2000

Church Discipline and Grace

Stefan Radu
Andrews University

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ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Dissertation

Andrews University
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

Title: CHURCH DISCIPLINE AND GRACE

Name of researcher: Stefan Radu

Name and degree of faculty adviser: Ricardo Norton, D.Min.

Date completed: December 2000

Problem

Local churches are in general confusion about the meaning, importance, and function of church discipline. Hence, this biblical task is mostly ignored, or even opposed by many as being judgmentalism. As a result, baptismal candidates are poorly prepared and sometimes members are allowed to continue in sinful habits. This study sought to research and present material about why and how the church ought to work with sinning believers.

Method

Based on a search of the Holy Scripture, the writings of Ellen G. White, and other theological literature, material for a seminar about church discipline and grace was
produced. A shortened version was used for the seminar conducted in the Show Low, Arizona, Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Results

The findings of the research, confirmed by long-time pastoral experience, are available to be popularized through similar seminars and in periodicals published by the church. Such an initiative can improve the general awareness about God’s expectations regarding proper church discipline, which is designed to grow healthy congregations that are more successful in their witnessing.

Conclusions

This research has discovered a widespread decline in practicing discipline in the Christian world, due, perhaps, to the contemporary societal trend against order and authority. Personal freedom is interpreted as unlimited permissiveness. As a result, church members falling in sin or committing acts of injustice are simply abandoned to their practices. Yet preaching the gospel is an insufficient work if it lacks serious follow-up for growing spiritual church members and successful evangelists.

At the same time the research recorded a positive cry from many writers of various religious orientations and affiliations pleading for the reinstatement of this vital work in the Christian church. Church discipline is first justified by the fact that Christ and His disciples promoted it as essential for the health, influence, credibility, and development of the church. Discipline was obviously practiced in primitive Christianity and is indispensable for the church living prior to the return of Jesus Christ in glory.
CHURCH DISCIPLINE AND GRACE

A Dissertation
Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Ministry

by
Stefan Radu
December 2000
CHURCH DISCIPLINE AND GRACE

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>INTRODUCTION</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I.</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Problem</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Justification of the Study</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Delimitations</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Method</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Definition of Terms</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.</td>
<td>BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE AND GRACE</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>General Biblical Teachings About Church Discipline and Grace</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Forgiveness Is Compatible with Discipline</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Need of Discipline</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neglecting Discipline in the Church</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Church Discipline Is a Rewarding Work</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jesus’ Teachings on Church Discipline and Grace</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How the Savior Corrected Sinners</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>An Unwarranted Attempt to Discipline People</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Church and Its Foundation</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Church Discipline and the Remission of Sins</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Church Discipline and Conflict</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Paul’s Teachings on Discipline and Grace</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Proper Discipline Is Motivated by Love</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Church Responsibility in Disciplinary Matters</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discipline Needs to Distinguish Wickedness from Failure</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Paul’s Guidelines on Church Discipline and Grace</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Meaning and Purpose of Discipline</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Role of the Church in Regard to Discipline</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Terminology Related to Church Discipline</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disciplinary Procedures</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reasons for Church Discipline</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Benefits of Church Discipline</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Right Spirit for Disciplinary Actions</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III.</td>
<td>ELLEN G. WHITE’S TEACHINGS ON DISCIPLINE AND GRACE</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Meaning and Purpose of Discipline</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discipline and the Recuperation of Sinners</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority and Church Discipline</td>
<td>56</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misconceptions About Discipline</td>
<td>61</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disciplinary Procedures</td>
<td>62</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons for Discipline</td>
<td>68</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits of Discipline in the Church</td>
<td>69</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>69</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. REVIEW OF OTHER LITERATURE ON DISCIPLINE AND GRACE</td>
<td>71</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline and Grace, a Divinely Appointed Responsibility</td>
<td>71</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Origin of Church Discipline</td>
<td>71</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head and Body Working Together</td>
<td>73</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Concept of Church Discipline and Grace</td>
<td>75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitions</td>
<td>75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genders of Discipline</td>
<td>76</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of Discipline</td>
<td>77</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of Discipline</td>
<td>80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biblical Instruction on Discipline and Grace</td>
<td>86</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Church Discipline and Grace</td>
<td>86</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus Did Not Prohibit Discipline</td>
<td>88</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus and the Erring Believers</td>
<td>91</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation of Paul’s View on Discipline</td>
<td>93</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulties in the Practice of Church Discipline</td>
<td>99</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limits of Church Discipline</td>
<td>99</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuses of Church Discipline</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neglect of Church Discipline</td>
<td>102</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposition to Church Discipline</td>
<td>105</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misconceptions About Church Discipline</td>
<td>107</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Practice of Church Discipline</td>
<td>114</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disciplinary Procedures</td>
<td>114</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons for Discipline</td>
<td>116</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes Toward Discipline</td>
<td>117</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Wrongdoer’s Cooperation</td>
<td>119</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative Church Discipline</td>
<td>120</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits of Church Discipline</td>
<td>121</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preventive Christian Discipline</td>
<td>123</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>125</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. NATURE AND MEANING OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE</td>
<td>127</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning and Purpose of Church Discipline</td>
<td>127</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Universal Significance of Discipline</td>
<td>127</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church Discipline and the Cosmic Conflict</td>
<td>129</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of Church Discipline</td>
<td>132</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline as a Timeless Task</td>
<td>135</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline and Community Perception</td>
<td>136</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risks Related to Church Discipline</td>
<td>137</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Problem

Jesus commanded His followers in Matt 7:1 not to judge in order not to be judged, but in chap. 18:15-18 He also instructed how to deal with erring fellow believers. The former text teaches one not to judge, while the latter text, along with 1 Cor 5:1-13, clearly requires the church to practice discipline. Christians struggle with these two injunctions. One extreme tendency is to reject discipline as being judgmental or faultfinding. However, abandoning church discipline can ruin a congregation, as Ellen G. White writes: “If there were no church discipline and government, the church would go to fragments.”

While a pastor in Communist Romania from 1961 to 1984, I experienced a lot of frustration caused by the repressive politics of the one-party system. Government restrictions interfered with almost every aspect of church life, such as finances, the number of students to be admitted into the Adventist Theological Seminary, who could

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be employed or fired by the denomination, which messages could be preached in the churches, etc. One of the most painful avenues of interference was control of baptism.

Every baptism had to be announced and a list of candidates had to be submitted for approval or rejection to the territorial inspector of the Department of the Church Affairs. Still, some solutions remained: Many pastors would baptize surreptitiously, hoping no church member or baptismal candidate would report the event to the authorities. However, my greatest fear was that the autocratic Department of Church Affairs would one day prohibit disciplinary actions taken by the church. I knew that such a measure would force the church to keep everybody in the church, adulterers, thieves, or even atheists, thus blurring the distinction between the church and the world.

Fortunately, this did not happen. Even those church members who were most protected by the agents of the secret police (securitate) were not supported when church discipline was applied to them. However, in July 1984, after moving to the free world from whence Adventism had come to Romania, I found it almost unbelievable to discover the great lack of interest in genuine church discipline. This prompted me to initiate research on this issue and to integrate the findings in this dissertation.

Commenting on the rejection of church discipline, Mark Littleton noted that this rejection is primarily an American problem. In regions where there is heavy religious persecution, churches take discipline much more seriously; their commitment to it is “very high.”

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More often than not, people from the community at large identify a sinning member with the entire congregation. This attitude emphasizes the importance of appropriately practicing church discipline. However, one must first determine what church discipline is. Destructive criticism, which is of itself a misdemeanor, is not church discipline. Three wrongs are committed all at once by such criticism of one’s neighbor’s errors: The speaker engages in harmful behavior, the listener is negatively influenced, and the person targeted by such gossip is attacked without having any possibility of defense.

Ultimately, there are two extremes: to apply disciplinary measures for every perceived infraction or to have none at all. Which criteria are to be followed? Since all humans are sinners, total confusion would reign if there were no inspired texts to consult in order to clarify the issue.

Clearly, the Word of God reveals that forgiveness does not exclude consequences of committed sins. God loves sinners, no matter how deep they have fallen, but He will never cease to hate sin. Jesus loved sinners beyond any human comprehension. He was even dubbed by His opponents as “a friend of publicans and sinners” (Luke 7:34), and He came “to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10). Yet that Great Lover of sinners commanded the church to be serious in dealing with the sins of its members.

**Purpose**

The main purpose of this study is to suggest a better understanding of how the Scriptures instruct the church to deal with erring believers, that both the extremes of
permissiveness and judgmentalism are to be avoided. This instruction may also assist church members and pastors to live a growing spiritual life in Christian fellowship, one that is as free as possible from poisoning criticism which grieves the Spirit of the living God. This study then is geared to help pastors and elders to appropriately resolve disciplinary cases in local churches, while at the same time preventing avoidable losses of membership. By following scriptural procedures for promoting spiritual purity in the lives of their members, I believe churches can foster the cause of God more successfully in the larger community.

With these purposes in mind, chapter 2 presents how theologians of various orientations and denominational affiliations have understood this issue and dealt with it. A careful examination of such sources can bring the practice of church discipline into a general Christian context, thus increasing its credibility and facilitating its acceptability.

**Justification of the Study**

The Holy Scripture requires the Christian church to practice discipline. It was Jesus, the Founder of the church, who established the rules for dealing with wrongs committed by church members. His words in Matt 18:15-20 and John 20:23 give the church the authority to preserve order and discipline in its midst. This is an internal matter which should be taken very seriously.

A survey of current literature on this issue reveals that many denominations emphasize the need to follow the biblical injunction about discipline in local congregations. It is therefore a necessary work if the church is to live in harmony with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Seventh-day Adventist Church cannot ignore this
divinely appointed responsibility without serious consequences for its purity and mission in this time just prior to the return of the Lord.

After having lived and worked for the church for over two decades behind the Iron Curtain, I am surprised to find among church members in the most advanced countries three negative attitudes towards ecclesiastical discipline. The first and the most widespread is confusion. Many members wonder what discipline is all about and why to be concerned. Terminology regarding church discipline is either unfamiliar or misunderstood. Love wrongly perceived as unlimited acceptance of anything is seen as a proper replacement of any form of church discipline.

A second stand is the total neglect of church discipline. Some members and ministers realize the need of following this biblical requirement, but they prefer complacency, mainly because discipline is unpopular and relationships matter more than conscientious actions. Nevertheless, neglect of discipline may encourage people to continue in sin, thus hindering the church’s spiritual and numerical growth and decreasing its credibility in the community.

Third, there are people who openly and decidedly oppose the practice of church discipline. They claim that sinners should never correct other sinners, that one should be content that sinners come to the church.

I think that the aforementioned attitudes are unacceptable for a healthy and dynamic church family. The truth is that performing this duty in love is the responsible choice in keeping with God’s instruction and will for His church.

Given that such attitudes do injustice to God and His cause, harming the life and the mission of the church, it is obvious to me that a study on church discipline and grace
is justified. Therefore, I have decided to research this topic and offer some reasonable recommendations.

**Delimitations**

This study deals only with discipline in the area of church membership, not disciplinary action against denominational employees, institutions, or congregations. It is a study which refers to the spiritual life of church members, and to the protective function of church discipline for individuals and the entire body of believers.

**Method**

Three sources provided information for this dissertation:

1. The vast body of literature dealing with church discipline and grace – the King James Version of the Bible as the primary and basic source and the writings of Ellen G. White and many other authors, as consulted in the library of Andrews University and other places

2. My own pastoral experience accumulated over several years in various districts in Romania, Australia, and the United States of America

3. A seminar on church discipline and grace I held in the district of Show Low, Springerville, Arizona. This seminar consisted of six lessons presented in the Show Low Seventh-day Adventist Church on July 7, 9, 14, and August 4, 11, 18, 1999. Printed material was provided for each attendee at every session. The reading of each lesson’s material was performed collectively by the author of this dissertation and various participants. Numerous explanations by the author and his responses to questions raised
by the attendees amplified the printed material. The participants repeatedly interrupted the lecture, which enriched it by the large variety of discussions, questions, uncertainties, improvements, and/or voiced appreciation. Everyone agreed the seminar was very original and presented innovative ideas. Generally, the participants thought the content of the seminar presented a necessary experience for the local congregation. The seminar was preceded and followed by a survey. A more detailed description of the seminar is presented in chapter 7; the entire six lessons of the seminar are included in the appendix.

B. Their titles are:

1. Belonging to God’s Church
2. A Double Concern of the Church: To Expand Its Boundaries, and To Strengthen the Achievements
3. Saving Wrongdoing Believers
4. Unrepentant Church Members
5. The Church Has a Responsibility

Definition of Terms

Thirteen terms generally employed in the Bible and the literature considered in this study are defined for a general orientation.

Church appears in the King James Version only in the New Testament, in singular (church) 77 times, and in plural (churches) 37 times, a total of 114 times. The first and the last occurrences render the words of Jesus addressed to two of His disciples, Peter and John, respectively, and before and after His glorification: “And I say unto thee,
That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt 16:18). “I Jesus sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches” (Rev 22:16). The word church is the English equivalent of the Greek ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑ, which comes from two words: εκ (out) and καλεῖω (to call), meaning an assembly of individuals whom God called out of the world to be His spiritual family.¹

**Discipline** is used only once in the KJV (Job 36:10), but the notion is represented by numerous equivalents in various parts of Scripture. This notion can have the following connotations: a training of the mind and character, a branch of learning, a mode of life according to some rules, and punishment for misdemeanor.² The last two connotations are the most meaningful for this study. According to Adams, the word discipline is related to the Latin verb *disco*, which means to learn.³ Studies in Church Discipline explains discipline as the “training which corrects, molds, strengthens, or perfects.”⁴ This idea is confirmed by Koranteng-Pipim⁵ who claims discipline is a form of discipling, a basic educational tool in any school which strives to be successful.

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² *New Webster’s Dictionary and Thesaurus of the English Language* (Danbury, CT: Lexicon Publications, 1993), 270.


Church discipline is well described by the Presbyterian Church: “Discipline is the exercise of that authority, and the application of that system of laws, which the Lord Jesus Christ has appointed in his Church: embracing the care and the control, maintained by the Church, over its members, officers, and judicatories.”¹ Laney moves even closer to the point. He shows that “church discipline may be broadly defined as the confrontive and corrective measures taken by an individual, church leaders, or the congregation regarding a matter of sin in the life of a believer.”² Furthermore, White and Blue make church discipline extremely comprehensive when they say that “church discipline is anything the body of Christ does to train Christians in holiness, calling them to follow their Lord more closely. There is a special (and unpopular) category of training we call corrective church discipline.”³

Here my tentative definition of church discipline is seen from the point of view of correction: Church discipline includes the totality of procedures undertaken for restoring an erring member of the church to an orderly conduct, according to the Scriptures, and for the protection of the congregation against apostasy. To a certain degree, discipline is the entire process of working with a wrongdoer because, as already

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¹ Presbyterian Church, The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1899), 393.


³ John White and Ken Blue, Healing the Wounded (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1985), 19.
shown, its purpose is to bring the person back to a disciplined or orderly conduct from
which the person has departed.

White and Blue look beyond the corrective discipline and see a type of
discipline which is permanent and consists in the spiritual education of believers:

Discipline is training. Christian discipline is achieved by training in godliness.
Godliness is not only a matter of being zapped by the Holy Spirit. Spiritual
experiences, crises, moments of revelation, all have their place. But their effects will
not last unless godly training equips Christians with moral stamina... Church
discipline is the training of the church by the church. Trained professionals have
their place, but they cannot and never were meant to be a substitute for the whole
body.1

When practiced in accordance with the divine instruction, church discipline is
characterized by Littleton as "a mark of a God glorifying fellowship of believers."2

Finally, one can say that Christian discipline represents not only a service for the
individual and the congregation but also a true act of worship, which is, as we learn from
James F. White, everything the believers do according to the will of God and for His
glory.3

Grace is the English word equivalent of the Hebrew chen, which means
kindness or favor and appears in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament 38 times. It
renders the contents of the term tech-in-naw, meaning graciousness, favor, with only one

1 Ibid., 16, 18.

2 Littleton, 30.

occurrence. In the New Testament, the term grace translates from the Greek χάρις, which means benefit, favor, gift, joy, liberality, pleasure, and thankfulness. It occurs 130 times. Grace is also translated from the Greek εὐπρεπεία, meaning beauty, loveliness, which occurs once. χάρις itself is a noun derived from the verb χαίρω, which means to be cheerful. χάρις appears 155 times; however, in 24 cases it is translated in KJV with words other than grace.

From the meanings of these terms in the original texts of the Bible, we can conclude that grace, considered for the purposes of this study, is God’s unmerited favor extended to sinners, His willingness to forgive, accept, and restore. Beyond that, grace is the divine power for salvation, which can be accepted or made useless.

Commenting on grace, The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary notes:

Generally the translation of the Hebr. ḥen and the Gr. Charis, meaning “favor,” or “kindness,” especially when unearned or undeserved. ... The OT reveals not only God’s displeasure with sin but also His patience and love for sinners, and the grace provided for their salvation. It remains, however, for the NT to proclaim the fullness of divine grace, “For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.” (John 1:17)

Thus, grace is God’s forgiving love for the sinner who deserves death for the committed transgression of the eternal Moral Law. It surpasses all understanding, therefore Nelson calls it “outrageous.”


3 Neufeld and others, 419, 420.

Hughes lists four aspects of the grace of God: General Grace, sustaining life and controlling the human society; Prevenient Grace, the initiative of God enabling sinners to believe; Salvation Grace, whereby God saves, justifies, sanctifies, and restores; Sufficient Grace, adequate to serve and supply all needs into eternity.¹

God’s love is eternal and all-comprehensive. Grace for sinners is only one if its sides. It is limited in time to the history of the fallen human race, as Ellen G. White says:

We would never have learned the meaning of this word “grace” had we not fallen. God loves the sinless angels who do His service and are obedient to all His commands, but He does not give them grace. These heavenly beings know naught of grace; they have never needed it, for they have never sinned. Grace is an attribute of God shown to undeserving human beings. We did not seek after it, but it was sent in search of us. God rejoices to bestow this grace on everyone who hungers for it, not because we are worthy, but because we are so utterly unworthy. Our need is the qualification which gives us the assurance that we will receive this gift.²

It is absolutely preposterous to see discipline and grace as exclusive terms. Bonhoeffer writes: “Discipline in a congregation is a servant of the precious grace of God.”³ Describing the relationship between God’s love and His grace bestowed on repenting sinners, Ellen G. White notes that “you should have the crowning grace of God, which is love.”⁴

⁴ Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, 3:418.
Offense is defined by The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church as follows:

"An offense is anything, in the doctrine, principles, or practice of a church member, officer or judicatory, which is contrary to the Word of God; or which, if it be not in its own nature sinful, may tempt others to sin, or mar their spiritual edification."\(^1\)

Rebuke is used as a verb or a noun 46 times in the entire Bible: 34 times in the Old Testament and 12 times in the New Testament. Its synonym, reprove, appears altogether 19 times: 16 times in the Old Testament and 3 times in the New Testament. One dictionary says this term means “to tell (someone) severely that his conduct or action is wrong or unsatisfactory.”\(^2\) According to Bryson, the apostolic church used the word rebuke with reference “to moral censure.”\(^3\)

Censure is a probation, a testing of one church member who committed a wrong deed, but one not serious enough to require removal from the church roster. In the Seventh-day Adventist Church, “a vote of censure is for a stated period of time, from a minimum of one month to a maximum of twelve months; it terminates the erring one’s election or appointment to any and all offices he or she may hold in the church, and removes the privilege of election to office while under censure.”\(^4\)

\(^1\) Presbyterian Church, 393.

\(^2\) New Webster’s Dictionary, 832.


\(^4\) General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Church Manual (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1995), 168.
Exclusion or disfellowshipping is the disciplinary measure whereby a member is expelled from membership, with his or her name being removed from the church roll.\(^1\)

Ban is the equivalent of the Hebrew charam. Ezra convened the assembly of Jews to deal with mixed marriages (Ezra 10:1-44). Those who did not attend lost all goods and were expelled from the congregation.\(^2\)

To judge translates the Greek κρίνειν. Explaining this term as used in Matt 7:1, one commentary notes that the verb “implies unkind, condemnatory judgment;” it does not refer “to our private judgment, nor to the official expression of our opinion which may be bound in duty to give, . . . but to those uncalled-for judgments which are neither dictated by duty, nor prompted by love.”\(^3\) The Scripture teaches that every child of God is his or her neighbor’s keeper (cf. Gen 4:9). This invalidates the interpretation that zero-judgment is being taught in the Sermon on the Mount. White and Blue declare: “It will be necessary for us to judge in the sense of assessing or weighing the actions of our fellow Christians from time to time.”\(^4\) This is authentic Christian love.

Anathema is related to the Hebrew herem and refers to something given up to God as consecrated, or for destruction. It is used in the original text of the New

\(^1\) Ibid.


\(^4\) White and Blue, 89.
Testament six times as a noun, αναθημα (Acts 23:14; Rom 9:3; 1 Cor 12:3; 16:22; Gal 1:8; 1:9), and four times as a verb, αναθηματιζειν (Mark 14:71; Acts 23:12; 23:14; 23:21). According to Coleman, anathema was, in the first Christian church and in the then Jewish community, “a solemn sentence of excommunication, publicly pronounced upon the transgressor.” Coleman also draws attention to the fact that, as seen in 1 Cor 16:22, anathema was usually followed by the Syro-Chaldeic phrase Maran-atha, which means “the Lord cometh.” The implication is that the transgressor was separated from the community of believers and abandoned to the imminent divine judgment.

Excommunication, as taught by Laney, comes from two Latin words: ex (out), and communicare (share, communicate). It means, in the practice of church discipline, that the sinner was removed from church membership, fellowship, and communion. The use of the term excommunication is avoided in the text of this study, except in quotations, because of its association with the medieval inquisition.

Restoration – can this word be related to the practice of church discipline? Yes, because it expresses the process of forgiving and reintegrating the erring believer into the fellowship and community of saints. This is the central purpose and the desired outcome of church discipline.


CHAPTER II

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE
AND GRACE

The contents of the Scripture were given by inspiration “for doctrine, for
reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16). These four biblical
functions are directly related to the discipline which needs to be practiced in the
atmosphere of the grace abundantly offered in Jesus Christ. This chapter analyzes the
biblical teachings about discipline and grace in the Christian church.

General Biblical Teachings About Church Discipline
and Grace

The central purpose of the plan of redemption is to deliver sinners from the
kingdom of darkness and to translate them into the kingdom of God’s eternal Son (Col
1:13). According to Jesus’ words spoken to Nicodemus, every human being needs to be
born again in order to inherit the kingdom of heaven (John 3:1-5).

The standard of spiritual life to be pursued by God’s children is high; they are
invited to live a holy life, because God, their heavenly Father, is holy (1 Pet 1:15, 16).
Nevertheless, such an ideal is not promoted in order to discourage people or to frighten
them. Even as they endeavor to follow the divine example of holiness, they are still
subject to temptations; they still can fall in sin. Given such ongoing perils, Heaven
provides all the means for recuperation, because if someone sins, “we have an advocate
with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (1 John 2:1). The church is called to cooperate with the Deity in this vital process. Therefore, all the efforts it makes to instill discipline should be directed toward this end.

Forgiveness Is Compatible with Discipline

The power of the Redeemer accomplishes the deliverance of the sinners from the tyranny of the evil one, leading them through the vital experience of spiritual transformation, sanctification, and glorification. There is hope even in the worst circumstances and failures, and the grace of the Almighty offers such a hope despite the most discouraging sinfulness. This does not mean that a sinner’s attitude is insignificant: He or she can thwart the workings of divine grace. The author of the book of Hebrews says:

For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, But a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries. He that despised Moses’ law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace? (Heb 10:26-29)

According to this text, there is no hope in a continual rejection of the grace of God, just a dark perspective of eternal death. God Himself cannot do anything, anymore, for the fierce opponents of the salvation offered in His Son. The same writer gives details about how such a dangerous condition develops:

For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to open shame. (Heb 6:4-6)
Some readers claim that this biblical writer refers here to God’s rejection of a sinner who falls again after the experience of conversion, which would render re-conversion impossible. I think that such a view is unacceptable because it does not reflect what appears to be the true meaning of the text. God accepts every sincere repentance. The issue in this text is the impossibility of repentance and renewal in the case of hardened sinners who no longer respond to the promptings of the Spirit. The problem is not God’s unwillingness to forgive a repentant sinner, but a sinner’s unwillingness to return to God, which creates a situation without solution. A classic case of this sort is Esau, who sought the blessings with tears, but was rejected. The rejection did not mean that the love of God was withdrawn from him, but that “he found no place of repentance” (Heb 12:17).

Isaiah understood that automatic forgiveness granted to the wicked in the absence of repentance is counterproductive: “Yet will he not learn righteousness” (Isa 26:10). Neither can God be untrue to Himself and His law of justice to consider the guilty innocent (Exod 34:6, 7). Consequently, God is absolutely objective in dealing with sinners. He does not ignore or reject genuine repentance when repentance occurs, nor does He clear the unrepentant sinner. There is no provision for forgiveness in a case of willful sinning without confession and repentance.

The Bible clearly teaches that forgiveness does not necessarily remove the consequences of sin. When the first humans sinned, God was merciful by promising them salvation, but He expelled them from the garden of Eden. God warned them in advance about the consequences of disobedience. He told them what would be the results of their fatal choice (Gen 3:16-19).
God was angry with the Israelites when ten of the twelve spies returning from Canaan led the people to open rebellion. Entreated by Moses, God said: “I have pardoned according to thy word: But as truly as I live . . . Surely they shall not see the land which I sware unto their fathers, neither shall any of them that provoked me see it” (Num 14:20-23). Forgiven, yes, but their disobedience brought about a loss.

David violated the law of God by committing adultery and murder. Confronted by Nathan with his sins, David prayed for forgiveness, and his prayer is touchingly worded in Ps 51:1-19. However, the prophet pointed out that, “because by this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, the child also that is born unto thee shall surely die” (2 Sam 12:13, 14).

In another time, God said to Israel through His prophet, referring to the Babylonian captivity, “I will not make a full end of thee, but correct thee in measure; yet will I not leave thee wholly unpunished” (Jer 46:28).

The Need of Discipline

The history of God’s people as recorded in the Old and the New Testaments shows that leaders were required to promptly deal with rebellion and willful sinning. The safety of the community of believers necessitated such a discipline. God emphasized the need for the removal of sin and unrepentant sinners from the congregation. This is obvious from many scriptural passages. Through Solomon, God noted that “one sinner destroyeth much good” (Eccl 9:18). In the old covenant, God required the uncircumcised man-child to be “cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant” (Gen 17:14). Others removed from the congregation by divine acts of justice included Nadab and

The Bible reveals the fundamental truth that God's judgments are always prompted by love. He declared this through the pen of the wise man of old: “My son, despise not the chastening of the Lord; neither be weary of His correction: For whom the Lord loveth he correcteth; even as a father the son in whom he delighteth” (Prov 3:11, 12). And Heb 12:5-11 notes that even though parents discipline their children, normally they still receive their reverence; so also should people accept the chastisement of the Lord which is applied for their sanctification and as a preparation for the heavenly life.

Before the close of probation, God's judgments have a corrective purpose; God uses them because He loves His creatures and wants to bring them back into a loyal relationship with Him. The Holy Scriptures say: “When thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness” (Isa 26:9). And Jesus’ remark to the church in Laodicea was: “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent” (Rev 3:19).

God charged His earthly servants to do justice. Texts that reveal this are Isa 56:1: “Thus saith the Lord, Keep ye judgment, and do justice: for my salvation is near to come, and my righteousness to be revealed,” and Mic 6:8: “He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?”
Neglecting Discipline in the Church

If the Bible is taken seriously, nothing can justify reluctance to do justice, and nothing can annul the church's responsibility to discipline members who behave unjustly. James decried the evil speaking among the believers and showed that, by so doing, people judge the law (Jas 4:11, 12). Yet, the organized actions of the church for preserving its purity are plainly required in the Scriptures.

The guilt of silence is inexcusable before God. Moses wrote: "And if a soul sin, and hear the voice of swearing, and is a witness, whether he hath seen or known of it; if he do not utter it, then he shall bear his iniquity" (Lev 5:1). Thus the witness of such behavior becomes an accomplice with the perpetrator of the evil when he or she refuses or fails to cooperate with the church in its efforts to do justice. When the members of the entire congregation hide their eyes from the person who committed iniquity, God warns that He decidedly will intervene (Lev 20:4, 5) and directly punish the guilty. Nothing is said about what happens to the congregation, but obviously God will be displeased with it. Two breath-taking questions are asked in Ps 58:1: "Do ye indeed speak righteousness, O congregation? do ye judge uprightly, O ye sons of men?" Missing in the KJV is the translation of the word *elem* (in silence); a more exact rendering would be: "In silence do ye righteousness?" What is referred to in this context is the silence of those who refuse to be involved when their participation would help establish truth and perform justice.

Church Discipline Is a Rewarding Work

Every true believer is required to "rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him" (Lev 19:17), which means that sincerely and lovingly one should help a fellow
Christian in restoring the right relationship with his or her Maker. Each child of God is admonished to live a genuinely spiritual life which can exert a saving influence on the lives of erring people: “Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees; And make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed” (Heb 12:12, 13). Thus, not just by words but by setting a good example of a sanctified life can one really help those who are tempted by the enemy of souls.

Helping a sinner to return to God is a very noble and rewarding work. James says: “Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way, shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins” (Jas 5:19, 20). On the other hand, accepting correction in any of its forms will prove a blessing to the guilty. The psalmist declares: “Let the righteous smite me; it shall be a kindness: and let him reprove me; it shall be an excellent oil, which shall not break my head: for yet my prayer also shall be in their calamities” (Ps 141:5).

**Jesus’ Teachings on Church Discipline and Grace**

A unique description of Jesus’ mission to our world is offered in the first chapter of the Gospel of John. The writer in a succinct trilogy states (1) that the incarnated Word dwelt among people “full of grace and truth” (vs. 14), and (2) that all have received from Him “grace for grace” (vs. 16), because (3) “grace and truth came by Jesus Christ” (vs. 17). This section explores what the source of grace and the personified truth taught about the proper work with sinning fellow believers. Jesus is the most authoritative Person to speak about church discipline.
How the Savior Corrected Sinners

When challenged about His treatment of sinners, Jesus told His opponents three parables about lost things recorded in Luke 15. One man lost one sheep out of hundred, a woman lost one piece of silver out of ten, and a father lost one of his two sons. The quest was successful, and there was great joy. In every case the lost valuable represented sinful human beings; the searcher was a symbol of Christ who left heaven to find the lost, and for whose rehabilitation He gave His life. The accomplishments of the plan of redemption are wonderfully mirrored in these three stories and in the ensuing rejoicing.

In His earthly activity, Jesus was extremely zealous to save sinners. He said: "For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). At the same time, He was very concerned with the preservation of members. He prayed: "While I was with them in the world, I kept them in thy name; those that thou gavest me I have kept, and none of them is lost, but the son of perdition; that the scripture might be fulfilled" (John 17:12).

Not all the accusations brought against Jesus by His adversaries were false; some actually were true. For instance: "This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them" (Luke 15:2). Yes, He did it. Jesus was willing to accept the publican Matthew into the closest circle of His disciples. Out of gratitude for the Master, Matthew gave a dinner to which he invited Jesus and His disciples. At the same time, some publicans and sinners came to attend that reception (Matt 9:9-13). The Pharisees murmured to Jesus' disciples: "Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners?" (vs. 11). Three statements issued by Jesus to answer this question manifest His love for sinners:

1. "They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick" (vs. 12).
2. “Go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice” (vs. 13).

3. “I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (vs. 13).

No less murmuring was produced by Jesus’ acceptance of a second publican, Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10). We are told that “they all murmured, saying, That he was gone to be guest with a man that is a sinner” (vs. 7). But Zacchaeus honored Jesus’ loving attention when he said: “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold” (vs. 8). Jesus confirmed the authenticity of this sinner’s conversion by publicly announcing: “This day is salvation come to this house, forsomuch as he also is a son of Abraham” (vs. 9). Then He emphasized His own mission in this world: “For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost” (vs. 10).

It is both surprising and shocking to learn that two of the disciples closest to Jesus, James and John, were for the extermination of sinners (Luke 9:51-56). When the Samaritans were not hospitable to Jesus, these two disciples asked Him as shown in vs. 54: “Lord, wilt thou that we command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them, even as Elias did?” In Jesus’ response, we have the essence of His mission in this world: “The Son of man is not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them” (vs. 56).

The apostle John reported in his Gospel, chap. 8:1-11, the story of a woman who had been “taken in adultery, in the very act” (vs. 4). The accusers were more anxious to attack Jesus than the guilty woman, but Jesus wisely and compassionately dismissed the case. His action is exploited by many as vivid proof of His opposition to church discipline. Indeed, by quoting the way Jesus treated that person, they make discipline in
the community of believers not only unnecessary, but even a violation of the true spirit of
the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We need to make the following remarks:

Jesus’ challengers tried to lay a snare for Him. By approving to kill the woman,
He could have been reported to the Roman authorities as interfering with their
jurisdiction. On the other hand, had He not done so, they could have discredited Him
among the crowd as being in contempt of the law of Moses. In fact, in this case, it was
the accusers who disregarded the law of Moses by bringing to trial only one of the
partners in the adulterous act. Moses’ law stipulated: “If a man be found lying with a
woman married to an husband, then they shall both of them die, both the man that lay
with the woman, and the woman: so shalt thou put away evil from Israel” (Deut 22:22).
Thus, the accusers themselves were involved in sin. Jesus’ words so discreetly written in
the dust of the ground appalled them so much, that they ceased to inculpate the woman.
The written text and Jesus’ challenge for the accusers to cast the first stone at her if they
were without sin had an effect: “They which heard it, being convicted by their own
conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last” (vs. 9).

These words of the Lord about casting the first stone, addressed to the scribes
and Pharisees, did not condone sin or minimize its gravity. They just exposed the
complainants’ hypocrisy. Talking to the guilty woman after their departure, Jesus said:
“Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more” (vs. 11). The first coming of Jesus was
not for judgment, but for redemption: “For God sent not His Son into the world to
condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved” (John 3:17). By the
words, “sin no more,” Jesus gave an admonition without condemnation, and those words
were real power. Other people had led the woman to sin; He forgave her sin, and
encouraged her to live a godly life. While the church Founder was present, there was not yet an organized church, in which discipline could be administered according to biblical rules. Jesus’ sentences, “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her,” and “Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more,” did not wipe out the discipline in the body of Christ, which the Lord Himself required to be practiced.

An Unwarranted Attempt to Discipline People

In the Sermon on the Mount, the Savior addressed the issue of personal judgment as follows:

Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother’s eye. (Matt 7:1-5)

The big question is whether by such a saying Jesus refuted any personal judgment, any attempt to help a believer correct his or her ways. A careful examination of this text and other related texts indicates that this is not what Jesus had in mind. To think so would be twisting the Gospel. It is vital to notice that here nothing is said about the corporate work of a congregation. Instead, it concerns a personal approach, one which is not made in the right spirit but is condemnatory. The attempt to clear the other person’s eye is vicious because the “helper” is actually a hypocrite. Such a person would be unable to prove helpful and would not be the right person to try to help, because he or she has more serious problems than the would-be patient. A beam is considerably bigger.
than a mote. It would be like a heavy drinker of alcohol trying to correct one from eating between meals.

But what happens when there is no hypocrisy involved, only sincerity, compassion, and love? Is then an innocent judgment, in the form of an assessment for real help, objectionable? Several texts deny that: Jesus “turned and said unto Peter, Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men” (Matt 16:22, 23). “Yea, and why even of yourselves judge ye not what is right?” (Luke 12:57). “Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment” (John 7:24). Jesus, the author of the injunction in Matt 7:1-5, would never have invited people to judge rightly and justly if every type of judgment were sinful. Moreover, He, as the Son of man who had not come to condemn the world, would not have harshly rebuked Peter when this disciple talked under a satanic influence.

The Church and Its Foundation

After Simon Peter’s remarkable statement of faith in Jesus as being “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt 16:16), the Lord declared: “Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (vs. 18). In Jesus’ words, the foundation of the Christian church is Himself, the Rock of ages, Πέτρα, a solid rock, as opposed to πέτρος, an unstable stone, applied to the disciple Simon Peter. The Savior said He would build His church, therefore the church is His creation and property, and its members are His redeemed followers. As such, the church is invincible; the hosts of darkness can never prevail against it.

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The Bible offers some metaphors for the concept of the church: body (1 Cor 12:12, 13; Col 1:18), flock (John 10:1-14; Acts 20:28), family (Eph 3:14, 15), bride (Eph 5:25; Rev 19:7), and building (Eph 2:20-22). Furthermore, a multiple dualism regarding the church can be distinguished: true church (Rev 12:1-17; Eph 5:25), false church (Rev 17:1-7); local church (Rom 16:5), universal church (Eph 5:23); visible church (Matt 18:17), invisible church (Matt 16:18); militant church (Eph 5:25-27), triumphant church (Rev 7:9).

Paul described Jesus’ program for His church: “Christ loved the church and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish” (Eph 5:25-27).

Church Discipline and the Remission of Sins

At His first appearance in the locked room where the disciples were hiding because of their fear of the Jews, Jesus said to them: “Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained” (John 20:21-23). The resurrected Lord sent His disciples into the world to work for sinners, as His Father had sent Him. It is the same work, performed in cooperation. After breathing on them to receive the Holy Spirit, Jesus declared: “Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained” (vs. 23). The New Testament makes it clear that it is God only (Jesus, as a Person of the Trinity, included).
who can forgive sins; such a claim by anybody else is a blasphemy (cf. Mark 2:7). Jesus entrusted His church with the authority to deal with people who transgressed, remitting or retaining their sins. These actions of the church are not the ultimate forgiveness for the violations of the law of God; such forgiveness is the Lawgiver’s exclusive prerogative. It is true, strange, sad, and tragic that mortal humans have tried to take the place of God by claiming the power to forgive people’s sins. Such a practice has become an outrageous trade for centuries.

A congregation may, in a limited way, remit or retain sins. In this instance it functions as God’s instrument to help sinners come to the Savior for the remission of their sins. When transgressors reject the provided help, the church may fail and the sinner retains his or her transgressions. Believers do not transmit and cannot withhold grace; they do not grant and cannot refuse forgiveness of sins. Only in its organized work, the local church as a body of Christ can and ought to deal with wrongs committed by its members. Its efforts to restore the guilty to God and the community are honored by Christ. Church discipline is a way of working with sinners for their correction and spiritual healing. Such remission of sins only means restoration of vertical or horizontal relationships.

The Greek for “are remitted” is ἀφεονται (third person, plural, perfect, indicative) from ἀφεῖναι which means to cancel, forgive, or remit. For “are retained” the Greek is ἐκκρατηται (third person, plural, perfect, indicative) from κρατέω, meaning to hold – in this case, to hold unforgiven.¹ In such instances, the use of the perfect tense shows permanence, both remission and the impossibility to remit being the unceasing

¹Newman, 29, 30, 103.
effects of the congregation’s actions. Jesus assured His followers in Matt 18:18 that Heaven ratifies the church’s actions performed in harmony with God’s instruction.

The Savior said to His disciples: “Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him” (Luke 17:3). In the process of forgiveness and reconciliation, reproof is a necessary approach when it is made in the spirit of Christ. James encouraged church members with the words: “Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much” (Jas 5:16). Such reciprocal confession of “faults” is a prerequisite for a harmonious congregational life and is a form of church discipline.

**Church Discipline and Conflict**

No integrated system of church discipline is displayed in the New Testament, but sufficient elements are there to construct one. Jesus, the divine Founder of the church, did not leave His followers without any instruction in regard to the way of working with offenders in the church. Neither did He give them advice limited to His time on earth. He taught His disciples the right procedure which is still valid today.

The Lord’s instruction on how to work with erring church members is presented in Matt 18:15-20. This injunction follows His lesson about who will enter the kingdom of heaven, i.e., those who are humble like a little child – including a warning not to offend the little ones – and the parable about the lost sheep. Just after this Peter asked a question about forgiveness. Jesus’ answer was illustrated by the parable of the unforgiving servant. In these passages, Jesus first emphasized His care for the little ones, be they children, recently converted souls, or weak believers. By placing, immediately
after that, the parable about the shepherd seeking the lost sheep, the Lord showed to what extreme lengths the love for sinners is expected to go. Then the parable of the unforgiving servant functions as a strong warning against an unforgiving spirit. The message here is that those who refuse to forgive will not be forgiven. Thus, right in the middle of chap. 18 appears this short teaching about conflict management in the church. It ties together both the previous and the subsequent passages. This work with offenders should be inspired and dominated by a spirit similar to that of the caring shepherd and by a permanent readiness to forgive as was not demonstrated by that “wicked servant.”

Because the central tenet of the Lord Jesus Christ on church discipline is developed in Matt 18:15-20, we need to quote this passage in its entirety.

Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two or you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

Gender is not a problem here: The conflict can be between a brother and a sister, between two brothers, or between two sisters. They are church members, children of God, and the teaching is equally valid for any of them. The Savior taught that a worshipper against whom a fellow believer has a complaint should interrupt his or her worship until reconciliation is made (see Matt 5:23, 24). The following question needs to be answered: Is there any contradiction between these two texts? By combining them, one can see that Jesus cared for both individuals, the offended and the offender, because
both are His creatures. He died for and loves them both. In the former text, the offended is urged to go; in the latter text, the offender is sent to the offended. They could have met in the middle of the road. Why did Jesus urge in Matt 18:15 that the injured take the initiative, if he or she is innocent? Because that person is better equipped to think objectively, and the offender may not even be aware of the errors.

The word church used in Matt 18:17 shows clearly that the talk is about church members. Vs. 15 clarifies that Jesus referred to personal offenses and goes on to point to the purpose of the entire process: to gain the offending person. Vs. 17 points out the jurisdiction of the church, its right, and its responsibility to pronounce a decision in connection with the offender who rejects any appeal. Vs. 18 guarantees Heaven's ratification of the decision when the church follows Jesus' instruction.

The Greek for the phrase “shall be bound in heaven” is εσται δεδεμενα εν ουρανω, and for “shall be loosed in heaven” is εσται λελυμενα εν ουρανω.¹ In each case, the future form of the verb to be (Greek εμι) is connected with a perfect participle passive, which gives the meaning of an already accomplished action. It is not Heaven that follows the decision of the church, but vice-versa, the church has worked in harmony with Heaven's decision. How does the church know what is bound or loosed in heaven? The principles of heaven are revealed in the Holy Scripture and the church has to follow them faithfully. Vss. 19 and 20 speak about the unity of the church in worship, this being in context with the previous verses. Thus, unity is demonstrated in the manner of the work with erring members. The same verses also show the spirit and the method for

resolving conflicts in the life of a congregation. Every phase of the conciliatory process must be accompanied by earnest prayer.

In the previous verses Jesus Christ developed three stages for working with the erring individual:

1. A strictly personal talk or dialogue takes place between the injured person and the wrongdoer. The former was hurt. He or she could ignore the fact, but that would be detrimental to the offender. The innocent one is advised to go to the offender, and if reconciliation is achieved, everyone is happy and an erring individual is gained.

2. A second phase is needed when the attempt for reconciliation undertaken by the offended alone is rejected. Now the injured party is advised to take one or two witnesses, spiritual people from the congregation, who will listen to all that goes on and also appeal to the conscience of the offender.

3. If the second attempt also fails, the injured person is advised to talk to the church. Now the organization is responsible for managing the conflict. In all three phases, the supreme purpose is the restoration of relations. However, if the offender shows contempt for the church as well, his or her name should be removed from membership. In fact, the wrongdoer should then be considered as “a heathen man and a publican” (Matt 18:17).

Jesus gave advice as to the procedure, but this is not a strict mathematical formula as to details. If the offended has ten dialogues instead of one, and four companions are taken instead of one or two, or if such attempts are repeated, he or she walks the extramile.
When the issue is a public transgression of the law of God, the first stage is not required. Yet the church cannot refuse to be involved for resolving personal conflicts unless the offended has neglected the first two stages. The wrongdoer may have caused extreme financial, physical, or emotional harm. The body of Christ should not blame the victim or encourage the perpetrator even by silence. The Word of God clearly and decidedly calls for justice. The harmed individual has the right to enjoy protection from his or her church.

When the Lord said, "If he shall hear thee," it was a conditional clause. Therefore, either outcome is possible, success or failure, but everything conceivable should be done to achieve reconciliation.

How does the offender hear? By listening, regretting, and asking for forgiveness. Much prayer and guidance from the Holy Spirit are needed because this is a very difficult work. If the issue is not carefully handled, the offender's attitude may be aggravated.

The word neglect from vs. 17 is not the best translation of the Greek verb or phrase. In vs. 16, the original text is εαν δε μη ακουση, where the verb ακουω is used in conjunctive aorist. A literal translation is "if he will not hear." In vs. 17, the parallel sentence is εαν δε παρακουση which should be translated "if he refuses to listen" (or "pay attention").\(^1\) Such a rendering is more consistent with the context. The two sentences are parallel and refer to the same attitude of the offender who, in the first instance, refuses to listen to the offended, and in the second instance refuses to respond to

\(^1\)Jay Green, ed., The Interlinear Hebrew/Greek English Bible, 4 vols. (Lafayette, IN: Associated Publishers and Authors, 1979), 4:45.
the offended as well as his or her helping companions. This is not just a matter of negligence; it is a deliberate refusal or rejection, a willful opposition to the offer of love.

If success is achieved, “thou hast gained thy brother.” This is a soul-winning work and is no less valuable than converting unbelievers. In fact, it is a model of the plan of salvation. Our history began with the first human beings offending God. And it was He, the innocent, who came to talk with the offenders and did everything possible to win them back, even to ultimate sacrifice of His Son. The plan of salvation is the greatest work of reconciliation. A small shadow of it is present in Matt 18:15-20. The fact is that some offenders are gained back to God and others are lost, and the latter are as heathens and publicans to their eternal death. Thus, the basic purpose of the work Jesus required by this passage is to gain the sinner.

Some scholars believe there is a fourth phase in the reconciliation process. That is the work of trying to convert the lost person who now is outside the church just like a heathen and a publican. Although this is an after-stage, it can certainly be considered a part of the process of reconciliation. As long as the individual lives, even after expulsion from church membership, the church is encouraged to continue to work for him or her. In the saddest case of disfellowshipping, the church should act with a missionary spirit and do its best to regain the apostatized soul.

Jesus’ command of how to work with an erring church member is not to be treated in a bureaucratic manner. Every phase can be repeated as often as necessary. Ideally, conflict should be kept at the lowest possible level. So long as the offended individual has not made every effort to confine the conflict to its incipient stages and
thereby to resolve it without resorting to formal church intervention, it is wise for the church to refuse to be involved.

According to Jesus' words, Matt 18:15-20 deals with personal offenses: "If thy brother shall trespass against thee" (vs. 15). It is not about committing abominations, open sins, or other grave deeds which violate the law of God and discredit His cause in the community. Yet the method and the spirit of working with the guilty as laid down in this chapter are applicable to any case of church discipline.

In Matt 5:23, 24, the Savior said that if someone brings a gift to God's altar and remembers that another individual has a complaint against him or her, that person should leave the gift and go to be reconciled with the complainer. This seems to be a very belated time to do the critical work of reconciliation. Why should one wait so long? But many people never seem to have that kind of recollection; their remembrance is not stirred even at the altar. Faithful and committed Christians need an ongoing concern to live at peace with other people as far as it depends on them.

What happens when the guilty individual is not a church member? In that case, the church cannot be implicated other than to advise the suffering believer to behave in a Christlike manner. Nevertheless, all the sons and daughters of Adam are our brothers and sisters biologically. Hence, the Christian spirit of forgiveness, peace, and reconciliation should be extended to all even though not everyone is included in the direct intervention of the church.

The procedure recommended in Matt 18:15-20 is a work of forgiveness inspired and promoted by three godly virtues:
1. **Patience.** This virtue is voiced by the second servant in the last parable in Matt 18 where he entreats his creditor: “Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all” (vs. 29).

2. **Faith.** Jesus’ disciples prayed, “increase our faith” (Luke 17:5), after Jesus’ injunction that they forgive seventy times seven.

3. **Love.** In Paul’s description, love “beareth all things... endureth all things” (1 Cor 13:7).

**Paul’s Teachings on Discipline and Grace**

According to his own words, the apostle Paul received the Gospel “by the revelation of Jesus Christ” (see Gal 1:12). Ever after he aimed to be true to that revelation and warned the believers to reject any “gospel” contradicting it. The Gospel of Christ was his fundamental criterion in matters of doctrine, mission, or church life. Some of this apostle’s writings tender valuable guidelines on discipline and grace, as presented in this part of the study.

**Proper Discipline Is Motivated by Love**

Like his divine Redeemer, the apostle Paul dedicated his entire life for the salvation of sinners. At one point, he asked two rhetorical questions: “Who is weak, and I am not weak? who is offended, and I burn not?” (2 Cor 11:29). Paul was ready to go out of his way for the sake of the lost: “To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some” (1 Cor 9:22).
Although he was appointed an apostle to the Gentiles, in his missionary activities Paul was permanently motivated by a strong desire to cooperate with Jesus to save his fellow Jewish descendants. He noted: “For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh” (Rom 9:3).

Church Responsibility in Disciplinary Matters

As a devout coworker of Christ, Paul was very serious about the purity of the church family. He expressed his deep disappointment with the believers in Corinth who, instead of dealing with a case of incestuous relationship, were “puffed up” and proud of their broadmindedness (1 Cor 5:1, 2). He was shocked because of their negligence to act against the shameful sin of sexual immorality, which could cause considerable injury to the work of God in that city. Further, he gave some general indications of the things which should be regarded as reasons for church discipline. “I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner” (vs. 11).

Another sad practice was taking place in the church of Corinth. The believers went with believers to solve their conflicts in the world’s courtroom. Paul decried such a practice as unchristian. He required the congregation to participate in resolving such problems so they would not resort to the worldly justice system. He asked: “Know ye not that we shall judge angels? how much more things that pertain to this life?” (1 Cor 6:3). He believed that church members can and should judge “things that pertain to this life.” Paul asked: “Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you? no, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren?” (vs. 5).
The verb to judge as a responsibility of the organized church is used in 1 Cor 5:12: “For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within?” The church has no jurisdiction on nonbelievers, but it must exert this function toward its members. Conflicts and all kinds of problems which disrupt the life of the church must be solved within the church, not outside in the unbelievers’ courthouse. The word “judgment” used in relation to church practices is considered taboo by many Christians, but such a prohibition is not biblical. The church can judge and is called to do so. And judge is the very word used by Paul. Another taboo word is “punishment,” again by ignoring the biblical terminology. Paul said: “Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many” (2 Cor 2:6). The Greek for “of many” is πλείονων, which in a more accurate translation means by the majority, and for “punishment” is επιτιμία, correctly translated with punishment or censure. In 2 Cor 2:7 the apostle wrote: “So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him.” The disfellowshipped person can be accepted back into the membership of the church, after the church has acted according to the Word of God, and after the individual shows repentance.

In Paul’s view, salvation is to be everyone’s personal concern. He wrote to Philippians: “Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil 2:12). Yet no believer should be indifferent to other church members’ eternal fate. He warned the church in Corinth to have no company with individuals

\[1\]Green, 4:418.
openly living in sin. The apostle assumes that the Christian community is one in which members call one another to accountability. Phrases like "not to company" (1 Cor 5:9), or "not to keep company" (vs. 11), get their meaning from the context. Antithetical phrases are "taken away from among you" (vs. 2) and "put away from among yourselves" (vs. 13), both of them meaning, obviously, to disfellowship those persons. In 2 Thess 3:14, 15, Paul admonishes the believers to have no company with a member behaving disorderly, but to admonish him as a brother. The disciplinary action in this case is not expulsion but relative isolation that the individual may be ashamed. This procedure seems to be alluded to in Eph 5:11 where the apostle asks the believers to "have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them." The action to be followed, called reproof, is avoidance of such deeds but not the loss of membership.

According to 2 Tim 4:2, rebuke, correction, and instruction are included among other roles of the Holy Scriptures, coming immediately after the admonishment to preach the Word. Instruction is needed for those "that oppose themselves" and are caught in the devil’s captivity in order to be thus helped to repent and to spiritually recover (cf. 2 Tim 2:25, 26). In fact, the entire Bible was inspired and given "for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16). Persistent rejecters of any correction oppose Christ. They eventually will be judged by Him, at His imminent return. Paul wrote: "If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema Maranatha" (1 Cor 16:22).
Discipline Needs to Distinguish Wickedness from Failure

The apostle carefully distinguishes between a wicked person, as a willful transgressor of God's commandments (1 Cor 5:13), and erring brothers or sisters (cf. 2 Thess 3:14, 15) who are overtaken in a fault (Gal 6:1). The latter text deserves a detailed analysis.

Paul's words read: “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.” The apostle shares here some facts:

1. In the church, some people experience spiritual falls.
2. Every church member is vulnerable.
3. Spiritual persons are in the church.
4. The spiritual individuals' God-given task is to restore the erring one.
5. This work needs to be done in the spirit of meekness, which is a synonym for the spirit of Christ who said about Himself: “Learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart” (Matt 11:29).

Paul does not talk in this text about someone leaving the church, but about a church member “overtaken in a fault” to which Jesus referred in Matt 18:15-20. The easiest attitude toward such a transgression is to be silent, but this is not what Jesus and His apostle Paul recommended. Another unhealthy approach would be to reject the person. The biblical way to treat these individuals is restoration. With such restoration in mind, church discipline should begin and end. Its supreme goal is the redemption of the sinner, although in some cases the outcome is not that which has been desired.
Paul’s Guidelines on Church Discipline and Grace

The apostle’s ideas about this issue did not appear in a vacuum. He saw God’s judgments as recorded in the Old Testament as permanent warnings for the children of God. He declared in 1 Cor 10:11: “All these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition.” Although the apostle never wrote a treatise per se on church discipline and grace, his writings offer an ample gamut of guidelines discussed under the following subheadings.

Meaning and Purpose of Discipline

The sin which grieved the apostle and begged to be removed was an open sin, which means known sin, according to 1 Cor 5:1: “It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you.” When it comes to open sin, tolerance is unacceptable. Therefore Paul rebuked the Corinthians for having done nothing about that (1 Cor 5:2).

The elimination of sin from the congregation is an absolute necessity, as the apostle showed using various expressions: “This deed might be taken away” (1 Cor 5:2), “to deliver such an one unto Satan” (vs. 5), “purge out therefore the old leaven” (vs. 7), “not to company with fornicators” (vs. 9), “with such an one no not to eat” (vs. 11), “put away from among yourselves that wicked person” (vs. 13). As in any other domain, little things neglected can have a big effect on the life of a congregation: “A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump” (1 Cor 5:6). A personal sin left untreated can effect the entire body of believers. Therefore, when the church has to suffer because of the sin of one, private behavior ceases to have a strictly private character (1 Cor 5:1; 1 Tim 3:15).

Living in open sin while claiming to be a Christian is hypocrisy: “If any man that is called a brother be a fornicator . . .” (1 Cor 5:11). Obviously, living a life the
opposite of what Christ calls for, while claiming obedience, is hypocrisy. In the Christian church, as in the secular world, nobody is above the law, as Paul demonstrated when he rebuked the apostle Peter in Antioch for his hypocritical conduct.

According to 1 Cor 5:5, disciplinary actions have a double purpose for the sinner: destruction of the flesh (Greek σαρκίζω, in this context the carnal, sinful nature) and the salvation of the spirit (spiritual healing followed by eternal life).

The Role of the Church in Regard to Discipline

In 1 Cor 5:10 a distinction is made between the fornicators of this world and those living in the church. According to vs. 12, the church has jurisdiction on its members only: “For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? Do not ye judge them that are within?” Church discipline is responsibility of the organized church which should solve internal conflicts and transgressions of the law of God in the spirit of Christ and according to biblical instruction. Church members are not supposed to appeal to the world’s justice system to resolve conflicts between them (cf. 1 Cor 6:1-7).

Inaction in relation with erring members is not necessarily compassion or love, and mourning should not be equated with acceptance of sin or with carelessness. In 1 Cor 5:2 the apostle decries the fact that they “have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away.”

Terminology Related to Church Discipline

Some terms belonging to the vocabulary used in church discipline are viewed by many Christians as taboo. Nevertheless, Paul used them in his epistles. Two examples are to judge (1 Cor 5:3; 6:2, 5) and punishment (2 Cor 2:6).

Expulsion from church membership is portrayed by Paul as “delivery unto Satan” (1 Cor 5:5), which is the withdrawal of communion with the saints. When allowed, Satan can inflict suffering, as in the case of Job (Job 2:6, 7). Two such cases are mentioned by Paul in 1 Tim 1:19, 20: “Of whom is Hymenaeus and Alexander; whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme.”

Disciplinary Procedures

Full cooperation between pastor and congregation, and among members, is a prerequisite for successful church discipline. Paul was absent in the body (when he wrote to the Corinthians) but present in spirit, and thus they judged together (1 Cor 5:3). Unity of action is frequently taught by the apostle; for instance, in 1 Cor 1:10 he encouraged the believers “that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.”

Any disciplinary measure needs to be taken in a church meeting only, as Paul said: “When ye are gathered together . . . to deliver such an one unto Satan” (1 Cor 5:4, 5); “them that sin rebuke before all” (1 Tim 5:20). Such decisions are valid only when taken by a majority vote. In 2 Cor 2:6 the apostle speaks about the “punishment, which was inflicted of many” – the Greek for “of many” being, as shown before, πλειονοῦν, which means most or majority.
However true a certain fact may be, it cannot be an object of church discipline unless proven with witnesses: “Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses” (1 Tim 5:19).

It is desirable for all disciplinary actions to be followed by forgiveness: “Ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him” (2 Cor 2:7); “To whom ye forgive any thing, I forgive also” (vs. 10).

Reasons for Church Discipline

The apostle did not write an exhaustive list of reasons for disciplinary actions to be taken by a congregation. The actual issue in the fifth chapter of his first letter to the church of Corinth is incest, but in vs. 11 he offers some other reasons: covetousness, extortion, idolatry, railing, drunkenness. Writing to his coworker Titus, Paul added that teaching false doctrines is also not to be tolerated among the believers (see Titus 3:10, 11). It is useful in this context to remember his warning against “any other gospel” (Gal 1:8). He generally called the congregation to deliberate and decide in unity from case to case.

Benefits of Church Discipline

Disciplinary actions function as a deterrent for similar transgressions and thus protect individuals and the congregation. As Paul urged Timothy: “Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear” (1 Tim 5:20). This fear is not to be understood as intimidation, but as the disposition to take the Christian teachings and morality seriously. Also, proper discipline makes a church stronger: “Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump” (1 Cor 5:7). According to 2 Cor 5:17, when someone is in
Christ, he or she is a new creature; old sinful practices are abandoned, and everything becomes new. This is true not only about individual members, but about congregations as well.

**The Right Spirit for Disciplinary Actions**

Truthfulness in the practice of church discipline, as always expected from God's children, is required by the Holy Scriptures: “Putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbor: for we are members one of another” (Eph 4:25).

A congregation and its leaders should never practice church discipline that is motivated by malice or wickedness (1 Cor 5:6-8). Also, disciplinary decisions should never be a reason for rejoicing, but for grief – as Paul wrote in 2 Cor 2:5.

The church is expected to love the sinner, but hate the sin. In Hebrews 12:1, reference is made to sin – “let us lay aside every . . . sin.” However, in 1 Cor 5:13 Paul speaks about the individual: “Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.” The ideal is to remove sin while retaining the person, but the unrepentant sinner is responsible for his or her sin, and being removed from the congregation is part of the discipline. In any case, love should be the soul of the entire process of church discipline: “Wherefore I beseech you that ye would confirm your love toward him” (2 Cor 2:8).

**Summary**

Church discipline performed in love has a redeeming and educational purpose and is unquestionably supported by the Word of God. Initiated by the Founder of the Christian church, who gave His life for it, this work contributes to the spiritual health of the body of believers and favors its positive influence in the community. When
congregations fall short of faithfully following this scriptural duty, the cause of God suffers painful setbacks. The apostle Paul offers an important contribution to the elucidation of this issue. His instruction and warnings resulted from some local churches' failure to promptly act in order to preserve their moral and spiritual integrity. Yet, the loving and wise practice of discipline, according to the biblical direction, enables Christian congregations to be successful in their fellowship and mission, and God's name is thereby glorified.
CHAPTER III

ELLEN G. WHITE’S TEACHINGS ON DISCIPLINE AND GRACE

Keeping permanently in our minds the instructions of the Word of God, we consider in this section a rich selection of ideas from Ellen G. White which helps us to better understand the importance of upholding order and discipline in the community of believers. Ellen G. White (1827-1915) was a co-founder of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and a prolific writer. All the quotations in this section are taken from her writings, therefore her name is omitted in any further references in the footnotes.

Meaning and Purpose of Discipline

Nothing less than “holiness to God through Christ is required of Christians.” The church needs order and discipline because “everything connected with heaven is in perfect order . . . and subjection and thorough discipline mark the movements of the angelic host.” Unlike them, Satan hates order in the church and


2 Testimonies for the Church, 1:650.

3 Ibid., 649.
does all he can to destroy it, because he "well knows that success can only attend order
and harmonious action."\textsuperscript{1}

Discipline is vital for the life of the church; without it "the church would go to
fragments."\textsuperscript{2} Those who reject warnings "are not to be retained in the church . . . for they
will be as Achan in the camp of Israel – deceived and deceiving."\textsuperscript{3} If we can root out
evils from the church without harm and fail to do it, "we are just as responsible as if we
were guilty of the acts ourselves."\textsuperscript{4} Moreover, the light of God’s presence is withdrawn
"from the entire congregation"\textsuperscript{5} as long as the needed actions are neglected.

White insists that dealing with errors in the church is "a plain scriptural duty,"\textsuperscript{6}
although "a painful duty that has to be done,"\textsuperscript{7} and a "sad step"\textsuperscript{8} to be taken only after all
other means of correction have failed. Sin needs to be removed from the congregation;
"let the church take action in regard to its members."\textsuperscript{9} Among the Corinthians was
tendency to return to the debasing customs of paganism or to do even worse. In order to
maintain the good name of the church, "the apostle pleaded with the church to put away

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{1} Ibid., 650.
\item \textsuperscript{2} Ibid., 3:428.
\item \textsuperscript{3} Letter 215, 1902, quoted in SDA Bible Commentary, 5:1096.
\item \textsuperscript{4} Desire of Ages (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1990), 441.
\item \textsuperscript{5} Testimonies for the Church, 3:265.
\item \textsuperscript{6} Ibid., 3:266.
\item \textsuperscript{7} Evangelism, 368.
\item \textsuperscript{8} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{9} Testimonies for the Church, 7:262.
\end{itemize}
from among them 'that wicked person.'”¹ Similarly today, efforts must be made “to cleanse the church from moral uncleanness.”²

History provides lessons for the church living in the end time, because “in His dealings with His people in the past the Lord shows the necessity of purifying the church from wrongs.”³ The church can experience hardships in its spiritual journey; when “darkness is settling upon them; . . . they should seek God earnestly, in great humility and self-abasement, until the wrongs which grieve His Spirit are searched out and put away.”⁴ It should be a permanent concern of all the believers and “a continual struggle to keep evil out of our churches.”⁵

The church must act responsibly, and “the names of those who sin and refuse to repent should not be retained on the church books.”⁶ This duty of the church cannot be waived without grave consequences. Therefore, if a person persists in living in open sin, “upon the church rests the responsibility of separating him from fellowship. His name should then be stricken from the books.”⁷ Sentimentality is out of place: “There must be rigid, impartial discipline exercised.”⁸

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² Evangelism, 369.
³ Testimonies for the Church, 3:265.
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Ibid., 5:538.
⁶ Letter 215.
⁷ Testimonies for the Church, 7:262.
⁸ Ibid., 5:538.
Criticism is not to be part of church discipline. White is very clear about its destructive effect: "The atmosphere of selfish and narrow criticism stifles the noble and generous emotions, and causes men to become self-centered judges and petty spies."

The biblical concepts related to discipline are clarified by White against any possible misinterpretation. For instance, Jesus’ warning against judging as recorded in Matt 7:1, 2 refers to the practice of setting oneself up as a standard. Therefore, White’s advice is “do not make your opinions, your views of duty, your interpretations of Scripture, a criterion for others and in your heart condemn them if they do not come up to your ideal.”

However, if someone in defiance of Jesus’ warning still sets himself or herself up as the standard, that attitude amounts to a blasphemy: “Christ is the only true standard of character, and he who sets himself up as a standard for others is putting himself in the place of Christ.” Surprising as it may seem, White interprets Paul’s injunction not to eat with the open transgressors of the law of God as referring to the communion service: “Christ’s example forbids exclusiveness at the Lord’s Supper. It is true that open sin excludes the guilty. This the Holy Spirit plainly teaches (1 Cor 5:11).”

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1 Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1955), 123.
2 Ibid., 124.
3 Ibid., 125.
4 Desire of Ages, 656.
Discipline and the Recuperation of Sinners

Church discipline is a blessing for the community of believers when its underpinnings are both justice and love. God Himself has worked this way. White notes: “Love, no less than justice, demanded that God’s judgments should put a check on sin.”

It is commonly known that in many cases those “who have been overtaken in sin . . . have no real sense of their villainy.” Therefore “the true object of reproof is gained only when the wrongdoer himself is led to see his fault and his will is enlisted for its correction.” White was always highly interested in the fair treatment of erring believers. The best example of how to do this is the way Jesus treated sinners. He “sat as an honored guest at the table of the publicans, by His sympathy and social kindliness showing that He recognized the dignity of humanity; and men longed to become worthy of His confidence . . . New impulses were awakened, and the possibility of a new life opened to these outcasts of society.”

Jesus is very optimistic in His dealings with sinners. White writes: “He takes men as they are, with all their faults and weaknesses, and trains them for His service, if they will be disciplined and taught by Him.” The Savior is patient with human weakness, as He proved in His work with the disciples, when He “did not, because of

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3 Education (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1952), 291.
4 Desire of Ages, 274.
5 Education, 91.
their errors, withdraw from them."¹ Neither did the disciples abandon their Master because of His treatment of them: "Jesus reproved His disciples, He warned and cautioned them; but John and Peter and their brethren did not leave Him. Notwithstanding the reproofs, they chose to be with Jesus."²

While working with sinners in the church, responsible persons from the leadership should never forget that "human beings are Christ's property, purchased by Him at an infinite price,"³ therefore "only the love that flows from the Suffering One of Calvary can avail here."⁴ In treating their wounds, "delicate touch, the finest sensibility"⁵ absolutely are needed. It is always helpful to "point him [the sinner] to the source of pardon and power,"⁶ also to "pray for him, and see if God will not move upon the heart of the erring."⁷ Manifested in the work with the erring ones should be "not only the tenderness of the Great Shepherd, but also His undying care and love for the poor, straying sheep."⁸ Instead of humiliating the person, "seek to preserve his self-respect and to inspire him with courage and hope,"⁹ and the most powerful message is to "speak to

¹ Ibid.
² Ibid.
³ Testimonies for the Church, 7:260.
⁴ Desire of Ages, 440.
⁵ Ibid.
⁶ Education, 291.
⁷ "Be Gentle Unto All Men," Review and Herald, 14 May 1895, 1.
⁹ Education, 291, 292.
the erring of the forgiving mercy of the Saviour."\(^1\) A godly combination would
enormously serve the purpose of correcting wrongdoers: "Remember that Duty has a twin
sister, Love; these united can accomplish almost everything, but separated, neither is
capable of good."\(^2\)

In the process of reconciliation and rehabilitation of an erring believer, it is very
important to hear a truly genuine confession, unlike Achan who just acknowledged his
fault when he was caught.\(^3\) Such people "hide their wrongs and refuse to make a
voluntary confession,"\(^4\) even though they know that the congregation thereby has to
suffer. True confession is made in the setting in which the wrong was committed, be it in
personal relationship with God, in connection with another individual, or publicly; "but
all confession should be definite and to the point, acknowledging the very sins of which
you are guilty."\(^5\) If this is the case, then the assurance is given that God "always pardons
when confession is made."\(^6\)

\(^1\) Desire of Ages, 806.
\(^2\) Testimonies for the Church, 4:62.
\(^3\) Ibid., 3:270.
\(^4\) Ibid.
\(^6\) Evangelism, 370.
After the disciplinary action is taken by the congregation, work still remains to be done with that individual; i.e., church members “are to seek earnestly to win him to repentance,”¹ and all endeavors should be directed “for his recovery.”² Of course, a frivolous repentance is not desirable. But acceptance back into membership can be granted following “unqualified confessions and a period of sincere repentance.”³ Then “God will freely pardon and heal.”⁴ This guarantee is based on the prophetic word of Scripture, i.e., “all who repent have the assurance, ‘He will have compassion upon us; He will subdue our iniquities; and Thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea’ (Micah 7:19).”⁵ The church is urged to have a positive attitude toward a repentant, backslidden individual: “He is to be forgiven and welcomed to the fold again. His brethren are to encourage him in the right way, treating him as they would wish to be treated were they in his place.”⁶ This is not a human enterprise, but a divine work in which mortals are involved; forgiveness and salvation of sinners are possible only in the name of Him who died for them.⁷

A great lesson about Jesus’ acceptance of sinners and His utter efforts to save them can be found in the way He treated Peter in the context of his fall by denying the

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¹ Testimonies for the Church, 7:263.
² Desire of Ages, 440.
³ Adventist Home, 346.
⁴ Evangelism, 370.
⁵ Desire of Ages, 806.
⁶ Testimonies for the Church, 7:263.
⁷ Desire of Ages, 806.
Lord three times. Jesus had warned him before, and, in the midst of the disciple’s predicament, He looked at him with pity, sorrow, and tenderness, which led to Peter’s deep repentance. Notice the sequence: Jesus warned him, prayed for him, looked at him in love, forgave him, rehabilitated him, and gave him tasks. This is the model of the ideal restoration of a sinner. Therefore, the best thing a congregation can do for achieving a veritable restoration of a disciplined wrongdoer is to place “his trembling hand . . . in the loving hand of Jesus.”

Authority and Church Discipline

One of the most valuable comments White ever wrote about the relationship and cooperation between Jesus as the head and the church as His spiritual body is the following:

The church is built upon Christ as its foundation; it is to obey Christ as its head. It is not to depend upon man, or be controlled by man. Many claim that a position of trust in the church gives them authority to dictate what other men shall believe and what they shall do. This claim God does not sanction. The Saviour declares, “All ye are brethren.” All are exposed to temptation, and are liable to error. Upon no finite being can we depend for guidance. The Rock of faith is the living presence of Christ in the church. Upon this the weakest may depend, and those who think themselves the strongest will prove to be the weakest, unless they make Christ their efficiency.

From this we can learn that the supreme authority in the church belongs to Jesus Christ. The church has only a delegated authority. Many statements illustrate this further. God cares for His church in spite of any appearances to the contrary. “At times the Lord may seem to have forgotten the perils of His church and the injury done her by

1 Ibid., 713.
2 Ibid., 806.
3 Ibid., 414.
her enemies. But God has not forgotten. Nothing in this world is so dear to the heart of God as His church.”

The church is not perfect, it can make mistakes, “but God does not destroy His church because of its imperfection.” More than that, “the world’s Redeemer has invested great power with His church,” conferring upon it “the power to act in Christ’s stead.” The church is “God’s instrumentality for the preservation of order and discipline among His people. To it the Lord has delegated the power to settle all questions respecting its prosperity, purity, and order.” Jesus’ statement that the decisions of the church taken in accordance to His word would be ratified in heaven “holds its force in all ages.” He did not give to any human being the liberty to judge the actions of other individuals, “but on the church in its organized capacity He places a responsibility for the individual members.” The Savior entrusted His church with the authority to remit sins. White says: “But there is a brighter side to the picture. ‘Whosesoever sins ye remit, they are remitted.’” This occurs only by bringing sinners to Jesus.

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1 Prophets and Kings (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1943), 590.
3 Testimonies for the Church, 3:428.
4 Ibid., 7:263.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Desire of Ages, 805.
8 Ibid., 806.
People can refuse to consider the role of the church, but we are told that “by ignoring the authority of the church, they show contempt for God, who gave to the church its authority.”1 “He who despises the authority of the church despises the authority of Christ Himself.”2 According to White, God has laid upon the leaders of the church the authority or “the burden of reproving and correcting prevailing sins;”3 there is no excuse for them “if they shun pointed testimony.”4 On the contrary, if they “neglect to diligently search out the sins which bring the displeasure of God upon the body, they become responsible for these sins.”5 A strong warning is issued against any attempt by leaders to obstruct the efforts for correcting evildoers. Those who “shield persons from the censure which they deserved” become themselves responsible, and, “if these persons fail to reform, their lack is set to your account.”6

Not only leaders are addressed, there is a collective responsibility and accountability in the congregation of believers about helping and correcting members who apostatize. White shows that “toward those who fall into sin, the church has a duty, to warn, to instruct, and if possible to restore.”7 The leaders’ failure to act is no excuse for the rest of the believers, because “if the sins of the people are passed over by those in

2 Desire of Ages, 806.
3 Testimonies for the Church, 3:270.
4 Ibid., 1:214.
5 Ibid., 3:269.
6 Ibid., 1:214.
7 Desire of Ages, 805.
responsible positions, His frown will be upon them, and the people of God, as a body, will be held responsible for those sins."¹ Those who refuse to repent should be disciplined, "lest the saints be held accountable for their evil deeds."²

No church member is exempted from this responsibility; she points out: "God will hold the church at ______ responsible, as a body, for the wrong course of its members."³ This responsibility lasts "until they have done all they can to remedy the existing evil."⁴ White decries the fact that, while abuses in the area of church discipline had abounded, "proper discipline has been strangely neglected."⁵

A mere disapproval of evil, such as that of taking advantage "to the injury of the unfortunate and thus rob them of means,"⁶ is not enough for the church to clear itself before the Lord. The evil must be remedied, perhaps restitution needs to be made, while explaining that such deeds are not sanctioned.⁷

White declares that evils existing and tolerated in the life of a local church can have baleful consequences, as happened in the camp of Israel in the time of Joshua. Israel was weakened, and their army suffered a humiliating defeat when one man

¹ Testimonies for the Church, 3:265.
² Letter 215.
³ Testimonies for the Church, 3:517.
⁴ Ibid., 518.
⁵ "Be Gentle Unto All Men," 1.
⁶ Testimonies for the Church, 3:517, 518.
⁷ Desire of Ages, 806.
transgressed against the commandment of God. We are not left without counsel as to what is to be done in such circumstances. She wrote that “when the church is in difficulty, when coldness and spiritual declension exist, giving occasion for the enemies of God to triumph, then, instead of folding their hands and lamenting their unhappy state, let its members inquire if there is not an Achan in the camp.” This is a collective work to be done. The exhortation further urges: “With humiliation and searching of heart, let each seek to discover the hidden sins that shut out God’s presence.” Such individuals should not “be retained in the church,” because to do so “would be an insult to the God of heaven.”

White admonishes the church to act responsibly and faithfully when wrongs are committed in its midst so members need not seek justice in the courtrooms of the world, this being a shame for the Gospel of Christ that will bring the church into disrepute. God wants to have “a clean and pure people that He can delight in,” and He feels dishonored by the church’s “linking or uniting the clean with the unclean.” His displeasure will be the result when the guilty, instead of being seriously dealt with, are justified and sustained. The further warning is that the Lord “will not hearken to the

1 Testimonies for the Church, 3:270.
2 Patriarchs and Prophets, 497.
3 Ibid.
4 Letter 215.
6 Testimonies for the Church, 1:117, 118.
7 Ibid., 3:265, 266.
prayer of His people while the orphan, the fatherless, the lame, the blind, and the sick are neglected among them."1

God expects His stewards to be “true and faithful in giving reproof and correction,”2 in a decided unity: “There must be concerted action, and the members of the church must move together like a band of well-trained soldiers.”3 When the task is faithfully accomplished, God is glorified and the church is spiritually uplifted. Assurance is given that “the heavenly authority ratifies the discipline of the church in regard to its members when the Bible rule has been followed.”4

Misconceptions About Discipline

Satan tries to thwart the work of God by developing all kinds of misconceptions about order in the church. He deceives even professed followers of Christ into believing that “order and discipline are enemies to spirituality, that the only safety for them is to let each pursue his own course.”5 He convinces them to look at discipline as unchristian and foreign to the spirit of the Gospel. However, White expresses it in different terms: “The faithful physician of the soul cuts deep, that no pestilent matter may be left to burst forth again.” She also contends that even a sharp rebuke “is not doing the erring one any

1 Ibid., 3:518.
2 Evangelism, 368, 369.
3 “Individual Responsibility in the Church,” Review and Herald, 22 October 1889, 1.
4 Testimonies for the Church, 3:428.
5 Ibid., 1:650.
wrong.”¹ Consequently, the work of discipline is healing rather than ruining. When wrongfully practiced, however, it can ruin rather than heal.

White also warns about what would happen if we tried “to uproot from the church those whom we suppose to be spurious Christians,” and says that “we should be sure to make mistakes.”² She shows that overzealous church members can destroy “in five minutes” what the ministers toiled for “week after week.”³ Some people go so far in their indifference for the poor souls that they say: “Well, if they want to go off, let them go.” This could lead such “inexperienced souls . . . to make shipwreck of faith.”⁴ Off-limits for the practice of discipline is any attempt to judge “character or motive.”⁵ That prerogative belongs only to the final judgment of God. For humans to take that privilege would mean to take His place.

**Disciplinary Procedures**

White offers some insights regarding disciplinary procedures. She insists that “the principles of heaven are to be carried out in every family, in the discipline of every church, in every establishment.”⁶ For that to be possible, “diligent heed should be given

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¹ Evangelism, 370.
² Christ’s Object Lessons (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1900), 71.
³ Life Sketches, 186.
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Christ’s Object Lessons, 71.
to the instructions of God's word.”¹ The church is supposed to work in “accordance with the directions given in God's word,”² to deal with moral uncleanness “in God's way.”³

Congregations need to be very careful how they handle various disciplinary cases because “it would do more harm to weed out the tares, unless in God's appointed way, than to leave them alone.”⁴ Believers must “expel wrong after the rule God has given in His Word, not according to their own ideas and impulses.”⁵ Discipline is not a device of the church; it is God who “states the rules to be applied in cases of trial with its members.”⁶ White emphasizes that no church member should be mistreated, but should be corrected “in the way outlined in the word of God.”⁷

Special attention is given by White to the rule established by Jesus in Matt 18:15-20 for resolving conflicts which occur in a congregation. She says, “God's people are carefully to follow the instruction given by the Saviour in the eighteenth chapter of Matthew,”⁸ and that not carelessly, but “strictly.”⁹ There can be no negotiation in this respect. Therefore, “no church officer should advise, no committee should recommend,

¹ Testimonies for the Church, 5:241.
² Ibid., 7:263.
³ Evangelism, 369.
⁴ Testimonies to Ministers, 46.
⁵ Evangelism, 369.
⁶ Testimonies for the Church, 3:428.
⁷ Ibid., 7:261.
⁸ Ibid., 260.
⁹ Ibid., 5:241.
nor should any church vote, that the name of a wrongdoer shall be removed from the church books, until the instruction given by Christ has been faithfully followed.”¹

Ministers are cautioned not to “allow individuals to tell them the errors and faults of their brethren . . . . They should not listen to these reports, but should inquire: ‘Have you strictly followed the injunctions of your Saviour?’”² White specifies the area covered by Jesus’ instruction, which is “misunderstandings and personal injuries.”³

Dealing with such cases in the terms underlined by Jesus is a work of cosmic proportions, because “all heaven is interested in the interview between the one who has been injured and the one who is in error.”⁴ The final goal for all efforts should be “to effect a reconciliation.”⁵ When the first two steps undertaken for reconciliation have failed, “then an advance step is to be taken – tell it to the church, and let action be taken in the case according to the Scripture.”⁶ If the offender continues to reject any help, “upon the church rests the responsibility of separating him from fellowship. His name should then be stricken from the books.”⁷ Such an act “will be ratified in heaven.”⁸

¹ Ibid., 7:262.
² Ibid., 5:616, 617.
³ Ibid., 7:261.
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Ibid., 5:241.
⁶ Ibid., 617.
⁷ Ibid., 7:262.
⁸ Ibid., 263.
What, then, is the status of the church before God? This answer is given: “When this instruction has been followed, the church has cleared herself before God.”

Improper practices of church discipline are advised against. The right timing is very important, neither delays nor precipitous action being acceptable. She adds that “decided efforts should be made to show those who are unchristian in life their wrongs,” and those wrongs “should receive immediate attention.” The church has the duty “to deal promptly with the sins existing among them.” However, the opposite mistake, that of excessive and reckless haste, is equally discouraged: “Wait patiently; never hurry the matter of cutting off a member from the church.”

Abusive actions can do much harm to the cause. White notes: “Discipline has been largely perverted.” Often it is those who themselves are not in order with God and His word who prompt such unwarranted actions. We are told that “those who have had very defective characters themselves have been very forward in disciplining others, and thus all discipline has been brought into contempt.” Any case should be well documented in order for the erring individual to have a fair trial. It cannot be based on

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1 Ibid., 262, 263.
2 Ibid., 1:117.
3 Evangelism, 370.
4 Testimonies for the Church, 3:270.
5 “Be Gentle Unto All Men,” 1.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
“dreams or impressions,” because it had happened that “some of the church had been
disfellowshipped without sufficient cause.”

The right spirit is critical. It had been reported that some people “had been too
rigid, too cutting in remarks.” Thus the warning is also given against “spasmodic,
zealous, hasty action taken by church members in cutting off those they may think
defective in character,” against “harsh means, . . . unfair, hasty, impulsive work.”
A clear choice is recommended, i.e., everybody should know that using “milder means will
effect far more” than “harsh measures.” White writes that “every manifestation of
animosity or unkindness must be checked, . . . every root of bitterness be removed.”

Other evils compromising the disciplinary actions are partiality and hypocrisy.
There are always individuals “with zeal not according to knowledge, who would purify
the church, and uproot the tares from the midst of the wheat.” The harsh and unloving
treatment of church members has serious consequences, as already noted above.

Some helpful instruction on the appropriate procedures in the practice of church
discipline is further given. Before doing anything else for them, “those who pursue a

1 Spiritual Gifts, 4 vols. (Battle Creek, MI: Published by James White, 1860),
2:150.

2 Life Sketches, 186.

3 Testimonies to Ministers, 46.

4 Evangelism, 369.

5 “Be Gentle Unto All Men,” 1.

6 Testimonies for the Church, 5:241.

7 Testimonies to Ministers, 46.
course of transgression should be visited and labored with."¹ No publicity is suitable.

"Do not expose him, and thus increase the difficulty."² In order to avoid harmful
publicity, "if there are things of a disgraceful nature that should come before the church,
let them be brought before a few proper persons selected to hear them."³ This does not
mean that a group of individuals can take disciplinary actions. No, not even the church
board can do that,⁴ only the congregation. White clearly shows: "Shall a few persons in a
board meeting take upon themselves the responsibility of disfellowshipping the erring
one? . . . Let the church take action in regard to its members."⁵

The church will be blessed when the right spirit is at work, when the erring is
treated with "the most delicate touch, the finest sensibility . . . and pitying tenderness."⁶
Believers are expected to manifest "sympathy and love . . . the same spirit as that
manifested by our merciful and faithful High Priest, who is touched with the feeling of
our infirmities."⁷

¹ Letter 215.
² Testimonies for the Church, 7:260.
³ Ibid., 5:646.
⁴ Ibid., 7:262.
⁶ Desire of Ages, 440.
⁷ Testimonies to Ministers, 186, 187.
Reasons for Discipline

White points out some reasons for church discipline. Among them are "lying, Sabbath breaking, stealing, idolatry," which comprise acts of transgression of the law of God. She wanted sin to be called "by its right name," that people may be made aware of what Heaven says of each of those evils. She further required attention to be given if someone "manufactures wine or cider for the market." Disciplinary actions are also required for "all exhibitions of pride in dress," persistent refusal to resolve a conflictual situation, parental neglect "to train their children for usefulness," disregard for "the instruction given by God’s ministers," and refusal "to hear the admonitions and warnings given by God’s faithful messengers." Other reasons for discipline are refusal of one to recognize the church’s authority by going to public court against a fellow believer, bringing "dishonor on the truth" by "un-Christlike conduct," and persisting

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1 Desire of Ages, 806.
2 Ibid.
3 Testimonies for the Church, 5:359.
4 Ibid., 4:647.
5 Ibid., 5:241.
6 Ibid., 327.
8 Letter 215.
10 Testimonies for the Church, 7:263.
White was always guarded in her statements, showing that disciplinary actions are supposed to aim at “open sin,” which means known, willful, persistent sin.

Benefits of Discipline in the Church

It is worth noting here what White said about the benefits of church discipline. Sin’s removal from the life of a congregation prevents its dissemination. She comments: “The evil must then be made to appear as it is, and must be removed, that it may not become more and more widespread.” By practicing discipline, “the health and purity of the church” are maintained, which is important, because God wishes to have “a clean and pure people that He can delight in.”

Another blessed result is “growth and prosperity in every church.” There are individuals, although few, who receive rebuke with gratefulness, “and bless those who seek to save them from pursuing an evil course.”

Summary

Ellen G. White dealt intensively with the subject of church discipline. The 149 quotations presented in this chapter cover a wide range of aspects of this congregational

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1 Acts of the Apostles, 300.
2 Christ’s Object Lessons, 71.
3 Testimonies for the Church, 7:263.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 1:117, 118.
7 Patriarchs and Prophets, 667.
work. Emphasized is the need of working with erring believers in the spirit of Christ and for their spiritual recovery. Both haste and delay in approaching open transgressions of the law of God by church members are discouraged. Sinning individuals need to be led to their merciful Redeemer with their hands placed in His gracious hand.

Love and duty are to be combined in all such actions. The writer quoted in this chapter carefully urges the family of believers to work for the restoration of the fallen children of God, at the same time uplifting the law of God and His honor. Church discipline acting with grace is seen as vital for the existence of the spiritual body of Christ. Without it, the church would disintegrate. Yet, Jesus gave His life for the church and assured it of gaining a final victory over the powers of darkness.
CHAPTER IV

REVIEW OF OTHER LITERATURE ON DISCIPLINE AND GRACE

The purpose of this chapter is to offer an overview of the contributions brought by a series of theologians on the topic of discipline and grace in the Christian church. Literature over an extended period of time right up to the contemporary era is under consideration. Included in this chapter is the mode these authors understood and how they explained Jesus' and Paul's teachings on discipline and grace as exposed in the New Testament writings.

Discipline and Grace, a Divinely Appointed Responsibility

The literature quoted in this section makes it clear that the Christian church is called to glorify God through all its actions. Therefore the life and order of the church need to be governed by the revealed will of God.

Origin of Church Discipline

Various theologians view the discipline in the church as a responsibility originating in clear biblical teachings and injunctions. Yu, for example, contends that "the authority for disciplinary arrangements is Christ Himself, the whole question of
discipline is situated in the context of the 'response to the founder.'”¹ For Koranteng-Pipim, “church discipline is a command of Scripture, a matter of obedience.”²

Adam Clarke finds that “reproving a brother who had sinned was a positive command under the law (Lev 19:17)”³ long before New Testament times. Thus, it was an issue in all times because, as Liesch puts it, “the character of God requires accountability.”⁴ Quoting Mittelburg, Pritchard agrees that “God ‘is a good judge,’ and a ‘good judge doesn’t let lawbreakers off the hook.’”⁵ The authors of The Baptist Manual imagine the Lord Jesus Christ as walking among some churches, where “He would find some things to approve . . . and many things to censure.”⁶

As Brown shows, Jesus used the word church twice in the text of the Gospels, and on one of the two occasions He referred to church discipline. According to Brown, the passage in question (Matt 18:17) supplied “a divine warrant for the regular practice of church discipline in the early Church – a practice also urged elsewhere in the New Testament.”⁷

¹ Chai-Shin Yu, Early Buddhism and Christianity (Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass, 1981), 179.
² Koranteng-Pipim, 347.

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Testament as well as in the early Fathers.”¹ Patterson says that “it is unthinkable that the kingdom of God should tolerate within its fellowship unrepentant sin, open rebellion. That belongs to the kingdoms of this world.”²

**Head and Body Working Together**

In the practice of church discipline, the head and the body of the church need to cooperate. As Davis notes, practicing discipline “does not mean that a given local church is a sinless fellowship; however, it does mean that a local body of believers is conscientiously striving to be obedient to the biblical mandate of maintaining a regenerate and committed fellowship.”³ According to Brown, this means a church with a pure doctrine. He says that “if apostolic teaching makes a church apostolic, it is necessary to demonstrate that teaching is kept pure.”⁴

According to Koranteng-Pipim, a well-trained church presupposes “a body of doctrine that is a test of fellowship as well as the right to censure or exclude those who affirm some other creed.”⁵ This is neither easy nor comfortable, but, Gerber insists, “If we want to be a church true to the Bible, we must obey the guidelines of the New

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⁴ Brown, 51.

⁵ Koranteng-Pipim, 348.
Testament even where it seems to us painful and difficult." The same thought was preached by Bonhoeffer: "If the Church is to walk worthily of the gospel, part of its duty will be to maintain ecclesiastical discipline." An example of rigorous practice of discipline was given by Wesley, who believed that it was necessary to inquire into the spiritual condition of the church members. As a result, he reported that "many disorderly walkers were detected; and thus the society was purged of unworthy members."3

Every individual is responsible to God for the life he or she lives, but the church, writes Moore, has a say "about the lives of its members." The church needs to confront those who refuse to comply with its demands and principles of conduct, declares Koranteng-Pipim. It is not about mistakes and weaknesses, Rock points out, it is "when a person persists in waywardness in spite of loving counsel and encouragement," that "the church must act."6

Ewert says that an attitude of understanding toward the sinner means to heap no condemnation upon that person. No "indifference or laxness toward sin" is appropriate,

1 Samuel Gerber, Gemeindezucht (Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Herold Verlag, n.d.), 8.
2 Bonhoeffer, 260.
3 John W. Fowler, Adventist Pastoral Ministry (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1990), 125, 126.
5 Koranteng-Pipim, 348.
neither is transgression to be ignored, but, on the contrary, it is to be “recognized, faced, and dealt with in all its ugly reality.”¹

The Concept of Church Discipline and Grace

Before exploring the subject under consideration as seen by biblical scholars any further, we need to inquire about their perspective on the essence of Christian discipline. It is important to learn how they define, classify, and value this type of concern for the well-being of the body of believers. This is the task pursued in the present section.

Definitions

Some writers help us to have a clearer picture of what church discipline is all about. For instance, Littleton explains various views about this issue circulating in the Christian world. For many Evangelical Christians, “these words cast nightmarish images on the back of the mind – images of excommunication, inquisition, and witch-hunting.” For others, “it is a loving, positive term, a reminder of a time when they were brought back into the fold after they had been involved in sinful practice. For still others, it is a foreign term; it is something they have never encountered in a church.”²

Which is the real meaning of this concept? The answer is given by Edman: “Discipleship means ‘discipline!’ . . . Without discipline we are not disciples. . . . In an undisciplined age when liberty and license have replaced law and loyalty, there is greater

² Littleton, 25:30.
need than ever before that we be disciplined to be His disciples.”¹ Why are we Christians? “Not because of what we believe,” answers Hauerwas, “but because we have been called to be disciples of Jesus. To become a disciple is not a matter of a new or changed self-understanding, but rather to become part of a different community with a different set of practices.”²

In The Baptist Manual discipline is not viewed as the entire order of the church, but as “that part of church-government which consists in a mutual watch over one another, and the conduct we are directed to pursue in cases of disorder.”³ Yet I contend that discipline extends beyond the area indicated by The Baptist Manual and includes indeed the entire church life. We should be cautious about that “watching over one another” because it can so easily degenerate into judgmentalism, at times with grave results.

Genders of Discipline

The concept of church discipline becomes clearer by Yu’s excellent distinction between two genders of discipline:⁴

1. A system of arrangements defining a life style
2. A set of specific decisions designed to meet ad-hoc problems.

¹ V. Raymond Edman, The Disciplines of Life (Chicago, IL: Scripture Press, 1948), 9.
³ The Baptist Manual, 1, 2.
⁴ Yu, 179.
Importance of Discipline

Various authors of religious literature try to explain the importance of discipline for the life and progress of the Christian church. Church discipline is a fundamental prerequisite for the church's very existence, its identity as the body of Christ, and its mission in the world. Abolishing this work makes the church devoid of the needed spiritual vitality, in a great measure resembling secular society. Worse than that, in the view of some theologians, the peril would be a total dissolution of the church itself.

Fowler notes that both the Gospel and the doctrine of the church call for discipline. In his words, "Ekklesia means a called-out group of disciplined individuals who hold a unique belief system and who follow a disciplined lifestyle." Burgess attaches an eschatological dimension to it, which "ought to modify absolute judgments." In the view of Heideman, the identity of the church depends on two parameters: its center, which is the Trinity, and its boundaries, defined through "disciplinary procedures by which heretics were excluded and immoral excommunicated." Greenslade gives a classical formulation of the importance of church discipline: "As the saving doctrine of Christ is the soul of the church, so does discipline serve as its sinews, through which the members of the body hold together, each in its own place."

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1 Fowler, 119.
Writing about discipline in early Adventism, Fowler says that the first concern was for the quality of the spiritual experience of the baptismal candidates rather than the number of converts. This concern should continue today and always because quality is a prerequisite for a disciplined community of faith. Culpepper believes that Eph 5:1-14 is a strong argument for maintaining discipline in the church, whose members are called to be children of light. And Patterson notes that “discipline has its reasons. . . . Discipline is positive, not just negative. You deny this in order to have that, which is of greater value. Or, as Richard Foster once put it, discipline is simply taking the necessary measures to get the necessary done.”

Greenslade warns us that “to remove discipline would contribute to the ultimate dissolution of the Church,” which surely would be the supreme joy of its invisible enemy. Yet such an end cannot happen because Jesus prophesied and promised that the gates of hell would not prevail against His church. The practice of discipline is in harmony with Jesus’ plan for His church to survive all the attempts of the evil one to destroy it. Therefore, writes Fowler, it should be “the primary concern of the church” to be a disciplined community of believers. Hauerwas agrees. He fears that, if the first

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1 Fowler, 121.
3 Patterson, 109.
4 Greenslade, 71, 72.
5 Fowler, 121.
priority of the church is to be a society of care, then it “lacks the rationale to build the church as a community capable of standing against the powers we confront.”¹

Christian freedom is not to be equated with debauchery. George Joy claims, “Any community which sets moral standards must recognize the limits beyond which the transgressions of its fundamental standards become intolerable.”² According to Ewert, caution is needed right from the beginning of each individual’s spiritual journey, therefore “every organization must . . . set certain limits on the qualifications of its membership.”³

Church discipline has changed its character throughout the centuries of the Christian era. In the early church it was primarily pastoral. Then, according to Brown, it became the “bone of contention for apologetics and inter-confessional controversy” during the Reformation period, when it was “an essential mark of the true Church.”⁴ Clarke, when writing his Bible commentary in the first third of the nineteenth century, claimed that “discipline must be exercised in the Christian Church; without this it will soon differ but little from the wilderness of this world.”⁵ The danger is not diminished today. Krahn compares a worldly church with a consecrated one and finds that in the former the discipline is poor or absent, while the latter flourishes in an atmosphere of

¹ Hauerwas, 881.
³ Ewert, 97, 98.
⁴ Brown, 51.
⁵ Clarke, 6:215.
“separation from the world, consecrated Christian living, and church discipline.”\(^1\) If Krahn’s study is valid, it is more than strange that most churches care very little or not at all about discipline. In fact, Ewert asserts that “church discipline is not something the church does as an afterthought to the rest of its program. Instead it becomes an integral part of its central program.”\(^2\)

**Purpose of Discipline**

Nineteen sources quoted below point out why discipline is necessary in the Christian church. They emphasize singular aspects or offer more or less comprehensive lists of the goals of this church activity. A careful examination of these references leads to the conclusion that ecclesiastical discipline has a three-dimensional focus – on God, His church, and His erring children. When a church proves faithful to the scriptural demand to practice discipline, the name of God is glorified because justice is being done. The church’s vital interests are also served: Its spiritual purity is preserved, its integrity and credibility in society are protected, and the work of the Holy Spirit in its midst is unrestricted. Finally, the sinning member as the recipient of church discipline benefits from the disciplinary action whose goal is to awaken him or her to a genuine repentance and a visible change of life. All these writers agree that church discipline is to be an attempt to rescue the sinner in the spirit of love.

\(^1\) Cornelius Krahn, “Menno and Discipleship,” in *Studies in Church Discipline* (Newton, KS: Mennonite Publication Office, 1958), 63, 64.

\(^2\) Ewert, 97, 98.
Schweizer sees church discipline as a means for managing the church for its purity and caring for the salvation of its members.¹ Brown points out a double concern acting in the context of church discipline: the welfare of the individual and the purity of the community.² Fowler contends that “only a disciplined church can provide the nurture, support, and discipline that new members need,”³ therefore disciplined churches are more attractive and grow faster.

The Baptist Church draws attention to the necessity to “prune as well as plant” if we want the church to bear fruit which remains, and to be “Christ’s disciples.”⁴ The truth is, as understood by Bonhoeffer, that a disciplinary action by the church “is really nothing more than the recognition of a state of affairs which already exists,”⁵ because the wrongdoer excluded himself or herself, in a practical sense, before the church acted for that purpose.

Gerber is another author who affirms that, by practicing discipline, the church shows love for the sinner, and exclusion, undertaken after softer means have failed, “is not a sentence of condemnation, but a deeply stretching salvation attempt.”⁶ Quoting an unidentified source, Nelson emphasizes his idea of the “fire rescue method” used by God

² Brown, 51.
³ Fowler, 120.
⁴ The Baptist Manual, 2.
⁵ Bonhoeffer, 263.
⁶ Gerber, 65.
in the Old Testament. In Nelson's terms, it means "Extricate now. Explain later." He notes that when a building burns down there is no time for the firefighters to explain to the inhabitants why they act. People need to be quickly brought out of the collapsing building before it is too late. After the rescue act, and not before or during it, there is enough time for reflection.¹

What purpose does church discipline serve? According to Culpepper, it dispels the darkness existing in the church because, although the church is called to be the light of the world, "there is darkness even in the community of the children of light."² And, as Koranteng-Pipim contends, "Church discipline is a command of Scripture, a matter of obedience," preserving the integrity of the church and serving for its self-preservation.³

In any case of conflict management by the church, it would be ideal for justice and mercy to be simultaneously applied, both being held in balance "that violence be done to neither." This comment was made by Waggoner more than a century ago.⁴

Rock identifies three purposes church discipline can accomplish:⁵

1. It invites the sinner to make changes in his or her life (2 Thess 3:14, 15).
2. It helps the congregation and the society to reflect on the high standards of the Word of God for His children (Testimonies to Ministers, 426).

¹ Nelson, 13.
² Culpepper, 533.
³ Koranteng-Pipim, 347, 348.
⁵ Rock, 11.
3. It removes any hindrance which could make the work of the Holy Spirit in the church ineffectual (Testimonies for the Church, 5:147).

A writer for the Jehovah's Witnesses gives four justifications for practicing church discipline:¹

1. It magnifies the name of God.
2. It protects the congregation against apostasy.
3. It promotes the safety of individuals in the church.
4. It encourages sinners to repent of their transgressions.

Greenslade lists three good purposes of church discipline that he sees in the Scots Confession of 1560:²

1. Those who live a vicious life can no more be called Christians, dishonoring the name of the living God, “as if His holy Church were a conspiracy of wicked and abandoned men.”
2. The good members are protected from corruption on the part of the wicked, which quite often happens.
3. The transgressors may be “overcome by shame” and be motivated to repent.

Another catalog of the purposes of church discipline is presented in The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church:³

1. Maintenance of the divine truth in the congregation

² Greenslade, 71, 72.
³ The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, 393.
2. Vindication of Jesus’ authority and glory

3. Removal of the offences committed by church members

4. Preservation of the spiritual purity in the congregation

5. Help for the offender to spiritually recover.

Discipline is a challenge for believers who continue “to move away from the brotherhood into the world,” and, Krahn points out, it has the purpose “to produce repentance, and a return to the flock.”

To illustrate the need of a wise and loving discipline, Nelson tells his readers how he corrected his little son when he repeatedly ignored the warning not to play in the middle of the road. Because the explanations and re-explanations did not work, he added an incentive by “warming a certain portion of his anatomy (namely, his gluteous maximus) so that the truth will be red hot in another portion of his anatomy (namely, his mind).” To help believers have a balanced view on the real purpose of discipline, Bonhoeffer declares that “the purpose of such discipline is not to establish a community of the perfect, but a community consisting of men who really live under the forgiving mercy of God.”

Far from being a coercion, “discipline in the life of the church is,” as Ewert described it, “necessary for a ministry of redemption.” According to Laney, when discipline is administered with loving concern, it helps “sinning saints” to understand the

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1 Krahn, 64.

2 Nelson, 12, 13.

3 Bonhoeffer, 260.

4 Ewert, 97.
gravity of their sinful actions, which contradict their beliefs. Krahn says that this work is to be done only in order to win the offender and preserve the spirituality of the church.

In the view of the authors of *The Baptist Manual*, while referring to the discipline in the case of the Corinthian offender, the entire action promoted by the apostle had the purpose “that his spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord, and to clear themselves as a church from being partakers of his sin.”

As Durand states, it is unpopular today to say that the church needs to maintain its spiritual purity. He agrees that an institution is not more important than individuals; nevertheless, the church is comprised of many individuals, and the many should not suffer because of the sins of the few. This truth makes the church responsible for the sins which are tolerated among its members. Therefore, as Durand puts it, “true love dares discipline.”

Finally, a Methodist Bible commentary remarks that the discipline in Corinth was aimed at purging the church of the contaminating evil, warned the church against a similar corruption, and strove to awaken the sinner to a real repentance and change of life.

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2 Krahn, 65.


Biblical Instruction on Discipline and Grace

This section analyzes the New Testament teachings on church discipline and grace as interpreted in the theological sources under consideration. In other words, a wider understanding of this biblical topic is offered by means of explanations found in the writings of various biblical scholars. The same scriptural instruction appears in chapter 2, which reveals my own interpretation.

Sense of Church Discipline and Grace

Some theologians make ample comments on the understanding of the biblical instruction on church discipline and grace throughout the centuries of the Christian era. They refer first of all to the meaning of this concept as used in Scripture and interpreted in the Christian church. It is reported that the church in Ephesus was praised by Jesus because believers “could not bear those who were evil.”1 Peter King lists six features that are to be examined in any study on the practice of discipline in the early church:2 (1) for which faults were offenders censured, (2) what was the identity of the judges, (3) in what manner were their censures made, (4) which were the actual censures applied to the offenders, (5) what course were offenders to take to be absolved, and (6) what was the manner of their absolution.

1 The Baptist Manual, 2.

2 Peter King, An Inquiry into the Constitution, Discipline, Unity, and Worship, of the Primitive Church, that Flourished within the First Three Hundred Years after Christ (New York: G. Lane and P. P. Sandford, 1841), 107, 108.
According to Brown, discipline was “a feature of Christian congregational life” right from the beginning of the Christian epoch.\(^1\) The Reformers of the sixteenth century commonly understood that the church needs a certain kind of discipline for its believers. Oecolampadius had a “profound insight into the very nature of church discipline itself, namely its pastoral (\textit{seelsorgerisch}) and curative function, in sharp contrast to the punitive or prophylactic measures taken by the secular magistrate.”\(^2\) Meylan writes that in the Anabaptist community, according to the Confession of Schleitheim, church discipline had a double function: to keep the brethren in the community and to exclude those who proved unworthy.\(^3\)

Fowler informs us that Wesley removed unfaithful individuals from the membership as “a method of discipline in a negative sense.”\(^4\) Recently, successful Evangelical churches have proved themselves to be serious about the practice of discipline. Warren reports that “Saddleback practices church discipline – something rarely heard of today. If you do not fulfill the membership covenant, you are dropped from our membership. We remove hundreds of names from our roll every year.”\(^5\) Willow Creek is not more lax about its members observing this biblical duty, either.

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\(^1\) Brown, 51.

\(^2\) Akira Demura, \textit{Church Discipline according to Johannes Oecolampadius in the Setting of His Life and Thought} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Theological Seminary, 1964), 78.

\(^3\) Henry Meylan, \textit{Mélanges D'Histoire Du XVIe Siècle} (Geneève, Switzerland: Librairie Droz, 1970), 23.

\(^4\) Fowler, 127.

\(^5\) Rick Warren, \textit{The Purpose Driven Church} (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 54.
learn from Paulien: “Contrary to what most Adventists would expect, Willow Creek offers no soft religion. In order to be accepted as a member, you must attend faithfully for a year, become involved in a small group, and have a clearly identifiable ministry! This is no easy way to join a church!” ¹ Hybels, himself, tells the story of a young lady who “slipped into a pattern of disobedience to God... She forfeited her position with the vocal team and as the church began to follow scriptural principles regarding discipline she lost heart and left the church.” A long time later she came back, confessed to the congregation her transgression, asked for forgiveness, and, in tears, the church embraced her back into its fellowship.²

**Jesus Did Not Prohibit Discipline**

Paradoxically, many Christians see in Jesus’ words from Matt 7:1-5 a resolute prohibition of church discipline. Therefore it is helpful to discover how theologians of various orientations and affiliations interpreted the passage. Culpepper points out that “the words of Jesus, ‘Judge not, that ye be not judged (Mt 7:1),’ could be taken to exclude any practice of church discipline, but the early church did not apply the saying in this way.”³ As Jeschke declares:

A little examination will show that the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:1-3) is no excuse for neglecting admonition. In the first place, admonition is exactly what Jesus was doing here – He was admonishing His disciples! Furthermore, His admonition was not against admonition; it was against a

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² Lynne Hybels and Bill Hybels, *Rediscovering Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 183.

³ Culpepper, 534.
self-righteous way of judging. Jesus invited men to take the log out of their own eye in order to be able to help remove the speck from their brother's eye. The log was not to be retained and enjoyed as an excuse for neglecting to help the brother.1

In the view of White and Blue, Jesus here was teaching two things: "To exercise discernment about the sins of our brothers and sisters, but to be cautious about jumping to hasty conclusions."2 Nixon reveals what caused the deterioration of the meaning of Jesus' injunction about not judging: "The popular emphasis on openness and sensitivity has overwhelmed the critical faculties of discernment and assessment. We are in danger of losing altogether the capacity to discriminate between right and wrong, between good, better, and best. Is this what Jesus had in mind?"3 The Gages observe that "many believers assume that passage (Matthew 7:1) is all that the Bible teaches on the subject. They conclude that they must never make a value judgment on what is right or wrong for another Christian."4 According to The New American Commentary, the verb κρίνω used in Matt 7:1, 2 "can imply to analyze or evaluate as well as to condemn or avenge. The former senses are clearly commanded of believers (e.g., 1 Cor 5:5; 1 John 4:1), but the latter are reserved for God. Even on those occasions when we render a negative evaluation of others, our purposes should be constructive and not retributive."5

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1 Marlin Jeschke, Discipling the Brother: Congregational Discipline according to the Gospel (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1972), 83.
2 White and Blue, 89.
By comparing Matt 7:1, where Jesus said, “Judge not, that ye be not judged,” with John 7:24, where He admonished the Jews, “Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment,” White and Blue believe the meaning of the first is “Don’t be critical of others. Don’t look down on them and feel you are better than they. Don’t play the magistrate.” In the second text, Jesus is saying, “Be discerning. . . . Be careful to judge justly.” Nixon asserts that Jesus’ command not to judge “is not a command to indiscriminately accept everything. It is an edict against pre-judging, against peremptory legalism, against castigation and vindictiveness that leave no place for forgiveness and reconciliation.” Nixon also specifies that “it is not the faculty of judgment that Jesus attacks, it is punitive accusations, sweeping condemnations, and the spirit of ‘unforgiveness.’ Christ would have us learn proper judgment, judging with humility and in the spirit of redemption.”

The Beacon Bible Commentary offers renderings given by various theologians for Matt 7:1. Thus, paraphrases are suggested: “Don’t be critical, or you will be criticized!” “Don’t condemn others, or you will be condemned yourself.” Further the translation of Bowman and Tapp is quoted: “Do not practice ‘sitting in judgment’ lest you come in for judgment!” And Oswald Chambers warns: “Beware of anything that puts you in the superior person’s place.” Nixon has a further comment that is very

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1 White and Blue, 88, 89.

2 Nixon, 29.

3 Ibid.

interesting and helpful. He says that “as Christ’s followers we cannot dispense with
moral judgment, a necessary element of Christian character. It helps us to negotiate our
way through a confused society of lost values and standards.”¹ Such misinterpretations
of Matt 7:1 as quoted before are themselves in violation of that command because often
persons who plead for zero-judgment are thereby judging those who do not see the text
their way. Indeed, they call “those who would hold others accountable by questioning
their behavior as ‘callous’ and ‘uncaring.’”² Nixon concludes with the sad finding that
“we have been led into a non-discriminating acceptance of everything as the measure of
graciousness,”³ which is exactly the opposite of Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the
Mount.

Jesus and the Erring Believers

Theological literature gives special attention to Jesus’ rule for working with
erring church members as recorded in Matt 18:15-20. The entire work of ecclesiastical
discipline should follow the pattern offered by Jesus Christ in this text. Even when the
issue is not reconciliation between individuals but a personal transgression of the law of
God by a church member, Jesus’ words are helpful, especially in the spirit manifested, if
not in the step-by-step procedure. Opportunity for repentance always should be offered;
the central aim is to win back the guilty. By doing that, much evil is precluded.

¹ Nixon, 29.
² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
Parackel sees in the placement of vss. 15-18 between the parable of the lost sheep (vss. 12-14) and the assurance of God’s answer to a united prayer (vss. 19, 20) a sign that Jesus made forgiveness a general principle in the entire judicial system of the local church.¹ In dealing with this text, The Pulpit Commentary shows which are the beneficiaries of the approach required by the Lord: we, the guilty person, the church, the world.²

Learning from Rev. J. Wesley, Clarke emphasizes that there is a big advantage in following the Lord’s rule on how to deal with offenders. As he puts it, “whoever follows this threefold rule will seldom offend others, and never be offended himself.”³ Rock decries as “objectionable” the fact that churches sometimes administer discipline without first visiting the guilty person and offering the “opportunity for repentance.”⁴

According to Davies and Allison, the verb παράκουω used in Matt 18:17 means “to hear without heeding,” which is a rejection of counsel. Also, treating the offender as a Gentile and a tax-collector means the “breaking off of fellowship and hence the exclusion from the community,” in the hope that the action will awaken the sinner and cause him or her to repent.⁵

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³ Clarke, 5:184.
⁴ Rock, 11.
considered a pagan and a tax-collector, The New American Commentary shows that this is a type of avoidance while at the same time reaching out to that person as a call to repentance.\(^1\) In the words of Laney, such an individual is “outside the circle of God’s people,” which makes him or her subject to outreach.\(^2\)

Clarke believes that the church owes to the expelled “good will, and acts of kindness; but have no religious communion with him.”\(^3\) Krahn notes, “The congregation has received the power to bind and to loose and the authority to declare that an erring member is not any more a member of the church.”\(^4\)

**Interpretation of Paul’s View on Discipline**

The writings of the apostle Paul which deal with the issue of church discipline and grace have been amply analyzed by various theologians. The starting point of Paul’s theology on discipline is a case of incest in the church of Corinth. The quoted writers comment on Paul’s ideas and terminology, which sometimes is difficult. Basically, the Christian church is seen as a safe environment, a projection on earth of God’s kingdom. Loss of membership in the church means exposure to Satan’s cruel attacks. At the same time, when the sinner is finally faced with loss of membership it may be his or her last opportunity to grasp the gravity of the situation and repent.

\(^1\) Craig L. Blomberg, 22:279.


\(^3\) Clarke, 5:184.

\(^4\) Krahn, 65.
Clarke warned about the grave situation of a sinning member and all its implications. He believed that when “the soul of a brother is on the road to perdition, the cause of God is so far betrayed and injured, and Christ is re-crucified in the house of His friends.” He added that the congregation should be filled with pity toward the transgressor and prayer for that individual should occupy all the members of the church.\(^1\) Both Jews and Gentiles living in Corinth in Paul’s day condemned an incestuous relationship; therefore, its toleration by the Christian church would have been detrimental for the work of God in that city.\(^2\) Moreover, in Paul’s absence, that church had done nothing to condemn the sin. In fact, according to Durand, they even created the impression that “they were proud of their broad-mindedness.”\(^3\) George Joy points out that Paul criticized more the “irresponsibility and leniency” of the church than the transgressor himself.\(^4\)

We are given four reasons why Paul’s language in 1 Cor 5:1-13 is so harsh:\(^5\)

1. The Savior in Matt 18:15-18 required firm discipline in the case of a church member who despises the authority of the church.

2. Toleration for lax moral standards would have been devastating for a congregation recruited mostly from paganism.

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\(^{1}\) Clarke, 6:215.

\(^{2}\) A. Lukyn Williams, 19:186, 187.

\(^{3}\) Durand, 5.

\(^{4}\) George Joy, 431, 432.

3. Physical suffering would be considered the inevitable consequence of the alienation from the family of God, which enjoyed His protection from satanic attacks.

4. They believed that the punishment of the flesh would lead the transgressor to a genuine repentance and, ultimately, to being saved.

At least two factors spawn sorrow in the church when transgressions are committed: the concern of church members for the welfare of their fellow believers, and jealousy for the church's good name in society. Clarke considers discipline the "most important branch of a minister's duty." He notes four basic requirements for proper discipline: "judgment, prudence, piety, and caution." The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary says that "a person living in such deliberate and dreadful immorality should be expelled from the church. God does not bless His people when they knowingly permit open transgression of His law to continue among them."

In 1 Cor 5:5 Paul said that the church was gathered together "to deliver such an one unto Satan." This statement was conducive to a multitude of interpretations in the theological literature. George Joy has a strange idea. He suggests that "Satan apparently has a more positive role" than the one usually portrayed in the New Testament, where he is the adversary of the Christians. Yet by taking that action the church is not cooperating with Satan. He is and remains the enemy of the work of God and of His children.

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2 Clarke, 6:215.

3 "1 Corinthians," SDA Bible Commentary, 6:689.

4 George Joy, 434.
sees in such a delivery “the loss of fellowship within the community and all that that involves, . . . being formally, visibly, and completely excluded from that community.”¹

From The Wesleyan Bible Commentary, we learn that in the early church, the world was considered the kingdom of Satan. Therefore, being excluded from the Christian community meant rejoining the world and being in the hands of the evil one with all of its consequences.² The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary says there are only two spiritual kingdoms, the kingdom of God and that of Satan. When someone leaves the first, he or she automatically is subject of the second. Thus, when the Corinthian sinner by his conduct abandoned the kingdom of God, his act had to be officially recognized by the church. He had to be expelled from its midst.³

In their consideration of the sinner being delivered to Satan, White and Blue explain that, in the body of Christ, one is protected against the wickedness of Satan. But such protection is lost when a person is separated from that spiritual connection. They say: “To be delivered to Satan means that we no longer march in rank. Instead, we are isolated and exposed so that this protection is withdrawn.”⁴ Clarke attempted to express the reason and the utility of such a delivery in another way. He said, “Let him have this extra mark of your abhorrence of all sin; and let the world see that the Church of God does not tolerate iniquity.”⁵


² Charles W. Carter, 5:154, 155.

³ “1 Corinthians,” SDA Bible Commentary, 6:690.

⁴ White and Blue, 105.

⁵ Clarke, 6:215.
Theologians also have struggled to explain the phrase “destruction of the flesh” as used by Paul in 1 Cor 5:5. The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary says it means “a mortification of the fleshly desires.”¹ White and Blue think that Paul “uses the term flesh to mean carnality, the sinful nature that plagues us all.”²

Here it is very important for the church members to understand what is the appropriate attitude they should have toward a member who was cut off from the membership. “Shunning,” a discipline started by the Mennonites in the sixteenth century, is not a biblical approach. It created innumerable complications and raised more questions than it answered. “To what extent should this reach, even within the family? Did 1 Corinthians 5:11 mean separation from bed and board of married couples or not? Various Mennonite groups disagreed.”³ Even Clarke goes too far by saying that believers can have worldly business with those who do not know God, but not with nominal Christians whose conduct is scandalous.⁴ In such a case, the non-spiritual Christians are treated worse than the heathen and tax-collectors, and such a practice violates the instruction of Jesus Christ. Brun sees here an interruption of any association with the unrepentant sinner who has been disfellowshipped; but, in the light of Jesus’ calling that sinner a Gentile and a publican, Brun does not advocate the avoidance of any attention at

¹ “1 Corinthians,” SDA Bible Commentary, 6:690.
² White and Blue, 105.
⁴ Clarke, 6:215.
That would be counter-productive and against the instruction given by Jesus. At this point, it might be well to heed a warning by Clarke. He notes that church affiliation is not a "passport to heaven"; someone can be a church member formally but not "in the sight of God." Clearly, such an affiliation would be useless.

Referring again to disciplinary procedures in Corinth, George Joy explains that the entire community passed the sentence and put it into effect. It was the right and the duty of the community to judge the wrongdoer. The apostle stepped in only when the disciplinary action was neglected.

In 1 Cor 5:3, Paul affirmed that he had been "absent in body, but present in spirit." Clarke thinks this is a reference to the gift of discernment of spirits. But I believe it is rather an agreement of the apostle with the action of the organized congregation, as this action is continued in vss. 4 and 5. Clarke speaks about the extreme attitude of a minister in treating offenders: "He may be too easy and tender, and permit the gangrene to remain till the flock be infected with it. Or he may be rigid and severe, and destroy parts that are vital while only professing to take away what is vitiated." He recommends two things to be done for the person whose name has been removed from the church: "thy best advise and heartiest prayer."

1 Lyder Brun, Segen und Fluch im Urchristentum (Oslo, Norway: I Kommisjon Hos Jacob Dybwad, 1932), 92, 93.
2 Clarke, 6:215.
3 George Joy, 432.
4 Clarke, 6:213.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., 6:215.
Laney notes that the verb καταρτίζω (translated to mend, restore, set right, make complete), employed by Paul in 1 Cor 1:10, has some implications for church discipline:\(^1\)

1. The discipline in the church does not have the purpose to destroy, but to repair someone injured on the battlefield of life.

2. Restoration has the meaning of helping the wounded person to possess the principles needed for avoiding further injuries and to live a life according to Christ’s will.

3. True restoration means not only forgiveness but the process of bringing the sinners back to their former condition.

**Difficulties in the Practice of Church Discipline**

The five parts of this section show how the reviewed literature identifies negative attitudes and reactions toward the practice of discipline in Christian congregations. When appropriate, my comments on the findings of these authors are offered.

**Limits of Church Discipline**

Theologians have dealt intensively with various difficulties met in the practice of church discipline, but not much has been written on the limits of discipline. Haslehurst, for instance, shows that “there are within the Church both good and bad; wheat and chaff. Let no one leave the floor before the time, but let him bear with the chaff in the time of threshing.” He speaks also about a double separation of the two, that

\(^1\) Laney, “The Biblical Practice,” 357.
is, a permanent spiritual separation now and a bodily separation later. I think this interpretation is in harmony with Jesus’ teaching about wheat and tares. The Lord showed that some negative realities occurring in the Christian church are to be tolerated until the harvest.

**Abuses of Church Discipline**

More has been written about abuses committed against erring believers. The church is Jesus’ servant in a fallen world. It was called for a mission of love and redemption. Coercion is not God’s method but of His enemy. Discipline is a part of the redemptive action of the church. To abuse it in any form is to jeopardize people’s spirituality and please the invisible adversary.

Gerber decries the strange fact that, while in many churches almost nothing, not even murder, adultery, or blasphemy, is followed by punishment, in others, severe measures are applied with such a hypocritical and unloving spirit, that the discipline becomes horrible. In a book on discipline published by the Church of Scotland, the division of responsibility between the civil authorities and the church is defined. According to that view, if civil authorities do not act, the church must “draw the sword, which of God she hath received, holding them as accursed even in their very fact.” It is unclear what that sword is: If the Word of God is meant, that is all right, but if what the authors signify is a physical punishment, such a right never belonged to the church.

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1 Haslehurst, 113.

2 Gerber, 7.

In his long essay *On Penance* written in c. A.D. 203, Tertullian referred to penance or exomologesis as a "public period of prostration and humiliation, wearing mean clothes, tasting little food, and much weeping."¹ This is exactly the opposite from what a proper congregational discipline should be. It is never to include a public humiliation. As a historian, James F. White takes a neutral position and simply describes the facts. Coleman, on the other hand, shows that, while in the primitive church discipline was collective, it was “exchanged for a complicated and oppressive system of penance administered by the clergy” in the third and the fourth centuries.²

Laney writes about abuses in the practice of church discipline and asserts that “with some justification the church has been accused of being the only army that shoots its wounded.”³ Use of force, including physical force to correct believers, is absolutely out of place. Bannerman declares that “a discipline not spiritual, not addressed to the understanding and conscience, cannot be discipline in the proper sense of the term at all. To attain the ends of the ‘potestas ἀιρετικῆ’ in the Christian Church, compulsion is not merely improper, but impossible.”⁴ This thought is continued by Ewert who shows that “our readiness to condemn is really an expression of our inability to face realistically and deal effectively with a person who is in sin and needs to find restoration.”⁵

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¹ James F. White, *A Brief History*, 65.
² Coleman, 87.
⁵ Ewert, 98.
Schweizer calls perverse anything different from mild action in discipline and thinks that a clear warning against hasty actions is found in 1 Tim 5:19. In this text Paul clearly requires sufficient proof when accusations against an elder are under consideration.

**Neglect of Church Discipline**

A whole series of authors have underlined the costly effects of neglect to practice discipline in the family of believers. The implications are offensive to God, degrading for the church life, and debilitating for its witness in the community. The army of God loses its morale, and the battles with the forces of darkness become unwinnable. Sin does not stay isolated; if not confronted, it contaminates the whole like leaven. Such an experiment is suicidal for any congregation.

Bash is concerned with the fact that “we have rejected the disciplines of the Christian life. We require nothing, literally nothing, of our people except a formal unexamined public statement of faith in Jesus Christ and baptism.” Davis raises the pathetic question, “Whatever happened to church discipline? Even the most casual churchgoer is aware that very few churches today practice church discipline.” He thinks it is paradoxical for the church to claim it follows a NT pattern while intentionally ignoring the Bible’s teachings on church discipline which were faithfully respected by the apostolic Christianity. The fact that the church can act only on the basis of “the outward

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1 Schweizer, 82.


3 Davis, 345.
and the visible,” says Davis, “should not deter a local church from fulfilling its scriptural responsibility.”

When he wrote about the neglect of discipline in the church of Corinth, Clarke warned that, according to Paul’s thinking, if the immoral deed passed by unchecked, “the flood-gates of impurity will be opened on the Church, and the whole state of Christianity ruined in Corinth.” One sin not dealt with made the church in Corinth suffer, says Laney, and that sin proliferated, like a rotten apple, which spoils the whole box of good apples.

In 1979, a flourishing church, Willow Creek in Illinois, suffered a terrible “Train Wreck,” according to its chief leader, Bill Hybels. It happened because of the failure to tell the truth about the sin of some leaders. That neglect to act eroded the unity of the church and started the domino falling. Adams correctly observes and warns that “the weakened state of the churches in the present time is the direct result of a failure in church discipline.” He then gives details, i.e., “divorces occur, church splits take place, false teaching is introduced and the like, because the means Christ outlined for forestalling such things, the process and application of church discipline, is no longer intact.”

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1 Ibid., 347, 348.
2 Clarke, 6:214.
4 Hybels and Hybels, 88.
5 Adams, 11.
Lack of disciplinary action according to the Holy Scripture when sin occurs in the church has at least two major consequences. Bonhoeffer underlines them: The sinner will “forfeit his own salvation and the gospel be discredited.”¹ The internal injury for the cause of the Lord is mercilessly followed by external harm because, according to Clarke, “if evil be tolerated in Christian societies, the work of God cannot prosper there.”² The Gages point out that “a church loses its witness not so much through the sin of a member as through the lack of corporate judgment upon that sin.”³ Koranteng-Pipim agrees. He says that neglect of ecclesiastical discipline “has a debilitating effect on the mission and spiritual vitality of the church.”⁴

Allowing a sinner to remain in the church despite all the gravity of the committed sin is devastating for the life of a congregation. Such baleful effects are singled out by Gina Sprivey-Brown: “It brings reproach upon the church, decreases the morale within the church, sends the message that God approves of the sin (which He does not), says to the sinner that he or she can actively participate in the church and that what he or she does is acceptable (when it is not), and says to the world that the church tolerates open sin.”⁵ The church needs to be aware of the fact that it “does injustice to God when it allows to exist as part of itself elements that are bringing dishonor upon His

¹ Bonhoeffer, 260.
² Clarke, 6:215.
³ Gage and Gage, 26.
⁴ Koranteng-Pipim, 348.
cause."¹ What would happen with the Adventist movement if church discipline were abolished? The answer is given by Koranteng-Pipim, who says that “without an uncompromising regard for the authority of Scripture and our fundamental beliefs, only a shadow of Adventism remains.”²

**Opposition to Church Discipline**

Since corrective discipline in the church is a difficult and not quite so enjoyable task, it cannot escape opposition. This is caused by some people’s option to live independent from God and free from any “interference” by the church in their lives. Opposition can be more than the culprits’ carnal reaction to discipline. It can be the response of sympathizers or of advocates of disorderly conduct. This is dangerous solidarity because opposition to the scriptural actions of the church is implicitly opposition to Jesus Christ who works through the church.

In the fellowship of New Song, the forerunner of the Willow Creek Church, Hybels discovered that one of the “twenty-something punk rockers in leadership was sleeping with two of the women in the church.” Hybels said to him: “Hey, you can’t do this. This is wrong. This is sin.” The response was aggressive: “Who are you to tell me what to do?” Then the fellow spread the news that Hybels had an authoritarian and dictatorial spirit.³ Clearly, church discipline is not without risks. The mentality, as

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¹ Vernon Sparks, “Authority in God’s Church,” Australasian Record Articles 312, (n.d.): 58, 59.

² Koranteng-Pipim, 348.

described above, of denying anyone the right to interfere when sin is committed, is widespread in the world today and even in Christian settings. "It's none of your business," or "it's my life, and I'll do what I want," or "why should you care?" often is said by transgressors of the law of God and by their sympathizers.¹

Strangely, more often than not, people sympathize with an offender rather than with the victim thereof. Waggoner explains that some "think it is a virtue to sympathize with wrongdoers. Of this sort are they who expend all their pity on criminals, reserving none for the injured party, for society, nor for the violated law. With them the worst criminal, if not the greatest hero, is yet the most interesting object upon which to bestow their favors."² It is not a rare thing for the church members to consider disciplinary actions as "harsh and demeaning." The question can be asked: "When a hardened criminal is sent to prison for breaking the law, is that viewed as harsh and coldhearted? No, because the public has the right to safeguard the peace and security of the community. In effect, the criminal is disfellowshipped from law-abiding society during his prison term."³ The authors of The Baptist Manual show that sympathizers plead either "for neglecting all wholesome discipline" or "for delaying it to the uttermost." By doing that, they portray themselves as "advocates for disorderly walkers, especially if they be their particular friends or relations."⁴


² Waggoner, 65.

³ Anonymous, 27.

⁴ The Baptist Manual, 2, 3.
Waggoner points out that some individuals, whose concern is not for justice, reject the discipline under the pretext of charity, ignoring Paul’s description of charity or love as not rejoicing in iniquity, but in the truth (see 1 Cor 13:6). For Sparks the opponents of discipline in the church speak against Christ’s authority, whatever their arguments. They empty the authority of the church of any meaning when they reject the duty of the church to work according to God’s command to remove the names of “those who prove themselves unworthy of church fellowship.” Waggoner uses strong language for those who disregard the discipline of the church. He writes, “The Lord recognized no power on earth higher than that of the church; and he who refuses to hear the church forfeits his standing and place in the body of Christ.”

**Misconceptions About Church Discipline**

Another area of concern when church discipline is examined is that of misconceptions. Theologians have seriously dealt with this issue. Genuine Christian freedom does not refute or exclude discipline but requires it. As Jesus said in John 8:32, truth makes people free. Only a disciplined life is free, successful, and happy. Anything short of it is heading toward utter ruin. Real love helps a sinner instead of ignoring or condoning the sinful condition. If Satan cannot directly stop the disciplinary work of the church, he tries to thwart it by a multitude of excuses and misinterpretations. By doing that, he creates confusion and obstruction.

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1 Waggoner, 65.

2 Sparks, 58.

3 Waggoner, 64.
A widespread confusion about the role of the church is noted by Patterson, and Davis emphasizes that discipline in the church is indeed unpopular, "but unpopularity does not imply irrelevance." The Adventist Review received many letters that cast doubt upon church discipline. In one of them, Rock notes, the writer raised some questions: "Putting people out of the church is barbaric and un-Christlike. Jesus forgave; why can't we? Some churches are so self-righteous they're absolutely disgusting. I say, 'Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.' Don't you agree?" Of course, Rock did not agree because church discipline is about forgiveness and restoration.

Most people understand that church discipline of a certain kind is needed, but they have distorted views about it, thinking of the "excommunication as a relic from the past - a harsh style of discipline that reminds them of witch-hunts and inquisitions." Due to the current "climate of nonjudgmentalism," writes Koranteng-Pipim, discipline "has appeared increasingly quaint and peculiar, and is often abandoned, even among us." The secular world has influenced the church so strongly that one Episcopalian writer once said that "excommunication is part of our tradition, but I don't think it's been invoked in this century."

1 Patterson, 109.
2 Davis, 345.
3 Rock, 11.
4 Anonymous, 26.
5 Koranteng-Pipim, 347.
Extremes in understanding discipline compromise its true character and tend to annihilate it. Littleton has a sobering appraisal: Sin is either “reduced to drinking, smoking, adultery, dancing and swearing,” making it “a hazy issue,” or regarded as everything and anything people do, or leading to a “constant nit-picking and fault finding,” which is very harmful for the life of the congregation.\(^1\) While examining the state of ecclesiastical discipline today, Burgess finds that modern psychology and psychiatry have “undermined the concept of sin” making people wonder whether drunkenness is an illness or a sin, or whether breaking the fifth commandment is an issue for psychopathology. As everybody knows, “courts are overrun with psychiatrists giving expert testimony on such questions.”\(^2\)

Can the church still practice biblically required discipline? According to Gerber, nowadays God is described for both non-Christians and Christians as loving, soft, modern-minded, and sin is beautified, made harmless or even justified. Thus, he continues, it is difficult to speak in the church about discipline or punishment, and people have become so tolerant, that tolerance for sin is synonymous with love.\(^3\)

One of the reasons the notion of discipline is not popular today is people’s unlimited thirst for freedom, as they conceive it, any restriction from it being met with suspicion and aversion. What such individuals forget, as Smucker advises us, is that “real freedom is not doing as we please but as we ought. A life that is not properly disciplined is decadent, and our lack of inner controls is responsible for much of our

\(^1\) Littleton, 31.
\(^2\) Burgess, 215.
\(^3\) Gerber, 14.
tensions and the havocs caused thereby.”

Writing about the tendency of legalists to control other people’s lives, Moore states that anybody is “free to drink, smoke, and behave sexually the way he or she wants to” if the laws of the country permit that, but not while retaining church membership under any circumstances. Waltner helps us to understand that discipline and freedom are not opposite concepts. They complement each other because “discipline is actually meaningless apart from freedom, and freedom is finally impossible without discipline.”

Waggoner calls attention to the fact that not all offenses are referred to in Matt 18:15-18, as many Bible readers tend to assume. Not all are personal offenses against a fellow believer. Many of them “are offenses not against individuals, but against the church at large, against the truth, against society, against morality; offenses manifest in the sight of the world.” These are not private offenses; therefore, the issue is not a personal reconciliation between two individuals. Rather it is a task of the body of Christ which is called to act responsibly, although “due regard for the welfare of the erring one should always be had.”

Another misconception which is an impediment for the practice of discipline in the church is the claim that personal behavior is a private matter, having nothing to do with congregational business. Indeed, some topics do belong only to the individual

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2 Moore, 157.


4 Waggoner, 70, 71.
believer, as matters of conscience, but not everything falls into that category. Grave sins committed by church members do have "an impact on the church," as Gaventa insists.\(^1\) One of two things is needed for such an impact to be absent: either the sin is not committed, or the sinner does not belong to that church.

Some people see censure and love as mutually exclusive. This is totally wrong. According to Durand, "Indifference is the opposite of love and the greatest cruelty."\(^2\) Laney uses an interesting illustration to make this point. He writes that "few people would dispute the necessity of pulling a drowning man from a flooding torrent or recovering a fallen climber from a mountain crevasse."\(^3\) Then why is rescuing a spiritually drowning person so unacceptable?

The expectation that an erring member "will drop off after a while," to use the language of Waggoner,\(^4\) as an excuse for neglecting a case is a big mistake. It is detrimental at the same time both for the guilty person and for the cause of God as it is not in keeping with Holy Scripture. Schweizer says that when someone is subject to discipline "it is hardly expected that the member will be regained," and that Paul therefore admonished the church in 1 Tim 5:22 "to keep itself pure by avoiding any contact with such people."\(^5\) I disagree. Whatever the case, hope should always be

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2 Durand, 5.


4 Waggoner, 66, 67.

5 Schweizer, 82.
cherished, and the church is never supposed to "avoid any contact" with Gentiles and publicans. Neither are such texts as Heb 6:4-6; 10:26-29; 12:17 evidence to exclude "the possibility of a second repentance," as Culpepper mistakenly claims.¹ Those verses refer instead to cases of persons who persistently refuse to repent. Dyck rightly contends that reconciliation is not a way to appease "an angry God, but the removal of sin-barriers within the erring brother."²

Something is wrong with striving to have a large membership by all means. Warren's conviction, based on experience, is that if more members are on the church roll than in attendance, the meaning of membership needs to be redefined. On the contrary, when more people attend than the number of the names on the roll, the church must be very effective, similar, perhaps, to Saddleback.³ That church removes hundreds of names from its book every year. They are not interested in a large membership, just the real members who are involved in the life and activities of the church.⁴

One might think that dealing with discipline would reduce the numerical growth of a congregation, but the practice has demonstrated the opposite effect. A convincing example is the well-known Willow Creek Church. We are told that, although "the standard is high; the elders of the church spend more time dealing with adultery than any other issue, ... the average weekend attendance is more than fifteen thousand. And the

¹ Culpepper, 534, 535.


³ Warren, 133.

⁴ Ibid., 132.
offerings total more than 200,000 dollars a week. They baptize a thousand people a year, 65 percent of them from unchurched, secular backgrounds.\textsuperscript{1} 

One must remember that the responsibility of the church does have limits. To take action for every sin would be both impossible and absurd. There are always gray areas where decisions are not easy. Kitchens shows that there is “occasional sin (1 John 2:1),” and “if church discipline is to be carried out against all sin, then all church members would be regularly facing disciplinary action.”\textsuperscript{2} However, as Davis states, the fact that “even the saints are not infallible in their judgments and decisions” is not proof that discipline should be thrown out altogether because “the issue at hand is the recovery and reestablishment of church discipline in accordance with biblical principles and practices.”\textsuperscript{3}

Even without a rationale for rejecting discipline, most people are hesitant about it. Durand rhetorically asks: “Why are we so reluctant to follow what we have voted in General Conference sessions in regard to church discipline, which appears in our Church Manual?”\textsuperscript{4} Appalling as it may seem, he reveals that “it is harder to get out of our church than to get into it” . . . and “it would seem that one can break any of the Ten Commandments or deny any of our 27 fundamental beliefs and yet continue to be a Seventh-day Adventist.”\textsuperscript{5} In consequence of ignoring these inconsistencies, Koranteng-

\textsuperscript{1} Paulien, 212.


\textsuperscript{3} Davis, 347, 348.

\textsuperscript{4} Durand, 5.

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid.
Pipim proposes a practical question: "Does honesty permit one to continue in a church committed to the exclusive support and proclamation of specific doctrinal truths?"¹

Clarke shows that, in the final analysis, "it is not under names, creeds, or professions, that men shall be saved at the last day; those alone who were holy, who were here conformed to the image of Christ, shall inherit the kingdom of God. Those who expect it in any other way, or on any other account, will be sadly deceived."²

The Practice of Church Discipline

We now turn to the actual practice of church discipline itself. Experience in this field of congregational activity, accumulated over the long centuries of the Christian era, is reflected in a multitude of theological writings. This provides valuable help for finding the most effective ways to deal with wrongs and shows how to restore sinning believers to a holy relationship with their Lord.

Disciplinary Procedures

The congregational practice of church discipline is considered here in light of the theological literature. As it is generally understood, holy purposes do not sanctify all the means. A work can be correct in its substance and still be wrong methodically. The sincere desire to follow the Word of God in disciplinary matters needs to be accompanied by a modus operandi in keeping with His revealed will. The most necessary and best

¹ Koranteng-Pipim, 348.
² Clarke, 6:215.
justified action can be compromised and even nullified by the use of improper methods. As one anonymous author puts it, the servant of God is required to do the work of God with the methods of God, for the glory of God.

Without giving any suggestion for a right procedure, the Wilsons warn against three wrong approaches:1

1. Cheap grace, which is a quick, non-confronting approach to the problem, accepting a mere apology and doing nothing else

2. A legalistic response, the sinner being asked, publicly or privately, to leave the church, again a short-term, quick process

3. The most frequent response is to ignore the problem or to limit the approach to counseling; but in doing this the injured person has absolutely no vindication and no healing. Nothing is made public, the congregation lives on in an atmosphere of rumor and whispering.

Waggoner offers two reasons for not letting an erring member to just drop out:2

1. It is the church’s duty to do everything possible to save the person who walks disorderly.

2. Withdrawal from that person is needed, “both for his good and for the good of the cause.”

Referring specifically to disciplinary procedures, Rock distinguishes between censure or probation, “which occurs when the offense is serious but does not call for loss

1 Earl Wilson and Sandy Wilson, Restoring the Fallen (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 126.

2 Waggoner, 66, 67.
of membership,” and dismissal or expulsion, “which means dropping the member from the church records for what the manual calls heinous or grievous sins.”¹ The same author admits that “some transgressions are so flagrant as to demand church action even though they are repented of.”²

Reasons for Discipline

Another question various writers struggle with is to create an enumeration or categorization of reasons for disciplinary actions that are acceptable. Apostasy is the reverse of conversion. The latter renders the meaning of the Greek word μετανοεῖ (change of mind), which is a return from sin to righteousness, while the former defines spiritual decay. Apostasy unquestionably requires church discipline, but how are particular cases of transgression of the law of God to be considered? Which concrete deeds are to be disapproved by disciplinary measures? Some answers are given by the consulted sources.

Littleton shows that, in a restrictive version, some people would discipline for “drinking, smoking, adultery, dancing and swearing.”³ Gerber, like many others, insists that the main reason for church discipline is offene Sünde (open sin).⁴ Waugh notes “neglect of duties of any kind, imprudent conduct, indulging sinful tempers, or words, the buying, selling, or using, intoxicating liquors as a beverage, or disobedience to the order

¹ Rock, 11.
² Ibid.
³ Littleton, 31.
⁴ Gerber, 7.
and discipline of the Church.”¹ Questionable in this list is “neglect of duties of any kind.” True, Jas 4:17 says that to know to do good and not to do it is a sin, but it is a sin of omission, and the Bible says nothing about its punishment by the church. Saddleback Church has a “membership covenant” with “lifestyle guidelines” which members are expected to follow; specifically “those who engage in immoral activities are subject to church discipline.”² For Bonhoeffer, “it is only sins that have become public which come into consideration,”³ the offene Sünde (open sin) mentioned before.

Attitudes Toward Discipline

The attitude and the spirit in which disciplinary actions are undertaken are viewed by theologians as very critical for doing a work expected to be a blessing for the church. Servants of God who administer discipline must begin with self-discipline, as the high priest in the Levitical system on the Day of Atonement began the operation of cleansing with himself and his family. They can perform properly only when they, themselves, are consecrated individuals, and are animated in their corrective actions by the spirit of Christ.

Ewert writes that “done in the proper spirit, discipline can lead to redemption and restoration of those in sin or who have fallen. Undertaken in an unwholesome spirit it will surely lead only to the detriment of all involved.”⁴ The Seventh-day Adventist

¹ Beverly Waugh, The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1856), 98.
² Warren, 217.
³ Bonhoeffer, 261.
⁴ Ewert, 103.
Bible Commentary on 1 Cor 5:2 says that “never should anger, pride, revenge, party feelings, dislike, or any carnal sentiment of the natural heart prompt the church members to take action against an offending brother. On the contrary, there should be compassionate love and tender pity manifested toward him.”1 According to Sparks, discipline in a Christian congregation should always be based on “justice and righteousness and faithfulness.”2

Proper discipline, in the view of Ewert, always begins with the person who intends “to carry out the disciplinary action,” involving “careful and continual self-examination . . . and self-discipline.”3 Who are those individuals? Littleton claims that church discipline should be exercised by “godly pastors, elders, and church members.”4 Kephart writes that “the duties of a pastor” are “to faithfully exhort, to administer needed reproof, to restrain the rush, to protect the innocent, and to reclaim the erring.”5 If the judgment is to be Christian indeed, then it must be “faithful, loving, spiritual.”6 Ewert further reveals that “to understand a person in his lostness and sin,” one should look “beneath the ordinary appearances of things,” giving attention “to the total situation.”7

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1 “1 Corinthians,” SDA Bible Commentary, 6:689.
2 Sparks, 58, 59.
3 Ewert, 103.
4 Littleton, 30.
6 A. Lukyn Williams, 15:234.
7 Ewert, 98.
Nelson says that when it comes to disciplining children, “punishment and discipline are an integral part of demonstrating that saving love.”¹ Finally, it is well to remember what Clarke says, in the style of the prophet Hosea, about God’s treatment of sinners, which should be a model for disciplinary action in any Christian congregation: “‘Turn, ye backsliders, for I am married unto you!’ He suffers long, and is kind: do thou likewise.”²

The Wrongdoer’s Cooperation

For church discipline to be successful and, indeed, a blessing for the community of believers, the wrongdoer’s cooperation in that action is indispensable. This is a prerequisite of and a preparation for the work of reconciliation and rehabilitation. The perpetrator of the transgression can facilitate the church’s redemptive intervention or create unsurmountable obstacles.

True discipline, according to Bannerman, appeals to the understanding and conscience. It is not based on compulsion, otherwise it is not genuine discipline at all.³ Ewert declares that “discipline can be redemptive only when the person in need experiences understanding and acceptance,” which means that “we do not heap judgment and condemnation upon the wrongdoer.”⁴

After the “Train Wreck” experience in 1979, the leaders of Willow Creek came to realize that the biblical way is to acknowledge “the seriousness of sin,” but, at the same

¹ Nelson, 13.
² Clarke, 6:215.
³ Bannerman, 228.
⁴ Ewert, 98.
time, to open “the door for repentance and restoration.” That realization introduced a period of tremendous success in the mission of that community. One can only fully agree with Ewert when he contends that the real task in the discipline of the church is “to create an atmosphere – a relationship – in which the sinner is free to face his condemnation, and repent. He must experience the attitude of acceptance in spite of his known unacceptableness.” The Baptist Manual states that this entire work is crowned when “the penitent will be fixed on the greatness of his sin, and he will be the last to discern or talk of his repentance for it. So far from pleading it, in order to evade censure, he will censure himself, and desire nothing more than that testimony may be borne against his conduct for the honour of Christ.”

Creative Church Discipline

Some authors envision a creative discipline and advance valuable ideas for that purpose. Biblical occurrences or past experiences in the life of the church do not exhaust all the possibilities. Innumerable ways of working with erring individuals can be explored further. God’s workers need to think innovatively because each case is different from every other, and pastoral practice is enriched by every new situation.

In the Saddleback Church, a distinction is made between “the crowd (uncommitted attenders)” and “the congregation (our membership)” with practical consequences because, in the words of Warren, “we apply different standards of conduct

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1 Hybels and Hybels, 88.
2 Ewert, 98.
3 Baptist Church, 3.
to members and attenders.”¹ Bonhoeffer recommends that some homework should be done before corrective discipline is applied. For him the starting point of any church discipline is to “preach the word . . . reprove, rebuke, exhort.” Moreover, “the exercise of discipline is not confined to formal assemblies in Church, for the Church’s officers are always on duty.”² While rejecting the idea that church discipline is not practiced today, Baker shows that “the ideal method of discipline” is “rebuking, exhorting, encouraging, and warning our people – but mostly in private.”³

In the understanding of Phillips, “a suspension – a temporary stoppage,” could be a solution to respond to a misdeed, rather than elimination from office and even exclusion from church membership.⁴ The best form of discipline, according to Bash, is self-discipline, which is the “total response . . . to the total demand of God,” and takes place “in creative freedom,” people placing appropriate demands on themselves.⁵

Benefits of Church Discipline

Special attention is given to the benefits of church discipline. The author of the book of Hebrews compares the parental correction of children with that of the heavenly Father. He notes: “For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure;

¹ Warren, 217.
² Bonhoeffer, 261.
⁵ Bash, 33.
but he for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness” (Heb 12:10). There is real “profit,” an obvious blessing, in the discipline God requires His church to practice. The five sources quoted below deal with this aspect of church discipline, underlining its various happy returns.

A writer for Jehovah’s Witnesses says about discipline: “Those who learn from it reap bountiful fruitage.”¹ This is a correct observation, but only valid when implemented in the context of grace. Discipline, according to Peter King, is “absolutely necessary to the unity, peace, and being of the church.”² Schweizer considers such discipline “a distinct concern to deter others (1 Tim 5:20),” even when there is no case of the guilty individual’s being lost.³ One writer explains that a corrective action “prevents the sinner from spreading corruption in the congregation.”⁴

Fowler says that church discipline, “if handled properly, would be a great strength and a powerful incentive to church growth.”⁵ That proper church discipline does contribute to spiritual and numerical growth in a congregation is attested by more than one writer. For instance, quoting Dean Kelley, Fowler shows that “high standards and faithful discipline are essential to church growth. He suggests that people value that which costs them something. The more a thing costs, the more value they attach to it.”⁶

¹ Anonymous, 27.
² Peter King, 105.
³ Schweizer, 82.
⁴ Anonymous, 27.
⁵ Fowler, 128.
⁶ Ibid., 132.
Similarly, Hostetler explains why conservative churches are attractive: “There are certain persons who seek escape from the ‘worldly’ churches and take refuge in a group which exercises a stricter discipline.”¹

**Preventive Christian Discipline**

Almost everyone realizes that corrective disciplinary measures are not ideal, not pleasant, and not entirely desirable. Therefore, it seems that a better way should exist for one to follow. We learn from an adage that a helping hand granted at the edge of a precipice is more valuable than a thousand ambulances at the bottom of it. Applied to our context, this means that it is better to help sinners to recover before their situation is aggravated beyond repair or, even better, that working for sinning situations not to occur at all is unquestionably preferable to a hard work of leading sinners to re-conversion after a terrible fall.

Harris insists that care should be taken “to prevent improper persons from gaining admission into the church.”² Such prevention, in the interpretation of Bonhoeffer, means that “baptism can be administered only on condition that the candidate repents of his sins and confesses his faith in Jesus Christ.”³ For the purposes of this dissertation it is useful to remember how this theologian defines the concept of cheap grace that seems so prevalent in the Christian world today: “Cheap grace is the preaching


2 William L. Harris, ed., *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1884), 35.

3 Bonhoeffer, 260.
of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, 
Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is 
grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and 
incarnate.”¹

In the last third of the nineteenth century, the Methodist Episcopal Church 
prescribed at least a six-month trial before someone could be accepted into the church.²
Writing about the serious attention to be given to preparation of baptismal candidates, 
Holmes exhorts that “the catechetical instruction that leads to faith prior to baptism must 
become more rigorous as society becomes more pagan. Furthermore, the church must 
not hesitate to make clear the moral and ethical expectations of God for the converted 
life.”³ Grenz decries the general uncertainty about “the link between baptism and joining 
the church,” or even “whether congregations should continue formal membership at all” 
in a climate in which “church-hopping” is an usual practice, signifying the loss of loyalty 
to any given congregation.⁴

Pre-baptismal instruction needs to be continued after baptism; otherwise, 
Wesley says, “simply making converts without careful spiritual direction afterward” is 
“breeding souls for damnation.”⁵ This negligence is so consequential that Holmes

¹ Ibid., 36.

² Methodist Episcopal Church, The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church (New York: Hitchcock and Walden, 1876), 37.


⁴ Stanley J. Grenz, Revisioning Evangelical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 164.

⁵ James F. White, Protestant Worship, 157.
considers it to be a "heresy of a fundamental nature."\(^1\) He also pinpoints two major goals for the Seventh-day Adventist Church: an evangelistic goal which pursues quantitative growth and is an initiation into the faith, and a pastoral goal which is interested in qualitative growth, in training for mission and a preparation for the future life. He says that "the first goal concerns birth, the beginning of the Christian life; the second goal concerns growth toward the culmination of that life."\(^2\)

**Summary**

Seventy-nine various sources quoted in this chapter reveal the understanding of those writers about discipline in the Christian church. They see it as being based, primarily, on Christ's and not on the church's authority. Many perceive and decry a steady decline of this practice. Yet, God's character requires accountability. Only a pure doctrine favors a pure spiritual life and a flourishing mission.

Removal of discipline and order would cause the ultimate annihilation of the work of God. True Christian freedom is possible only in the context of reasonable discipline. Jesus warned against peremptory condemnation of sinners, but He did not refute spiritual discernment, which is part of the Christian character.

True love does not encourage people to live in sin, even by indifference; on the contrary, it helps them to repent and change. Disciplinary actions are meant to be an integral part of the rescue effort. The most successful, corrective discipline is performed in cooperation with the wrongdoer. Use of force is absolutely out of place. Discipline

\(^1\) Holmes, 65.

\(^2\) Ibid., 130, 131.
needs to appeal to mind and heart, motivating sinners to see the gravity of the situation and truly return to God. Such a loving approach creates a safe environment for the fallen believers and for the entire congregation.
CHAPTER V

NATURE AND MEANING OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

While chapters 3 and 4 expose an ample analysis of the literature dealing with discipline in the Christian church, this chapter reflects my own understanding of this topic. My ideas are based on personal experience, i.e., the interaction with members and congregations I served in Romania, Australia, and the United States, from May 1961 to the present.

Meaning and Purpose of Church Discipline

From the infinite macrocosm to the infinitesimal particles of matter, everything exists and functions according to laws established by the omnipotent and omniscient Creator. Beyond these physical connections, intelligent beings are subject to moral codes whose defiance leads to chaos and annihilation. The dark history of our world is a living demonstration of the fatal consequences of departing from this sacred order. This is the context in which church discipline is considered in this chapter.

The Universal Significance of Discipline

The Bible informs us that “God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good” (Gen 1:31). As it came into existence at God’s command, our world was perfect and beautiful. Yet the Fall disturbed that state of things. The plan of
redemption focuses on the full restoration of the impeccable order established by the
Creator. Therefore, all the efforts made in the process of church discipline, regardless of
the difficulties encountered or of the outcome, should be directed toward recovery,
which, as shown before, is the essence of the work of salvation.

The ancient church believed that spirit and discipline make a Christian, as the
spirit and the body make a human being.\(^1\) In the widest acceptance, life itself is
discipline, church life included. Discipline is an all-encompassing concept, touching
everything in the existence of a congregation and of its members, from Bible study to
church services and other public activities to personal or collective conduct. Take
discipline out of Christianity, and you have nothing left.

Every human society, every organized group of people, right from its
establishment, must have ways to deal with conflicts and wrongdoings occurring in its
midst. As the civil society has laws to protect its order, so the church of Christ has a
certain government for protection against confusion and ruin, as King notes.\(^2\)

As in any area of human activity, abuses cause people to be suspicious of church
discipline, but it is not fair to indiscriminately condemn good and bad actions. White and
Blue make this point very clear:

The abuses of discipline, rather than discipline itself, are what we must fear. Is
there anything good that isn’t abused? How about marriage? Or surgery? Ought we
to abandon them because of their abuses? Law is abused. Should we therefore opt
for chaos? The only reason why there are not more abuses of corrective church
discipline is simple: there isn’t enough practiced for many abuses to occur. Yes, the
reintroduction of corrective church discipline will bring dangers with it. Some

\(^1\) Fowler, 124.

\(^2\) Peter King, 105.
people may get badly hurt. But the dangers of failing to restore it will be incalculably greater.¹

Responsibility for personal actions increases with knowledge and position in the work of God. Remember the foolishness of Miriam and Aaron when they spoke against Moses, the meek servant of God: "Hath the Lord indeed spoken only by Moses? hath he not spoken also by us?" (Num 12:2). Because of that rebellion, Miriam was punished by God with leprosy, and she had to be isolated, “shut out from the camp seven days” (vs. 14). Moreover, Moses himself, along with his brother Aaron, the high priest of Israel, forfeited the privilege of entering the promised land because they did not sanctify the Lord at the water of Meribah (cf. Num 20:1-13). Yet it would be a big mistake to consider church discipline a mere penalty for committed sins. This is not what the Word of God teaches. Adams shows that discipline is not only a negative work of sending troublemakers out of the congregation. It is God’s holy arrangement for order in the church, which creates the needed conditions for the believers’ education and real spiritual growth.²

Church Discipline and the Cosmic Conflict

The Bible informs us in Rev 12:7-9 that there was war in heaven between Michael and His angels on one side, and the dragon and his cohorts of rebellious angels on the other. The defeated rebels were expelled from heaven. In the present state of our world, the ancient controversy continues. God’s children cooperate with their Master to

¹ White and Blue, 23.
² Adams, 17.
vanquish the forces of darkness and to bring to the light of the Gospel those who are slaves of the evil one. People redeemed from that slavery are expected to remain faithful to their Lord and to grow spiritually. No warfare can be successful and effective without exercising a consistent and reasonable discipline.

God's people of the Old Testament suffered a severe defeat in their battle against the small city of Ai not because the enemy was better equipped and trained than the inhabitants of the already conquered Jericho, or because Joshua had not gone with the troops himself. The cause of the disaster was the sin of Achan, who had taken from the accursed things, contrary to the commandment of God. This is a living proof of how right Solomon was to say that "one sinner destroyeth much good" (Eccl 9:18).

The erring person we talk about is not an outsider, but a church member trespassing the law of God, or an offender against a fellow believer. The main goal of any approach in such cases is the restoration of the offending individual, as Jesus teaches in Matt 18:15-20. Very instructive is the parable of the lost coin. It was lost in the house. All efforts are made to find the lost valuable: lighting a candle, sweeping the floor, seeking diligently. The woman does not simply gather the dust and throw it out with whatever it contains, including the lost coin, just to cleanse the house. Cleaning up is a phase of the process focusing on recovery of the lost treasure.

Assisting an erring believer to understand the situation and restoring that individual to a healthy relationship with God and with other people is a real mission performed inside the church. A good shepherd caring for the flock, first of all Jesus, the great example, and then His faithful servant, behaves as described in Ezek 34:16: "I will
seek that which was lost, and bring again that which was driven away, and will bind up
that which was broken, and will strengthen that which was sick.”

The Christian church was organized by Jesus Christ to be a light in the world. This does not mean it has to carefully watch over every possible mistake of its members in order to be able to correct it before it is too late. Also it does not mean to avoid any dealing with wrongs, because it is an organization totally different from those of the surrounding world. The church is called to feed, instruct, and educate its believers in the truth. By doing that, it prevents wrongdoings rather than dealing with them when they surprisingly occur.

According to Gerber, Christ gave His life out of love for His church. His purpose to keep it thoroughly safe against the world’s influences cannot be accomplished without church discipline. Such discipline should never be regarded as antagonistic to the Gospel of forgiveness.

One of the metaphors the Bible employs with reference to the church is that of a body (1 Cor 12:12-27). It is well known that a living organism’s two fundamental functions are assimilation and elimination. Absence of one of them means death. Keeping toxins in the body leads to a dangerous disturbance of the vital functions of such an organism.

As Waggoner notes, in the state of sin “a revelation or a system of religion having no reproof, no correction, would be quite unsuited to our wants.”

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1 Gerber, 21.
2 Greenslade, 73.
3 Waggoner, 61.
contrary, in the view of Brown, discipline is “an essential mark of the true Church.”¹

Nothing can replace discipline, neither massive indoctrination, nor preaching, nor appeal to duty.²

People voluntarily accept specific requirements when they are admitted into the membership of the Christian church. The question is if they can retain the membership when they do not meet those requirements. It is obvious that in no other areas of the human society would such disregard of voluntarily accepted obligations be tolerated.

There is a continuous cycle in the work of the Christian church. Individuals are won for the Gospel. When they commit abominable deeds with which the church cannot identify, they sever themselves from the membership of the church. Disciplinary actions taken by the congregation are only an organizational sanction of what those persons have already chosen themselves. But lost membership can be regained, and this should be the after-effort of the church. Love and care ought to operate in all actions, whether they are pleasant or not. As Jesus said in Matt 22:39, the second great commandment requires everyone to love the neighbors as oneself. Love is supposed to be the reason, the essence, and the atmosphere of church discipline. Without it the entire process is a real disaster.

**Purpose of Church Discipline**

Writing about the discipline as understood and practiced in the early church, Dyck says that “the end purpose of discipline was not judgment but the desire to win the

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¹ Brown, 51.

² Waggoner, 61.
sinner.”¹ The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary cautions that “the aim of church punishment should never be vengeance, but recovery from ruin. The disfellowshipped member should be an object of deep concern to the church, and strenuous efforts should be made for his spiritual restoration.”²

The ultimate goal of church discipline is not simply to isolate the sinner for the protection of the congregation, although such a protection is important. Least of all, it is to display a loyal submission to the policies of the church administration. The goal is to help erring members to be restored to an orderly conduct in harmony with the teachings of the Holy Scripture. This work is to be always done in true Christian love.

Regardless of how they are structured, I think the purposes of discipline can be reduced to four, which are the most representative and are based on scriptural authority: (1) to do justice (Mic 6:8), (2) to protect the church against apostasy (1 Cor 5:6, 7), (3) to salvage the church’s influence in society (Matt 5:16), and (4) to help the sinner to repent and spiritually to recover (Jas 5:19, 20).

The church has the moral obligation to disapprove of any evil committed by its members, as Paul shows in Eph 5:11: “And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them.” For Koranteng-Pipim, “the integrity of the church is also at issue here. Church discipline is simply the right of self-preservation.”³ The idea that the church needs to preserve its purity is not an arrogant error promoted by

¹ Dyck, 47.
² “1 Corinthians,” SDA Bible Commentary, 6:690.
³ Koranteng-Pipim, 347.
legalists, nor a dangerous sentence produced by theologians, but Christ's true aim for the organized body of believers.

Rock's experience as a pastor for many years proved that "when congregations discipline appropriately, when church books are kept clean – that is, uncluttered with the names of those who have apostatized, when our pastors and conference officials are more concerned with quality than quantity of membership, credibility is maximized and the activity of the Holy Spirit more evident."\(^1\)

Believers who love their church will be "jealous for the good name of the church" in society,\(^2\) and for the glory of God's name. Therefore they will not be indifferent to what happens in their church family. Fowler thinks that the goal of discipline is "a disciplined individual and a disciplined church."\(^3\) Such an accomplishment sends a strong message to the unconverted world, far beyond any written or verbal communication.

Disciplinary action is aimed at awakening the wrongdoer when nothing else is effective. One cannot help a sinner without a straight and loving confrontation. It is only that which leads to discerning the guilt and regretting it, to understanding its gravity and offensiveness, and to cherishing a desire to be changed. Montague King points to the fact

\(^1\) Rock, 11.

\(^2\) "1 Corinthians," SDA Bible Commentary, 6:689.

\(^3\) Fowler, 119.
that, by avoiding the service of the courts, the offended believer works for the rescue of
the offender, thus becoming a co-worker with the Good Shepherd of the flock.¹

Bonhoeffer asserts that “the purpose of such discipline is not to establish a
community of the perfect, but a community consisting of men who really live under the
forgiving mercy of God,” leading to sanctification, which means “driving out the world
from the Church as well as separating the Church from the world.”²

**Discipline as a Timeless Task**

According to Culpepper’s information, in the Qumran community each member
was “responsible for confronting his brother from any lapse from the Law,” each believer
was assigned a certain rank which had to be reviewed every year. Thus, that religious
community was aware of the need of “self-purification,” learning in that respect from the
apostolic church.³

In the Saddleback Church, California, leaders distinguish between crowd
(uncommitted attenders) and congregation. No discipline is exercised toward
unbelieving attenders, “because they are not actually a part of our church family.”

Discipline is the congregation’s concern and practice for its registered members only. As
Paul writes in 1 Cor 5:12: “For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do

¹ George Montaque King, *Church Discipline as Restoration: Guideliness for Its
Implementation in the Seventh-day Adventist Churches in the Caribbean Union* (Berrien

² Bonhoeffer, 260.

³ Culpepper, 533.
not ye judge them that are within?” The crowd is the group of outsiders who are not subject to the discipline of the congregation.¹

Discipline has been practiced since the oldest times up to the contemporary era by any successful religious group striving to be faithful to the Scripture. Therefore, it is to be seen as a timeless and universal task for the children of God.

**Discipline and Community Perception**

The society of Paul’s day accused the Christians of any conceivable “crime and vice.” Failure to act for the preservation of the church’s purity would have fostered those prejudices, therefore the apostle was eager to urge the congregation strictly to respect the Christian discipline.² Such false charges by the infidels against the children of God were not confined to ancient times. Even during my life in Romania, until 1984, it was common practice for unbelievers to falsely accuse church members of practicing promiscuity in the church meetings. Recent information from friends shows that this mentality is unchanged.

It is interesting that the community usually identifies a church member with the entire congregation, which is especially obvious in cases of misconduct. But God does the same. He holds the church accountable for a member’s way of life. Israel lost 36 people in the first battle against the inhabitants of the city of Ai. The leader’s desperate prayer after the defeat was not accepted. God said to him: “Israel hath sinned, and they

¹ Warren, 217.
² “1 Corinthians,” SDA Bible Commentary, 6:693.
have also transgressed my covenant which I commanded them: for they have even taken of the accursed thing, and have also stolen, and dissembled also, and they have put it even among their own stuff" (Josh 7:11). One Israelite had committed sin, but failure to act against it extended the guilt to the entire assembly. God identified the individual with the community, which identification was going to continue until the guilt was removed. Responsibility was collective. God did not speak about Achan but about Israel as the sinner. All further sentences are in plural: "they have also transgressed," "they have even taken," they "have stolen and dissembled," "they have put it among their own stuff."

Risks Related to Church Discipline

Kephart notes that it is almost impossible to be faithful to God’s instruction about discipline in the church “without exciting the anger and inspiring the hatred of offending brethren.” Yet he further informs his readers that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the right of religious groups to discipline their members “has been fully and repeatedly established by the highest civil authority.”

Which is the situation today? Dealing with sins, and condemning them by disciplinary actions of a congregation, is not always risk free. Sometimes people threaten with litigations. Yet I contend that God is mightier than people and He will protect His church in time of danger. This is equally true about evangelism. Faithfulness toward the Word of God should not be situational, although much wisdom from above is needed. Never in my ministry on three continents was I subject to any lawsuit, although I

1 Kephart, 60.

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struggled to respect the biblical instruction on church discipline even when confronted with quite difficult cases.

God’s laws and human laws are not always in agreement. Civil courts can condemn for things the church has absolutely no objection against, or the church can take disciplinary measures for deeds never condemned by the judges of this world.

The following arguments can be invoked against fear of litigation when church discipline is practiced:

1. Where separation between church and state is a clear constitutional principle, this should not be an issue because churches have their internal jurisdiction, which does not go beyond withdrawal of membership. Why should disfellowshipping someone for working on Sabbath be subject to a lawsuit?

2. The battle for religious freedom should not ignore the right of the church to practice discipline. Such endeavors ought not to be limited to having freedom of worship, and Sabbath rest, and to defeating unfavorable legislation. Congress should be urged, if need be, to clarify the issue of non-interference of the justice system, which is a governmental branch, with the discipline inside the church. Every church has the inalienable right to receive new members and to remove names from its books.

3. If properly practiced, with sufficient evidence, the guilty person’s confession, and the careful use of language in the procedure so as not to insult the individual or to inflict damage to his or her reputation, it is hardly possible for a lawsuit to succeed.

4. In the church’s actions, the words of Peter are still valid: “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). The Word of God ought to have absolute preeminence; millions of people died for obeying it. In doing the work of God, His
faithful servants are ready to suffer whatever consequences. This is not to say that
wisdom is not required. It is, but beyond it, God is able and willing to protect His church
as Jesus vowed: “The gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt 16:18).

In August 1999, I inquired about more competent information on the legality of
ecclesiastical disciplinary actions. For that purpose I talked with Mr. Alan Reinach,
director of the Religious Liberty Department at the Pacific Union Conference of Seventh-
day Adventists. He directed me to the homologous Department of the General
Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in Silver Spring, Maryland. I had a phone
interview with Mr. Robert Nixon, General Counsel for Religious Liberty, on August 19,
1999. He said that it is extremely important to respect fully the following paragraph from
the Church Manual: “Letters of resignation should be presented to the church board
which will forward them to the church at a duly called business meeting. Out of
Christian consideration for the individuals involved, action shall be taken without public
discussion.”¹ The point is to have no public discussion in cases of resignation from
church membership. Mr. Nixon also said that it is the legal right of churches to deal with
disciplinary cases in their business meetings, bringing witnesses and other evidences, and
to take the required disciplinary measures. It is illegal to push ahead with a debate on a
case in spite of a withdrawal letter forwarded to the congregation by the accused
individual. Also, it is legally unacceptable and can become subject to a lawsuit for
character defamation if the church makes publicity, in the media or otherwise, about the
disciplined person.

¹ Church Manual, 172.
On August 20, 1999, I sent an e-mail message to Mr. Nixon, to which he replied on October 12, 1999. Copies of both messages are enclosed in appendix A.

I raised the following three questions:

1. How do plaintiffs justify such lawsuits, or what reasons do they invoke to go to the courtroom for ecclesiastic disciplinary actions applied to them?

2. Have any such lawsuits in the United States of America involved our denomination or others?

3. How can a local congregation practice church discipline according to the Holy Scripture and still be safe against possible litigations?

Mr. Nixon's answers to the three questions are as follows:

1. In general, the courts in the United States of America do not permit lawsuits by disfellowshipped members who wish to bring legal action because the church has taken disciplinary action against them. There have been some cases in the past involving Baptist congregations. However, the clear trend in the last half century is for courts to refuse to take jurisdiction of cases involving church disciplinary matters. Both federal and state constitutions contain provisions that in general terms separate church and state and guarantee the church's free exercise of religion.

2. Information was solicited from the staff lawyers and none is aware of a reported case involving church discipline by a member or former member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

3. In order to avoid lawsuits from discipline applied to members, local congregations are best advised to follow the stated procedures in chapter 13 of the Church Manual called "Church Discipline." This chapter states the Seventh-day
Adventist Church’s procedures for member discipline and the rights members have in the disciplinary process.

Discipline as Christian Training

Restoring the Fallen warns that “many churches are unprepared to deal with sinful and destructive behavior patterns in their members.”¹ This unpreparedness makes education on the issue of discipline imperative. Waggoner writes that from the beginning of its existence a church needs to be instructed in matters of church discipline.² Ongoing training is needed, not only catastrophe discipline, which means waiting until something goes wrong.³ Adams sees counseling and church discipline as “inextricably intertwined,” neither one being effective without the other.⁴

People ought to know that they are accountable for their misdeeds not only at the final judgment of God but for the time being as well. When they join the church, they must understand that their lives have a bearing on the church’s name and influence in the world.

While defining “cheap grace,” Bonhoeffer says that one of its features is “baptism without church discipline.”⁵ Church discipline is connected to baptism in the sense that acquired church membership can be lost, therefore baptismal candidates need

¹ Wilson and Wilson, 122.
² Waggoner, 65.
³ White and Blue, 19.
⁴ Adams, 11.
⁵ Bonhoeffer, 36.
to be made aware of that possibility before they join the church or do something wrong.

When the writer of the book of Hebrews refers to parental discipline in chap. 12:11, he understands discipline as an educational process. Adams teaches that church discipline is exactly such a process.¹ All church members need ongoing education on disciplinary issues because, as Paul warns his readers, “let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor 10:12).

When a church member apostatizes, it would be an un-Christian attitude for other church members to avoid any contact with that member in order to be safe themselves. Worse would be to forbid the former member to attend further church services. The worst would be to suggest that he or she should join another denomination. The right thing to do is to deal with the case in the spirit of Christ and according to His instruction.

This is what Ellen G. White means about receiving reproof in the right spirit:

“There are many who, when they are reproved, think it praiseworthy if they receive the rebuke without becoming impatient; but how few take reproof with gratitude of heart and bless those who seek to save them from pursuing an evil course.”²

The Congregation's Responsibility in Mission and Discipline

No human being is the head of the Christian church, be it an apostle, an administrator, or a minister. According to the Scripture, the head of the church is Jesus

¹ Adams, 14.

² Ellen G. White, Patriarchs and Prophets, 667.
Christ (Col 1:18). Paul shows the Savior’s treatment of the church in that He “loved the church, and gave himself for it” (Eph 5:25).

Ellen G. White considers the church “God’s appointed agency for the salvation of men.”¹ A remarkable picture of the relation between Christ and His church is further given: “All is done in the name and by the authority of Christ. Christ is the fountain; the church is the channel of communication.”² The Savior appointed His church to represent Him in the world. We are told that “the Son of God identified Himself with the office and authority of His organized church.”³ That God gave His church authority does not mean the church can change biblical principles and commandments, or that it can dictate to its members how to think or what to believe. It simply means that the church can exercise its authority in obedience to the Bible.

It is not only wrong but dangerous and destructive to spiritual life to think that the authority of the church is devoid of any practical meaning or that it is just as important as that of any other institution. In reality, the church’s authority was granted by God and, therefore, is sacred. As Ellen G. White declares, because God invested His church with its authority, disregarding it is similar with rejecting the voice of God.⁴ Betrayal of the church is extremely dangerous because the church is God’s fortress in a rebellious world and because His Son shed His blood for the church.⁵

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² Ibid., 122.
³ Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, 3:432.
⁵ Ibid., 11.
The church was not called into existence to take care of itself only, nor to be an entertainment center. The main reason of its existence is to bring the everlasting Gospel to every creature.

Speaking to Peter about his imminent fall and repentance, the Lord said: “And when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren” (Luke 22:32). Every sinner returned to God is called to work for other sinners. The experience of conversion will fill his or her soul with love for other fallen human beings and with an earnest desire to see them changed into the image of Christ. In the aftermath of his terrible transgressions, David prayed for forgiveness and purity: “Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. . . . Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit. Then I will teach transgressors thy ways; and sinners shall be converted unto thee” (Ps 51:10, 12, 13). Following the happy experience of conversion, David wrote: “He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings. And he hath put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto our God: many shall see it, and fear, and shall trust in the Lord” (Ps 40:2, 3). It is for sinners to have this experience of salvation transmitted to others that God did not commit the angels to preach the Gospel. Sinners are sent to preach it to other sinners, or, more exactly, saved sinners are expected to work for lost sinners.

The concrete task of the Christian church in its missionary endeavors is not to wait until those interested in the divine truth show up at the church services, or to target for evangelism the “best people” of the society, but to give attention to all people.

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1 Ellen G. White, The Great Controversy, 312.
One experience represents an absolute and vital necessity for any human beings, in order to become citizens of the kingdom of heaven. In His nocturnal dialogue with Nicodemus, Jesus called it new birth (cf. John 3:1-5). Paul understood this spiritual process as producing “a new creature” in Christ (2 Cor 5:17). However, being born again is not a spiritual occurrence sufficient in itself. Like the physical birth, it needs to be followed by growth toward Christian maturity. Referring to this development, Peter explains that newborn babies need to desire “the sincere milk of the word” to be able to grow thereby (1 Pet 2:2).

Which is the role of the church in people’s experience of conversion, from new birth to spiritual maturity, so vital for all sinners? The Word of God shows that the church has a double missionary task:

1. To expand its boundaries by continually making new converts
2. To preserve and strengthen such accomplishments.

Both sides of this responsibility of the church are displayed in Isa 54:2:

“Enlarge the place of thy tent, and let them stretch forth the curtains of thine habitations: spare not, lengthen the cords, and strengthen thy stakes.” The first undertaking is expansion, dealing with quantity: “Enlarge thy place,” “stretch forth the curtains,” “spare not” (which means do not stop), “lengthen the cords.” The second pursuit is consolidation, which focuses on quality: “strengthen thy stakes.”

God gave His servant Abraham the promise, “in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed” (Gen 12:3). From Abraham’s descendants, Messiah had to be born and in Him, i.e., in the plan of salvation accomplished by Him, people from all nations were going to be blessed for eternity, to be saved. God has conceived the plan of redemption
for the entire world, “that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). This is expansion.

The physical Israel was called to be a light for the nations and to serve the Lord of heaven and earth. In Isa 49:6 the twin concept of expansion and consolidation is present again: “It is a light thing that thou shouldest be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth.” To restore “the preserved of Israel” is consolidation, to bring light and salvation to the Gentiles “unto the end of the earth” is expansion.

When His disciples tried to keep Him in a certain place, Jesus said: “Let us go into the next towns, that I may preach there also; for therefore came I forth” (Mark 1:38). To preach in the next towns, farther and farther, is expansion of the mission field. The Lord did not leave for heaven without giving His followers a clear description of their mission in the world, which is called the Great Commission: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19, 20). To teach all nations is expansion. To teach people after they have been baptized is consolidation of the attainments.

The work of the disciples had to be performed in a prescribed order, according to their Master’s design: first in Jerusalem, then in all Judea, in Samaria, and in the uttermost parts of the earth (Acts 1:8). The start had to be in Jerusalem, the capital city of Israel. The next phase was to evangelize the entire home country, Judea. Samaria, a foreign country, followed. The final target was the whole world. The book of Acts
abounds in reports of the apostles’ missionary efforts, in obedience to Jesus’ command. In chap. 14:21-23, the writer describes how they preached the Gospel in a certain city, where they taught many (a diligent expansion), “conforming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith” (a conscientious consolidation). To such extent was the Great Commission accomplished in the first century that Paul dared to speak about the Gospel “which is come unto you, as it is in all the world” (Col 1:5, 6), undeviating from the assignment given by Jesus in Matt 28:19. He further says that the Gospel “was preached to every creature which is under heaven” (Col 1:23), in full accord with the Lord’s words from Mark 16:15.

In the final period of the world’s history, the same task is to be fulfilled by the remnant church. The end will come only after that, as Jesus points out in Matt 24:14: “And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come.” The vast Advent Movement is described in Rev 14:6: “And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people.” Preaching the everlasting Gospel is not only the work of ordained ministers and elders of the church, but a calling to all the believers.

As already shown, Isaiah speaks in chap. 54:2 about enlarging, stretching forth, lengthening — all of these pointing to growth in all directions, but the last part of the verse adds a vital side to the picture, requiring believers to strengthen what already exists. World mission is a biblical program embraced by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and it is working as never before. At the same time God admonishes His church to preserve and strengthen things already achieved. Quality accompanying quantity should be part of
the same program, in order for the church not only to have an ever-expanding tent, but also to keep it strong. It is an inadequate accomplishment to receive a large group of people through the front door of the church and lose most of them through the back door. People won for Christ need help and motivation to stay and grow. The church has to cope with apostasy, discouragement, disappointment, and falls from grace, but it should never neglect its calling, which is expansion, and real, serious consolidation.

The church is God’s appointed agency for reaching with His Word all the inhabitants of this planet, and, as far as possible, to win people for God and His present truth. This must not be done at the expense of the faithfulness to the biblical teachings, only in order to succeed in increasing the membership. Quality in evangelism is not less important than quantity. On the contrary, quality promotes quantity because serious people are attracted by a spiritual congregation. The church does not benefit at all, and God is not glorified by questionable statistics.

Christ said to His first disciples, and His words are valid for any other Christians: “Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain” (John 15:16). To bring forth fruit means expansion; the fruit to remain is consolidation. After people are baptized and thereby become members of the congregation, ongoing instruction must still be given to them. One of the reasons why some converts do not stay in the church is the fact that they are not well enough prepared for baptism. To this Ellen G. White writes:

There is need of a more thorough preparation on the part of candidates for baptism. They are in need of more faithful instruction than has usually been given them. The principles of the Christian life should be made plain to those who have newly come to the truth. None can depend upon their profession of faith as proof
that they have a saving connection with Christ. We are not only to say, “I believe,” but to practice the truth.¹

In His high-priestly prayer reported in John 17:1-26, Jesus refers to His disciples by saying in vss. 11 and 12:

And now I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to thee. Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are. While I was with them in the world, I kept them in thy name: those that thou gavest me I have kept, and none of them is lost, but the son of perdition; that the scripture might be fulfilled.

Thus the Lord’s instruction leads to the following conclusions:

1. The central goal of the Christian church is, according to the Great Commission (cf. Matt 28:19, 20 and Mark 16:15), to make disciples for the kingdom of heaven.

2. The further task of the church is to keep in the Father’s name the already converted individuals, now themselves disciples of Christ, for none of them to be lost.

3. Despite these noble ideals, there is a risk which should not be underestimated: Some disciples can be lost.

We need to emphasize again that keeping the converted disciples is as important as winning them. Keeping is not a failure to sincerely acknowledge real losses. It does not mean preservation of their formal membership by all means. On the contrary, keeping the disciples means nurture and assistance provided to them in order to spiritually grow “unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (Eph 4:13).

When Gospel workers correctly and faithfully perform their duties, casualties are minimized, and they are innocent of the blood of those who choose to be lost.

¹ Ellen G. White, Evangelism, 308, 309.
To sum up, the Bible enables us to distinguish three sides of the work of evangelism: winning souls from the world (Matt 28:19, 20), keeping them in the family of God (John 17:11, 12), and reclaiming those who left the church (Jas 5:19, 20).

**Church Membership as Related to Discipline**

Being a church member is underestimated by some as not quite necessary and overestimated by others as bringing salvation of itself. The biblical teaching is that belonging to the church entity matters greatly because the church is the spiritual body of Christ. By belonging to Jesus' body one effectively belongs to Him, which renders church membership extremely important. This truth is plainly underlined by the apostle of the Gentiles: "For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we baptized into one body.... Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular" (1 Cor 12:12, 13, 27).

Commenting on the connection of the individual believers with the spiritual body of Christ, Ellen G. White says that "many do not realize the sacredness of church relationship and are loath to submit to restraint and discipline."¹ Faithful children of God will never deliberately choose isolation but will be happy to be members of His church, with all the resulting implications.

Genres of Church Discipline

According to Smucker, the need of discipline is ubiquitous in nature, science, mathematics, sports, or traffic of all kinds of vehicles.\(^1\) Lack of it means nothing less than disappointments, failures, and catastrophes. Any sphere of existence and activity requires restrictions and limitations, exactness, and order. Deviations from such parameters lead to chaos, conflicts, and disintegrations.

Discipline can be freely chosen, required, or imposed. Ideal discipline is that which individuals freely agree upon or demand of themselves. This is what the Christian church ought to permanently promote. The church cannot enjoin discipline because believers voluntarily enter its ranks, and “it is no part of Christ’s mission to compel men to receive Him.”\(^2\)

The definition provided by one dictionary\(^3\) helps us to distinguish two genres of church discipline:

1. **Positive discipline.** It refers to a principled and orderly conduct of a person, in keeping with the biblical teachings.

2. **Negative or corrective discipline.** Its purpose is to help erring individuals to return to an orderly deportment. This can be sad and painful and accompanied by undesired actions taken by the congregation, but which work together for the eternal interests of the souls.

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\(^1\) J. N. Smucker, 3.

\(^2\) Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages*, 487.

\(^3\) *New Webster’s Dictionary*, 270.
The negative discipline contains various subgenders with their underpinnings in the Word of God:

1. Admonition or rebuke (Titus 3:10; 1 Tim 5:20)

2. Censure as a temporary sanction involving withdrawal of rights or privileges (During Israel’s wilderness journey, God commanded in regard to Miriam, “Let her be shut out from the camp seven days, and after that let her be received in again” [Num 12:14].)

3. Exclusion or disfellowshipping (Matt 18:17; 1 Cor 5:2, 5, 7, 11, 13).

Benefits of Church Discipline

Such benefits are expressions of the functions of church discipline. Some of them are:

1. God’s holiness is uplifted and glorified.

2. The divine law is justified. In the United States, child molesters must be reported to authorities. This is the law’s requirement, and everybody with knowledge of the facts has to obey it. The alternative is imprisonment or fines. Yet few people expect that individual to be reported to the church, if he or she is a church member, in order for the church to be able to act with responsibility, no less than the civil authorities. The church’s failure to act, where possible, creates a situation in which people give to Caesar that which belongs to Caesar, but God does not receive what belongs to Him. Fear of legal punishment proves stronger than love toward God and His church.

3. Justice is done as the Word of God requires.

4. The church enjoys God’s favor and blessings.

5. The church continually receives spiritual light from heaven.
6. The unity of the church is maintained, as Ellen G. White writes: “If there were no church discipline and government, the church would go to fragments.”

7. Protection is assured for the church’s good name, credibility, and influence in the community.

8. The church’s growth, both numerical and spiritual, is promoted. Fowler notes that church discipline, “if handled properly, would be a great strength and a powerful incentive to church growth.” The same truth is underlined by Ellen G. White: “Development and discipline are essential if we would see growth and prosperity in every church.”

9. The wrongdoer is helped to repent and change his or her life.

10. Church discipline is a deterrent for similar occurrences, thus guarding the church against corruption and apostasy. Paul says: “Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear” (1 Tim 5:20). We know and agree that a child abuser must be isolated in order for the abused child and others to be protected. Why then not isolate a church-abuser through church discipline in order to protect the church?

Summary

According to the Holy Scripture, God created this world in a perfect condition; the people made in His image were destined to rule over it forever. Sin disturbed that ideal order of things. The essence of the plan of redemption is the sinners’ restoration

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1 Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, 3:428.
2 Fowler, 128.
into the image of their merciful Creator. The Christian church is a spiritual environment designed by God for such spiritual recuperation. Discipline in whatever form is an integral part of this process. It is a timeless task, equally necessary for any Christian group which endeavors to be successful in its mission, as clearly demonstrated throughout the long centuries of the Christian era.

Membership in the church is acquired on a voluntary basis, which increases the believers’ accountability for their conduct. Yet, discipline should never aim at inflicting public humiliation; rather, it offers loving assistance for an experience of repentance. It is better to prevent wrongdoings than to deal with them when they surprisingly occur. This objective calls responsible servants of God to feed the flock, to instruct, and to educate it in truth.

Disciplinary actions are not always risk free. However, when these are properly conducted, appealing to clear proofs and employing careful language to protect a person’s reputation, litigations as a consequence are hardly successful. Ultimately, obedience to the Word of God has preeminence over any other concerns.

The church is called to win souls for Christ and to keep them in an atmosphere of spiritual safety. Corrective disciplinary measures may at times be necessary for the protection of the body of believers and, as a last effort, to awaken guilty individuals and lead them to repentance.
CHAPTER VI
THE PRACTICE OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Chapter 5 provided a theoretical basis for the concept of church discipline. Now we move into the practice of discipline in a local congregation. We first deal with the difficulties usually encountered in this activity and try to provide responses to them. Next, procedures and reasons for discipline as viewed and practiced in the Seventh-day Adventist Church are pointed out. The final part of this chapter directs attention to the rehabilitation of sinners as God's desired end of the entire process of church discipline.

Misconceptions About the Practice of Church Discipline

To a certain degree, suspicion of and opposition to discipline in the church result from misconceptions regarding this activity. Misconceptions can represent mass mentality or the way leading individuals understand the practice of discipline. All these misconceptions can be classified in the two categories developed below along with the responses I deem appropriate.

Erroneous Ideas About the Practice of Discipline

Some believers think they are responsible only before God for all their actions, while the congregation has no participation in evaluating them. Such independence is not promoted by Scripture, which describes the individual disciples as parts of a spiritual
body in which various organs are interdependent, their behavior influencing the whole:

"And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be
honoured, all the members rejoice with it. Now ye are the body of Christ, and members
in particular" (1 Cor 12:26, 27).

Related to the previous error is the opinion that everything a believer says or
does is a private matter, in which the church is not supposed to interfere. Yet the
church’s inner peace and outer influence can be strongly affected by such “private
matters.” J. G., a young man from a Seventh-day Adventist congregation, borrowed a
pick-up truck from another church member. The borrower was involved in an accident
which rendered the truck unusable, and it was not insured. He did not make any
restitution for the loss of a few thousand dollars, but continued to claim he was a good
servant of God. The loser did not attend church services for a long time. A conflict or an
act of injustice between church members is not really a private issue in which the church
should never meddle. Rather, it is a transgression of God’s law committed on the
territory of the church, and the church is responsible for doing justice and solving the
problem.

N. C. was a member of a rural church in Romania. In the early 1970s he would
come very seldom to the church services. In fact, he was working on Sabbath days and
drinking alcohol. Urged to change his life and improve his relationship with the church,
N. C. promised, but after that he complained to the Communist authorities about being
harrassed by the church. This was a very sensitive accusation. Yet his lack of
cooperation and aggressive attitude led to his being disfellowshipped. Next, he sent a
written complaint to the county administration accusing the pastor of illegal religious
activities. This could be considered dangerous. In response to his complaint, however, an inspector visited him and talked with him. To the former member's surprise, the inspector said: "Sir, you like the life, that's great. I also like the life, I have the pleasure to drink a little alcohol. If that is the case with you, let these people alone."

The argument of freedom is used frequently to discredit discipline in the church. But freedom is not the same as permissiveness. The apostle Peter writes: "As free, and not using your liberty for a cloak of maliciousness" (1 Pet 2:16). Koranteng-Pipim shows that "no argument about individual liberty, academic freedom, or popular objection to 'heresy trials' can negate the need for any group to preserve its fundamental doctrinal commitments."\(^1\)

In a letter published in 1998, a church from Connecticut stated:

The present conditions make for unacceptable problems which are finding greater acceptance. We are living in an ever expanding mental, moral and social swamp. We are working from a faulty foundation consisting of evolution (man is a meaningless accident of nature, evolved from what?), communism (man is matter in motion and nothing more) and psycho-babble (man is told over and over again that he is not to blame for his actions; that he is not responsible).\(^2\)

Some persons point out that in Matt 7:1, 2, Jesus forbade us to judge our brothers and sisters because He is the supreme Judge. This is true, but personal judgment prompted by hypocrisy should not be confused with the task of the body of Christ as a whole to exercise its duty clearly explained in the Gospels and the epistles. To forget that

\(^1\) Koranteng-Pipim, 347.

\(^2\) "It Doesn't Matter, Does It?" U. S. A. Today, 19 October 1998, 9A, regarding the Middletown Bible Church, in Middletown, CT.
is to condemn Peter for confronting Ananias and Sapphira, and Paul for rebuking Peter in Antioch.

Another objection to discipline is the concept by some that we must accept sinners as they are and not reject them. Yes, God Himself accepts sinners as they are, but in order to change them. He reaches out to people where they are, but He does not leave them there. We need to be careful to distinguish between accepting sinners and accepting sins. The question is when love for sinners is authentic and effective – when we let them continue in their wrongdoings, or when we eagerly work to rescue them. One of the fundamental goals of the Christian church is to win souls, and, of course, not to lose them. Ideally, none should be lost, but ideals are not always achieved. Jesus Himself lost one of the twelve apostles, Judas, and many other disciples (cf. John 6:66). An imperfect church cannot yield better results than its perfect Founder and Head. To imply that by disciplining its members the church risks the possibility of causing the eternal perdition of some is to ignore the fact that a greater risk is run by not doing so, thus corrupting the congregation and losing many more. In fact, church discipline focuses on saving a sinner by making him or her aware of the lost condition and leads to conversion. If we consider the sad case of someone being lost, the question to be asked is, What is the difference between being lost in the church and being lost outside it? Ellen G. White notes: “The fact that men are in the church does not prove them Christians.”

It is often said that the church functions like a hospital, which for some people means that everybody must stay in the church, no matter what kind of life that person

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1 Ellen G. White, Christ's Object Lessons, 74.
lives. The comparison is not bad when it is entirely explored. Miller writes: "It would be nice if we also saw the church as a hospital, where Christians rested up to gain enough strength to reenter the battle."\(^1\) There is no doubt that the church resembles a hospital, but in a hospital patients do not enjoy a leisure time; they are treated, they get shots, and they are subject to surgeries, which are not necessarily comfortable, but absolutely needed. Every day and every hour are well employed because hospitalization is expensive and because patients suffer pain. When they die, they are no longer kept in the hospital; it would be nonsense to do so, a futile expenditure, and a danger for everybody. The church is more than a hospital. Hospitalization is transitory, but Christians stay in the church permanently, even when they grow healthy in Christ. Gaventa touches this issue when she says:

The church of Jesus Christ is not a therapeutic community, although healing can and does happen within it. The church of Jesus Christ is not a social club, although it sustains profound social relations. The church of Jesus Christ gathers in his name and with his presence. For that reason, conflicts, hurts, pains must be examined, discussed and addressed and healing prayed for. Not because the church is ours, but because it is his.\(^2\)

Quite often it is emphasized that we all are sinners and therefore there should be no church discipline at all. This view implies that both Jesus, when He said "let Him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican" (Matt 18:17), and Paul, when he required to "put away from among yourselves that wicked person" (1 Cor 5:13), were wrong.

The assumption that all sins are of equal gravity is:

\(^1\) Calvin Miller, *The Empowered Communicator* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 83.

\(^2\) Gaventa, 773.
1. **Illogical**, contrary to common sense (Human justice systems distinguish between various types of violation of the laws, whether an act is a misdemeanor, a crime, or a felony. Crossing a street on red or high speed will result in a fine, not in a death sentence. The rule is that a sentence must meet the crime.)

2. **Dangerous**, being of Satanic inspiration (He tells people they can do grave sins without remorse because sin is sin; they sin daily anyhow, and it does not make any real difference. Which means, if you do one sin, you may as well do all other sins.)

3. **Unbiblical**, as a series of texts demonstrate: "And the Lord said, Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous . . ." (Gen 18:20). "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (Gen 39:9). "And Moses said unto Aaron, What did this people unto thee, that thou hast brought so great a sin upon them?" (Exod 32:21). "Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me: then shall I be upright, and I shall be innocent from the great transgression" (Ps 19:13).

Linguists have found that there are no absolute synonyms; therefore, what in a given language we call synonyms are rather words with close, but not similar meaning. If this is true, then the Bible’s use of terms like sin, trespass, transgression, iniquity, and abomination, especially when connected with the conjunction “and,” must refer to categories of misdeeds, all of them, of course, violations of the law of God. God said about Himself in Exod 34:7: “. . . forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.” The Bible employs the term “abomination” when it speaks about horrible transgressions of the moral law.
In the second millennium of the world’s history, God obliterated by water almost the entire population of the earth, saving only the lives of Noah and of his family, eight persons altogether. They were sinners, too, but God did not consider their sins as of equal gravity with those of the rest of the world. The same reasoning is valid in subsequent actions of God in the cases of Sodom and Gomorrah, of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram; or in the cases of Achan, Uzzah, Ananias and Sapphira. To be sure, God does not act arbitrarily or capriciously. When He differentiates in the way He treats people, it is because their guilt is different as well.

Every transgression of the law of God has consequences of various magnitudes. People bear these consequences in their own lives, or they affect their families, the congregation of believers, the community, and the environment. Solomon says in Prov 6:30-33 that adultery is much more shameful than theft, that the effects of such a sin extend through the entire life and beyond. Paul also says in 1 Cor 6:18, 19 that any other sin is “without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body.” Ultimately, every and any sin unrepented of leads to eternal destruction. No sin is negligible for God, but the consequences in this life are not alike. Ellen G. White comes to a similar conclusion: “God does not regard all sins as of equal magnitude; there are degrees of guilt in His estimation, as well as in that of man; but however trifling this or that wrong act may seem in the eyes of men, no sin is small in the sight of God.”

1 Ellen G. White, Steps to Christ, 17.
It is a big mistake to think that, as long as someone does a good service in the church, his or her sinful acts are not relevant. Castillo refutes such an argument. She writes:

As a mother of three, I am sickened by the argument that personal behavior isn’t important as long as a person does his or her job. That’s like telling our children they can lie and cheat as long as they get good grades in school. Honesty, integrity, and obeying the law are principles we teach our children every day – principles we all should expect our president to uphold. . . . While the American people can forgive the man, his actions must have consequences. To do nothing would set precedents for future presidents and would condone actions that, in most occupations, would result in termination. We cannot afford to lower the standards of the highest office in the land, because surely the rest of the country would slowly follow suit.¹

Another misconception is to regard the church roll as the book of life, which means, whatever happens, one’s name must be there. This is a big illusion and delusion because the church’s book of membership is not identical with the book of life, which is kept by God in heaven, and from which many names will be removed. Just to have one’s name on paper guarantees nothing, however important church membership is. God will not take into His kingdom of glory nominal believers, but only truly converted persons. Ellen G. White states: “Salvation is not to be baptized, not to have our names upon the church books, not to preach the truth. But it is a living union with Jesus Christ to be renewed in heart, doing the works of Christ in faith and labor of love, in patience, meekness, and hope.”²

¹ Bonnie Castillo, Letters, U. S. A. Today, 9 September 1998, 14A.

² Ellen G. White, Evangelism, 319.
Erroneous Attitudes Toward the Practice of Discipline

Any individual, group of persons, or Christian congregation can make incorrect decisions. This can happen in church discipline also. Unquestionably, God does not accept or bless such unfair actions. In cases of this sort, a higher level of the organized church has to address and rectify the situation. However, even when a local church is fair and true to the Gospel in the administration of discipline, some individuals affected by the discipline question the validity of the church’s decision by saying: “You exclude me, but God does not.” This is a poor understanding of the church’s calling and responsibility, and of the relation between Christ, the Head, and the church, His body; or Christ, the Bridegroom, and the church, His bride. It is also a denial of Jesus’ assurance given in Matt 18:18 that the legitimate actions of the church are ratified in heaven.

Solidarity with a wrongdoer is not a real help, as seen in the book of Judges, chaps. 19-21. The Benjamites’ refusal to cooperate with Israel for the punishment of the sexual abusers from Gibeah led to the extermination of almost the entire tribe. God Himself will act when the church fails to do so: “And if the people of the land do any ways hide their eyes from the man, when he giveth of his seed unto Molech, and kill him not: Then I will set my face against that man, and against his family, and will cut him off, and all that go a whoring after him, to commit whoredom with Molech, from among their people” (Lev 20:4, 5). Church members do well to show love and compassion for a sinner, but not solidarity or sympathy in the committed sins. In such circumstances, the sinner does not feel encouraged to change. It seems even bizarre to reward evildoers with special attention not enjoyed by other church members. What lesson is given by that?
Another mistaken attitude is illustrated by a scene I witnessed in a shop in Romania in the late 1970s. When a shoplifter was caught in action, a certain shopper pleaded with the employees not to be that harsh with him. To which a register operator asked: “Sir, are you willing to pay for our losses?” This is a clear case of a wrongly manifested “mercy,” when the “kind” person has nothing to lose. In a church setting, individuals who are themselves guilty of some serious transgressions will hardly be supportive of disciplinary actions. Others by their opposition prepare the ground for possible future personal transgressions, preferring a church that does not act at all.

One can distinguish two extreme attitudes toward the practice of discipline in the church: opposition to it and haste to promote it. The Church Manual shows that the “unconsecrated resist church discipline.”¹ What motivates the inverse stance is shown by Ellen G. White: “Those who have had very defective characters themselves have been very forward in disciplining others.”²

Questions such as “Who decides what is right and wrong, acceptable or unacceptable?” or “When does a church have to act and how?” are easy to answer. The Christian church is not a chaotic mob, but an organized body of believers. It has elected officers called to work for the health of the congregation based on the Word of God. Such officers along with the entire local church are expected to manifest a highly acceptable jealousy as one of the reasons for practicing proper discipline. This jealousy is in fact pure love for the erring person, for the church, and its positive influence in society.

¹ Church Manual, 163.
Limits of Church Discipline

Church discipline has limits beyond which only God can and will act. Some of these limits are pointed out in the following paragraphs.

1. Hidden sins impossible for others to know (Paul writes that "God shall judge the secrets of men" [Rom 2:16]. A church cannot be held responsible for sins which it cannot know.)

2. Sins of omission, although under certain circumstances the justice system condemns them, i.e., the failure to act to save a life, or to prevent or limit a wrong

3. Sins committed under threat or lack of freedom (In Romania, during my years of ministry there, the church did not deal with sins people committed out of weakness or fear while in a war prisoners’ camp, in regular military service, or in a jail.)

4. Sins committed elsewhere, before a transfer of membership was completed, unless the sins are continued in the present (When some unresolved wrongs are known, the transfer can be rejected, but once performed, it is and remains valid.)

5. Misdemeanors whose disapproval through disciplinary action by the church would cause unnecessary and harmful criticism in the larger community (For instance, to avoid the impression that the church is mainly interested in money, members who are unfaithful in tithes and offerings cannot be subject to church discipline on this ground, although such a failure is declared in the Scripture as robbery [cf. Mal 3:8-10].)

6. Motives of actions (Ellen G. White writes: “Christ has plainly taught that those who persist in open sin must be separated from the church, but He has not committed to us the work of judging . . . motive.”1)

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1 Ellen G. White, Christ's Object Lessons, 71.
7. Character flaws (The writer of the previous quotation also says: "... but He has not committed to us the work of judging character..." Although pride, laziness, or envy are sins capable of excluding some from the kingdom of heaven, the church has no role in dealing with them other than spiritual instruction. Yet, when such evil roots bring forth fruit leading an individual to harm others, the latter should be considered.)

8. State of spirituality (The church cannot weigh its members' spiritual condition and exclude those who did not reach a certain level of it.)

9. Degree of readiness for the kingdom of God. This would mean removing from the church those who are not considered ready. Only God can and will decide between wheat and tares.

Abuse of Church Discipline

As happens in every area of human existence and activity, abuses cause people to be suspicious of church discipline. Yet it would be preposterous to throw the baby out with the bath water. Discipline is of divine origin and is the law of success for individuals and organizations. What is to be rejected is any extreme practice that displays tyranny or permissiveness. Neither one is sanctioned by the Word of God. Right discipline and order are to be preserved. In fact, abuse of church discipline is no better than total lack of discipline.

Some of the abuses which more or less frequently occur in the area of church discipline are the following:

1 Ibid.
1. Bringing a conflictual case directly before the congregation without taking the first two steps required by Jesus in Matt 18:15-18 (Ellen G. White says: “No church officer should advise, no committee should recommend, nor should any church vote, that the name of a wrongdoer shall be removed from the church books, until the instruction given by Christ has been faithfully followed. When this instruction has been followed, the church has cleared herself before God.”¹)

2. Taking a disciplinary action against a church member without sufficient grounds or clear proofs (Again Ellen G. White writes: “At our season of prayer in the morning at Bro. Abbey’s, the Spirit of the Lord was poured out upon us, and I was taken off in vision, and saw that some of the church had been disfellowshipped without sufficient cause, through the influence of dreams and impressions.”²)

3. Ignoring the circumstances in which the wrongs were produced

4. Ignoring the positive attitude of the erring person

5. Applying church discipline without giving the guilty person occasion for defense

6. Working with passion or for revenge

7. Allowing a leader’s attitude to be expressed as: “I exclude you!” (Only the congregation can discipline members.)

8. Making such a precise statement as: “You will be disfellowshipped!” before things have been clarified in the church board and the congregation’s business meeting

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¹ Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, 7:262, 263.

² Ellen G. White, Spiritual Gifts, 2:150.
9. Attempting to discipline people by all means based on the formula: “If this does not work, we will find something else and still hold you accountable!”

10. Using police-like methods of harsh interrogation or spying methods to catch people in sin

11. Forcing the congregation to take a disciplinary action

12. Spreading the knowledge of the wrong, instead of limiting it as much as possible

13. Taking actions without sufficient regard to their possible consequences in the life of the individual, his or her family, or that of the congregation

14. Refusing to accept repentant sinners back into the fellowship of the church.

**Neglect of Church Discipline**

When the church intentionally neglects or fails to adequately practice biblically required discipline, baleful effects plague individuals and the congregation. Such neglect can lead to several consequences.

1. People are encouraged to continue in sin.

2. God will hold leaders and congregations accountable for the committed sins. We are told that “the names of those who sin and refuse to repent should not be retained on the church books, lest the saints be held accountable for their evil deeds.”

3. The church loses God’s blessings and His favor. Ellen G. White says that “God holds His people, as a body, responsible for the sins existing in individuals among

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1 Ellen G. White, Letter 215.
them. If the leaders of the church neglect to diligently search out the sins which bring the displeasure of God upon the body, they become responsible for these sins."

4. The church’s spiritual and even numerical growth is negatively affected.

5. The congregation risks being subject to devastating attacks from the invisible enemy, as happened in the case of Achan.

6. People from outside the church identify the entire church and denomination with the wrongs committed by some church members. Thereby the church loses its credibility in the community.

**Disciplinary Procedures**

According to Greenslade, reconciliation becomes “impossible if discipline is made trivial.” This underlines the importance of right procedures in the disciplinary process. A straight confrontation is effective, even though such a task can sometimes be tough. The self-esteem, rights, and interests of the offender should be protected as much as possible. Baker notes that “rebuking, exhorting, encouraging, and warning our people” should be made “without attracting public attention. This is, to me, the ideal method of discipline.” And church discipline, in whatever form, is only for the members of a given church. Totally different standards apply to visitors.

The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary shows that “the leaders of the church, together with the congregation” are delegated by God to take disciplinary

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2 Greenslade, 105.

3 Baker, 29, 30.
actions. As it became the practice in Corinth, discipline is to be decided in a full assembly, not only in a group of leaders. "All are servants. There is no dichotomy of clergy and laity." Coleman emphasizes that "the church itself possesses the only legitimate authority for the administration of discipline." 

A vote is only valid when taken by the majority of the church members present in a duly called meeting, and which vote. The offending member has the right of defense, therefore notice about the business meeting should be given. Action can be taken in absentia only in case of refusal to participate.

Censure and disfellowshipping are two ways in which the Seventh-day Adventist Church disciplines its members. Censure is defined as "an expression of disapproval" when the offense is not so serious as to require removal from membership. No provision about subsequent exclusion is appropriate when censure is applied. Censure can be decided for a minimum period of one month and a maximum of twelve months. This measure "terminates the erring one's election or appointment to any and all offices he or she may hold in the church, and removes the privilege of election to

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1 "1 Corinthians," SDA Bible Commentary, 6:690.
2 Liesch, People in the Presence of God, 30.
3 Coleman, 87.
4 Church Manual, 171.
5 Ibid., 167.
6 Ibid., 168.
7 Ibid.
office while under censure."¹ An inquiry into the conduct of the disciplined member is appropriate after the period of censure.² According to this observation the censure expires or a further action can be taken, whether a new censure or disfellowshipping.

According to the Church Manual, "in cases of flagrant violation of the law of God, which have brought public reproach upon the cause, the church may deem it necessary, even though a sincere confession has been made, to disfellowship the member to protect its fair name and its Christian standards."³ After sincere repentance, "the offender may be received back into the fold after baptism."⁴

Exclusion is not irreversible, unless the offender never repents. Yet when the person demonstrates "that the issues which led to the action to disfellowship have been resolved beyond reasonable doubt," he or she can be received back into the fellowship, usually by rebaptism. It is right and normal for the reinstatement to be performed in the excluding church, except if this is impossible due to circumstances.⁵ A last question about an individual who has been disfellowshipped and reinstated as church member is if he or she can be elected in a responsible position. I think election immediately after reinstatement is not a wise approach. If the transgression leading to the disciplinary action severely damaged the person's influence in that church, promotion should be delayed. Sometimes the damage is for life. Forgiveness and acceptance cannot be

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¹ Ibid.
² Ibid.
³ Ibid., 169.
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Ibid., 173.
substitutes for a good influence, and ability to successfully serve requires more than mere reintegration. Such a member can do a much better work in another congregation; therefore, considering a transfer of membership would be a wise thing to do.

Concrete Reasons for Church Discipline

Identifying reasons for church discipline is a very critical issue. God has called sinners to work for the spiritual welfare of other sinners, and at times to help correct them. When does the church have to take a disciplinary action? I think there are three sources which can provide an acceptable response: the Word of God, the historical practice of Christianity when it was reasonably performed, and the counsel of the body of believers. As noted in chapter 2 of this dissertation, Jesus instructed the church to remove from its membership a person who spurns reconciliation and the congregation’s appeals about it. Paul offers in 1 Cor 5:11 a short list of disciplinary reasons. He writes that the church has to discipline a member who is a “fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner.” In Titus 3:10, 11, he adds “a man that is an heretick,” which means, one who is teaching false doctrines or otherwise causing divisions in the congregation.

We are informed about reasons for which John Wesley disfellowshipped church members:

In port cities he often had to exclude some for smuggling and found with time that this discipline bore fruit in reducing smuggling in the area. From one society he expelled sixty-four persons, two for cursing, two for habitual Sabbath breaking, seventeen for drunkenness, two for selling liquor, three for quarreling, one for wife beating, three for habitual lying, four for evil speaking, one for idleness, and twenty-nine for “lightness and carelessness.”¹

¹ Fowler, 128.
While we can agree with reasons as Sabbath breaking, drunkenness, alcohol trading, and spouse abuse, the other Wesleyan reasons for church discipline can hardly be applied today.

Moore gives another such list: “Sexual immorality, theft, blasphemy, and murder are among the sins that a church can very properly discipline its members for. Seventh-day Adventists include the use of alcohol, tobacco, and street drugs among those behaviors for which members can be disciplined.”

Chapter 13 of the Church Manual deals with church discipline. It shows that church members cannot be disciplined for financial reasons, or for non-attendance. The latter point is usually misunderstood. It does not refer to members who simply vanished and do not report. Their names have to be dropped “after an absence of two years,” and the clerk’s record will be: “Whereabouts unknown. Voted to designate as missing.” The tolerable non-attendance is for “age, infirmity, or other unavoidable cause.”

The eleven “reasons for which members shall be disciplined,” as identified in the Church Manual, are as follows:

1. Denial of faith in the fundamentals of the gospel and in the cardinal doctrines of the church or teaching doctrines contrary to the same. 2. Violation of the law of God, such as worship of idols, murder, stealing, profanity, gambling, Sabbathbreaking, and willful and habitual falsehood. 3. Violation of the seventh commandment of the law of God as it relates to the marriage institution, the Christian home, and biblical standards of moral conduct. 4. Such violations as fornication, promiscuity, incest, homosexual practice and other gross sexual...

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1 Moore, 157.
2 Church Manual, 171.
3 Ibid., 172.
4 Ibid.
perversions, and the remarriage of a divorced person, except of the "innocent party" in a divorce for adultery or for gross sexual perversions. 5. Fraud or willful misrepresentation in business. 6. Disorderly conduct which brings reproach upon the cause. 7. Adhering to or taking part in a divisive or disloyal movement or organization. 8. Persistent refusal to recognize properly constituted church authority or to submit to the order and discipline of the church. 9. The use, manufacture, or sale of alcoholic beverages. 10. The use, manufacture, or sale of tobacco in any of its forms for human consumption. 11. The misuse of, or trafficking in, narcotics or other drugs.¹

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Rehabilitation as the Crux of Church Discipline

Our Savior is able to save "to the uttermost" (cf. Heb 7:25) all those who come to God through Him because He is the merciful High Priest who was tempted in all things "like as we are, yet without sin" (Heb 4:15). All the "uttermost" situations have solutions for the great sin-bearer. This means that no case of transgression is beyond Jesus' power and willingness to save. The work He does for the fallen sons and daughters of Adam and Eve goes to the "uttermost" because it is a perfect salvation.

Judas, the only one of the twelve disciples of Jesus who was lost, enjoyed the Lord's loving attention, care, and patience, until he fatally left the upper room. There can never be any doubt that Jesus employed all the possible and necessary means to help that obstinate disciple, even though the desired end was not achieved.

The Gospels offer convincing examples of sinners restored to the dignity of children and servants of the living God, out of the most desperate situations. We can think of Zacchaeus, Mary Magdalene, the demoniac living in the tombs, the repentant crucified thief, and so many others. This is also the work of the church. Because Jesus had to return to heaven, He committed the Christian church to continue His work with

¹ Ibid., 168, 169.

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sinners. He promised His followers they would do “greater works” than He had done (John 14:12). Paul identifies those “greater works” as being “the word of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:19) committed to the Christians, who for this purpose are “ambassadors for Christ” (vs. 20).

In harmony with the aforementioned thoughts, the supreme goal to be achieved by the work of church discipline, in whatever form or stage, is the moral rehabilitation of the apostatized souls. By no means should corrective discipline aim at defeating a wrongdoer, causing discouragement, or displaying the power and the authority of a congregation or its leaders. When lost individuals come to realize their lostness and hate their sins, when they follow God’s will and live a godly life, the true intent of the biblical rectifying discipline is accomplished. Losses can at times be unavoidable, in spite of all the work done. But the active church motivated by love is strengthened and blessed by its immortal and infallible Leader.

Summary

Pastoral care for erring church members is a Christian mission performed inside the community of believers. It is vital for the offending individuals, for the congregation’s life and strength, and for its influence and success in society. The main objective is to help, correct, and save. It is wrong to see church discipline as something to be afraid of, or to consider its negative side exclusively. Disciplinary actions should be taken only when they are absolutely necessary and unavoidable, being a last attempt to awaken the wrongdoers and rescue them after all other means have been exhausted.

Discipline without grace is brutality; grace without discipline is a mockery of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. I believe proper church discipline is motivated by
love, is imbued with grace, is propelled by a deep Christian compassion, and always is
baptized in humility.
CHAPTER VII

DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF A SEMINAR ON CHURCH DISCIPLINE AND GRACE

In March 1996, I attended Dr. Douglas Kilcher's class for the Doctor of Ministry program held at Southern College of Seventh-day Adventists in Tennessee. Meeting him on campus, the evening of the third class period, I told him about my plans regarding this project. Without hesitation, Dr. Kilcher said: "Hold a seminar!" This is what I did in the Show Low Seventh-day Adventist Church of Arizona, where I served as pastor, September 1996 to December 1999.

The idea of preparing and organizing a seminar had been born earlier in my mind, but Dr. Kilcher's encouragement strengthened that idea. Producing the material for this seminar helped me to develop the basic substance for the body of the dissertation itself. This metamorphosis was peculiar and worked both ways. The skeleton of the dissertation was inspiration for the seminar, and the seminar spawned the larger text of the dissertation. This chapter deals with the development and the implementation of the seminar on church discipline and grace.

The Purpose of the Seminar on Church Discipline and Grace

This seminar had a double purpose:

1. To instruct the membership on the biblical teachings about the way to work with erring believers (Intensive education is needed before anything else is started. Ellen
G. White encourages: "Train the youth, mold the character, educate, educate, educate, for the future, immortal life." 1)

2. To test the effectiveness of my concept of discipline and grace, based on inspired sources and developed in the body of the current dissertation.

In accordance with the analysis of the survey presented in the final section of this chapter, some significant changes were made in the mind-set of the participants in the seminar. This outcome is surprising because long-ingrained prejudices do not die quickly. In fact, I did not have the hope that this would happen. For real, healthy, and lasting results, such a process should take time. Actually, the membership was generally confused about discipline. This in itself is an important finding. Many did not even think it is an issue. Yet the atmosphere among the participants was one of eagerness to learn and cooperate.

For years, no church discipline had been practiced there. This omission established the prevailing mind-set in the congregation. In a personal conversation with me, one of the former church elders claimed: "We encountered . . . problems from time to time, but chose to deal with them on a 'mercy' level rather than discipline." This is what had happened, except that the so-called "mercy" was absolute silence and indifference. The "hospital"-model of the church was understood as an establishment with many patients, but no physician and no nurse, no diagnosis or treatment. Instead of being helped, even while enduring some pain, the ill persons were practically abandoned as those at the pool of Bethesda.

1 Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, 5:590.
In the synagogue of Nazareth, Jesus foretold that the people would say to Him: "Physician, heal thyself" (Luke 4:23). In the Show Low Seventh-day Adventist Church this demand took on a more bizarre form: "Patient, heal yourself." This concept is biblically unacceptable. Jesus said He had been sent "to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised" (Luke 4:18). This was the messianic destiny of the Lord, and His servants are called to work for that noble purpose. When Jesus sent the twelve disciples to work, "he gave them power against unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all manner of sickness and all manner of disease" (Matt 10:1). His clear order of activity for them was: "Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils" (vs. 8). The New Testament model of the Christian church is that of an active and healing one. Passivity in the face of sinning believers is a direct negation of what Christianity actually means.

This seminar was taught at the height of a crisis, which plagued the Show Low Church. A hard-line nominating committee had abruptly decided to deprive members wearing jewelry from holding any elected responsibility in the church. Without any warning, previous education, or business meeting, the new regulation was introduced. The church members were given no opportunity to decide on the subject. One cannot punish people for their wrongdoing in the absence of loving, purposeful, and persistent instruction. I strongly discouraged the new rule, but I was unsuccessful.

The character of that strange "purification" was in striking contrast to a strong opposition to any attempt to initiate any confrontation with church members living in open sin. The church suffered quite a few cases of teen pregnancies, divorce for trivial
reasons or no reason at all, and unbiblical marriages. This says nothing of the cases of alcoholism and tobacco dependency.

When, in a church-board meeting long before that election period, I raised the issue of working with such persons, there was absolutely no support, not even from the most devout officers. The head deacon angrily answered: “We should be happy that they come to the church!” While this was a positive point, it is not all a church has to do. My seminar had to face people with these mentalities and help them to understand how imperative it is to “heal the sick,” as Jesus said, instead of simply abandoning them.

An even more counterproductive stance would be to shower wrongdoers with rewards, paying them more attention than to people who, like Joseph, choose to walk in God’s ways. Shunning is not acceptable, nor should love be withdrawn, but in the Show Low Church, pregnant girls, if not considered heroes, at least received the impression that their lifestyle is in accordance with the church’s ideals and standards. Their preferential treatment was an incentive to sin rather than a discouragement from continuing in it.

The church’s influence in society is vital if it is to be able to send a genuine message about the purity of the Gospel. How can someone have respect for and a sense of attraction to the Adventist church if the “missionary” lives a worldly life?

For those who favor church discipline, the atmosphere of dead discipline neutralizes all the power of the Gospel, and Adventism is stripped of all its meaning. Clarke mentions a saying of the Jews “that one of the causes of the ruin of their nation was, ‘No one reproved another.’” In almost such a context, the seminar on church discipline and grace was taught.

1 Clarke, 5:184.
The seminar was intended to sweep away a recurrent and widespread illusion noted by Ellen G. White: "The fact that men are in the church does not prove them Christians." To confuse salvation with formal church membership, as important as affiliation is, is a fundamental error: "Salvation is not to be baptized, not to have our names upon the church books, not to preach the truth. But it is a living union with Jesus Christ to be renewed in heart, doing the works of Christ in faith and labor of love, in patience, meekness, and hope."  

The effectiveness of this seminar cannot be entirely quantified after hours or days. It can take months or years. People received the material at the sessions of the seminar. My aim was to create an awareness of the necessity of practicing discipline again, the essence of which is real and non-procrastinating help offered by individuals and the congregation to sinning members. This work was initiated, demonstrated, and commanded by the Head of the church. It is feasible and efficient when performed "in faith and labor of love, in patience, meekness, and hope."

Description of the Seminar on Church Discipline and Grace

A copy of the entire material for this seminar is found in section 1 of appendix B. The text is a shortened version of the dissertation. It was copied and given free to each seminar participant. It consists of six lessons, one for each session, and each was planned to last approximately one hour. The lessons move from the general to the particular and are described below.

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1 Ellen G. White, Christ's Object Lessons, 74.
2 Ellen G. White, Evangelism, 319.
Lesson one is a presentation of the biblical doctrine of church, as established by Jesus Christ Himself, the stable Rock of ages. The Savior promised unlimited and absolute protection for His church, which is His spiritual body. He loves the church; therefore He gave His life for it. His program for the church is to purify it, making it "a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Eph 5:25-27). "The Son of God identified Himself with the office and authority of His organized church."¹ The authority of the church is to be respected by all its members because "God has invested His church with special authority and power which no one can be justified in disregarding and despising, for he who does this despises the voice of God."² Any harm to the church is directed against its Founder. Ellen G. White notes: "Any betrayal of the church is treachery to Him who has bought mankind with the blood of His only-begotten Son."³ Lesson one also emphasizes the significance of church membership. What various organs are for a human body, the same are the believers for the church they belong to. They are interconnected and serve each other. In this spiritual body of Christ, every component is important and deserves attention, protection, and love. Unity in beliefs and actions is crucial, therefore a basic condition of preserving it is "to submit to restraint and discipline."⁴

Lesson two describes the mission of the Christian church. Jesus established the church for service. Before ascending to His Father, Jesus gave His followers the Great

¹ Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, 3:432.
³ Ibid., 11.
⁴ Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, 4:17.
Commission, according to which they were to teach every human being the Word of God, thus making disciples for the kingdom of heaven. These new disciples were to be baptized in the holy name of the Trinity. The church is implicated in the great controversy started by the dragon in heaven and continued on our planet. The fervent desire to extend the boundaries of God’s spiritual kingdom by making permanent new converts should not ignore the imperative of strengthening the achievements. The already integrated new disciples need ongoing instruction in order to be faithful to the Lord. The notion of expansion and consolidation is developed and clarified. Believers are ordained to bring forth fruit and their fruit is to remain (John 15:16). The world mission as a vast program of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is a blessing for the human race, provided things already won are preserved and strengthened. Quality accompanying quantity should be part of this program, meaning that an ever-expanding tent must be kept strong (see Isa 54:2).

**Lesson three** stresses the need of keeping believers in the grace of God. It deals with the work to be done for wrongdoing believers. Discipline motivated by and imbued with grace begins with faithful efforts to help those who fall in sin. Inspiring is the great example of Christ in the way He treated sinners. He was their friend and ate with them. His motto and basic principle of activity was that it is not healthy people, but the sick, who need a physician. He was that Physician providing real healing for all in need and eager to attain to it. Saved sinners are sent to work for lost sinners. One cannot help a sinner without a straight confrontation. This leads one to discern the guilt, and, upon regretting it, to understand its gravity and offensiveness and to cherish a sincere desire to be changed. Everyone is vulnerable, as Paul says in Gal 6:1; therefore, the work of
helping sinning members to repent needs to be done in the spirit of Christ, in humility and meekness.

**Lesson four** starts by showing why the church has to do a work for offending members, while everyone is a sinner. One must distinguish weakness from willful sinning. The Bible makes this distinction by reporting incidents of how God dealt with sinners in different cases. Korah, Datan, and Abiram, Achan, Uzzah, Ananias and Sapphira are clear proofs that some sins are "grievous sins," particularly offensive to God. Ellen G. White's conclusion is similar: "God does not regard all sins as of equal magnitude; there are degrees of guilt in His estimation, as well as in that of man; but however trifling this or that wrong act may seem in the eyes of men, no sin is small in the sight of God."¹ In Matt 18:15-20, Jesus gave instruction on how erring believers are to be treated by the church. Conflicts need to be resolved at the lowest level possible. Every effort is to be made for reconciliation. Yet, when individuals reject every appeal and spurn the work of the church, they are to be separated from the flock. This is a last attempt to awake them and a measure for the protection of the congregation against apostasy. Such actions are ratified in heaven, said Jesus. In the last part of this lesson, Paul's teachings about church discipline and grace are studied. Paul took this issue very seriously. He was shocked that the church in Corinth had ignored a case of incest in its midst. He had expected the church to act by putting away from among themselves "that wicked person" (1 Cor 5:13). Disciplinary action by a congregation is merely an organizational sanction of what those persons have already chosen themselves. Lost

membership can be regained; this should be the after-effort of every church. Loving care ought to operate in all the actions of the church, whether they are pleasant or not.

**Lesson five** points out the church's responsibility in disciplinary matters. The church is cautioned against abuses of church discipline, which discredit such a work and are no better than a total lack of discipline. Limits of church discipline are also listed. Beyond those limits only God can and will decide. Emphasized particularly is the principle that people are not qualified to judge the motives of actions or human character. Ellen G. White writes: "Christ has plainly taught that those who persist in open sin must be separated from the church, but He has not committed to us the work of judging character and motive."¹

Consequences of neglecting discipline are explored further. It is wrong to consider the transgressions of the law of God by church members as their private matters. The church is responsible for doing justice by resolving such issues. Problems which are not resolved promptly, at the right time, only complicate the church life and later its work. People from outside the church identify the entire church and denomination with the wrongs that are committed by some church members. God takes a similar position. Referring to the case of Achan, Ellen G. White states that "God holds His people, as a body, responsible for the sins existing in individuals among them. If the leaders of the church neglect to diligently search out the sins which bring the displeasure of God upon the body, they become responsible for these sins."²

Lesson six is the most extensive. It begins by exposing various misconceptions about or objections to church discipline and tries to respond to them. Many people misunderstand the concept of church discipline. Some individuals object because of their own spiritual faults. It is a big mistake for someone to cling to formal membership while living in open sin, as if the church roll were actually the book of life. Ellen G. White says: “The fact that men are in the church does not prove them Christians.”¹ Discipline as practiced in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is described further in the eleven reasons for church discipline as listed in the Church Manual² and quoted in this lesson.

Another section of lesson six considers the various benefits of practicing church discipline. Among them are the deterrence of similar occurrences in the congregation, promotion of spiritual and numerical growth, restoration of sinners to a holy conduct, and protection for the church’s good name, credibility, and influence in the community. This final lesson concludes by pointing out that church discipline pursues salvation of sinners as its ultimate goal, not their defeat or humiliation. To a certain degree, discipline is the entire process of working with a sinning church member, because its purpose is to bring the person back to a disciplined or orderly conduct from which he or she has departed.

These six lessons prepared for the seminar are of various lengths depending on the content of each. The length of the chapters in the version printed for attendees varies from five to twelve pages. The entire manual for the seminar consisted of forty-nine, 8.5 x 11 in. double-spaced pages.

¹ Ellen G. White, Christ’s Object Lessons, 74.
Implementation of the Seminar on Church Discipline and Grace

This seminar was announced a few weeks in advance, and was hosted in the sanctuary of the Show Low Seventh-day Adventist Church, which is located in 701 South, 8th Avenue, Show Low, Arizona 85902.

General Information About the Seminar

The six sessions for the seminar were held from July 7 to August 18, 1999. Except for one meeting held on a Friday evening, all others were scheduled for Wednesday evenings in place of prayer meetings. Table 1 in appendix B, section 3, gives exact information concerning the days, times, durations, and the number of attending persons for each session. Since most of these meetings were replacing prayer meetings for several specified weeks, they were conducted in the spirit and atmosphere of worship, apart from the fact that each meeting began and closed with prayer. Appeals for consecration were also made.

At the start of the first lesson, I stated that no plan was contemplated for initiating any disciplinary action in the local church – no program was envisioned for congregational cleansing. I repeated this assurance on several occasions. The seminar was not an attempt at brainwashing or a preparation of the participants’ minds for a massive purification of the membership list. Not one single case of church discipline was in the discussion of the church board. The intention was to instruct believers in the Word of God and in its teachings about church life and order. No elimination of members was to follow in the aftermath of the seminar. It was intended to be a model of how things
should proceed, a theoretical direction of how a congregation should work for disciplined spiritual conduct, and what was to be done when people fell in sin.

Although each meeting was supposed to last circa 60 minutes, the actual time varied from lesson to lesson, depending on the vivacity of the discussion. The shortest meeting was the first, which lasted 47 minutes; longest was the fifth meeting with one hundred minutes. As table 1, appendix B, section 3 shows, the total number of attenders at the six meetings was 132, actually 43 different persons, and the total time was 405 minutes. Some participants attended all meetings and others some of them, but each one received the complete text of all six lessons.

A Survey on Church Discipline and Grace

At the start of the first lesson and at the end of the last, each participant received a questionnaire with fifteen questions or statements. For convenience, all of them are called questions here. Question 10 had 6 points, giving the entire set 20 questions. A copy of the questionnaire, which was identical both before and after the seminar, is included in appendix B, section 2. Each question had five available options: strongly disagree, disagree, unsure, agree, strongly agree. One person claimed that the multiple-choice system promotes uncertainty and shows lack of conviction. I explained that it is widely practiced and is scientific.

Before the participants completed the questionnaires, I showed the procedure and the purpose of the survey. Since all replies would be anonymous, everybody could express personal points of view without embarrassment. And because the questionnaire was in the form of multiple choice, any drastic orientation between white and black was
eliminated. Another advantage of the multiple-choice questionnaire is that it excludes the need for written-word answers. Having the participants respond simply by putting a check in the preferred column saves a tremendous amount of time and requires a minimum of effort. Of course, everybody was supposed to check just one column for each point, use only one questionnaire, and respond personally. I explained what every question or statement meant until everybody was comfortably clear, and then I gave them adequate time to choose the one preferred possibility.

The questionnaires were returned immediately before the start of the first lesson and at the conclusion of the last lesson of the seminar. Those who could not attend the first lesson still had the opportunity to participate in the survey because the first lesson was very general, concerning the church. The initial test was to record people’s thinking or attitude toward church discipline prior to learning about it from the written material. They completed the first survey before reading lesson one. The final survey, although identical in content with the first, was destined to reflect the attendees’ understanding and attitude after studying the material. Those who did not participate at the final lesson received the text for lesson six and completed the questionnaire after reading the text. Forty questionnaires considered valid were retained at the start, and forty after the seminar. They are analyzed below. Although the survey was to be kept anonymous, some information, needed for subsequent evaluation, about the respondent was required in the introductory part of each questionnaire.
The Method of Work at the Seminar

Before a lesson started, every participant received the complete text of the lesson so he or she could follow the lecture and participate in the discussion. In order to stimulate the attention and the interest of the attenders, I read some paragraphs, asked some questions, and invited other individuals to read also. Frequent stops were made for additional explanations, questions, and discussion. This discussion took place in a friendly atmosphere, sometimes colored with humor.

As already shown, the reading of each lesson's material was done collectively by myself and various participants. My numerous explanations and responses to questions raised by the attendees amplified the printed material. People repeatedly interrupted the reading, which enriched the experience with a large variety of debate, questions, uncertainties, improvements, and/or voiced appreciation.

Opinions, Impressions, and Reactions About the Seminar

A seminar held only once cannot be flawless, but everyone who participated agreed that this seminar was very original in intention and content and promoted innovative ideas. Generally, in their discussions, the participants thought the seminar was a necessary experience for the local church family. Given the intrinsically difficult character of the topic of church discipline and the generally unfavorable mentality about disciplinary actions in the Christian environment, I was surprised and pleased by the attendees' acceptance of the tenets contained in the material of the six lessons. It seemed that many of them had actually desired such instruction.
Two negative reactions or disagreement with my view on church discipline and grace also came to light. One person insisted that the Church Manual (of course, frequently referred to during the seminar) itself is an unfortunate and unnecessary product of the church leadership, an attempt to super-regulate the church life beyond the stated words of Scripture. I explained that Scripture also requires the church to practice discipline and has given clear directions to that end. For example, Paul said in 1 Cor 14:40: “Let all things be done decently and in order.” This text and others hint at the church having an internal policy for all its activities.

Someone else questioned the validity of point B of the section “Abuse of Church Discipline,” lesson five. The text states: “Taking actions without sufficient regard to their possible consequences in the life of the individual, his or her family, or that of the congregation.” The person who disagreed with this point noted that order is order, whatever the consequences. I explained that discipline is not given to harm people, but to help them. Therefore, a congregation does well to postpone an action or even to avoid it altogether rather than to destroy a family or cause any other major injury.

A strong positive impression was made by the second section of lesson one, “The Significance of Church Membership.” Somebody emphasized the importance of belonging to God’s family of believers and the responsibility coming along with it. However, the participants approvingly smiled when I said that, although church membership is very essential for the spirituality of the people, it is a big error to look at the church roster as being the equivalent of the book of life of the Lamb. Jesus will not call up this roll for entering His kingdom (see lesson six, section one, “Misconceptions About Church Discipline,” point 7).
There was no doubt about my contention that not all sins are of equal gravity, as it is amply developed and documented in lesson four, section one, "Not All Transgressions Are Alike." This unanimous acceptance was contrary to my concern. I expected opposition to such a statement, which does not agree with the popular belief that sin is sin, and there is no difference from any point of view. My assertion is based on biblical reports of God's severe judgments visited upon some people throughout the history of Israel and the early Christian church, because of their wicked, rebellious, or reckless deportment. Examples include Korah and his allies, Achan, Uzzah, and Ananias and Sapphira. God never obliterated the entire nation, or church, along with these individuals. He does not act arbitrarily or capriciously. His discipline varies according to the situation and the gravity of the sin, whether it is, as described by various texts, "grievous," "great," or "mighty." For instance, fornication is considered by Solomon and Paul as being greater than other sins (see Prov 6:30-33 and 1 Cor 6:18, 19). Although every sin unrepent of leads to eternal death, the gravity of the sin and its consequences in this life vary.

Obviously persuasive was point 8 of section four, "Benefits of Church Discipline," lesson six. This notes that appropriate church discipline promotes numerical and spiritual growth. The statement's power of conviction was enhanced by sharing an experience from the church of G. in Romania. In the 1930s, pastor D. B. had a sleepless time one night. A voice told him to get up immediately and visit the head elder at his workshop (he was a shoemaker). The pastor did so although it was late in the night. He knocked at the street door of the workshop. Eventually, surprised and scared, the head elder came and opened the door. Pastor D. B. went in and asked the head elder what was
happening with him, what kind of life he was living, because a voice had prompted him to make the visit right away. He discovered that the elder would spend night after night with a woman from the local church in a back room of his workshop (his home was at another address). He continually justified his absence from home by telling his wife he had to work overtime. Both the elder and the woman concerned were disfellowshipped from the church on the grounds of that affair. A tremendous increase in the membership of that church was later experienced. It was clear that the Spirit of God could work only after the church removed the evil from its midst. I pastored that church about four decades later. Narrating this story to the Show Low Church members during the seminar was very impressive. It demonstrated the role church discipline can play in the development of a congregation.

I noticed general consent that church discipline performed in love and consistently is vital for the church anywhere. It helps rescue sinning members from their miserable predicament and is indispensable for real progress in church life. Yet the knowledge acquired needs time to change attitudes and to have a practical impact in people's lives.

**Survey Analysis**

The 80 questionnaires were electronically analyzed by Joseph Fleishman, associate director of the Institutional Research and Development Center at Mohave Community College in Kingman, Arizona. The seven tables and two graphs reflecting this analysis and included in the appendix B, section 3, were made by my son Uwe-Wolfgang Radu, computer engineer at American Engineering, Collegedale, Tennessee.
The criteria for comparisons among individual respondents were gender, age group, year of baptism, and whether or not born into a Seventh-day Adventist family. The only criterion producing any relevant differences was age group; all others were therefore ignored. The five options positioned in vertical columns received numerical values as follows: 5 for strongly disagree, 4 for disagree, 3 for unsure, 2 for agree, and 1 for strongly agree.

**Expected Responses to the Questionnaire**

For the analysis of the survey, each of the twenty questions was given an expected response noted from 5 to 1 in order to have a term of reference. Some explanations are noted here only for those questions where the reasons for assigning the number are not immediately obvious.

**Question 1.** Expected answer is 1, which means strongly agree. Church membership does not save, yet it creates a favorable environment for spiritual formation. The key word in this question is “important.”

**Question 3.** Expected answer is 5, which means strongly disagree, because in the given congregation discipline has been almost forgotten.

**Question 4.** In conditions like those described before, church members could hardly be interested in or indifferent to persons under church discipline.

**Question 6.** Even if not as a step-by-step approach, Jesus’ instruction from Matt 18:15-20 always is to be taken into consideration for orientation and for the proper spirit needed to implement the disciplinary process.
Question 7. Key phrase in this question is “to consider.” It is helpful to see how similar cases have been handled in the past, locally or in other Seventh-day Adventist congregations, not for a blind imitation, but for an easier resolution.

Question 9. Key word in this question is “immediately.” Normally, it takes time for a fair action to take place, therefore 5 was the expected answer.

Question 10 refers to six concrete reasons for discipline, whether acceptable or not. Key word in this question is “actions.” Only for point E about gambling is a “strongly agree” response expected because this practice is mentioned in the Church Manual, page 169, as a reason for discipline. No legal basis exists to discipline members for any of the other five points, where education, admonition, or rebuke are the only appropriate forms of discipline.

Question 11. Disciplinary actions need to look into the gravity of the transgression, the circumstances, and the sinner’s attitude. Therefore, the expected answer is 1.

Question 12. The sentence is too general to receive an affirmative answer, therefore 5 is the anticipated response. The missing word is “some” (cases). In most situations a sincere repentance precludes disciplinary measures.

Survey Assessment before and after the Seminar

Table 2 in appendix B, section 3, displays the findings of the survey taken before and after the seminar. Each of these categories of figures is compared with the awaited answer for every question. These results can be studied two ways: (1) By looking into the two sets of responses before and after the seminar, in which the mean
figures are compared among themselves, and (2) by considering all the questions among themselves.

In the first approach, the examination of the mean figures before and after the seminar at each of the twenty questions generally reveals changes of plus or minus. The only question with similar responses in both instances is IOC, which refers to persistently wearing jewelry. Where the foreseen response was 1, a minus is an improvement, while a plus is an aggravation. The opposite is true for questions where the desired answer was 5: pluses are improvements and minuses are aggravations. The total mean value of improvements is 1.625, while aggravations lead to a total mean value of 1.5. The subtraction shows that improvements prevail against aggravations by a mean value of 0.125 or 4 percent.

The second way of obtaining final results is to use a question-by-question comparison. Thus, we discover that the answers for eleven questions ended up with improvements, which total 55 percent, the answers for one question remained unchanged, representing 5 percent, and the answers for eight questions were aggravations, a total of 40 percent. Considering the 5 percent of the unchanged answers a neutral zone, we obtain a difference of 15 percent on the side of improvements. According to the Research Center of Kingman, this is statistically a very significant figure. Even 5 percent is for that Center a relevant increase in such a type of comparison.

**Survey Assessment by Age Groups**

In dealing with the age groups, Fleishman doubled the number of respondents by taking into account all eighty questionnaires, in order to increase the reliability of the resulting figures. As he recommended, the group under 20, represented only by two
respondents, can be ignored because their answers are not conclusive for that category of individuals. The remaining groups were represented, in declining order, by the over 50 group with fifty-one questionnaires, the 35-50 group with nineteen, and the 20-35 group with eight. Table 3 in appendix B, section 3, contains the figures for this assessment and is a summary of the descriptive statistics from the tables 4-7.

Relatively balanced seems to be the 35-50 group. They were the first to plead for the protection of the individual ahead of the church’s other interests. They showed the strongest acceptance that the church has received from God the authority to discipline sinning members. These participants agreed with the way discipline had been handled in the past, but not with members’ indifference toward the disciplined persons. From the six reasons for discipline suggested by question 10, the middle-age group was foremost in disapproving lawsuits between church members and, surprisingly, for disciplining members persistently wearing jewelry.

The category over 50 was the first to accept the role of church membership in the divine work of salvation. They disagreed that members who openly break God’s commandments could have responsibilities in the church and claimed that Matt 18:15-20 needs to be applied all the time. In their view, discipline should differentiate between various cases. They also were the first to agree that discipline has a positive impact on a church’s spiritual development. More than any other, these respondents insisted that sincere repentance should still be followed by disciplinary action. Strangely enough, they promoted disciplinary measures for not returning tithes and offerings and for non-attendance of church services.
The youngest of these three groups, 20-35 years old, appeared in the forefront only three times: first, for underlining that love should be manifested toward those under church discipline. Surprisingly, they expected those eating in public restaurants on Sabbath days to be disciplined and, against any anticipation, claimed that members who commit adultery must be disfellowshipped immediately. These respondents were the last to admit that membership has anything to do with salvation or that discipline has a positive impact on the spiritual life of a congregation. They were also reluctant to agree that discipline focuses on the restoration of an erring member and, strangely, that his or her protection should have preeminence over the other concerns of the church. They did not display much enthusiasm even for the meager kind of past discipline, or that Matt 18:15-20 always should be applied. After considering such responses, one can better understand why this group did not strongly agree that God gave the church the authority to discipline its members. They are inclined to accept the idea that individuals openly breaking God’s commandments could have responsibilities in the church. These participants are the least prepared to approve disciplinary measures for gambling and lawsuits between believers. They do accept discipline for non-tithing (!), although they are the last ones for this option. The 20-35 age category seems to be the least enthusiastic about church discipline, in general, and the most prone to leniency, although some inconsistencies do exist.

Conclusions About the Seminar, Based on This Survey

Giving reasonable answers to these questions was indeed a hard task because of some intricate formulations. For instance, should a person who commits adultery be
disciplined immediately? It required attention and caution to perceive the time factor involved in such action, which can be easily overlooked. Yet the formulation precluded frivolous solutions.

Joseph Fleishman, the expert who made the electronic evaluation of this survey, declared the results excellent. Compared with usual community surveys, where a 5 percent increase after instruction is seen as a success, the 15 percent improvements discovered through the general assessment of the survey taken before and after the seminar on church discipline and grace are above any expected achievement.

Encouraging also is the finding that the middle-age group, which is usually the most active in most congregations, proved relatively stable and serious about practicing discipline in their local congregation.

Improved and extended, this seminar could bring a positive and significant contribution for a raising of the level of awareness about this necessary work in God’s spiritual family. As can be clearly seen, despite a widespread discipline illiteracy and confusion, education on this critical topic makes an important difference.
CHAPTER VIII

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The everlasting Gospel portrayed in Rev 14:6 is being preached “to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people.” This is the largest and greatest enterprise ever committed to human beings. Passage of time, crossing of space, and interaction with a multitude of cultures, mentalities, and circumstances do create a series of complications and difficulties with which the servants of God have to cope. Shepherding the flock, not according to human but divine will, is not an easy task. Yet the church’s Founder, Head, and Savior has given indisputable promises: “The gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (the church built on the eternal Rock, Matt 16:18); “Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world” (Matt 28:20).

Summary

The apostle Paul warns the responsible factors in the church about their duty in relation to the safety of the flock: “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). In this passage the energetic apostle refers to internal and external dangers jeopardizing the church’s beliefs, spiritual condition, and mission. The overseers cannot simply ignore such dangers.
Safety in a spiritual environment requires order and discipline. As George Joy indicates, "any community which sets moral standards must recognize the limits beyond which the transgressions of its fundamental standards become intolerable."\(^1\) We can only agree with Bonhoeffer that "if the church is to walk worthily of the gospel, part of its duty will be to maintain ecclesiastical discipline."\(^2\) Which is the alternative? It is clearly pointed out by Greenslade, who says that "to remove discipline would contribute to the ultimate dissolution of the Church."\(^3\) Who would rejoice over such a dissolution of the church? Its archenemy who caused so much suffering and ruin in this world. Ellen G. White emphasizes the fatal consequence of abolishing discipline in the church: "If there were no church discipline and government, the church would go to fragments; it could not hold together as a body."\(^4\) History is not short of examples of such tragedies. For instance, Clarke quotes a saying of the Jews "that one of the causes of the ruin of their nation was, 'No one reproved another.'"\(^5\)

Littleton gives five reasons why churches are so reluctant to discipline their members.\(^6\) The first is that the practice of discipline is not sufficiently taught and applied in daily life by church leaders. Second, many preachers present the Word of God more as an intellectual exercise than a guide for living righteously and justly in the world. The

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1 George Joy, 431, 432.
2 Bonhoeffer, 260.
3 Greenslade, 71, 72.
4 Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, 3:428.
5 Clarke, 5:184.
6 Littleton, 31.
third reason is an obsession with building a big church rather than a pure church. Fourth, under the influence of the American individualism, sin is often regarded as a private matter. Fifth, there is a lack of responsibility to one another as members of the Christian family.

As Koranteng-Pipim writes, “Church discipline is a command of Scripture, a matter of obedience.”¹ Disobedience cannot escape consequences. Christ warned that a “servant, which knew his lord’s will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes” (Luke 12:47). It is essential to consider Ellen G. White’s counsels in this matter. She writes that it should be a permanent concern of all the believers and “a continual struggle to keep evil out of our churches.”² This being a corporate responsibility, those who refuse to repent should be disciplined by the church, “lest the saints be held accountable for their evil deeds.”³

People cannot be forced to join the Christian church or to continue membership in it against their will. A church elder friend of mine complained in 1984 that some members of his congregation had submitted letters of resignation from church membership years or even decades after leaving that congregation, but the church ignored the letters and retained the names on the membership roll. This is outrageous. There is no compulsion in the work of salvation. Jesus did not coerce the twelve disciples to stay with Him (see John 6:66-68).

¹ Koranteng-Pipim, 347.
² Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, 5:538.
Laney contends that a church without discipline is a church "without purity, power, and progress."¹ A pastor tried to explain to the territorial inspector of the Department of Church Affairs in a town in Romania during the 1960s why a certain disciplinary action in the local Seventh-day Adventist church was needed. To this, the official responded: "In fact, it is your internal matter. But I tell you something. We Communists say that, when the party excludes, it grows stronger." Jesus said that "the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light" (Luke 16:8).

Deploring the general lack of interest in church discipline in Christian churches, Davis pleads for "the recovery and reestablishment of church discipline in accordance with biblical principles and practices."² This is the central thrust of this dissertation. In light of the Word of God and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, every local church can and ought to help erring members to return to Him who is the way, the truth, and the life.

**Conclusions**

Three types of losses in human resources are more or less connected with failure to consistently practice church discipline:

1. Decrease in baptisms because non-members are not enthusiastic to join a congregation where biblical teachings are despised

2. Members leaving the church, disappointed about its spiritual condition

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² Davis, 347, 348.
3. Proliferation of splinter groups – individuals wrongly hoping to achieve a better experience outside a given assembly.

More often than not, cases ignored or neglected become more complicated with the passage of time. Procrastinated actions in the field of church discipline can only derange the work of a congregation. Satan is interested in the distortion of the counsel of God. He overemphasizes the effects of abuses of church discipline as an argument to abolish it altogether, while influencing people to overlook the consequences of negligence. By doing that, his purpose is to thwart a normal development of the body of Christ, and to annihilate its influence in society. He well knows, as the Gages write, that “a corrupt church has little to offer to a corrupt world.”

It is sad and beyond any comprehension that in the Show Low Seventh-day Adventist Church, which I pastored for over three years, very little was done in terms of church discipline in its 26 years of existence. In my understanding, when people live in sexual immorality, or divorce for lack of affection or trivial inconveniences, or commit acts of injustice, or practice some other biblically unacceptable things, local leaders have something to do. Their spiritual duty, after they voluntarily accepted the appointments, is to visit the offenders, counsel them, talk and pray with them. And yes, in cases of stubborn refusal to repent, to lead the church in taking disciplinary action. Such endeavors have been neglected in the aforementioned church. Neither could I do anything for that purpose because of the hostile mentality toward such a work. Two things could be discovered by analyzing this situation:

1 Gage and Gage, 26.
1. Church members came to look at any transgression as something normal, as long as people attend church. To question the validity of such a view proved disturbing.

2. The attitude toward sinning believers has been one of pure abandonment, wrongly considered Christian tolerance and love. This creates confusing and deploring conditions which make the congregation look more like a city neighborhood where nobody cares for anybody's moral life.

It can be insightful to narrate in this context my own experience with a church member who went through a time of terrible personal moral failure. I. M. lived in Romania and belonged to one of the churches I was pastoring. He was in his late 30s and served as youth director of a congregation of ninety-eight members. He had an affair with an unmarried woman from his village – a single mother of one or two. She got pregnant by this youth director, who was married and had two children. People in the village heard the news, great shame came to the local church, and its mission suffered a powerful setback. Something had to be done. At first, I. M. denied any wrongdoing. Later, to everybody's surprise, he handed me a letter of withdrawal from church membership. On that basis, his name was dropped from the church roll by the unanimous vote of the congregation. His father actually seconded the motion to accept the resignation. Tormented by remorse because he had lived in adultery and then tried to cover it up by lying, I. M. asked for an opportunity to confess, which he did in another business meeting. The entire congregation was touched by his confession, and many wept.
The following year he was re-baptized and requested a transfer of membership to a Seventh-day Adventist congregation in the main city 20 miles from his home village. He moved with his family to that city.

In August 1980, when I was transferred to the capital city of Romania for other responsibilities in the denomination, a special farewell meeting was held in the new church of I. M. The following day I met him unexpectedly on the street. He was accompanied by his wife and a little son. For a while we walked together. I. M. was very friendly. I asked him: “Dear brother, what kind of feelings will you have toward me in the future, seeing I led the congregation in the action of dealing with your case?” His response was: “Pastor, you did your duty! I would have been disappointed if you had behaved otherwise!”

One author writes about the confession made by an apostatized believer returned to the flock. This individual declared: “I realize that I had to be disfellowshipped and that I fully deserved what I got. It really was necessary and helped me to see just how serious my course was and the need to seek Jehovah’s forgiveness.”1

Exclusion is never an ideal approach; just the last attempt to awaken a sinner. Before that happens, hard work must be done. “Toward those who fall into sin, the church has a duty, to warn, to instruct, and if possible to restore.”2 Indeed, all endeavors should be directed “for his recovery.”3

1 Anonymous, 27.
2 Ellen G. White, Desire of Ages, 805.
3 Ibid., 440.

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Because it was required by the Lord of love, who "loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end" (John 13:1), discipline in the church needs to always be motivated by love. Loving discipline is not an oxymoron, as some people think. Durand affirms that "true love dares discipline."¹

Sin is a curse, but if dealt with promptly and properly in a biblical and Christlike way, in love, this curse can be annihilated and both individual and congregation are blessed and strengthened. The psalmist glorified God by saying: "But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared" (Ps 130:4). There is place for forgiveness in the ecclesiastical work of discipline, a forgiveness which is not permissiveness, and is not encouragement to continue in sin. This forgiveness was given an excellent definition by Ellen G. White: "God’s forgiveness is not merely a judicial act by which He sets us free from condemnation. It is not only forgiveness for sin, but reclaiming from sin. It is the outflow of redeeming love that transforms the heart."²

Recommendations

1. **More conscientious indoctrination of baptismal candidates.** This would contribute greatly to the development of healthy, powerful congregations. On this issue, Ellen G. White notes: “There is need of a more thorough preparation on the part of candidates for baptism. They are in need of more faithful instruction than has usually been given them.”³ When people are being prepared for baptism, they need to be made


² Ellen G. White, Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing, 114.

³ Ellen G. White, Evangelism, 308.
aware that membership implies responsibility and that acquired membership can be lost if the embraced beliefs and principles of conduct are not observed. They should be taught not only church doctrines but church order as well.

2. **Faithful pastoral work with all those who fall in sin.** Rather than ignoring grievous transgressions of God’s law by church members, pastors and elders should immediately visit erring members and attempt to lead them to a sincere repentance and change of life. The very calling of these leaders includes such redemptive work. Positive results will be visible, not only in the lives of the affected individuals, but in the spiritual condition of the entire congregation.

3. **Immediate clarification of church rolls.** In the two churches I began to work with in January 2000, Kingman and Bullhead City, Arizona, I sat down with church officers and together we made a careful analysis of the membership lists. I recommended that we look at every name and consider three categories of members: (a) Those who live in the church’s area and attend church services, regardless of frequency; (b) members who live in the church’s area and never come to the church services; (c) persons belonging to the church who simply vanished and nobody in the church has any information about them.

The goal of this approach was to be able to visit the members of the second group, work with them, and encourage them to re-enter the fold from a practical point of view. By doing that we endeavored to move as many individuals as possible from the second to the first category. Finally, we pledged to do our best to discover the whereabouts of the third category members and contact them if at all possible. The purpose again was to move them into the first group, encouraging them to acquire a
membership transfer to the proximate Seventh-day Adventist congregation. If any attempt to recuperate them fails, their names have to be dropped from the list by the majority vote of the congregation convened in a business meeting.

According to Paul's words quoted above, God's workers are "overseers" of the flock (Acts 20:28). Such a widespread confusion regarding the membership situation should not exist, and it would not if overseers faithfully fulfilled their duty. Without proper care, we never know how many members we really have.

The Arizona Conference of Seventh-day Adventists discovered in the first quarter of 2000 that one individual held membership in three congregations. The president provided this information at a ministerial meeting I attended in Phoenix on April 4, 2000. Presenting our conferences, quarter after quarter, with erroneous statistics is wrong and very impractical, management-wise. All planning, of any description, is negatively affected. Congregations have to cope with unrealistic per capita in tithes and offerings, and the appointment of delegates for conference constituency sessions as well as higher denominational levels is distorted. These are only the most conspicuous consequences of chaotic membership recording. Clarifying church rosters does not jeopardize anybody's eternal fate. It just shows clearly what is to be done. It should be understood that people continue to have freedom of choice even after they become church members, and this freedom must be respected.

4. Keeping a list of hope for missionary in-reach. If it seems impossible to have a satisfactorily clear membership list, why not try an alternative. A church could keep a list of active members and operate the church's affairs only with the members of that list. The rest of the members, the so-called inactive, could be kept as a list of hope
for missionary in-reach. In the age of computerized tables, such a distinction is easy. In fact, this practice is used in the Show Low Church when church officers are elected; this may be a widespread practice. If we make such a distinction for election purposes, we can make it for other purposes, too. My recommendation does not conflict with the stipulation in the Church Manual that a "retired membership list"\textsuperscript{1} should not be kept because it refers to church members, not to those who lost their church affiliation by withdrawal. For practical purposes and using a computer, the suggested distinction is possible and useful. This would eliminate excessive numbers of non-existent members in both congregations and conferences.

5. Diligent study and faithful application of the provisions of the Church Manual regarding church discipline. At every elective session of the General Conference, currently held on a quinquennial basis, the Church Manual is re-analyzed and reprinted. It is adopted by the majority vote of the elected delegates. To a certain degree, this document is our organizational constitution or our church policy. From the highest to the lowest level of our denomination, the Church Manual should be studied and followed. It should be applied in every local church.

6. Ongoing education of local congregations on the subject of church discipline. Local churches need to be educated in this important area of church life, just as they are instructed in theological issues. Every church member should be made aware of God’s requirements for the converted life. If such instruction is faithfully provided, church members can more clearly understand their collective responsibility to work

\textsuperscript{1} Church Manual. 38.
redemptively in behalf of sinning fellow believers, and to keep evil out of the church. I think that the six lessons of my seminar on Church Discipline and Grace, included in appendix B, can be used for such an education in local congregations.

7. More articles addressing church discipline in our publications. Our worldwide or regional periodicals can help enormously by regularly publishing articles that heighten awareness of the vital need for practicing discipline in all our congregations. An excellent example of this kind of article is “Church Discipline and Church Growth” by Wesley McDonald, published in Ministry, April 2000, pages 26-28.
APPENDIX A

CORRESPONDENCE WITH ROBERT W. NIXON
From: Stefan Radu  
To: Robert Nixon  
Sent: Friday, August 20, 1999 7:12 AM  
Subject: Church Discipline  

August 20, 1999  

Dear Brother Nixon:  

I am currently writing my doctoral dissertation for Andrews University on the topic Church Discipline and Grace. My adviser asked me to include something about possible litigations resulted from disciplinary actions taken by local congregations. I need to have the following questions answered:  

1. How do plaintiffs justify such lawsuits, or what reasons do they invoke to go to the courtroom for ecclesiastic disciplinary actions applied to them?  

2. Have any such lawsuits in the United States of America involved our denomination or others?  

3. How can a local congregation practice church discipline according to the Holy Scripture and still be safe against possible litigations?  

Are you so kind to send me a letter answering these questions, which can be used as a reference in the context of my dissertation?  

I would be extremely grateful.  

Sincerely Yours,  

Pastor Stefan Radu  
Lakeside, Arizona
Dear Stefan Radu:

Here are answers to your three questions:

1. In general, the courts in the United States do not permit lawsuits by disfellowshipped members who wish to bring legal action because the church has taken disciplinary action against them. Both federal and state constitutions contain provisions that in general terms separate church and state and the church’s free exercise of religion. Though there are older cases, often involving Baptist congregations, in which state courts from time to time forced local congregations to conform to their own stated disciplinary processes, those cases did not prohibit ultimate discipline of members. However, the clear trend in the last half century is for courts to refuse to take jurisdiction of cases involving church disciplinary matters. The theoretical basis of that trend, in my opinion, is found in the decision of the Supreme Court of the United States in the case of Kedroff v. St. Nicholas Cathedral, 344 U.S. 94 (1952), where the Court stated that the religion clauses of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution radiate “a spirit of freedom for religious organizations, and independence from secular control or manipulation – in short, power to decide for themselves, free from state interference in matters of church government as well as those of faith and doctrine.”

2. I have solicited information from the staff lawyers and none is aware of a reported case involving church discipline by a member or former member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

3. To avoid lawsuits from discipline of members, local congregations are best advised to follow the stated procedures in Chapter 13 of the Church Manual, “Church Discipline.” That chapter states the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s stated procedures for member discipline and the rights members have in the disciplinary process.

Please let me know if you think I can be of further assistance.

Robert W. Nixon
General Counsel
General Conference of
Seventh-day Adventists
APPENDIX B

SEMINAR ON CHURCH DISCIPLINE AND GRACE
SECTION I: THE TEXT OF THE SEMINAR

LESSON ONE: BELONGING TO GOD'S CHURCH

Jesus Christ illustrated the work of redemption through the parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15:3-7). The Good Shepherd leaves the ninety-nine and goes to search for the one unfortunate creature. He yearns to find it and to bring it back into the fold. Jesus also spoke of other sheep “which are not of this fold.” These, too, He desires to bring into the fold so “there will be one fold, and one shepherd” (John 10:16). These reclaimed sheep belong in the fold, but they will be lost as long as they stay outside the flock.

The Church as God's Instrumentality

The word church appears in the KJV only in the New Testament. In the singular (church), it appears 77 times and in the plural (churches), 37 times – a total of 114 times. In the first and the last occurrences the words of Jesus are addressed to two of His twelve disciples, Peter and John, before and after His glorification, respectively.

“And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt 16:18).

“I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches” (Rev 22:16).

The first text consists of these seven basic elements: (1) Rock (Greek πέτρα, solid rock); (2) I (Christ, the Creator, the great I AM); (3) will (future action, starting from that moment); (4) build (the church is a spiritual building, whose architect is Jesus); (5) my (the church belongs to its eternal Founder); (6) church (Greek τὴν εκκλησίαν),
noun in accusative, made up of ἐκ (from) and καλέω (to call); (7) hell (Satan) will not prevail against it (the church is invincible).

Commenting on the relationship between Christ and His church, Ellen G. White writes:

God, who put all things under the Saviour’s feet, “gave Him to be the head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all” (1 Cor 11:3; Eph 1:22, 23). The church is built upon Christ as its foundation; it is to obey Christ as its head. It is not to depend upon man, or be controlled by man. Many claim that a position of trust in the church gives them authority to dictate what other men shall believe and what they shall do. This claim God does not sanction. The Saviour declares, “All ye are brethren.” All are exposed to temptation, and are liable to error. Upon no finite being can we depend for guidance. The Rock of faith is the living presence of Christ in the church. Upon this the weakest may depend, and those who think themselves the strongest will prove to be the weakest, unless they make Christ their efficiency.¹

The Bible offers some metaphors for the concept of the church: (1) Body (1 Cor 12:12, 13; Col 1:18); (2) flock (John 10:1-14; Acts 20:28); (3) family (Eph 3:14, 15); (4) bride (Eph 5:25; Rev 19:7); (5) building (Eph 2:20-22).

A multiple dualism regarding the church can be distinguished: (1) True church (see Rev 12:1-17), false church (Rev 17:1-7); (2) local church (Rom 16:5), universal church (Eph 5:23); (3) visible church (Matt 18:17), invisible church (Matt 16:18); (4) militant church (Eph 5:25-27), triumphant church (Rev 7:9).

Christ’s program for His church is exposed by Paul: “Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot,

¹ Ellen G. White, Desire of Ages, 414.
or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish’’
(Eph 5:25-27).

Ellen G. White developed valuable ideas about the relationship between the
Founder and His church. A selected few are the following:

“The Son of God identified Himself with the office and authority of His
organized church.”

“The church is God’s appointed agency for the salvation of men. It was
organized for service, and its mission is to carry the gospel to the world. From the
beginning it has been God’s plan that through His church shall be reflected to the world
His fullness and His sufficiency.”

“All is done in the name and by the authority of Christ. Christ is the fountain;
the church is the channel of communication.”

“God has invested His church with special authority and power which no one
can be justified in disregarding and despising, for he who does this despises the voice of
God.”

“The church is God’s fortress, His city of refuge, which He holds in a revolted
world. Any betrayal of the church is treachery to Him who has bought mankind with the
blood of His only-begotten Son.”

1 Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, 3:432.
3 Ibid., 122.
4 Ibid., 164.
5 Ibid., 11.

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The Significance of Church Membership

As already shown, the Bible compares the Christian church with a physical body: “For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body” (1 Cor 12:12, 13). This text says that Christ is the head, and the church is the body; individuals are members or organs of this spiritual body. Thus, by belonging to the church (which is the body of Christ), one belongs to Christ. The question is often raised: Is membership in the church important, or necessary, or required by God? It is hard to imagine better answers to this question than those found in the following quotations from the writings of Ellen G. White:

“Many do not realize the sacredness of church relationship and are loath to submit to restraint and discipline.”\(^1\)

“By ignoring the authority of the church, they show contempt for God, who gave to the church its authority.”\(^2\)

“Enfeebled and defective as it may appear, the church is the one object upon which God bestows in a special sense His supreme regard. It is the theater of His grace, in which He delights to reveal His power to transform hearts.”\(^3\)

“The church is very precious in God’s sight. He values it, not for its external advantages, but for the sincere piety which distinguishes it from the world. He estimates

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\(^1\) Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 4:17.


\(^3\) Ibid., 12.
The first task is expansion, dealing with quantity, and is shown in points 1 through 4; the second is consolidation, dealing with quality, and is evident in point 5:

(1) Enlarge the place of thy tent; (2) stretch forth the curtains of thine habitations;
(3) spare not (which means: do not stop); (4) lengthen the cords; (5) strengthen thy stakes.

God’s great promise made to Abraham was: “. . . in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed” (Gen 12:3). From Abraham’s descendants, the Messiah was going to be born, and in Him, through the plan of salvation accomplished by Him, people from all nations were going to be blessed or saved for eternity. God had conceived the plan of salvation for the entire world “that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). This is the expansion of His love to every believer.

Physical Israel itself was called to serve the Lord and to be a light for the nations, according to Isaiah’s prophecy: “It is a light thing that thou shouldest be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth” (Isa 49:6). “To restore the preserved of Israel” is consolidation; to bring “light” and “salvation” to the Gentiles, “unto the end of the earth” is expansion.

In His earthly activity, Jesus was extremely zealous to save sinners; He said: “For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10). At the same time, Jesus was very concerned with the maintenance and preservation of what had been saved. He prayed: “While I was with them in the world, I kept them in thy name: those that thou gavest me I have kept, and none of them is lost, but the son of perdition; that the scripture might be fulfilled” (John 17:12). When His disciples tried to
keep Him in a certain place, Jesus said: “Let us go into the next towns, that I may preach there also: for therefore came I forth” (Mark 1:38). To preach in “the next towns,” further and further, is expansion of the Gospel field, to keep the converts is consolidation.

The Lord Jesus did not leave for heaven without giving His followers a clear direction about their mission in the world, which we call the Great Commission: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19, 20). To “teach all nations” is expansion; to teach people after they have been baptized is consolidation of those achievements. Mark adds a detail to the version of the Great Commission as written by Matthew: “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15). “To every creature” is expansion.

The work of the disciples had to be performed in a certain order, as Jesus said to them: “But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Thus, they had to begin in the capital city of Israel, Jerusalem; then they were to work in all Judea, their home country; afterwards in Samaria, a foreign country; then in the whole world. The book of Acts reports the apostles’ missionary work in compliance with the command of Jesus. One of these reports notes: “And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch, Conforming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:21, 22). That they “taught many” is expansion, and “conforming the souls of the disciples” is consolidation. To such extent
was the Great Commission accomplished in the first century that Paul was able to declare about the Gospel of Jesus: “... which is come unto you, as it is in all the world, ... which was preached to every creature which is under heaven” (Col 1:5, 6, 23).

In the last part of the world’s history, the same task must be fulfilled by the remnant church. The end will come only after that accomplishment. Jesus clearly said: “And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come” (Matt 24:14). The vast Adventist Movement is described at the end of the Bible: “And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people” (Rev 14:6). This is a universal expansion of God’s Gospel message, more than in the first century, because it takes place on all continents, before the Lord arrives.

Jesus said to His disciples: “Ye have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain” (John 15:16). To “bring forth fruit” is expansion; “that your fruit should remain” is consolidation. After people are baptized, becoming members of the body of Christ, an ongoing instruction must still be given to them. One of the reasons many converts do not remain in the church is that they are not prepared sufficiently before baptism. Ellen G. White writes:

There is need of a more thorough preparation on the part of candidates for baptism. They are in need of more faithful instruction than has usually been given them. The principles of the Christian life should be made plain to those who have newly come to the truth. None can depend upon their profession of faith as proof...
that they have a saving connection with Christ. We are not only to say, "I believe," but to practice the truth.¹

As noted above, Isaiah speaks about enlarging, stretching forth, lengthening—all of which point to growth in all directions. But the last words of the verse add a vital part to the picture—to strengthen what already exists. World mission is the biblical program promoted by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and it is working as never before. At the same time God admonishes His children to preserve and strengthen things already won. Quality accompanying quantity should be part of the same program. Not only should there be an ever-expanding tent, but this tent must be kept strong. It is an inadequate accomplishment to receive a large group of people through the front door of the church only to lose many of them through the back door. People won for Christ must be helped to stay and grow; we have to cope with apostasy, discouragement, disappointments, and falls from grace, but we should never give up. Our calling is to expand and to seriously consolidate.

¹ Ellen G. White, Evangelism, 308, 309.
LESSON THREE: SAVING WRONGDOING

BELIEVERS

The apostle John questions the authenticity of one’s love for God if the individual shows no concern for fellow believers or exhibits animosity toward them (see 1 John 4:20, 21). When people err from the truth and are trapped by the inducements of the archenemy, true Christian love offers immediate assistance. Wrongdoing church members need selfless and effective help from those who walk close to God.

The Supreme Example of Christ

Not all the accusations brought against Jesus by His enemies were false; some of them were true. For instance: “This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them” (Luke 15:2). Yes, He did it. Jesus was willing to accept a publican in the strictest circle of His disciples, Matthew. Out of gratitude for the Master, Matthew gave a meal to which he invited Jesus and His disciples. A lot of publicans and sinners also came to attend that reception (see Matt 9:9-13). The Pharisees murmured to Jesus’ disciples: “Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners?” (vs. 11). Three sentences spoken by Jesus as a response to the Pharisees’ accusation have become a classic:

1. “They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick” (vs. 12).
2. “Go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice” (vs. 13).
3. “I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (vs. 13).

About that encounter of the Lord with sinners, Ellen G. White writes:

Jesus sat as an honored guest at the table of the publicans, by His sympathy and social kindliness showing that He recognized the dignity of humanity; and men
longed to become worthy of His confidence. Upon their thirsty hearts His words fell with blessed, life-giving power. New impulses were awakened, and the possibility of a new life opened to these outcasts of society.¹

No less murmuring accompanied Jesus’ acceptance of a second publican, Zacchaeus (see Luke 19:1-10). The Gospel writer says that “they all murmured, saying, That he was gone to be guest with a man that is a sinner” (vs. 7). But Zacchaeus honored Jesus’ loving attention by saying: “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold” (vs. 8). Jesus confirmed the authenticity of Zacchaeus’ conversion by publicly announcing: “This day is salvation come to this house, forsomuch as he also is a son of Abraham” (vs. 9). Then He emphasized His mission in this world: “For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost” (vs. 10).

Matthew and Zacchaeus escaped only with contempt and hatred, but another sinner, a female caught in adultery, was violently brought to Jesus in order to have her stoned (see John 8:1-11). Jesus hated sins more than His opponents, but He loved sinners and worked for their healing. He said to the woman: “Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more” (vs. 11).

Absolutely surprising and shocking is the discovery that two of the disciples closest to Jesus – James and John – were for the extermination of sinners (see Luke 9:51-56). When the inhabitants of a Samaritan village were not hospitable with Jesus, the two disciples asked Him: “Lord, wilt thou that we command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them, even as Elias did?” (vs. 54). Jesus’ response is the

¹ Ellen G. White, Desire of Ages, 274.
quintessence of His mission in this world: “The Son of man is not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them” (vs. 56).

A great lesson about Jesus’ love for sinners and His uttermost efforts to save them can be found in the way He treated Peter in the context of this disciple’s fall by denying the Lord three times in the courtyard of the high priest. In legal terms today, that would be called “high treason.” Jesus had already warned Peter: “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren” (Luke 22:31, 32). Jesus prayed for the sinner called Simon Peter; it was His gracious look which caused Peter’s repentance. Ellen G. White points out:

The Saviour turned from the frowning judges, and looked full upon His poor disciple. At the same time Peter’s eyes were drawn to his Master. In that gentle countenance he read deep pity and sorrow, but there was no anger there. The sight of that pale, suffering face, those quivering lips, that look of compassion and forgiveness, pierced his heart as an arrow. Conscience was aroused. . . . A tide of memories rushed over him. The Saviour’s tender mercy, His kindness and longsuffering, His gentleness and patience toward His erring disciple, – all was remembered. . . . He pressed on in solitude and darkness, he knew not and cared not whither. At last he found himself in Gethsemane.¹

One of the points on Jesus’ agenda after His resurrection was the moral rehabilitation of Peter. At the Sea of Galilee, He confirmed the repentance of Peter in the presence of six other disciples and entrusted him with shepherding the flock for which Jesus had died. Peter was now converted and was commissioned to strengthen his brethren.

¹ Ibid., 713.
Believers Helping Believers

Luke, in his Gospel, quoted Jesus’ words referring to Peter’s fall and repentance:

“And when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren” (chap. 22:32). A sinner returned to God is called to work for other sinners. His experience of conversion will fill his own soul with love for fellow fallen human beings and with the earnest desire to see them changed. After his terrible transgression, David prayed for forgiveness and cleansing:

“Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. . . . Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit. Then will I teach transgressors thy ways, and sinners shall be converted unto thee” (Ps 51:10, 12, 13).

After the happy experience of restoration, David wrote: “He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings. And he hath put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto our God: many shall see it, and fear, and shall trust in the Lord” (Ps 40:2, 3).

According to Ellen G. White, “the work of preaching the gospel has not been committed to angels, but has been entrusted to men. Holy angels have been employed in directing this work, they have in charge the great movements for the salvation of men; but the actual proclamation of the gospel is performed by the servants of Christ upon the earth.”¹ Sinners are sent to preach the Gospel to other sinners, or, more exactly, saved sinners are expected to work for lost sinners.

However, the erring person is not always an outsider; he or she can be a church member trespassing the law of God. He or she can be an offender against a fellow believer. The goal of any talk on the subject of personal offenses and, in general, of all

¹ Ellen G. White, The Great Controversy, 312.
efforts made in working for the guilty is restoration. Jesus pointed out: “Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother” (Matt 18:15).

One cannot help a sinner without a straightforward confrontation which leads him or her to discernment of the guilt and, upon regretting it, to understanding its gravity and offensiveness, and to cherishing a desire to be changed. Such a task can sometimes be tough. A sinner named Nathan was sent by God to another sinner, David, in order to rebuke him and help to restore him to a healthy spiritual life. The episode is reported in 2 Sam 12:1-14. Nathan said to David: “Thou art the man” (vs. 7), and then he asked him: “Wherefore hast thou despised the commandment of the Lord, to do evil in his sight?” (vs. 9). David’s response was: “I have sinned against the Lord” (vs. 13). And Nathan said to David: “The Lord also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die. Howbeit, because by this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, the child also that is born unto thee shall surely die” (vss. 13, 14).

Helping a sinner to return to God is a very noble and rewarding work. James in his epistle writes: “Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way, shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins” (Jas 5:19, 20).

The apostle Paul committed his entire life to the conversion of sinners. He raised the questions: “Who is weak, and I am not weak? who is offended, and I burn not?” (2 Cor 11:29). He was ready to go to extreme lengths for the sake of the lost: “To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some” (1 Cor 9:22).
The Bible encourages every believer to live a genuinely spiritual life, which can exert a saving influence on the lives of erring people: “Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees; And make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed” (Heb 12:12, 13).

In his missionary activities, Paul was permanently motivated by the desire to cooperate with Jesus in order to save his fellow Jewish descendants: “For I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office: If by any means I may provoke to emulation them which are my flesh, and might save some of them” (Rom 11:13, 14).

A very important text of Paul, which shows the proper way to deal with erring believers, needs to be analyzed: “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted” (Gal 6:1). This text says:

1. In the church some people fall spiritually.
2. Everyone is vulnerable.
3. There are, however, spiritual people in the church.
4. The God-given task of those spiritual individuals is to restore the erring one.
5. This work has to be done in the spirit of meekness, which is, in fact, a synonym for the spirit of Christ. Jesus said: “Learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart” (Matt 11:29).

In Matt 18:15-20 Jesus Christ referred to a person who was overtaken in a fault. The easiest attitude toward such an incident is to be silent, but this is not what Jesus and Paul recommended. Another unhealthy approach would be to reject the person. The
biblical way of treating these individuals is restoration. Here is where church discipline begins and ends. This is its supreme goal, though sometimes the outcome is not the one we desire.

Helping an erring fellow believer to understand when he or she is in a dangerous situation and helping to restore that person to a healthy relationship with God and with others is a real mission performed inside the church. A good shepherd faithfully cares for the flock, and Jesus offered the supreme example of such a care. His servants will follow His example and will behave as described by the prophet Ezekiel: “I will seek that which was lost, and bring again that which was driven away, and will bind up that which was broken, and will strengthen that which was sick” (Ezek 34:16).

Another picture of working inside the family of God to recover the spiritually lost was given by Jesus when He spoke about the piece of silver lost in the house (see Luke 15:8-10). Every effort was made to find that lost coin: lighting a candle, sweeping the floor, seeking diligently. This woman did not just gather up the dust and throw it out with whatever it may contain (including the lost coin) just to clean up the house. Cleaning up is a phase of a process that focuses on finding the lost valuable. And success is crowned by collective rejoicing.
LESSON FOUR: UNREPENTANT CHURCH MEMBERS

Love cannot be imposed. Although the supreme sacrifice of God’s only-begotten Son is absolutely sufficient for everyone, still innumerable people will be lost forever. Scripture promises that “whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). Yet Satan continues to make inroads into the fold to steal sheep. Jesus warned: “The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy” (John 10:10). We must not let this happen. Only those who do not heed the voice of the Good Shepherd can be seized by the evil one. When a sinning believer persists in rejecting any appeal or assistance from the church family, we have a work to do. The safety of the rest of the flock cannot be endlessly jeopardized.

Not All Transgressions Are Alike

In the third millennium of the world’s history, God obliterated by fire five cities located in the valley of the river of Jordan. Their inhabitants’ sinfulness provoked the judgment of God. God did not burn all the cities of the entire world, although there were sinning people in all of them.

During Israel’s sojourning in the wilderness, severe judgments of God visited the wicked and rebellious people in some occasions. For instance, “the ground clave asunder that was under them: And the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed them up, and their houses, and all the men that appertained unto Korah, and all their goods” (Num 16:31, 32). Involved in rebellion were Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and their families. It is
obvious that the earth did not swallow up the entire nation, although none of them was sinless.

Because Achan sinned by taking some accursed things for himself, the army of Israel suffered a humiliating defeat. All Israel was shocked and frightened. Achan, the guilty person, and his family and his cattle were all stoned (according to Josh 7:23-26); but the entire nation was not destroyed, despite the general sinfulness of its citizens.

Uzzah, a non-priest, "put forth his hand to the ark of God, and took hold of it; for the oxen shook it. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah; and God smote him there for his error; and there he died by the ark of God" (2 Sam 6:6, 7). As is well known, the rest of the nation, including King David, remained alive, and not because they were without sin.

One more example comes from the New Testament that tells about God's immediate retribution for sin. Ananias and Sapphira tried to lie to the Holy Spirit and they suffered a sudden death (see Acts 5:1-11). This happened in the era of grace. Who would claim that all the other Christians were perfect individuals?

To be sure, God does not act arbitrarily or capriciously; when He differentiates in the way He treats people, it must be that their guilt is different as well. Some people claim, however, that all sins are of equal gravity. Such a view about sin is:

1. Illogical, contrary to common sense; even those who say that don’t actually believe it (Human justice systems distinguish between various types of violations of the law, whether an act is a misdemeanor, a crime, or a felony. Crossing a street on red or high speeding do not result in a death or life sentence, but in a fine. The juridical principle is that a sentence must fit the crime.)
2. **Dangerous** because it has satanic inspiration (He tells people they can do grave things without remorse because sin is sin. Since they sin daily anyhow, it does not make any difference what they do.)


Linguists claim there are no absolute synonyms. Therefore, when synonyms are suggested in a given language, the words are close, but they do not have identical meaning. If this is true, then the Bible's use of terms like sin, trespass, transgression, iniquity, abomination, especially when they are connected with the conjunction and, must necessarily refer to categories of misdeeds. All of them, of course, are violations of divine law. God says about Himself: “... forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin” (Exod 34:7). The Bible employs the term abomination when speaking about horrible transgressions of the moral law.

The Word of God clearly differentiates between various transgressions.

Consider the following texts:

"And the Lord said, Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous ...” (Gen 18:20).

"How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?” (Gen 39:9).

"And Moses said unto Aaron, What did this people unto thee, that thou hast brought so great a sin upon them?” (Exod 32:21).

"And it came to pass on the morrow, that Moses said unto the people, Ye have sinned a great sin” (Exod 32:30).

"And Moses returned unto the Lord, and said, Oh, this people have sinned a great sin, and have made them gods of gold” (Exod 32:31).
About Eli’s sons it is written: “Wherefore the sin of the young men was very
great before the Lord: for men abhorred the offering of the Lord” (1 Sam 2:17).

“Jeroboam drave Israel from following the Lord, and made them sin a great sin”
(2 Kgs 17:21).

“Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have
dominion over me: then shall I be upright, and I shall be innocent from the great
transgression” (Ps 19:13).

“For I know your manifold transgressions, and your mighty sins” (Amos 5:12).

Those who still try to make all sins alike from all points of view should rather
consider such terms as used in the Holy Scripture: sodomy, adultery, idolatry, profanation
of God’s offerings, presumption. These disgusting acts, which are especially offensive to
God, are called in the aforementioned texts: grievous sin, great wickedness, great sin,
very great sin, great transgressions, manifold transgressions, mighty sins.

Some violations of the law of God are extremely shameful or destructive of the
body. Solomon and Paul referred to them as totally different from others. Solomon said:
“Men do not despise a thief, if he steal to satisfy his soul when he is hungry; But if he be
found, he shall restore sevenfold; he shall give all the substance of his house. But whoso
committeth adultery with a woman lacketh understanding: he that doeth it destroyeth his
own soul. A wound and dishonour shall he get; and his reproach shall not be wiped
away” (Prov 6:30-33). Such a shame, resulting from adultery, extends through the entire
life and beyond, much more than in a case of theft.

The apostle Paul wrote: “Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is without
the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body. What? know
ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?” (1 Cor 6:18, 19). For Paul not all sins were equally grave; most of them occur outside the body, but sexual immorality is a sin inside the body, which is the temple of the Holy Spirit, and he appeals to believers: “Flee it!”

Ellen G. White states that “God does not regard all sins as of equal magnitude; there are degrees of guilt in His estimation, as well as in that of man; but however trifling this or that wrong act may seem in the eyes of men, no sin is small in the sight of God.”

The honest conclusion then, after having read all these quotations, is that sins are of various gravities, that there are degrees of sinfulness or seriousness of transgressions. Ultimately, any and all sin can lead to eternal destruction if not repented of and forsaken. The issue is not to make a list of sins, but to see transgressions as the Bible speaks about them. No sin is small in the sight of God, but the consequences in this life are not identical. Getting furious for a few minutes and saying some ugly words, on one side, and smoking 80 cigarettes a day for 50 years, practicing sexual child abuse, or committing genocide, on the other side, cannot have the same gravity and the same consequences in life.

All these texts and arguments should be sufficient to clarify the point that the church cannot be frivolous in its estimation of the abominations which could destroy its credibility and influence in society. The church must not consider that all its members are equally guilty and all deserve to be disciplined or none. There are wrongs for which

1 Ellen G. White, Steps to Christ, 17.
the church is expected to act responsibly, for its own good, for the interest of the cause of
God, and for the rescue of the evildoer.

Jesus’ Instruction for How to Treat Offenders

In Matt 18:15-20, Jesus instructed His disciples how to deal with personal
offenses, which can occur among the church members. For the purposes of this study the
entire text needs to be quoted:

Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault
between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But
if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two
or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear
them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee
as an heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind
on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be
loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as
touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which
is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in
the midst of them. (Matt 18:15-20)

The word church used in vs. 17 shows clearly that the talk is about church
members. Vs. 15 clarifies the category of sins Jesus referred to, personal offenses. The
same verse points to the purpose of the entire approach: to gain the offending person. Vs.
17 describes the jurisdiction of the church, its right and responsibility to pronounce a
decision in connection with the offender who rejects any appeal. Vs. 18 guarantees
Heaven’s ratification of the decision when the church follows Jesus’ instruction.

The Greek expression in vs. 18 for “shall be bound in heaven” is εσται
δεδεμέναι εν ουρανω, and for “shall be loosed in heaven” is εσται λελυμένα εν
ουρανω. In each case the future form of the verb to be (Greek εἰμί) is connected with a
past participle passive, giving the meaning of an already accomplished action. It is not
Heaven which follows the church’s decision, but vice-versa: the church has to work in
harmony with Heaven's decision. But how does the church know what is bound or loosed in heaven? Heaven's principles are revealed in the Scripture, and the church has to follow them. Vss. 19 and 20 speak about the unity of the church in worship, this being the context of the previous verses. Thus, unity is demonstrated in the manner of working with the erring members as well.

Some scholars consider the context to be even longer, extending from vs. 15 through the last verse of the chapter, which is vs. 35. This means that the parable about the unforgiving servant is included. Immediately after showing the procedures to be followed in working with offending members, the Lord gave a parable which emphasizes the vital need for church members to forgive each other. When the offender has the right attitude, the offended has to forgive. An unforgiving spirit has a fatal consequence: neither will the heavenly Father forgive the unforgiving person.

Vss. 19 and 20 show the spirit and the method for resolving conflicts in the life of the congregation – it is prayer. Every phase of the conciliatory process must be accompanied by earnest prayer.

Jesus Christ developed three stages for this work with the offending person:

1. A strictly personal talk or dialogue takes place between the offended individual and the offender. The former was hurt. He could ignore the fact, but that would be detrimental for the offender. The innocent is advised to go; he is better prepared to start the action than the guilty one, who often is not even aware of the committed wrong. Happy is the positive outcome – the brother is gained.

2. A second phase is needed when the attempt for reconciliation undertaken by the offended alone fails. Now he has to take one or two witnesses, spiritual people from
the congregation, who will listen and cooperate, appealing to the conscience of the wrongdoer.

3. If the second attempt also fails, the offended person is advised to talk to the church. The organization is now responsible for managing the conflict. In all three phases, the supreme purpose is the restoration of good relations. However, if the offender shows contempt for the church, too, his or her name must be removed from the membership roster. The offender who precipitated the outcome is likened to a “heathen man and a publican.” Ellen G. White says: “He who rejects this united overture has broken the tie that binds him to Christ, and thus has severed himself from the fellowship of the church.”¹ And this is what follows, in the words of a Bible Commentary:

This does not mean that he should be despised or shunned or neglected. Efforts should now be put forth for the erring member as for any nonmember. In working for a person who has thus severed himself from the church, members should beware of associating with him in such a way as to make it appear that they share his point of view or participate with him in his evil course of action.²

Jesus gave a pattern of procedure, but not as a strict mathematical formula in its details. If the offended has ten dialogues instead of one, and if he or she takes four companions instead of one or two, or if such attempts are repeated, he or she walks the extramile. The church cannot refuse to be involved, unless the offended has neglected or failed to respect the first two stages. The wrongdoer may have caused extreme financial, physical, or psychological harm. The body of Christ should not blame the victim and

¹ Ellen G. White, Desire of Ages, 441.
encourage the perpetrator, not even by silence. The Word of God calls for justice and the harmed person has the right to enjoy the protection of his or her church.

**Paul's Teaching About Church Discipline and Grace**

In the church of Corinth there was a sad practice: believers went with believers to the world's courtroom to solve their conflicts. Paul decried such a practice as being unchristian, and required that the congregation act to solve the problem instead of the worldly justice system. He asked: "Know ye not that we shall judge angels? how much more things that pertain to this life" (1 Cor 6:3). The point is that believers can and must judge "things that pertain to this life." Paul continued: "Is it so that there is not a wise man among you? no, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren?" (vs. 5).

The verb to judge, as a responsibility of the organized church, is used in 1 Cor 5:12: "For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within?" The church has no jurisdiction on nonbelievers, but it must exert this function toward its members. Conflicts and all kinds of problems which disturb the life of the church must be solved within the church, not outside, in the unbelievers' courtroom.

The word judgment is taboo for some people, but such a prohibition is not biblical. According to Jesus' words in Matt 7:1, 2, personal judgment, especially when prompted by hypocrisy, is forbidden, but the church as a body cannot neglect its responsibility. The church can judge and is called to do so. This is the word used by Paul. Another tabooed word is punishment. Again, this error arises from ignoring the biblical vocabulary. Said Paul: "Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many" (2 Cor 2:6). The Greek word for of many, in this case πλειονοννον, means rather majority, and the word for punishment is επιτιμα, correctly translated with
punishment or censure. In vs. 7, Paul says: “So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him.” The disfellowshipped individual can be accepted back into the membership of the church, after the church has acted according to the Word of God, and after that person has repented.

Paul was very serious about church discipline. He was shocked that the Corinthians had neglected to act in a case which was extremely shameful and harmful for the work of God in that city, an incestual relationship (see 1 Cor 5:1, 2). He gives some general indications of which things should be regarded as reasons for church discipline: “I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat” (vs. 11). The church has the calling to elaborate on reasons for disciplinary actions, starting from this sample list. A detailed list of such reasons is given in the Church Manual, as seen further in lesson six.

Paul said: “With such an one no not to eat.” What kind of eating is hinted at here? The answer is given by Ellen G. White:

Christ's example forbids exclusiveness at the Lord's Supper. It is true that open sin excludes the guilty. This the Holy Spirit plainly teaches (1 Cor 5:11). But beyond this none are to pass judgment. God has not left it with men to say who shall present themselves on these occasions. For who can read the heart? Who can distinguish the tares from the wheat?1

Conclusion

We need to remember how Jesus worked with heathen and with tax collectors. There is a continuous cycle. People are won for the Gospel. When they commit

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1 Ellen G. White, Desire of Ages, 656.
abominable things with which the church cannot identify, they sever themselves from the membership of the church. Disciplinary actions of the congregation are just an organizational sanction of what those persons have already chosen themselves. Lost membership can be regained. This should be the after-effort of the church. Love and care should operate in all the actions of the church, whether they are pleasant or not.
LESSON FIVE: THE CHURCH HAS A
RESPONSIBILITY

Referring to the tragic experience of the Fall, the apostle Paul writes to the believers in Rome: "By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned" (Rom 5:12). And further: "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). All the inhabitants of our planet, in its entire history, have sinned, except Jesus; no one can question that. All have been transgressors of the law of God, and without repentance and faith in the atoning death of Christ for them, people are lost forever. The Christian church is called to cooperate with the divine Master to seek the lost and to bring them into the spiritual fold. When believers transgress the law of God, spiritual individuals are expected to help to correct them, even by "pulling them out of the fire" (Jude 23). Church discipline is the work of God for erring members and is the redemptive responsibility of the entire congregation.

Abuse of Church Discipline

As happens in every area of human existence and activity, abuses cause people to be suspicious of church discipline, but it would be preposterous to throw the baby out with the bath water. Discipline is of divine origin and the law of success for individuals and organizations. What is to be rejected is an extreme practice such as permissiveness or tyranny. Neither is sanctioned by the Word of God, but right discipline and order are to be preserved. In fact, abuse of church discipline is no better than total lack of discipline.
Some of the abuses that can occur in the area of church discipline are as follows.

1. Bringing a case directly before the congregation ("tell it unto the church," Matt 18:17) without taking the first two steps required by Jesus in Matt 18:15-20, when the issue is a personal offense (Ellen G. White says: "No church officer should advise, no committee should recommend, nor should any church vote, that the name of a wrongdoer shall be removed from the church books, until the instruction given by Christ has been faithfully followed. When this instruction has been followed, the church has cleared herself before God."

2. Taking a disciplinary action against a church member without sufficient grounds or clear proof (About this fact Ellen G. White writes: "At our season of prayer in the morning at Bro. Abbey's, the Spirit of the Lord was poured out upon us, and I was taken off in vision, and saw that some of the church had been disfellowshipped without sufficient cause, through the influence of dreams and impressions.

3. Ignoring the circumstances in which the wrongs were produced

4. Ignoring the positive attitude of the erring person

5. Applying church discipline without giving the guilty person occasion for defense

6. Working with passion or for revenge

7. A leader's attitude indicating: "I exclude you" (Only the congregation can discipline members.)

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1 Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, 7:262, 263.

2 Ellen G. White, Spiritual Gifts, 2:150.
8. A precise statement of this type: “You will be disfellowshipped!” before things have been clarified in the church board and the congregation’s business meeting.

9. Attempts to discipline people by all means based on the formula: “If this does not work, we will find something else and still hold you accountable!”

10. Using police-like methods of harsh interrogation or using spying methods to catch people in sin.

11. Forcing the congregation to take a disciplinary action.

12. Spreading the knowledge of the wrong, instead of limiting it as much as possible.

13. Taking action without sufficient regard to the possible consequences in the life of the individual, his or her family, or that of the congregation.

14. Refusing to accept repentant sinners back into the fellowship of the church.

**Limits of Church Discipline**

The clear directions given by God should make every congregation aware of its responsibility to practice discipline. Yet church discipline has limits beyond which only God can and will act. Such limits are:

1. Hidden sins which are impossible to know (Paul writes that “God shall judge the secrets of men” [Rom 2:16]. A church cannot be held responsible for sins which it cannot know.)

2. Sins of omission, although under certain circumstances the justice system does judge such instances as the failure to act to save a life or to prevent or limit a wrong
3. Sins committed under threat or lack of freedom (In Romania, the church did not deal with the sins people committed out of weakness or fear while being prisoners of war, in regular military service, or in a jail as requiring church discipline.)

4. Sins committed elsewhere, before a transfer of membership was completed, unless they are continued into the present (When some unresolved wrongs are known, the transfer can be rejected, but once performed, it is and remains valid.)

5. Misdemeanors whose disapproval through a disciplinary action by the church would cause unnecessary and harmful criticism in the larger community (For instance, in order to avoid the impression that the church is mainly interested in money, no member who is unfaithful in tithes and offerings can be subject to church discipline on this ground although such a failure is declared in the Scripture as robbery [see Mal 3:8-10].)

6. Motives of actions (Ellen G. White says: “Christ has plainly taught that those who persist in open sin must be separated from the church, but He has not committed to us the work of judging . . . motive.”1)

7. Character flaws (In the previous quotation, White also said: “. . . but He has not committed to us the work of judging character.”2 Although pride, laziness, or envy are sins capable of excluding someone from the kingdom of heaven, the church has no role in dealing with them other than giving spiritual instruction. However, when such evil roots bring fruit leading an individual to harm others, the latter should be considered.)

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1 Ellen G. White, Christ's Object Lessons, 71.

2 Ibid.
8. State of spirituality (The church cannot weigh its members' spiritual condition and exclude those who did not reach a certain level of it.)

9. The degree of one's readiness for the kingdom of God, which would mean removing from the church those who are not considered ready (only God can and will decide between wheat and tares).

**Neglect to Act According to the Scripture**

Every human society, every organized group of people, right from its establishment, needs ways to deal with conflict and wrongdoing occurring in its midst. People ought to know that they are accountable for their misdeeds, not only at the final judgment of God, but for the time being as well. When they join the church, they must understand that they are no longer independent thinkers, that their lives have a bearing on the church's name in the community. Questions such as “And who decides what is right or wrong, acceptable or unacceptable?” or “When does the church have to act and how?” are comparatively easy to answer. The church of the living God is not a chaotic mob, but an organized body of believers with elected officers called to work for the health of the congregation on the basis of the Word of God.

God still asks: “He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” (Mic 6:8). The Lord wants His church to do justice; He says: “Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow” (Isa 1:17).

Neglect of correcting wrongs is often justified by the claim that we must avoid losing members. This argument is very weak because of the greater risk of losing the
victim while retaining the offender. A wise, just, and loving action by the church can save both, but this hardly happens when the church chooses not to interfere. Problems which are not resolved promptly, at the right time, only complicate the church life later. A conflict or act of injustice committed by a church member against another is not absolutely a private matter in which the church should not meddle; it is a transgression of the law of God committed on the territory of the church, and the church is responsible for doing justice by resolving that issue.

When the church intentionally neglects or fails to appropriately practice biblically required discipline, baleful consequences plague individuals and the congregation. Consider the following:

1. People are encouraged to continue in sin.

2. God holds leaders and congregations accountable for the committed sins.

Four quotations from the writings of Ellen G. White support this conclusion:

“God will hold the church at ______ responsible, as a body, for the wrong course of its members.”¹

“The Lord holds the church accountable for the sin of its members until they have done all they can to remedy the existing evil.”²

“God holds His people, as a body, responsible for the sins existing in individuals among them. If the leaders of the church neglect to diligently search out the sins which bring the displeasure of God upon the body, they become responsible for their sins.”³

¹ Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, 3:517.

² Ibid., 518.

³ Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, 3:269.
"The names of those who sin and refuse to repent should not be retained on the church books, lest the saints be held accountable for their evil deeds."\(^1\)

3. The church loses God’s blessings and His favor.

4. The church’s growth, both numerical and spiritual, is negatively affected.

5. The congregation risks being subject to devastating attacks from the invisible enemy, as happened in the case of Achan. Ellen G. White comments on the sad event which led to the defeat of the army of Israel in the time of Joshua:

   Achan’s sin brought disaster upon the whole nation. For one man’s sin the displeasure of God will rest upon His church till the transgression is searched out and put away. The influence most to be feared by the church is not that of open opposers, infidels, and blasphemers, but of inconsistent professors of Christ. These are the ones that keep back the blessing of the God of Israel and bring weakness upon His people. When the church is in difficulty, when coldness and spiritual declension exist, giving occasion for the enemies of God to triumph, then, instead of folding their hands and lamenting their unhappy state, let its members inquire if there is not an Achan in the camp. With humiliation and searching of heart, let each seek to discover the hidden sins that shut out God’s presence.\(^2\)

6. People from outside the church identify the entire church and denomination with the wrongs committed by some church members, and thereby the church loses its credibility in the community.

\(^1\) Ellen G. White, Letter 215.

Church discipline and grace need to work together to rescue those who fall into sin. Anything less than this approach can only aggravate things. Christian virtues should shine when sinners are called to repentance. Paul assures us, “Now abideth faith, hope, charity (Greek: αγάπη), these three; but the greatest of these is charity” (1 Cor 13:13). Christianity was born by love, works by love, and overcomes by love. Αγάπη must be the soul of all the endeavors to rescue an erring soul. This last lesson mainly deals with the practice of discipline in the church as animated by love: love for God, love for His dearly purchased church, and love for those who reject God’s spiritual order of things.

Misconceptions About Church Discipline

To a certain degree, suspicion of and opposition to church discipline are based on misconceptions or prejudices. Some of them are identified below.

1. Order and discipline are harmful for the congregation. Ellen G. White shows that Satan “deceives even the professed people of God and makes them believe that order and discipline are enemies to spirituality, that the only safety for them is to let each pursue his own course.”¹ It is obvious which is the source of this idea.

2. Jesus said about wheat and tares: “Let both grow together until the harvest” (Matt 13:30). This is an one-sided view of the teachings of Jesus because He also said: “If he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican” (Matt 18:17). This distinction was underlined by Ellen G. White: “Christ has plainly

¹ Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, 1:650.
taught that those who persist in open sin must be separated from the church, but He has
not committed to us the work of judging character or motive.\textsuperscript{1}

3. We all are sinners. This objection tries to persuade us that there should be no
church discipline. The words of Jesus, when He said “let him be unto thee as an heathen
man and a publican” (Matt 18:17), and of Paul, when he admonished “put away from
among yourselves that wicked person” (1 Cor 5:13), are thereby disregarded.

4. Jesus forbade His followers in Matt 7:1, 2 from judging their brothers and
sisters, because He is the supreme Judge. This is true, only to the extent that personal
judgment based on hypocrisy should not be confused with the task of the body of Christ
as a whole, as a congregation, to exercise its duty according to the teachings of the New
Testament. To forget this is to condemn Peter for confronting Ananias and Sapphira, and
Paul for rebuking Peter in Antioch.

5. The goal of the Christian church is to win souls, not to lose or remove them.
Absolutely true, but Jesus Himself lost one of the twelve apostles, Judas, and many other
disciples (see John 6:66). Such losses are caused by people’s failure to follow the
Master, not by the faithful work of the church.

6. We must love sinners. This, of course, is the Bible’s central tenet and one of
Jesus’ main reasons for going to the cross, no question about that. What is questionable
is the meaning attributed to the concept of loving sinners. Authentic love includes a
willingness to correct sinners as God chastises those He loves, and to do it until the
correction is persistently rejected.

\textsuperscript{1} Ellen G. White, \textit{Christ’s Object Lessons}, 71.
7. The church roster is seen as a replica of the book of life, which means that, whatever happens, the name must be there. What a misconception! This is nothing but a big illusion and delusion. The church book of membership is not the book of life, which is in heaven, and even from it many names will be removed. Just to have one's name on paper guarantees nothing, however important church membership actually is. God will not take to heaven nominal believers, only truly converted people.

8. Because the church functions like a hospital, everybody must stay in the church, no matter what kind of life the person lives. The comparison with the hospital is not bad when it is entirely explored. Miller said: “It would be nice if we also saw the church as a hospital where Christians rested up to gain enough strength to reenter the battle.” No doubt that the church does resemble a hospital, but in a hospital patients do not enjoy a leisure time; they are treated, they get shots and are subject to surgeries, which are not necessarily comfortable but are absolutely needed. Every day and every hour are well employed because hospitalization is expensive and because patients suffer pain. When they die, they are kept in the hospital no longer, it would be nonsense to do so, a futile expenditure, and a danger for everybody. The church is more than a hospital; hospitalization is transitory, but Christians stay in the church permanently, even when they grow healthy in Christ.

9. We must accept sinners as they really are and not reject them. Yes, God Himself accepts sinners as they are, but then He changes them. He reaches out to people

1 Miller, 83.
where they are, but He does not leave them there. It is necessary to distinguish between accepting sinners and accepting sins.

10. By disciplining its members, the church runs the risk of causing their eternal perdition. A greater risk still exists: to corrupt the congregation and lose many more. In fact, church discipline focuses on saving a sinner by making him or her aware of a lost condition and by offering help for returning to God. In the sad case, everybody should ponder over the difference between being lost in or lost outside the church. This interesting statement is from Ellen G. White: “The fact that men are in the church does not prove them Christians.”

Discipline in the Seventh-day Adventist Church

Jesus Christ said that “the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light” (Luke 16:8). Referring to the great politician, Bonnie Castillo writes:

While the American people can forgive the man, his actions must have consequences. To do nothing would set precedents for future presidents and would condone actions that, in most occupations, would result in termination. We cannot afford to lower the standards of the highest office in the land, because surely the rest of the country would slowly follow suit.

After mentioning letters received at the Adventist Review about people working for years on the Sabbath and other such cases when no disciplinary actions had been taken, Durand wrote:

1 Ellen G. White, Christ’s Object Lessons, 74.

2 Bonnie Castillo, 14A.
All of which leaves me wondering what a person has to do to receive church discipline. It would seem that all too often one can break any of the Ten Commandments or deny any of our 27 fundamental beliefs and yet continue to be a Seventh-day Adventist. Could it be that it is harder to get out of our church than to get into it? . . . Why are we so reluctant to follow what we have voted in General Conference sessions in regard to church discipline, which appears in our Church Manual? Jesus has told us that if a member sins, we should speak to him or her personally. If he or she refuses to listen to us or to others or to the whole church, that member must be separated from the fellowship, and heaven will ratify what was done (Matt 18:15-20).¹

Referring to the artificial antagonism created by some people between loving sinners and disciplining them, the same author said:

We seem to feel that it is better to love people than to censure them. But are these two choices mutually exclusive? James Dobson wrote a book about children titled Dare to Discipline. When we discipline children, does this mean we don’t love them? Quite the contrary. It means we love them very much, too much to let them ruin their lives by going out of control. If we truly love our brothers and sisters in the faith, we will take enough interest in them to deal with sins that may cost them their salvation. Indifference is the opposite of love and the greatest cruelty. Unpopular as it is to say so these days, the church has an obligation to preserve its purity. In recognizing this, we do not make an organization more important than individuals. The church is individuals – many of them. And the many should not suffer for the sins of the few. “One sinner may diffuse darkness that will exclude the light of God from the entire congregation” (Testimonies, vol. 3, p. 265). The church is responsible for the sins it tolerates in its midst. True love dares discipline.²

Commenting on individual freedom and a person’s relationship with the church, Koranteng-Pipim writes:

What demands shall the church make upon its members? What is to do if one refuses to comply with its demands, or if one’s principles of conduct are no longer in harmony with those it has developed? . . . Is one to be left to go his or her own way, and lead others also? Or is the church, local and universal, to confront such members, and if so, at what point and in what manner? . . . The integrity of the church is also at issue here. Church discipline is simply the right of self-preservation. No argument about individual liberty, academic freedom, or popular objection to “heresy trials” can negate the need for any group to preserve its fundamental doctrinal commitments . . . The church has the right to a body of

¹ Durand, 5.

² Ibid.
doctrine that is a test of fellowship as well as the right to censure or exclude those who affirm some other creed. The clarity of faith demands this. Any other attitude has a debilitating effect on the mission and spiritual vitality of the church. Nor are we to forget that discipline is part of discipling.¹

Referring to those who choose to belong to the church in spite of their opposition to its beliefs, Koranteng-Pipim asks this crucial question: “Those who disparage biblical doctrine must face a practical question: Does honesty permit one to continue in a church committed to the exclusive support and proclamation of specific doctrinal truths?”²

This part of the lesson cannot be better concluded than by quoting Rock, whose comments on the practical value of church discipline are inspiring:

At times “pulling the weeds” does more damage to the wheat than letting them grow. But it has been my experience as a pastor that when congregations discipline appropriately, when church books are kept clean – that is, uncluttered with the names of those who have apostatized, when our pastors and conference officials are more concerned with quality than quantity of membership, credibility is maximized and the activity of the Holy Spirit becomes more evident.³

Concrete Reasons for Church Discipline

Chapter 13 of the Church Manual deals with church discipline. On pages 168 and 169 are shown “reasons for which members shall be disciplined.” Here is the entire quotation:

1. Denial of faith in the fundamentals of the gospel and in the cardinal doctrines of the church or teaching doctrines contrary to the same. 2. Violation of the law of God, such as worship of idols, murder, stealing, profanity, gambling, Sabbathbreaking, and willful and habitual falsehood. 3. Violation of the seventh

¹ Koranteng-Pipim, 347, 348.
² Ibid., 348.
³ Rock, 11.
commandment of the law of God as it relates to the marriage institution, the
Christian home, and the biblical standards of moral conduct. 4. Such violations as
fornication, promiscuity, incest, homosexual practice and other gross sexual
perversions, and the remarriage of a divorced person, except of the "innocent party"
in a divorce for adultery or for gross sexual perversions. 5. Fraud or willful
misrepresentation in business. 6. Disorderly conduct which brings reproach upon
the cause. 7. Adhering to or taking part in a divisive or disloyal movement or
organization. 8. Persistent refusal to recognize properly constituted church authority
or to submit to the order and discipline of the church. 9. The use, manufacture, or
sale of alcoholic beverages. 10. The use, manufacture, or sale of tobacco in any of
its forms for human consumption. 11. The misuse of, or trafficking in, narcotics or
other drugs.

Benefits of Church Discipline

Such benefits are expressions of the functions of church discipline, and some of
them are:

1. God's holiness is uplifted and glorified.

2. The divine law is justified. In the United States child molesters must be
reported to authorities; this is the law's requirement, and everybody with knowledge of
the facts has to obey it. The alternative is imprisonment or fines. However, few people if
any expect that individual to be reported to the church, if he or she is a church member, in
order for the church to be able to act with responsibility no less than the civil authorities.
The church's failure to act, where possible, creates a situation in which people give to
Caesar that which belongs to Caesar, but God does not receive what belongs to Him.
Fear of legal punishment proves stronger than love toward God and His church.

3. Justice is done as the Word of God requires.
4. The church does not lose God's favor and blessings, but enjoys them. Ellen G. White writes that "for one man's sin the displeasure of God will rest upon His church till the transgression is searched out and put away."\(^1\)

5. The church continually receives spiritual light from heaven; the alternative is dreadful. Ellen G. White warns: "In His dealings with His people in the past the Lord shows the necessity of purifying the church from wrongs. One sinner may diffuse darkness that will exclude the light of God from the entire congregation."\(^2\)

6. The unity of the church is maintained. Again a statement of Ellen G. White is helpful: "If there were no church discipline and government, the church would go to fragments."\(^3\)

7. Protection is ensured for the church's good name, credibility, and influence in the community.

8. The church's growth, both numerical and spiritual, is promoted. Ellen G. White notes: "Development and discipline are essential if we would see growth and prosperity in every church."\(^4\) Referring to disciplinary actions needed to be taken in local congregations, Fowler writes: "This is an area of discipline that is neglected far too much in the Adventist Church today, yet, if handled properly, it would be a great strength and a powerful incentive to church growth."\(^5\)

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\(^1\) Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 497.


\(^3\) Ibid., 428.

\(^4\) Ellen G. White, "Individual Responsibility in the Church," 1.

\(^5\) Fowler, 128.
9. The wrongdoer is helped to repent and change his or her attitude and life.

10. Church discipline is a deterrent for similar occurrences, thus guarding the church against corruption and apostasy. Paul puts it this way: "Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear" (1 Tim 5:20). We know and agree that a child-abuser must be isolated in order for the abused child and others to be protected; then why not isolate a church-abuser through church discipline in order to protect the church?

**The Ultimate Goal Is to Save**

Before the close of the time of probation, God's judgments have a corrective purpose; God uses them because He loves His creatures and wants to bring them back to a loyal relationship with Him. The Bible says: "When thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness" (Isa 26:9). "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent" (Rev 3:19). Rebuke is a means whereby God works in order to develop in His children a Christ-like character. Not always does He speak to people directly, but mostly by the instruments of His grace, His consecrated servants. The psalmist says: "Let the righteous smite me; it shall be a kindness: and let him reprove me; it shall be an excellent oil, which shall not break my head: for yet my prayer also shall be in their calamities" (Ps 141:5). Whether a loving rebuke will help a person or not depends on the spirit with which it is met. Ellen G. White notes: "There are many who, when they are reproved, think it praiseworthy if they receive the rebuke without becoming impatient; but how few take reproof with gratitude of heart and bless those who seek to save them from pursuing an evil course."

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Regarding Abigail's role in correcting King David, a commentary says: "The reproof of a friend will prove a blessing if accepted in the right spirit. He only who is willing to lay down his life for his brother, if need be, is properly equipped to offer reproof to an erring brother... Abigail proved herself to be a faithful friend by her tactful reproof of David's conduct."¹

Reasonable discipline is redemptive, from the childhood to the last moments of one's life. It is a duty of the physical parents and God's loving dealing with His children. The author of the book of Hebrews confirms these thoughts:

> For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons. Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live? For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but he for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness. Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby. (Heb 12:6-11)

Shortly before His crucifixion, speaking about His disciples in His high-priestly prayer, Jesus said:

> And now I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to thee. Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are. While I was with them in the world, I kept them in thy name: those that thou gavest me I have kept, and none of them is lost, but the son of perdition; that the scripture might be fulfilled. (John 17:11, 12)

Three basic things can be learned from these words of Jesus:

1. An important goal of the church’s work is that “none of them” (church members) be lost.

2. The task of the church means keeping the disciples in the Father’s name.

3. There is a point which should not be ignored: despite all good will and faithful work, some losses are still possible.

The Great Commission (see Matt 28:19, 20, and Mark 16:15) requires to win souls and to make disciples for Christ – this should be the permanent aim of any Christian congregation. The already converted persons, now disciples of Jesus, need to be kept in the Father’s name that none of them be lost. This is a ministry as important as winning them. Yet, as shown above, a dreadful possibility still exists, some disciples may be lost. When God’s servants correctly and conscientiously do their work, losses are minimized, and the faithful servants are innocent of the blood of those who choose to be lost.

Keeping in mind these thoughts, we can distinguish three sides of the work of evangelism: (1) Winning souls from the world (Matt 28:19, 20); (2) keeping them in the family of God (John 17:11, 12); and (3) reclaiming those who leave the church (Jas 5:19, 20).

It is necessary to again emphasize that keeping the converted disciples is as important as winning them. Keeping is nurture, is aiding the disciples to grow spiritually. It is not a failure to honestly acknowledge real losses, while attempting to preserve their formal membership by all means. Compromise of standards can lead to a decrease in the church’s spirituality. Undesirable reactions can be the loss of some members, and the creation of splinter groups.
Bringing forth fruit is the commission the church received from its Lord Jesus Christ. One only can bring forth fruit by abiding in Christ (see John 15:4). Jesus is not satisfied with the church merely bringing forth fruit; the fruit should remain.

In order to have healthy congregations with spiritual members and to avoid losses due to people leaving the church or to absolutely necessary disciplinary actions, much more serious attention must be given to the preparation of the candidates for baptism. As Holmes puts it: “The catechetical instruction that leads to faith prior to baptism must become more rigorous as society becomes more pagan. Furthermore, the church must not hesitate to make clear the moral and ethical expectations of God for the converted life. Failure to do so constitutes heresy of a fundamental nature.”¹

It is a mistake to think of church discipline only in terms of corrective measures. To a certain degree, discipline is the entire process of working with an erring church member, because its purpose is to bring the person back to a disciplined or orderly conduct from which that person has departed. Thus, the notion of church discipline has a double meaning:

1. A positive one, which is orderly deportment in harmony with the teachings of the Word of God

2. A negative or restorative one, which leads a person back to a disciplined spiritual life (this work can be painful, sad, or even accompanied by undesirable actions by the congregation, but it does serve the eternal interests of the erring person).

¹ Holmes, 65.
In order for churches to be balanced in their understanding of church membership, of acceptance, and disciplining, they need to regard this valuable statement of Ellen G. White: “Salvation is not to be baptized, not to have our names upon the church books, not to preach the truth. But it is a living union with Jesus Christ to be renewed in heart, doing the works of Christ in faith and labor of love, in patience, meekness, and hope.”

1 Ellen G. White, Evangelism, 319.
SECTION II: THE QUESTIONNAIRE ON CHURCH

DISCIPLINE AND GRACE

General information about the respondent:
Gender: Male _____ Female _____
Age group: Under 20 _____ 20-35 _____ 35-50 _____ Over 50 _____
Year of baptism: _____
Current responsibility in the church: ______________________________
Born in a Seventh-day Adventist family? Yes _____ No _____
If not born in a Seventh-day Adventist family, the religion of your parents at your birth:
Father __________________________ Mother __________________________

Please place a check mark in the box which better corresponds with your conviction:

1. Church membership is important for the salvation of the individual.
   Strongly disagree □ Disagree □ Unsure □ Agree □ Strongly agree □

2. God gave the local church authority to discipline unfaithful members.
   Strongly disagree □ Disagree □ Unsure □ Agree □ Strongly agree □

3. Do you agree with the way this church has handled discipline in the past?
   Strongly disagree □ Disagree □ Unsure □ Agree □ Strongly agree □

4. Do you think church members have been indifferent to those under church discipline?
   Strongly disagree □ Disagree □ Unsure □ Agree □ Strongly agree □

5. Should church members manifest love toward those who have been disciplined?
   Strongly disagree □ Disagree □ Unsure □ Agree □ Strongly agree □

6. Do you believe Matt 18:15-20 is to be followed at all times?
   Strongly disagree □ Disagree □ Unsure □ Agree □ Strongly agree □

7. Is it appropriate for the congregation to consider how similar disciplinary cases have been handled in the past, locally or in other Seventh-day Adventist congregations?
   Strongly disagree □ Disagree □ Unsure □ Agree □ Strongly agree □
8. Is it incorrect for the church to give church responsibilities to members who openly break God’s commandments?

   Strongly disagree □  Disagree □  Unsure □  Agree □  Strongly agree □

9. Do you believe a person who falls into adultery should be excluded immediately?

   Strongly disagree □  Disagree □  Unsure □  Agree □  Strongly agree □

10. Do you think the church should take disciplinary actions, when its members refuse to repent, in cases of:

   A. Lawsuits between church members?

      Strongly disagree □  Disagree □  Unsure □  Agree □  Strongly agree □

   B. Eating on the Sabbath days in public restaurants?

      Strongly disagree □  Disagree □  Unsure □  Agree □  Strongly agree □

   C. Persistently wearing jewelry?

      Strongly disagree □  Disagree □  Unsure □  Agree □  Strongly agree □

   D. Unfaithfulness in returning to God tithes and offerings?

      Strongly disagree □  Disagree □  Unsure □  Agree □  Strongly agree □

   E. Gambling?

      Strongly disagree □  Disagree □  Unsure □  Agree □  Strongly agree □

   F. Nonattendance of church services?

      Strongly disagree □  Disagree □  Unsure □  Agree □  Strongly agree □

11. Do you believe disciplinary action should vary from case to case?

    Strongly disagree □  Disagree □  Unsure □  Agree □  Strongly agree □

12. In cases of sincere repentance, the church should still discipline a member, to maintain its good name in the community.

    Strongly disagree □  Disagree □  Unsure □  Agree □  Strongly agree □
13. Do you think concern for an individual's protection ought to have preeminence over other interests of the church?

Strongly disagree □ Disagree □ Unsure □ Agree □ Strongly agree □

14. Properly practiced, church discipline has a positive impact on the church's spiritual development.

Strongly disagree □ Disagree □ Unsure □ Agree □ Strongly agree □

15. The restoration of a church member to an orderly conduct is the ultimate goal of the church discipline.

Strongly disagree □ Disagree □ Unsure □ Agree □ Strongly agree □
SECTION III: TABLES AND GRAPHS REGARDING
THE SEMINAR

Table 1: Schedule for and Attendance at the Seminar

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson Number</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Time, p.m.</th>
<th>Duration in Minutes</th>
<th>Attendance (Persons)</th>
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<td>3</td>
<td>July 14</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>7.10-8.03</td>
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<td>August 4</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>7.05-8.20</td>
<td>75</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>August 11</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>7.00-8.40</td>
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Table 2: General Assessment Before and After the Seminar
In Mean Values and Quality of Changes

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<tr>
<th>Question</th>
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<th>After</th>
<th>Plus</th>
<th>Minus</th>
<th>Quality of Change</th>
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<td>-</td>
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<td>3. Agree past discipline</td>
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<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.125</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>Improvement</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Indifferent to those disciplined</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>Aggravation</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Love toward those disciplined</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>Aggravation</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Matt 18:15-20 always</td>
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<td>7. Similar disciplinary cases</td>
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<td>8. Incorrect assign responsibilities</td>
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<td>-</td>
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<td>0.475</td>
<td>Improvement</td>
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Total mean values:

- Improvements = 1.625 (52%)
- Uniformity = 0 (0%)
- Aggravations = 1.5 (48%)

Difference in favor of improvements:

- 0.125 (4%)

A question-by-question comparison:

- Improvements = 11 (55%)
- Uniformity = 1 (5%)
- Aggravations = 8 (40%)

Difference in favor of improvements:

- 55% - 40% = 15%
Table 3: General Assessment by Age Groups

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<th>Question Number</th>
<th>Under 20</th>
<th>20-35</th>
<th>35-50</th>
<th>Over 50</th>
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Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for the Age Group under 20

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Table 5: Descriptive Statistics for the Age Group 20-35

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Table 6: Descriptive Statistics for the Age Group 35-50

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Table 7: Descriptive Statistics for the Age Group over 50

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Graph 1: General Assessment Before and After the Seminar

1. Membership and salvation
2. Authority to discipline
3. Agree past discipline
4. Indifferent to those disciplined
5. Love toward those disciplined
6. Matt 18:15-20 always
7. Similar disciplinary cases
8. Incorrect assign responsibilities
9. Adultery exclude immediately
10A. Discipline for lawsuits
10B. Discipline restaurants Sabbath
10C. Discipline wearing jewelry
10D. Discipline not tithing
10E. Discipline gambling
10F. Discipline non-attendance
11. Discipline case by case
12. Discipline despite repentance
13. Individual's protection first
14. Discipline positive impact
15. Restoration ultimate goal

Expected Answer  Mean Value Before  Mean Value After

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Graph 2: General Assessment by Age Groups

1. Membership and salvation
2. Authority to discipline
3. Agree past discipline
4. Indifferent to those disciplined
5. Love toward those disciplined
6. Matt 18:15-20 always
7. Similar disciplinary cases
8. Incorrect assign responsibilities
9. Adultery exclude immediately
10A. Discipline for lawsuits
10B. Discipline restaurants Sabbath
10C. Discipline wearing jewelry
10D. Discipline not tithing
10E. Discipline gambling
10F. Discipline non-attendance
11. Discipline case by case
12. Discipline despite repentance
13. Individual's protection first
14. Discipline positive impact
15. Restoration ultimate goal

□ Expected Answer ■ 20-35 □ 35-50 □ Over 50

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