

The Means of Grace

Fellowship and Church Discipline

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Acts 2:42

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you [singular] bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

Truly, I say to you, whatever you [plural] bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

Matthew 16:19; 18:18

The Fellowship of the...?

Nine companions thrown together by fate to find a way to destroy the one ring of power. A group of guys **tailgating** before the game on Saturday. Three close buddies climbing a **14er** together. Women in Nepal all gathering by the local stream to wash their **clothes**. Family coming together on **Thanksgiving** or Christmas. A meeting at the local **Rotary Club**. A foursome taking the long trek across the pond to play St. **Andrews**. A group of men lining up behind the pigskin to “**win one for the Gipper**.” Friends hanging out in

Starbucks and have a Bible Study (ok, how about Ziggy?). A youth group going to an Amy Grant concert at Red Rocks (ok, how about Stephen Curtis Chapman?). The close intimate friendship of David and Jonathan. A 50 year marriage between a husband and wife. Having a potluck after Sunday service. A personal relationship with Jesus. How many, if any, of these things would you define as *fellowship*?

Fellowship: The Binding Together Of One Another in Christ

This will be our last week discussing the Means of Grace, especially from a supernatural perspective of Christian warfare—an emphasis that is there in the Bible, but not taken as seriously as it should be even among those who do believe the means of grace are the power of God to save and to sanctify his people. Although, when you think about even what I just said, it seems obviously implicit in the whole point of there being some kind of means that God uses to save and to sanctify people, since those are themselves great supernatural works of God.

Today we want to look at *fellowship*. We learn in **Acts 2:42** that this was a very important thing to the first Christians in Jerusalem. “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and *the fellowship*, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” So let’s try to make some progress at answering my question by looking at the word.

Our English word “*fellowship*” comes from a 13th century word *feolahschipe*, meaning “*companionship*.” It is a compound of “*fellow*” (a companion or comrade; a partner, one who shares with another) + “*ship*” (quality, condition of being). It is the word Wycliffe chose to translate the Greek *koinonia*, a word we have seen in our study of the means of grace before, when we discussed the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper also called Communion. “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a *participation* in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a *participation* in the body of Christ?” (**1Cor 10:16**). “*Participation*” is *koinonia*, also translated as “*communion*,” or in the Young’s Literal: “*fellowship*.”

With that in mind, the answer to my question depends on *what kind of fellowship* we have in mind. There is certainly a secular use of the word; in fact the root (*koinos*) can carry the connotation of “*profane*.” When we think of

“profane,” we usually think of *profanity*—and therefore something unholy. But something profane is technically not unholy, but simply **common or secular** or belonging to the sphere of this realm—the earth. When the Greeks shared **property** or other things, they had them in common—hence, *koinos*. It was something accessible and permissible to all. The Jewish usage of the word wasn’t a whole lot different.¹ And in fact, the NT uses *koinonia* on several occasions to refer to “**contributions**” collected in the worship service that will be dispersed to other saints in need (**Rom 15:26; 2Cor 8:4; 9:13**; cf. **Heb 13:16**).

But more often, *koinonia* is a word that adds this common sharing of material goods to **a relationship with another person** (when you give to the saints in the preceding texts, it is based on some kind of intimate fellowship you have with them even if you have never met them). **Common enterprises** (like a quest to take the ring of power into the fires of Mt. Doom), **legal relations, business partnerships**. These are all *koinonia*. **Marriage** is probably the most comprehensive form of *koinonia*. But in the Greek

¹ Friedrich Hauck, “Κοινός, Κοινωνός, Κοινωνέω, Κοινωνία, Συγκοινωνός, Συγκοινωνέω, Κοινωνικός, Κοινώω,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 789–91.

world, **friendship** was the supreme expression of fellowship (remember, marriages were often arranged and not rooted in *eros*-love like we have today). One dictionary explains that for Plato, *koinonia* “**acquires its greatest systematic significance**” in friendship and actually forms the basis of *sōtēria*—“**salvation,**” which for him was **the preservation of individuals and the whole cosmos, including men and gods.**² This *koinonia* has its most intimate moments in **offering sacrifices to the gods**, where both men and the gods eat together at table. And that’s the idea going into the Lord’s Supper, hence Communion the at the center of fellowship in the NT.

You can immediately hear then **why the NT authors chose to use those words to describe the salvific relationship** we have with God, especially in the Supper. Here are a few verses that get the point across, “**That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you ... indeed our fellowship is *with the Father* and with his Son Jesus Christ**” (1Jn 1:3). “**God is faithful, by whom you were called into *the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord***” (1Cor 1:9). “**The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and *the fellowship of the Holy Spirit* be with**

² Ibid., 799.

you all” (2Cor 13:14). And then of course we have that verse with communion: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a *fellowship* in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a *fellowship* in the body of Christ?” (1Cor 10:16). So biblically speaking, we have fellowship with the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three persons individually, yet one God.

A dissertation done in the late 70s on *koinonia* has some interesting things to say in terms of helping us understand what is really meant by the word in as the NT authors use it. First, “*Koinōnia*, as the New Testament sees it, does not originate in man but in God.”³ This is perhaps the key insight to understanding what we mean when we talk about fellowship *from a Christian perspective*. It is of *supernatural origin*. It isn’t just us getting together to do things. That makes sense, given that we are able to actually have fellowship with the living God—a truly mind-blowing idea if ever there was one. And yet, *koinonia* does not end with our fellowship with God. Due to the mystical union we are all in, together, with Christ, “It is not a random coming together of men because they share a common interest; it is

³ George Panikulam, *Koinōnia in the New Testament: A Dynamic Expression of Christian Life*, vol. 85, *Analecta Biblica* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1979), 140.

the coming together of those whom God has called into *koinōnia* with Himself through His Son and in him with one another.”⁴

What does this **divine initiative**, this movement of God towards his called out elect do? It, “**Communicates to him the divine life [supernatural] and transforms him and elevates him to the divine sphere [supernatural]** .⁵ These, again, are deeply supernatural, metaphysical, mystical works that happen through fellowship. **Calling** man is that initial voice of God creating life from the dead. It’s like Lazarus being called by name by Jesus while he lay dead for several days in his tomb. To be called by name is what God does when he enters into a covenant with you—a covenant of grace. He calls you, transforms you, makes you into a new creation, brings you to live, and pledges to be with you for the rest of eternity through the merits of his Son Jesus being credited to you as you believe in him.

Communicating the divine life is what Calvin would call “**union**” with Christ. It is an intimate fellowship the likes of which can only be thought of through analogies like a **husband and a wife** or a **head and a body**. They are

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ **Panikulam**, 140.

two, and yet they are one. Peter goes so far as to say that God's "*divine power* has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who *called* us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become *partakers of the divine nature*, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire" (2Pe 1:3-4).

To become *partakers of the divine nature*? This is a truly incomprehensible thought, one that pagans have long thought possible, but to their own destruction, because they do not think rightly about it. This is not becoming god, like a pantheist believes. This is not a spark of the divine like pagans speak about, where we are actually little gods ourselves who by our inherent nature are a piece of God or something like that. This is being brought, through adoption, through calling, through new life, into the life of God as a *branch grafted into the vine* becomes one with the vine. The Creator-creature distinction always remains. And yet, somehow, God communicates his very life to us through this fellowship.

As such, we are also *elevated to the divine sphere*. The divine sphere can be thought of in many ways. It is *the*

spiritual realm, something we were by our nature made to participate in because we have been given souls that are eternal and immaterial. Life goes on past the death of our bodies. It is *heaven*, the place where God resides. It is the invisible *kingdom of God*, through which his attributes are all manifested to the creation. The chief of these is love.

As I said earlier, you can show *koinonia* by responding to others with reciprocity and gifts, helping one another with needs they may have. Offerings of the church are thus called *koinonia*. However, John speaks about this in terms of faith and love.⁶ “We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we *love* the brothers. Whoever does not *love* abides in death” (1Jn 3:14). “By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not *practice righteousness* is not of God, nor is the one who does not *love* his brother” (3:10). This is said to be something that *comes from the other realm*, the divine sphere of God himself. And the world does not know it, because it belongs to the realm of the devil (2:15; 3:1; 17; etc.).

In this way, *how we behave and act* towards one another is a *chief element of fellowship*. “If we say we have

⁶ Panikulam, 141.

fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth, but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin” (1:6-7). So you can start to hear that fellowship is so much more than just getting together for a common purpose (a game, a bible-study, a concert, or whatever). It is actively acting in love towards one another in personal ways thanks to being in union with Christ.

It is important to understand that our **fellowship with God is the basis for how we act** towards one another. We have both fellowship with God and with one another, because God is saving many together to be one body, of which Christ is the head. The fellowship of saints **to encourage us in our sojourn, building us up, advancing in the kingdom, becoming ambassadors**, being a means of **advancing the gospel** (especially as the world sees your love for one another). If we do not want to act in love towards one another, it therefore follows that the love of God is not in us. This means that we have not been grafted into the vine. It means that we do not have fellowship with God, but are still of the world, held captive to the devil.

Church Discipline as a Means of Grace

This brings me to a transition in the sermon, for we cannot only talk about fellowship today. We must also discuss its compliment and opposite: [Church Discipline](#). Though this might sound funny or even wrong, church discipline has always been regarded as [a means of grace](#) in the Reformed World. Parsons writes in *Tabletalk*, “The means that God has appointed for our spiritual nourishment and growth in grace are what we call the ordinary means of grace—namely, the Word, prayer, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and, necessarily joined to these, the *church’s discipline* and care of souls.”⁷ Wayne Grudem says, “Because church discipline is a means by which the purity of the church is advanced and holiness of life is encouraged, we certainly should count it as a ‘means of grace’ as well.”⁸

Did you hear [what church discipline is for](#)? Paul Washer rightly says, “In the minds of many, the mere mention of church discipline evokes images of legalism, self-righteousness, hypocrisy, lovelessness, and cruelty.

⁷ [Burk Parsons](#), “[The Ordinary Means of Grace](#),” *Tabletalk* (Jun 2020).

⁸ [Wayne A. Grudem](#), *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 2004), 956.

Oftentimes, it is rebutted with other Scriptures taken out of context: ‘Judge not, that you be not judged [1Cor 5 and judge those inside church]’ (Matt 7:1) or ‘He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first’ (John 8:7).”⁹ If we do not understand what church discipline is and what it is for, then this will surely be our default, knee-jerk reaction to the term. He continues, “These negative opinions and rebuttals can often be traced to three distinct sources—past instances in which church discipline has been practiced in an unbiblical manner, a blatant ignorance of the Scriptures, or anti-biblical, carnal, and worldly opinions regarding what it means truly to love and demonstrate spiritual concern for another.”

Ignorance of Scripture is an obvious one, as is easily seen in how those passages are badly taken out of context. It is easily remedied, if the church would actually bother to teach on this subject. But this isn’t a popular thing to talk about, for a multitude of reasons. But I think in helping you think rightly about the subject, it can easily sway you to understand how it is both important and a vital means of grace. But that will take a bit of unpacking.

⁹ Paul Washer, *The Essential Means of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2020).

To me, while there are sadly few churches that even bother practicing church discipline in our day, some that have **abused it** badly, acting neither biblically nor in love. And of course that puts a very sour taste in people's mouths. But should we throw the baby-out with the bathwater?

Jesus commanded us to carry out church discipline, and the NT letters often bear witness that this was practiced by the Apostles and as a command to be continued until Jesus returns. But to understand this, we need to move slowly. The first thing to say is to explain **how church discipline is the compliment of fellowship**. Church discipline is, at its root, the *dis*-fellowshipping of a person from various aspects of the Christian fellowship. This can include first and foremost, the **protecting of the sacraments** from blasphemy. Church discipline is there to keep the sacraments pure, in a way equivalent to God killing Nadab and Abihu for offering strange fire, though we do not "kill" anyone. Rather, we **hand them over to Satan**, something that needs much more unpacking, as it is also not well understood, particularly as a supernatural activity.

To get at this, I want you to hear Q. 92 of the *Orthodox Catechism*. It is the last question dealing with the Lord's

Supper. “Q. 92. You told us but now, that those who in Confession and Life declare themselves to be Infidels, profane and ungodly, should by the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven be driven from this Supper: what are the keys of the kingdom of heaven? A. Preaching of the Gospel and Ecclesiastical Discipline, by which Heaven is opened to the Believers, and (d) is shut against the Unbelievers.”¹⁰ Notice that one opens the doors of heaven; the other shuts them.

The two proof-texts for this are both in Matthew, and are the only two places in the NT that speak of “binding and loosing.” The first is that famous statement of Peter at the foot of Mt. Hermon at the entrance to the cave of Pan. “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt 16:16). To this Jesus responds, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt 16:17-19).

¹⁰ Hercules Collins, *An Orthodox Catechism* (1680), Q. 92.

While we are focusing on the end of this today, it cannot go unnoticed that this comes in the context of Christ's "church" (*ekklesia*). In Reformed theology, we speak of the church as both "invisible" and "visible." The London Baptist Confession says, "The catholic or *universal* church, which (with respect to the internal work of the Spirit and truth of grace) may be called *invisible*, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ, the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of him that fills all in all." (LBC 27.1). It then says, "All persons throughout the world, professing the faith of the gospel, and obedience unto God by Christ according unto it, not destroying their own profession by any errors everting the foundation, or unholiness of conversation, are and may be called *visible* saints; and of such ought all *particular congregations* to be constituted" (2).¹¹

Quite honestly, the NT rarely uses *ekklesia* to refer to the invisible church, though it does from time to time (for example, **Heb 12:23**). The vast majority of times it is talking about **local congregations** formally constituted with

¹¹ See the Westminster Confession ch. 25 for the Presbyterian view, which also holds a visible-invisible distinction.

elders and deacons who oversee the spiritual and physical needs of a local, embodied group of believers who gather in a physical place and time to worship God. And while Jesus is certainly gathering a vast army of saints from all over the world whom we might call “invisible,” the NT is abundantly clear that the way he grows his church is locally in this visible way. And this is vital to both fellowship and discipline.

Returning to Matthew 16 and the catechism, Jesus is telling Peter that through his “rock,” that is through his **Petrine declaration of faith** in Christ the **Son of God** there **on Mt. Hermon**, Jesus would build his church. This will take place **positively** through the preaching of the gospel which opens heaven to believers, and **negatively** through church discipline which shuts heaven against unbelievers. This is the meaning of “binding” and “loosing” as being the “keys” of heaven. Hendriksen explains,

The one who “has the keys” (cf. Rev. 1:18; 3:7) of the kingdom of heaven determines who should be admitted and who must be refused admission. Cf. Isa. 22:22. That the apostles as a group exercised this right is clear from the entire book of Acts. *All* did this on an equal basis (4:33):

there was no boss or superintendent. Nevertheless, as has already been shown, the influence of Peter was outstanding. By means of *the preaching of the gospel* he was opening the doors to some (Acts 2:38, 39; 3:16–20; 4:12; 10:34–43), closing them to others (3:23).¹²

Commenting further on discipline, Q. 93 asks, “How is the Kingdom of Heaven opened and shut by the preaching of the Gospel?” “A. When by the Commandment of Christ it is publicly declared to all and every one of the faithful, that all their sins are pardoned them of God for the merit of Christ, so often as they embrace by a lively faith the promise of the gospel, but contrarily is denounced to all infidels and hypocrites, that so long as the wrath of God does abide on them, as they perish in their wickedness according to which testimony of the gospel God will judge them, as well in this life as in the life to come.”

Q. 94 then asks, “How is the Kingdom of Heaven opened and shut by Ecclesiastical Discipline?” “A. When according to the Commandments of Christ, they who in name are Christians, but in their doctrine and life shew

¹² William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, vol. 9, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 650.

themselves aliens from Christ, after they have been some time admonished, will not depart from their error, heresies, or wickedness, are made known unto the church, and if neither then they obey the churches admonition, are by the same church kept from the sacrament, and shut out by authority received from Christ, from the congregation or church, and by God himself out of the Kingdom of Heaven.”

This takes us to [the parallel in Matthew 18](#), a passage that gets at the heart of the commandment of Jesus to carry out church discipline. It is a parallel because it says, “[Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven](#)” ([Matt 18:19](#)). Two things to note here. First, the “you” in Matthew 16 is singular. Jesus is talking to Peter. But here, it is [plural](#). He is talking to everyone who is in charge of such matters in a church context. Second, it says “[whatever](#)” not “whoever,” and as such refers to “[beliefs and actions, not directly to people.](#)”¹³ The church disciplines a person who claims to be a Christian by forbidding certain actions and beliefs, but not by itself damning someone to hell. That is God’s business.

¹³ Hendriksen, 651.

Matthew gives a process that is all too often ignored. It begins with individuals. “If your (singular) brother sins against you (singular), go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone” (Matt 18:15). Far too often, people who have a gripe or a grudge immediately go and tattle, often to the pastor, and expect him to get involved first. That’s the cowards way out. The answer from any sane leader should always first be, have you first told this person and tried to deal with it yourself? “If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.”

Second step, “But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses” (16). This has a deep OT context, as the “two or three witnesses” is found in Deut 17:6 and 19:15, both of which deal with disciplining Israelites who have violated some law and then possibly cutting them off from the assembly and nation. These witnesses are not witness to the crime, but are those there to pass impartial judgment. As such, they should not have a conflict of interest and it makes sense that at least some of them be officers of the church.

Step three, “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church” (Matt 18:17). This would be not just the pastor,

but the entire congregation. Along the way, it needs to be pointed out, **the goal here is never punitive**, but always seeking repentance and reconciliation. “**And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly ... whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven**” (18). And for good measure he concludes, “**Against I say to you, if two or 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**” (19). Curiously, this is **not a proof-text for fellowship** as such, much less for justifying every gathering of Christians together as somehow being “church.” Rather, it is the context of church discipline, and the two or three are those who have just been called to witness and intercede in the problem. The idea is very clearly that that have decided along with the church that the person needs to be cast out. And God will be among them, which will in a fascinating way, increase their actual real fellowship, because **discipline and fellowship go hand in hand**.

At this point, I want to bring up the question of **what even is discipline?** It comes from the Latin *disciplina*, which

is “instruction given, teaching, learning, knowledge.” In other words, discipline is the setting straight of the mind. A disciplined person is one who has learned to control their passions, one who’s life is in order, one who is not given over to whims and outbursts, one who is on a steady course, not lazy or a procrastinator. As you can see from this, at the core of the word then is not punishment for the sake of punishment. It is not revenge, retribution, reprisal, reckoning, or retaliation.

Nevertheless, punishment can be involved. The word as an Old English word meant “penitential chastisement; punishment for the sake of correction.” Listen to what Hebrews says, “It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?” (Heb 12:9). This is in line with Deuteronomy. “Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the LORD your God disciplines you” (Deut 8:5). After walking in the wilderness for 40 years as punishment for their faithlessness it says, “And consider today (since I am not speaking to your children who have not known or seen it), consider the discipline of the LORD your God, his greatness, his mighty hand, and his outstretched arm” (11:2). Yes, they were not allowed to

enter the Promised Land. But God also provided for them every day, gave them Manna, water in the desert, their shoes did not wear out, he gave them everything they needed in the midst of the trials and tribulations. For these were his children; he was their Father, and he loved them.

Unfortunately, the world knows little of this, even from a commonsense perspective these days. Many parents do not discipline their children, but actually encourage them in their rebellion. They do not withhold things in order to discipline them, they give them everything they want. We have created an entire culture of entitled spoiled brats who do not know their right hand from their left. And it has become dangerous and even deadly. An already confused and psychologically messed up parent thinks their little boy should actually be a girl because he plays with dolls, so they go and give him hormone blockers and cut off his genitals. This is the dead end street of a society that hates and spurns discipline, right and wrong, correction, being set straight. And it is not loving. In fact, it is deeply hateful and hurtful. Yes, the world has the entire idea of discipline exactly backwards, as it has confused it with a kind of death-penalty.

Think about this. Jesus says **treat them as a Gentile or tax-collector**. Now, you might say, “**OK, that means treat them like the scum of the earth.**” Maybe, if you were a Pharisee. But, friend, it is *Jesus* who said this. How did he treat Gentiles and tax-collectors? He befriended them. He ate with them. He hung out with them. He taught them.

This **might seem contrary** to discipline. How can one cast someone out of the congregation and yet do these kinds of things? How is this discipline? This gets at the root of what church discipline is and is for. It is here for the **protection of the sheep**, the **purity of the body**, of worship, and of the **sacraments**, and most of all **God’s Holy Name**. It is not here to finally pronounce an eternal condemnation upon someone’s head—though it is to be a warning to the unrepentant person, as we see in a great example in 1Cor 5. Let’s look briefly at this passage.

In the most messed up of all the churches of the NT, Paul tells us at this point in his letter that “**it is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans**” (1Cor 5:1). What was happening? It truly is astonishing. “**A man has his father’s wife.**” He is sleeping, apparently, with **his step-mother**. And not only this, the church is bragging about it!

“And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who had done this be removed from among you” (2).

Notice next that he says, “For though absent in the body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing.” Remember how people use Jesus’ words, “Judge not lest you be judged” out of context? Jesus isn’t saying don’t even tell someone that what they are doing is wrong. He is saying, *beware of being a hypocrite*, judging them while you do the very same thing; having a double-standard, one for you and one for everyone else—kind of like America’s elite politicians have for themselves vs. everyone else.

No, Paul says *he has already judged this person*. A little later in the chapter he says, “Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?” (12). This is why it is “*church*” discipline. “God judges those outside.” But we are to “*purge the evil person from among you*” (13). That is, they are to be cast out of the assembly, no longer to be treated by us as if they are Christians.

A little more from Paul and then I’ll comment. He says, “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” (5). A difficult verse to even understand, what we

can say for certain without even studying is that the goal is to see this man saved, not damned. Church discipline has salvation, not damnation as its end goal. But **what does it mean deliver him to Satan?**

This refers to the kingdom of darkness, the kingdom to which each of us was born into. **Ephesians 2:1ff**, “**And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived...**” But God took us out of Satan’s kingdom and brought us into the glorious kingdom of his Beloved Son. To hand the person back over to Satan is therefore to remove him from the means of grace, those things we’ve been discussing which are for our salvation and sanctification. This shuts him out from the means of grace in the kingdom.

This needs another small detour. Many people in our day seem perfectly happy **executing church discipline on ... themselves!** They don’t go to church. They don’t want to go to church. They remove themselves from the means of grace, on purpose, for whatever reasons—good or bad—they think they have. This is an ultimate irony and

tremendous contradiction, and people do not understand what they are doing.

There's a softer version of this, which is to go to church, but not to really be involved in it, but especially in a mutual covenantal agreed upon way. When we first began our church, as good Reformed Baptists, we had church **membership** be something put into our Constitution. We had some who didn't think formal membership was biblical. After all, all Christians are in some sense automatically members of the Universal Church when they are converted. In some ways, we considered this a debatable matter, because it is not clear that the NT did constitutions and formal memberships the exact same way we do today. And so we added a kind of second-tier membership for those who are regular attenders. Here, we expect regular attenders will frequent attendance of worship and other meetings, participate in areas of ministry by serving, participate in regular contribution and offering, and so on.¹⁴

But there's **a looming question** that I softly want to challenge those who are not formal members on. If Jesus

¹⁴ You can see how we worked this out in "Article 3 ~ Membership," *Constitution of Reformed Baptist Church of Northern Colorado*, RBCNC.com.

commanded church discipline, which he did, and if this takes place in the context of the local visible church, which is the only place it can, **how can a church discipline someone who isn't actually a member?** How can one be cast out of something from which they were never “in” in the first place? Maybe that's possible, but it is difficult to see how. This is why we have long argued that some kind of formal covenantal agreement should take place with all people who want to call that local church their home.

The point of this agreement is always first and foremost for **the mutual fellowship**, as we have defined it, with one another in the context of other members and biblical leadership that greatly desires to help the body come to maturity in Christ. Like any agreement or covenant, it places a bond between the parties that is deeper than just getting up and going to a building on a Sunday (or Saturday or Tuesday). It makes the **commitment more serious** and earnest. It **seeks something from both sides** of the relationship.

On the part of the member, they are saying that they are going to hold the leadership accountable to acting and leading as they should. And as members, they hold power to help see that happen. They are also entering into an

agreement to help preserve the purity of the local congregation when others are up for membership. But they are also **telling the leadership** that they want them to discipline them in a biblical way if they should get out of line. The point of all this is for our ultimate salvation, and for the life of me I don't know why churches won't talk about this, because it is entirely edifying when done biblically.

Let's return to 1 Cor 5 and Matthew 18. To cast someone out of the congregation is to not allow them to talk about themselves, at least around this group of Christians, **as if they are a Christian**, thereby taking the LORD's Name in vain. They are not acting like their profession and this is a great contradiction. It is telling them that this is not what God's people do. We are not to be recalcitrant in a state of **hardened unrepentant arrogance**, but rather to be constantly repenting of all our sins, humble, and desiring forgiveness from God and one another, knowing we always fall short of his glory. In handing them over to Satan, they are therefore being taken away from the means of grace, put back into Satan's realm, and left to the darkness of their sins where they might contemplate how lonely, how black, how dark this world truly is.

Then, [as soon as repentance returns](#), the person is to be brought back in, extended the right hand of fellowship, and the discipline is to be removed. Some have made the case that the man in 1 Corinthians 5 actually repented. We read about it in 2Cor 2. It's worth hearing the whole story.

⁵ Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. ⁶ For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, ⁷ so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. ⁸ So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. ⁹ For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. ¹⁰ Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, ¹¹ so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.

The problem we have is that Paul seems to have written a letter between 1 and 2 Corinthians, and since we don't have that letter, we don't know if there yet another man he discussed as needing to be placed under discipline. Some think the man here has caused Paul pain personally,

meaning it was a personal grievance. I don't think this necessarily follows. By the fact that Paul started this church, this man's offense would have been deeply hurtful to Paul, for it meant that he did not seem to listen to anything he told him about how Christians are supposed to live in light of the Gospel.

Assuming it's the same guy, I think it is instructive that this means the Corinthians not only did place the man under discipline, but *they were also harsh about it*. Indeed, they did not seem to understand the fullness of what they were doing. How so? He clearly had become repentant to the point of "*excessive sorrow*," and yet the Corinthians were refusing to forgive him and to reaffirm their love for him. This was what (assuming it refers to 1Cor), he was trying to tell them in the first letter about why they were to do it. But amazingly, they have been outwitted by Satan up till now, when it was he who was supposed to have been handed over to Satan. So forgive him and bring him back in so that Satan will not outwit you in the good you wish to do but are failing to do fully.

Hopefully, in this short discussion of discipline, you can see how the point is actually *to restore a person to fellowship*! It does it by taking the means of grace so

seriously that it understands the power of casting someone out of the congregation and away from the means of grace. I don't think she would mind if I told you, but our church has practiced discipline only twice. Once was when a young woman had committed adultery. There was no repentance and after much struggle and heartache, we finally put her under discipline. She was not welcome to take the Supper with us anymore and she would not return again to us for ten years, even though her father was one of our elders. Tough situation!

But then in God's very hard providence, her oldest daughter's husband committed suicide and the girl is the one who found the body. She came back to our church in 2023 for only two Sundays. With time now a factor, I confronted her on what had happened and how we all very much wanted to see her restored. [She began to cry](#) and said she wanted that to, that she knows she was wrong, and that she repents of what she did. It was a most welcome fellowship restored. A week later, the church removed her discipline and only a few weeks ago we were able to give her a substantial check to help her in yet another dark providence, as her entire house was destroyed in the

hurricane of October 2024 in Florida that eventually ripped its way into North Carolina.

The point of all this is to put **a final cap on the means of grace**. Christians, these are precious gifts God has given to his people. They are gifts for our eternal salvation and sanctification. They are **ordinary**, because they are just talking and singing and reading and praying and covenanting and bonding together and sometimes doing the hard things. But they are **extraordinary** because they involve powers that we cannot see, realms of both darkness and light that are in a battle for our souls, and a God who is both omnipotent and benevolent to make sure that he wins this battle for us. All he asks is that we attend to the means of grace through his church **by faith**. That we **trust** him and his promises in the gospel entirely. That we **believe** him when he says he works all things for the good of those who love him who have been called according to his purposes. He has given you such extraordinary means of grace. Make certain that you spend your life attending to them until he brings you safely to your heavenly home.

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