

Church Discipline

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Institution and Goal of Church Discipline

It is the task of the Christian church to investigate, proclaim and preserve the contents of its faith, and to keep its standard of conduct pure. This means discharging duty and upholding right at the same time, duty and right in defending/protecting the truth and in correcting error. Both are aspects of pastoral care. Therefore, pastoral care includes discipline and in a broader sense can be viewed as synonymous with it.¹

Strictly speaking, church discipline is the last resort of pastoral care. For example, we refer to a vote of censure or a vote to disfellowship (to drop from membership)² in the case of permanent obstinacy and impenitence. These actions may be called for not only over doctrinal matters (dissemination of heresy) but also over questions of behavior (open violation of Christian ethics) in order to preserve the reputation of the church.³

However, church discipline (no matter how thorough) can never produce “a perfect church for it has to ignore secret sins and hypocrisy.”⁴ As a matter of fact, the church has never achieved its ideal.⁵ Thus, only objective and open transgressions of God’s Word and commandments can be the subject of discipline.

Church discipline was instituted by Jesus Christ,⁶ introduced into the churches by the apostles,⁷ and exercised by the authority of the local churches themselves.⁸ True discipline issues from God’s holiness and calls to the church to reflect Him (Lev 19:2; 2 Cor 6:16-18). The final objective is reform (2 Cor 13:10) and reincorporation of the erring member (Matt 18:15; 2 Cor 2:1-11).⁹

¹ See Eduard Thurneysen, *Die Lehre von der Seelsorge* (Ziollikon-Zurich: Evangel. Verlag, 1957), § 2 Seelsorge als Kirchengzucht (Pastoral Care as Church Discipline).

² The biblical terms are: *ekballō* (to cast out, 3 John 10), *deō* and *luō* (to bind and to loose, Matt 16:19), to treat someone like a pagan (*ethnikōs*) and a publican (*telōnēs*, Matt 18:17), *airō* (to take away, 1 Cor 5:2) or *exairō* (1 Cor 5:13), *paraitēomai* (to reject, Titus 3:10), *aphiēmi* and *krateō* (to remit and to retain, John 20:23), and to deliver someone unto Satan (1 Cor 5:5; 1 Tim 1:20). The expression *excommunicare* (to excommunicate) occurs for the first time in Augustine (Sermo 165, chap. 6). See Georg May, “Bann IV,” in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, ed. Gerhard Krause and Gerhard Mueller (Berlin, 1980), 5:170.

³ E. G. White: “Health and purity of the church must be preserved, that she may stand before God unsullied, clad in the robes of Christ’s righteousness” (*Gospel Workers* [Washington, DC, 1915], 501). “If there were no church discipline and government, the church would go to fragments; it could not hold together as a body” (Id., *Testimonies for the Church* 3 [Mountain View, CA, 1885]: 428). Cf. J. Calvin, *Institutio*, 4:12, 1.

⁴ R. N. Caswell, “Excommunication,” in *The New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas (London, 1962), 402.

⁵ Acts 1:6; Rom 14:15; 1 Cor 5:6; Gal 6:1. Rev 2-3.

⁶ Matt 16:19; 18:12-18; John 20:23.

⁷ Rom 16:17; 1 Cor 5:1-5, 9-13; 2 Thess 3:6, 14, 15; 1 Tim 1:20; 5:20; Titus 3:10-11; 2 John 8-11.

⁸ Matt 18:17; 1 Cor 5:13. Gordon D. Fee: “Church discipline is not the affair of one or a few. Even though Paul as an apostle pronounced the sentence prophetically, the sin itself was known by all and had contaminated the whole; so the action was to be the affair of all.” “The First Epistle to the Corinthians, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids, 1987), 7:213-14. See also Julius Schniewind, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, in *Das Neue Testament Deutsch*, ed. Paul Althaus and Johannes Behm, 13th ed. (Göttingen, 1984), 2:199. E. G. White, “On the church has been conferred the power to act in Christ’s stead” (*Gospel Workers*, 501).

⁹ E. G. White: “All possible effort should be made to effect a reconciliation” (*Testimonies* 5 [Mountain View, CA, 1889]: 241). According to Calvin, there is a threefold purpose in church discipline (*Inst.* 4:12, 5): (1) the preservation of the reputation of the church, (2) the protection of the member in good standing, and (3) the conversion and reintegration of the sinner.

Pastoral Concern

Church discipline is not an act of revenge and condemnation. It does not have a juridical character but a pastoral one. This is demonstrated:

1. By the meaning of the word “discipline” which signifies “school” and by its obvious equation with “pastoral care.”¹⁰ Therefore, discipline at its outset is a matter of teaching and learning, of advice, admonition, discernment and consolation.
2. By the lack of any kind of casuistry with its correspondent retributions.¹¹
3. By the responsibility the whole congregation bears.
4. By its motive (agape: love), and goal (reconciliation).
5. By its theological character. For example, church discipline is rooted in the Word of God and therefore in Jesus Christ. The Word of God guides to repentance and sanctification.¹²
6. By its effects. The exercise of church discipline in a compassionate and responsible spirit shows a living church which cares for its members.

Thus, church discipline can be interpreted as “brotherly duty.” The whole church bears responsibility for the open sin of one of its members (1 Cor 5:2; 1 Thess 5:11, 15), and the individual participates in the general responsibility for the brothers and sisters (Gal 6:1; 1 John 5:16). At any rate, the brother’s sin and trespass is never an hour for triumph but a challenge for service!

This is a general principle and is not to be limited simply to cases of personal offense (Matt 18:15).¹³ Every Christian has to manifest the Saviour’s pastoral attitude, caring for the “lost sheep.”¹⁴ On each of the disciples first, and then on the whole congregation, is conferred the pastoral duty of admonition and pardon. Every disciple has the right and duty to administer God’s pastoral counsel, and every disciple has an obligation to listen to his brother and sister (Matt 18:15), to his brethren (vs. 16) and to the whole congregation (vs. 17).

The authority of the binding and loosing power of the gospel is given to all Christians (vs. 18). However, the responsibility of binding is greater than that of loosing (vss. 16-17). Binding does not belong to the individual’s authority; it requires the assistance of witnesses (vs. 16)¹⁵ and finally the action of the local congregation (which *alone* has the right to excommunicate) is required if a member is to be cut off from communion (vs. 17b). Only within the assembly of the witnesses and the congregation is Christ present with His authority (vs. 19).

But this binding and loosing authority does not reside in the church membership itself, but in the “keys” which Christ entrusted to the church (Matt 16:19), that is, in the Word of God (Luke 11:52). Only a church guided by the Word and the Spirit can avoid the dangers of wrongly conceived and exercised church discipline that might be prompted by lack of compassion, self-righteousness, hypocrisy, or pettiness.

¹⁰ Although *paideia* (upbringing, training) and *paideuō* (instruct, discipline, discipline with punishment) refer in most of the cases to God (1 Cor 11:32; Eph 6:4; 2 Tim 3:16; Titus 2:12), the disciple has the duty to instruct (*paideuō*, 2 Tim 2:25).

¹¹ Hellenistic communities and Jewish synagogues penalized by fines or corporal punishment (2 Cor 11:24). Later ecclesiastical discipline acted in the same way. The primitive church rejected such means of violence. The erring member was not excluded from the brotherly service of admonition and the Christian service of mission. See Albrecht Oepke, *Die kleineren Briefe des Apostels Paulus*, in *Das Neue Testament Deutsch* 8:185.

¹² According to J. Calvin, doctrine is the “soul” and discipline is like the “tendons” of the church body (*Institutes* 4:12, 1).

¹³ The better manuscripts (B, Aleph) read, “If your brother sins” and omit “against you,” which is only found in younger manuscripts (e.g., D).

¹⁴ The “brother” who “errs” is evidently the same as the “one sheep” that “went astray” (Matt 18:12-14). *The SDA Bible Commentary*, ed. F. D. Nichol (Washington, DC, 1980), 5:447.

¹⁵ Cf. Deut 19:15; 2 Cor 13:1; 1 Tim 5:19; Heb 10:28, 29

If church discipline is “brotherly duty” it also is “missionary duty.” The excommunicated person is neither condemned nor separated forever. Considered as a “heathen man and a publican” (Matt 18:17, KJV), he evidently does not belong to the community anymore, but he is nevertheless an object of care, an object of new missionary activity. Jesus did not accept pagans and publicans as such, but He did not reject them (Luke 15:1). He ate with them (Luke 15:2). He called them to follow Him (Matt 9:9); He preferred them to the impenitent priests and elders (Matt 21:31); and the publicans recognized God’s gracious call by being baptized (Luke 7:29; Matt 21:32).

The excommunicated person is in the class to which he belonged before becoming a member of the church. Esteem, love, and faithfulness for persons outside the Christian community not only excludes every form of social discrimination and civil persecution, but also demands an intensive endeavor to reach those who have gone astray.

Differing from His Jewish contemporaries’ estimate of pagans and publicans (often discriminated against and condemned), Jesus accepted sinners. He repeatedly appealed to them, kindly called them to repent and to follow him. Thus, the excommunicated church member is not considered a “son of perdition” like Judas who closed his probation (John 17:12), but as a “pagan and publican” (Matt 18:17), a person outside of the community until he/she becomes sensible and returns to it.

Just as sinners are called to draw near to God through the proclamation of the gospel, so in the same manner the former member is to be challenged to repent and to return through personal admonition. Thus, the passage (Matt 18:21-35) that directly follows the guidelines on binding and loosing speaks of compassion and pardon. This missionary task can only be accomplished by faith (Luke 17:1-6) and love (Matt 18:12-14), through prayer (Matt 18:19-20) and the Word of God (2 Tim 3:16; Titus 1:9).

Firm in faith and life, the church has to act in compassion and humility (Matt 7:1-5; Gal 6:1) in order not to discourage the sinner (2 Cor 2:5-8), and not to err by its own pride (1 Pet 5:5b). Church discipline is, therefore, not intended to function as an exclusion from salvation, but as a warning of possible perdition unless conversion takes place.

Biblical Foundations

Matthew 18:15-18. This is the basic passage in question. The three-step procedure has a striking resemblance to Qumran discipline (see 1 QS 5:25–6:1). But it lacks the Essene casuistry and recognizes only one kind of excommunication which is complete but reversible. In both instances, however, the final authority is based within the congregation.¹⁶

The “binding” and “loosing” (vs. 18) refer back to the “keys” in Matthew 16:19.¹⁷ This means the authority of administering God’s Word with its power of judgment and grace.¹⁸ In Jewish understanding it can have two meanings:¹⁹

1. Halachic teaching: a declaration of what is prohibited (bound) and allowed (loosed).
2. Judgment authority: exercise and release of the ban (censure/excommunication).

¹⁶ See C. H. Hunzinger, “Bann II,” in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 5:165. The view of Joachim Jeremias for whom authority was based only within the twelve and not within the entire church (*Theologisches Wörterbuch zum NT*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, [Stuttgart, 1938], 3:751) is rejected by most of the NT scholars, e.g., Th. Zahn, A. Schlatter, W. Grundmann.

¹⁷ J. Jeremias, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum NT* 3:751. „Wo das Wort verkündigt wird, wird Schlüsselgewalt ausgeübt.” H. Thyen, J. Heubach, “Schlüsselgewalt” in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, ed. K. Galling, 3rd ed. (Tübingen, 1961), 5:1450.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 751.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 750.

It is in this last sense that Matthew 18 should be understood.²⁰ When the gospel message is rejected, it binds the transgressor to his unforgiven sin (Acts 8:18-24; John 3:36) in view of the future judgment; or if accepted, looses him from sin (Luke 24:47; Acts 13:38). Such a sentence is recognized by Heaven.²¹

But the final separation between those who are declared free and those who are declared bound is determined exclusively by God's ultimate judgment, for He alone has the capacity, the right, and the power to pronounce the final sentence. God's ultimate binding (Matt 22:13), which means condemnation, has to be distinguished from the congregation's binding, which means disapproval and referral to the Divine judgment.

The three steps outlined in the disciplining process rest on, (1) the compassion and faith, the self-discipline and courage of the admonishing person; (2) the patience and discretion of the witnesses; and (3) the conviction of truth and self-esteem of the church.

First Corinthians 5:1-5, 11-13. The passage forms a unity. Verse 5 and verses 2, 7, 11, 13 mean basically the same: removal. The act of delivering unto Satan (vs. 5) and the putting away (vs. 13) are linked together.²² "Delivering unto Satan" is not an "execration" formula as it is understood by H. Lietzmann²³ and H. Conzelmann,²⁴ but "some kind of expulsion from the Christian community" (G. D. Fee).²⁵

Although Paul does not refer to Jesus, the passage reflects the ideas of Matthew 18.²⁶ Paul is acting on Christ's authority and power in connection with the church (vss. 3-5). It is true, Paul takes the initiative because the church has not realized its duty (vss. 2, 12, 13), but the penalty inflicted upon the sinner is executed by the church.²⁷

To "deliver unto Satan" means the exclusion from the church (vss. 7, 13; 1 Tim 1:20) which is not subject to Satan's power. Removal of the disciplined to the world outside of the church places him/her under the reign of Satan (2 Cor 4:4).²⁸ But this is only the visible aspect of the procedure; there is also an invisible one. The sinner is subject to Satan and has to bear the consequences ("destruction of the flesh"),²⁹ which may lead him/her to repentance and salvation

²⁰ Ibid., 751.

²¹ "Where it is done according to the will of Christ it will have the authority of Christ" (*The New Bible Commentary Revised*, ed. D. Guthrie and J. A. Motyer [Grand Rapids, 1970], 839). E. G. White: "The heavenly authority ratifies the discipline of the church in regard to its members when the Bible rule has been followed" (*Testimonies for the Church* 3:428). "Whatever the church does that is in accordance with the directions given in God's word, will be ratified in heaven" (*Gospel Workers*, 502).

²² See Leon Morris, "1 Corinthians," in *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, ed. L. Morris, rev. ed. (Leicester, 1985), 7:85.

²³ An die Korinther I/II, in *Handbuch zum Neuen Testament*, ed. G. Bornkamm, 5th ed., (Tübingen, 1969), 9:23.

²⁴ Der erste Brief an die Korinther, in *Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament*, ed. F. Hahn, 12th ed. (Göttingen, 1981), 5:125.

²⁵ *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* 7:208-209.

²⁶ See Adolf Schlatter, *Paulus der Bote Jesu*, 2nd ed., (Stuttgart, 1956), 176.

²⁷ The church was not only the "forum" for Paul's individual acting as H. Conzelmann, *Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament* 5:117 pretends, but the acting agency. See C. H. Hunzinger, "Bann II," *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, 5:166; H. Lietzmann, *Handbuch zum Neuen Testament* 9:23.

²⁸ This view is often interpreted as being a magic relic in Paul, unacceptable for modern man. Cf. H. Conzelmann, *Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament* 5:125. But it is unthinkable to integrate God's sovereignty into a scientific system of comparative religion. Cf. Ernst Käsemann, cit. in Erich Fascher, *Der erste Brief des Paulus an die Korinther*, in *Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament*, ed. Erich Fascher (Berlin, 1975), 7/1:160. Paul is rooted in OT ideas (Job 1:11, 12; 2:5-7).

²⁹ The concrete way of realization is not clearly pointed out by Paul. On the whole, there are three possibilities of explanation: First, Paul is not aiming at physical destruction (death) but at the destruction of the person's carnal mind, so that we might be saved eschatologically. See G. D. Fee, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* 7:212-13. Second, Paul is really aiming at sickness and death, either because spiritual rebuke and moral disorders often result in corporal consequences (Acts 5:5, 10; 13:11), or because the man is directly exposed to Satan's destructive power (Heb 2:14), *New Bible Commentary Revised*, ed. R. Clements, M. Black (Grand Rapids, 1971), 55.

in the day of final judgment.³⁰ In the time between, the church should have no intimate fellowship with this person (vs. 11).³¹

G. D. Fee resumes the pastoral aspect of the passage in three points:

First, in this text church discipline is not the affair of one or a few. Even though Paul as an apostle pronounced the sentence prophetically, the sin itself was known by all and had contaminated the whole; so the action was to be the affair of all.

Second, the ultimate reason for such discipline is remedial, not judgmental. For such to take place, one needs an especially loving, redemptive community, where the power of the Lord Jesus is a regular part of corporate life.

Third, according to the rest of the passage, the problem was truly affecting the life of the whole community. Probably discipline of this kind should be reserved for such contaminating “sins.”³²

Second Thessalonians 3:6, 14, 15. After the exceptional judgment on Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5) and the rejection of Simon (Acts 8), this text is chronologically the first example of discipline in the young church.

Not to cause scandal (vss. 6-9) but rather to prevent it by warning (vs. 15b), reflects the principles of Matthew 18:15. Through the authority of Christ (vs. 6a), Paul addresses members and not only the presbyters (vs. 10), warning the church against those brethren who are living “disorderly” (*ataktōs*, vss. 10-12; cf. 1 Thess 4:11; 5:14). It is a question of idlers, neglecting their daily work in expectation of the near coming (*parousia*) of Christ.³³

The church has to “withdraw” from them (vs. 6), which in the light of verse 15 does not mean to abstain from all intercourse, “but stands for the withholding of intimate fellowship.”³⁴ Such a man should be “marked out” (vs. 14a) for censure (vs. 14b).³⁵

Hellenistic circles and Jewish synagogues inflicted fines or corporal punishment (2 Cor 11:24). Later on, such became models for ecclesiastical disciplining. But the apostle refuses to use such means. The Pauline censure aims at repentance and peace (vs. 15). We repeat: Paul is severe but fraternal (1 Thess 5:14). A disorderly brother should be marked out (in church

³⁰ This is evidently the last chance. Although Paul does not mention here any other moment of possible return, 2 Cor 2:5-10 shows that Paul was open to reaccept a transgressor at any time, although the person in 2 Corinthians 2 is probably not the man of 1 Corinthians 5. See G. D. Fee, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* 7:212. The traditional view, the person being the same, is still brought forward by Ph. E. Hughes, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* 8:59-65.

³¹ This is only an apparent contradiction between Jesus and Paul. It is true, Jesus ate with publicans and sinners, but this intercourse had the character of invitation and call. Paul, on the other hand, is dealing with someone who had at one time been saved and become a “brother.” See Heiko Krimmer, 1. Korintherbrief, in *Edition C*, ed. G. Maier (Neuhausen-Stuttgart, 1985), 11:135-36.

³² *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* 7:213-14.

³³ See L. Morris, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* 12:251; Kari Staab, *Die Thessalonicherbriefe*, in *Regensburger Neues Testament*, ed. O. Kuss, 5th ed. (Ratisbon, 1969), 7:61-62.

³⁴ L. Morris, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* 12:251.

³⁵ L. Morris: “The means whereby this is to be done is not specified.” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* 12:258. Some commentators (A. Oepke, K. Staab) take the verb *synanamignymi*, meaning “to have no company” (here in vs. 14 and 1 Cor 5:11) as an indication of excommunication, “But,” says L. Morris, the text in 1 Corinthians 5 “is much more far-reaching. It is specifically laid down there that they are not to eat with such a man and that they are to put him away from among them. Here the man is still to be regarded as brother (see the very warm statement of vs. 15). The treatment is primarily intended to bring him back to his rightful position. At the same time it is a punishment.” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* 12:258. “Es ist nicht an Exkommunikation zu denken . . . , eher daß die Gemeinde einen solchen durch Distanz, Reduzierung der Kommunikation, durch Isolierung zur Einsicht bringen und zum ‘Gehorsam’ zuruckrufen soll,” Wolfgang Trilling, *Der zweite Brief an die Thessalonicher*, in *Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, ed. J. Blank, et al. (Zurich, 1980), 14:155-156. Those who are behaving in an unacceptable fashion are still called by the name of brother and are not excommunicated, I. Howard Marshall, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, in *New Century Bible*, 220.

service?) and intimate fellowship with him should be cut off. Ideally, the church's action would lead to his becoming ashamed (*entrepō*, literally to return) of his conduct.

First Timothy 1:20. This passage is similar to 1 Corinthians 5:3-5 but less comprehensive. It is again a "sentence of excommunication"³⁶ with the intention of not only punishing but also reforming. Unlike 1 Corinthians 5, the action has already taken place in the past and is summarized in a condensed form. "Because the offender had rejected one or more of the fundamentals of the Christian faith (1 Tim. 1:19) he had, by his own acts, really disfellowshipped himself from the spirit and body of the church proper."³⁷

First Timothy 5:20. The issue Paul addresses in this text is not excommunication but public rebuke of persistent sinners in the church.³⁸ In this forum more than the presbyters are represented. "Before all" (*enōpion pantōn*) means the whole congregation. There is no contradiction of Matthew 18, since the cases are different. Christ spoke about the checking of the beginning of a sinful state and of mutual relations between two members.³⁹ Here Paul is dealing with a question of persistent sin; the mention of admonition in verse 1 indicates the intense pastoral work preceding the public rebuke.⁴⁰

Titus 3:10-11. The "heretic" (*hairetikos anthrōpos*, only mentioned here in the NT) seems to be not only a leader of a church faction (cf. 1 Cor 11:19) but more significantly one who is in opposition to the faith and order of the church.⁴¹ He has an unsound faith (1:13, 14) of a nomistic-gnostic stance (3:9) which is opposed to the apostolic doctrine (1:9). He is not only a "vain talker" and "deceiver" (1:10, KJV) but an "unbeliever" (*apistos*, 1:15).

Since he despises the apostolic teaching (1:14) and acts differently from what he believes (1:16), he must be severely rebuked (1:13). If he refuses to listen to the church (3:10b; Matt 18:17), he has actually cut himself off (3:11). This implies an act of "rejection" (KJV). The verb used here (*paraiteomai*, 3:10b) is interpreted to mean, "to have nothing to do with him" (N.J.D. White, G. Holtz)⁴² or to excommunicate him (W. Bauer, J. Jeremias).⁴³

Second John 9-11. What John calls the "doctrine of Christ" is what Paul calls sound doctrine.⁴⁴ It is the doctrine which Christ Himself has brought, and which speaks about Him, and which has been spread by the apostles. Those who "do not bring this doctrine" are identified as rejecters of Christ's Incarnation (2 John 7; 1 John 4:2, 3), his Sonship of God (1 John 4:15; 5:5), and of the apostolic teachings (1 John 2:24-26).

These words suggest that they have much in common with the "docetists" of the second century (H. Baltz).⁴⁵ They once belonged to the church but have separated themselves from her (1 John 2:19). Since they persistently stick to their errors, they should neither be received into the "house"⁴⁶ nor bidden welcome.

³⁶ N.J.D. White, The First and Second Epistles to Timothy, in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids, 1980, reprint) 4:102.

³⁷ *The SDA Bible Commentary* 7:292.

³⁸ J. Jeremias, Die Briefe an Timotheus und Titus, *Das Neue Testament Deutsch* 9:42.

³⁹ N.J.D. White, *Expositor's Greek Testament* 4:136.

⁴⁰ H. Burki, *Wuppertaler Studienbibel*, 164.

⁴¹ See G. Baumbach, "Hairesis, Hairetikos," in *Exegetisches Wörterbuch zum NT*, ed. H. Balz, G. Schneider (Stuttgart, 1980), 1:97.

⁴² N.J.D. White, *Expositor's Greek Testament* 4:201; G. Holtz, Die Pastoralbriefe, *Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament* 13:236.

⁴³ W. Bauer, K. Aland, *Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, 6th ed. (Berlin, 1988), 1246; J. Jeremias, *Das Neue Testament Deutsch* 9:76.

⁴⁴ 1 Tim 1:10; 2 Tim 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1.

⁴⁵ H. Baltz, W. Schrage, Die katholischen Briefe, *Das Neue Testament Deutsch*, 10:157.

⁴⁶ Rather, the house where one is living (J. P. Lange, H. Baltz) than the house where the church is assembling (D. Smith).

As verse 11 shows, John does not have a formal act in mind but an internal relationship of communion.⁴⁷ Therefore, this does not exclude any contact with false teachers. They must always remain the subject of the missionary endeavor of the church. “Heretics are our fellow-creatures; Jesus died for them also, and our office is to win them” (D. Smith).⁴⁸

Causes for Church Discipline

From a Christian viewpoint the NT “catalogues” of pagan vices (especially in Paul’s writings) underscore defects in sexual ethics (Rom 1:24, 26, 27) and doctrinal aberration of idolatry (Rom 1:25) as the most striking sins in Gentile society. Faults concerning behavior in social life follow: avarice, envy, quarrelsomeness, pride, infidelity, disobedience, lack of mercy, etc. (Rom 1:29-31).

The same order is followed where members of the church are concerned. First mentioned are licentiousness and idolatry (1 Cor 6:9; Gal 5:19, 20a), then sins of theft, avarice, alcoholism, robbery (1 Cor 6:10; Gal 5:20, 21).⁴⁹ Paul treats the problems in Corinth according to the same principle: sins in sexual life (1 Cor 5) and questions of divorce (chap 7), and then idolatry (chaps. 8 and 10). In 2 Peter 2:1-3 the order is slightly changed: First, doctrinal heresy and apostasy, then licentiousness and avarice. Also in Revelation 21:8 apostasy and unfaithfulness are mentioned first, but then follow murder, sexual immorality, idolatry, and deviation from the truth.

This kind of a rather rough systematization seems to have been made from a horizontal standpoint; that is, sexual and religious impurity being the most striking sins in society are judged from a Christian point of view. It leaves out the theological aspect which treats every sin as equal and leading to final destruction (Rom 6:23). For every sin is an offense to God, rooted in man’s presumptive autonomy to be his own ethical norm, and is, therefore, rebellion against the Creator, the authentic source and norm of life.

But God is not only just, He is also gracious. There is no sin He is not willing to forgive (Ps 103:1-4), even the worst (Isa 1:18). Thus repented sin is not unto death (1 John 5:16a, KJV)⁵⁰ and may, therefore, be forgiven and the life renewed.

While the church in its proclamation has to emphasize the vertical aspect of sin, repentance, and forgiveness, she has to distinguish between the vertical dimension and sin on the horizontal level. Secret sin—as previously mentioned—cannot be made the object of discipline, but open sin is a challenge to act. The NT mentions several cases where the local church is challenged to exercise her authority.

Continual impenitence, Matthew 18:15-18. As already shown above,⁵¹ it is not merely a matter of personal offense (although this may be implied in Luke 17:3, 4)⁵² but the general

⁴⁷ H. Baltz, *Das Neue Testament Deutsch*, 10:215.

⁴⁸ David Smith, *The Epistles of John; The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, 5:203.

⁴⁹ In Eph 5:3-5 and Col 3:5 we also have the same sequence: first sexual immorality, then idolatry which is identified with avarice. In 1 Cor 5:11 the order is slightly different: sexual immorality, avarice, idolatry and then drunkenness and robbery.

⁵⁰ The sin “unto death” for which there is no forgiveness is sometimes identified with the sin of “deliberate refusal to believe in Jesus Christ” (I. Howard Marshall), with the attitude of the “secessionists” denying the incarnation of Christ (Raymond E. Brown), with “continual” apostasy from “Christian faith and life” (J. Michl; E. Ruckstuhl; Johannes Schneider) and with the sin of “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit” (H. Krimmer). See “The Epistles of John,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* 17:248. *The Epistles of John*, AB, ed. W. F. Albright and D. N. Freedman (Garden City, NY, 1982), 30:618; *Die katholischen Briefe, Regensburger Neues Testament* 8/2: 249; *Jakobusbrief—1.-3. Johannesbrief*, in *Die Neue Echter Bibel*, ed. J. Gnilka and R. Schnackenburg, 2nd ed. (Würzburg, 1988), 19: 67; *Die Kirchenbriefe, Das Neue Testament Deutsch* 10:186; *Johannesbriefe, Edition C*, 21:144.

⁵¹ N. 13.

⁵² See William Hendriksen, “Exposition of the Gospel according to Matthew,” in *New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, 1973), 1:697-98.

“attitude of the shepherd” (W. Grundmann)⁵³ as he moves among Christ’s disciples (Matt 18:12-14). The challenge to the church is rooted in the conviction that sin risks the loss of belief and separates from God. Hence, every disciple has a responsibility for all his brethren (Gal 6:1; 1 John 5:16) as has the whole community for each one (1 Thess 5:11, 15; 1 Cor 5:2)⁵⁴ True discipline is the continual work of the Holy Spirit through the believer and the whole church, fighting against sin and appealing to reconciliation and peace.

Sharing the authority of Christ, the disciples (the church) have to apply the “rule of justice” (Rechtsregel) to prevent sin from penetrating the community. At the same time the church must also apply the “rule of love” (Liebesregel) which tends to restore (A. Schlatter).⁵⁵ Where this does not happen, the authentic church of Jesus Christ is no longer there (F. Rienecker).⁵⁶ Special cases are, (1) open opposition against the apostolic doctrine, (2) public scandal, and (3) secular thinking and acting.

Apostolic doctrine, Jude 3. The church must oppose false teachers who introduce damnable heresies (2 Pet 2:1)⁵⁷ which may lead finally to total apostasy (2 Thess 2:3).⁵⁸ The criterion for detecting heretical teaching in the NT is not the so-called “infallibility of the church” or the authority of the bishop. Rather, it is the “truth” (2 Thess 2:10), the “gospel” (Gal 1:8-9), the “[apostolic] doctrine” (1 Tim 4:6) which is rooted in the “doctrine of Christ” (1 Tim 6:3-5; 2 John 9, 10).

As in the OT, where belief was founded on the law and not on the priest (Mal 2:7-8), so in the NT the doctrinal norm is not the preacher, but the Scriptures (Acts 17:11). The Scriptures of the OT and the apostolic witness and proclamation which has found expression in the writings of the NT (1 John 1:3-4) represent the norm of the Christian faith (2 Tim 3:15-17).

When the uniqueness of Christ’s person and work is denied by “another gospel”—as in Judaism (Gal 1:6-9; 5:4), syncretism (Col 2:8-10a), hedonism (Phil 3:18, 19, KJV), gnosticism (1 Tim 6:20) and docetism (1 John 4:1-3)—salvation by Christ alone is rejected and the authentic proclamation of the church, the *raison d’être* of the Christian church itself, is denied. A believer who has espoused any of these or similar beliefs has to be disfellowshipped. Such persons have condemned themselves. (Titus 3:10-11).

Where there is disagreement in the interpretation of Christ’s word, for example, in questions concerning the basic contents of the Christian faith, the confessional church has to act in the same manner. Although she does not question the Christian attitude of such a person, she

⁵³ “Hirtenverhalten,” Das Evangelium nach Matthäus, *Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament* 1:419.

⁵⁴ The church is the local Christian community (Matt 18:17), represented by the disciples (vs. 18) and not the *hierarchie ecclesiastique* as Catholic authors have tried to prove. For ex. J. Renié, *Manuel d’Ecriture Sainte*, 4th ed. (Lyon, 1948), 4:497-98. Against the Catholic interpretation see Adolf Schlatter, *Der Evangelist Matthäus* (Stuttgart, 1948), 556.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 553.

⁵⁶ Das Evangelium des Matthäus, in *Wuppertaler Studienbibel*, 256.

⁵⁷ *Hairesis* in classical Greek “decision” (Plato, Phaidros 25 B.C.), in Hellenistic Greek “doctrine” or “school” (Philo, *De plantatione* 151). According to Josephus (Bell. Jud. 2:118-19; Antiqu. 13, 10, 6) and the NT (Acts 5:17; 15:5; 26:5) the religious parties of Judaism (Sadducees, Pharisees). The Christian church was also called *hairesis* (Acts 28:22). Here the concept already has a discriminating touch (Acts 24:5, 14). In Christian vocabulary *hairesis* means the forming of “fractions” in the church, an *ergos tēs sarkos*, a work of the flesh (Gal 5:20). Therefore *hairesis* and *schismata* are synonymous (1 Cor 11:18, 19). They are not according to the will of God but finally serve God’s intentions. In 2 Pet 2:1-3 the word already has the meaning of today: Wrong doctrine in dogmatics (vs. 1) and ethics (vss. 2, 3). See H. Schlier, “Hairesis” in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum NT* 1:179-84.

⁵⁸ *Apostasia* from the verb *aphistemi* (to withdraw). In Hellenistic Greek it means political rebellion (Plutarch, *Galba* 1). In the LXX it has more the sense of religious apostasy (Josh 22:22; Jer 2:19). This is also the meaning in the NT (Acts 21:21; 2 Thess 2:3-12). *Apostasia* is *anomia* (2 Thess 2:3, 7: lawlessness, i.e. hostility to God’s law, vs. 4). The consequence is lying (vss. 9, 11), error (vs. 11), injustice (vss. 10, 12) and perdition (vss. 3, 10). Paul’s argumentation is based on Daniel 7, 8, 11. See H. Schlier, “Apostasia,” in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum NT* 1:510-11.

must separate the opposer from her communion in case of open opposition, in order to safeguard her self-understanding as a denomination and the spiritual well-being of her members.⁵⁹

Ethical conduct. What is true in the domain of doctrine, is also true in the domain of ethics. Scandal in a member's life-conduct (*porneia*, "sexual immorality," 1 Cor 5:1;⁶⁰ *ataktōs peripateō*, "to walk disorderly," 2 Thess 3:6-15)⁶¹ cannot be tolerated by the church.⁶² The local community has to act according to the principles previously mentioned.

Forms of Church Discipline

Different forms of discipline are mentioned in the NT. We mention them in brief:

Admonition (Titus 3:10). To exhort, reprove, and rebuke are listed as some of the duties of the minister (2 Tim 2:24, 25; 4:2; Titus 1:9) But they are also obligations of every church member (Matt 18:15). Such an admonition may be private, or public in the case of a public scandal (1 Tim 5:20).⁶³

⁵⁹ See "Church Discipline," in *SDA Encyclopedia*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC, 1976), 298. ("Denial of faith in the fundamentals of the gospel and in the cardinal doctrines of the church.")

⁶⁰ In classical Greek *Porneia* means fornication, adultery, prostitution (cultic and profane) and homosexuality. The OT (LXX) adds the meaning of religious infidelity (Isa 1:21; Jer 3:1-4; Hos 2:4-15; 4:12-14). In the gospels it is sinful sexual lust (Matt 15:19), adultery (Matt 5:32; 19:9), and religious infidelity (John 8:41). In Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25 it probably means the prohibition of marriage with relatives: Fornication is here linked with the abstention of blood, as the prohibition of such marriages (Lev 18:6-18) is linked with the abstention of blood (Lev. 17:10-14). For Paul, *porneia* is the opposite of the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9; Eph 5:5), especially because in *porneia* the profane and the religious aspects are linked together (1 Cor 10:8; Num 25:1-8). *Porneia*—a sum of vices—is also the cause of God's judgment on the pagan world (Rom 1:18-32). There can be no community of Christians with fornicators among them (1 Cor 5:9). The will of God is sanctification (1 Thess 4:3) which includes sanctification of the person's body and the body of Christ (1 Cor 6:15-20). *Porneia* is a consequence of *sarx* (flesh) and the opposite of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:19-22). Since everyone does not have the "gift" of abstention, the protection against *porneia* is marriage (1 Cor 7:1-7). Although Paul is speaking severely against *porneia*, he leaves no doubt that it can be forgiven as every other sin (1 Cor 6:11). In the figurative language of the Apocalypse, *porneia* is religious infidelity (2:14, 20) but also profane fornication (9:21; 21:8; 22:15). *Porneia* finally takes shape in the great prostitute (chaps. 17-19), the seducer in politics, economics, and religion, a synonym, of total apostasy. See Hauck/ Schulz, *Porneia*, in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum NT* 6:579-95. In 1 Cor 5:1, *porneia* is interpreted differently. Most of the commentators agree on the phrase "His father's wife" as being the stepmother of the fornicator (Ph. Bachmann, F. F. Bruce, H. Conzelmann, E. Fascher, G. D. Fee, F. W. Grosheide, F. Lang). Most of them also think that she was a pagan (G. D. Fee, F. Lang, H. Lietzmann), others that she was a Christian (E. Fascher). The fact, as such, is interpreted as (1) marriage (Lev 18:8), the father being dead (W. Bousset, H. Conzelmann, A. Schlatter); as (2) concubinage, the father being alive (H. Lietzmann); as (3) concubinage, the father being dead (A. Strobel, J. Weiss). Others think that the passage is not clear enough whether it was marriage or concubinage but differ on the view whether the father was alive (O. V. Gerlach) or dead (Ph. Bachmann, Clarence T. Craig). Again others think that it is not possible to maintain whether the father was alive or not but say that it was marriage (F. F. Bruce, G. D. Fee, H.-D. Wendland) or concubinage (E. Fascher). Finally some think that it is impossible to solve the question (*The SDA Bible Commentary*; L. Morris).

⁶¹ *Ataktōs* in classical and Hellenistic Greek: disorderly, unrestrained, licentious. *Atakteō*: neglecting of duty, being without discipline, abstention of regular work. In the NT the adjective is found in 1 Thess 5:14, the adverb in 2 Thess 3:6, 11, and the verb in 2 Thess 3:7. It means that somebody lives beyond the normal order of society, in the special case of the Thessalonians (2 Thess 3:7-12) aversion to work accompanied by vain activities depending on the means of other persons. They live outside the civil and the Christian order of life. See G. Delling, "Ataktōs," in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum NT* 8:48-49. It is possible that they were motivated by an unsound expectation of the Parousia (E. v. Dobschütz, *Die Thessalonicherbriefe*, in *Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das NT*, ed. F. Hahn, 7th ed. (Göttingen, 1909 [1974]), 10:182-83).

⁶² This is necessary according to Seventh-day Adventist understanding in the case of "Fraud or willful misrepresentation in business; disorderly conduct that brings reproach on the church; persistent refusal to recognize properly constituted church authority; the use, manufacture, or sale of alcoholic beverages; the use of tobacco or addiction to narcotic drugs; open violation of the law of God, such as worship of idols, murder, adultery, fornication, stealing, profanity, Sabbathbreaking, willful falsehood, and remarriage of divorced persons except the innocent party in a divorce of adultery. . . . Members cannot be dropped for nonattendance at church services nor for failure to render financial support to the church" ("Church Discipline," in *SDA Encyclopedia*, 298).

⁶³ In serious cases—according to Seventh-day Adventist policy—admonition can take the form of a vote of censure by the local church. The goal of this act is a double one: (1) The church openly manifests its disapprobation and (2) thereby offers the possibility of a new insight and a change of life. Such a vote is temporally limited. It makes a person unfit for being eligible for church offices and votes; but does not exclude him/her from church services and the Communion. See *SDA Church Manual*

Refusal of intimate communion (Rom 16:17).⁶⁴ If *paraiteomai* (Titus 3:10b) means “to have nothing to do with a person,” such an attitude on the part of the church members may express the most extreme form of censure. However, this does not mean to break all contact with the erring person. On the contrary, the disfellowshipped must remain the object of an intensive pastoral endeavor, but which at the same time must include the necessary distance to his false thinking and acting.

Excommunication (Matt 18:17).⁶⁵ It is the ultimate discipline.⁶⁶ As we have seen, the steps leading up to the disfellowshipping of a church member is (1) private remonstrance, (2) remonstrance with the help of witnesses, and (3) the presentation of the case to the community of the local church under the guidance of its elected officers, after having consulted the ordained minister.⁶⁷

Excommunication, in itself, has a temporal character, because it always aims at repentance and reintegration (Acts 8:21-23; 2 Cor 2:5-11) even when such a change possibly will only be known in the day of the Lord (1 Cor 5:5). Excommunication and reconciliation always belong together.⁶⁸ The church must also be conscious that she is human and can make a false decision. Only in conformity with the Lord’s gospel and with the truth of the facts may she express God’s will (Matt 18:18). Every judgment of the church ultimately remains reserved for God’s eschatological judgment.

According to Adventist polity the discipline of excommunication may occur only at a duly called church meeting under the chairmanship of an ordained minister or an ordained local elder.⁶⁹ It can take place only by majority vote of the members present.⁷⁰ Neither the minister nor the officers of the church board may dismiss a member.⁷¹ Simple justice requires that a member being considered for discipline shall be allowed the right to be heard in his/her defense before any action is taken by the church. Only if, through indifference, obstinacy, or hostility, the person renounces this right, can he/she be dropped from the rolls without being present.

Since the church is a spiritual fellowship (treating spiritual questions spiritually), lawyers defending the case of a person in question are not admitted in the church meeting.⁷² Sin is not primarily a phenomenon of a horizontal dimension (national, civil, interpersonal) but mainly of a vertical dimension (estrangement from God, transgression of His will). Therefore, sin is first a spiritual problem and must be dealt with spiritually.

Public sin, confessed and repented, may lead to censure,⁷³ but can also lead to excommunication in the case of a severe and flagrant violation of God’s commandments. This may be necessary in order to protect the reputation of the church.⁷⁴ Absent persons must be notified of the church’s decision and should be encouraged to change and to return.⁷⁵

(issued by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, rev. ed. 1971), 232-33.

⁶⁴ See also Titus 3:10a; 2 John 10-11.

⁶⁵ See also 1 Cor 5:5, 13; 1 Tim 1:20.

⁶⁶ *SDA Church Manual*, 234.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 235.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 237-38.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 238.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 235.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 240-41.

Excommunication is a cutting off from fellowship with the church (the person is considered like a non-Christian: Matt 18:17b); the condition, therefore, is like an interruption of intimate fellowship (2 John 10, 11).⁷⁶ But does it also mean a definite *anathema* (curse), as some have concluded from Paul's words: "deliver this man to Satan" (1 Cor 5:5) and "cursed" (1 Cor 16:22; Gal 1:8, 9, "let him be *anathema*")?

As some commentators have pointed out, the context in the first passage (1 Cor 5:2, 7, 13) indicates that "deliver this man to Satan" from a Christian standpoint⁷⁷ means simply to expel from the domain of the church to the domain of the god of this world, Satan (2 Cor 4:4).

The *anathema* formulas on the other hand have the character of an "eschatological call for repentance" (C. H. Hunzinger). In other words, an *anathema* is not an "ecclesiastical form of discipline but an eschatological threat of judgment."⁷⁸ To carry out the threat of an *anathema* is not the church's, but God's prerogative. It is "not an act of church discipline" (J. Behm),⁷⁹ but it means to leave somebody to God's final judgment.

Therefore, the term only aims toward the eschatological separation from Christ (Rom 9:3). And at times, it may refer to a dimension not accessible for church discipline, for example, angels (Gal 1:8) or Christ Himself (1 Cor 12:3). Christ cannot be cursed by the Christian, and fallen angels will ultimately be cursed by God.

The *anathema*, the judge's sentence, leads to the elimination of every kind of *katathema* (curse, Rev 22:3). As Didaché 16:5 puts it, "Then the creature of men will get into the fire of probation . . . but those who hold fast to their faith will be saved-by the 'cursed' himself." Christ, being condemned by His enemies and enduring the curse for mankind (Gal 3:13) will save those who persevere in faith.

Conclusion

Church discipline is not a topic of the past. Rather, it is the continual expression of the church's authority and charity. While preaching the gospel, the church also exercises a "supervisory purpose," preserving the faith and life of her members. Because of her self-understanding and her testimony, the church cannot tolerate deviations from her life-connection on the vertical and horizontal level. She, therefore, has a continual task of preserving, calling back, correcting and healing. Church discipline, or "the power of the keys," is "an aid and consolation against sin and a troubled conscience."⁸⁰ Therefore it is true, "Where God's people does not exist, the keys do not exist, and where the keys do not exist, God's people does not exist" (M. Luther).⁸¹

⁷⁶ I. Howard Marshall: "The situation was one in which the evangelistic and pastoral ministry of the church depended largely on Christians who were prepared to travel around the countryside, preaching the gospel as they went and ministering in the various church groups. For their hospitality and keep they depended on the generosity of the members of the church. Such hospitality is not to be offered to preachers with a false message; it can be taken for granted that they were not to be allowed to minister in the church. Nor are the members of the church to 'welcome,' literally 'greet' them. Such a greeting would have been regarded as no mere formality but as a positive expression of encouragement." The Epistles of John, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* 17:74.

⁷⁷ In Rabbinic Judaism there existed a kind of "full excommunication" (*hērem*), a religious condemnation and social ban. This idea was derived from the theocratic *hērem* of the OT which resulted in calamity (Lev 26:14-26) and destruction (Lev 26:27-39). See W. Daskočil, Th. Klauser (Stuttgart, 1969), 7:7.

⁷⁸ C. H. Hunzinger, "Bann II," *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 5:164.

⁷⁹ "Anáthema," *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum NT* 1:356.

⁸⁰ M. Luther, Schmalkaldische Artikel III, 8 in *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* 453.

⁸¹ *WA* 50, 632, 10f.