

**10. Describe the role you believe church discipline should play in biblical counseling.**

- **Overview**

- Introduction
- The Goal & Purpose Church Discipline
- Biblical Process of Church Discipline
- The Role of Church Discipline in Biblical Counseling

**I. Introduction**

- A. Adams “Discipline is not easy to do correctly or even to do at all. It involves courage and fortitude. It requires care and precision. It must be done in neither a sloppy nor a careless manner. Therefore the process must be carried on with the knowledge and assurance that what is being done is right in God’s sight. But even though discipline is difficult and runs many risks, churches dare not run the greater risk of withholding a privilege and blessing provided by Christ, thus depriving sinning members of all the help He has provided for them. Nor dare they disobey Him in refusing to follow His program for church discipline lest, in the end, they find themselves disciplined by Him (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:31-32).”<sup>1</sup>
- B. Westerberg “Church discipline is the correct application of those Biblical principles and practices that bring order in the lives of church members and the life of their congregation for God’s glory, the witness of the church, and the blessing of all concerned. . . Churches that practice church discipline will deal with problems as they arise, not giving them the opportunity to grow out of control.”<sup>2</sup>
- C. Three benefits that a church receives if it practices church discipline are (1) maintaining the integrity of the church, (2) providing accountability for a member who becomes caught up in sin, and (3) preserving the testimony of Christ’s name among the world.<sup>3</sup>
- D. Adams “Without peace, learning is impossible. Education depends on order. That is one of the major reasons why in the recent past, and even up to the present, there has been such poor learning in our schools--peace, a chief factor in the learning situation, has been missing. Where there is no peace, there is no learning; 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.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jay Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline: A Right and Privilege of Every Church Member*, 75.

<sup>2</sup> Randy Westerberg, *The Nature of Church Discipline*, a lecture delivered at Cross Pointe Church: 2018 Biblical Counseling Conference.

<sup>3</sup> Randy Westerberg, *The Nature of Church Discipline*, a lecture delivered at Cross Pointe Church: 2018 Biblical Counseling Conference.

<sup>4</sup> Jay Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline: A Right and Privilege of Every Church Member*, 14.

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1. Adams “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. Discipline has a positive function. . . While the positive purpose discipline that grows out of its educational emphasis is good order, it is also the case that this good order leads to the honor of God, the welfare of the church, and where possible, the reclamation of the offender.”<sup>5</sup>

### II. The Goal & Purpose Church Discipline

- A. Westerberg “The goal (of church discipline) is always for the sinner to be restored, to lead the sinner to repentance, to encourage the forsaking of sin, and for full restoration to the church.”<sup>6</sup>
  1. **James 5:19-20** *My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.*
- B. Adams “Church discipline is not intended to get rid of anybody. At every point in the disciplinary process, the whole concern is to bring about reconciliation.”<sup>7</sup>
  1. **1 Corinthians 5:1-2** *It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father’s wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.*
    - a. **1 Corinthians 5:9-13** *I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.”*

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<sup>5</sup> Jay Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline: A Right and Privilege of Every Church Member*, 17-18.

<sup>6</sup> Randy Westerberg, *The Nature of Church Discipline*, a lecture delivered at Cross Pointe Church: 2018 Biblical Counseling Conference.

<sup>7</sup> Jay Adams, *A Theology of Christians Counseling: More Than Redemption*, 287.

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2. **2 Corinthians 2:5-8** *Now if anyone has caused pain, he has cause it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.*
- C. Adams “The purpose of church discipline is to win others back to the Lord and to bring about reconciled conditions between brothers.”<sup>8</sup>
1. Adams “. . . it (church discipline) functions in the educational process to produce righteousness as its fruit, a fruit which, when you bite into it, tastes like peace.”<sup>9</sup>
  2. Adams “. . . the consistent theme of church discipline is concern for the offender. His repentance and reclamation are always to be a hoped-for expectation, and much of the effort expended in properly conducted discipline is directed toward that end.”<sup>10</sup>
  3. **Hebrews 12:5-11** *And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.” It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.*

### D. Two types of Church Discipline

1. The underlying heart attitude of Church Discipline is that of love and a sincere desire to reconcile a fellow believer to a righteous, God-glorifying manner of living. This type of Church Discipline is concerned primarily with an individual believer, although concern for the church at large is also a significant factor.
  - a. **Matthew 18:15-20** *If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.*

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<sup>8</sup> Jay Adams, *A Theology of Christians Counseling: More Than Redemption*, 289.

<sup>9</sup> Jay Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline: A Right and Privilege of Every Church Member*, 14.

<sup>10</sup> Jay Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline: A Right and Privilege of Every Church Member*, 18-19.

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2. Another type of Church Discipline is primarily focused on maintaining the unity of the church. The church is Christ's bride, and she is to be perfect and holy (Eph 5:25-27).
  - a. **Titus 3:9-11** *But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.*

### III. Biblical Process of Church Discipline

#### A. The Steps/Stages of Church Discipline

##### 1. Self-Discipline (*Informal Stages of Church Discipline*)

- a. **Proverbs 25:28** *A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls.*
- b. **1 Corinthians 9:24-27** *Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.*
- c. **Titus 2:11-12** *For the grace of God has appeared, bring salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age,*

##### 2. One-on-One

- a. Confronting a brother or sister in Christ is generally not a pleasant experience. Depending on your personality, or cultural norms (Minnesota nice/passive-aggressive), you may 'instinctually' avoid confrontation at all costs. However, confronting a fellow believer with love, after self reflection, and in a spirit of gentleness, even with the unpleasantness, is what we are called to do as Christians (2 Cor 4:17-18; Eph 4:15; Gal 6:1-2; James 5:19-20).
  - 1) Westerberg "Questions prick the conscience; accusations harden the will."
- b. **Matthew 18:15** *If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.*
  - 1) **Galatians 6:1** *Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you to be tempted.*
  - 2) **Luke 17:3** *Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him,*

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- 3) **Ephesians 5:11** *Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.*

### 3. One or Two Others

- a. **Matthew 18:16** *But if he does not listen, take on or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.*

- 1) Adams “The ‘witnesses’ are not *merely* witnesses. They are first counselors who seek to reunite the two estranged parties. . . They do not appear to be witnesses in this informal stage (to whom would they witness?; they will become witnesses if and when the matter is formally brought before the church. Paul makes it clear that issues may not be entertained by the church unless witnesses are present (2 Cor 13:1).”<sup>11</sup>

- i. **2 Corinthians 13:1** *This is the third time I am coming to you. Every charge must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.*
- ii. **Deuteronomy 19:15** *A lone witness is not sufficient to establish any wrongdoing or sin against a man, regardless of what offense he may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.*

- 2) In reference to church discipline, if a believer approaches a fellow believer and confronts him with some sin, there are, in fact, two or three witnesses present in this exchange. The individual confronting his brother, the individual being confronted, and the Holy Spirit, all of whom bear witness to the offense. However, due to the hardness of the heart of the transgressor, approaching him with two or three individuals ups the ante. This is the point of this step, increase pressure on the transgressor, emphasizing the significance of the transgression and the importance of repenting and reconciling with God.

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<sup>11</sup> Jay Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline: A Right and Privilege of Every Church Member*, 60.

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### 4. **The Church** (*Formal Stages of Church Discipline*)

#### a. **Matthew 18:17a** *If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.*

1) Adams “Obviously, these brief words lack a clear statement about how to carry out Jesus’ instructions; no process for telling the church is even outlined, let alone detailed. Therefore we shall have to piece together the ways and means as best we are able from other passages of Scripture and from an application of the principles of decency and good order that are required by god in 1 Corinthians 14.”<sup>12</sup>

i. **1 Corinthians 14:23-25** *If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and the outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds? But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.*

ii. **1 Timothy 5:20** *As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.*

2) Adams “. . . one must tell the church either at a closed meeting of its membership . . . duly called by the elders in a decent and orderly manner for that purpose, or one does so by telling the elders in their capacity as representatives of the church.”<sup>13</sup>

#### b. Church Leadership

1) This stage should begin by going to local church leadership, as they are entrusted as the shepherds of the church.

i. **1 Peter 5:1-4** *So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.*

2) Adams “There is some indication that the elders themselves, being the first informed about the recalcitrant brother or sister, should seek to persuade him or her about the sin before telling the congregation at large. . . It is one step, in two phases, carried out decently and in order: (A) The elders officially deal with him

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<sup>12</sup> Jay Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline: A Right and Privilege of Every Church Member*, 68.

<sup>13</sup> Jay Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline: A Right and Privilege of Every Church Member*, 69.

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and (B) then, if that is unsuccessful, the entire congregation does so.”<sup>14</sup>

### c. The Local Church

- 1) The specifics of the practical application of this step is debated within the church.
  - i. There are some churches that call a meeting and have the individual who is being disciplined present. They then explain the situation to the church and offer an opportunity for the accused to respond. This approach is rooted in the position that additional pressure can become persuasive and that bringing him before the church body and publicly confronting his lack of repentance will increase the pressure to repent.
  - ii. Other churches believe that once the issue has been elevated to church leadership, and that the individual met with the leaders and is still unwilling to repent, that the next step is for the church to be made aware of the discipline and that they are to be instructed to treat the individual as an unbeliever, encouraging them to repent.

## 5. The World

- a. **Matthew 18:17** *If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*
- b. Adams “If all this fails, he is removed from the midst of the church, and Satan and the world are providentially utilized by God to bring about repentance. . . Thus, in Christ’s plan for discipline an ever-increasing number of persons become involved in the helping process.”<sup>15</sup>
- c. The fundamental goals with this step in the process of church discipline are to (1) allow this individual to indulge his sinful flesh to the point of his own fleshly destruction in the hopes that he will come to his sense and repent of his sinful ways, (2) to remove this disobedient member from the congregation to maintain the integrity of the church body and promote holiness from within, and (3) to serve as a warning to the rest of the congregation of where the path of transgressions lead.
  - 1) **1 Timothy 1:18-20** *This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.*

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<sup>14</sup> Jay Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline: A Right and Privilege of Every Church Member*, 70.

<sup>15</sup> Jay Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline: A Right and Privilege of Every Church Member*, 71.

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2) **1 Corinthians 5:4-5** *When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.*

d. What if you remove the individual from your congregation and never repent?

1) **1 John 2:19** *They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.*

### 6. **Restoring Fellowship**

a. **2 Corinthians 2:2-8** *For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained? And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all. For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you. Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.*

1) Adams “These are wonderful verses. The love, the concern, the tenderness exhibited in them is remarkable. Paul can be stern, but he can also be tender. . . Some had been inclined to allow the offender too much freedom, not thinking it necessary to remove him from the church. . . Now, to any who would put the repentant brother on the spit and slowly turn him over the fire before accepting him back in the church, he says, ‘He’s had enough; don’t go on with the punishment. Be careful he isn’t overwhelmed by it.’ This balance is rare in the church. Too often church are weighted toward one or the other of these two extremes. To strike the proper balance is difficult.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Jay Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline: A Right and Privilege of Every Church Member*, 92.

IV. **The Roles of Church Discipline in Biblical Counseling**

A. A Right and a Privilege of a Christian

1. Adams “Every believer in Jesus Christ has the right to be disciplined. Counselee’s may say, ‘That’s the kind of right I can do without.’ No, they can’t. Church discipline is extremely important.”<sup>17</sup>

B. A Layer of Loving Accountability

1. Church discipline is an essential benefit that is provided by the church in the counseling process. In the case of church discipline, the church provides an additional layer of accountability. This layer is built on the friendships and relationships that were established as a result of the fellowship that inherently accompanies regular church attendance.
2. The church provides accountability for its members. Habitual patterns of sin can be extremely difficult to break, even for a believer that is seeking repentance and restoration.<sup>18</sup>
3. **Galatians 6:1-2** *Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.*
4. **James 5:16** *Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.*

C. A Promise of Confidentiality

1. Adams “The implication of this biblical requirement to seek additional help in order to reclaim an offender is that Christians must never promise absolute confidentiality to any person. Frequently in is the practice of Bible-believing Christians to give assurances of absolute confidentiality, never realizing that they are following a policy that originated in the Middle Ages and that is unbiblical and contrary to Scripture (there is not a scrap of evidence in the Bible for the practice).”<sup>19</sup>
  - a. If you understand the process of church discipline, it becomes clear that a promise of absolute confidentiality is not biblical. The process of church discipline is antithetical to confidentiality. As the discipline takes its course, it widens its reach to more and more Christians, eventually expanding the entire world. As biblical counselors, we cannot promise absolute confidentiality for the sake of church discipline.

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<sup>17</sup> Jay Adams, *A Theology of Christians Counseling: More Than Redemption*, 288.

<sup>18</sup> Heath Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 311.

<sup>19</sup> Jay Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline: A Right and Privilege of Every Church Member*, 30.

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- b. However, remember that the reason for church discipline is not necessarily the sin issue that began the process, but rather the sin of unrepentance. If the individual is unwilling to reconcile and repent, it's that sin that necessitates the progression of church discipline. Therefore, it would be inappropriate to tell the whole church the specifics of the initial sin issue when a member is being put out. Instead, announcing the lack of repentance and an unwillingness to reconcile will suffice.

### V. Suggested Reading

- A. **Jay Adams, Handbook of Church Discipline.**
- B. **Jay Adams, A Theology of Christian Counseling: More Than Redemption, 286-294.**
- C. **Heath Lambert, A Theology of Biblical Counseling, 304-314.**
- D. **Jay Adams, The Christians Counselor's Manual, 54-62.**
- E. **Jonathan Leeman, Church Discipline.**
- F. Jonathan Leeman, Church Membership: How The World Knows Who Represents Jesus, 107-121.
- G. Wayne Mack, "Biblical Counseling and Inducement," in Counseling: How to Counsel Biblically, 268-284.
- H. Bill Goode, "Biblical Counseling and the Local Church," in Counseling: How To Counsel Biblically, 222-230.