



HEBRON

Wednesday, March 27, 2019

Dr. Landon Dowden

WHAT IS A HEALTHY CHURCH?

LESSON 6

A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP AND DISCIPLINE

What is a Healthy Church – Lesson #6

- I. **TWELVE REASONS WHY CHURCH MEMBERSHIP MATTERS (Taken from Jonathan Leeman's book, *Church Membership*)**
 - a. **It's biblical.** Jesus established the local church and all the Apostles did their ministry through it. The Christian life in the New Testament is church life. Christians today should expect and desire the same.
 - b. **The church is its members.** To be "a church" in the New Testament is to be one of its members (read through Acts). And you want to be part of the church because that's who Jesus came to rescue and reconcile to himself.
 - c. **It's a pre-requisite for the Lord's Supper.** The Lord's Supper is a meal for the gathered church, that is, for members (see 1 Corinthians 11:20, 33). And you want to take the Lord's Supper. It's the team "jersey" which makes the church team visible to the nations.
 - d. **It's how to officially represent Jesus.** Membership is the church's affirmation that you are a citizen of Christ's kingdom and, therefore, a card-carrying Jesus Representative before the nations. And you want to be an official Jesus Representative. Closely related to this...
 - e. **It's how to declare one's highest allegiance.** Your membership on the team, which becomes visible when you wear the "jersey," is a public testimony that your highest allegiance belongs to Jesus. Trials and persecution may come, but your only words are, "I am with Jesus."
 - f. **It's how to embody and experience biblical images.** It's within the accountability structures of the local church that Christians live out or embody what it means to be the "body of Christ," the "temple of the Spirit," the "family of God," and so on for all the biblical metaphors (see 1 Corinthians 12). And you want to experience the interconnectivity of his body, the spiritual fullness of his temple, and the safety and intimacy and shared identity of his family.
 - g. **It's how to serve other Christians.** Membership helps you to know which Christians on planet Earth you are specifically responsible to love, serve, warn, and encourage. It enables you to fulfill your biblical responsibilities to Christ's body (for example, see Ephesians 4:11-16; 25-32).



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- h. **It's how to follow Christian leaders.** Membership helps you to know which Christian leaders on planet Earth you are called to obey and follow. Again, it allows you to fulfill your biblical responsibility to them (see Hebrews 13:7; 17).
- i. **It helps Christian leaders lead.** Membership lets Christian leaders know which Christians on planet Earth they will “give an account” for (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2).
- j. **It enables church discipline.** It gives you the biblically prescribed place to participate in the work of church discipline responsibly, wisely, and lovingly (1 Corinthians 5).
- k. **It gives structure to the Christian life.** It places an individual Christian's claim to “obey” and “follow” Jesus into a real-life setting where authority is actually exercised over us (see John 14:15; 1 John 2:19; 4:20-21).
- l. **It builds a witness and invites the nations.** Membership puts the alternative rule of Christ on display for the watching universe (see Matthew 5:13; John 13:34-35; Ephesians 3:10; 1 Peter 2:9-12). The very boundaries that are drawn around the membership of a church yield a society of people that invites the nations to something better.

II. **A Biblical Understanding of Church Membership (from Dever's, *What is a Healthy Church?*)**

a. **The Bible and Membership**

- i. A numerical record of membership was kept. (Acts 2:37-47)
- ii. A record of widows was also kept so they could care for them. (1 Timothy 5:3-16)
- iii. Elections were conducted. (Acts 6:1-6)
- iv. Discipline was carried out. (Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5; 2 Corinthians 2:6; Galatians 6:1)
- v. Elders were informed of their future accountability for each member. (Hebrews. 13:17)
- vi. There was an awareness of who was committed to the Church. (Romans 16:1-16)
- vii. Membership draws a boundary line around the church, marking the church off from the world.

b. **Biblical Membership Means Commitment**

- i. Church membership is not simply a record of a box we once checked. It's not a sentimental feeling. It's not an expression of affection toward a familiar place. It's not an expression of loyalty or disloyalty toward parents. It should be the reflection of a living commitment, or it is worthless. Indeed, it's worse than worthless; it's dangerous (p. 95).



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c. Biblical Membership Means Taking Responsibility

- i. By identifying ourselves with a particular local church, we are telling the church's pastors and other members not just that we commit to them, but that we commit to them in gathering, giving, prayer, and service. We are telling them to expect certain things from us and to hold us accountable if we don't follow through (p. 95).
- ii. Less will Christians regard their churches with a come-as-you-please and get-what-you-can attachment. More will they view them as a body in which all parts care for one another (p. 96).
- iii. Many evangelical pastors today might be more proud of their so-called membership than distressed by the large number of members not attending (p. 96).

d. Biblical Membership Means Salvation Affirmation

- i. Uninvolved members confuse both real members and non-Christians about what it means to be a Christian (p. 97).
- ii. Membership is the church's corporate endorsement of a person's salvation. Did you catch that? By calling someone a member of your church, you are saying that that individual has your church's endorsement as a Christian. So if a congregation has not set its eyes upon an individual for months, even years, how can it testify that that person is faithfully running the race? (p. 97)
- iii. When a person is perpetually absent, a church endorsement is, at best, naïve; at worst, dishonest.
- iv. A church that practices biblical church membership does not require perfection of its members; it requires humility and honesty.

e. Biblical Membership is Meaningful

- i. Members in name become members in fact.
- ii. We don't love old friends well by allowing them to hold onto their membership in our congregations for sentimental reasons.
- iii. Benefits of meaningful church membership
 - 1. It will make the witness of our churches to non-Christians more clear.
 - 2. It will make it harder for weaker sheep to stray from the fold and still call themselves sheep.
 - 3. It will help shape and focus the discipleship of more mature Christians. It will help church leaders know exactly for whom they are responsible.
 - 4. In all of this, God will be glorified.
- iv. Church membership means traveling together as aliens and strangers in this world as we head to our heavenly home.



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III. WHAT DOES A COMMITTED CHURCH MEMBER LOOK LIKE (From Anyabwile)

- a. Attends regularly (Hebrews 10:24-25)
- b. Seeks peace (Romans 14:19; James 3:18)
- c. Edifies others (1 Corinthians 12, 14; Ephesians 4:11-16)
- d. Warns and admonishes others
- e. Pursues reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-21; Matthew 5:23-24)
- f. Bears with others (Matthew 5:5; Matthew 18:21-22; Romans 15:1; Galatians 6:2)
- g. Prepares for the ordinances
- h. Supports the work of the ministry (Romans 12:6-8; 2 Corinthians 8-9)

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN MEMBERS DON'T REPRESENT JESUS? (Taken from Jonathan Leeman's book: *Church Membership*)

A key text: 1 Corinthians 5:1-13

What is church discipline?

- Informally, church discipline begins with a private word of admonition to a brother/sister who is sinning.
- In more specific and formal terms, church discipline is the act of removing an individual from membership and participation in the Lord's Supper.
- The church is not telling the individual to stop attending its public gatherings. The church wants the person to come and hear God's Word preached.
- Rather, the church is saying that it can no longer affirm the person's profession of faith, so it refuses to give the Lord's Supper.
- To be a church member is to be a Jesus representative. Discipline, then is the appropriate course of action when the character of a person's representation brings shame on Jesus' name.

What's the purpose of church discipline?

- **5 key purposes:**
 - **To expose.** Sin, like cancer, loves to hide. Discipline exposes the cancer so that it might be cut out quickly (1 Corinthians 5:2).
 - **To warn.** A church does not enact God's judgment through discipline. Rather, it stages a small play that pictures the great judgment to come (1 Corinthians 5:5).
 - **To save.** Churches pursue discipline when they see a member taking the path toward death, and none of their pleading and arm waving causes the person to turn around. It's the device of last resort (1 Corinthians 5:5).



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- **To protect.** Just as cancer spreads from one cell to another, so sin quickly spreads from one person to another (1 Corinthians 5:6).
- **To present a good witness for Jesus.** Church discipline is actually good for non-Christians, because it helps to preserve the attractive distinctiveness of God's people (1 Corinthians 5:1).
- When a church engages in discipline what it is really saying to the member is, "You're not choosing Jesus, so you must not be with Jesus."
- The underlying purpose in every act of discipline must be love: love for the individual, love for the church, love for the watching world, love for Christ.
- God "disciplines the one He loves" and "He chastens everyone He accepts as His son" (Hebrews 12:6). "God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in His holiness (Hebrews 12:10). "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." (Hebrews 12:11)

When should a church practice church discipline?

- The short answer is, a church should practice church discipline when someone sins.
- Church members should learn the skill of how to privately and tenderly confront sin.
 - Often it's best to say nothing. When you do say something, it is best to begin by asking questions, making sure you have the facts right and are giving the person the benefit of the doubt.
 - Churches should cultivate the kinds of relationships where informal correction is invited and received as an act of love.
- Formal church discipline from the entire congregation is reserved for sins of such significance that the church no longer feels able to affirm a person's profession of faith.
- We cannot know people's hearts but God does call churches to consider the fruit of individual lives and make a judgment call (1 Corinthians 5:12; Matthew 3:8; 7:16-20; 12:33; 21:43).
- Formal church discipline is required in cases of outward, serious, and unrepentant sin.
 - Outward – It must be something that can be seen with the eyes or heard with the ears.
 - Serious – Not every sin should be pursued to the utmost. There needs to be some place in a church's life for love to cover "a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8). Thankfully, God does not perceptibly discipline us every time we sin.
 - Unrepentant – The person involved has been confronted with God's commands in Scripture, but he or she refuses to let go of the sin. From all appearances, the person prizes the sin more than Jesus.



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How should a church practice church discipline?

- Cole: We should deal with any professing believer who associates with this church and is knowingly and rebelliously disobeying the clear commandments of Scripture.
 - The person must be a professing believer.
 - The person must associate with this church.
 - The person must be disobeying the clear commands of Scripture.
 - You don't discipline someone for areas on which the Bible has no clear commandments. Drinking alcoholic beverages is not grounds for discipline; drunkenness is. Watching movies is not grounds for discipline; watching pornographic movies is. Scripture contains many lists of sins (1 Corinthians 6:9-10; Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 4:25- 5:6; 1 Timothy 1:9-10; 2 Timothy 3:2-5; etc.). We may summarize these as:
 - Violations of God's moral commandments (1 Corinthians 5:10- 11; 6:9-10; 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1; Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 5:3-5).
 - Unresolved relational sins, such as gossip, slander, anger, and abusive speech (Matthew 18:15-20; Ephesians 4:25-31; Galatians 5:19-21; Colossians 3:8).
 - Divisiveness in the church (Romans 16:17-18; Titus 3:10; 3 John 9-10).
 - False teaching on major doctrines (Galatians 1:8-9; 1 Timothy 1:20; 6:3-5; 2 John 9-11).
 - Disorderly conduct and refusal to work (2 Thessalonians 3:6-15; 1 Timothy. 5:8).
- Matthew 18 describes the basic process of church discipline, moving from one person, to several, to the whole church. Jesus' basic concern here is to extend the process no wider than necessary for producing reconciliation.
 - A private meeting (Matthew 18:15)
 - A private conference with witnesses (Matthew 18:16)
 - A public announcement to the church
 - Public exclusion from the church
 - Public restoration when there is genuine repentance
- Sometimes the processes of discipline should move quite slowly, as when the individual shows interest in fighting the sin. Sometimes the processes of discipline need to speed up, as in 1 Corinthians 5 where the man's sin is flagrant and apparently unrepentant.
- Different sinners require different strategies (1 Thessalonians 5:14).
- How should church members interact with someone who has been disciplined? (1 Corinthians 5:9, 11; 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15; 2 Timothy 3:5; Titus 3:10; 2 John 10).
 - The general tenor of one's relationships with the disciplined individual should markedly change.
 - Interactions should not be characterized by casualness but by deliberate conversations about repentance.



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- Certainly family members should continue to fulfill family obligations (Ephesians 6:1-3; 1 Timothy 5:8; 1 Peter 3:1-2).
- When does restoration to the church's fellowship occur? When the sinner repents.
- Once a church decides to restore a repenting individual to its fellowship and the Lord's Table, there should be no talk of a probation period or second-class citizenship. Rather the church should publicly pronounce its forgiveness (John 20:23), affirm its love for the repenting individual (2 Corinthians 2:8), and celebrate (Luke 15:24).
- When churches start to practice discipline, they will often find themselves facing complex situations with no exact case study in Scripture to follow. But the church's uppermost concern must be to guard the reputation of Christ. It does this by carefully considering whether it can continue to affirm the verbal profession of someone whose life grossly mischaracterizes Christ. Guarding His reputation is, in fact, what's most loving for the sinner, the church, and the nations.

Five Positive Reasons for Practicing Corrective Church Discipline (from Dever)

- It shows love for:
 - The good of the disciplined individual;
 - Other Christians as they see the danger of sin;
 - The health of the church as a whole;
 - The corporate witness of the church and, therefore, non-Christians in the community;
 - And the glory of God. Our holiness should reflect God's holiness.

A Healthy Church Member Seeks Discipline (Anyabwile)

- The vast majority of discipline in any church will be positive or formative discipline as people grow from the preached Word, as they study the Scriptures in personal devotion, and as they are shaped by fellowship and encouragement from brethren in Christ.
- No one lives an entire life without the need of discipline, whether positive or corrective. So the healthy church member embraces discipline as one means of grace in the Christian life.
- How do we joyfully seek discipline?
 - Receive the Word with meekness (James 1:21)
 - As we read the Bible, are we reading for information only or with faith that God actually speaks through his Word?
 - When we hear the Word preached, are we generally looking to have a need met (for example, to be entertained or to gather some practical advice) or are we primarily desiring to understand the original meaning of the text and apply it to our lives?
 - Is our first reaction to the Scripture "how does this make me feel?" or "do I accept this as true?" Do we allow our feelings to determine what's true, or do we allow the Scriptures to determine our feelings?



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- Is our listening posture during sermons or Scripture readings defensive or combative, as though we demand someone to “prove it to us”?
- Do we tend to judge other philosophies and viewpoints by the Scripture, or do we try to either reconcile or judge the Scripture by other philosophies and views?
- Learn to recognize chastisement as evidence of God’s love (Hebrews 12:5-6).
- Humbly accept correction from others (Proverbs 27:5-6).
- Take seriously our responsibility to discipline others.
- Don’t forget to rejoice (2 Corinthians 2:6; James 5:19-20).

Mistakes Pastors Make in Practicing Discipline (From Leeman’s book, *Church Discipline*)

- They fail to teach their congregation what church discipline is and why they should practice it.
- They fail to practice meaningful membership, which includes (1) teaching people what membership entails before they join; (2) encouraging casual attenders to join; (3) carefully interviewing everyone who wants to join; (4) giving regular oversight to all the flock; and (5) maintaining an up-to-date membership list that accurately reflects who is present at the weekly gathering.
- They fail to teach their congregation about biblical conversion, especially the need for repentance.
- They fail to teach new members as they enter the church about the possibility of church discipline, and that preemptive resignations don’t work.
- They fail to ensure that the church’s public documents (bylaws, constitution, articles of incorporation, etc.) address the procedures of church discipline, thereby exposing the church to legal risk.
- They fail to follow the steps of Matthew 18 or 1 Corinthians 5, depending on the circumstance. In a Matthew 18 situation, for instance, they fail to begin the process by confronting sin privately.
- They misjudge how quickly to move toward formal discipline, either by dragging their feet or by rushing into judgment.
- They fail to adequately teach and explain to a congregation why a particular act of discipline is necessary.
- They tell the congregation too many details about a particular sin for which they are recommending discipline, embarrassing family members and causing weaker sheep to stumble.
- They treat the processes of church discipline entirely as a legal process with little consideration for shepherding the unrepentant individual’s heart.
- They give little attention to the differences between *kinds* of sinners and how that might affect how long a church should bear with a pattern of sin before proceeding to subsequent stages of discipline (see 1 Thessalonians 5:14).
- They forget that they too live by the gospel’s provision of mercy, and therefore prosecute the discipline from a posture of self-righteousness. Other mistakes follow from this wrong posture, such as an overly severe tone and standoffishness.
- They fail to truly love the sinner...by not begging the Lord for his or her repentance.



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- They demand too much from a smoldering wick or bruised reed. In other words, their stipulations for repentance are too high for someone who has been deeply enslaved in sin's grip.
- They fail to properly instruct the congregation on how to interact with the unrepentant sinner, such as how to relate to him or her in social situations and how to pursue his or her repentance.
- They fail to invite the disciplined individual to continue attending services of the church so that he or she might continue to hear God's Word (assuming there is no threat of criminal harm). Also, they fail to inform the church that everyone should hope for the disciplined individual to continue attending.
- They put the responsibility for leading the discipline process entirely on the shoulders of one man, the senior pastor, thereby, tempting individuals in the church to accuse the senior pastor of being personally vindictive.
- They fail to have sufficient elder involvement in the congregation's life, such that the elders are unaware of the state of the sheep. This failure of formative discipline will inevitably weaken the church's ability to do corrective discipline well.
- They fail to teach God's Word on a weekly basis.
- They allow the congregation to approach a case of discipline with a wrongful spirit of retribution, rather than with the loving desire to warn the unrepentant sinner about God's ultimate retribution to come.
- They pursue discipline on nonbiblical grounds (playing cards, dancing, etc.).
- They pursue discipline for any reason other than for the good of the individual, the good of the church, the good of the onlooking community, and the glory of Christ.