

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

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**Church Discipline:  
Rationale, Scope, Process, and Issues**

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KEY WORDS

| Closed Communion | Corrective Discipline | Excommunication |  
| Judgement | Practical Theology |

ABSTRACT

This essay discusses why corrective discipline is necessary for healthy church life by showing how the popular understanding of Matthew 7:1 is incorrect and that the church is commanded to judge the behavior of its own members. The author explains what types of behaviors are suitable for church discipline and explains how the discipline process should proceed. The article concludes with insights for how churches lacking a discipline process can begin to implement biblical teaching in a manner worthy of Christian grace and pastoral concern.

INTRODUCTION

“Who are you to judge?” is a common response used by “Christians” to blunt comments perceived to be critical of their beliefs or behavior. The assumption of this defense is that Christians are only responsible to the Lord Jesus Christ. The Church or Body of Christ, therefore, is not a familial institution where members have responsibilities and commitments to each other, let alone any authority over believers<sup>1</sup>. Rather, the Church is like college. It’s a place where the attendee gets his/her needs met to live a more successful and productive life. Whether the attendee participates in the life and activities of the college is up to the goals of the attendee. If the attendee finds that the college does not “fit” his/her perceived needs, one need only transfer

to a different, and presumably better, institution.

This individualistic behavior amongst Christians in the Western church is so prevalent, it is difficult for many to imagine the Christian life being any different. The individualistic narrative fits so well with the West’s long-standing focus on the individual against the collective or ruling institutions. Evangelicals may even point to Martin Luther’s assertion that his conscience trumped the power and intellectual heft of the Roman Catholic Church.

But is this hyper-individualistic understanding of Christianity Biblical? Does it align with the witness of the first century tradition as presented through the apostolic witness contained in Scripture? As can be surmised from the tone of this introduction, I believe the answer is a resounding, “No!” However, the manner by which the New

<sup>1</sup> J. Carl Laney. *A Guide to Church Discipline: God’s Loving Plan for Restoring Believers to Fellowship with Himself and with the Body of Christ*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 72-78.

Testament explains how accountability should “look” needs to be unpacked. This chapter seeks to not only justify the righteousness and necessity of Church discipline but also to provide a vision for how proper Church discipline should be enacted.

Peterson argues that discipline is broader than punishment. Discipline includes training, drilling, exercising, cultivating and preparing believers for the Christian life. Thus the preaching of the Word is part of the discipline process<sup>2</sup>. Peterson is quite right in this regard. Proper Christian teaching, both in word and deed, prevents a lot of problems and/or eliminates them before they become severe. Traditionally, this kind of discipline is called formative, because it seeks to shape the life of the believer<sup>3</sup>. However, this chapter will focus on the narrow definition of discipline known as corrective discipline<sup>4</sup>. Corrective discipline involves the direct confrontation of specific issues involving specific individuals<sup>5</sup>. The chapter will discuss four key questions concerning corrective discipline: What is the rationale for Church discipline? What is the scope of Church discipline? What is the process of Church discipline? What is the tone and the extent of Church discipline? I end with some practical considerations on how the contemporary Evangelical church can begin to implement the process of biblical discipline in

2 Roger L. Peterson. “Discipline in the Local Church.” *Central Bible Quarterly* 2:3(Fall 1959), 1-2. See also Don Cox, “The Forgotten Side of Church Discipline,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4:4(Winter 2000):44-45.

3 Mark Dever. “Biblical Church Discipline.” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4:4(Winter 2000), 29.

4 Dever. “Biblical Church Discipline”, 29.

5 The New Testament does not directly address the discipline of groups, such as is done when the Catholic Church enacts an interdict (see Peter D. Clark. *The Interdict in the Thirteenth Century: A Question of Collective Guilt*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007). However, the idea of collective punishment is suggested by Paul and John (Rev 2:5).

churches where it has long been absent.

Readers should be advised that I will only be focusing on biblical and spiritual grounds and procedures for the proper implementation of corrective/reformative church discipline. I will not engage the problem of restoration for difficult sins such as domestic violence<sup>6</sup>. Likewise, discussion of how Christians can avoid civil lawsuits and criminal charges will not be addressed. This narrowing of the topic is not due to any assertion that those issues lack relative importance as I believe they are or soon will become increasingly important as the culture and its laws shift from apathy towards Christian values to open hostility. Rather, the decision stems from my lack of counseling/legal training (I am not a lawyer) and from the belief that we must first have a clear understanding of Biblical teaching on church discipline before we consider how to restore those with profoundly hurtful sins or how avoid lawsuits when the church implements it. In addition, I contend there is a point at which Christians will have to bear the burden of persecution for following Christ’s commands. We must, after all, obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29).

## WHAT IS THE RATIONALE FOR CHURCH DISCIPLINE?

There are essentially two reasons why the church must enact discipline. The first relates to the church itself. Paul argues that failure to evict an unrepentant sinner can negatively impact the church, just like a little leaven, leavens the whole batch of dough (1 Cor 5). Robert E. Moses argues that the reason why Paul was so adamant that the incestuous man be excommunicated

6 See Susan E. Hysten. “Forgiveness and Life in Community.” *Interpretation* 54:2(2000), 146-157.

was that if he was allowed to remain Satan would be able to breach the church's protective hedge<sup>7</sup>.

The second reason the church must exercise discipline is for the benefit of the person being excommunicated. In the case of 1 Corinthians 5, Paul wants the immoral (i.e. sensual) man to be excommunicated so that he can suffer physical decline at the hand of Satan, and perhaps see the transitory value of physical pleasure and ultimately return to Christ<sup>8</sup>. Restoration was also the goal behind Paul's condemnation in 1 Timothy 1:20 (cf. 2 Cor 2:5-11).

Some readers may point out that Christ himself forbid judging in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 7:1; cf. Lk 6:37-38). But did Jesus actually forbid people from distinguishing between right and wrong behavior? Consider Matthew 7:6. There Jesus tells his listeners not to cast their pearls before swine or give holy things to the dogs. If we understand dogs as a euphemism for wicked people (see Phlp 3:2; Rev 22:15), then Christ seems to be commanding Christians to identify (i.e. judge) a person to be evil or not. One could argue that Matthew 7:1 and 7:6 are just contradictory because they were inserted by different schools of Christian thinkers. While that position may be taken, there is no external evidence to support such a supposition. Fortunately, there is no reason to

adopt that sort of skepticism because reading the context provides a straightforward solution. Matt 7:2-5 gives us the key. Christ is warning his followers to carefully evaluate their own "righteousness" before condemning others. In addition, his warning that you will be judged in the manner that you gave judgement reminds his readers to get their facts straight and err on the side of mercy or caution<sup>9</sup>.

Christians are, however, to judge themselves first as James assumes in 5:16. Now whether the confession of sin pertains only to those sins against those that were injured<sup>10</sup> or should be construed more broadly<sup>11</sup> does not detract from the idea that Christians are obligated to evaluate their own behavior. But James is unfamiliar with the notion that Christian judgement is limited only to self-evaluation. For James 5:19 shows the author clearly encouraging members of the faith to watch out for each other (cf. Eph 4:25), explaining that turning a wayward brother back to the right path (i.e. truth) will cover a multitude of sins (Jms 5:20)<sup>12</sup>. What James meant by "cover a multitude of sins" is unclear. Does he mean the sins of the wayward believer or the sins of the exhorter?<sup>13</sup> Perhaps, the question forces a false disjunction<sup>14</sup> because James says everyone

7 Robert E. Moses. "Physical and/or Spiritual Exclusion? Ecclesial Discipline in 1 Corinthians 5." *New Testament Studies* 59(2013), 185-189. The grounds for Moses' opinion is based on the notion that a Christian's protection against Satan is only partial. Since Satan and his minions are not destroyed until the end of the age (1 Cor 15:24-25; Rom 8:22-23), they retain power. Christians are protected (Gal 1:4) as long as they maintain purity in the church. I suspect that the need for purity is also why elders are subject to public punishment (1 Tim 5:19-20; cf. Jms 3:1).

8 Robert E. Moses. "Physical and/or Spiritual Exclusion? Ecclesial Discipline in 1 Corinthians 5." *New Testament Studies* 59(2013), 172-191. See also Simon J. Kistemaker. "Deliver This Man to Satan (1 Cor 5: 5): A Case Study In Church Discipline." *Master's Seminary Journal* 3(1992), 34-46.

9 For a more sophisticated argument for this point see Walter T. Wilson. "A Third Form of Righteousness: The Theme and Contribution of Matthew 6.19-7.12 in the Sermon on the Mount." *New Testament Studies* 53:3(2007), 303-324.

10 Kistemaker and Hendrickson, 178.

11 Martin Dibelius, and Heinrich Greeven. *James: A Commentary on the Epistle of James. Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 255.

12 It should be mentioned that James seems to use the word "brethren" or its cognates to emphasize particular points which often involve uncomfortable truths (see James 1:2, 16, 19; 2:1, 5, 14; 3:1, 10, 12; 4:11; 5:7, 9, 10, 12, 19).

13 Dibelius, Martin, and Heinrich Greeven. 258.

14 D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Carlisle, U.K.; Grand Rapids, MI: Paternoster; Baker Books, 1996), 90.

stumbles (Jms 3:2). It would appear that James could have been referring to the practical reality that past (and corrected) sins were overlooked by the community as well as the fact that the wayward believer that returned to the faith would experience eschatological removal of sins in heaven<sup>15</sup>.

### THE SCOPE OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Some have tried to argue that the essentials of the Christian life center on correct behavior (orthopraxy) and not correct belief (orthodoxy)<sup>16</sup>. Certainly, a simple reading of James would prove that right behavior is a critical element of the Christian life. James' teaching is even more potent if one accepts the tradition that he was not only the half-brother of Jesus Christ but also the first leader of the Jerusalem Church<sup>17</sup>. But is there more?

Yes. Consider James' use of the word ἀλήθεια (truth)<sup>18</sup>. He uses the term three times (1:18; 3:14; 5:19), the last two with the definite article. In 1:16-17, James corrects the false theology that God can tempt people. Then in verse 18, James says that believers were brought forth through the word of truth. Now James could

15 Martin Dibelius and Heinrich Greeven, *James: A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 258.

16 Bruce Demarest, "Christendom's Creeds: Their Relevance in the Modern World," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 21:4(December 1978): 353.

17 Simon J. Kistemaker, and William Hendriksen, *Exposition of James and the Epistles of John. Vol. 14. New Testament Commentary*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 7-10.

18 William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 43. They give three definitions: 1. Truthful, honest, 2. Fact, true, and 3. Real, genuine, and not imaginary.

be using the phrase "word of truth" to refer to Christ (cf. John 15:6) or the gospel message (cf. Col 1:5)<sup>19</sup>. Ultimately, definitional precision in this instance does not matter because to truly encounter the truth requires an intellectual and behavioral change (Jms 3:14 where James explicitly connects behavior with theology<sup>20</sup>). In other words, to follow the truth involves both correct belief and correct action. Thus when interpreting James 5:19, we should understand that straying from the truth refers to someone leaving the faith in terms of theology and/or practice<sup>21</sup>. Both errors are in view and upon seeing either one should cause a concerned believer to be stirred to action to save his/her brother from error.

### THE PROCESS OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Matthew 18:15-20 is the classic text covering the process of discipline in the church. There Jesus lists several simple steps aimed at resolving the harm when a brother sins against you<sup>22</sup>. Interestingly, the focus appears to be a

19 William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 324b.

20 Contra William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 324a, which seems to have over emphasized the intellectual element of truth as against the embodiment of truth.

21 Examples of the tight relationship between theology and behavior abound in the N.T. Consider 1 Tim 1; Gal 2:11-15; Mark 8:32-3.

22 Roger L. Omanson and Bruce Manning Metzger, *A Textual Guide to the Greek New Testament: An Adaptation of Bruce M. Metzger's Textual Commentary for the Needs of Translators* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006), 29 point out that the earliest manuscripts leave out "against you". Unfortunately, a case can be made for including or excluding the words. Art Azurdia. "Recovering the Third Mark of the Church." *Reformation and Revival* 3:4(Fall 1994), 65.n.7. Azurdia contends that the textual issue is not

harm against a person, rather than deviation from a theological tenet<sup>23</sup>. The wording is decidedly laconic in that it does not detail every possible issue, such as perhaps the victim misunderstood the perpetrator<sup>24</sup>. The steps assume that the victim cannot shrug off the offense. Thus to prevent bitterness from taking root, Jesus tells (i.e. commands<sup>25</sup>) the victim to confront (ἐλέγχω)<sup>26</sup> the perpetrator privately. The goal is to restore the fractured relationship as demonstrated by Mt 18:15b and the passage's position between the stories of the lost sheep (Mt 18:10-14) and the parable of the unforgiving servant (Mt 18:21-35)<sup>27</sup>.

If the perpetrator does not repent after the private confrontation, then the victim is to revisit the person accompanied by two to three witnesses (again Christ commands

this act)<sup>28</sup>. The witness does not need to have witnessed the original sin. Azurdia argues they are to witness the second confrontation<sup>29</sup>. He correctly explains that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed at this point. I would add that neither can Christians plead the Fifth Amendment Right provided by the U.S. Constitution against self-incrimination<sup>30</sup>.

If the issue is still not resolved, then the matter is ultimately brought before the whole congregation (Mt 18:17). Azurdia argues that the goal of the public statement is to elicit the help of the congregation to encourage the wayward member to repent. Too often says Azurdia, the church moves to step four (i.e. disfellowshipping/excommunication) before the pressure of the church is fully felt by the unrepentant believer, thereby robbing him/her of another opportunity to repent<sup>31</sup>.

In the end, if the disobedient believer fails to repent (if as Azurdia, says after numerous<sup>32</sup> attempts at resolution), then the church is to excommunicate that person (Mt 18:17b). As Paul points out in 1 Corinthians 5, excommunication does not mean you cannot talk to the person. Excommunication means that you can no longer perceive or treat that person like a brother or sister in the Lord, which in the ancient world would involve not sharing a meal with that person<sup>33</sup>.

relevant because Galatians 6:1 tells us that the church is to be concerned with "...sin in general, not just when it is a direct offense experienced against one's person."

23 Prashc contends that Mt 18 refers to personal offenses while James 5 refers to theological ones. J. Jacob Prashc. "Binding and Loosing." Chap. 3 in, *The Challenge of Church Discipline Today*, edited by Anthony Royle: CreateSpace, 2016. NP. I am not completely convinced of this hard distinction.

24 Azurdia. "Recovering the Third Mark of the Church," 64-70. Azurdia does a superb job unpacking the rationale of the steps and I will be relying on his article heavily in this section.

25 Roger L. Peterson. "Discipline in the Local Church." *Central Bible Quarterly* 2:3(Fall 1959), 13.

26 J. Carl Laney. "The Biblical Practice of Church Discipline." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 143:572(Oct 1986), 358. He explains that the same verb is used to describe the Holy Spirit's work of convicting of sin (John 16:8). William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 315 entry 3 defines the word as "to express strong disapproval of someone's action," It also references Lev. 19:17.

27 See David McClistler, "Where Two or Three are Gathered Together": Literary Structure as a Key to Meaning in Matt 17:22-20:19." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39:4(December 1996), 549-560 for a compelling discussion on forgiveness within the larger subject of binding and losing.

28 Roger L. Peterson. "Discipline in the Local Church." *Central Bible Quarterly* 2:3(Fall 1959), 13.

29 Art Azurdia. "Recovering the Third Mark of the Church." *Reformation and Revival* 3:4(Fall 1994), 66.

30 <http://constitutioncenter.org/interactive-constitution/amendments/amendment-v> visited May 1, 2016.

31 Art Azurdia. "Recovering the Third Mark of the Church." *Reformation and Revival* 3:4(Fall 1994), 66-7.

32 I understand that "numerous" is a vague term. But while the structure of church discipline is clear its implementation must be flexible enough to adjust to the person's spiritual maturity, severity of the offense, etc.

33 Jonathan Schiebert. "Table Fellowship and the Translation of 1 Corinthians 5:11." *Journal of Biblical*



## WHAT IS THE TONE AND EXTENT OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE?

Scripture repeatedly discusses the importance of the tone and extent of corrective discipline. Christ reinforces this concept with his repeated references to the heart (i.e. motivations, attitude) of people (Mt 5-7). The key is two-fold, the heart of the “corrector”, as Paul says we must restore people gently lest we too become tempted (Gal 6:1-2) and the repentance of the “contrite” as Christ tells us that we must be always open to forgive the repentant sinner (Mt 18:21-35)<sup>34</sup>. The goal of discipline is restoration of fellowship so that the wayward believer can return to the life and blessing of the church where he/she can continue to grow in Christ (Eph 4-5).

But even amongst those who believe that discipline is an important part of church life, the question remains regarding which sins or issues demand or require church discipline. It is a fair question. We do not want church discipline to devolve into a cult where every aberration from the status quo is condemned (cf. Titus 3:9). I believe the church in the western world is a long way from this excess (though there are some regrettable examples) but I recognize that sometimes zealous Christians commit the opposite error by over-correcting a bad behavior<sup>35</sup>.

*Literature* 127:1(2008), 163-164.

34 Many thanks to my wife Donna Vantassel for helping with the wording here. J. Carl Laney. *A Guide to Church Discipline*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 156. Laney argues that Eph 5:12 means that confessions should avoid excessive details because speaking of such evil things is shameful. While believing that such advice is wise, I have not found any interpreter to support that understanding of Eph 5:12.

35 Discussion of forgiveness and restoration of a repentant believer is beyond the scope of this essay. For insight see Laney, 2010 chapter 8; and Keller, *Timothy*. 2009. *Serving*

I think the first step toward resolving this thorny question is to separate different issues. First, let's put aside conflicts between individuals and suggest that those be resolved according to Matthew 18. The thornier problem, at least on a theological level, is how to deal with moral and theological failings. Let's begin with moral failings. The New Testament provides many vice lists<sup>36</sup>. The table opposite lists the vices as they appear in the canonical order. Since I am only interested in a complete list, I have only mentioned a sin once even though readers should recognize that many are repeated elsewhere.

The question is whether the church should seek to excommunicate unrepentant believers who commit these acts? We should remind ourselves that the behavior must be repeated despite admonitions<sup>37</sup>. Many of the vices mentioned here assume repetition of sufficient enough to suggest the person's character is bent towards evil. Excommunication should only be applied to incorrigible members.

But are some of the sins listed above more serious than others? I would suggest that these vice lists overwhelmingly focus on behaviors that would fail to maintain the distinction between the world and the church as well as poison the fellowship in the church. Thus in light of the seriousness of those sins, I would argue that all of them are suitable for excommunication, when the member has failed to repent.

*Each Other Through Forgiveness and Reconciliation. Redeemer City to City*. [http://vinechurch.com.au/media/pdf/Forgiveness\\_and\\_Reconciliation.pdf](http://vinechurch.com.au/media/pdf/Forgiveness_and_Reconciliation.pdf) visited June 23, 2017.

36 John T. Fitzgerald, “Virtue/Vice Lists,” ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 858.

37 Ian McNaughton, Opening up 2 Thessalonians, Opening Up Commentary (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2008), 15. McNaughton argues that Paul in 2 Thessalonians 3 makes the distinction between repentant and unrepentant Christians.

TABLE 1

Matt 15:19	Murder, adultery, sexual sins, stealing, lying, speaking evil of others *
Mk 7:22	Greed, evil actions, doing sinful things, pride, foolish living
Lk 18:11	Cheat, tax collector
Rom 1:29-31	Selfishness, hatred, jealousy, fighting, thinking worst of each other, gossip, hate God, rude, conceited, brag, invent ways to do evil, don't obey parents, foolish, don't keep promises, no kindness, or mercy to others. Applaud others that do aforementioned things.
Rom 13:13	Wild parties, drunkenness
1 Cor 5:10-11	Worship idols, don't associate with people that do those things and call themselves Christians
1 Cor 6:9-10	Male prostitutes, homosexuality,
Gal 5:19-21	Not being pure, witchcraft, making trouble, anger, causing people to be angry with each other, causing divisions, envy, other things like these
Eph 4:31	Bitterness, angry shouting to hurt others, doing evil
Eph 5:3-5	Evil talk, foolish speaking, evil jokes
Col 3:5-8	Evil thoughts
1 Tim 1:9-10	No religion, patricide, matricide, murder, same-sex relations, slave trading, do anything against the true teaching of God
1 Tim 6:4-5	Stands for nothing, fighting over words, evil mistrust, think serving God is a way to riches
2 Tim 3:2-4	Lovers of self, ungrateful, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, holding a form of godliness but denying its power.
Titus 1:7;	Passage explicitly deals with pastors and won't be dealt with here as I am discussing Christians in general.
Titus 3:3	Malice
1 Pet 2:1	Deceit, slander
1 Pet 4:3	Sins stated elsewhere
1 Pet 4:15	Evildoer
Rev 9:21	Sorcery, immorality
Rev 21:8	Cowardly, unbelief
Rev 22:15	Loves lying

\* : I used the New Century Version and the New American Standard Bible (updated) for wording of vice

**A TABLE OF NEW TESTAMENT VICES**  
**A list of vices as they appear in the canonical order**

Now Moses believes that Paul distinguishes between exclusion (i.e. excommunication) and handing over to Satan<sup>38</sup>. Moses argues that the incestuous man of 1 Cor 5 receives the harsh condemnation (i.e. handing over to Satan) because he not only was committing the sin but claiming theological justification for that sin. But even if we assume Moses is correct, the additional discipline only occurs following an excommunication. I suspect that the need for additional condemnation would be exceedingly rare.

### PRACTICAL ISSUES

In light of all that has been stated, you might think that churches should start instituting church discipline immediately. But Kenneth Schenk makes an important observation about the applicability of Paul's comments to the contemporary (western) church. He writes<sup>39</sup>,

One of the debates that has surfaced from time to time is the question of whether the church should be a "hospital for sinners" or a "haven for saints." Both have been true at different times and places.

However, our mega-churches today scarcely look much like any of the churches Paul founded in the first century. Our small groups and prayer meetings are much more on the scale of his house churches. We should probably consider this aspect of our situation when applying this chapter to today. We must prayerfully consider whether Paul's goals would be accomplished today by the same disciplinary actions. Would the negative influence of an individual sinner play out the same way in a service of a thousand,

38 Robert E. Moses. "Physical and/or Spiritual Exclusion? Ecclesial Discipline in 1 Corinthians 5." *New Testament Studies* 59(2013), 179-180.

39 Kenneth Schenk. *1 & 2 Corinthians: A Commentary for Bible Students* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2006), 83.

which at times we treat more like the entry-way into the church as much as the church itself?

I think Schenck's observation should cause us to pause. Many churches today lack the intense "life sharing" that the New Testament seems to assume<sup>40</sup>. His comments carry weight only because what we call "church" is a hollow replica of what God actually has for his bride. Perhaps the first step is to build community and holiness through fellowship and the proclamation of the word before we jump on the discipline bandwagon too eagerly.

I would, however, suggest that one strategy (certainly not the only one) to encourage a greater sense of unity and bonding within the church is to institute closed communion. Anyone can attend the church at any time, but not everyone would be able to participate in communion<sup>41</sup>. I think one of the reasons for the lack of unity in churches stems from the easy membership policies. Membership often means little more than you are a stockholder in the church. You can vote on financial matters and possibly hold positions that involve teaching or ruling ministries. Unless you care about those issues (and most Christians do not care or they

40 Luke Timothy Johnson. "Making Connections: The Material Expression of Friendship in the New Testament" *Interpretation* 58:2(2004), 158-171 argues that the New Testament frequently speaks of sharing material possessions as the quintessential concept of *κοινωνία*.

41 My thinking has similarities with early American Puritanism and Jonathan Edwards save on two points. First, Christians should not adopt a Gestapo-like approach when relating to fellow members. Second, excommunicated people can attend the church but cannot participate in communion. See Jeremy M. Kimble. "That Their Souls May Be Saved: Theology and Practice of Jonathan Edwards on Church Discipline." *Themelios* 39:2(July 2014): Logos Edition. Note that Paul assumed non-believers attended church in his comments in 1 Cor 14:22-25. For this latter point as well as Paul's views on insiders and outsiders See Paul Trebilco. "Creativity at the boundary: Features of the Linguistic and Conceptual Construction of Outsiders in the Pauline Corpus." *New Testament Studies* 60:2(2014), 191 and rest of article.



lack gifting in those ministries) then the lack of being a member results in no net loss. In all the years I have attended church, I frequently did not know the member status of most attendees. I even attended churches where I wasn't a member and often was treated no differently than the members, except being prevented from voting or teaching.

Closed communion, however, would force people to commit as they would not be able to partake unless they were full members in good standing with the congregation. Closed communion would empower church leaders whose status is often lower than the local postman and it would reconnect Christians to the corporate nature of communion. It would also reduce the practice of people leaving churches to avoid discipline and joining, and being accepted of, other churches in a casual manner. People can attend church but they would not be allowed to partake of communion unless in good standing<sup>42</sup>.

We must use care to not be dogmatic with this idea because Paul does not explicitly forbid the idea of open communion<sup>43</sup>. But I suggest that using closed communion would reinforce the body's unity in Christ. It also would be more in line with the intent of the Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians. In the vast majority of churches, I have attended, ministers have taken the warnings of 1 Corinthians to refer to an individual's personal relationship with Christ. While that notion is important, Paul's emphasis in this passage is on our horizontal relationships, namely with how we have treated our fellow believers<sup>44</sup>.

42 Daniel E. Wray. *Biblical Church Discipline*. (Banner of Truth Trust, 1978), 347.

43 The local churches were so small and socially/culturally isolated that non-Christians would not be seeking to attend so the idea of open communion would not have crossed their minds.

44 Gordon D. Fee. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*,

While Paul was specifically condemning the way the wealthy believers were treating their poorer brothers and sisters in Christ, it seems highly likely that he would have included other inter-relational sins as well. Ultimately then, communion would be a time for members to reflect on how they treated their fellow believers, not on whether they used a curse word when they were working on their car.

I understand that some will claim that closed communion smacks of Catholicism. I would point out that the issue is not whether the practice is Catholic, the issue is whether it is biblical. While the Catholic Church has many errors, even a broken clock is right twice per day. I had one minister tell me that he would not adopt the practice of closed communion because it was the Lord's Table not his church's table. This type of argument sounds spiritual but ignores the question of what the Lord has commanded in regards to the life of His church and the communion its members must celebrate.

## SUMMATION

Implementing corrective discipline is difficult because it causes hurt feelings. No one likes to be the bearer of bad news. But like a surgeon removing a tumor, the infliction of pain often prevents a larger problem<sup>45</sup>. May the Lord grant each of us the wisdom and the courage to implement his commands.

*The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 561-562.

45 See the spiral of conflict that results from unresolved issues. Robertson, C. K. "Courtroom Dramas: A Pauline Alternative for Conflict Management." *Anglican Theological Review* 89:4(2007), 605.

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