

Church Discipline: The Missing Mark

by R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

The decline of church discipline is perhaps the most visible failure of the contemporary church. No longer concerned with maintaining purity of confession or lifestyle, the contemporary church sees itself as a voluntary association of autonomous members, with minimal moral accountability to God, much less to each other.

The absence of church discipline is no longer remarkable—it is generally not even noticed. Regulative and restorative church discipline is, to many church members, no longer a meaningful category, or even a memory. The present generation of both ministers and church members is virtually without experience of biblical church discipline.

As a matter of fact, most Christians introduced to the biblical teaching concerning church discipline confront the issue of church discipline as an idea they have never before encountered. At first hearing, the issue seems as antiquarian and foreign as the Spanish Inquisition and the Salem witch trials. Their only acquaintance with the disciplinary ministry of the church is often a literary invention such as *The Scarlet Letter*.

And yet, without a recovery of functional church discipline—firmly established upon the principles revealed in the Bible—the church will continue its slide into moral dissolution and relativism. Evangelicals have long recognized discipline as the “third mark” of the authentic church.¹ Authentic biblical discipline is not an elective, but a necessary and integral mark of authentic Christianity.

How did this happen? How could the church so quickly and pervasively abandon one of its most essential functions and responsibilities? The answer is found in developments both internal and external to the church.

Put simply, the abandonment of church discipline is linked to American Christianity’s creeping accommodation to American culture. As the twentieth century began, this accommodation became increasingly evident as the church acquiesced to a culture of moral individualism.

Though the nineteenth century was not a golden era for American evangelicals, the century did see the consolidation of evangelical theology and church patterns. Manuals of church discipline and congregational records indicate that discipline was regularly applied. Protestant congregations exercised discipline as a necessary and natural ministry to the members of the church, and as a means of protecting the doctrinal and moral integrity of the congregation.

As ardent congregationalists, the Baptists left a particularly instructive record of nineteenth-century discipline. Historian Gregory A. Wills aptly commented, “To an antebellum Baptist, a church without discipline would hardly have counted as a church.”² Churches held regular “Days of Discipline” when the congregation would gather to heal breaches of fellowship, admonish wayward members, rebuke the obstinate, and, if necessary, excommunicate those who resisted discipline. In so doing, congregations understood themselves to be following a biblical pattern laid down by Christ and the apostles for the protection and correction of disciples.

No sphere of life was considered outside the congregation's accountability. Members were to conduct their lives and witness in harmony with the Bible and with established moral principles. Depending on the denominational polity, discipline was codified in church covenants, books of discipline, congregational manuals, and confessions of faith. Discipline covered both doctrine and conduct. Members were disciplined for behavior that violated biblical principles or congregational covenants, but also for violations of doctrine and belief. Members were considered to be under the authority of the congregation and accountable to each other.

By the turn of the century, however, church discipline was already on the decline. In the wake of the Enlightenment, criticism of the Bible and of the doctrines of evangelical orthodoxy was widespread. Even the most conservative denominations began to show evidence of decreased attention to theological orthodoxy. At the same time, the larger culture moved toward the adoption of autonomous moral individualism. The result of these internal and external developments was the abandonment of church discipline as ever larger portions of the church member's life were considered off-limits to the congregation.

This great shift in church life followed the tremendous cultural transformations of the early twentieth century—an era of “progressive” thought and moral liberalization. By the 1960s, only a minority of churches even pretended to practice regulative church discipline. Significantly, confessional accountability and moral discipline were generally abandoned together.

The theological category of sin has been replaced, in many circles, with the psychological concept of therapy. As Philip Reiff has argued, the “Triumph of the Therapeutic” is now a fixture of modern American culture.³ Church members may make poor choices, fail to live up to the expectations of an oppressive culture, or be inadequately self-actualized—but they no longer sin.

Individuals now claim an enormous zone of personal privacy and moral autonomy. The congregation—redefined as a mere voluntary association—has no right to intrude into this space. Many congregations have forfeited any responsibility to confront even the most public sins of their members. Consumed with pragmatic methods of church growth and congregational engineering, most churches leave moral matters to the domain of the individual conscience.

As Thomas Oden notes, the confession of sin is now passé and hopelessly outdated to many minds.

Naturalistic reductionism has invited us to reduce alleged individual sins to social influences for which individuals are not responsible. Narcissistic hedonism has demeaned any talk of sin or confession as ungratifying and dysfunctional. Autonomous individualism has divorced sin from a caring community. Absolute relativism has regarded moral values as so ambiguous that there is no measuring rod against which to assess anything as sin. Thus modernity, which is characterized by the confluence of these four ideological streams, has presumed to do away with confession, and has in fact made confession an embarrassment to the accommodating church of modernity.⁴

The very notion of shame has been discarded by a generation for which shame is an unnecessary and repressive hindrance to personal fulfillment. Even secular observers have noted the shamelessness of modern culture. As James Twitchell comments:

We have in the last generation tried to push shame aside. The human-potential and recovered-memory movements in psychology; the moral relativism of audience-driven Christianity; the penalty-free, all-ideas-are-equally-good transformation in higher education; the rise of no-fault behavior before the law; the often outrageous distortions in the telling of history so that certain groups can feel better about themselves; and the “I’m shame-free, but you should be ashamed of yourself” tone of political discourse are just some of the instances wherein this can be seen.⁵

Twitchell sees the Christian church aiding and abetting this moral transformation and abandonment of shame—which is, after all, a natural product of sinful behavior. “Looking at the Christian Church today, you can only see a dim pentimento of what was once painted in the boldest of colors. Christianity has simply lost *it*. It no longer articulates the ideal. Sex is on the loose. Shame days are over. The Devil has absconded with sin.”⁶ As Twitchell laments, “Go and sin no more” has been replaced with “Judge not lest you be judged.”

Demonstration of this moral abandonment is seen in mainline Protestantism’s surrender to an ethic of sexual “liberation.” Liberal Protestantism has lost any moral credibility in the sexual sphere. Homosexuality is not condemned, even though it is clearly condemned in the Bible. To the contrary, homosexuals get a special caucus at the denominational assembly and their own publications and special rights.

Evangelicals, though still claiming adherence to biblical standards of morality, have overwhelmingly capitulated to the divorce culture. Where are the evangelical congregations that hold married couples accountable for maintaining their marriage vows? To a great extent, evangelicals are just slightly behind liberal Protestantism in accommodating to the divorce culture and accepting what amounts to “serial monogamy”—faithfulness to one marital partner *at a time*. This, too, has been noted by secular observers. David Blankenhorn of the Institute for American Values remarked that “over the past three decades, many religious leaders have largely abandoned marriage as a vital area of religious attention, essentially handing the entire matter over to opinion leaders and divorce lawyers in the secular society. Some members of the clergy seem to have lost interest in defending and strengthening marriage. Others report that they worry about offending members of their congregations who are divorced or unmarried.”⁷

Tied to this worry about offending church members is the rise of the “rights culture,” which understands society only in terms of individual rights rather than moral responsibility. Mary Ann Glendon of the Harvard Law School documents the substitution of “rights talk” for moral discourse.⁸ Unable or unwilling to deal with moral categories, modern men and women resort to the only moral language they know and understand—the unembarrassed claim to “rights” that society has no authority to limit or deny. This “rights talk” is not limited to secular society, however. Church members are so committed to their own version of “rights talk” that some congregations accept almost any behavior, belief, or “lifestyle” as acceptable, or at least off-limits to congregational sanction.

The result of this is the loss of the biblical pattern for the church—and the impending collapse of authentic Christianity in this generation. As Carl Laney laments, “The church today is suffering from an infection which has been allowed to fester . . . As an infection weakens the body by destroying its defense mechanisms, so the church has been weakened by this ugly sore. The church

has lost its power and effectiveness in serving as a vehicle for social, moral, and spiritual change. This illness is due, at least in part, to a neglect of church discipline.”⁹

HOLINESS AND THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Throughout the Bible, the people of God are characterized by a distinctive purity. This moral purity is not their own achievement, but the work of God within their midst. As the Lord said to the children of Israel, “I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy” (Lev. 11:44a).¹⁰ Given that they have been chosen by a holy God as a people carrying His own name, God’s chosen people are to reflect His holiness by their way of living, worship, and beliefs.

The holiness code is central to the understanding of the Old Testament. As God’s chosen nation, Israel must live by God’s Word and law, which will set the children of Israel visibly apart from their pagan neighbors. As the Lord said through Moses: “Be sure to keep the commands of the LORD your God and the stipulations and decrees he has given you. Do what is right and good in the LORD’s sight, so that it may go well with you and you may go in and take over the good land that the LORD promised on oath to your forefathers” (Deut. 6:17-18).

The nation is reminded that it is now known by God’s name and is to reflect His holiness. “For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth” (Deut. 7:6). God promised His covenant faithfulness to His people but expected them to obey His Word and follow His law. Israel’s judicial system was largely designed to protect the purity of the nation.

In the New Testament, the church is likewise described as the people of God who are visible to the world by their purity of life and integrity of testimony. As Peter instructed the church: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Pet. 2:9-10).

Peter continued, “Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us” (1 Pet. 2:11-12).

As the new people of God, the church is to see itself as an alien community in the midst of spiritual darkness—strangers to the world who must abstain from the lusts and enticements of the world. The church is to be conspicuous in its purity and holiness and steadfast in its confession of the faith once for all delivered to the saints. Rather than capitulating to the moral (or immoral) environment, Christians are to be conspicuous by their good behavior. As Peter summarized, “Just as he who ‘called you is holy, so be holy in all you do” (1 Pet. 1:15).

The apostle Paul clearly linked the holiness expected of believers to the completed work of Christ in redemption: “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation” (Col. 1:21-22). Clearly, this

holiness made complete in the believer is the work of God; holiness is the evidence of His redemptive work. To the Corinthian congregation Paul urged, “Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God” (2 Cor 7:1).

The identity of the church as the people of God is to be evident in its pure confession of Christ, its bold testimony to the Gospel, and its moral holiness before the watching world. Nothing less will mark the church as the true vessel of the Gospel.

DISCIPLINE IN THE BODY

The first dimension of discipline in the church is that discipline exercised directly by God as He deals with believers. As the book of Hebrews warns, “You have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: ‘My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.’ Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?” (Heb. 12:5-7). As the passage continues, the author warns that those who are without discipline “are illegitimate children and not true sons” (v. 8). The purpose of discipline, however, is righteousness. “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it” (v. 11).

This discipline is often evident in suffering—both individual and congregational. Persecution by the world has a purifying effect on the church. This persecution is not to be sought, but if the church is “tested by fire,” it must prove itself pure and genuine and receive this suffering as the Lord’s discipline, even as children receive the discipline of a father. The fact that this analogy is so foreign to many modern Christians points out the fact that discipline has disappeared in many families, as well as in the church. Children are treated as moral sovereigns in many households, and the social breakdown of the family has diminished its moral credibility. The loving discipline portrayed in this passage is as foreign to many families as it is to most congregations.

God’s loving discipline of His people is His sovereign right and is completely in keeping with His moral character—His own holiness. His fatherly discipline also establishes the authority and pattern for discipline in the church. Correction is for the greater purpose of restoration and the even higher purpose of reflecting the holiness of God.

The second dimension of discipline in the church is that disciplinary responsibility addressed to the church itself. Like God’s fatherly discipline of those He loves, the church is to exercise discipline as an integral part of its moral and theological responsibility. That the church can fall into moral disrepute is evident in the New Testament itself.

The apostle Paul confronted a case of gross moral failure in the Corinthian congregation that included “immorality of . . . a kind that does not occur even among pagans” (1 Cor. 5:1). In this case, apparent incest was known to the congregation, and yet it had taken no action.

“And you are proud! Shouldn’t you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?” Paul accused the Corinthian congregation (v. 2). He instructed

them to act quickly and boldly to remove this stain from their fellowship. He also warned them, “Your boasting is not good. Don’t you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are” (vv. 6-7a).

Paul was outraged that the Corinthian Christians would tolerate this horrible sin. Incest, though not literally unknown in the pagan world, was universally condemned and not tolerated. In this respect the Corinthian church had fallen beneath the moral standards of the pagan world to whom they were to witness. Paul was also exasperated with a congregation he had already warned. Mentioning an earlier letter unavailable to us, Paul scolds the Corinthians:

I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. “Expel the wicked man from among you.” —VV. 9-13

The moral outrage of a wounded apostle is evident in these pointed verses, which call the Corinthian church to action and the exercise of discipline. They have now fallen into corporate sin by tolerating the presence of such a bold and arrogant sinner in their midst. Their moral testimony is clouded, and their fellowship is impure. Their arrogance has blinded them to the offense they have committed before the Lord. The open sin in their midst is like a cancer that, left unchecked, will spread throughout the entire body.

In the second letter to the Thessalonians, Paul offers similar instruction, combining concern for moral purity and doctrinal orthodoxy: “In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us” (2 Thess. 3:6). Paul instructs the Thessalonians to follow his own example because “We were not idle when we were with you” (2 Thess. 3:7).

THE PATTERN OF PROPER DISCIPLINE

How should the Corinthians have responded to this public sin? Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians of delivering this sinner unto Satan and removing him from fellowship. How is this to be done? To the Galatians Paul wrote that “if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted” (Gal. 6:1). This teaching is clear, indicating that spiritual leaders of the church are to confront a sinning member with a spirit of humility and gentleness, and with the goal of restoration. But what are the precise steps to be taken?

The Lord Himself provided these instructions as He taught His disciples: “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).

The Lord instructed His disciples that they should first confront a sinning brother in private. “Show him his fault,” instructed the Lord. If the brother acknowledges the sin and repents, the brother has been won. The fact that the first step is a private confrontation is very important. This limits the injury caused by the sin and avoids a public spectacle, which would tarnish the witness of the church to the Gospel.

In the event the private confrontation does not lead to repentance, restoration, and reconciliation, the next step is to take witnesses. Jesus cited the Deuteronomic law which required multiple witnesses of a crime for conviction. Yet His purpose here seems larger than the mere establishment of the facts of the case. Jesus seems to intend for the witnesses to be an important presence in the *event* of the confrontation, thus adding corroborating testimony concerning the confrontation of a sinning brother. The brother cannot claim that he was not confronted with his sin in a brotherly context.

If the brother does not listen even in the presence of one or two witnesses, this becomes a matter for the congregation. “Tell it to the church,” instructed Jesus, and the church is to judge the matter before the Lord and render a judgment that is binding upon the sinner. This step is extremely serious, and the congregation now bears a corporate responsibility. The church must render its judgment based upon the principles of God’s Word and the facts of the case. Again, the goal is the restoration of a sinning brother or sister—not a public spectacle.

Sadly, this congregational confrontation may not avail. If it does not, the only recourse is separation from the sinning brother. “Treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector,” instructed the Lord, indicating that the separation is to be real and public. The congregation is not to consider the former brother as a part of the church. This drastic and extreme act is to follow when a brother or sister will not submit to the discipline of the church. We should note that the church should still bear witness to this man, but not as brother to brother, until and unless repentance and restoration are evident.

THE POWER OF THE KEYS

What is the church’s authority in church discipline? Jesus addressed this issue directly, even as He declared the establishment of the church after Peter’s great confession: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 16:19). This “power of the keys” is one of the critical controversies between evangelicals and the Church of Rome. Roman Catholics believe that the pope, as Peter’s successor, holds the keys, and thus the power of binding and loosing. Protestants, however, believe that the Lord granted the keys to the church. This interpretation is supported by the Lord’s repetition of the matter in Matthew 18:18, “I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Here the context reveals that the power of binding and loosing is held by the church.¹¹

The terms *binding* and *loosing* were familiar terms used by rabbis in the first century to refer to the power of judging matters on the basis of the Bible. The Jewish authorities would determine how (or whether) the Scriptures applied in a specific situation and would render judgment by either binding, which meant to restrict, or loosing, which meant to liberate. The church still bears this responsibility and wields this power. John Calvin, the great Genevan Reformer, believed that the power of binding should be understood as excommunication, and loosing as reception into membership: “But the church binds him whom it excommunicates—not that it casts him into everlasting ruin and despair,

but because it condemns his life and morals, and already warns him of his condemnation unless he should repent. It looses him when it receives into communion, for it makes him a sharer of the unity which is in Christ Jesus.”¹²

Calvin’s interpretation is fully in agreement at this point with Martin Luther, whose essay on “The Keys” (1530) is a massive refutation of papal claims and Roman Catholic tradition. Luther saw the keys as one of Christ’s great gifts to the church. “Both of these keys are extremely necessary in Christendom, so that we can never thank God enough for them.”¹³ As a pastor and theologian, Luther saw the great need for the church to bear the keys, and he understood this ministry to be gracious in the recovery of sinning saints. As Luther reflected:

For the dear Man, the faithful Bishop of our souls, Jesus Christ, is well aware that His beloved Christians are frail, that the devil, the flesh, and the world would tempt them unceasingly and in many ways, and that at times they would fall into sin. Therefore, He has given us this remedy, the key which binds, so that we might not remain too confident in our sins, arrogant, barbarous, and without God, and the key which looses, that we should not despair in our sins.¹⁴

What about a church leader who sins? Paul instructed Timothy that a church leader—an elder—is to be considered “worthy of double honor” when he rules well (1 Tim. 5:17). When an elder sins, however, that is a matter of great consequence. First, no accusation is to be received on the basis of only one uncorroborated witness. If a charge is substantiated by two or three witnesses, however, he is “to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning” (1 Tim. 5:20). Clearly, leadership carries a higher burden, and the sins of an elder cause an even greater injury to the church. The public rebuke is necessary, for the elder sins against the entire congregation. As James warned, “Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (Jas. 3:1).

The scandals of moral failure on the part of church leaders have caused tremendous injury to the cause of Christ. The stricter judgment should be a vivid warning to those who would violate the Word of God and lead others into sin by example. The failure of the contemporary church to apply consistent biblical church discipline has left most of these scandals unresolved on biblical grounds—and thus a continuing stain on the church.

The Bible reveals three main areas of danger requiring discipline. These are *fidelity of doctrine*, *purity of life*, and *unity of fellowship*. Each is of critical and vital importance to the health and integrity of the church.

FIDELITY OF DOCTRINE

The theological confusion and compromise that mark the modern church are directly traceable to the church’s failure to separate itself from doctrinal error and heretics who teach it. On this matter the Bible is clear: “Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work” (2 John 9-11). The apostle Paul instructed the Galatians that “if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: if anybody is

preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!” (Gal. 1:8-9).

The letters of 2 Peter and Jude explicitly warn of the dangers presented to the church in the form of false prophets and heretics. Jude alerts the church that “certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord” (v. 4). Similarly, Peter warns, “There will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them— bringing swift destruction on themselves” (2 Pet. 2:1).

The church must separate itself from these heresies—and from the heretics! The permissive posture of the church in this century has allowed the most heinous heresies to grow unchecked—and heretics to be celebrated. Francis Schaeffer was among the most eloquent modern prophets who decried this doctrinal cowardice. Schaeffer emphatically denied that a church could be a true Christian fellowship and allow false doctrine. As he stated, “One cannot explain the explosive dynamite, the *dunamis*, of the early church apart from the fact that they practiced two things simultaneously: orthodoxy of doctrine and orthodoxy of community in the midst of the visible church, a community which the world can see. By the grace of God, therefore, the church must be known simultaneously for its purity of doctrine and the reality of its community.”¹⁵

PURITY OF LIFE

The visible community of the true church is also to be evident in its moral purity. Christians are to live in obedience to the Word of God and to be exemplary in their conduct and untarnished in their testimony. A lack of attention to moral purity is a sure sign of congregational rebellion before the Lord.

Writing to the Corinthians, Paul chastised them severely: “Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor. 6:9-11).

When Christians sin, their sin is to be confronted by the church in accordance with the pattern revealed in Scripture. The goal is the restoration of a sister or a brother, not the creation of a public spectacle. The greatest moral danger to the church is the toleration of sin, public or private. Conversely, one of the greatest blessings to the church is the gift of biblical church discipline—the ministry of the keys.

UNITY OF FELLOWSHIP

The integrity of the church is also dependent upon the true unity of its fellowship. Indeed, one of the most repeated warnings found in the New Testament is the admonition against toleration of schismatics. The unity of the church is one of its most visible distinctives—and most precious gifts.

The warnings about this are severe: “I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people” (Rom. 16:17-18). Writing to Titus, Paul instructed that the church should “Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned” (Titus 3:10-11).

A breach in the unity of the church is a scandal in the body of Christ. The church is consistently exhorted to practice and preserve a true unity in true doctrine and biblical piety. This unity is not the false unity of a lowest-common-denominator Christianity, the “Gospel Lite” preached and taught in so many modern churches, but rather is found in the healthy and growing maturity of the congregation as it increases in grace and in its knowledge of the Word of God

The ongoing function of church discipline is to be a part of individual self-examination and congregational reflection. The importance of maintaining integrity in personal relationships was made clear by our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount as He instructed the disciples that anger against a brother is a deadly sin. Reconciliation is a mandate, not a hypothetical goal. “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift” (Matt. 5:23-24).

Similarly, Paul warned against participating in the Lord’s Supper amidst divisions. The Supper itself is a memorial of the broken body and shed blood of the Savior and must not be desecrated by the presence of divisions or controversies within the congregation, or by unconfessed sin on the part of individual believers. “For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself” (1 Cor. 11:26-29).

The “discipline of the Table” is thus one of the most important disciplinary functions of the congregation. The Lord’s Supper is not to be served indiscriminately, but only to those baptized believers who are under the discipline of the church and in good standing with their congregation.

THE RECOVERY OF THE THIRD MARK

The mandate of the church is to maintain true gospel doctrine and order. A church lacking these essential qualities is, biblically defined, not a true church. That is a hard thing to say, for it clearly indicts thousands of American congregations who long ago abandoned this essential mark and have accommodated themselves to the spirit of the age. Fearing lawsuits and lacking courage, these churches allow sin to go unchallenged, and heresy to grow unchecked. Inevitably, the false unity they seek to preserve gives way to the factions that inevitably follow the gradual abandonment of biblical Christianity. They do not taste the true unity of a church grounded on the truth and exercising the ministry of the keys.

John Leadley Dagg, the author of a well-known and influential church manual of the nineteenth century, noted: “It has been remarked, that when discipline leaves a church, Christ goes with it.”¹⁶ If so, and I fear it is so, Christ has abandoned many churches who are blissfully unaware of His departure.

At the end of the twentieth century, the great task of the church is to prove itself to be the genuine church revealed in the New Testament— proving its authenticity by a demonstration of pure faith and authentic community. We must regain the New Testament concern for fidelity of doctrine, purity of life, and unity of fellowship. We must recover the missing mark.

NOTES

1. The identification of proper discipline as the third mark of the true church goes back at least to the Belgic Confession [1561]: “The marks by which the true Church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if she maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin; in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church. Hereby the true Church may certainly be known, from which no man has a right to separate himself.” “The Belgic Confession,” in *The Creeds of Christendom*, ed. Philip Schaff, rev. David S. Schaff, Vol. 3 (New York: Harper and Row, 1931), pp. 419-420. Similarly, the *Abstract of Principles* of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (1858) identifies the three essential marks as true order, discipline, and worship.
2. Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South 1785-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), P. 12.
3. Philip Reiff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).
4. Thomas C. Oden, *Corrective Love: The Power of Communion Discipline* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1995), p. 56.
5. James B. Twitchell, *For Shame: The Loss of Common Decency in American Culture* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), P. 35.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 149.
7. David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), p. 231.
8. Mary Ann Glendon, *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse* (New York: Free Press, 1991).
9. J. Carl Laney, *A Guide to Church Discipline* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985), p. 12.
10. This verse is quoted in I Peter 1:16 and is addressed to the church.
11. *The New American Standard Bible*, revised edition, is correct in translating the Greek verb in the perfect tense. Any other translation of the verb tense confuses the meaning and can lead to a distorted understanding of Jesus’ teaching. He is not stating that the church has the power to determine what shall later be decided in heaven. The verb tense indicates that as the church functions on the authority of Scripture, what it determines shall have been already determined in heaven. For a complete consideration of this issue, see Julius Robert

- Mantey, "Distorted Translations in John 20:23; Matthew 16:18-19 and 18:18," *Review and Expositor* 78 (1981), pp. 409-416.
12. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, *Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. 20 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), p. 1214.
 13. Martin Luther, "The Keys," in *Luther's Works* (American Edition), ed. Conrad Bergendoff, gen. ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, Vol. 40 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), p. 373.
 14. *Ibid.*
 15. Francis A. Schaeffer, "The Church Before the Watching World," in *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1970), p. 144.
 16. J. L. Dagg, *A Treatise on Church Order* (Charleston, SC: The Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1858), p. 274.
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Author

R. Albert Mohler, Jr. (B.A., Samford Univ.; M.Div., Ph.D., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) serves as the ninth president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Formerly the editor of *The Christian Index*, he was general editor for *Gods of the Age or God of the Ages?* Dr. Mohler was named on of *Time* magazine's most promising leaders age forty and under in the December 5, 1994 issue.

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