

A WELL-ORDERED HOSPITAL FOR SINNERS

1 Corinthians 14:40

Church discipline. What do we mean by it? Broadly speaking, it has to do with correcting sin in the life of a believer, which is part and parcel to discipleship.¹ But let's look at each word separately.

First, what is the *church*? It's not a building or a denomination. Rather, the "church" is a group of people. There's the church *universal*, which consists of all believers in Jesus Christ worldwide.² Then there's the church *local*, which consists of a group of professing believers in Jesus Christ who assemble on a regular basis. *The Baptist Faith and Message* defines the local church as "a body of baptized believers."³ Historically, a regenerate church membership has been a key Baptist distinctive—*the church must be composed of believers only*. Consequently, church discipline has absolutely nothing to do with *non*-church members! Only those who are members of the local church are subject to church discipline.

Jonathan Leeman makes an insightful distinction between the church *universal* and the church *local*: "The universal church is united in faith. *The local church is united in faith and order*. Christ's kingly authority is regnant in the universal church, but it is given concrete expression in the local church (italics mine)."⁴ This distinction will serve us well because "order" is the theme of today's message.

¹Jonathan Leeman states: "In broad terms, church discipline is one part of the discipleship process, the part where we correct sin and point the disciple toward a better path. To be *discipled* is, among other things, to be *disciplined*." Jonathan Leeman, *Church Discipline: How the Church Protects the Name of Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 27.

²Mark Dever, defines the church universal as "the body of people called by God's grace through faith in Christ to glorify him together by serving him in this world." Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2012), 3.

³Southern Baptist Convention, "Baptist Faith and Message, 2000," Statement of Faith; available from <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp>; Internet; accessed 23 June 2016.

⁴Jonathan Leeman, "Introduction—Why Polity?," in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, eds. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2015), 5 (italics mine).

Now, let's define the term *discipline*. One reason why so many people are put off by the phrase "church discipline" is because they automatically equate the term "discipline" with "punishment" or "correction." Pastor Thabiti Anyabwile clears up the confusion:

Today, when people hear the word *discipline*, they most likely think of negative forms of punishment. . . . To many, discipline sounds harsh. . . . For others, it sounds restrictive of freedom and joy. To be sure, discipline is not always a pleasant experience. . . . But actually, the word *discipline* has a much broader and more positive meaning than "unpleasant punishment." *Discipline* and *disciple* share the same Latin root and are closely tied to the idea of education and order.⁵

Essentially, discipline has to do with *order*. And if we as a local church wish to create a culture of discipleship (learning), then we must have an environment of discipline (good order).⁶ Listen carefully to the following remarks by Jay Adams:

⁵Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *What Is a Healthy Church Member?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 74. Along these same lines, Jay E. Adams writes: "Etymologically the word 'discipline' is related to the latin words *disco* ('to learn') and *disciplina* ('learning'), having to do with education . . . [and] discipline may be defined as the functions of a school that promote and maintain conditions of learning together with those that root out all hinderances to it." Jay E. Adams, *A Handbook on Church Discipline* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 21.

⁶Cornelis Venema declares: "A rightly-ordered and vibrant church is indispensable to the fulfillment of the Great Commission Christ gave to the church, to make disciples of all the nations until the end of the present age (Matthew 28:20)." Quoted in the forward of William Boekestein and Daniel R. Hyde, *A Well-Ordered Church: Laying a Foundation for a Vibrant Church* (Welwyn Garden, UK: EP Books, 2015), 11. For well over half a century, Southern Baptists have been obsessed with numbers and church growth. Unfortunately, this has in many ways opened the door to pragmatism and weakened the denomination. We have placed *quantity* over *quality*. But despite our emphasis upon church growth, we have nevertheless been in decline for decades now. Perhaps a major reason for this decline is because the vast majority of our churches are not "rightly-ordered." Could part of the problem be that we have long abandoned the practice of church discipline? Ironically, Gregory Wills notes that in the nineteenth century when Baptist churches were faithful to administer church discipline, they grew both spiritually *and* numerically. When they failed to do so, they declined. Wills writes, "Without discipline, there could be no order, peace, or vital fellowship in the church. Baptists believed that churches with impure members suffered in reputation, which undermined their evangelistic mission. But the neglectful church could encounter even harsher realities: God 'invariably chastised' them with 'declension and destruction.' A church negligent in discipline 'tolerates or connives at the sinful conduct of her members' and brought a curse not only upon itself but also upon the community' (Jesse Mercer, 'Circular letter,' Georgia Baptist Association, 1806, in Mercer, *History*, 167). . . . Proper tribunals, however, brought showers of blessing. . . . When churches attended to moral correction, God granted them prosperity. Disciplined churches were shining cities on a hill whose light drew unbelievers to God. . . . Discipline brought revival. Baptists had good reason to believe this. They maintained high rates of discipline at the same time they experienced rapid growth. Nationally, Baptists grew 1.9 times faster than the population, from 67,000 in 1790 to 1 million in 1860. In Georgia, they grew 2.3 times faster than the population, from 3,340 in 1790 to 99,149 in 1860 (Robert Gardner, *Baptists of Early America: A Statistical Study* [Atlanta: Georgia Baptist Historical Society, 1983], 35)." Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South 1785-1900* (New York, NY: Oxford, 1997), 35-36.

Discipline brings “peace.” That is another reason why there is much unrest in many congregations, homes, and lives. Where there is chaos rather than the disciplined, structured, orderly living that comes when a church enforces Christ’s commands, unrest of every sort arises. *And the irony is that, apart from church discipline, there is no way to settle it down.* One finds rest, refreshment, and peace in Christ’s school only when learning is enforced through His rules of order. Thus, discipline is not, as many have thought, simply a negative task of reading troublemakers out of the church. *Rather, first above all, it is God’s provision for good order in His church that creates conditions for the instruction and growth of the members. . . .* When discipline is intact, God’s name is honored, His church grows, and offenders against God and His righteousness are reclaimed in repentance. That is what discipline is all about (italics mine).⁷

When it comes to discipline, there are two basic forms: *formative* and *corrective*. John Hammett distinguishes between the two: “Formative discipline shapes the members of the church in holiness, and corrective discipline is exercised when a member wanders from holy living.”⁸ Therefore, *formative* discipline is simply a matter of Christian discipleship; a matter of being “formed” into Christlikeness through the ordinary means of grace. *Corrective* discipline is needed when a professing church member is flagrantly pursuing unholiness.

⁷Adams, *A Handbook on Church Discipline*, 17, 21-22.

⁸John S. Hammett, “Church Membership, Church Discipline, and the Nature of the Church,” in *Those Who Must Give an Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline*, eds. John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2012), 15. Pastor Andrew Davis elaborates on this distinction: “In the past theologians writing about biblical church discipline have made a distinction between formative and corrective discipline. Formative discipline is comprised of faithful biblical instruction and warnings which are sown into the hearts of Christians before specific sins have occurred. It really is just a matter of Christian discipleship, of teaching Christ’s followers to obey everything He has commanded them (Matt 28:19). Corrective church discipline is needed when a church member actually acts in a way harmful to himself and the body at whatever level of seriousness.” Andrew M. Davis, “The Practical Issues of Church Discipline,” in *Those Who Must Give an Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline*, eds. John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2012), 170. Narrowing our scope to *corrective* discipline in particular, Jonathan Leeman claims: “Corrective discipline helps to correct the disciple through correcting sin. . . . In more specific and formal terms . . . [it] is the act of removing an individual from membership in the church and participation in the Lord’s table. It’s not an act of forbidding an individual from attending the church’s public gatherings. It is the church’s public statement that it can no longer affirm the person’s profession of faith by calling him or her a Christian. It’s a refusal to give a person the Lord’s Supper. It’s excommunicating, or ex-communication-ing, the person.” Jonathan Leeman, *Church Discipline: How the Church Protects the Name of Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 27-28. Moreover, Wyman Richardson asserts: “Corrective church discipline refers to the church’s response to those within the body of Christ who decide to embrace a lifestyle of rebellion against God and His church. It is the church’s attempt to call a wayward brother or sister away from behavior that, if not abandoned, will wreck their own relationship with the Lord, cause others to sin, dishonor the Lord, and weaken the witness and ministry of the Lord’s church.” Wyman L. Richardson, *Walking Together: A Congregational Reflection on Biblical Church Discipline* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 16.

So what does corrective discipline look like when carried out? It includes everything from a private one-on-one appeal, to an appeal with two or three witnesses, to an appeal by an entire congregation, to the act of excommunication.⁹ But the goal of corrective discipline is to produce repentance in the offender with the hope of preventing excommunication. However, as Mark Dever asserts, should it reach that point, this “typically means excluding the parties in question from communion (the Lord’s Supper). In essence, this is a removal from church membership.”¹⁰

It’s imperative that we understand this distinction between formative and corrective discipline. We also need to understand that both are stressed in the Bible and therefore both are needed in the life of the church. Jay Adams explains why:

Today, say the words “church discipline” and you will get responses that have wholly to do with correction. There will be no thought of good order, good doctrine, and smoothly functioning church life. In most minds today, discipline means “the way you get rid of troublemakers.” I have taken the time to emphasize this fact because, until we are able to restore the two-sided, biblical emphasis, we shall go on thinking wrongly and, as a result, acting wrongly about discipline. *There will be no wholesale change in practice until there is a wholesale change in concept. . . .* What must be established is the full biblical concept of discipline, both preventive and remedial; not merely the one or the other (*italics mine*).¹¹

Now, up to this point it’s been all left brain. Time to shift over to the right brain and use our imaginations. In Matt 9:12-13 NLT, Jesus said, “Healthy people don’t need a doctor—sick people do. . . . I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners.” The church has long been referred to as “a hospital for sinners.” And this is a good way to think about the church. But ironically this image of the church is often used to argue against church discipline. Pastors Boekestein and Hyde assert: “The modern tendency is to

⁹Richardson, *Walking Together*, 16.

¹⁰Dever, *The Church*, 67.

¹¹Adams, *A Handbook on Church Discipline*, 23-24 (*italics mine*). Adams goes on to state: “When either the remedial or corrective side is discussed, its positive aspects—promoting the glory of God, the welfare of the church, and the reclamation of the offender—likewise should be noted. In all its aspects, discipline must be seen as a blessing; it is a privilege of all believers that the church does wrong to withhold from them. Even in its corrective measures, discipline must be shown to be the privilege that it is—the privilege, when necessary, of having the informal care and concern of other members of the body and the care of Christ Himself working formally through the officers of His church, to bring a straying member back into the ways of truth and righteousness” (Ibid., 24).

write off discipline since, after all, ‘the church is a hospital for sinners.’ This is true. But more accurately, the church is a place for *repentant* sinners. This is the goal of discipline.”¹²

In his book titled *Walking Together*, Wyman Richardson offers a brilliant response to those who use the image of the church as “a hospital for sinners” to argue against church discipline. He writes,

A hospital, technically speaking, is not a place for sick people *per se*. It is actually a place for sick people who are seeking to be well, willing to cooperate, within reason, to the treatments administered to them there, and who are not disruptive to the others seeking to be well. But what would a hospital do if a patient decided to destroy the hospital from the inside out? What would it do, for instance, if a patient with a contagious disease decided to run from room to room and infect the other patients trying to get well? What would the hospital do if a patient decided that his own personal ideas of how to run a hospital should hold sway, and that he was going to storm the medicine cabinets and emergency rooms, and surgeon’s tools, and take over the hospital for himself? What would a hospital do then?

It is possible that the hospital would say this to such a person: “You are sick. You desperately need to let us help you and we desperately want to help you. But you are making it impossible for us to do so. We have no choice, unless you stop and let us help you, but to ask you to leave. And when you leave the hospital, you are very likely to get even more sick and rethink the importance of what it is we do here. When that happens, we want you to know that we are ready at any moment to take you back in and help you.” That is likely what a hospital would say. It is also what churches must sometimes say in similar circumstances. This is the nature of church discipline.¹³

I propose that we revise the older phrase “a hospital for sinners” and instead use the phrase “a *well-ordered* hospital for sinners.” It is, after all, a more biblically grounded phrase. Paul writes in 1 Cor. 14:40 that, “all things should be done decently and in *order* (τάξις),” and in Col 2:5 Paul writes, “rejoicing to see your good *order* (τάξις) . . .” Then, in 1 Thess 5:14 and 2 Thess 3:6-7, 11, Paul rebukes those who live a “disorderly” or “unruly” life (ἀτάκτους). The church is to be “a *well-ordered* hospital for sinners” because, after all, the alternative is *chaos*. As Anyabwile observes:

Chaos . . . is the enemy of growth. Disorganization, sloppiness, and inattention generally introduce the kind of instability that weakens rather than strengthens. Where there is no order there will be little in the environment that sustains and nourishes. Life needs to be ordered.¹⁴

¹²Boekestein and Hyde, *A Well-Ordered Church*, 145.

¹³Richardson, *Walking Together*, 34.

¹⁴Anyabwile, *What Is a Healthy Church Member?*, 73.

When you stop and think about it, this applies in every sphere of society. Alexander Strauch notes, “Every responsible society has a code of discipline to protect itself from unlawful behavior among members. This is true for the police, military, legal and medical societies, and for the political and corporate worlds.”¹⁵ I would add that this is true for families and local churches too. Regarding the latter, John Calvin wrote:

But because some persons, in their hatred of discipline, recoil from its very name, let them understand this: if no society, indeed, no house which has even a small family, can be kept in proper condition without discipline, it is much more necessary in the church, whose condition should be as ordered as possible.¹⁶

There must be order or else there will be “instability that weakens.”¹⁷ But there can be no order without discipline. As Jay Adams maintains, “Where there is no discipline, there is no order; where there is no order there is no peace. Discipline is, at its heart and core, good order.”¹⁸ A healthy church is a *well-ordered* church. But as Boekestein and Hyde warn,

A church will not be well-ordered if it allows sickness to flourish internally. . . . The church is a reflection of God. When rebellion is permitted in the church of God, his reputation suffers. . . . A broken-down household can reflect poorly on its owner. The church is the household of God (Ephesians 2:19). When she tolerates disrepair she scorns her calling to be that mirror that reflects God’s glory.¹⁹

God is a God of order. We could even say that “orderliness” is God’s nature and is one of a myriad of ways in which God’s glory is manifested. Therefore, a well-ordered church is one that reflects God’s glory. Beloved, the Owner of the hospital has given us an operations manual. If we will follow the instructions given to us in the holy Scriptures—including the ones about church discipline, we will be “a *well-ordered* hospital for sinners.”

¹⁵Alexander Strauch, *Leading With Love* (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth, 2006), 157.

¹⁶John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* in Library of Christian Classics, vol. XXI, ed. John T. McNeill (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 1229-1230.

¹⁷According to Mark Dever, “The health of the whole church would be radically improved in many congregations by excommunicating those members who are committed to sins like nonattendance, divisiveness, adultery, or fornication more than they are committed to God’s glory” (*The Church*, 164).

¹⁸Adams, *A Handbook on Church Discipline*, 14.

¹⁹Boekestein and Hyde, *A Well-Ordered Church*, 140.

Before we conclude, let's apply what we've learned from today's message. There can be no order without *discipline*. We've seen how this applies in the local church. But the same applies in the home and in one's personal Christian life. So let me ask you this morning . . .

How's your home-life? Is it *well-ordered*? I'm going to challenge the men in particular. Men, we're called to be spiritual leaders in our homes. **We set the spiritual tone in the home.**

In fact, having a well-ordered home is one of the qualifications for serving as an elder or a deacon in the church. In 1 Tim 3:2 Paul writes: "Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach . . ." In verses 4 and 5 Paul writes: "He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church" Then in v 12 Paul says: "Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well."

The homes of church leaders are to be *well-ordered*. But really this applies to everyone. Surely Paul's instructions given in Eph 5:23-6:4 imply this. Men are to be spiritual leaders in the home. Wives are to graciously submit to their husband's leadership. Fathers are "not provoke (their) children to anger, but (are to) bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." Children are told to "obey (their) parents in the Lord, (and to) 'Honor . . . father and mother.'" The Puritans used to say, "Every home is to be a little church." Not always, but more often than not, the lack of peace and order in the home is due to a lack of spiritual leadership from men. **Men, we set the spiritual tone in the home!**

But every one of us as *disciples* of Jesus Christ are called to a life of *discipline*. You may be a genuine believer in Jesus Christ, and yet, your personal life is in chaos. Peace does not rule in your heart. Now, if it's true that "discipline brings peace," then unrest is obviously due to a lack of self-discipline, which by the way, is an indication of not walking in step with the Spirit. In Gal 5:16 Paul writes: "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh . . ." A few verses later (vv 22-23) Paul states: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law." And finally, 2 Tim 1:7 says, "God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control."

So let me ask you: Is there unrest in your personal Christian life? Is there an area that needs to be brought under the control of God's Spirit? If so, let me urge you to confess that to the Lord today, and to submit yourself to the influence of Holy Spirit.

It's the Lord's will for the local church, the Christian home, and your personal Christian life to be *well-ordered*. God wills for peace to rule in His church, in your home, and in your heart today. May the Lord have His way. Amen.