

Viewpoint: JAV374

CHURCH DISCIPLINE

by John M. Frame

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My childhood church taught me the Bible pretty well, but they taught me almost nothing about church discipline. After I grew up, however, I was somewhat stunned by the discovery that church discipline is a major theme of the Scriptures. In the Old Testament, we learn early that God excluded Adam and Eve from the garden after they had violated His command (Gen. 3:23–24). In the time of Abraham, God said that any male of the covenant family would be “cut off” if he were not circumcised (Gen. 17:14). In the law of Moses, God punished many sins by this kind of exile (see Exod. 12:15; 19; 30:33; 38; 31:34, and many other texts).¹ Later, God expelled the whole nation of Israel from the Promised Land because of their idolatry (Jer. 10), their oppression of the poor (Isa. 3:13–26, Amos 5:11–12), and their failure to care for the land (2 Chron. 36:21). In the New Testament, Jesus establishes a rule of discipline in the church, beginning with individual confrontation, continuing with church involvement. If the offender is not repentant, the conclusion is to “let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matt. 18:17). Paul later devotes a whole chapter to urge the Corinthian church to cast out a man who had been committing incest with his father’s wife (1 Cor. 5:1–13).

Scripture also calls the church to discipline people because of some kinds of theological error—“false teaching” (see Gal. 2:4; 2 Tim. 4:1–5; Tit. 1:13–14; 2 Pet. 2:1; 1 John 4:1). Not every difference of opinion within the church falls into this category. In Romans 14:1–4, Paul speaks of a dispute between some Christians who eat meat and others who eat only vegetables. He sides with the meat-eaters, but he never suggests that vegetarianism should be a subject of church discipline. Rather, he says that these parties should not despise or judge one another, for God has “welcomed” both into His

fellowship. But “false teaching” deals with central matters, such as the person of Christ, salvation by grace, and the substitution of “myths” for the gospel.

Pure Motives. The reason for the stress on discipline is that Jesus takes the purity of His body very seriously. Discipline has three purposes: (1) to restore a sinning believer (Matt. 18:15, 1 Cor. 5:5, Gal. 6:1, 1 Tim. 1:20, James 5:20), (2) to prevent such sinning by others (1 Cor. 5:2, 6–7, 1 Tim. 5:20, Heb. 12:15), and (3) to protect the honor of Christ and His church (Rom. 2:24, 1 Cor. 6:6, Eph. 5:27). The process is not intended to hurt people, but to build the church up in the love of God. That includes those who are being disciplined, as 1 Corinthians 5:5 clearly indicates.

We should not, therefore, be afraid of discipline, as though it will turn the church from a loving fellowship into a fortress of mutual suspicion and rivalry. As in a godly family, discipline is the way of love. As we seek to build one another up into mature believers (Heb. 10:24–25), we should follow the example of our heavenly Father, who, the writer to the Hebrews says, “disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives” (Heb. 12:6; note also the following context).

Practical Tips. Discipline is, of course, a difficult process, for several reasons. For one thing, we don’t like to talk about sins, especially the specific sins of our friends. Another problem with discipline is communication. In the early church, a person (such as the heretic Marcion) could be expelled from one congregation only to show up at another, pretending to be a believer in good standing. The second church just wasn’t aware of what the first church had done. The aged apostle John instructed an “elect lady” that when preachers came through town asking her for hospitality, she should not welcome them if they denied the true humanity of Jesus (2 John 10–11). Evidently the elect lady was not fully knowledgeable about the theological debates going on in far distant Christian bodies. John’s letter gives her that knowledge. It also enlists her help in the disciplinary process. She must carry on something of a theological examination of people who come by offering to preach and teach in her area. We see how this passage makes it necessary for individual believers (both men and women) to participate in the evaluation of teachers in the church and in the discipline of false teachers.

Divisive Denominations. Today’s modern communications have alleviated this problem, but another development has made it worse: denominationalism. In a previous article,² I argued that denominations are no part of New Testament church government, and the formation of denominations has violated the prayer of Jesus before His crucifixion that His followers should be one (John 17:22–23). But here we notice another problem with denominationalism. Someone who is excommunicated

from First Presbyterian can simply walk over to First Methodist and be accepted as a Christian in good standing, free to continue his mischief in another location. We cannot expect Methodists to be up to date on Presbyterian disciplinary cases and act appropriately, or vice versa.

Denominations and discipline are intrinsically opposed to one another, for denominations typically represent the failure of discipline. Often when issues have arisen in churches, the body either has failed to deal with them adequately or they have done so without the support of other churches. The result is that someone who should have been disciplined runs out and starts his own church, and other churches do not oppose this development in any effective way. As I said in my previous article, the New Testament never suggests that when someone is unsatisfied with the church's judgment he should leave the body and start a rival church or a denomination. Indeed, in 1 Corinthians 1:10–13, 3:1–23, Paul warns against the kind of rivalry that later produced denominations. But it happens anyway, and such divisions have led to the existence of more than forty thousand denominations in the world today. I cannot believe that this development pleases our Lord.

Some denominations and congregations do not practice discipline at all; others practice it, but without biblical standards. Some seem to be more concerned with maintaining their human traditions and style than enforcing the norms of Scripture. But since the early church, biblical discipline has been one of the greatest needs of Christians. The church's failure to discipline has not been limited to minor issues. Rather, the church has been inundated by major battles over the nature of the gospel itself, such as the relation between grace and works. Godly discipline could have prevented this.

But even among the churches that do practice biblical discipline, the denominational divisions of Christianity make it difficult to carry out. In Paul's day, the house churches of the city of Corinth were parts of a larger structure called "the Church of Corinth" with its own elders. If something went wrong in one house church, the larger body would know about it and it would be their responsibility to deal with it. But today, if there is a discipline case in First Presbyterian Church of Orlando, there is no overarching "Church of Orlando" to take responsibility. First Presbyterian can appeal for help, but only to other Presbyterians within the same presbytery. The Methodists and Episcopalians will not care, and most likely they will not even know. There ought to be a discipline court governing all the Christians in every metropolitan area. Today there is not. And that is one reason why heretic Joe can be thrown out of one congregation, even one denomination, and be accepted without question somewhere else.

So the failure of church discipline, aided and abetted by denominational division, is the source of the incredible confusion today, within the church and outside it, over the nature of the gospel and the teaching of the Word of God.

Denominationalism, then, prevents a serious and consistent exercise of biblical discipline. That weakens everything the church does, from its doctrinal teaching to its ministry of mercy. That weakness extends also to “parachurch” ministries. It often happens that a group of Christians from one denomination will seek to enter a joint ministry with Christians of other denominations. Sometimes that has worked well, with the blessing of God, as we see in many of these groups. But we often have a hesitancy, an uncertainty, that if we cannot trust the discipline of other denominations, how can we trust parachurch ministries that combine people from many denominations?

What to do now? It would be a good thing (for this and many other reasons) if we could reduce the churches’ tendency to glorify their denominational distinctives and even to create additional denominations without justification. But we know, of course, that denominations are presently a fact of life; they are not going away any time soon. Not all forty-one thousand, at any rate. I’d like to offer some suggestions. (1) Discipline could become to some extent a transdenominational activity. Churches within a city or region could agree, as the “church of Pittsburgh” or the “church of Orlando,” to oversee discipline within their area, as in the New Testament. (2) When one church carries out discipline, it could send out a letter to all churches in its area (not just those in its denomination) describing what happened and seeking their support. (3) When someone seeks membership in a local church, that church should ask, and receive, a letter from the person’s previous church to verify that he or she has been a member in good standing.

Of course, any or all of these suggestions would require greater trust of our fellow Christians across denominational lines. Not a blind trust, of course, but a trust justified by greater knowledge of one another and a deeper unity in gospel witness. We should pray that the Lord will build up that trust among us, as we learn that fundamental biblical command to love one another (1 John 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11–12).

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NOTES

- 1 The language of “cutting off” may also refer to capital punishment in some contexts — that is discipline in the extreme.
- 2 John Frame, “What Denomination Should I Join?” *Christian Research Journal* 36, 2 (2009): 60–61. See also <http://www.evangelicalreunion.org/>.