

**Church Discipline in a Consumer Culture:  
A Call for Compelling Community**  
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The American culture of individualistic consumerism is problematic for the church in many ways, but its impact on biblical church discipline is especially startling. I have witnessed this myself. The church my wife belonged to in college (where we were married and continue to fellowship frequently) has been ostracized by other evangelical churches in the area as a direct result of its commitment to biblical church discipline. In this paper I will demonstrate the importance of church discipline and how consumerism and the resulting commodification of both parishioners and religion itself have undermined the biblical model. I will then make the case for reclaiming biblical church discipline by pursuing a Trinitarian model of compelling community based on our unity in Christ.

Corrective church discipline is commanded by scripture and is critical to the health and witness of the church. Scripture tells us to exercise discipline for the benefit of the church and the sanctification of individual believers. The goal is to compel our sinful sibling to repent so that “the sinful nature may be destroyed” and the individual’s “spirit saved”. Also we must practice church discipline to maintain purity in the church because “a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough” (1 Corinthians 5).

Although recognized as crucial from both ends of the evangelical theological spectrum,<sup>1</sup> biblical church discipline has fallen on hard times. Scholars and pastors alike have lamented the seeming unwillingness or inability of contemporary churches to effectively implement biblical discipline. The result is a church that looks very much like the world; whether one looks at the issues of divorce, business practices, or racial integration, the contemporary American church is failing to stand apart from the rest of our society.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer links this failure directly to the issue of church discipline, saying, “If the Church is to walk worthily of the gospel, part of its duty will be to maintain ecclesiastical discipline. Sanctification means driving out the world from the Church as well as separating the

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<sup>1</sup> My research showed a call for a renewal of biblical discipline across the spectrum, from the very conservative Jay Adams to progressive voices such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Church from the world.”<sup>2</sup> This failure to “drive out the world” has led to a weak corporate witness and a lack of moral authority within our society.

At the heart of this problem is consumerism and its tendency to reduce all things to commodities that can be compared and exchanged. The connection between the two is subtle and often unnoticed because as individuals “we have little idea of the extent to which we are molded by the culture we live in.”<sup>3</sup> As modern Americans we are conditioned by our culture to be individualistic consumers; this conditioning impacts the way we think about everything, including church and how individuals relate to church authority.

The most obvious way our consumer society (which elevates individual preferences to the status of an unalienable rights) undercuts church discipline is that it views the biblical paradigm for discipline as archaic and oppressive. “Church discipline [can] be seen as discriminatory and as a violation of individual rights” and “churches which exercise corrective discipline might ... be called cults.”<sup>4</sup> Another aspect of this societal pressure is the threat of lawsuits against churches that do follow the biblical paradigm.<sup>5</sup>

Consumerism also undermines church discipline in subtle ways. Even devoted Christians who desire to follow the Bible are being “trained” by our culture to “find fulfillment in consumption” and as this training takes root they invariably “bring the habits and dispositions of consumption to more traditional sources of meaning, including religion.”<sup>6</sup> This leads to the expectation that the church is “a vendor of religious services and goods,” and the Evangelical culture has largely molded itself to meet this expectation.<sup>7</sup> Relationship with Jesus becomes a

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<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 260.

<sup>3</sup> John White and Ken Blue, *Healing the Wounded: The Costly Love of Church Discipline* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 1985), 28.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

<sup>5</sup> Lynn R. Buzzard and Thomas S. Brandon, Jr., *Church Discipline and the Courts* (Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House, 1987), provides and in depth discussion of the legal implications of exercising biblical church discipline.

<sup>6</sup> Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 88.

<sup>7</sup> George R. Hunsberger, “Missional Vocation: Called and Sent to Represent the Reign of God,” in *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, Darrel L. Guder, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 84.

product;<sup>8</sup> a commodity that can and is offered in a multitude of forms by a multitude of religious vendors.

Embracing this commodification of religion leads to a competitive spirit between churches because “churches are in competition to deliver the best goods – and to deliver those goods in a more digestible format than their competitors do.”<sup>9</sup> Since “religious economies are like commercial economies”, churches “must compete for members” knowing “that the ‘invisible hand’ of the marketplace is as unforgiving of ineffective religious firms as it is of their commercial counterparts.”<sup>10</sup> Consequently churches clamor for more members by emphasizing what is popular rather than what is biblical and because “our individualism (as well as our sinfulness) militates against exercising corrective church discipline.”<sup>11</sup> As a result, biblical discipline is often abandoned.

As churches compete for members they begin to see them as customers to be served rather than sheep to be cared for. This business model adopts business principles such as “the customer is always right” and “it’s easier to keep an existing customer happy than to replace her with a new one”. This commodification of people treats them as resources to be retained and leveraged rather than children of God to be lovingly disciplined so they might become more like Christ. Consequently, church discipline is seen as neither necessary nor desirable.

Even if an individual congregation resists the temptation to abandon biblical discipline in favor of the competitive business model of customer retention, the current dynamic makes it less likely for individuals to repent when disciplined.

Craig Van Gelder notes that one of the results of modern consumerism is a “multiplicity of options” available to the consumer.<sup>12</sup> We see this in Evangelicalism where churches offer a host of opportunities to minister and be ministered to so that individuals may choose which

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<sup>8</sup> George Barna, *A Step-by-Step Guide to Church Marketing: Breaking Ground for the Harvest* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1992) Throughout his book Barna describes relationship with Jesus as the product that churches are to market.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Louis Metzger, *Consuming Jesus: Beyond Race and Class Divisions in a Consumer Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 135.

<sup>10</sup> Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers, 2005), 9.

<sup>11</sup> White and Blue, *Healing the Wounded*, 29-30.

<sup>12</sup> Craig Van Gelder, “Missional Context: Understanding North American Culture,” in Guder, *Missional Church*, 27.

options they prefer. In addition to the options offered by each congregation there are numerous options available from other churches and from parachurch ministries. It is not uncommon for a family to attend Sunday services at one church while during the week one child goes to another church for Awana, another attends a Young Life club, the mother participates in Bible Study Fellowship, and the father invests in a ministry such as Gideons International. All of these are good ministries, but the end result is that this family is not closely tied to any single community of believers because their time and interests are diffused among so many groups.

In *The Connecting Church*, Randy Frazee demonstrates how this kind of diffusion of time and interests leads to the breakdown of compelling Christian community and the isolation of individual Christians.<sup>13</sup> Without a compelling community the biblical model for church discipline doesn't work because removal from one circle of fellowship has minimal impact. The sinning Christian can simply reinvest in other communities of faith where discipline is not enforced.

In today's evangelical world, an individual under the discipline of one congregation can simply go to another church, perhaps one with better music and a nicer nursery facility. Since most churches will view this individual as a potential customer rather than a wandering sheep he will have little difficulty finding a church to welcome him. He is then able to continue claiming Christ and justifying his sin, all the while being affirmed by other believers who likely don't even know why he left his previous congregation. Since the disciplined member's connection to the disciplining church was not especially deep or compelling to begin with, making this kind of switch costs him very little.

The very prospect of this scenario discourages leaders from exercising church discipline in the first place. "It is difficult enough to get churches to exercise biblical church discipline in the first place. How discouraging it is to find that it has been undercut by some other church down the block!"<sup>14</sup> This discouragement makes it easy to disguise the customer retention model of consumerism with the rationale that, as his church understands the situation best, and hopefully they will eventually get the sinner to repent. Of course such thinking only feeds the cycle of discouragement in the church and accommodation of the sinner.

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<sup>13</sup> Randy Frazee, *The Connecting Church: Beyond Small Groups to Authentic Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 23-30.

<sup>14</sup> Jay E. Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 105.

This continuing paradigm of consumer driven accommodation of sin has effectively deprived the church of a crucial tool for sanctifying individuals and bearing witness to Christ. Without church discipline, serious personal sin often goes unchecked. Without their brothers and sisters holding them accountable by confronting serious areas of sin (and ultimately withholding fellowship if they remain unrepentant), individual believers can be easily led into the self-deception that justifies and excuses sin. When personal sin isn't dealt with, spiritual growth is all but impossible and the individual is unable to influence the world for Jesus: he loses his saltiness. (Matthew 5:13)

Corporately, the toleration of serious sin compromises the holiness of the entire community. This in turn prevents us from shining "like stars in the universe" because we as a church are no longer "blameless and pure" and therefore do not stand apart from this "crooked and depraved generation" (Philippians 2:15). Even if one congregation takes a tough stand against sin by rigorously enforcing biblical discipline, the effect on the culture will be minimal as long as the majority of churches claim Christ while tolerating sin. The example of the many will overshadow the exception and our culture will continue to see Christians in general as hypocrites. The end result slanders Christ's name and severely undermines our witness.

It is imperative for today's Evangelical church to reclaim the biblical model for church discipline as we seek to become a holy and compelling witness for Christ. Unfortunately, the forces of consumerism that have undermined church discipline are not easily overcome. Vincent Miller asserts that the capitalistic system that drives American consumerism has shown itself capable of easily defusing even its "greatest critic" (communism), so it would be naïve for us to think the problem can "be adequately addressed by compelling counterarguments or passionate preaching."<sup>15</sup>

While the church must continue to battle the notion that consumers should be given "what they want, when they want it and at the least cost to consumers themselves"<sup>16</sup> we cannot wait for our society to be so radically transformed before reclaiming biblical discipline. Our consumer culture leads many to "choose the church that best suits their tastes and the needs they

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<sup>15</sup> Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 18, 35.

<sup>16</sup> Metzger, *Consuming Jesus*, 40.

perceive,”<sup>17</sup> but even as we seek to transform this consumer culture we must also be seeking to transform people’s perception of need according to scripture. It is the need for compelling community in Christ that gives biblical discipline its power, and it is the blindness to this need caused by the individualistic nature of consumerism that must be overcome.

The truth is, most people’s desire for compelling Christian community is very real (if not always realized). We were created to live in community, but individualism, the “key value [that] Western culture has implanted in us,”<sup>18</sup> often blinds us to that need for community, leaving it unmet even though we feel it deeply.

God himself is our model for compelling community. He exists in the perfect Trinitarian community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The mission of the church must be to create a community where we are one even as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one. Since people were created to experience this kind of community, there is a deep need for intimate personal connection with God and each other, even in our individualistic world. Churches that resist the tendency to commodify people by practicing biblical discipline can reach people in this consumer culture by demonstrating the need for community and meeting that need through compelling community in Christ.

Randy Frazee’s *The Connecting Church* presents a model for building this kind of Christian community. He asserts that, as believers share in each others’ purpose, place and possessions, they can achieve the kind of profound unity God intended all believers to experience.<sup>19</sup> Frazee’s methodology is open to question but his vision for compelling community must be embraced by the church if we are to reclaim biblical discipline.

We must pursue this type of compelling community in dependence on the Holy Spirit and by first seeking unity with Christ himself. True Christian unity cannot be achieved apart from the Triune God through whom we are all united. Therefore true unity must be achieved by submitting to God’s word and enforcing biblical discipline. While this may be painful at first, as our communities grow in depth and profound unity we will reclaim the power of biblical church discipline. Individuals so intimately connected to each other through their connection with

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>18</sup> White and Blue, *Healing the Wounded*, 29.

<sup>19</sup> Frazee, *The Connecting Church*.

Christ will be compelled to repent when confronted by the fellow members of this compelling community.

We must not stop there, however. Since all believers are part of the Body of Christ, congregations must work together to restore church discipline across congregational and denominational lines. Our “communal God invites us to collaborate” with himself and each other, uniting our many communities of faith in a co-operational and co-missional endeavor.<sup>20</sup> We must work together to sanctify sinners and preserve holiness within the church by enforcing biblical church discipline throughout the body of Christ. This means that when a believer has alienated one community of faith she must not be sheltered by another community until restoration has occurred. We must resist the temptation to commodify God’s children by welcoming their money, time, and gifts into our fold instead of urging them to repent and be restored to the community that loved them enough to confront their sin.

As we strive for compelling community and a co-operational spirit based on our unity in Christ, we can restore biblical discipline in the midst of our consumer church culture. With a renewed desire for biblical discipline, the church will be more capable of transforming the wider culture by shining forth as an example of holiness and love, thereby attracting many to be transformed by the holiness and love of Christ himself.

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<sup>20</sup> Metzger, *Consuming Jesus*, 136.

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