

September/October 2009, Volume 6, Issue 5

[Subscribe](#) | [Unsubscribe](#) | [Forward to a Friend!](#)

Editor's Note

Tough love. Who wants it!? Who doesn't prefer cushy love, or chocolate and rose-petaled love, or even beatific vision love!

Western culture doesn't seem to understand tough love. Love today means unconditional acceptance. If you love me with conditions, you don't love me. You're judgmental and intolerant.



God knows better. He knows we're finite and fallen. Therefore, his love challenges us at the very points of our finitude and fallenness for our good, and that's not comfortable.

Church discipline is just such an uncomfortable act of tough love, which is why 9Marks would like to spend two issues of the eJournal considering this important topic. In this issue, Wyman Richardson and Greg Wills help us to count the cost of practicing or not practicing church discipline. Ken Sande offers some legal counsel. And Kevin DeYoung, a pastor in mainline Protestant land, offers words of warning to evangelical land, a land where tough love increasingly has to shout to be heard.

In case you are new to the topic of church discipline, I offer a primer and review three good books on the subject. Also, check out Bobby Jamieson's user's guide to the intimidating but inimitable *Polity* volume.

When asked what she learned from 1 Corinthians 13, my three year old daughter said, "Love is patient, love is kind. Love is huggy and kissy." Yes, she is a darling. But I must ask, shouldn't we expect deeper sentiments from our church's leaders?

— Jonathan Leeman

FACING UP TO CHURCH DISCIPLINE



[More Than Worth It: Costs and Benefits of Church Discipline](#)

Page 7

This church discipline cost-benefit analysis might surprise you, both by what you'll gain by practicing discipline and by what you'll lose by neglecting it.

By Wyman Richardson



[A Church Discipline Primer](#)

Page 10

In case you're new to the topic, here's the "what," the "when," the "how," and the "why" of church discipline.

By Jonathan Leeman

CHURCH DISCIPLINE IN HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE



[Was Dagg Right?](#)

Page 18

Over 150 years ago, John Dagg famously said, "When discipline leaves a church, Christ leaves with it." Was he right?

By Gregory A. Wills



[Informed Consent: Biblical and Legal Protection for Church Discipline](#)

Page 21

How can churches wisely practice discipline in a litigious society?

By Ken Sande



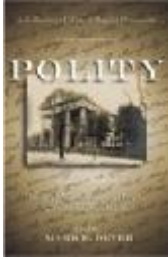
[Discipline in the Mainline—Is it Possible or Even Wise?](#)

Page 23

DeYoung tackles the question of whether a church can practice discipline when its denomination doesn't. Along the way he offers lessons for Evangelicals from the Mainline.

By Kevin DeYoung

CHURCH DISCIPLINE RESOURCES

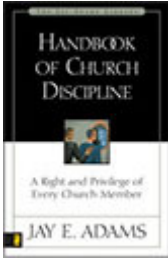


[**Polity on Church Discipline: A User's Guide**](#)

Page 26

Treasures of biblical wisdom lie buried beneath dense prose in this collection of historic Baptist writings. This article helps you mine them out.

By Bobby Jamieson



[**Book Review: Handbook of Church Discipline, by Jay Adams**](#)

Page 29

Reviewed by Jonathan Leeman



[**Book Review: The Transforming Community, by Mark Lauterbach**](#)

Page 31

Reviewed by Jonathan Leeman



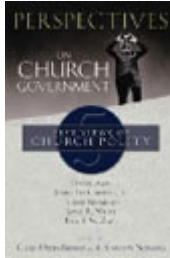
[**Book Review: Discipline with Care, by Steven McQuoid**](#)

Page 33

Reviewed by Jonathan Leeman

Reviews in the next issue: *Walking Together: A Congregational Reflection on Biblical Church Discipline*, by Wyman Lewis Richardson; *Winning the Real Battle at Church: Safeguard Your Congregation Against Destructive Conflict*, by David & Diane Noble

MISCELLANEOUS BOOK REVIEWS



[Book Reviews: *Who Runs the Church? Four Views on Church Government*, edited by Steven B. Cowan; *Perspectives on Church Government*, edited by Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman](#)

Reviewed by Bobby Jamieson

Page 35



[Book Review: *Restoring Integrity in Baptist Churches*, edited by Thomas White, Jason G. Deusing, and Malcomb B. Yarnell, III](#)

Reviewed by Greg Gilbert

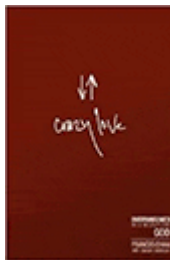
Page 38



[Book Review: *Organic Church*, by Neil Cole](#)

Reviewed by Kevin McFadden

Page 42



[Book Review: *Crazy Love*, by Francis Chan](#)

Reviewed by Patrick Schreiner

Page 44

AUDIO—LEADERSHIP INTERVIEWS



[The Emerging Church and More with Kevin DeYoung](#)

Posted on September 1, 2009

Kevin DeYoung discusses the emerging church, orthodoxy, finding the will of God, and more.



[Being Faithful in a Secular World with Darryl Hart](#)

Posted on August 1, 2009

Darryl Hart discusses J. Gresham Machen, evangelicalism, and why Christians shouldn't be afraid of secularism.

UPCOMING 9MARKS EVENTS



[God Exposed: Awkward Preaching in an Age of Comfort](#)

Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

Wake Forest, North Carolina

September 25 – 26, 2009

Mark Dever, Danny Akin, C.J. Mahaney, Thabiti Anyabwile, Michael McKinley



[9Marks Workshop](#)

Baton Rouge, Louisiana

October 16 – 17, 2009

Matt Schmucker, Greg Gilbert, and Kevin Wilkening



[9Marks Workshop](#)

Riverside, California

November 6 – 7, 2009

Mark Dever, Greg Gilbert, and Rick Holland



[Together for the Gospel 2010](#)

Louisville, Kentucky

April 13 – 15, 2010

Mark Dever, Ligon Duncan, C.J. Mahaney, Al Mohler, Thabiti Anyabwile, John MacArthur, John Piper, and R.C. Sproul

Registration is now open!

NEW TRANSLATIONS

The Korean translation of *The Message of the Old Testament* by Mark Dever, *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism* by Mark Dever, and *Twelve Challenges Churches Face* by Mark Dever can be purchased [here](#).

9MARKS ON FACEBOOK



9Marks now has a [Facebook fan page!](#) Click on the logo on the left to go there.

Contact Us

9Marks

525 A Street NE

Washington, DC 20002

Toll Free: (888) 543-1030

Email: info@9Marks.org

9Marks.org



More Than Worth It: Costs and Benefits of Church Discipline

By Wyman Richardson

He was a middle-aged pastor of a nice-sized and fairly affluent church. The church was theologically conservative and held a high view of Scripture, which is what made his comment so tragically memorable.

He had asked me what I was working on, to which I answered, “A case of church discipline.” I had been strongly convicted about taking God at his Word concerning church discipline. My own congregation had recently endured a difficult and painful situation, so I shared that I felt we would not be faithful if we did not strive to obey God in this area.

This was his response: “You’re right, of course. But, you know, I decided early in my ministry what I would and would not be about, and that’s just not a road I’m going to go down.”

I’ve never forgotten his words. It’s no small thing to deliberately decide to not heed Christ’s instructions (Matt. 18:15-18), apostolic application of divine truth (1 Cor. 5:1-7, 12-13), restorative congregational instruction (2 Cor. 2:6-8), a call to “fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:1-5), clear apostolic command (2 Thes. 3:6-10, Titus 3:9-11), injunctions to steer clear of those who disobey these instructions (2 Thes. 3:14), a God-ordained tool for instruction against blasphemy (1 Tim. 1:19b-20), and an unambiguous command that we “keep these rules” (1 Tim. 5:19-21).

Even so, many pastors have chosen not to go down “that road.” They want job security. They want to avoid the difficulties of confrontation. They want to steer clear of the complex dynamics that inevitably surface in a congregation when we practice church discipline.

It’s worth reminding ourselves as pastors what we stand to lose if we neglect biblical church discipline, as well as what we stand to gain by faithfully following God’s Word.

WHAT WE STAND TO LOSE

1. *The Blessing and Favor of God*

By neglecting church discipline, we stand to lose the blessings and favor of God. To make a knowing, intentional, and deliberate decision to write “No!” over the biblical teachings concerning church discipline is to write “Ichabod!” over the church. One seeks in vain for the blessing and favor of God when one chooses to ignore his instructions for his bride.

2. *Our Fallen Members*

We may also lose our fallen members. Here is a sad irony: the fallen members that we don’t want to “judge,” “hurt,” or “drive away” will, if left in their sins and robbed of the church’s call for repentance, find themselves eventually despising and leaving the church anyway. Even if they don’t leave, their inward distance from God makes their presence a mere façade, which means we’ve lost them anyway.

3. *Our Faithful Members*

If we fail to take seriously the whole counsel of God, we risk alienating those members who do take God’s counsel seriously. How odd it is to give up *faithful* members because

we fear lovingly calling *wayward* members back to the Lord through the ministry of church discipline!

4. ***Our Witness Before the Watching World***

The world may despise the gospel, but at least it respects consistency. When we fail to speak the truth to those who shipwreck their faith, thereby complying with their harmful rebellion, the watching world turns away in derision at the open hypocrisy of the church.

5. ***Our Authority to Speak***

What right do we have to speak a prophetic word to our culture about unhinged sexual libertinism if the very same rebellion runs unchecked in our churches? What right do we have to speak against corruption and greed if we fail to confront those things in our own church? To tear out the passages on church discipline is to tear out our own tongue.

WHAT WE STAND TO GAIN

1. ***The Favor of God***

By practicing biblical church discipline, we stand to gain the favor of God. It is appropriate to apply "Well done thy good and faithful servant!" to local congregations in addition to individual Christians. The favor and pleasure of God should be our primary motivation for embracing biblical church discipline.

2. ***The Growth of Our Brother or Sister***

Discipline also leads to growth. Church discipline is almost certainly the most neglected avenue of Christian growth in the body of Christ today. Yet lovingly administered church discipline helps believers grow in obedience to Christ.

3. ***Power in the Pulpit***

Another benefit pastors often miss by not practicing church discipline? Obeying Christ in difficult ways empowers our preaching. A congregation that watches its ministers faithfully apply the Word will take that Word more seriously, and listen more intently. And, as he leads the congregation in obeying God's Word, the preacher himself will grow in rightly grasping and boldly applying God's Word in his preaching.

4. ***The Unity of the Church***

Unity around anything other than the whole counsel of God is not unity. It is merely a shadowy, patchwork peace constructed on whatever bits of God's Word we deem acceptable. Only authentic unity, a unity that embraces all of God's Word, can claim the blessing of God.

5. ***Evangelistic Contrast***

In a day that has seen many churches reduce its evangelism to programs and its outreach to gimmickry, we too often forget *the inherent evangelistic appeal of the people of God being who they're meant to be*. This works itself out in what we might call the evangelistic ministry of contrast: as the church grows in holiness, it creates an increasingly stark contrast with the lost culture around it. When this happens, the world

begins to see that the church presents a genuine countercultural alternative, an alternative that emanates from convictions clearly founded on a higher standard than its own.

CHOOSING THE BETTER ROAD

It was some years after the sad conversation that I recounted earlier that I crossed paths with another minister, roughly the same age as the first. He was likewise the pastor of a good-sized church. He, too, was conservative in theology and held a high view of Scripture. We were talking about ministry, life, and the challenge of church discipline, and he too said something I will never forget: "You know, I just want to pastor a New Testament church once before I die. I believe we can be that, and I want to lead my people to be that."

Two men. Two paths. Two alternatives. The first brother, I am convinced, is going to pay a high a price for pursuing ease and comfort. The latter may occasionally pay a temporal price in discomfort and possible conflict, but his reward will be great.

Choose the better way. Isn't the choice obvious?

Wyman Richardson is the pastor of First Baptist Church in Dawson, Georgia, and the author of Walking Together: A Congregational Reflection on Biblical Church Discipline (Wipf & Stock, 2007).

September/October 2009
© 9Marks

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format, provided that you do not alter the wording in any way, you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and you do not make more than 1,000 physical copies. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be explicitly approved by 9Marks.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: © 9Marks. Website: www.9Marks.org. Email: info@9marks.org. Toll Free: (888) 543-1030.



A Church Discipline Primer

By Jonathan Leeman

What would you think of a coach who instructs his players but never drills them? Or a math teacher who explains the lesson but never corrects her students' mistakes? Or a doctor who talks about health but ignores cancer?

You would probably say that all of them are doing half their job. Athletic training requires instructing *and* drilling. Teaching requires explaining *and* correcting. Doctoring requires encouraging health *and* fighting disease. Right?

Okay, what would you think about a church that teaches and discipled but doesn't practice church discipline? Does that make sense to you? I assume it makes sense to many churches, because every church teaches and discipled, but so few practice church discipline. The problem is, making disciples without discipline makes as much sense as a doctor who ignores tumors.

I understand the reluctance to practice church discipline. It's a difficult matter for any number of reasons. Still, this reluctance to practice church discipline, a reluctance that many of us probably feel, may suggest that we believe ourselves to be wiser and more loving than God. God, after all, "disciplines those he loves"; and "he punishes everyone he accepts as a son" (Heb. 12:6). Do we know better than God?

God disciplines his children for the sake of their life, growth, and health: "God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness" (Heb. 12:10). Yes, it's painful, but it pays off: "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" (Heb. 12:11). A harvest of righteousness and peace! That's a beautiful picture.

Church discipline ultimately leads to church growth, just as pruning a rose bush leads to more roses. Said another way, church discipline is one aspect of Christian discipleship. Notice that the words "disciple" and "discipline" are etymological cousins. Both words are taken from the realm of education, which involves teaching *and* correction. Not surprisingly, there's a centuries-old practice of referring to "formative discipline" and "corrective discipline."

My goal in this primer is to introduce the reader to the basics of corrective church discipline—the "what," the "when," the "how," and a few more words on the "why."

WHAT IS CHURCH DISCIPLINE?

What is corrective church discipline? Church discipline is the process of correcting sin in the life of the congregation and its members. This can mean correcting sin through a private word of admonition. And it can mean correcting sin by formally removing an individual from membership. Church discipline can be done in any number of ways, but the goal is always to correct transgressions of God's law among God's people.

Not Retributive, but Remedial, Prophetic, and Proleptic

This correction of sin is not a retributive action; it's not enacting God's justice, per se. Rather, it's remedial, prophetic, and proleptic. By *remedial*, I mean it's meant to help the individual Christian and the congregation grow in godliness—in God-like-ness. If a member of the church is given to gossip or slander, another member should correct the sin so that the gossipier will stop gossiping

and speak words of love instead. God does not use his words to wrongfully harm; neither should his people.

By saying that church discipline is *prophetic*, I mean it shines the light of God's truth onto error and sin. It exposes cancer in an individual's or the body's life, so that the cancer might be cut out. Sin is a master of disguise. Gossip, for instance, likes to wear the mask of "pious concern." The gossip might think that his words are reasonable, even caring. Yet church discipline exposes the sin for what it is. It exposes the sin both to the sinner and to everyone involved, so that all may learn and benefit.

By saying the church discipline is *proleptic*, I mean it's a small picture of judgment in the present that warns of an even greater judgment to come (e.g. 1 Cor. 5:5). Such a warning is nothing if not gracious. Suppose a classroom teacher gave passing grades to a student's failing tests throughout the semester for fear of discouraging the student, only to fail her at the end of the semester. That would not be gracious! In the same way, church discipline is a loving way to say to an individual caught in sin, "Careful, an even greater penalty will result if you continue on this path. Please turn back now."

It's not surprising that people don't like discipline. It's hard. But how merciful God is to warn his people of the great judgment to come in comparatively small ways now!

Biblical-Theological Foundations

Behind church discipline is one of the grand projects of redemptive history—the project of restoring God's fallen people to the place where they will once more image God as they extend his benevolent and life-producing rule throughout creation (Gen. 1:26-28; 3:1-6).

Adam and Eve were to image God. So was the kingdom of Israel. Yet Adam and Eve's failure to represent God's rule, prompted by the desire to rule on their own terms, resulted in their exile from God's place, the Garden. Israel's same failure to keep God's law and reflect God's character to the nations also resulted in an exile.

As creatures made in God's image, our actions intrinsically speak about him, like mirrors representing the object which they face. The problem is, fallen humanity distorts the image of God, like wavy carnival mirrors. Since fallen humanity speaks lies, for instance, the world has concluded that God's own words cannot be trusted. He, too, must be a liar. As goes a creature, so must go its creator.

Gratefully, one son of Adam, one son of Israel, did keep God's law perfectly, the same one whom Paul would describe as "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15). Now, those who are united to this one Son are called to bear that same "image," which we learn to do through the life of the church "from one degree of glory to the next" (see 2 Cor. 3:18; Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:49; Col. 3:9-10).

Local churches should be those places on earth where the nations can go to find humans who increasingly image God truly and honestly. As the world beholds the holiness, love, and unity of local churches, they will better know what God is like and will give him praise (e.g. Matt. 5:14-16; John 13:34-35; 1 Peter 2:12). Church discipline, then, is the church's response when one of its own fails to represent God's holiness, love, or unity by being disobedient to God. It's an attempt to correct false images as they rise up within the life of Christ's body, almost like polishing smudges of dirt out of a mirror.

Specific Texts

Jesus grants local congregations the authority to discipline their own in Matthew 16:16-19 and 18:15-20. The power of the keys for binding and loosing on earth, first mentioned in Matthew 16:18, are handed to the local congregation in Matthew 18:15-20, which we'll consider more carefully below.

Paul describes the processes of church discipline in a number of places, including 1 Corinthians 5, 2 Corinthians 2:6, Galatians 6:1, Ephesians 5:11, 1 Thessalonians 5:14, 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15, 1 Timothy 5:19-20, 2 Timothy 3:5, and Titus 3:9-11.

John refers to a kind of discipline in 2 John 10. Jude seems to have it mind in Jude 22 and 23. More examples could be mentioned. Really, church discipline is what Jesus and the biblical authors have in mind every time they tell their listeners to correct sin in their lives together.

WHEN SHOULD A CHURCH PRACTICE DISCIPLINE?

When should a church practice discipline? The short answer is, when someone sins. But the answer might differ depending on whether we're talking about informal or formal church discipline, to use Jay Adams distinction between private confrontations and public church-wide confrontations.

Any sin, whether of a serious or non-serious nature, might elicit a private rebuke between two brothers or sisters in the faith. That's not to say we should rebuke every single sin that a fellow church member commits. It's simply to say that every sin, no matter how small, falls into the realm of what two Christians *may* lovingly raise with one another in a private setting, prudence depending.

When we turn to the question of which sins require formal or church-wide corrective discipline, we need to tread a little more carefully.

Biblical Lists

Some of the older theologies presented lists of when it's appropriate to conduct formal discipline. For instance, the Congregationalist minister John Angell James said that five kinds of offenses should be disciplined: (i) all scandalous vices and immoralities (e.g. 1 Cor. 5:11-13); (ii) the denial of Christian doctrine (e.g. Gal. 1:8; 2 Tim. 2:17-21; 1 Tim. 6:35; 2 John 10f); (iii) the stirring up of division (Titus 3:10); (iv) the failure to provide for one's near relatives when they are in need (e.g. 1 Tim. 5:8); (v) and unreconciled enmity (e.g. Matt. 18:7).^[1]

These types of biblical lists can be helpful to a point. Notice that each of the sins described are both serious and have an outward manifestation. They're not just inward sins of the heart; they can be seen with the eyes or heard with the ears. And in that outward manifestation they mislead both the world and other sheep about Christianity.

Yet what such lists fail to do is account for the vast multitude of sins which the Scriptures never address (what about abortion?). Plus, texts on church discipline may only mention one particular sin, such as 1 Corinthians 5 which discusses the sin of sleeping with a father's wife; but surely Paul doesn't mean for churches to only discipline *that* sin. How should churches extrapolate out from such examples to other sins?

Outward, Serious, and Unrepentant

One way to summarize the biblical data is to say that that formal church discipline is required in cases of outward, serious, and unrepentant sin. A sin must have an *outward* manifestation. It

must be something that can be seen with the eyes or heard with the ears. Churches should not quickly throw the red flag of ejection every time they suspect greed or pride in someone's heart. It's not that sins of the heart are not serious. It's that the Lord knows we cannot see one another's hearts, and that real heart problems will eventually rise to the surface anyway (1 Sam. 16:7; Matt. 7:17f; Mark 7:21).

Second, a sin must be *serious*. For instance, I might observe a brother exaggerate the details of a story and then privately confront him over the matter. But even if he denies it, I probably wouldn't draw him in front of the church. Why not? First, something like the sin of embellishing stories is rooted in far more significant and unseen sins like idolatry and self-justification. Those are the sins I want to spend personal time discussing with him. Second, pursuing every tiny sin in a church's life will probably induce paranoia and propel the congregation toward legalism. Third, there clearly needs to be a place for love to "cover a multitude of sins" in a congregation's life (1 Peter 4:8). Not every sin should be pursued to the utmost. Thankfully, God has not done so with us.

Finally, formal church discipline is the appropriate course of action when sin is *unrepentant*. The person involved in serious sin has been privately confronted with God's commands in Scripture, but he or she refuses to let go of the sin. From all appearances, the person prizes the sin more than Jesus. There may be one kind of exception to this, which we'll consider below.

All three factors were in play in my first experience with corrective church discipline. The person in question happened to be a good friend and running partner. Yet both I and the church were oblivious to the fact that he was engaged in a lifestyle of sexual sin, at least until he told me one day over lunch. Immediately I asked him whether he knew what the Bible said about such activity, which he did. Yet he said that he had made his peace with God. I urged him to repent. Others eventually did as well. But he said the same thing to all of us: "God is okay with it." After several months of such conversations, the church formally removed him from its fellowship. His sin was serious, unrepentant, and had a clear outward manifestation. It would mislead others both inside and outside the church about what it means to be a Christian. The church spent several months pursuing this man. We loved him. We wanted him to turn away from his sin and to know that Jesus is more valuable than anything this world affords. Still, it was clear almost immediately that he had no intension of turning away. He was resolute. Given a choice between his sin and the Word of God, he chose sin. So the church formally acted.

HOW SHOULD A CHURCH PRACTICE DISCIPLINE?

How should a church practice church discipline? Jesus provides the basic outline in Matthew 18:15-17. He says to his disciples,

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Notice here that the offense starts between two brothers, and the response should extend no further than it needs to go in order to produce reconciliation. Jesus describes the process in four steps.

Four Basic Steps

1. If a sin problem can be resolved between the two people by themselves, then the case is closed.
2. If it cannot be resolved, then the offended brother should bring two or three others so “that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses” (Matt. 18:16). Jesus takes this phrase from Deuteronomy 19, which in context is meant to protect people against false accusations. Deuteronomy in fact calls for a “thorough investigation” whenever there’s any doubt about the crime (Deut. 19:18). I take it that Jesus, likewise, means for Christians to be concerned with truth and justice, which may require due diligence. The two or three witnesses need to be able to confirm that, indeed, there is a serious and outward offense and, indeed, the offender is unrepentant. Hopefully, involving other people will either bring the offender to his senses *or* help the offended see that he should not be so offended. Both this step and the prior step may occur over several meetings, whatever the parties think is prudent.
3. If the intervention of the two or three does not admit of a solution, the offended party is then instructed to tell it to the church (Matt. 18:17a). In my own congregation, this is typically done through the elders, since the Lord has given the church elders to provide oversight in all the church’s affairs (1 Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:17; 1 Peter 5:2). The elders will announce the name of the party charged with outward, serious, and unrepentant sin. They will provide a very brief description of the sin, a description adjudged to not cause others to stumble or to bring undue embarrassment on any family members. And, typically, they will then give the congregation two months to seek out the sinner and call him or her to repentance.
4. The final step of church discipline is exclusion from the fellowship or membership of the church, which essentially means exclusion from the Lord’s Table: “And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matt. 18:17b). He is to be treated as someone outside of God’s covenant people, someone who should not partake of Christ’s covenant meal (though he will probably be encouraged to continue attending the church’s gatherings; see discussion below). Our own congregation will take this step once the two months have expired and the individual has refused to let go of the sin. Two months is an arbitrary number, of course; it simply presents a basic timeline to correspond with our church’s regularly scheduled members meetings. In any given situation, the church might deem it necessary to speed up that timeline, or slow it down.

Why Slow Down or Speed Up the Process?

Sometimes the processes of discipline should move quite slowly. This is the case, for instance, when a sinner shows at least some interest in fighting against his sin. It’s not just the nature of the sin which needs to be considered, it’s the nature of the sinner himself. Different sinners, to put it bluntly, require different strategies. As Paul instructs, “admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all” (1 Thess. 5:14). Sometimes it’s not immediately apparent whether people are idle or indifferent toward their sin or if they’re genuinely weak.

I remember working with one brother involved in one kind of addiction, and for a time I wasn’t sure if he was just making excuses for his moral lapses or if his soul was truly weakened and malformed by years of sinning, making it that much harder for him to stop sinning. The answer to those kinds of questions should affect how quickly the processes of discipline move.

Sometimes the processes of discipline need to speed up, which might mean skipping one or two of the steps described by Jesus in Matthew 18. Two clear biblical warrants for speeding up the processes of discipline are (i) division in the church and (ii) public scandal (i.e., sin that will misrepresent Christ in the community beyond the church). Regarding the first category, Paul says, “As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing

more to do with him” (Titus 3:10). It’s not entirely clear what kind of process Paul has in mind here. But his words do suggest that the church should respond quickly and decisively to division-makers for the sake of the body.

An even faster process is presented in 1 Corinthians 5, in which Paul calls upon the church to immediately remove an individual known to be engaged in a publicly scandalous sin, that is, a sin of which even the non-Christian community disapproves. In fact, Paul doesn’t even tell the church to warn the man in case he might be brought to repentance. He simply tells them to “deliver this man to Satan” (v. 5a).

Why skip over the question of repentance and not give the man a second chance? It’s not that Paul is uninterested in repentance or second chances. Rather, he tells the church to remove the man so that the man’s “spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord” (v. 5b). Surely, Paul is open to the man eventually rejoining the church should he indeed prove repentant (see 2 Cor. 2:5-8). But the point is, his sin is publicly known and makes a public statement about Christ. Therefore, the church should respond with an equally public statement before the world: “Not acceptable! Christians don’t do this!”

Having said that, it’s worth observing in 1 Corinthians 5 that there was no question about whether or not the man was engaged in sin. It was an uncontested fact. However, if there is a question about whether or not a sin has occurred, even if it’s a scandalous sin, the church should pause long enough to conduct a thorough investigation, as Jesus requires in Matthew 18. For instance, a church doesn’t want to discipline someone for embezzlement (a publicly scandalous sin) based on hearsay, only to have the secular courts throw out the case three months later because of insufficient evidence.

What then are the two considerations that might cause a church to speed up the processes of discipline? A church might deem it wise to move more quickly when (i) there’s an immediate threat to the unity of the church body or (ii) there’s a sin which could bring great harm to the name of Christ in the community. There is no precise formula for establishing when one of these lines is crossed, and a church does well to appoint a plurality of godly elders to give oversight to such difficult matters.

Attendance and Restoration

Church members often wonder whether a person who has been excluded from membership and the Lord’s Table can continue attending the church’s weekly gatherings, as well as how they should interact with him or her throughout the week. The New Testament addresses this matter in a number of places (1 Cor. 5:9, 11; 2 Thess. 3:6, 14-15; 2 Tim. 3:5; Titus 3:10; 2 John 10), and different circumstances may well require different responses. But the instruction given by the elders in my own church generally falls under two points:

- Except for situations in which the unrepentant party’s presence is a physical threat to the congregation, a church should welcome the person’s attendance in the weekly gathering. There’s no better place for the person to be than sitting under the preaching of God’s Word.
- Though the family members of a disciplined individual should certainly continue to fulfill the biblical obligations of family life (e.g. Eph. 6:1-3; 1 Tim. 5:8; 1 Peter 3:1-2), the tenor of church members’ relationships with the disciplined individual should markedly change. Interactions should not be characterized by casualness or friendliness but by deliberate conversations about repentance.

Restoration to the fellowship of the church occurs when there are signs of true repentance. What true repentance looks like depends on the nature of the sin. Sometimes repentance is a black

and white matter, as with a man who has abandoned his wife. For him, repenting means returning to her, plain and simple. Yet sometimes repentance doesn't mean conquering a sin completely so much as demonstrating a new diligence in waging war against the sin, as with a person caught in a cycle of addiction.

Clearly, the question of true repentance is a difficult one that requires much wisdom. Caution must be balanced with compassion. Some time may need to pass for repentance to be demonstrated by its fruits, but not too much time (see 2 Cor. 2:5-8). Once a church decides to restore a repenting individual to its fellowship and the Lord's Table, there should be no talk of a probation period or second-class citizenship. Rather the church should publicly pronounce its forgiveness (John 20:23), affirm its love for the repenting individual (2 Cor. 2:8), and celebrate (Luke 15:24).

WHY SHOULD A CHURCH PRACTICE DISCIPLINE?

As a church moves toward practicing church discipline, it will often find itself facing real-life situations that are complex and have no exact "case-study" in Scripture to help it sift through the various layers of circumstances. It will not always be clear whether formal church discipline is required, or how long the processes should take, or whether the guilty party is truly repentant, and so on.

As a congregation and its leaders work through these complex issues, they must remember that the church is called, above all else, to guard the name and glory of Christ. Fundamentally, church discipline is about the reputation of Christ and whether or not the church can continue to affirm the verbal profession of someone whose life egregiously mischaracterizes Christ. The sins and circumstances of sin will vary tremendously, but this one question always needs to be in the forefront of our churches' thoughts: "How will this sinner's sin and our response to it reflect the holy love of Christ?"

After all, to care about the reputation of Christ is to care about the good of non-Christians. When churches fail to practice church discipline, they begin to look like the world. They are like salt that has lost its saltiness, which is only good for being trampled upon (Matt. 5:13). They are no witness at all to a world lost in darkness.

Also, to care about the reputation of Christ is to care about other members of the church. Christians should want to look like Jesus, and church discipline helps to keep his holy picture clear. Members are reminded to take greater care in their own lives whenever a formal act of discipline occurs. The Congregationalist James sums it up well: "The advantages of discipline are obvious. It reclaims backsliders, detects hypocrites, circulates a salutary awe through the church, adds a further incentive to watchfulness and prayer, proves beyond question the fact and consequences of human frailty, and moreover, publicly testifies against unrighteousness."^[2]

Finally, to care about the reputation of Christ is to care about the individual caught in sin. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul knew the most loving course of action was to exclude a man from the congregation "so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord" (1 Cor. 5:5).

Why should a church practice discipline? For the good of the individual, the good of non-Christians, the good of the church, and the glory of Christ.^[3] Keeping these basic goals in mind will help churches and elders move from one difficult case to another, knowing that God's wisdom and love will prevail even as ours fall short.

Jonathan Leeman, an elder at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC, is the director of communications for 9Marks and is the author of [The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline](#) (Crossway, Jan. 2010).

1. John Angell James, *Church Fellowship or The Church Member's Guide*, excerpted from volume XI of the 10th edition of the *Works of John Angell James*, 53.
2. James, *Christian Fellowship*, 53.
3. See Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Crossway, 2004), 174-78.

September/October 2009
© 9Marks

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format, provided that you do not alter the wording in any way, you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and you do not make more than 1,000 physical copies. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be explicitly approved by 9Marks.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: © 9Marks. Website: www.9Marks.org. Email: info@9marks.org. Toll Free: (888) 543-1030.



Was Dagg Right?

By Gregory A. Wills

One hundred fifty years ago John Dagg suggested that “when discipline leaves a church, Christ leaves with it.” At that time, Baptists and most other evangelicals practiced a thorough church discipline. Over the next fifty years most evangelicals abandoned the practice. For at least three generations now, evangelical churches in the West have neglected it. Yet during this period, the Lord has blessed many of these churches in spiritual and material ways. So was Dagg right?

WE FEEL THAT DAGG SHOULD BE RIGHT, BUT...

We no doubt feel that Dagg should be right. To neglect church discipline is to disobey to Jesus Christ. The Lord commands churches to exercise church discipline in Matthew 18:15-17, as well as in many other passages in the New Testament. Yet Christ evidently has not yet abandoned our evangelical churches, despite the fact that our churches have abandoned discipline. This fact reminds us that there is no simple correlation between a church’s disobedience on the one hand and spiritual blight and abandonment by Christ on the other. Our Lord judges our disobedience in the time and measure of his wisdom.

One factor which may have delayed God’s judgment is that our churches are faithful in significant areas of gospel service. Indeed, our ambition to spread the gospel has been an obstacle to obeying Christ in the matter of discipline. Many pastors and church members fear that disciplining wayward members will result in more harm than good for the advance of the gospel. It will drive “good” families away in shame and anger, and it will render us an object of ridicule and disgust among unbelievers, who view discipline as barbaric and contrary to common sense and compassion. Our churches neglect discipline out of fear that the practice will harm the cause of Christ.

But even with virtuous motives, disobedience is still disobedience, and we will be called to account. The fact that the Lord has shown great mercy and patience toward disobedient churches is no excuse for their disobedience. We are presuming upon the Lord’s mercy and do not fear his judgment.

The neglect of church discipline, however, imperils the church in other fundamental ways. The loss of church discipline undermines the church’s very foundations.

UNDERMINING THE CHURCH’S FOUNDATIONS

Churches which fail to practice discipline undermine their regenerate character. By omitting it, they tolerate sinful behavior in their membership and make themselves comfortable places for the unregenerate.

Churches which fail to practice discipline undermine also the church’s holiness, since it weakens believers in their struggle against sin. Jesus provided discipline as one of his gospel remedies for sin, without which our sanctification will lag. Applying church discipline to our sinful diseases will strengthen Christians in our lifelong battle with Satan, the world, and the flesh.

Churches which fail to practice discipline further undermine their spirituality, zeal, and devotion to the Savior. Discipline teaches the church to obey the Lord in an area that is distasteful, unpleasant, and contrary to the broader culture’s sensibilities. In exercising discipline, we commit

ourselves to Christ's spiritual way, even when reason, compassion, and civility seem to argue that we should not obey. Christians thus learn to trust the wisdom of Christ rather than the wisdom of the world. They learn to obey Christ regardless of the uncomfortable consequences.

In neglecting discipline, we train ourselves not to take up our cross, not to fear God, not to suffer willingly for Christ's sake, and not to oppose the world. And once well-trained by the neglect of church discipline, the churches will lose their commitment to the gospel itself.

WHEN A CHURCH ABANDONS DISCIPLINE, IT ABANDONS CHRIST

This is why Dagg said that when discipline leaves a church, Christ leaves with it. However, it is perhaps more accurate to say that when a church abandons discipline, it abandons Christ. Churches do not intend to abandon Christ, and they may not do so entirely. But by neglecting discipline they begin to drive a wedge between themselves and Jesus.

In addition the principle upon which they have abandoned discipline works like leaven, working more broadly to weaken a church's commitment to Christ and its ability to take up its cross and follow him. They conform increasingly to the world. It is only a matter of time before Christ abandons them.

In the New Testament, the Lord judged churches that tolerated offenses against God's law. The church at Corinth observed the Lord's Supper in a sinful manner by tolerating immorality, divisions, and partiality and contempt among the members. Therefore, God visited some of them with sickness and others with death (1 Cor. 11:30). Both the Greek text and the context suggest that their failure was not so much a failure to recognize Christ's presence, to "discern the body," as it was a failure of discipline, to "judge the body" (1 Cor. 11:29). In any case, there is a direct connection between the Corinthian church's toleration of sinful behavior and God's judgment upon them.

Jesus rebuked churches that disobeyed his command to exercise church discipline faithfully. He admonished the churches at Pergamum and Thyatira because they neglected church discipline (Rev. 2:14-15, 20). The Pergamum church tolerated those who held the "teaching of Balaam" and others who held the "teaching of the Nicolaitans." The Thyatira church tolerated a false prophetess. He commanded them to repent, which could only be accomplished by church discipline. We do not know to what extent they repented of these sins of failure to discipline. However, we do know that Jesus did ultimately judge these churches by abandoning them.

IF WE REFUSE TO REPENT...

If our churches refuse to repent of tolerating unrepentant sin among our members, we can expect judgment. Therefore, let us presume no longer upon the Lord's mercy. Let us consider well what the Lord's reproof of the Sardis church in Revelations 3:1-3 means for our churches:

I know your works. You have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead. Wake up and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.

At that hour we will discover that Dagg was right.

Gregory A. Wills is an associate dean and professor of church history at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. He is the author of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1859-2009 (Oxford, 2009) as well as Democratic Religion (Oxford, 1997).

September/October 2009
© 9Marks

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format, provided that you do not alter the wording in any way, you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and you do not make more than 1,000 physical copies. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be explicitly approved by 9Marks.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: © 9Marks. Website: www.9Marks.org. Email: info@9marks.org. Toll Free: (888) 543-1030.



Informed Consent: Biblical and Legal Protection for Church Discipline

By Ken Sande

America is one of the most litigious countries in the world. Therefore, when a church begins the process of exercising formal, biblical discipline, it will often receive a letter from the member's attorney threatening to sue the church for defamation, invasion of privacy, and intentional infliction of emotional distress. Many church leaders who would not back down have found themselves forced into court, subjected to days of humiliating cross-examination, and shocked to see juries penalize their churches with six-figure damages awards. This trend was triggered by the *Guinn* case in 1984, which resulted in a \$400,000 judgment against a church and its leaders, and has continued to grow for twenty-five years.

Many of these judgments occur because churches have not clearly established and communicated how they will minister to members who are caught in conflict and sin. As a result, unrepentant members are able to persuade juries that the church's actions were unreasonable and offensive, which is not difficult to do in a culture that prizes autonomy and despises accountability.

Even when a church wins in court, it usually pays an enormous price in terms of legal fees, lost time and energy, damaged witness, distraction from ministry, and congregational confusion and dissension. Therefore, it is not good enough for a church to behave so well that it will *prevail* in a lawsuit. Instead, churches must act with such wisdom and integrity that they will *prevent* lawsuits from being filed in the first place.

One of the most effective ways to prevent such lawsuits is to adopt explicit biblical policies that comprehensively describe how your church will exercise discipline over unrepentant members. These policies will provide your church with one of the most effective defenses to any lawsuit: informed consent. To secure this defense, a church needs to be able to prove to a court that the person complaining of a wrong was in fact fully aware of the church's policies and procedures and knowingly agreed to be bound by them.

Although most churches have provisions in their bylaws about "exercising discipline pursuant to Matthew 18," this kind of general statement is usually insufficient for today's individualistic and anti-church legal climate. Therefore, it is essential that churches update their governing documents by adding language that preserves the church's right to shepherd its flock and rescue wayward members from sin. This added language should address specific challenges that may arise, such as continuing discipline after a member attempts to leave the church or informing your members of your disciplinary actions in order to protect others from harm (e.g., when someone is defrauding senior members through misleading investment schemes).

Based on its experience in mediating and arbitrating lawsuits against churches, Peacemaker Ministries has developed model "Relational Commitments." These are designed so that churches can clearly establish their own Scripture-based policies on conflict resolution, divorce, counseling methodology, confidentiality, and church discipline (see a sample document at www.Peacemaker.net/Risk_Management).^[1]

By updating your governing documents with these kinds of provisions, you can strengthen your ability to obey God's command to restore straying sheep, while simultaneously reducing your church's exposure to legal threats.

Ken Sande is an attorney who serves as president of Peacemaker® Ministries (www.Peacemaker.net), which provides training, educational resources, and conciliation services to churches, ministries, and individuals around the globe. He is also the author of The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict (Baker Books, 3rd Ed. 2004), and has written numerous other resources on biblical peacemaking and legal risk management.

¹Here is a sample provision from one of our model relational commitments: “We realize that our natural human response to correction often is to hide or run away from accountability (Gen. 3:8-10). To avoid falling into this age-old trap and to strengthen our church’s ability to rescue us if we are caught in sin, we agree not to run away from this church to avoid corrective discipline. Therefore, we waive our right to withdraw from membership or accountability if discipline is pending against us. Although we are free to stop attending the church at any time, we agree that a withdrawal while discipline is pending will not be given effect until the church has fulfilled its God-given responsibilities to encourage our repentance and restoration, and to bring the disciplinary process to an orderly conclusion (Matt. 18:12-14; Gal. 6:1; Heb. 13:17).”

September/October 2009
© 9Marks

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format, provided that you do not alter the wording in any way, you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and you do not make more than 1,000 physical copies. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be explicitly approved by 9Marks.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: © 9Marks. Website: www.9Marks.org. Email: info@9marks.org. Toll Free: (888) 543-1030.



Discipline in the Mainline - Is it Possible or Even Wise?

By Kevin DeYoung

Evangelicals have a lot to learn about church discipline from us in the Protestant Mainline.

I say that as an evangelical pastor in the Reformed Church in America (RCA). The RCA is the oldest Protestant denomination with a continuous ministry in the United States, dating back to 1628 and the Dutch settlement at New Amsterdam. The RCA is also part of the Protestant mainline. We have an official Formula of Agreement with the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, and the United Church of Christ. We are the most evangelical of the four groups, but that's not saying much.

Ecclesiastical discipline should be a rich part of church life in the mainline. We have some of the best polity and well-thought out procedures. The RCA's Book of Church Order (BCO), for instance, has a beautiful definition of church discipline and an entire section for judicial proceedings, complete with lawyerly footnotes. There's even a whole volume commentary on the BCO. So we have the structure in place.

Plus, many mainline denominations have confessional standards. We claim to believe certain things and should be able to hold each other to these commitments. In the RCA, we subscribe to the Belgic Confession which says that church discipline is one of the marks of a true church.

Yet discipline is scarce in the mainline.

In the RCA a local elder board must contact the Classis (think Presbytery) before it can proceed with excommunication. When I first contacted the Classis executive committee with such a request a few years ago the response was along the lines of "Wow, I don't think anyone has ever asked us that before." Perhaps their memories were fuzzy, or perhaps local congregations don't know to ask permission from the regional body. But, in either case, it seems that discipline has not been carried out very frequently, if at all. Discipline is possible, on a congregational and on a denomination-wide level. I've witnessed it with my own eyes. But it is rare and difficult.

And that's what evangelicals, whether in the mainline or not, should consider. Consider what happens when you churches lack the courage, humility, and love to discipline.

WHY DISCIPLINE IN THE MAINLINE IS DIFFICULT

You're Outnumbered

Discipline is difficult for several reasons. First, accountability is hard on a denominational level because you're outnumbered. Ask any conservative in a mainline denomination and he'll tell you that the conservatives have the bigger churches, but the liberals are better represented on boards and committees. This makes holding the line on ethical and theological issues extremely difficult. The majority in the pews may be with you, but the denominational machinery is against you.

Likewise, it is almost impossible to hold someone accountable in another part of your denomination. In the RCA, ministers are only amenable to their own Classis. This means that I am powerless to raise disciplinary proceedings against someone else in one of the other 44 Classes.

In 2005 I was one of dozens of ministers who pressed charges against one of our seminary presidents for performing a “wedding” ceremony for his lesbian daughter (in Jonathan Edwards’ church of all places). Three of the charges were upheld and the president was suspended as a minister of Word and Sacrament. But this was only possible because he was technically a “General Synod Professor of Theology” (a fourth office in the RCA) and thus amenable to the entire denomination.

“Who Are You to Say?”

Second, discipline is difficult because too many people refuse to say the Bible says something. Ironically, one of the charges against the seminary president that was declared invalid was the one that he had violated Scripture. He made a biblical case for homosexuality and therefore thought he was being biblical. Who were we to say he wasn’t?

The same thing happens with our doctrinal standards. Ministers only have to affirm that our confessions are “faithful and historic witnesses.” Sadly, this means that some can “affirm” our doctrinal standards because they give historic testimony to what Christians have believed.

With both Scripture and our Standards there is a postmodern fuzziness that eschews clear definition. As I’ve been told by denominational leaders before, “We can’t be too exact. All we have are truths with a lower case ‘t’. The only Truth with a capital ‘T’ we know is Jesus.”

It’s Tough to Hold the Line When It Keeps Getting Pushed Back

Third, as the line of deviant behavior and doctrine has been pushed back farther and farther, discipline has gotten harder and harder. Every mainline denomination is wrestling with the issue of homosexuality. Evangelicals are trying to hold the line, but they may have already given up too much. Almost no one is ever disciplined for divorce, or divisiveness, or any number of doctrinal truths the denomination believes on paper. It’s good that evangelicals are waking up on this issue, but they may have overslept for too long.

Denominations almost always drift liberal because it’s always easier to let things go than to maintain boundaries. After decades of neglecting the doctrinal and ethical fences, it will be almost impossible for conservatives to now hold the line on homosexuality. Discipline is rare because so much has already been overlooked and there are few offenses left to discipline.

Evangelicals, whether you’re in the mainline or not, are you paying attention?

People Can’t Stomach it

Finally, the biggest reason discipline is difficult in the mainline is that people just don’t have the stomach for it. Our Classis has the reputation for having the hardest ordination exams in the area (and they are most definitely not hard). But because we actually fail people once in awhile we are considered nigh unto the Inquisition by seminary students. I don’t think most of our students expect high doctrinal standards. And I don’t think most of the leaders in mainline churches have the guts to enforce doctrinal standards.

Most people in most our churches don’t have the stomach for discipline either. How could they? They’ve never seen it. They’ve probably never heard preaching on it.

On the denominational level, unity and growth are prized above all else. Purity is almost a bad word, too much like those nasty Puritans. So most people just try to get along. I’m convinced that most mainline denominations still have a faithful remnant larger than those who have bowed the

knee to Baal. But the remnant is cowardly. They have “orthodox instincts but little discernment,” as Athanasius said about the majority of bishops at Nicea.

The problem with the mainline is that it's just too mushy. And we have no one to blame but ourselves. Evangelicals not in the mainline should especially pay attention here. An orthodox confession of faith is not enough!

OKAY, BUT IS IT WISE?

Is discipline in the mainline possible? Barely, but it can be done.

Is it wise? Yes, but there is a cost and you will only get one or two shots before you're labeled a trouble-maker and banished to the ecclesiastical wilderness.

So be a serpenty-dove. Discipline may be difficult and it may not be popular, but it is necessary. The health of our churches, the vitality of our denominations, the good of the offender, and the glory of God depend on it.

Kevin DeYoung is the Senior Pastor of University Reformed Church in East Lansing, Michigan, the author of Just Do Something! (Moody, 2009), and the co-author (with Ted Kluck) of Why We're Not Emergent (Moody, 2008) and Why We Love the Church (Moody, 2009).

September/October 2009
© 9Marks

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format, provided that you do not alter the wording in any way, you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and you do not make more than 1,000 physical copies. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be explicitly approved by 9Marks.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: © 9Marks. Website: www.9Marks.org. Email: info@9marks.org. Toll Free: (888) 543-1030.

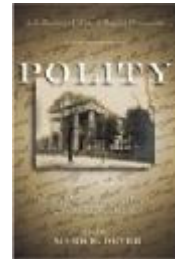


***Polity* on Church Discipline: A User's Guide**

By Bobby Jamieson

(Click [here](#) to buy *Polity*. Click [here](#) to download *Polity* for free.)

As an intern at Capitol Hill Baptist Church, I read *Polity*, a collection of ten Baptist polities from the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, together with three contemporary essays, pulled together by Mark Dever. And when I say I read *Polity*, I mean I read about five hundred dense, often-cryptic, clearly-belonging-to-another-era-of-history-and-English-usage pages. So I can tell you firsthand that if you're a busy pastor, elder, seminary student, or anyone without a lot of time on your hands, reading through *Polity* cover to cover may be a long-term project.



But despite its length, density, and occasionally difficult prose, the book is worldview shifting. Wade into its pages, and, after a while, you'll find that not only are you looking at a different world, but that that different world sometimes makes more sense than our own.

Further, *Polity* is a treasure trove of deeply biblical and rigorously practical thought on church life, especially on church discipline. I'm not sure there are many books out there that address church discipline with the biblical breadth and practical intensity that *Polity* does. So in an effort to bring the riches of *Polity* to the busy pastor's doorstep, here's a brief user's guide to *Polity* on the topic of church discipline.

CONSULT THE MODERN TOUR GUIDES

The contemporary authors whose essays open the volume provide a logical place to begin. In their introductory essays, Mark Dever, Greg Wills, and Al Mohler help bridge the gap from our current church scene to the historic Baptist perspectives represented in these works.

Mark Dever argues that Baptists have historically viewed the pastor's main responsibilities to be preaching the Word and administering the sacraments. He calls modern pastors back to those central, biblical tasks (3-18).

Greg Wills' essay (19-42) provides a helpful key to unlocking the entire volume. He sketches out the basic doctrinal framework which the older authors held in common as they thought through various topics like congregational authority, church membership, baptism, the Lord's Supper, church discipline, and church officers. This theological framework, which many contemporary Baptists lack, helps the reader move into the rest of the volume. Wills also provides a brief biography of each author, sums up the unique contribution of each polity, and highlights points of dispute or disagreement between them, making the second half of his chapter a useful resource to refer to before digging into any individual essay.

In his essay (43-56), Al Mohler bemoans the contemporary neglect of church discipline and pleads with churches to recover this essential and biblically required practice.

Reading all three of these essays will give the reader a sense of the chasm that separates the contemporary Baptist worldview from that of our Baptist forefathers. It will provide a theological framework for understanding some of the more nuanced discussions in the volume. And it should impress upon the reader the crucial importance of the matters discussed in the collected polities.

GET TO KNOW MESSRS. BAKER, MELL, AND SAVAGE

Although many of the polities collected in *Polity* are called something like "A Treatise on Church Discipline," the authors use the phrase "church discipline" to mean the whole government of the church, not merely what we typically call church discipline today. But there are three essays in *Polity* that are entirely devoted to church discipline in the narrower sense: *Queries Considered, or, An Investigation of Various Subjects Involved in the Exercise of Church Discipline* by Joseph Baker (249-292), *Corrective Church Discipline* by P.H. Mell (405-476), and Eleazer Savage's *Manual of Church Discipline* (479-523). These three essays are worth reading in their entirety.

Baker's *Queries Considered* (247-292) would be especially helpful for a church's elders or other leaders to work through as a group. It proceeds through the topic of church discipline in a Q&A format, answering many questions that may arise. Also, Baker's answers to these questions furnish a good model for how pastors can instruct their congregations on this sensitive topic.

Mell's treatise (409-476) is hair-splittingly precise and wondrously elaborate. While you likely won't agree with all of his distinctions or recommended procedures, you should be challenged to think clearly about the different disciplinary actions merited by different offenses and how your church can carry out those actions in a wise and orderly fashion.

Savage's treatise (479-523) should serve modern readers, Greg Wills points out, because he includes procedural details of church discipline which other writers of his day took for granted. Therefore, it should be of special use to pastors who are looking for practical help in implementing church discipline. Wills also observes that Savage's treatment of the spirit in which believers should carry out Jesus' instructions in Matthew 18:15-20 is especially edifying.

SORT THROUGH THE DISPUTES

Another way to make the most out of *Polity* without reading it cover-to-cover is to jump into the fray of the various disagreements between the authors. This will help you hone in on disputed issues and will force you to take another close look at the biblical texts that bear on church discipline.

In his summary of the collected polities, Greg Wills notes a handful of disagreements among the collected authors pertaining to church discipline. I'll mention two:

1. What are the biblically warranted means of church discipline? The Charleston Association argues for three: admonition, suspension, and rebuke (127-131), as does Benjamin Griffith (105-110). Baker explicitly rejects suspension (283), while Jones accepts it but considers it merely a delay of excommunication (153).
2. Are there any sins for which a church should discipline a member regardless of whether or not the person repents? The Charleston Association says "no" (129), but every other author in *Polity* who treats the issue says "yes."

DIG THROUGH THE SCRIPTURE AND SUBJECT INDECES

Finally, you can use *Polity* as a reference work on church discipline by consulting the Scripture and subject indices in the back of the book (571 ff. and 559 ff.). In the Scripture index you'll find over fifty references to 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 alone. To get the most profit from the authors' reflections on Scripture, look up all the references to the major New Testament texts on the subject: Matt. 18:15-20, 1 Corinthians 5:1-13, 2 Corinthians 2:5-11, Galatians 6:1-5, 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15, and 1 Timothy 5:19-21.

As you read the various authors' discussion of these passages you will repeatedly encounter careful interpretation and thoughtful application. To cite just one example: consider how the authors differently treat the process Jesus outlines in Matthew 18:15-20 and the action Paul requires in 1 Corinthians 5. The precedents set by these two texts for handling different types of offenses are a crucial component of a biblical understanding of church discipline, one that every pastor and church leader should be acquainted with.

The subject index is another useful tool, especially if you want to see what different authors said about a particular issue (559 ff.). Look up admonition, church discipline, church membership ("exclusion from" and "restoration to"), excommunication, expulsion or exclusion, gospel steps, ministers ("trial and excommunication of"), offences, offenders, repentance, unjust accusation or expulsion, and witnesses.

While not all these topics may interest you, the subject index provides quick access to relevant passages on whatever issue related to discipline you're facing.

WORTH THE SLOG

While reading *Polity* can at times feel like trudging through knee-deep sludge, the payoff is immense. If you're a pastor trying to obey Jesus by implementing church discipline, there are few books that will aid you in both understanding and applying the Bible's teaching on the subject the way *Polity* will. Don't let the dusty prose and the pictures of old, bearded, crotchety-looking men stop you. Both for the sake of gaining a larger, more biblical vision of the local church as well as for gaining a better understanding of church discipline, *Polity* is worth the slog.

Bobby Jamieson is assistant editor for 9Marks.

September/October 2009
© 9Marks

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format, provided that you do not alter the wording in any way, you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and you do not make more than 1,000 physical copies. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be explicitly approved by 9Marks.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: © 9Marks. Website: www.9Marks.org. Email: info@9marks.org. Toll Free: (888) 543-1030.



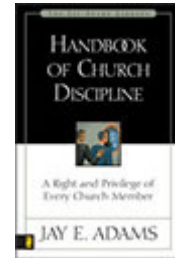
Book Review: Handbook of Church Discipline

By Jay E. Adams

Reviewed by Jonathan Leeman

Handbook of Church Discipline: A Right and Privilege of Every Church Member
[Zondervan, 1974. 120 pages. \\$14.99](#)

The first sentence of Jay Adams' *Handbook of Church Discipline* says it all: "This book in your hand is just what it calls itself—a handbook." Indeed, the book is as straightforward and helpful as that sentence. It's short, easy to read, and nicely divided so that the "busy pastor" and "Christian worker" can almost use it as a reference guide, if need be.



AN EVEN-HANDED INTRODUCTION

I don't agree with every jot and tittle, but Adams' 1974 work remains one of the most even-handed introductions to the topic. Church discipline has had a bad name historically, in part because many churches never got what Adams gets, namely, that discipline is largely about education, and that education has both a preventive and corrective element. Don't do corrective discipline, in other words, until you teach a congregation about all the things for which they might be corrected. That would be like handing out grades before you ever teach the class.

The great strength of Adams' book is that he sets corrective church discipline into this larger educative context. When done well, church discipline is a blessing, he says. A blessing? Yes, a blessing. He even calls it—look up at the book's subtitle—a right and privilege for every member. It's a right for every member because Jesus has commanded it. No leader should deny it. It's a privilege because discipline is a means of peace and righteousness for the individual and the church (see Heb. 12:11). At the same time, Adams could have done a better job of setting discipline in the larger context of the gospel, as Mark Lutherbach's book on discipline, *The Transforming Community* (click [here](#) for a review), does so well.

The bulk of the book is spent walking the reader through the stages of corrective church discipline, which he divides into five steps based partially on Matthew 18:15-17: self-discipline, one-on-one, one or two others, telling it to the church, and then removal from the midst. That first step isn't mentioned in Matthew 18, of course, but Adams makes a strong case for us to think of it as the first step nonetheless.

Throughout these steps, Adams offers the kind of balanced and practical advice one would expect of a long-time pastor and counselor.

- Should we go through every step always? Well, no, different circumstances call for different solutions (see 1 Cor. 5).
- What should the church leaders tell the whole congregation in a situation of discipline? As little as necessary, but enough for the church to do its job.
- Should we confront every unconfessed sin? Hardly. Love covers a multitude of sins (Prov. 10:12; 19:11).

Adam's wisdom and experience, in other words, show through in his ability to see that multiple principles should inform how we handle any given situation.

More than Lauterbach's or McQuoid's book on church discipline (click [here](#) for a review of McQuoid's book), Adams takes care to step around questions of polity, so that congregational, presbyterian, and episcopalian church leaders alike won't be put off. This means he avoids saying what a church should do in order to remove someone from its midst. Instead he tells us to check our denomination's or our church's own book of order.

At other moments, however, he can't hide his Presbyterianism, as when the elders make declarations on behalf of the church without the congregation's explicit consent. As a Baptist, of course, I would differ a little here.

MAYBE A COUPLE MISSTEPS

I also differ from Adam in that he equates "telling it to the church" with "excommunication" (step 4), which he then distinguishes from "removal from its midst" (step 5). I'm happy to separate "telling it to the church" and "removal from its midst," based on the Matthew 18, but I would equate excommunication with the latter, not the former. He says he once made this equation as well, but now he knows better. That may be the case, but he didn't say anything to help me know better.

The heavy reliance on word studies feels like evangelicalism circa 1974, and his chapter on "cross-congregational" discipline, which provides steps for disciplining entire congregations (?!) and allowing you to then sue them (?!!!), is a mixed bag. Still, his chapter on restoring repentant members is practical and very good, and his final chapter on trusting in Jesus' presence through the processes of discipline is hope-giving (see Matt. 18:19-20).

TRUSTY PRIMER

All in all, Adams' *Handbook of Church Discipline* is a trusty primer and guide on this difficult matter. His final two pages present six steps for how pastors can go about initiating discipline in their churches. Step two includes passing out this book to your elders. I'd agree.

Jonathan Leeman, an elder at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC, is the director of communications for 9Marks and is the author of [The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline](#) (Crossway, Jan. 2010).

September/October 2009
© 9Marks

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format, provided that you do not alter the wording in any way, you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and you do not make more than 1,000 physical copies. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be explicitly approved by 9Marks.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: © 9Marks. Website: www.9Marks.org. Email: info@9marks.org. Toll Free: (888) 543-1030.



Book Review: *The Transforming Community*

By Mark Lauterbach

Reviewed by Jonathan Leeman

The Transforming Community: The Practice of the Gospel in Church Discipline
[Christian Focus, 2003. 243 pages. \\$8.99](#)

I have to admit Mark Lauterbach's book on church discipline *The Transforming Community* started kind of slow for me. It's not a quick, bullet-pointed read like Jay Adams' *Handbook of Church Discipline* (click [here](#) for a review). Adams, you might say, marches up to the podium, marshals a few texts on church discipline, turns to the chalkboard behind him, and dashes out numbered lessons with a clacking piece of chalk.



By comparison, Lauterbach's book is a little more, well, touchy-feely. If Adams is the no-nonsense instructor of artillery (think General Stonewall Jackson from the Virginia Military Institute), Lauterbach is the contemplative professor of rhetoric (think Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain hailing from a private liberal arts college in Maine). Lauterbach says his book "could be seen" as a book about church discipline, but "really" it's a book about "Spirit-empowered community." He wants to paint the larger picture. What's the goal of the local church and its relationship to the universal church? What is the nature of a hard heart and how does self-deceit work? How does the gospel fit into all this?

THIS BOOK SNEAKS UP ON YOU

Yet Lauterbach's book sneaks up on you. He says things like, "The Gospel itself is a message which disciplines," and, "Grace disciplines" (57, 58). What?! Doesn't the gospel mean we're "forgiven"? And grace mean we're "accepted"?

If you're not careful, Lauterbach's book just might cause a paradigm shift in how you think about grace and the gospel, as well as how you think about the church. He believes that the gospel actually changes people, and that grace transforms them. The gospel does this, he says, by joining each of us to a community of people and giving us new corporate identities. Our salvation, if it's a true salvation, must be worked out among Christ's people somewhere on earth. Further, it's the church's daily actions of discipline, almost like boot camp, that trains and sharpens this transforming community. We learn to be holy and loving through the church's discipline so that the world might see something different among us.

If your church doesn't practice church discipline, you may want to recheck what it thinks the gospel is.

MANY MORE REASONS WHY THIS IS A GREAT BOOK

In all this, Lauterbach strikes a balance that some recent missional writers miss: the church is interested in both evangelism and edification, since the two necessarily work together. The gospel requires the church both to embrace and to exclude. The missional tilt toward the church's evangelistic purposes can mean all embrace and no exclusion, an imbalance Lauterbach's work helpfully corrects.

Yet Lauterbach's pastoral tone is nothing if not gracious and patient, which is another way his

book is a little different than Adams'. Adams tries to help Christians soften their tone when confronting another Christian by encouraging them to offer only a "tentative rebuke." He instructs the confronter to say, "if you have an explanation, I am ready to hear it before passing final judgment" (Adams, 50). A little bit like a panther preparing to pounce? Lauterbach essentially says the same thing, but he encourages the reader to be a friend who gives the benefit of the doubt, not to be a prosecuting attorney: "Assume you have misunderstood. State it that way. Most of the time, we have misread the situation. You are there to get the facts, not hold an inquisition" (108).

Transforming Community covers all the standard material about the whethers, the whys, and the hows of church discipline. What's more, just about every point of biblical exegesis or theological application is backed up by some personal story. The reader begins to wonder if God has given Mark Lauterbach the two-decades plus pastoral career he has exactly so that Lauterbach could write this book. The number and variety of anecdotes is astonishing.

THINGS THAT COULD BE BETTER

The book would be helped by adding a few elements of a handbook, such as numbered lists, bullet points, or clearly marked subheadings. He offers practical steps throughout, but they're buried in the chapters. Also, he makes a silly comment about not putting church discipline situations to a vote in the church "because obedience to God is not something we vote on" (169). How can the church be said to obey if it's never given a decision to make? Besides, don't the elders have to somehow decide whether or not to discipline? I fear that the elders who keep the congregation from making such decisions just might be usurping the power of the keys from the church.

GIVE IT TO YOUR ELDERS AND CHURCH MEMBERS

These matters aside, I'd say Lauterbach's book is a great resource to give your elders and church members, perhaps even better than Adams' classic work on the topic.

Jonathan Leeman, an elder at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC, is the director of communications for 9Marks and is the author of [The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline](#) (Crossway, Jan. 2010).

September/October 2009
© 9Marks

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format, provided that you do not alter the wording in any way, you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and you do not make more than 1,000 physical copies. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be explicitly approved by 9Marks.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: © 9Marks. Website: www.9Marks.org. Email: info@9marks.org. Toll Free: (888) 543-1030.



Book Review: Discipline with Care

By Steven McQuoid

Reviewed by Jonathan Leeman

Discipline with Care: Applying Biblical Correction in Your Church

[Day One Publications, 2008. 95 pages. \\$10.00](#)

On the whole, the genre of contemporary books on church discipline seem to have been written by nice guys. Which is good. You don't want to take your cues on church discipline from someone who sounds like they work for the Gestapo.

Stephen McQuoid, principal of Tilsley College in Glasgow, fits the nice-guy profile well. Just notice the book's title—it tells us to *Discipline with Care*.



Not surprisingly, then, there's almost as much in the book about "with care" as there is about "discipline." Church leaders, we're told, need to be "realistic" about life in the fallen world. They should be "flexible." They should look for solutions that yield "the least amount of damage." They should talk about the topic by borrowing metaphors from a realm that people today understand and appreciate, namely, the athletic realm. So talk about "disciplined athletes" or "life coaching" (interestingly, the book doesn't follow its own advice on this score).

McQuoid stands in the centuries-old tradition of dividing the topic of church discipline between "preventative" and "corrective." Preventative discipline includes teaching, pastoral care, discipleship, and community life. He says about teaching, "Unless people within our churches know what God expects of them, they will not be in a position to live it out" (33-34). Very true.

THE MOST BRITISH BOOK ON DISCIPLINE

In all, I would say that *Discipline with Care*, like its author, is the most British of the books I've read on church discipline. Where Jay Adams' book might feel a little strident to a British reader (click [here](#) for a review), and Mark Lutherbach's a tad mawkish (click [here](#) for a review), Stephen McQuoid might seem a touch squishy to American readers. Americans usually want their preachers to illustrate in black and white. McQuoid's not afraid to pull out the grays.

In general, I expect that Adams' book on discipline will better appeal to straight-talking American readers, while McQuoid's might play better among more deferential, communally-minded, non-American readers.

McQuoid certainly knows that much is at stake with church discipline: principally, the honor of God; but also the reputation of the church, the health of the body, the unity of the Spirit, the spiritual life of the individual, and church's witness to the spiritual realm. And he doesn't have much patience for the mealy-mouthed pastor who won't confront sin because he doesn't want "to make waves." He also explicitly warns against false compassion and turning a blind eye to sin.

A FEW ISSUES

I do wish McQuoid was more explicit in showing how church discipline is an implication of the gospel. He does a biblical theology of discipline, which is helpful, but his emphasis falls primarily, if not exclusively, on the continuities between the Old Testament and New. For instance, he's excellent on the theme of God calling the church to be a holy witness to the nations (a point of

continuity). But you'll have to turn to Lauterbach's book to hear more about the hope Christians can have in a Holy Spirit who regenerates, indwells, and really changes people into the image of Christ, partly through the church's disciplinary work (a point of discontinuity).

Then again, McQuoid's book is considerably shorter than Lauterbach's and does not attempt to do as much. It's more like Adams' book in scope.

Biblically, I also disagree with McQuoid when he says that church discipline is "ultimately" the responsibility of the church leaders (54). Don't Jesus and Paul say otherwise (e.g. Matt. 18:15-20; 2 Cor. 2:6; Gal. 1)? Still, McQuoid is rightly adamant that the congregation must be involved in the processes of discipline (67-68). And his instruction to churches to respect the universal church by not quickly receiving into membership a disciplined member from another congregation is excellent (80).

HAPPY TO RECOMMEND IT

My bottom line: *Discipline with Care* is a good book on church discipline that will strengthen churches by promoting their holy witness. I'm grateful McQuoid has written it, and I'm happy to recommend it. It's considerably shorter than Lauterbach's and lacks the strange quirks of Adams'. Then again, it's not as straight-talking as Adams' or as gospel-enriched as Lauterbach's.

Jonathan Leeman, an elder at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC, is the director of communications for 9Marks and is the author of [The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline](#) (Crossway, Jan. 2010).

September/October 2009
© 9Marks

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format, provided that you do not alter the wording in any way, you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and you do not make more than 1,000 physical copies. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be explicitly approved by 9Marks.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: © 9Marks. Website: www.9Marks.org. Email: info@9marks.org. Toll Free: (888) 543-1030.



Book Reviews: Who Runs the Church? and Perspectives on Church Government

Reviewed by Bobby Jamieson

Who Runs the Church? 4 Views on Church Government, edited by Steven B. Cowan
[Zondervan, 2004. 320 pages, \\$16.99](#)

&

Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity, edited by Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman
[B&H Academic, 2005. 368 pages, \\$19.99](#)

Of the making of many multiple views books there is, apparently, no end. At last count Zondervan alone has published 25 of them, and other publishers are beginning to join the fun.



Who Runs The Church? 4 Views on Church Government, edited by Steven B. Cowan, and *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity*, edited by Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman, are fine specimens of the burgeoning genre. Both books are written at a moderately academic level, rendering them accessible to the interested layperson, seminary student, or church leader. Both allow each author to present an extended defense of his view, immediately followed by responses by the other authors (*Who Runs the Church?* also includes closing statements by each author). And both are well-researched and well-documented, making them useful reference works on a topic that is not often at the top of the evangelical agenda: church polity.

A STANDING DEBATE

Despite its low profile, church polity is a particularly apt topic for a multiple views book. Polity, after all, has sparked voluminous debate between evangelical Christians for nearly five centuries. It's been one of the major sources of denominational division since the Reformation. These debates have worn on for so long, and the different positions have become so entrenched, that many Christians have long given up hope of reaching widespread agreement.

Christians have instead resorted to a number of ways of living with the conflict. Some, including both of the Episcopalians respectively featured in these two volumes, argue that the New Testament evidence on polity is irreconcilably diverse, which means that any search for a biblical form of church government is in vain. Some argue that polity is a matter of Christian liberty. Some say that we should pattern church polity on whatever corporate structures work best in the business world.



All of these approaches, in one way or another, find ways not to deal directly with whatever it is the New Testament says about church polity.

WELL DONE, COWAN, BRAND, AND NORMAN

So with the current evangelical discussions about polity in such disarray, the editors of both volumes should be commended for putting together an engaging pair of books that prominently feature sustained biblical argumentation.[1] In addition, both books model irenic, charitable,

Christian disagreement. Both books also include not only theological argumentation, but also useful discussion of the practical importance of church polity. Finally, both books demonstrate that there is indeed a gap in between "essential" and "unimportant."

FINDING THE MISSING MIDDLE GEAR

Many evangelicals, it seems to me, have only two theological gears: (1) "What is absolutely essential in order for someone to be saved?" and (2) "The rest is just a lot of unimportant details." Yet both of these books amply demonstrate that there are some matters which, while not essential to salvation, are important for the life of the church and have serious implications for the Christian life.

The clearest articulation of this "middle gear" comes in Steven Cowan's outstanding introductory essay to *Who Runs the Church?*, which is one of the most valuable sections in either of these volumes. Cowan writes,

Nevertheless, despite our profound disagreements, we are all united in the conviction that the form of church government is not a matter of indifference. As Thomas Witherow says, "Though we may not regard the polity of the New Testament Church as essential to human salvation, we do not feel at liberty to undervalue its importance." In other words, the issue of church government may not be a doctrine crucial to the *esse* (being of the church), but it is a doctrine crucial to the *bene esse* (well-being) of the church, vital to its spiritual health. (WRC 11)

If you're indifferent to matters of polity, Cowan's introduction should upend your complacency, as well as provide a helpful orientation to different polities.

So both books are good. Both books are substantial. Both books will hopefully bless the church by encouraging Christians to look closely at what Scripture has to say about the church. But if you're not going to buy, much less read, two very similar-sounding books on church polity, you're probably wondering, "Which is better?"

WHICH BOOK IS BETTER?

For my money, that award goes to *Who Runs the Church?* First, Steven Cowan's introduction, as I've mentioned, is superb. Beyond that, the chapters in this book tend to be a little more focused than those in *Perspectives on Church Government*, a couple of which are strewn with so many footnotes or massive quotations that they're a chore to read.

Also, the taxonomy of the different views on polity is somewhat clearer in *Who Runs the Church?* In *Perspectives on Church Government*, "Single-elder Congregationalism" appears side by side with "Congregationalism," which confuses the conversation a bit, since, unlike all of the other chapters, the defense of plain old congregationalism says little about the role of a congregation's leaders.

APPEARANCES MAY BE DECEIVING

While I'd recommend either of these books, especially *Who Runs the Church?*, there's a danger inherent in this genre which I fear plays out in these two. In perusing a neatly arranged cross-section of viewpoints on an issue, a reader may be left thinking that he's now considered all the views on a subject.

In this case I would be particularly disappointed if the reader was left with such an impression.

Why? Because two elements of polity that I believe are biblical and compatible are presented as incompatible in each book. Not unlike more and more people today and many Baptists historically, (1) I believe that the congregation has final authority in matters of membership, discipline, and doctrine, and (2) I believe that the day to day leadership of a local church should be entrusted to a plurality of elders.

ELDERS AND CONGREGATIONALISM CAN BE FRIENDS! REALLY!

Part of the problem in *Who Runs the Church?* is that the word "congregationalism" is used in two different ways. Paige Patterson, who defends "Single-elder Congregationalism," consistently means two things by the term: (1) every local church is to be independent from any higher ecclesiastical authority such as a presbytery or bishop, and (2) the congregation as a whole possesses the final authority in matters of membership, discipline, and doctrine. Some people refer to the first as the "independent principle" and the second as the "democratic principle." (I will use these terms for simplicity's sake here, though I think both are problematic. "Independent" tempts us to think that churches should not work together; "democratic" tempts us to think in terms of "representing the will of the people," which is not the point of congregationalism at all!)

Sam Waldron, on the other hand, who defends "Plural-elder Congregationalism," uses the term "congregationalism" primarily to refer to the independent principle, while making somewhat ambivalent statements about the democratic principle. For instance, he expresses discomfort with Mark Dever's description of elders' authority as "finally advisory" (WRC 177); yet elsewhere he affirms, "The implication of the authority of the church to terminate membership is that it has the right to receive or admit new members" (WRC 210).

So it appears that Waldron *does* affirm the final authority of the congregation in matters of discipline, but he frequently warns against over-emphasizing the "democratic principle," which tends to weaken the force of his affirmation. Waldron himself says that "there is a kind of tension between a democratic view of church government and a plural-elder view of church government," even though he believes both are biblical (189). At the very least, then, by his own admission, Waldron presents plural eldership and congregational authority as being inherently in tension.

In *Perspectives on Church Government*, a similar wedge is driven between plural eldership and full-scale congregationalism. In this volume Daniel Akin defends a single-pastor-led polity, James Leo Garrett presents a pastor- and deacon-led polity, and James R. White defends a plural-elder-led church. So we have a single-pastor congregationalist, a pastor-and-deacons congregationalist, and an plural-elder-led congregationalist (in the first sense of the term above).

To be fair, the book does not label White's position "congregationalist," and White doesn't claim to advocate congregationalism. Moreover, many churches today practice precisely the kind of independent, elder-rule polity that White advocates, including Grace Community Church, pastored by John MacArthur. No problem there.

But I can't help being slightly disappointed that the book's taxonomy of views thereby gives the impression that a plurality of elders is somehow incompatible with congregationalism. Even if the editors of *Perspectives on Church Government* didn't intend to erect a wall of separation between a plurality of elders and congregationalism, the book's selection of views lends such a separation a certain amount of credibility. Given that many of the viewpoints represented in the book *are* mutually exclusive (such as episcopalian, presbyterian, and congregational polity), the authors of *Perspectives on Church Government* would have done well to acknowledge that some of them *are not*.

But why does that matter? Because I believe that congregationalism (in both senses) and plural

elder leadership are taught and exemplified in the New Testament. Not only that, many who advocate for one are highly suspicious of the other, which in at least some cases owes more to tradition than exegesis.

Multiple views books like this provide a perfect opportunity—an opportunity neither book fully makes good on—to set the record straight about positions that are not mutually exclusive. In failing to do so, both books furthered the widespread perception that a plurality of elders and congregationalism are mutually exclusive, or at least in serious tension. No, it's not the end of the world, but it is a disappointing quirk in two otherwise impressive books.

PRAISE GOD FOR THE CONVERSATION THEY'RE HAVING

But to pull the lens back from this fairly miniscule critique, even the fact that these two books are fostering this kind of a detailed conversation about the relationship between elder leadership and congregationalism is wonderfully encouraging. Books that diligently pore over Scripture in order to discern its teaching about the church are all too rare. I pray that both of these books would be used by God to drive evangelicals back to Scripture and make its teaching their sole sufficient basis for life and ministry in the church.

Bobby Jamieson is assistant editor for 9Marks.

¹Except from the Episcopalian brothers. In *Who Runs the Church?*, Peter Toon appeals almost entirely to a selective reading of the first five centuries of church history in order to buttress Anglican polity. In *Perspectives on Church Government*, Paul Zahl appeals to the personality of Queen Elizabeth, the historical circumstances of the English Reformation, and the pragmatic value of a broad ecclesiastical "tent" in order to justify his polity. Both authors believe that Scripture's teaching is not finally decisive for our church government, so both appeal to Scripture far less extensively than all of the other authors.

September/October 2009
© 9Marks

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format, provided that you do not alter the wording in any way, you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and you do not make more than 1,000 physical copies. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be explicitly approved by 9Marks.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: © 9Marks. Website: www.9Marks.org. Email: info@9marks.org. Toll Free: (888) 543-1030.



Book Review: *Restoring Integrity in Baptist Churches*

Edited by Thomas White, Jason Deusing, and Malcolm Yarnell

Reviewed by Greg Gilbert

Restoring Integrity in Baptist Churches

[Kregel, 2008. 261 pages. \\$18.99](#)

It's hard to assess the health of Baptist churches with any claim to accuracy.

For one thing, there are just so many of them in so many different places with so many different ideas. For another thing, it seems that for every step Baptist churches take in a *good* direction, there's often another step in the *opposite* direction.

There's also the not-unusual-but-still-frustrating fact that most Baptists' formal doctrinal statements, which are often good, aren't lived out. Sound formal statements don't necessarily translate into sound practices.



REARTICULATING BAPTIST DISTINCTIVES

The editors of *Restoring Integrity* recognize that fact up-front, but they hope that rearticulating several Baptist distinctives will remind members of Baptist churches who they are and how they are supposed to live as Baptist Christians.

The book has eleven chapters. John Hammett and Mark Dever write on regenerate church membership, what Hammett calls "the Baptist mark of the church" (21). Daniel Akin, David Allen, Thomas White, and Jason Lee write on baptism, and White and Emir Caner write on the Lord's Supper. Greg Wills and Stan Norman each offer chapters on church discipline, and Malcolm Yarnell contributes one on the priesthood of believers (*not*, he insists, the priesthood of *the* believer).

Restoring Integrity doesn't really break new ground, nor does it take head-on any of the more high-profile controversies which have roiled the Baptist world recently. Danny Akin mentions the International Mission Board's baptism policy as an instance of the confusion that results from misunderstanding the doctrine of baptism, but he does not address it any further. Malcolm Yarnell puts a final stake through the heart of the old moderate idea of "soul competency." David Allen mentions the controversy over baptism at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis (John Piper's church), but he wrongly characterizes it as primarily a dispute over immersion rather than paedobaptism.^[1]

A GOOD REFRESHER

As a compendium of exegetical and historical arguments for Baptist distinctives, the book is good. Probably its best use would be as a quick resource for reminding oneself of what Baptists believe about the five major issues it addresses. John Hammett's chapter on church membership is systematic and clear; Dever's is pastoral and practical. Akin's on the meaning of baptism is comprehensive, succinct, and preachable. White gives a careful and nuanced treatment of six different categories bearing on the validity of baptism. Wills's chapter on church discipline is typically excellent, especially his description of the factors which led to the Baptist

loss of church discipline. And Yarnell's chapter on the priesthood of believers is a very good exegetical, historical, theological, and practical treatment of the subject.

STRANGE ROOTS?

I was somewhat surprised by just how colored the book is by Anabaptist and Landmarkist sources. Balthasar Hubmaier makes an appearance in two of the chapters, and Pendleton and Graves both seem to show up at regular intervals, too. That's a different emphasis than I am accustomed to seeing.

A SPRINKLING OF UNIMPRESSIVE ARGUMENTS FOR IMMERSION

I was also surprised at the relative weakness of David Allen's chapter on immersion. I have read good arguments for immersion as the only valid baptism, but this is not one of them.

Most importantly, Allen constantly confuses the questions of subject and mode. When he cites, for instance, the debates between Baptists and paedobaptists about the nature of the church, he concludes that biblical ecclesiology "includes a return to believer's baptism by immersion." But logically speaking, "by immersion" is sort of smuggled in there, isn't it? The early Baptists didn't argue so much that *immersion* got at the nature of the church; rather, *whether you baptize unbelieving infants* gets at that issue. They may have argued the two points, subject and mode, at the same time, but that doesn't mean both questions bear in the same way on what the church *is*.

In another place, Allen states that "Our Anabaptist and Baptist forefathers were mistreated, imprisoned, tortured, and murdered by Catholic and Protestant alike over their commitment to a New Testament ecclesiology centered on believer's baptism by immersion." Again, "by immersion" is smuggled in. The persecution our forefathers (if Anabaptists truly count as such) endured was not because they insisted on dipping, but because the whole idea of *Christendom* was threatened by their insistence on baptizing only those who professed faith in Christ.

Finally, Allen closes by quoting from Charles Spurgeon, but the quote argues against infant baptism, not against sprinkling. None of this is necessarily to say that one or the other of these issues is unimportant. It is simply to recognize that they are in fact *two* issues, and that to prove one is not to prove the other.

This is not nearly so important, but Allen also uses several times what may be the all-time worst argument for immersion. It goes like this: In the story of Philip and the eunuch, the text uses the Greek words for "to go down [into]" and "to come up [out of]" water. Going down into the water and coming back up—that's immersion.

Well, no. That's a bad argument. Here's what the text says (Acts 8:38-39):

And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.

Now if "went down into the water" and "came up out of the water" refer to the baptism itself, are we to understand that both Philip and the eunuch were baptized? The text, after all, says that "they *both* went down into the water" and that they *both* came back up. Surely the text is *not* saying that both were baptized. Also, look carefully at the text's sequence; it's very precise. They went down into the water, he baptized him, then they came up. If "went down" and "came

up" refer to the immersion itself, then we're left with the ridiculous picture of Philip pushing the eunuch under (presumably going under himself, too), *then* immersing him while they're both under water, and then both of them coming up together out of the water. What sense does that make? It's much easier to understand "went down into the water" as referring not to immersion, but to stepping down into whatever body of water the eunuch saw. Then Philip baptized him, and then they both stepped out of the body of water.

Finally, Allen's charge that any failure to translate *baptizo* as "immerse" must be motivated by "bias, cowardice, or even misrepresentation" is surely far overstated. That would indict as liars or cowards the translators of every major English translation in history, including those of the Holman Christian Standard version. Surely Allen does not mean to go so far.

BAPTISTS NEED THIS

Allen's chapter aside, however, *Restoring Integrity* is generally a well-articulated statement of some important Baptist distinctives. If nothing else, having these ideas republished in the modern era is a useful thing. Pastors seeking to reform their churches can point to the book as proof that regenerate church membership and church discipline, for instance, are not strange new ideas.

Incidentally, I wonder if it might have been even *more* useful in that regard if the book had been published by someone like Broadman & Holman rather than Kregel, especially if the hope is to reassure long-time Southern Baptists of the essential Baptist-ness of these ideas.

Greg Gilbert is an assistant pastor at Capitol Hill Baptist Church and the author of What Is The Gospel? (Crossway, 2010).

¹It is true that Bethlehem's position would have allowed for membership without immersion, since people who are baptized as infants are usually baptized by sprinkling. But as I remember the scandal surrounding the proposal, what most people seemed to find "shocking" was the proposal's treatment of baptism's *subject*, far more than they did its treatment of baptism's *mode*. At the very least, I think most people would characterize the controversy as being over whether *people baptized as infants* should be allowed into membership, not (as Allen does) over whether *the unimmersed* should be so allowed.

September/October 2009
© 9Marks

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format, provided that you do not alter the wording in any way, you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and you do not make more than 1,000 physical copies. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be explicitly approved by 9Marks.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: © 9Marks. Website: www.9Marks.org. Email: info@9marks.org. Toll Free: (888) 543-1030.



Book Review: Organic Church

By Neil Cole

Reviewed by Kevin McFadden

Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens

[Jossey-Bass, 2005. 272 pages. \\$23.95](#)

When you hear the term "house church," what comes to mind? Maybe some place where Christianity is not free to go public, like China? But did you know that house church movements are also growing in the United States?

So we learn from Neil Cole, who is the executive director of Church Multiplication Associates and the author of *Organic Church*. *Organic Church* is the product of his own journey planting "spontaneous multiplication movements" resulting in hundreds of "organic" churches.[1]



WHAT IS AN "ORGANIC" CHURCH?

An organic church is essentially a house church. Cole prefers the former term because of pejorative connotations associated with the latter, and because he has found organic churches meeting in many places other than houses (23). Cole believes this new kind of church is the answer to the problem he sets up in his introduction: "there are many people in the United States who want to hear and believe in the message of Jesus but are not interested in the institution of the church as it is" (xxii). In fact, "all around the world, where church follows the Western institutional pattern, its influence is in decline" (xxiii).

Cole suggests a new approach to evangelism—instead of inviting the world to church and trying to make Sunday relevant (note his criticism of the seeker-sensitive model), "let's bring Christ to people where they live" (xxvi). More memorably: "If you want to win this world to Christ, you are going to have to sit in the smoking section" (xxvii).

Most of the book is spent describing the organic church model, recounting Cole's experience, outlining principles for church planters, and supporting these principles with Scripture. One of the more significant chapters is chapter 12, where Cole provides five principles for starting churches that reproduce. These principles are rooted in his experience and based on Matthew 10 and Luke 10 (173): (1) the practice of prayer; (2) pockets of people (finding a receptive *oikos* ["household"], which Cole defines loosely as a basic social unit); (3) the power of presence ("showing up"); (4) a person of peace (finding someone who can reach an entire *oikos*); and (5) a people of purpose (people who have had the gospel injected into their community rather than people who have been drawn out of their community).

EVALUATING ORGANIC CHURCH

Strong on Bible Reading, Prayer, and Depending on God

Overall, *Organic Church* is an inspiring book with many biblical emphases but with weak biblical foundations. The book is inspiring because of Cole's zeal. His passion to reach people with the gospel is contagious. He emphasizes prayer—he prayed for years that his mother would become a follower of Christ (168–69). He emphasizes reliance on the Spirit (89) and on Jesus Christ (49–53). And he emphasizes God's Word, warning us not to replace reading the Bible itself

with reading books about the Bible or listening to others explain the Bible. In fact, in the Life Transformation Groups he developed, group members read about thirty chapters of the Bible each week (67)!

Strong on Membership and the Importance of Truth

This emphasis on Bible reading is one facet of his commitment to intense Christian discipleship and meaningful church membership. He notes, for example, that "we compromise the life of the church if we keep bad soil in our membership" (69).

Further, in a day when many "missional" evangelicals are hesitant to speak of truth, Cole writes that "divine truth in the heart is the start of everything. A transformed life, and consequently loving relationships and a life on mission, is the fruit of divine truth flooding the heart of a regenerate soul. It is the heart set free by the powerful atoning work of Jesus that is the starting place for all else" (116).

Finally, Cole both humbly and helpfully devotes an entire chapter recounting the mistakes he has made in ministry (ch. 13).

Weak Biblical Foundations

Unfortunately, however, the book has weak biblical foundations. For example, Cole spends an entire chapter addressing the organization and leadership of the church without ever referring to the biblical descriptions of church polity or the even clearer prescriptions for church leadership (such as 1 Timothy 3).

Weak Understanding of the Church

More importantly, Cole has a weak understanding of the church, which surfaces both in his description of New Testament house churches and in his definition of the church. While the early Christians often met in their homes (Acts 2:47; Rom. 16:5; Col. 4:15; Phlm. 2), the first church in Jerusalem also gathered together at the Temple (Acts 2:46; 5:12). Paul's pattern of evangelism usually began in the Jewish synagogues, not in households (Acts 13:5, 14; 14:1; 17:1–3, 10; 18:4; 19:8). And when an entire "household" (*oikos*) was converted and baptized in the NT (e.g., Acts 16:33), this was not simply a social unit but a group of dependents who lived under one roof.[2] We should not equate these converted households with house churches, in which people from outside the household would meet in a house for worship.

My point is: the picture is more complicated than Cole would have us think. Granted, some of this is quibbling about facts, but the details are significant because Cole presents organic churches as *the way* Jesus intended for us to do church (41–44). To do this, he must stretch what the New Testament actually says about house churches. House churches have been helpful at times in Christian history and may still be helpful today, but Cole is wrong to argue that this is *the* biblical pattern for evangelism and church planting.

Weak Definition of the Church

Finally, we should consider Cole's definition of the church itself. He is right to ask the question, "What is the church?" but his answer shows little awareness that Christians have been discussing the question throughout church history. Cole defines the church as "the presence of Jesus among His people called out as a spiritual family to pursue His mission on this planet" (53). There is certainly truth in this definition, but our Protestant forebears would have considered it biblically deficient, pointing to the importance of the right preaching of the gospel, the right administration

of the sacraments, and church discipline. As David Wells observes, it is questionable whether many modern home fellowships, which used to *complement* the local church, will really carry out the duties of the church.[3]

In conclusion, you may find this book helpful if you are a church planter, particularly if you are considering urban ministry, but you'll need to buttress it with books that have a more solid biblical ecclesiology.

Kevin McFadden is a PhD student in New Testament at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

¹In 2004, it was reported that Cole's Awakening Chapels have planted over 300 churches (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/workplace/articles/issue10-leanchurch.html>).

²*Dictionary of New Testament Background*, s.v., "Family and Household," 353, 366.

³David F. Wells, *The Courage to Be Protestant: Truth-Lovers, Marketers, and Emergents in the Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 12.

September/October 2009
© 9Marks

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format, provided that you do not alter the wording in any way, you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and you do not make more than 1,000 physical copies. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be explicitly approved by 9Marks.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: © 9Marks. Website: www.9Marks.org. Email: info@9marks.org. Toll Free: (888) 543-1030.



Book Review: Crazy Love

By Francis Chan

Reviewed by Patrick Schreiner

Crazy Love: Overwhelmed by a Relentless God

[David C. Cook, 2008. 192 pages. \\$14.99](#)

"Your love has got me looking so crazy right now."

So sings Beyonce in her song "Crazy in Love." Francis Chan doesn't quite use this line in his book *Crazy Love*, but switch out Beyonce's mythical man for the eternal God, and the lyric works nicely: God's love should make us look crazy right now.

Chan is the teaching pastor of Cornerstone Church in Simi Valley California and a regular speaker at Passion conferences. His book *Crazy Love* challenges the "Christian" status-quo. In the preface, Chan says that this book is "written for those who want more Jesus, and are bored with American Christianity" (21). Chan argues that the problem with nominal or lukewarm Christianity is an inaccurate view of God (22).



OVERVIEW

Crazy Love has a simple format. In the first section, Chan addresses the problem. He reviews God's character from the Bible and challenges our small understanding of who God is. In the second section of the book Chan challenges professing Christians to examine themselves. He gives a profile of the lukewarm and concludes, "A lukewarm Christian is an oxymoron; there's no such thing. To put it plainly, churchgoers who are lukewarm are not Christians. We will not see them in heaven" (81).

Chan knows that what he has said will produce fear and guilt, so he counteracts that with pointing to God's love. He says love is the only answer for the lukewarm: "The answer lies in letting him change you" (103).

Chan then moves on to challenging Christians to live counter-culturally. The title of chapter seven is "Your best life...later." He wants to see Christians living differently from the world. And he gets the fact—rightly I think—that Christians are provoked to be crazy and distinct not by talking about the value of this world, but by teaching them to store up their hope in the next. It's these Christians who become "obsessed"—who become lovers, servers, the humble, the risk takers, the sojourners, the engrossed, the dedicated, the sacrificers.

A WAKE-UP CALL FOR NOMINAL CHRISTIANS

Crazy Love is essentially a response to nominal Christianity. Chan rightly goes to the root of the problem, a wrong understanding of God. He also says what many Christians are afraid to say: that nominal, lukewarm, half-hearted "Christians" are not Christians. Chan also briefly balances his confrontational language. He says, "I do not want true believers to doubt their salvation as they read this book. In the midst of our failed attempts at loving Jesus, His grace covers us"(87).

Chan also understands that by calling believers to examine themselves they may be tempted to

look to their own works for salvation:

Perhaps it sounds as though I believe you have to work your way to Jesus. I don't. I fully believe that we are saved by grace, through faith, by the gift of God, and that true faith manifests itself through our actions..."

But

The lives of many people who call themselves "Christians" in America lack manifestations of a vital and active faith. And this, to be perfectly honest, frightens me. (95)

WHAT ABOUT THOSE WITH NORMAL LIVES?

Overall, the book is a good call for all to look anew at God and examine themselves to see if they are living a changed life. However, I do wish that Chan would have been a little more careful not to dishearten those Christians who are simply living faithful Christian lives. Granted, Chan does cover his bases (see pages 166, 168, and 172), but I would have liked to see him guard more against discouraging those who do not move to Ethiopia or sell all their possessions, but who faithfully evangelize at work, serve their families, and love the church.

Chan quotes a lot of Scripture that speaks of our radical faith in God, yet he does not interact much with verses that speak of us simply being faithful to God in our everyday business. For example, Matthew 24:45-46 speaks of the Son of Man coming back and finding the faithful and wise servant who "give[s] them their food at the proper time. Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes." Jesus here encourages believers to be faithful every day in their jobs, families, and relationships. In the same vein, Paul encourages the Christians to live "quiet and peaceable lives" (1 Tim 2:2). The Bible calls us to be radically faithful to God, but this devotion will look different in different circumstances.

A USEFUL PROD

That said, this book is a useful prod—a prod for anyone who treats Christianity as if it only means intellectually assenting to a set of facts, but not something that changes your life. Jesus calls us to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37).

Patrick Schreiner is an MDiv student at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

September/October 2009
© 9Marks

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format, provided that you do not alter the wording in any way, you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and you do not make more than 1,000 physical copies. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be explicitly approved by 9Marks.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: © 9Marks. Website: www.9Marks.org. Email: info@9marks.org. Toll Free: (888) 543-1030.