

The *SBJT* Forum: Perspectives on Church Discipline

Editor's Note: Readers should be aware of the forum's format. William G. Travis, Bruce A. Ware, D. A. Carson, and C. Ben Mitchell have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: What does the reformation teach us about church discipline?

William Travis: When sixteenth century Anabaptists were baptized, the act was seen as more than an outward testimony to inward faith (though, of course, it was that) and obedience to a New Testament command. In addition, the newly baptized person pledged to live in newness of life in the believing community, placing himself voluntarily under its authority. Baptized believers constituted a holy brotherhood, in which members were subject to discipline by the local congregation.

The model for such discipline was Matthew 18:15-18, where Jesus laid out a three-step sequence of seeking to win over the erring person. If no change occurred after these efforts, the last resort was to treat the offender as a Gentile and a tax-collector, i.e., as someone outside the believing community. The erring person must be put under the "ban" (excommunicated) and shunned by all others in the church. Menno Simons (1492-1559) saw the whole process as an attempt to heal, not to amputate: the congregation issued its judgment in a spirit of compassion, and welcomed the repentant person back in a spirit of grace. He even suggested that the congregation should wait patiently, hop-

ing for repentance, before invoking the ban—up to two years. The shunning was not unrelievedly harsh, especially inside the family, but it was important to let the sinning person know that he was not in fellowship with other believers.

Balthasar Hubmaier (c. 1485-1528) agreed with Menno, and went so far as to argue "no discipline, no church." Even if adult baptism and the Lord's Supper are observed in the congregation, without discipline there is no real church. One of the debates of the sixteenth century centered on what the distinctive marks of the church were. Both Luther and Calvin contended for two marks: the Word of God correctly preached, and the sacraments rightly administered. Hubmaier added discipline as a third mark: discipline is *esse*, foundational, to the church's very being.

The ban was a church matter—related to issues of religion, morality, and church fellowship—not a civil matter. The Anabaptists did not contend for political punishments such as exile or imprisonment; discipline was only internal to the congregation. By contrast, Martin Bucer (1491-1551), reformer in Strasbourg, placed discipline ultimately in the hands of the magistrates. While some matters

William G. Travis is Professor of Church History at Bethel Seminary in St. Paul Minnesota. He holds a Ph.D. in American History from New York University. He is the co-author of *Religious Traditions of the World*, (Zondervan) and *How Great Thou Art* (Multnomah).

could be handled by the congregations, he had the common sixteenth century belief that the church and the state in a given city were roughly coterminous. In contrast to the Anabaptist belief that one was banished from the church (the believing community) to the commonwealth (the unbelieving community), Bucer saw expulsion from the commonwealth as one of the forms of discipline.

John Calvin (1509-1564) argued that while discipline is not *esse* to the church, it is nonetheless *bene esse*, essential to the church's well-being. Word and sacrament are better able to do their work when discipline is in place. Discipline brings honor to God, prevents the corruption of other members of the church, and can be the means of bringing the erring person back to the fold. When discipline is not present, the churches run the risk of representing a deformed gospel to the world. The Matthew 18 passage is the primary basis for discipline, but 1 Corinthians 5 with its telling "expel the immoral brother" was applied by both Menno and Calvin to egregious cases of sinning: some situations are so public and odious that the congregation moves immediately to excommunicate (though even here there is the hope for a repentant return to a holy life).

While agreeing with Menno on the need for excommunication and shunning, Calvin is somewhat more restrained in both regards here. Excommunication in Geneva commonly took the form of barring from the Lord's Supper, and that usually temporarily, and shunning was done in mild forms. Calvin used an oil and vinegar analogy to describe his approach: the vinegar of punishment should be accompanied by the oil of a gentle spirit; discipline punishes the sins committed

and holds out the hope of a renewed life.

Calvin placed discipline in the hands of the consistory, a group of elders both lay and clergy, with authority over the churches. This turned out to be a mix of state and church, because in Geneva the town council nominated members to the consistory. The Anabaptists saw Christian society as consisting of Christian societies, local groups of believers, whereas Bucer and Calvin saw Christian society as the whole Christianized order. Thus, while the magistrates in Geneva did not mete out punishments based on Matthew 18, they did engage in some attempts at controlling the society in general according to biblical concepts.

The seventeenth century Puritans in both Britain and America continued the Reformed tradition by emphasizing the need for discipline in the church. On the one hand, they agreed with Anabaptist Hubmaier by virtually making discipline a mark of the church. On the other hand, they agreed with Calvin in contending that the social order should be Christianized through legislation based on biblical concepts. The famous Two Tables debate between Roger Williams and John Cotton in the 1630s illustrates this view, since Cotton contended (contra Williams) that First Table commandments (the first four of the Ten) could be enforced by legislation in the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Appeal to the state to aid in church discipline stopped after the new nation was founded in 1789, but the Reformation insistence on discipline as a part of church life did not end with the Puritans. In *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Discipline in the Baptist South*, Gregory Wills makes clear that the practice of discipline continued well into the nineteenth century. Baptists, like other Protestants,

included discipline in congregational life as a matter of course. The Baptist example is particularly telling because of the emphasis on freedom among Baptists—presumably the most freedom-conscious of all Protestants. But the egalitarian implications of an emphasis on freedom (so-called “soul competence”) was coupled with an equally strong emphasis on authority and discipline; democracy and authority were not opposites, democracy was carried out within the lines of authority. Wills’s evidence is compelling: until after the Civil War, discipline was a common feature of Protestant ecclesiology.

Both cultural and theological changes led to the gradual diminishing of the use of discipline in most American churches beginning in the late nineteenth century. But it need not stay that way. Whether *esse* or *bene esse*, the end result of the use of discipline is a purer church, both in its general constituency—the whole congregation—and in particular individuals (erring persons might be brought back to fellowship). Calvin was right: preaching, prayer, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and discipline are means God uses to edify and to sanctify the body of believers.

Suggested Reading:

Davis, Kenneth R. “No Discipline, No Church: An Anabaptist Contribution to the Reformed Tradition.” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 13:4 (Winter 1982) 43-57.

White, Robert. “Oil and Vinegar: Calvin on Church Discipline.” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 38 (1985) 25-40.

Wills, Gregory A. *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

SBJT: Why do many churches find church discipline difficult and seldom, if ever, practice it? And what, theologically, may give impetus to a revival of the practice of a healthy church discipline?

Bruce Ware: I heard a comment recently that sounded plausible: “While John 3:16 was once the most well-known Bible verse in America, now that honor goes instead to Matthew 7:1, ‘Do not judge lest you be judged.’” Just try to raise the issue of holding someone accountable for misconduct, and watch how quickly the defenses come up: “Do not judge lest you be judged.” There is no doubt that our cultural drift toward postmodern relativism has rendered serious, judicious, and hard-nosed evaluation of another’s alleged misbehavior into a sort of moral wrong that is itself worthy of instant and judicious rejection. As is often said now, the only “sin” that is not tolerated is intolerance—a contradiction, to be sure, but more importantly, it is a reality of life at the beginning of the 21st century.

Just as the church is prone to absorb cultural values in other areas, so too is it here. How pious it can sound for people to cite Bible passages like Matthew 7:1, or Jesus’ words in John 8:7 (“he who is without sin, let him cast the first stone”) to legitimate non-action in the face of grievous violations of God’s standards of righteousness. How susceptible the church is to accepting all kinds of worldliness and immorality, all behind a veil of false but pious-sounding expressions of tolerance. Recognition of our *common sinfulness* becomes the new paradigm within which *common acceptance* is given to a greater variety and extent of this sinful expression.

In all of this one important truth is often lost: the standard by which each of

Bruce A. Ware is Senior Associate Dean and Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Before coming to Southern, Dr. Ware served as a professor at Bethel Theological Seminary, Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He is the writer of a number of articles and served as the co-editor of *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace* (Baker). He is the author of a recent book from Crossway entitled *God’s Lesser Glory*.

us is to evaluate our lives is nothing less than the perfect holiness of God himself (Matt 5:48; Rom 8:29; Eph 1:4; 1 Pet 1:15-16). Because this is true, the church must be a community in which we constantly call one another to grow, by God's grace, to higher and more consistent levels of conduct befitting that standard of holiness. But to do this, we must call one another to account when growth is stunted and violations are egregious. Community accountability is the backbone of a vibrant theology of church discipline, and our common pursuit of holiness is what drives both community accountability and corporate discipline.

Jesus himself expected just such interpersonal accountability to occur. Consider again the oft-cited text in Matthew 7:1-6. After Jesus says what is commonly quoted ("do not judge lest you be judged"), he proceeds with instructions precisely about how properly to bring an erring brother to account. Recall that he warns to "take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye" (7:5). What is often missed in this is that once the log is removed, one has the obligation then to help remove the speck from his brother's eye. In other words, Jesus expects us to be used in the lives of others to help them advance in holiness, just as they may be used likewise in our lives to help us to grow. Church discipline is, most essentially, the formal structure that grows out of a healthy practice of corporate accountability.

The bottom line is this: where a sense of common sinfulness breeds common *acceptance of sin*, accountability and discipline will seem foreign, even "un-Christlike." After all, it is thought, we must be more understanding of our com-

mon difficulties and thereby avoid any "judgmental" attitudes toward one another. But, on the other hand, where *zeal for holiness* prevails, we see our common sinfulness as an occasion for community accountability, all for the purpose of growing more and more like Christ. When community accountability becomes the norm, a healthy church discipline naturally takes shape. Therefore, as with so much else, we pray that God would work mightily within us, and within our churches, to give us the longing to pursue "the sanctification [i.e., holiness] without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb 12:13).

SBJT: Do you think that a fallen Christian leader can ever be restored? If not, why not? But if so, under what conditions?

D. A. Carson: This question has become increasingly pressing, owing in no small part to the number of Christian leaders who have fallen into publicly acknowledged sin, often (but certainly not always) of a sexual nature. Substantial books have been written on the subject; I am certainly not going to resolve all the difficulties in a thousand words or so. But perhaps I can set out what some of the crucial issues are, in four points.

(1) The question posed is sometimes ambiguous, or even tendentious. "Do you think that a Christian leader can ever be restored?" The first response must be: "Restored to what?" Suppose the sin is sexual. Does the restoration mean "restored to this family"? That will depend on the spouse, and what the spouse's reaction will be turns on many factors. More commonly "restored" in the questioner's mind really means "restored to the Lord." The obvious answer is a joyous "Yes!"—for however grievous the

D. A. Carson is Research Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. He is the author of numerous commentaries and monographs, and is one of this country's foremost New Testament scholars. Among his books are *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* (John Knox Press, 1981; reprint, Baker, 1994) and *How Long, O Lord?: Perspectives on Suffering and Evil* (Baker, 1990).

sexual conduct, it is not in itself the unforgivable sin. But that does not necessarily mean that the Christian leader who has been restored to the Lord, and perhaps restored to church membership and participation at the Lord's Table (if we assume that he or she has been excommunicated) should also be restored to Christian leadership. Not every Christian in good standing in the church is qualified for every office in the church. So if someone has been removed from office for a biblically justifiable reason, the question about restoration *to that office* now turns on whether or not that person *now* meets the biblically mandated requirements of that office.

(2) Whether or not the person in question meets the biblically mandated requirements of that office now turns on two related matters. To give the discussion concrete form, let us suppose we are dealing with a former pastor who has been disciplined for adultery, but who has repented, put himself under the care of the elders (pastors) of the church, and has been restored to church membership (assuming he was removed). Now the question arises as to whether or not he can be restored to pastoral office. The two related matters to be explored are these: (a) Is he in danger of committing the sin again? This requires pastoral judgment as to the measure of the repentance, the degree of his spiritual restoration, the nature of the resolve and the accountability that he will display in the future. Let us be quite frank: the number of people (including pastors) who offend in this area *and then offend again* is extremely high. Quite apart from the moral obligation of the elders to protect the flock from a predatory pastor (and in this litigious society, that obligation has many dimensions to it!), there is an obligation to come

to consensus on whether or not the offender has been restored to the kind of moral resolve that makes recidivism unlikely. In biblical terms, the leaders must determine if the former pastor is now truly "self-controlled" (1 Tim 3:2), and someone who knows well how to manage his own family (1 Tim 3:4). For these are among the domains where his adultery has proved him unqualified to be an overseer, a pastor. (b) To what extent has his moral failure destroyed his credibility, both among the faithful and with outsiders?

(3) It is the second of these two questions that calls for further reflection. When the fallen pastor's supporters accuse the elders or the church of being unloving and unforgiving if they do not restore him to leadership, and loudly remind everyone that adultery is not the unforgivable sin, it is profoundly important to point out that such arguments are nothing more than red herrings. The real issue is public credibility. Paul insists that "the overseer must be above reproach" (1 Tim 3:2) and "must also have a good reputation with the outsiders" (1 Tim 3:7). The "above reproach" category does not demand sinless perfection. Rather, what is demanded is that the candidate have no moral flaw for which many people "reproach" him. Moreover, the fact that this pastor must have "a good reputation *with outsiders*" is surely worth thinking about. Sometimes a church is so sentimentally attached to its pastor that even when he falls into grievous sin, many in the church, perhaps even the majority, will be happy to let him remain in pastoral office, provided he shows adequate signs of repentance. But what about the outsiders? Do they look at his adultery, nod knowingly, and smirk? Is Christ's name

debased, not only because the pastor has committed adultery but also because the church has indicated it does not mind being led by a man who cannot keep his zipper up? Has this pastor so lost his credibility that when he preaches on anything to do with morality and integrity, a surfeit of polite sighs will escape from either the believers or the unbelievers or from both?

(4) In this light, then, the elders must ask tough questions not only about how this fallen pastor is doing in himself, but also about how his credibility has been affected, both with the church and outside. If they are satisfied with the pastor's improvement in the former domain, they must nevertheless ask the hard questions in the latter domain. At this juncture the prospect of the fallen pastor being restored to active pastoral leadership is nothing more than the question of how (or if) he can regain public credibility.

At this juncture I break with some hardliners, who insist that restoration to public office must be ruled out, precisely because this sort of public credibility is forever forfeit. I am not so sure. I am quite certain that the kind of three month, self-imposed withdrawal of Jimmy Swaggart, followed by his self-declared fitness for return to pastoral office, is a sad joke. In theory, however, I cannot see why a man could not regain credibility by starting over again, beginning at the bottom, proving faithful in small things. Perhaps he begins by cleaning the building, by parking cars for the elderly in the church lot, by attending the prayer meetings. Perhaps after some years his participation in a house group is of such humility and of such quality that he is occasionally asked to address the group. Perhaps with time he becomes a faithful deacon, and after

some years the integrity of his home life coupled with the depth of his biblical knowledge convince more and more people that he can be trusted with more. Perhaps he begins to preach once in a while. And so, over a long period of time, he may regain a great deal of public confidence, and be restored to some measure of spiritual leadership.

But this sort of path to restoration to pastoral office implicitly means two things. First, it is doubtful if this man will ever regain the authority he had before his fall. Too many people will know what has happened, and they will never be able entirely to forget it. Even if they agree that the man has regained substantial credibility, when he deals with certain themes they will inevitably remember his own egregious failure. And second, this model of restoration presupposes that the more prominent the pastor before the fall, the more unlikely is his full restoration to public trust after the fall. His very prominence means that more people will be devastated by this tumble, and more outsiders will make snide comments, ensuring that his restoration will take longer, be more difficult, and perhaps prove impossible.

SBJT: Why must churches be cautious and careful in restoring the practice of church discipline?

C. Ben Mitchell: Along with the current revival of interest in ecclesiology among Baptists and other evangelicals, there has been a revival of interest in church discipline. Recent works by Southern Baptists have included important discussions of the doctrine. Gregory Wills examines church discipline in the antebellum south in his exacting study, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline*

C. Ben Mitchell is associate professor of bioethics and contemporary culture at Trinity International University and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He serves as a consultant on biomedical and life issues for the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission and is a senior fellow with The Center for Bioethics and Human Dignity in Bannockburn, Illinois. Dr. Mitchell is the general editor of the *New International Dictionary of Bioethics* (Paternoster, forthcoming in 2001).

in the Baptist South, 1785-1900 (Oxford University Press, 1996). Wills argues that the influence of American individualism essentially eviscerated effective church discipline. By the 1920s, church discipline virtually disappeared from Baptist churches in the South.

Donald Whitney briefly takes up the subject of church discipline in a volume meant to encourage church members, *Spiritual Disciplines Within the Church* (Moody Press, 1996). Whitney maintains that church membership only makes sense in a context in which church discipline is practiced.

Most recently, Mark Dever, has contributed to the discussion on the role of church discipline in his volume, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Crossway, 2000). One of the leading indicators of the health of a local congregation is its commitment to the "regular practice of church discipline." Interestingly, none of these books were published by the denominational publishing company, Broadman & Holman Press.

This renewed interest in church discipline, while welcomed, also warrants several cautionary observations. First, corrective church discipline is not the only form of church discipline. Patrick Hues Mell (1814-1888), president of the Southern Baptist Convention for over seventeen years, published his own examination of the biblical doctrine of church discipline under the title, *Corrective Church Discipline* in 1860. Mell begins by dividing the topic into two major categories: formative church discipline and corrective church discipline. Formative church discipline includes the preaching, teaching, and discipleship ministries of the church. These ways of "disciplining" believers are foundational and primary to corrective church discipline. Churches wishing to return to

a biblical pattern of church discipline would do well to pay attention to this distinction and to place a great deal of emphasis on the formation of biblical Christians. To attempt corrective discipline, without first seeking to form disciples, is a sure recipe for disaster. Without attention to formative discipline, corrective discipline either will seem capricious or will consist of calling disciples back to practices they did not know were normative for Christian faith and practice. Especially in an age such as ours, new converts cannot be expected to know what counts as normative Christian behavior. For example, some new Christians may not know that premarital cohabitation is wrong. Pastors and their churches must, in this post-Christian era, spend more time and energy on Christian discipleship than in previous eras in which Christendom shaped social practices more pervasively.

Furthermore, because church discipline has been so little practiced in American churches in the past century, pastors must be patient with their churches as they try to bring them into conformity with biblical patterns of ecclesiology. More than one eager pastor, seeking to institute church discipline in a congregation unprepared to deal with the subject, has found himself unemployed and looking for another congregation. Dever is right. Church discipline is one of the marks of a healthy church, but, frankly, it may be one of the latter marks to appear in the process of church reformation.

Second, caution is due because of a history of abusive church discipline. One reason church discipline ceased among evangelical churches was American individualism. Another reason churches stopped disciplining their members was because of arbitrary or extrabiblical ration-

ales for discipline. Legalism sometimes dictated the reasons for discipline rather than the biblical witness. We must be certain, therefore, that corrective church discipline is reserved for the clearest and most obvious of infractions of normative Christianity. Appropriate corrective discipline always aims to restore disciples to the way of the Lord Jesus. Abusive power games and the flexing of theological muscles have no place in church discipline.

This means, in practice, that corrective discipline should be reserved for rebellion against clear commands of God revealed in scripture. For instance, violations of the Ten Commandments would constitute grounds for corrective discipline. Having other gods than the one true God, making idols, lying, thievery, adultery, etc., would be sins worthy of discipline. Yet even here there is a problem. Many evangelicals would not be strict sabbatarians. To create categories for corrective church discipline around matters of Christian liberty would wrongly bind the conscience of another believer. Furthermore, church leaders must remind themselves constantly that the goal is correction and restoration, not retaliation and vengeance against the fallen party. The apostle Paul, after all, reminds the Galatians that a spirit of meekness is to permeate appropriate discipline: "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted" (Galatians 6:1 RSV).

As we face the challenges of the future, churches that practice discipline will be increasingly tempted to exercise it in dubious cases. I have been asked recently whether corrective discipline is warranted in a case where a woman sold her ova for \$80,000. In another case, a woman served

as a surrogate mother for her sister. While I have very serious reservations about both practices, neither of them rise to the level of corrective discipline. Why not? First, it is not clear that either woman sinned. Christian churches and denominations are still in the process of developing ethical guidelines to inform these kinds of decisions. There remains great diversity in the churches as to whether these kinds of reproductive relationships are sinful or merely imprudent. Second, in most churches, there has been little or no formative discipline aimed at the new reproductive technologies like egg donation and surrogacy. In fact, while there are increasing numbers of infertile couples utilizing these technologies, most churches are silent on these issues. Sadly, we have few formative resources to offer couples who are considering these arrangements and technologies. Until churches begin to examine and teach what the Bible says about procreation, marriage, and family and the relationship between them, we dare not discipline members for disobeying what they could not have known. Someone once said, "You can never go back to where you've never been." Christians cannot obey what they do not know. Church discipline, therefore, must include both formative and corrective components—in that order.