want to see anyone disciplined, and you've got the very legalistic and harsh. Bringing immature people together for a congregational vote is not a formula for restoration, understanding, and redemption.

Are there legal dangers for pastors and leaders as well?

We hear from pastors all the time who are considering disciplining a member for egregious behavior, but before anything can be done they get a phone call from an attorney threatening a lawsuit if the church says anything publicly about the member's behavior.

The average pastor tends to back off, and that is the end of that. The church may have avoided a lawsuit, but they will have done nothing to restore the brother or sister in sin or protect the church from further problems.

What are some things church leaders can do to overcome the dangers of using discipline?

Take God at his word. The Bible consistently presents discipline as an act of love and redemption. We have to loose the cultural idea that accountability and discipline are bad things.

Secondly, realize that preparation is 99 percent of the battle. Most churches do not prepare their congregations for discipline until a crisis hits. You can't just teach these things in one sermon. We need to be teaching about the blessings and meaning of discipline long in advance of a crisis.

It is also crucial to obtain informed consent. This is a legal term, and it is the only reliable defense against being sued. Informed consent means that the people in the church know what the bible says about discipline, they know exactly what the process involves, and they have agreed to submit to the process sometimes in the form of a membership covenant.

If we do not intentionally prepare our congregations for discipline we will undermine its effectiveness, and leave ourselves vulnerable to lawsuits. When preparation is done you can proceed with discipline without looking over your shoulder, and without fear of lawsuits.

In environments where people are less committed to one particular church, how can we prepare for discipline?

I believe churches that allow a lack of commitment for an extended period of time is an error both biblically and legally. We should be calling people to make a formal commitment to membership. It used to be the case that you could not move from church to church without a letter of transfer. That was done to maintain accountability and discipline.

The situation we find ourselves in today is like allowing all the kids in the neighborhood to play in your back yard. If they do some really bad and destructive things you are going to have a hard time responding because they are not your children, and you are limited in the discipline you can use. Today churches basically allow people to come in and play church year after year, but when there is a serious problem they find their ability to deal with it to be very limited.

So the answer is a clearer commitment to membership?

We need a clear commitment to membership, but we also need churches in a community working together to discourage church hopping. In some communities churches have begun to sign covenants of cooperation saying they will not sit back and allow people to move from church to church to church looking for a new thrill, and causing the same problems each place they go.

Our present culture does make redemptive church discipline more challenging, but I don't think it is impossible.

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But church discipline — which, everyone should be reminded, is all about Christian *discipleship*, not red-toothed heresy hunting — is in the news in the Protestant world too. This is pretty significant, given how infrequently church discipline is discussed in the church these days. There are almost no books on the subject from Christian publishers, and the standard-bearing book, [Marlin Jeschke's](#) *Discipling the Brother* (later *Discipling in the Church*) went out of print a couple of years ago due to near-nonexistent sales.

Pity, since someone like Pastor Buddy Westbrook of [Crossland Community Bible Church](#) in Ft. Worth, Texas, could really use a book like Jeschke's right now.

Crossland member Peggy Penley and her husband, Benjamin Stone, were getting marital counseling from Westbrook, but she decided to get a divorce. Westbrook reportedly confronted her, saying she didn't have biblical grounds for it.

When she went ahead, the [Ft. Worth Star-Telegram](#) reports, Westbrook met with church elders and later sent a letter to the congregation, explaining that Penley had become involved with another man (that's as far as he described the relationship), and that she "had declined to 'listen' in a way that would lead to 'repentance.'"

"We must break intentional/casual fellowship with her until the time of repentance and restoration," Westbrook wrote. "We must be careful to not gossip or judge. ... In this day and age, this would be called 'tough love.' Indeed, this is what this is — a deep and mutually painful commitment of love."

Westbrook's actions seem to be in line with Jesus' commands in [Matthew 18](#), but here's where it gets really messy. Penley actually resigned her membership from the church when she decided to get the divorce—and before Westbrook sent around the letter.

Penley sued Westbrook in 2001 for defamation, intentional infliction of emotional distress, invasion of privacy, and negligence. The [suit](#) got tossed out in 2002, and now the [2nd Court of Appeals](#) in Fort Worth has reinstated it—albeit with a different nature. The earlier suit named the church and the elders; the new suit only names Westbrook, and charges him only with professional negligence.

Here's where the case gets even messier: Westbrook is also a licensed professional counselor, so Penley is suing under the Texas Licensed Professional Counselor Act. She says Westbrook's license obliges him to keep information revealed in counseling secret. Appeals Court Judge Anne Gardner apparently agreed. Westbrook, she [wrote](#), argues that to the extent the regulations and statutes applicable to licensed professional counselors apply to Westbrook in his "pastoral capacity," they impose an impermissible and unconstitutional burden on his First Amendment rights. This argument fails because Penley is not arguing that Westbrook committed clergy malpractice or that he was otherwise negligent while providing *pastoral* counseling. Rather, Penley alleges that Westbrook provided negligent *secular* counseling to and for Penley and that his counseling services fell below the reasonable and prudent standards of care applicable to any licensed professional counselor under the same or similar circumstances.

This one may be much tougher to adjudicate than whether a Roman Catholic politician "obstinately persisting in grave sin" by supporting abortion should be denied Communion.

In any case, can we Protestants please start talking about church discipline again? And perhaps on more issues than marital affairs?