

Albert Mohler, president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary calls church discipline “the missing mark.” He says, “The decline of church discipline is perhaps the most visible failure of the contemporary church.”<sup>1</sup> I think he is right. John Dagg claimed that, “When discipline leaves a church, Christ goes with it.” Hardly anyone practices church discipline anymore, even though it is plainly taught all over Scripture.

Of course it is good to remind ourselves that this has not always been the case. Baptist historian Greg Wills documents that between 1781 and 1860, Baptists excommunicated more than 40,000 members in Georgia alone.<sup>2</sup> Between 1845 and 1900, Baptists in the South disciplined about 1.3 million members and expelled about 650,000. However, by 1950, the practice of church discipline was only a fading memory.<sup>3</sup>

According to one recent Southern Baptist study, the typical church has 233 members with only 70 present on a Sunday morning. What does this convey about Christianity to the world?<sup>4</sup> Is that a good representation of Jesus? At the 2021 annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention, there were 14,089,947 members listed on membership rolls, but only 4,439,797 present on an average Sunday.<sup>5</sup> What happened to ten million people? Our membership has become meaningless.

Historically, when Protestants spoke of true and healthy churches, they thought of three marks. As early as 1561, the Belgic Confession says that the three marks are right preaching, right administration of the ordinances, and right practice of discipline.<sup>6</sup>

If this is so clear in the Bible and Reformation history, why don't churches practice it? Why has hardly anyone experienced it in the last sixty years? As with all downgrades, there are a host of reasons. Churches have become pragmatic. They do whatever works. Their sole focus is too often the bottom right number. How can we gain more people and more money, even if that means compromising the clear teaching of Scripture. Church leaders lack courage and are fearful that people may leave. Some prideful pastors like being able to say they have a large membership,

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<sup>1</sup> Mohler in *Polity*, 43.

<sup>2</sup> Greg Wills, “The Church: Baptists and Their Churches in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” in Dever, *Polity*, 26.

<sup>3</sup> Gregory A. Wills, “Southern Baptists and Church Discipline,” in *Restoring Integrity*, 179. One Baptist historian said of 19th C Georgia Baptists: “They placed discipline at the center of church life . . . . Not even preaching the gospel was more important to them than the exercise of discipline.” *Restoring* 31.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Dever, *Understanding Church Leadership* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2016), 41

<sup>5</sup> <https://sbcannualmeeting.net/>.

<sup>6</sup> R. Stanton Norman, “The Reestablishment of Proper Church Discipline,” in *Restoring Integrity in Baptist Churches*, 202. The historic Baptist confession of faith, The Abstract of Principles of 1858 says this in article XIV on the church: “The Lord Jesus is the head of the Church, which is composed of all His true disciples, and in Him is invested supremely all power for its government. According to His commandment, Christians are to associate themselves into particular societies or churches; and to each of these churches He hath given needful authority for administering that order, discipline and worship which He hath appointed. The regular officers of a Church are Bishops or Elders, and Deacons.”

regardless of whether or not they actually come on Sundays. People are biblically illiterate. They simply don't know their Bibles. Our cultural air is individualistic and anti-authoritarian. We want it our way. Nobody can tell us what to do. We have misdefined love. Many Baptist entities went liberal. America is more and more secularized. We fear being judgmental. Perhaps in rare cases, people have seen church discipline abused or mishandled. Whatever the reasons, what is clear is that there has been a seeping accommodation and a creeping compromise in the church.

First Corinthians chapter five is a neglected chapter of the Bible. It reads,

*It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."*

Keep in mind as we walk through this neglected chapter that it is written to a local church. This is not written to elders, or church staff. This is written to the local church. First, what was going on in Corinth? Verse one says, "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife." There was a member of the church sleeping with his step-mother. Paul implicates the church. He is not rebuking the man here but the church. He says, "you are tolerating something that even pagans don't tolerate!" How counter-cultural is that? Today, tolerance is the great virtue! One can't disagree with anyone anymore, but here the Holy Spirit rebukes them for being too tolerant. Jesus does the same thing in his letters to the churches in Revelation: "I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols" (Rev 2:20). Paul and Jesus rebuke the church for tolerating what God does not tolerate.

Interestingly, the word for pagan is Gentile (*ethne*). Corinthians were Gentiles but here they are distinguished from the Gentiles. When Gentiles become Christians, they are no longer gentiles. They are the people of God. They are the circumcision (Phil 3:3). In 1 Corinthians 10:18, Paul speaks of Israel according to the flesh (*kata sarka*). Then at the end of that chapter he speaks of three different groups: Jews, Greeks, and the Church of God (1 Cor 10:32). The church is a third

race of sorts, no longer Jews or Gentiles (cf. 1 Cor 9:20-21). Gentile converts are no longer Gentiles. They are the people of God, Israel according to the Spirit (Gal 6:16, 1 Pet 2:9-10).<sup>7</sup>

These Corinthian Gentiles are now separate from Gentiles. God has always maintained a distinct and separate people in order to display his character. He separated Noah and his family then Abraham and his family, then the nation of Israel from the other nations, and now the church from the world.<sup>8</sup>

How should the church have responded to this incestuous man? Three ways: first, they should remove him from the church. First Corinthians 5:2-5 reads,

*And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.*

They were boasting about their tolerance but should have been mourning over his sin. This is the right posture toward sin. We don't tolerate unrepentant sin, but we also don't stand above others as if we are any better. We mourn. Sin is terrible. It is destructive. Any time we see sin, our hearts ought to break. We should mourn because we have been there too. We have been ensnared as well. "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted" (Gal 6:1). As we correct others we are to be meek, forbearing, large-hearted, gentle, courteous, and considerate. It is the opposite of being irritable, rude, or abrasive.<sup>9</sup>

Verse two tells the church to remove him from among you. The NLT says "remove this man from your fellowship." He says when you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus, remove him from the local church. Do you hear the parallels with Jesus' teaching from the previous chapter? Jesus says, "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them" (Matt 18:17-20). When you are assembled, gathered in the name of Jesus, remove him.

Paul teaches the same thing in 2 Thessalonians 3:6: "Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us." When there is serious, outward and unrepentant sin in the local church, the Word of God teaches that we are to assemble in the name of Jesus to remove them from the church. "When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and

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<sup>7</sup> For a biblical theology of the people of God, see my *God's Chosen People* ().

<sup>8</sup> Dever, *Understanding Church Leadership*, 42.

<sup>9</sup> Joel R. Beeke and Nick Thompson, *Pastors and Their Critics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing), 128.

my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord” (1 Cor 5:4-5). This is the job of the congregation, not the staff or elders. This happens in member meetings not in a church conference room. This practice occurs not in an elder meeting but in the assembly.<sup>10</sup> Listen to Benjamin Keach, writing in 1697: “And that the Power of the Keys is in the Church, appears to me from Mat. 18. If he will not hear the church; it is not said, if he will not hear the Elder, or Elders. As also that of the Apostle, in directing the Church to cast out the Incestuous Person, he doth not give his Counsel to the Elder or Elders of the Church, but to the Church.”<sup>11</sup>

Paul describes their act of excommunication as delivering him over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh. Those outside of the church are in the domain of the devil. According to Ephesians 2:2, before Christ we were following the prince of the power of the air. First John 5:19 says the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. Second Corinthians 4:4 says he is the god of this age. The church is the colony of the kingdom of Christ and the world is the domain of the devil. This is a turning over of this man to the devil's dominion.<sup>12</sup> It is dangerous outside the church. I once heard someone say the church is like Noah's ark. It can sometimes stink in there, but it will save your life.

This is similar to what Jesus said in Matt 18:17: “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” A Gentile is one outside the community, a non-Christian. In the circle, Jesus is Lord. Outside the circle, Satan is. When a church excommunicates a member, they are not saying the person is not saved. One cannot know the heart. That's between him and God. No, rather it is a "no confidence " vote on his profession of faith because of his lack of repentance.<sup>13</sup> We are saying that because his life is now at odds with Jesus, we can no longer affirm his profession of faith. As Jesus says in the sermon on the mount, not all who say “Lord, Lord” are actually saved, but the one who does the will of the Father (Matt 7:21-23). If they won't listen to fellow members or leaders, and will not turn back to the Lord, we must conclude that they are not regenerate. The church is to have a regenerate membership. There is a front door and a back door. If you can put someone out, that presupposes you have put someone in. Both are congregational acts.

What is the goal? “So that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord” (1 Cor. 5:5). The goal is their salvation. The goal of church discipline is always remediation, restoration, repentance, and salvation. It is not retributive but restorative. There was a doctrinal issue in Ephesus and listen how Paul tells Timothy to handle them: “holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme” (1 Tim 1:19-20). The goal is that they will learn, turn from error, and come back.

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<sup>10</sup> See Leeman, *Don't Fire*, 112-113.

<sup>11</sup> Keach, “The Glory of a True Church, And Its Discipline Display'd,” in *Polity*, 71.

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Leeman, *Don't Fire Your Church Members* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 112.

<sup>13</sup> Dever and Dunlop, *The Compelling Community*, 181.

In Paul's writings, flesh and Spirit refer to those outside Christ or in Christ. The destruction of the flesh means his rebellious nature that is opposed to God will be conquered.<sup>14</sup> Just a couple chapters earlier Paul wrote, "But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ" (1 Cor 3:1). Romans 7:5 says, "For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death." The hope for this incestuous man is the reality of Galatians 5:24: "And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." The goal is the defeat of the rule of sin in his life.<sup>15</sup> This is for his salvation before the last day.

Therefore, this is an act of love! This is an act of love for the wanderer. This is an act of love for God as we obey his Word even when it is hard and so countercultural. Our goal is to bring him back. If anyone wanders from the truth and a member brings him back, whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death (Jam 5:19). We want to prompt and provoke self-examination. "If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed" (2 Thess 3:14). We want them to see the seriousness and desperation of the situation they are in and the surpassing value of the church and life in Christ. That's why Paul calls the church to remove him.

The second response keep the church pure. Verse 6-8 read,

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

In the year 2021, we are all cognizant about the spread of the Coronavirus, but we should be much more concerned about the spread of sin in the church. A little leaven leavens the whole lump. Paul alludes to the Passover and Feast of Unleavened bread. All leaven was to be removed from the house during Passover. The slightest bit has the potential to ruin the whole batch of dough. It's the same with unaddressed sin. It contaminates if left unchecked. The whole church will be infected by unrepentant sin. The pure dough will turn sour. And just like Jesus, Paul cares about unity and holiness in the church. In verse 7, he tells the assembled church to cleanse out the old leaven that they may be a new lump. The church must be kept pure.

This is an act of love for the church. We do not want the leaven to spread and spoil the whole batch. Paul is saying toleration of sin leads to further sinfulness. Keep the church pure by maintaining a regenerate church membership. Historically, Baptists were known as "zealots for church purity." Nowadays the thought doesn't even cross the minds of most Christians. We passively shrug it off. Paul says be active and vigilant about the purity of the church. We must recover the church's calling as a holy people, a people set apart from the world, a people who not only calls Jesus Lord, but follows him as such. Keep the church pure.

The third call is to judge those inside the church, not outside. There seems to have been some confusion. This wasn't the first letter Paul wrote to Corinth. Verses 9-13 read,

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<sup>14</sup> Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 86.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2018), 111-112.

*I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside.  
“Purge the evil person from among you.*

In a previous letter he had told them to disassociate from people who claimed to be Christians but were living in willful unrepentant sin, but they took him to mean anyone in sin, even non-Christians. Paul therefore clarifies that that his not his intention and would be impossible anyway. You don't worry about judging the world. God will take care of that. He says you need to disassociate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is in outward and unrepentant sin. The NLT paraphrases it this way: “It isn't my responsibility to judge outsiders, but it certainly is your responsibility to judge those inside the church who are sinning” (1 Cor 5:12). Imagine how much more powerful the church would be if we cleaned up our own house first? If we focused on judging ourselves more and the world less.

When we think of church discipline, we need to think of more than just excommunication. We are tasked with what has been called formative and corrective discipline. Formative discipline should be happening all the time through accountability, exhortation, prayer, repentance, conflict resolution, reconciliation, reading the Word, discipleship groups, home groups, community, corporate worship, and more. Formative discipline is just part of discipleship. The idea is that we are in this thing together, as a family, and as we stray – as we all do – prone to wander, Lord I feel it – we have brothers and sisters who will show us our fault and win us back (Matt 18:15); who will bring us home from wandering. (Jam 5:19). Who will gently restore us when caught in sin (Gal 6:1). Who will exhort one another daily so that we won't fall away (Heb 3:12-13). Who will not neglect to meet together but will encourage one another as we see the day drawing near (Heb 10:24-25). We want a church full of members following 1 Thessalonians 5:14: “And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.” Leeman says “That is what discipline is all about: helping one another grow in Christlikeness by correcting sin.”<sup>16</sup>

This passage is not the end of the story on this incestuous man. Second Corinthians 2:6-9 says,

*For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything.*

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<sup>16</sup> *Church Discipline*, 48.

The man was restored! They forgave and restored him. This is the goal. An oft-overlooked detail is that Paul says the act of discipline was done by the majority. If there was a majority, then there was a minority. There was regenerate church membership. There was a clearly identifiable body of people and they had a way of determining a majority. There was a list! Which is why historically churches have voted in members and voted out members. Now, voting has a bad rap, often for good reason. One Sunday the preacher asked, I asked “Can I get an amen?” The church replied, “We’ll take a vote on Wednesday.” The vote is actually filled with significance though. The vote is congregational affirmation. The majority of the church must “agree.” Jesus taught that when it comes to church discipline, “If two of you agree on earth” (Matt 18:19). It is worth repeating that this is not written to church leaders but to the church. As New Testament scholar, Thomas Schreiner writes, “It is noteworthy that Paul does not call upon the leaders of the church to make the decision about excommunicating the offender. Instead, the entire church is to render a judgment to exclude him.”<sup>17</sup> Commentator Gordon Fee concurs, writing, “It must be effected in the context of the gathered assembly.”<sup>18</sup>

What does this look like practically? It means Jesus gave the church the keys of the Kingdom which is the authority to admit and exclude, bind and loose, open and close. The congregation’s job is to guard the gospel, receive members into the church and remove members when necessary. Ideally, this happens in membership meetings. The vast majority of those meetings will be hearing testimonies of new members and voting in unison. In a transient community, many members who have moved away will be voted out, but sometimes discipline will have to happen.

How do we treat a person that we have to discipline? What is our posture toward them? In Matthew 18, Jesus said let them be to you as a pagan and tax collector. Here in verse eleven, Paul says don’t even eat with such a one! Remember that in the ancient world, the table was significant. It was a sign of welcome and fellowship (cf. Gal 2:11-14). Our posture is no longer as if nothing has happened. We are friendly, gracious, and humble, but we now have a posture of warning and concern toward them. Flippancy will mislead them about the seriousness of their situation.

We want those disciplined sitting under the Word, but they are no longer welcome to the Lord’s Table. One of the main ways a church exercises the keys is through the ordinances: baptism and communion. Balthasar Hubmaier, an early Baptist born in 1480, says this: “For in water baptism the church uses the key of admitting and loosing, but in the Supper the key of excluding, binding, and locking away, as Christ promises and gives to it the power of the forgiveness of sins.”<sup>19</sup> We are baptized into the church and show our continued faith by participation in the Lord’s Supper. Baptism is the birth certificate and communion is the passport.<sup>20</sup>

Theologian Jeremy Kimble writes, “As a church gathers in local assemblies, the church is made visible through baptizing professing believers, bringing them into membership, and then constantly celebrating this solidarity shared around the gospel through the partaking of the Lord’s Supper. Baptism is the initiating oath-sign of the new covenant, and the Lord’s Supper is the

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, 111.

<sup>18</sup> Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 203.

<sup>19</sup> Jeremy M. Kimble, *40 Questions about Church Membership and Discipline* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2017), 178.

<sup>20</sup> Dever and Dunlop, *The Compelling Community*, 209.

renewing oath-sign of the new covenant.”<sup>21</sup> Leeman says, “Membership is a covenant between believers whereby they affirm one another's professions of faith through the ordinances and agree to oversee one another's discipleship to Christ.”<sup>22</sup> Elsewhere, he writes, “The ordinances present the world with a picture of who the church's members are.”<sup>23</sup> This is why historically Protestants have “fenced the table.” If someone has been removed due to unrepentant sin, they are no longer welcome to the Lord’s Table. They are ex-communicated. Ministers often fence the table by inviting anyone who is a member in good standing with a like-minded local church to come to the table. “In good standing” means not under church discipline. Mark Dever writes, “Essentially, the membership of a church is composed of those who are regularly admitted to the Lord's Table.”<sup>24</sup>

First Corinthians five really could not be more clear. Why is it so neglected in teaching and practice then? Because people object to it. What are some of the main objections to the practice of church discipline? Much could be said, but let me mention four popular ones.

First, we may get sued. We may, but obedience to Jesus matters more. Second, church discipline is unloving. Exactly wrong. It is biblical love. Hebrews 12 says God disciplines those whom he loves. Proverbs says parents who do not discipline actually hate their children (Prov 13:24). We do this because of love: love for God so we obey his Word, love for the church to keep it pure, love for the offender because we want to see them repent. It would be the opposite of love to just let them go the wrong way. Third, aren't we all sinners? Yes, absolutely. We are not talking about falling into sin, as we do. We all stumble in many ways (Jam 3:2). We are not talking about being excommunicated for greed or gossip or lust or pride. We are talking about serious, ongoing, outward, unrepentant sin. Christians sin but we hate it and fight it. We put it to death (Rom 8:13). Fourth, didn't Jesus say “judge not.” He did, in Matt 7, but he goes on to qualify it as we saw above. We are to judge ourselves first, then we are able to judge others.

Why then, should we practice church discipline? Eight reasons, at a minimum. First, the Bible explicitly teaches it all over the place. Second, as we saw in the last chapter, Jesus explicitly commands it. Third, it exposes sin. Fourth, it keeps the church pure. Fifth, it strengthens our corporate witness. Sixth, it shows God-like love. Seventh, it takes holiness seriously. Eighth, it is for their good.

Church should strive to be founded on the rock that is the Word of Christ. Churches and Christians have failed the Lord in this regard, but we are assured of God’s grace because of Christ. Earlier I quoted but didn’t unpack 1 Corinthians 5:7: “Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.” We are to cleanse out the old leaven to be a new lump as you really are. We are to become what we are through Christ, our unblemished, pure, holy Passover lamb who was sacrificed in our place. Judgment will pass over us because the lamb of God bore the punishment we deserve. Why do we do this? Because Jesus, our Passover lamb, is worthy of our obedience.

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<sup>21</sup> Kimble, *40 Questions*, 66.

<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Leeman, *Understanding Church Discipline* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2016), 27; also Jonathan Leeman, *Understanding the Congregation's Authority* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2016), 34.

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Leeman, *Understanding Church Discipline* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2016), 27.

<sup>24</sup> Dever, “Regaining Meaningful Membership” in *Restoring Integrity in Baptist Churches*, 51.