

# Practicing Church Discipline

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The ecumenical creeds speak of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. Arising from the Reformation, Reformed Churches have held that the marks of the Church should include the faithful preaching of the Word, the proper administration of the sacraments and the practice of biblical discipline.<sup>1</sup>

The history of denominations since the Reformation has proven that theological decline and the neglect of discipline often go hand in hand. The history of mainline denominations tends to involve three factors;

1. Theological decline (an erosion of biblical authority and a resultant dissimulation regarding doctrinal standards).
2. Neglect of discipline (both morally and theologically).
3. Abuse of ecclesiastical power (no matter what the church polity, any system may be abused and manipulated). Often that means that those who need to be disciplined are not, and those who are orthodox are persecuted.

The story line is the same; only the cast of characters and time frames are different.

**Discipline (*disciplina*), from the earliest days of the Church, is training in the Christian way of life, not just judicial process.**

Discipline involves;

- Discipleship, training Christians to follow a biblical lifestyle, a Christian perspective and practice in all areas of life, loving obedience to the law of Christ (Matt. 28:16-20);
- Informal pastoral discipline BCO 27-1 a.; 38-4
- Formal judicial process. BCO 27-1 b.

Discipline in Presbyterian Church Government. The Presbyterian system of church government is a *biblical, representative, and connectional* system.<sup>2</sup> We practice discipline because it is

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<sup>1</sup> See Calvin, Institutes IV, 12.1; Second Helvetic Confession, 1566; Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion of the Church of England, XXXIII, 1563; Irish Articles of Religion, 1615, sec. 73; Westminster Confession, Ch. XXX, 1647; Savoy Declaration, 1658; London Baptist Confession, 1689, ch. 26.12

<sup>2</sup> Presbyterians do not believe that they are the only Christians, or that Churches with other types of Church Government are not valid Christian Churches. Presbyterians do believe, however, that the Presbyterian, biblical, representative and connectional system is that which conforms most consistently with the Scriptures. Presbyterian Church Government is *biblical* because it is based on biblical directives and principles drawn from both the Old and New Testaments (not just the New Testament). The historical development of Church Government is informative, but not determinative for us. Both our form of government and our theology are based on the entire Bible. Presbyterian Church Government is *representative* because the people choose their spiritual leaders to govern the Church (its members and officers) on the local, regional, and national levels. We practice mutual accountability and discipline through our representative government. Presbyterian Church Government is *connectional*; local churches see themselves as part of the larger Church. We hold to a common binding doctrinal, confessional standard of the Reformed Faith, the *Westminster Standards*. Local churches, no matter what size they may be, do not minister best alone, but in cooperation with the larger Church. We engage in cooperative ministry as a body of churches to carry out the Great Commission Christ gave to the Church.

biblical, because it is the responsibility of elders and because the act of one court of the church is to be recognized by the other courts of the church.

**Discipline is important and necessary.**

- The Westminster Assembly produced the Westminster Standards, a Form of Government and a Directory of Worship. The FOG included disciplinary procedures.
- The BCO has three sections (Form of Government, Rules of Discipline, and Directory of Worship).
- The first General Assembly (1789) included some Preliminary Principles to the first American BCO, several of which deal with discipline.<sup>3</sup>

**BCO 27-3.** The exercise of discipline is highly important and necessary. In its proper usage discipline maintains:

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- <sup>3</sup> 1. God alone is Lord of the conscience and has left it free from any doctrines or commandments of men (a) which are in any respect contrary to the Word of God, or (b) which, in regard to matters of faith and worship, are not governed by the Word of God. Therefore, the rights of private judgment in all matters that respect religion are universal and inalienable. No religious constitution should be supported by the civil power further than may be necessary for protection and security equal and common to all others.
  2. In perfect consistency with the above principle, every Christian Church, or union or association of particular churches, is entitled to declare the terms of admission into its communion and the qualifications of its ministers and members, as well as the whole system of its internal government which Christ has appointed. In the exercise of this right it may, notwithstanding, err in making the terms of communion either too lax or too narrow; yet even in this case, it does not infringe upon the liberty or the rights of others, but only makes an improper use of its own.
  3. Our blessed Saviour, for the edification of the visible Church, which is His body, has appointed officers not only to preach the Gospel and administer the Sacraments, but also to exercise discipline for the preservation both of truth and duty. It is incumbent upon these officers and upon the whole Church in whose name they act, to censure or cast out the erroneous and scandalous, observing in all cases the rules contained in the Word of God.
  4. Godliness is founded on truth. A test of truth is its power to promote holiness according to our Saviour's rule, "By their fruits ye shall know them" (Matthew 7:20). No opinion can be more pernicious or more absurd than that which brings truth and falsehood upon the same level.  
On the contrary, there is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty. Otherwise it would be of no consequence either to discover truth or to embrace it.
  5. While, under the conviction of the above principle, it is necessary to make effective provision that all who are admitted as teachers be sound in the faith, there are truths and forms with respect to which men of good character and principles may differ. In all these it is the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other.
  6. Though the character, qualifications and authority of church officers are laid down in the Holy Scriptures, as well as the proper method of officer investiture, the power to elect persons to the exercise of authority in any particular society resides in that society.
  7. All church power, whether exercised by the body in general, or by representation, is only ministerial and declarative since the Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice. No church judicatory may make laws to bind the conscience. All church courts may err through human frailty, yet it rests upon them to uphold the laws of Scripture though this obligation be lodged with fallible men.
  8. Since ecclesiastical discipline must be purely moral or spiritual in its object, and not attended with any civil effects, it can derive no force whatever, but from its own justice, the approbation of an impartial public, and the countenance and blessing of the great Head of the Church.

If the preceding scriptural principles be steadfastly adhered to, the vigor and strictness of government and discipline, applied with pastoral prudence and Christian love, will contribute to the glory and well-being of the Church.

- a. the glory of God,
- b. the purity of His Church,
- c. the keeping and reclaiming of disobedient sinners. Discipline is for the purpose of godliness (1 Timothy 4:7); therefore, it demands a self-examination under Scripture.

Its ends, so far as it involves judicial action, are the rebuke of offenses, the removal of scandal, the vindication of the honor of Christ, the promotion of the purity and general edification of the Church, and the spiritual good of offenders themselves.

**Elders, acting in plurality, are responsible to exercise discipline.**

- The office of elder originated in the OT (Numbers 11).
- The office of elder was expanded by the development of the synagogue system after the destruction of the First Temple (585 B.C). Part of the role of a senate of elders in a local synagogue was to exercise discipline.
- The office of elder was carried over into the NT Paul ordained elders in every city (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5), a plurality of elders in each congregation (Acts 11:30; 13:1; 14:23; 15:2; 16:4; 20:17, 28; 21:18; Phil. 1:1; I Tim. 3:1-2; 4:14; Titus 1:5; Jas. 5:14; I Pet. 5:1-2; Heb. 13:7, 17, 24).
- The Council of Jerusalem is the *locus classicus* of Presbyterian polity in operation (Acts 15).<sup>4</sup>
- The terms used to describe the role of elder all specify or imply the office of elder to be an office of spiritual authority.<sup>5</sup>
- Discipline is part of the work of elders (I Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:17)
- The congregational vows taken at the ordination of ruling elders include submission to their authority (BCO 24-6).<sup>6</sup>
- The congregational vow taken at the installation of a pastor specifically mentions submission to him in the exercise of discipline (BCO 21-6, Q. 2).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> A single church appealed to the larger Church to settle a dispute (Acts 15:2, 22). Authority was shared by a plurality of elders, vv. 6, 22-23). The decision of the assembly was the decision of the whole Church (v. 22). The decision of the assembly was a binding confessional standard, vv. 23, 30; 16: 4).

<sup>5</sup> Elder (presbuteros), Acts 11:30; I Tim. 5:17; overseer, bishop (episkopos) I Tim. 3:1-2; Acts 20:28; leader, or governor, Heb. 13:7, 17, 24 [the *Westminster Form of Government* referred to Ruling Elders as “Church Governors”]; shepherd, Acts 20:28, Eph. 4:11; I Pet. 5:2; teacher Eph. 4:11; steward (a servant with delegated responsibility), Titus 1:7; parent, I Tim. 3:4-5.

<sup>6</sup> The ruling elder or deacon elect having answered in the affirmative, the minister shall address to the members of the church the following question:

**Do you, the members of this church, acknowledge and receive this brother as a ruling elder (or deacon), and do you promise to yield him all that honor, encouragement and obedience in the Lord to which his office, according to the Word of God and the Constitution of this Church, entitles him?**

The members of the church having answered this question in the affirmative, by holding up their right hands, the candidate shall then be set apart, with prayer by the minister or any other Session member and the laying on of the hands of the Session, to the office of ruling elder (or deacon). Prayer being ended, the members of the Session (and the deacons, if the case be that of a deacon) shall take the newly ordained officer by the hand, saying in words to this effect:

**We give you the right hand of fellowship, to take part in this office with us.**

The minister shall then say:

**I now pronounce and declare that \_\_\_\_\_ has been regularly elected, ordained and installed a ruling elder (or deacon) in this church, agreeable to the Word of God, and according to the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in America; and that as such he is entitled to all encouragement, honor and obedience in the Lord: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.**

There are several prerequisites that need to be in place in order for discipline to be effective.

- Church members must value the fellowship of the Church. This should involve true fellowship (κοινωνία, Acts 2:42), not just formal affiliation. So churches must develop genuine fellowship.
- Church members must value the privilege of receiving the sacrament of communion as a means of grace (I Cor. 10:16).
- Office bearers must hold in high esteem the privilege of being office bearers in the Church. (President Woodrow Wilson considered the highest honor in his life to have been his being a Presbyterian elder).
- Members need to be informed of the possibility of discipline when joining the church.
  - One of the vows of membership is to submit to the government and discipline of the church (BCO 57-5, Q. 5).
  - Some sessions consider it wise not only to record in the sessional minutes but also have new members sign the membership vows and the clerk of session keep the signed applications on file.
  - Office-bearers additionally vow to submit to their brethren in Lord (BCO 21-5, Q 4; 24-5, Q. 5)
- Judicial process needs to major offenses. In order for a member or officer of the PCA to be charged and tried there must be an allegation of a chargeable offense. "Chargeable offenses" (BCO 29-1 through 4),<sup>8</sup> are "violations of divine law," or doctrines or practices contrary to the Word of God, or the Constitution of the Church. The Constitution of the Church is the *Book of Church Order, The Westminster Confession of Faith, the Westminster Larger Catechism*.
  - Errors of judgment and relational failures may or may not rise to the level of a chargeable offense.
  - In the case of a local church member, a chargeable offense could be a violation of membership vows (BCO 57-5).
  - In the case of a Ruling Elder or Deacon a chargeable offense could be a violation of his ordination vows (BCO 24-6).
  - In the case of a Minister a chargeable offense could be a violation of his ordination vows (BCO 21-5).

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<sup>7</sup> **2. Do you promise to receive the word of truth from his mouth with meekness and love, and to submit to him in the due exercise of discipline?**

<sup>8</sup> **29-1.** An offense, the proper object of judicial process, is anything in the doctrines or practice of a Church member professing faith in Christ which is contrary to the Word of God. The *Confession of Faith* and the *Larger* and *Shorter Catechisms* of the Westminster Assembly, together with the formularies of government, discipline, and worship are accepted by the Presbyterian Church in America as standard expositions of the teachings of Scripture in relation to both faith and practice. Nothing, therefore, ought to be considered by any court as an offense, or admitted as a matter of accusation, which cannot be proved to be such from Scripture.

**29-2.** Offenses are either personal or general, private or public; but all of them being sins against God, are therefore grounds of discipline.

**29-3.** Personal offenses are violations of the divine law, considered in the special relation of wrongs or injuries to particular individuals. General offenses are heresies or immoralities having no such relation, or considered apart from it.

**29-4.** Private offenses are those which are known only to a few persons. Public offenses are those which are notorious.

- Judicial process should be used only after discipleship and informal pastoral discipline have failed.
- Church discipline needs to be exercised consistently not selectively.
- Church leaders need to be willing to discipline friends, relatives, allies, and “nice people.”
- All PCA church courts are to recognize the discipline of other PCA church courts (BCO 11-4).
- Other churches need to recognize discipline across denominational lines. The North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) has such an agreement; some local evangelical ministerial associations do as well. But joining another denomination is often used to avoid discipline.

### **Other factors in practicing discipline:**

- Discipline should be exercised with humility, seriousness, discretion, self-examination, tenderness and meekness (Gal. 6:1-5; BCO 32-12; 36-1).
- The exercise of wisdom and discretion are necessary in discipline.
  - When reading the Book of Proverbs some individual proverbs may seem to conflict with others. But the key to understanding Proverbs (and the entire Bible) is that the appropriate action may vary. For example it is unwise rebuke a person who is in a fit of anger. But it is wise and appropriate to rebuke a brother, i.e. someone with whom one has a personal relationship.
  - “Exhort” (παρακαλέω, call along side, call near, call for [a purpose]) may be either to rebuke or to encourage.<sup>9</sup> Sometimes we need to encourage people; sometimes we need to confront people.
  - There is the creative tension in the scripture between justice and righteousness on the one hand and mercy and grace on the other.
  - Part of the uniqueness of PCA polity is that:
    - The BCO is not written as canon law attempting to cover all details of possible situations, but to a large degree is written as a set of principles,
    - Judicial decisions in the PCA do not establish legal precedent as in the US court system.<sup>10</sup>
    - “Deliverances” (study committee reports, and other actions) of the General Assembly do not establish precedent (BCO 14-7).
    - There is no procedure for an “authoritative interpretation of the BCO” in the PCA to establish a precedent.
    - PCA polity gives discretion to the lower courts as a matter of principle and of specific statement (BCO 39-3).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Acts 2:40; 11:23; 14:22; 15:32; Ro. 12:8; 2 Cor. 9:5; I Thess. 2:11; 2 Thess. 3:12; I Tim. 2:1; 6:2; 2 Tim. 4:2; Titus 1:9; 2:6; 2:15; Heb. 3:13; 13:22.

<sup>10</sup> **14-7.** Actions of the General Assembly pursuant to the provision of *BCO* 14-6 such as deliverances, resolutions, overtures, and judicial decisions are to be given due and serious consideration by the Church and its lower courts when deliberating matters related to such action. Judicial decisions shall be binding and conclusive on the parties who are directly involved in the matter being adjudicated, and may be appealed to in subsequent similar cases as to any principle which may have been decided. (See *BCO* 3-5 and 6, and *WCF* 31:3.)

<sup>11</sup> **39-3.** While affirming that the Scripture is “the supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined” (*WCF* 1.10), and that the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in America is “subordinate to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, the inerrant Word of God” (*BCO* Preface, III), and while affirming also that this Constitution is fallible (*WCF* 31.3), the Presbyterian Church in America affirms that this subordinate and

- Courts are given discretion on the manner (private or public) in which censures are to be inflicted (BCO 36).
- Restoration from discipline may be celebrated (BCO 37).<sup>12</sup>
- Some sins, errors, and behaviors, though not excusable are explainable.
- The abuse of ecclesiastical power is a constant temptation.<sup>13</sup>
- Follow specified procedures in BCO carefully (see Judicial Procedures check list attached).
- Care should be taken in disciplining women particularly in marital situations. Some sessions have a woman sit in on meetings of the court to encourage and advise a woman who may be dealt with officially by the session.
- Ordained office bearers are held to higher standards (BCO 24-7; 34-2).
- Ministers are held to the highest standard (e.g. BCO 34-7, 8, 9).<sup>14</sup>

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fallible Constitution has been “adopted by the church” (*BCO* Preface, III) “as standard expositions of the teachings of Scripture in relation to both faith and practice” (*BCO* 29-1) and as setting forth a form of government and discipline “in conformity with the general principles of biblical polity” (*BCO* 21-5.3). To insure that this Constitution is not amended, violated or disregarded in judicial process, any review of the judicial proceedings of a lower court by a higher court shall be guided by the following principles:

1. A higher court, reviewing a lower court, should limit itself to the issues raised by the parties to the case in the original (lower) court. Further, the higher court should resolve such issues by applying the Constitution of the church, as previously established through the constitutional process.
2. A higher court should ordinarily exhibit great deference to a lower court regarding those factual matters which the lower court is more competent to determine, because of its proximity to the events in question, and because of its personal knowledge and observations of the parties and witnesses involved. Therefore, a higher court should not reverse a factual finding of a lower court, unless there is clear error on the part of the lower court.
3. A higher court should ordinarily exhibit great deference to a lower court regarding those matters of discretion and judgment which can only be addressed by a court with familiar acquaintance of the events and parties. Such matters of discretion and judgment would include, but not be limited to: the moral character of candidates for sacred office, the appropriate censure to impose after a disciplinary trial, or judgment about the comparative credibility of conflicting witnesses. Therefore, a higher court should not reverse such a judgment by a lower court, unless there is clear error on the part of the lower court.
4. The higher court does have the power and obligation of judicial review, which cannot be satisfied by always deferring to the findings of a lower court. Therefore, a higher court should not consider itself obliged to exhibit the same deference to a lower court when the issues being reviewed involve the interpretation of the Constitution of the Church. Regarding such issues, the higher court has the duty and authority to interpret and apply the Constitution of the Church according to its best abilities and understanding, regardless of the opinion of the lower court.

<sup>12</sup> Note particularly that BCO 37-3; 37-4; 37-5 state that the proceedings of restoration shall be concluded with “prayer and thanksgiving” and restoration to office additionally involves extending “the right hand of fellowship.”

<sup>13</sup> Money (greed), sex (lust, passion), and power (gaining and abusing authority) are all alluring. The desire for and the abuse of authority is often the most enticing temptation. Diotrophes-type persons (III John 1:9-10) were a problem not only in John’s day are but in churches throughout all time and in many places.

<sup>14</sup> **34-7.** When a minister, pending a trial, shall make confession, if the matter be base and flagitious, such as drunkenness, uncleanness, or crimes of a greater nature, however penitent he may appear to the satisfaction of all, the court shall without delay impose definite suspension or depose him from the ministry.

**34-8.** A minister under indefinite suspension from his office or deposed for scandalous conduct shall not be restored, even on the deepest sorrow for his sin, until he shall exhibit for a considerable time such an eminently exemplary, humble and edifying life and testimony as shall heal the wound made by his scandal. A deposed minister shall in no case be restored until it shall appear that the general sentiment of the Church is strongly in his favor, and demands his restoration; and then only by the court inflicting the censure, or with that court’s consent.

**34-9.** When a minister is deposed, his pastoral relation shall be dissolved; but when he is suspended from office it shall be left to the discretion of the Presbytery whether the censure shall include the dissolution of the pastoral relation.

- A minister must preside when a session conducts judicial cases (BCO 12-3).
- Larger churches sometimes use judicial commissions (BCO 15-1, 2, 3; See Sessional Judicial Commissions, attached).
  - The session must have specifically empowered the commission to serve as a judicial commission.
  - A minister must preside in a judicial case (BCO 12-3).
  - The judicial commission's decision must be ratified by the court appointing the commission (BCO 15-3).
  - All the rights and privileges of the accused tried before the session as whole apply to a trial before a judicial commission.
- Keep careful records and minutes. The testimony of witness must be recorded and transcribed (BCO 35-7). When higher courts (Presbyteries and the General Assembly [through its Standing Judicial Commission]) act upon complaints brought forward and appeals,<sup>15</sup> the appellate court does not ordinarily try a case de novo, but depends heavily on the Record of the Case. Therefore the Record of the Case needs to be detailed and preserved.
- Understand legal liabilities in continuing to prosecute a case after a person has left the church (BCO 38-3) and there may be liability in the public announcement of censures (BCO 36-3; 36-4).
- The Bible does not address every possible situation explicitly and in detail (e.g. physical abuse in marriage) or situations that have developed recently (e.g. internet pornography addiction, drug addiction). Elders have to use wisdom and discretion in applying biblical principles to specific situations.
- The Westminster Confession I-6 addresses the issue of using wisdom, discretion, and deduction in governing the Church.<sup>16</sup>

### **Nature of the Ten Commandments**

- Moral principles from which specific applications were later revealed or from which applications may be deduced.<sup>17</sup> The Ten Commandments are apodictic laws, the case laws apply apodictic laws to specific situations, but there is not a case law for every possible situation.
- A summary – a condensation of abiding moral principles.
- Covenant (Exod. 19:5; Deut. 5:2-3) – It is God's covenant with a redeemed people, rather than a conquered people.

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<sup>15</sup> In the PCA BCO the term “appeal” is used only with reference to one who has undergone a trial (BCO 42-1), all other judicial cases brought forward to a higher court are termed “complaints” (BCO 43).

<sup>16</sup> The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.

<sup>17</sup> This is why the *Westminster Larger Catechism* uses the procedure in dealing with each commandment of (1) definition, (2) duties required, and (3) sins forbidden. Duties and sins are extensive.

- Based on God's love and grace – The prologue is, “I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Exod. 20:1; Deut. 5:6). This is statement/formula that is used over 125 times
- Personal and individual<sup>18</sup> - All Ten Commandments are singular.
- Simple negatives – Negatives are concise. Negatives zero in on our evil inclinations. For every vice, there is a corresponding virtue. Simply refraining from evil does not completely fulfill the commandments.

### **Limitations of church discipline:**

- The judicial process itself does not change people's hearts.
- The judicial process does not heal broken relationships.

### **Difficult Cases**

- Marital breakdowns
- Divorces
- Teenaged misbehaviors.
- Sexual misconduct, particularly that which results in a pregnancy. Both parties should be considered.
- Child abuse perpetrators
- Internet pornography additions; internet romantic relationships, etc.
- Disputes among members involving money.
- Persons with emotional and mental disorders or with physical/biochemical disorders that affect behavior.

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<sup>18</sup> Though the King James Version is difficult for some to read because of its 17<sup>th</sup>-century English, it does have the advantage of easily discerning between second person singular (thee, thou, thine) and second person plural (ye, you, your).