

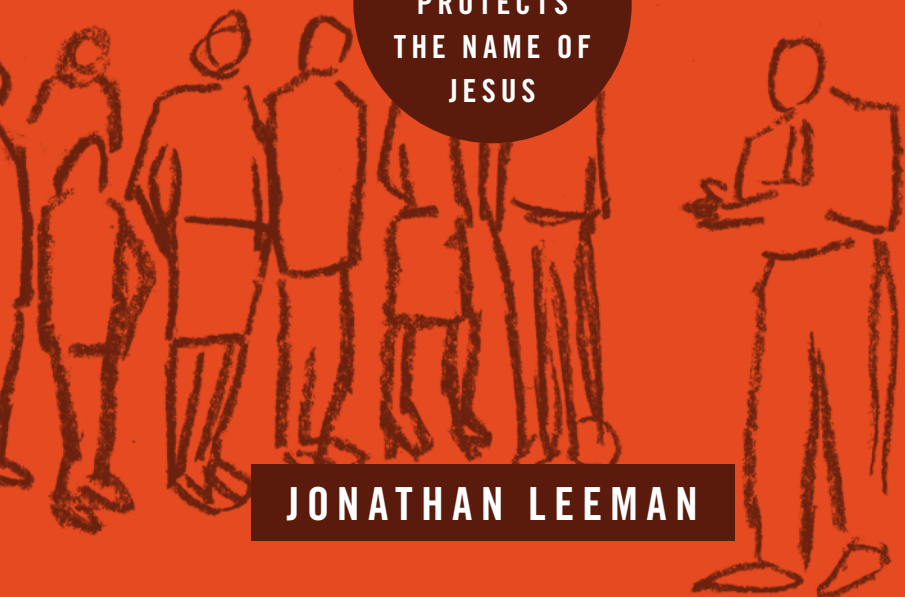
**IX** 9Marks

BUILDING HEALTHY CHURCHES

# CHURCH DISCIPLINE

HOW  
THE CHURCH  
PROTECTS  
THE NAME OF  
JESUS

JONATHAN LEEMAN



*Church Discipline: How the Church Protects the Name of Jesus*

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# SERIES PREFACE

Do you believe it's your responsibility to help build a healthy church? If you are a Christian, we believe that it is.

Jesus commands you to make disciples (Matt. 28:18–20). Jude says to build yourselves up in the faith (Jude 20–21). Peter calls you to use your gifts to serve others (1 Pet. 4:10). Paul tells you to speak the truth in love so that your church will become mature (Eph. 4:13, 15). Do you see where we are getting this?

Whether you are a church member or leader, the Building Healthy Churches series of books aims to help you fulfill such biblical commands and so play your part in building a healthy church. Another way to say it might be, we hope these books will help you grow in loving your church like Jesus loves your church.

9Marks plans to produce a short, readable book on each of what we call the nine marks of a healthy church, plus one more on sound doctrine. Watch for books on expositional preaching, biblical theology, the gospel, conversion, evangelism, church membership, church discipline, discipleship and growth, and church leadership.

Local churches exist to display God's glory to the nations. We do that by fixing our eyes on the gospel of Jesus Christ, trusting him for salvation, and then loving one another with

*Series Preface*

God's own holiness, unity, and love. We pray the book you are holding will help.

With hope,  
Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman  
Series editors

# THE BIBLICAL BASICS OF DISCIPLINE

What is church discipline? In broad terms, church discipline is one part of the discipleship process, the part where we correct sin and point the disciple toward the better path. To be *discipled* is, among other things, to be *disciplined*. And a Christian is disciplined through instruction and correction, as in a math class where the teacher teaches the lesson and then corrects the students' errors.

It's for this reason that there's a centuries-old practice of referring to both formative discipline and corrective discipline. Formative discipline helps to form the disciple through instruction. Corrective discipline helps to correct the disciple through correcting sin. This book focuses on corrective discipline, but teaching and correction always work together. That's the nature of discipleship.

In more specific and formal terms, church discipline 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

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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.

To be clear, then, I will treat these terms synonymously: "to excommunicate" is "to exclude from fellowship," which is to "remove from the Lord's Table," which is "to formally discipline." Some people treat one or two of these things as different stages in the process; I do not.

## JESUS ON DISCIPLINE

Many texts in the New Testament point to the practice of church discipline. The most well known is probably from Matthew's Gospel. Jesus says,

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that "every matter may be established by the testimony 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, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. (Matt. 18:15–17, NIV)

On the surface, Jesus appears to have two concerns: first, that the sinner repents; second, that the number of people involved remain as small as necessary for producing repentance. Beneath these concerns is the deeper conviction that the church should look different than the world—Christians are not to live like pagans or tax collectors. Matthew's Jewish



audience would have understood “pagan” to represent those who were outside the covenant community and “tax collector” to represent those who had betrayed the covenant community (and were therefore also outside the community). Church members should live differently than the world. And if, after a series of gracious warnings, they don’t, a church should exclude them from its fellowship.

The sin described here is an interpersonal one: “against you.” Yet I believe we often overemphasize the significance of this detail. The issue here is whether the individual is repentant and to be treated as a brother or sister in Christ. The larger point in these verses is that local churches have the authority to assess professions of faith and to act accordingly: “if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask” (Matt. 18:19). In other words, churches can employ the process of church discipline described in verses 15 to 17 to sins more broadly.

In short, Jesus means for churches to play a judicial function. He draws the language about “two or three witnesses” from Deuteronomy 19, a passage where Moses laid out rules of procedure for judging criminal cases. When faced with people who claim to represent Jesus with their lips but who live contrariwise, churches must carefully weigh the evidence and render judgment. “Is this a valid gospel profession? Is this a true gospel professor? What does the evidence suggest?”

## **THE APOSTLES ON DISCIPLINE**

The apostle Paul also invokes church discipline in a number of places:

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Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. (Gal. 6:1)

Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. (Eph. 5:11)

Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. (Titus 3:10, NIV)

If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother. (2 Thess. 3:14–15)

John encourages something like preemptive discipline by not letting someone participate in the fellowship of the church in the first place:

Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting. (2 John 9–10)

Peter also presents us with a clear example of preemptive discipline (Acts 8:17–24).

### DISCIPLINE IN CORINTH

One last famous passage on church discipline is 1 Corinthians 5. Paul lays out the sin and his reaction to it in the first few verses of the chapter:

### *The Biblical Basics of Discipline*

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.

For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. (1 Cor. 5:1–3)

What's striking about Paul's counsel is how it both overlaps and does not overlap with Jesus's counsel in Matthew 18. Like Jesus, Paul encourages the church to play a judicial function. He even uses the words "judgment" or "judge" several times (1 Cor. 5:3, 12–13). Like Jesus, Paul is addressing a scenario where someone professing the name of Jesus could be removed from the church body. Unlike Jesus, however, Paul does not tell the church to warn the man and call him to repentance, like Jesus advises in Matthew 18. He simply tells the church to remove him—no questions asked. We'll discuss the rationale for this in chapter 3.

In the ensuing verses, Paul more carefully describes what this act of discipline should look like:

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. (1 Cor. 5:4–5)

To hand the man over to Satan is to treat him, in Jesus's words, like a pagan or tax collector; it's to treat him as someone who no longer belongs to the covenant community.

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The church, after all, is an outpost of the kingdom of God. Everyone who does not belong to the kingdom of God, therefore, belongs to the kingdom of Satan. Satan is the prince of this world, and the kingdoms of the world temporarily belong to him (John 12:31; 14:30; Matt. 4:8–9).

Paul next observes that failing to remove the man from the church puts the whole church at risk:

Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

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. (1 Cor. 5:6–11)

In the final verses of the chapter, Paul reiterates the fact that the church has a judicial role to play in this man's life: "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'" (vv. 12–13).

## **THE PURPOSE OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE**

First Corinthians 5 is especially helpful for discerning the purposes of church discipline. We can observe at least five. First, discipline aims *to expose*. Sin, like cancer, loves to hide. Discipline exposes the cancer so that it might be cut out quickly (see 1 Cor. 5:2).

Second, discipline aims *to warn*. A church does not enact God's retribution through discipline. Rather, it stages a small play that pictures the great judgment to come (v. 5). Discipline is a compassionate warning.

Third, it aims *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 for bringing an individual to repentance (v. 5).

Fourth, discipline aims *to protect*. Just as cancer spreads from one cell to another, so sin quickly spreads from one person to another (v. 6).

Fifth, it aims *to present a good witness for Jesus*. Church discipline, strange to say, is actually good for non-Christians, because it helps to preserve the attractive distinctiveness of God's people (see v. 1). Churches, remember, should be salt and light. "But if the salt loses its saltiness . . .," Jesus said, "It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled by men" (Matt. 5:13, NIV).

## **THE NEED FOR A GOSPEL FRAMEWORK**

It's this last purpose that points to the need for a larger theological framework for knowing how to approach church discipline.

## CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Consider the dilemma raised by the topic of church discipline. Church discipline, we said, centers on the idea of *correcting sin*. But the Christian gospel, most would agree, centers on the idea of *forgiving sin*. If God forgives sin, why would we need to worry about correcting sin? Christians, too, are called to forgive others. What then would be the purpose of correcting one another's sin?

A thinned-out gospel that speaks only of forgiveness and unconditional love does not have the resources for addressing this surface-level tension. As a result, sin goes unaddressed, and churches begin to shadow the world.

However, a more robust gospel addresses not only the guilt-problem of sin, it addresses the corruption-problem of sin with the promise of a new nature. It also places the gospel within the larger biblical story line of God's purposes for humankind to represent him.

God tasked Adam with imaging him through ruling over creation, but Adam failed. So did Israel. So did Israel's king, David. But then came one who imaged God—perfectly. The good news of the gospel is that God has made a way for us to be restored to God and to his original purpose for our lives—reigning together with Jesus over all creation. He promises a pardon from guilt through the work of his Son as well as a new law-obeying nature through the work of his Spirit. It's within this framework that church discipline makes sense, as we now consider.

# A GOSPEL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING DISCIPLINE

Suppose an American football player joined some friends for a game of soccer. Then, midgame, he reached down and picked up the soccer ball and began to run with it. The referee no doubt would blow his whistle and call a foul.

At this point, the American football player might look back at the referee with bewilderment on his face. Why the whistle? Why the foul? He was simply doing what he always does—grab the ball and run.

In response, one could explain to the American football player that, except for the goalie, soccer players cannot touch the ball with their hands. Now, get back to the game and don't make that mistake again.

Or one could take a little more time to explain how the game of soccer works. Soccer is by definition a game for the feet, not the hands. The very thing which makes soccer fascinating to watch is the ability of skillful players to exert control over the ball without ever using their hands. It's not

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without reason that every nation in the world except America calls the game “football.” The American football player didn’t just break a rule; he broke a rule that defines the game’s very purpose.

Church discipline, likewise, can be described in two ways. One can describe it as the act of correcting sin, like blowing a whistle against a foul in the Christian life. Or, better, one can try to understand the act of blowing the whistle within the larger framework of the gospel, the church, and the purposes of the Christian life. Placing the act of discipline into this larger theological framework—what I’m calling a gospel framework—will help us exercise the discernment that is inevitably required amidst the many circumstances of sin in a church.

Lying, for instance, is a “foul.” Does that mean the whole church needs to get involved every time a member lies? Of course not. So much depends on all the circumstances surrounding the lie or lies: How consequential is it? Is the individual persisting in it? Is it a pattern?

Somewhere there’s a line in between a lie worth addressing in private and a lie worth addressing in public. How do we know when that line is crossed? That’s the practical challenge of church discipline. That’s precisely where so much wisdom is required.

My contention is that church leaders will be better equipped to figure out where that line falls if they understand their corrective activity within a larger gospel framework. The gospel helps us to gauge when to speak and when to stay silent, when to act and when not to act.



## **WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?**

Establishing a framework for church discipline requires us to understand (1) the gospel, (2) what a Christian is, (3) what a local church is, and (4) what church membership means.

What is the gospel? I offered one sketch in the preface. Let me fill it out just a bit here. The gospel is good news that comes at the end of a long story about human beings rebelling against God and enthroning themselves over his world. God created humankind in his image in order to represent his rule and character over creation. He constituted them in his image, so that they could image him. He called them to rule obediently, so that they could rule like he rules: with goodness, justice, holiness, and love.

But humanity decided it was wiser than God, and people chose to rule themselves. They corrupted their own natures and earned the penalty of death. The story of Israel is this creation and fall story writ large. A group of people were given all the advantages of God's law and God's presence for the purposes of representing him, but they did their own thing instead. So he cast them out of his land.

The good news, which comes at the end of this sad story, is that one of Adam's and Israel's sons came to do what neither Adam nor Israel could do: rule obediently and win a people for God. He who was the very image of God came as a man and established a kingdom by obeying the heavenly Father to the utmost. But not only did he establish a kingdom; he won a people for this kingdom by laying down his life as a payment for the guilt of sin, and then rising from the dead and inaugurating a whole new creation.

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The good news, in short, is that Jesus Christ has won salvation and rule for all who put their trust in him and follow him as Lord. Salvation includes the forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God in Christ, reconciliation with Christ's people, and a new Spirit-indwelt heart that now wants to rule obediently for the purposes of representing Jesus on earth.

### WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

What is a Christian? There are several ways to describe what a Christian is. For starters, it's someone who has been forgiven and united to God through the new covenant in Christ's blood. And it's someone who has been given a new nature by the Spirit (see Deut. 30:6–8; Jeremiah 31; Ezek. 36:24–27).

But there's more to a Christian than a new status and a new nature. A Christian has a new family. He or she, by definition, is now a member of a people. To be reconciled to Christ, by definition, means to be reconciled to Christ's people (Eph. 3:6). Paul makes this connection by linking the first half of Ephesians 2 with the second half. First, he tells us that we have been saved by grace (Eph. 1:1–10). Second, he tells us that the dividing wall of partition between Jew and Gentile has fallen, creating one new man (vv. 11–22). To be adopted by a mother and father is to be given a whole new set of brothers and sisters. So it is with Christianity. Whether we were aware that we were joining a new family or not, our adoption into Christ is an adoption into a family.

So a Christian has a new status, a new nature, a new family, and, finally, a new job description. A Christian is someone who now represents Jesus and therefore God. This is

precisely the message of baptism and the Lord's Supper. To be baptized is to identify ourselves with the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as well as to identify ourselves with Christ's death and resurrection (Matt. 28:19; Rom. 6:4–5). To receive the Lord's Supper is to proclaim his death and our membership in his body (1 Cor. 11:26–29; see Matt. 26:26–29). God wants his people to be known and marked off. He wants a line between his people and the world. He wants us to be holy because he is holy. Christians represent him now—today!

A Christian, in other words, is someone who wears the name of God on earth, who declares his gospel, and who is united to his people. In essence, the Christian is an ambassador—someone whose identity and work meld together. Everything that an ambassador is, says, and does represents his or her king. So it is with Christians and Christ.

## **WHAT IS A LOCAL CHURCH?**

How about the local church? What is it? A local church is more than just a gathering of Christians. Ten Christians sitting together in the park do not constitute a church. Jesus has given a kingdom authority to Christians gathered together as a local church that he has not given to individual Christians. Specifically, he has given local churches the authority to exercise the keys of the kingdom through giving and withholding baptism and the Lord's Supper, thereby doing the work of marking off God's people from the world.

This is the picture we first get in Matthew 16 and 18, and then in Matthew 28; this picture then turns into a motion

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picture in the book of Acts and the Epistles. Jesus authorizes the local church to use the keys of the kingdom to stand in front of a confessor, to consider the confessor's confession, to consider his or her life, and to announce an official judgment on heaven's behalf. Is that the right confession? Is this a true confessor? The local church follows Jesus's example of questioning Peter, who declared that Jesus was the Christ (Matt. 16:16–17). Specifically, the church carries out its task through the ordinances that are established in Matthew 26 and Matthew 28: the Lord's Supper and baptism.<sup>1</sup>

The local church, in other words, has heaven's authority for declaring who is a kingdom citizen and therefore represents Jesus's name on earth. Jesus has not authorized individual people to suddenly decide that they're Christians, and to then stand before the nations and declare that they represent Jesus. The people of Jerusalem ask Peter what they had to do to be saved. He replied, "Repent and be baptized" (Acts 2:38). They needed the Jerusalem church's official affirmation.

We should remember that the local church's power is declaratory. A church does not *make* someone a citizen of the kingdom. But it does have the responsibility for declaring who does and who does not belong to Christ's kingdom. A church, then, is like the embassy of a nation. If your passport expires while traveling in a foreign country, you apply to the

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<sup>1</sup>I offer a longer explanation and defense for my interpretation of these passages and the definitions offered here in chapter 3 of *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012). An even fuller defense can be found in chapter 4 of my *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love: Reinroducing the Doctrines of Membership and Discipline* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

embassy of your country to have your passport renewed. The embassy has an authority that you as an individual citizen do not have.

Of course, the church is more than an institution with kingdom authority. It's also a "body," a "family," a "flock," a "temple," a "pillar and buttress of truth," and more. But we must not overlook the fact that it is also the *institution* on earth *instituted* by Jesus with authority for declaring who his citizens or ambassadors are.

To define the local church institutionally, then, we could say that it is a group of Christians who regularly gather in Christ's name to officially affirm and oversee one another's membership in Jesus Christ and his kingdom through gospel preaching and gospel ordinances.

As such, Christians do not "join" churches like they join clubs, they submit to them. The church is not an absolute authority, any more than a parent is an absolute authority for a child. But Christ does want Christians to submit to the oversight of local churches by virtue of their citizenship in his kingdom.

Will the local church exercise the keys perfectly? No. It will make mistakes, just like every other authority established by Jesus makes mistakes. The local church is an imperfect representation of Christ's end-time gathering. But the fact that it makes mistakes, just like presidents and parents do, does not mean it is without an authoritative mandate.

In all of this, it should be clear that one of the church's primary jobs is to protect the name of Jesus.

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### WHAT IS CHURCH MEMBERSHIP?

What then is church membership? It's a declaration of citizenship in Christ's kingdom. It's a passport. It's an announcement made in the pressroom of Christ's kingdom. It's the declaration that a professing individual is an official, licensed, card-carrying, bona fide Jesus representative.

More concretely, church membership is a formal relationship between a local church and a Christian characterized by the church's affirmation and oversight of a Christian's discipleship and the Christian's submission to living out his or her discipleship in the care of the church.

Notice that several elements are present:

- a church body formally *affirms* an individual's profession of faith and baptism as credible;
- it promises to *give oversight* to that individual's discipleship;
- the individual formally *submits* his or her discipleship to the service and authority of this body and its leaders.

The church body says to the individual, "We recognize your profession of faith, baptism, and discipleship to Christ as valid. Therefore, we publicly *affirm* and acknowledge you before the nations as belonging to Christ, and we extend the *oversight* of our fellowship." Principally, the individual says to the church body, "Insofar as I recognize you as a faithful, gospel-declaring church, I *submit* my presence and my discipleship to your love and oversight."

The standards for church membership should be no higher or lower than the standards for being a Christian, with one exception. A Christian is someone who has repented and

believed, and that's who churches should affirm as members. The only additional requirement is baptism. Church members must be baptized, a pattern that is uniform in the New Testament. Peter said to the crowds in Jerusalem, "Repent and be baptized" (Acts 2:38). And Paul, writing to the church in Rome, simply assumes that everyone who belongs to the Roman church has been baptized (Rom. 6:1–3).

Church membership, in other words, is not about "additional requirements." It's about a church taking specific responsibility for a Christian, and a Christian for a church. It's about "putting on," "embodying," "living out," and "making concrete" our membership in Christ's universal body. In some ways, the union which constitutes a local church and its members is like the "I do" of a marriage ceremony, which is why some refer to church membership as a "covenant."

It's true that a Christian must choose to join a church, but that does not make it a voluntary organization. Having chosen Christ, a Christian has no choice but to choose to join a church.

## **A FULLER CONCEPT OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE**

The preceding discussion on the gospel, the Christian, the church, and church membership provides the framework through which church discipline should be understood. Let me draw out four elements from this discussion that provide important foundational assumptions for church discipline:

- 1) *An expectation of transformation.* The new covenant promises that Christ's people will live transformed lives through the

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power of the Spirit. Even if change comes slowly, churches should expect change—the visible fruit of God's grace and Spirit. Discipline is the right response to a lack of visible fruit, or, even more, the presence of bad fruit.

- 2) *The work of representation.* Christians are to be little Christs, representing Jesus on earth. The concept of representation depends on the idea that Jesus is Savior *and* Lord; it depends on the fact that Christians are given a new status *and* a new work. Discipline is the right response when Christians fail to represent Jesus and show no desire for doing so.
- 3) *The local church's authority.* Jesus gave the local church the authority of the keys to officially affirm and oversee citizens of his kingdom. Churches do not *make* people Christians. The Spirit does that. But churches have the declarative authority and responsibility for making public statements before the nations about who is and isn't a Christian. A church's act of excommunication, therefore, does not consist of physically and forcibly removing the individual from its public gatherings, as if the church had the state's power of the sword to physically move people's bodies; rather, it consists of the public statement that it can no longer vouch for an individual's citizenship in heaven. Excommunication is a church's declaration that it can no longer affirm that an individual is a Christian.
- 4) *Membership as submission.* Christians are called, as a matter of obedience to Christ, to submit to the affirmation and oversight of local churches. When threatened by a possible act of discipline, therefore, church members cannot simply preempt the church's action with a resignation. That would be analogous to an individual resigning his national citizenship before a court could prosecute the criminal activity for which he had been indicted.

When we view church discipline through this theological



grid, we gain a fuller understanding. It's not just about correcting sin or blowing whistles. It's about correcting sin for the purposes of ensuring that church members are indeed representing Jesus rightly. It's about calling them to be what they claim to be.

Discipline therefore revolves around the question of who on earth is licensed or authorized to represent heaven. To call oneself a Christian is to profess to have that right. To be a church member is to be formally affirmed as having that right. The local church, Jesus's key-carrying institution, vouches for the credibility of a Christian's profession through baptism and the Lord's Supper. Church discipline comes into play whenever that credibility is called into question. It's driven by a single question: does the church still believe an erring member is really a Christian, such that it's willing to continue declaring so publicly?

In short, church discipline is all about the reputation of Jesus on earth. The stakes are high indeed.



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