

*Purge the Old Leaven:  
Aspects of Church Discipline in the Bible, Theology, and Culture*

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Editorial

Anthony Royle

A brief survey of writings on church discipline in the latter part of the twentieth century and early twenty-first century will highlight that there has been little written on the subject of Church discipline. When compared to the volume of writings of the early church fathers, the Reformers, and nineteenth century Pietists, this lack of interest in the last hundred years is astonishing. By contrast pre-twentieth century writers had a higher view of church discipline. Notable figures such as Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen, and Cyprian contributed various works commenting on the subject and process of church discipline. These figures were interested in the penitential aspect of discipline and its administration.

Similarly the Reformer, Balthasar Hubmaier (1485-1528) described church discipline as the “third mark” of Church. The first mark was the gospel and the second was the sacraments. Therefore, church discipline was viewed as an integral part to the churches identity and how a church should function.

In the nineteenth century church records describe annual days of church discipline where church members would congregate for the express purpose of disciplining wayward

members. Various denominations published “manuals of discipline” to set guidelines in practicing many aspects in church administration including church discipline. Holiness and piety were of extreme importance and members were disciplined for activities that are acceptable, although perhaps still frowned upon in many churches, such as drinking alcohol and dancing.

There was a decline in these days of discipline and writings concerning the process of church discipline post World War II, which may have been a reaction to the over zealotry of the practice or heavy shepherding that wrought in previous centuries. Despite this decline, there have been notable contributions that have continued to uphold church discipline in the modern church. Continuing the reformers theme of the churches identity, Francis Schaeffer argued nine points of what a church should consist of in order to identify as a true church. Schaeffer’s fifth point was that the church must take discipline among its members seriously. The most notable and perhaps most popular book on church discipline in the twentieth century was *Handbook on Church Discipline: A Right and a Privilege of Every Church Member* by

Jay Adams. Adams' contribution was pastoral in tone and presented a balanced approach to the issues at hand compared to the strict approach of the previous century. The practical approach of Adams provided a wide readership and was aimed at both leaders and laity providing a comprehensive handbook with a step by step guide to the process of church discipline. Adams also sought to unify corrective discipline with formative discipline (discipleship) in providing a positive and productive approach to discipline.

Building upon Schaeffer's nine points, the pastoral approach of Adams, and rooted in reformed tradition, the Southern Baptist Seminary and a group formed by some of its faculty (9Marks) have published books and articles on church discipline at the turn of the twenty-first century. 9Marks, formed by Mark Dever alongside colleague Jonathan Leeman, are a group that helps to support churches and pastors in being "healthy churches". One of the signs of a healthy church is that both formative and corrective disciplines are practiced by its members. Many of the publications from 9Marks are aimed at church members for lay reading in order to educate them in church membership, discipleship, and even the corrective process of church discipline. The aims of these writing are to encourage Christians and churches to practice church discipline, noting the sanctity the process provides by protecting the church and the Lord's name, but also stresses that church discipline's main obligation is to, with grace and love, admonish someone who has fallen and restore them with the Lord and with fellow believers.

The Southern Baptist Seminary also contributed additional academic writings and published a volume of papers in a special edition of church discipline for their journal

in 2004. This covered a wide range of issues to the history of church discipline, to its practices, or lack thereof, in churches today, legal issues regarding the process of church discipline, and some other practical concerns.

Over the last thirteen years, there has been little academic output on the issue of church discipline. There have been some books over the last several years that have started to reflect on the theological aspects of church discipline. The most notable theme these works deal with is the love of God and how this is reflected through church discipline. Various illustrations of God's love as a father (Eric Bargerhuff, *Love that Rescues*) or as a husband (Robert K. Cheong, *God Redeeming His Bride*) are provided for the reader to reflect upon the relationship between Christ and the church. These theological reflections have been a neglected part of the discussion of church discipline in both academic settings and their practical implications exhorted in more popular writings. However, there are further aspects to consider when engaging on the subject of church discipline. For example, how does church discipline inform us about forgiveness? Is forgiveness unconditional or given on a series of conditions? Another aspect that requires investigation is the issue of judgement. Eric Bargerhuff in his book *The Most Misused Verses in the Bible* highlights that Matthew 7:1 Judge not lest ye be judged is often used by many Christians and non-Christians today (p. 25). However, church discipline requires us to make judgements upon the lives of others. These portions of Scripture, therefore, require us to read these themes with the whole scope of the bible in mind. The example of the use of Matthew 7:1 in our culture today reflects the use of proof texting that is used to support one's own presupposition or opinion of a church discipline situation.

An attitude of “judge not” is reflected in postmodern viewpoints that are expressed by many today. Unfortunately, there has been little written in regards to church discipline in regards to the cultural challenges of postmodernism, pluralism, and radical inclusivism. Although there have been many writings about the influencing factors of postmodernism on the church, both positive and negative, there is little in regards to its impact of the process of church discipline and the disruption it has on personal and corporate holiness. As the conversation of church discipline has navigated to pastoral responses to church discipline, there is a need to engage with a generation immersed with postmodern thought.

This collection of essays comprise studies that investigate some of these theological themes in the context of the church discipline process. Each study explores the multiple viewpoints of the biblical authors, wrestling with contesting issues, and noting various possible solutions provided by different scholars. Some of these themes are juxtaposed between values upheld in Scripture i.e. excommunication/hospitality, judgement/salvation, forgiveness/condemnation and are explored to clarify possible conflicting views. Furthermore, these essays challenge some of the pervading presuppositions that people impute on the biblical texts as well as analysing postmodern and pluralistic thoughts that abound in churches today that hinder the task of church discipline. Although these essays are not a handbook or guide to the process of church discipline, nor do they seek to offer advice regarding church polity, they do provide some sharp conclusions and principles that should guide the reader when faced with administering discipline in their own church setting. It is our hope that this collection of papers on church discipline will contribute

to the discussion of biblical, theological, and cultural issues and move the conversation on to pave the way for future contributions, leading to a positive approach and greater interest in both academia and the church.

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