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That His Spirit May Be Saved: Church Discipline as a Means to Repentance and Perseverance

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That His Spirit May Be Saved: Church Discipline as a Means to Repentance and Perseverance

Keywords

Church discipline

Disciplines

Biblical Studies | Christianity | Religion | Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion

Publisher

Wipf and Stock

Publisher's Note

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ISBN

9781625642103

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1

The Need for Discipline in the Church

THE PRACTICE OF CHURCH discipline, though not always implemented consistently in contemporary Protestant circles, has deep biblical moorings that must be clearly understood and practiced in order for the church to function properly.¹ Due to misapplications and misunderstandings, discipline has been ignored by many congregations, resulting in communities of faith that neglect many of the moral absolutes laid out in Scripture.² When one understands, however, that there is a “holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb 12:14), the church is compelled to use various means to pursue that goal in a corporate manner.³ As such,

1. For a specific portrayal of the decline of discipline among Southern Baptist churches see Haines, “Southern Baptist Church Discipline,” 14–27; Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 11–140. For a more current assessment of the application of discipline in local churches see Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 110–16; Mohler, “Church Discipline,” 16–27. It should also be noted that there has been a resurgence in teaching and practicing church discipline, and one crucial figure leading the way is Mark Dever through his ministry with Capitol Hill Baptist Church and 9Marks Ministries. See especially Dever, *9 Marks of a Healthy Church*, 167–94.

2. Albert Mohler elaborates on this point, saying, “As a matter of fact, most Christians introduced to the biblical teaching concerning church discipline confront the issue of church discipline as an idea they have never before encountered. At first hearing, the issue seems as antiquarian and foreign as the Spanish Inquisition and the Salem witch trials. Their only acquaintance with the disciplinary ministry of the church is often a literary invention such as *The Scarlet Letter*.” See Mohler, “Discipline,” 43. Brown similarly asserts, “If discipline is a mark of the true church, as several Reformers insisted, then hardly any modern congregations possess that mark.” Brown, “Role of Discipline,” 51–52.

3. Unless otherwise noted, this work will be citing from the English Standard

church discipline is an essential ingredient to the church's health. Therefore, it is vital that the church come to a coherent, robust understanding of ecclesial discipline, knowing that God desires a people who are holy, as he is holy (1 Pet 1:15–16).

STATEMENT OF THESIS

The thesis of this dissertation is that one purpose⁴ of church discipline is to serve as a declaration of potential eschatological judgment both to warn offenders of their need to repent, and, by implication, to exhort the church members to persevere in their faith.⁵ As such, church discipline is a means God uses to save and preserve his people to the end.⁶ It should be noted that only God can make ultimate pronouncements concerning the salvific status of individuals; the church is simply a messenger and steward of the message he has given. While this is the case, it must also be acknowledged that Christ has given his church authority and, though not ultimate, this authority is to be used as a warning to unrepentant sinners and as a means to restore them.

This work, therefore, will address the issue of church discipline in such a way as to offer robust theological support for its implementation, and also

Version of the Bible.

4. It must be acknowledged that there are a variety of purposes for church discipline. Dever helpfully summarizes, "Finally, church discipline should be practiced in order to bring sinners to repentance, a warning to other church members, health to the whole congregation, a distinct corporate witness to the world, and, ultimately, glory to God, as his people display his character of holy love (see Matt 5:16; 1 Pet 2:12)." Dever, "Doctrine of the Church," 809.

5. It must be acknowledged that the origin of this thesis was brought to fruition through dialogue with Dr. Gregg Allison during my time as a student at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Since that time Allison has written a chapter on church discipline that is largely in agreement with this work in Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 179–204. Regarding the specific nuancing of this thesis, a helpful paragraph was found on the idea of church discipline being a "sign of eschatological judgment." He elaborates on this idea, saying, "Just as God's future 'intrudes' on the present through Word and sacrament (the inauguration, sign, and seal of the new creation and the wedding feast), excommunication is an eschatological sign of the last judgment in the present. As a sign, however, it is declarative and not definitive: absolution is always held out as the end goal." Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology*, 272.

6. A similar argument is made in Schreiner and Caneday, *Race Set Before Us*, 38–45, wherein the authors argue that biblical warnings and admonitions serve as the means used by God in calling the saints to persevere in their faith. While this work is quite thorough in the exegesis of various texts on perseverance, particularly in the NT, there is relatively little data regarding church discipline, though there seems to be a very close connection between the warning passages in Scripture and the warning that comes through ecclesial discipline.

concurrently seek to assuage the fear many churches and leaders harbor regarding this topic. It is hoped that this effort will elevate the place of church discipline in ecclesiastical life in such a way as to strengthen both the faith of individual believers, as well as the corporate health of the Christian community. If purity is to be sought, sin is to be dealt with, and restoration is to occur, this practice must be understood and applied. When biblical discipline is consistently undertaken, blessing and benefit will be the ultimate result.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

The opening chapter contains the introduction to the dissertation, beginning with a brief summary of pertinent background regarding church discipline. Following the articulation of the thesis of this work will be an attempt to define terms such as “church discipline,” “eschatological judgment,” and “perseverance of the saints.” Due to the fact that these specific terms will be repeatedly referenced, a proper understanding of their respective definitions is crucial to understanding the overall argument of the dissertation. Each of these concepts will be elaborated upon textually and theologically as the work progresses. Finally, we will note the contribution made by this dissertation in relation to other works dealing with this specific topic, as well as the particular methodology that will be employed throughout.

Chapter 2 focuses on the biblical teaching regarding church discipline and its relationship to divine judgment and the perseverance of the saints. Since OT texts will be considered, this chapter will begin with a brief reflection of how one should understand continuity and discontinuity between the OT and NT, specifically in reference to the people of God.⁷ Based on this brief study, one can see that while there is a degree of discontinuity that one must take into consideration when approaching this topic, there are also OT trajectories that point toward the practice of ecclesial discipline in the NT church.

Three such trajectories will be analyzed: First, this study will investigate Adam and Eve’s exile from Eden for their disobedience to God’s command. Second, expulsion from the camp of Israel for various infractions of the Mosaic law will be considered. Finally, this chapter will take note of Israel’s continual disobedience and eventual exile to Babylon. In rightly understanding God’s discipline in the OT as evidenced through these three examples, one can see that God operates in a manner that displays his holiness

7. For an excellent study on this topic that offers multiple perspectives, see Feinberg, *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 37–86, 221–59.

and deals with sin in a fitting manner. However, it should also be noted that this discipline is always done with the goal that his people would repent, be restored, and endure in their obedience to him.

This OT foundation leads to a more comprehensive understanding of NT discipline. While there are a number of texts one could consider, this work will focus primarily on five: Matthew 16:13–19, 18:15–20, 1 Corinthians 5:1–13, Galatians 6:1, and 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15. Each of these texts will be examined thoroughly in order to rightly understand the data concerning church discipline, while also noting the various implications for eschatological judgment and perseverance.⁸ Other relevant texts regarding ecclesial discipline will be cited throughout this work, but they must be treated briefly since these five passages comprise the main focus of this study. Taking these various texts on discipline from the OT and NT will allow for an opportunity to bring the seemingly disparate ideas of the different passages together into a cohesive and fruitful arrangement. Ultimately, one will be able to observe that discipline is a warning of potential eschatological judgment, as well as a means of perseverance for the people of God.

Chapter 3 contains a historical analysis of church discipline, demonstrating that specific figures from church history conceived of discipline in eschatological and soteriological terms, similar to the way in which it is described in this dissertation. This chapter is important to our study in that it offers sufficient historical evidence for categorizing church discipline within a soteriological and eschatological framework. The chapter will begin with a brief history of church discipline leading up to the Reformation. This section will demonstrate that while disciplinary action within the church had its controversial and contentious moments, it appears that for the first several centuries the church consistently sought to apply disciplinary measures according to the biblical witness.⁹ According to Greg Wills, however, the practice of church discipline eventually declined and an emphasis on penance transformed church discipline largely into a private affair between the priest and layperson.¹⁰ As such, the communal role of church discipline

8. While one could elaborate a great deal on these passages and the data they possess regarding church discipline, space constraints demand that the focus of our investigation will be directed toward the issues delineated within the thesis. As such, there are exegetical and theological details that may not be thoroughly considered, and thus the reader is encouraged to consult other works listed in the bibliography that deal specifically with the topic of church discipline.

9. For accounts of the discipline of the early church, see Ferguson, *Christian Life*; Haslehurst, *Some Account of the Penitential Discipline*; Lea, *Studies in Church History*.

10. Wills, "Historical Analysis of Church Discipline," 140–41.

dissipated, and private confession and works of merit were common fare in the days leading up to the Reformation.¹¹

After this brief survey three figures will receive attention: Martin Luther, Balthasar Hubmaier, and Jonathan Edwards. These figures were chosen for specific reasons. Luther is a critical figure in that he serves in a transitional time from the medieval period to the Reformation era, asserting that church discipline, not penance, is a scriptural practice. Hubmaier is an influential Anabaptist, a movement that was well known for its strict application of discipline, making him worthy of study for this particular work. Finally, Edwards, while not often noted for his ecclesiology or disciplinary measures, is an extremely influential theologian in America and dealt with a number of significant disciplinary cases. Thus, each person was involved both in articulating the theology of church discipline, as well as in practicing discipline within differing congregational contexts. This section will examine the historical setting of each figure and will look predominantly at primary sources to ascertain their particular understanding of discipline. Where applicable, this work will consider specific cases of ecclesial discipline in which each individual was involved. One will thus be able to ascertain that historical warrant does exist for the thesis of this work, even if these figures did not elaborate on the topic as systematically as does this work.

Chapter 4 will present a theological synthesis based on the conclusions of the previous two chapters. While the connection between discipline, eschatological judgment, and the perseverance of the saints will be alluded to in previous sections, here is where the connections will be made explicit. This chapter will also take into account how this conception of church discipline highlights the missional nature of the church. As a warning of potential eschatological judgment and a means by which members of the church are called to persevere, ecclesial discipline calls for a church made up of believers in Jesus Christ who are dedicated to God's mission and held accountable to specific standards by fellow members. Emphasis will again rest on the fact that while church discipline is a warning of potential eschatological judgment, the main goal of discipline is to call sinners to repentance and to serve as a means of perseverance for the people of God. After this synthesis the chapter will conclude by answering potential objections and questions related to the overall argument of the dissertation.

The final chapter of this dissertation will conclude with the practical implications this study yields for local churches. First, the connection

11. For greater understanding of the development of medieval penitential practices, see McNeill and Gamer, *Medieval Handbooks of Penance*; Hamilton, *Practice of Penance*; Firey, *New History of Penance*.

between church membership and discipline will be demonstrated. The exercise of faithful discipline demands that a particular culture is set up within the church, wherein regenerate church membership is taken seriously, members care for one another deeply, and rightly understand their responsibility to hold one another accountable. Second, pastors of local congregations must understand that they are stewards of the gospel and shepherds of their people. As stewards, churches must be dedicated not only to corrective church discipline, but also formative discipline. This includes faithful preaching and teaching, leadership, as well as the proper administration of regenerate church membership. Personal attention should also be directed toward all members within the church in order to assess their spiritual vitality and provide them with proper oversight. Finally, attention will be given to the proper observance of the ordinances and their significance in relation to the view of discipline espoused in this dissertation. It is hoped, therefore, that this study will inspire such measures so that scholars, as well as pastors and church members, may see the connection between church discipline, the warning of final judgment, and the call to persevere in the faith.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Several terms will be emphasized throughout this study, including “church discipline,” “eschatological judgment,” and “perseverance.” Since these terms can take on different meanings depending on one’s theological presuppositions it is imperative that definitions are sufficiently delineated so as to provide continuity and clarity throughout.

Church Discipline

Since there are a number of factors involved in the process of discipline, definitions of this practice can vary, but they are typically situated around several common themes. These themes include accountability, exhortation, dealing with sin, authority of the church, excommunication, repentance, and reconciliation. Throughout this study the concept of church discipline will be understood as divine authority delegated to the church by Jesus Christ to maintain order through the correction of persistently sinning church members for the good of those caught in sin, the purity of the church, and the glory of God.¹² Thus, when gross, habitual, unrepentant sin occurs within

12. This definition is derived from a number of sources dealing with the topic of church discipline. Notable contributions to this doctrine include Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline*; Blue and White, *Church Discipline That Heals*; Dever, *Polity*; Jeschke,

the church, it must be dealt with accordingly, “but always with a view to bringing about repentance.”¹³

The concept of church discipline can be understood as both “formative” and “corrective.” Leeman notes, “In broad terms, church discipline is one part of the discipleship process, the part where we correct sin and point the disciple toward the better path. . . . And a Christian is disciplined through instruction and correction.”¹⁴ He continues and states that the idea of both instruction and correction is why “there’s a centuries-old practice of referring to both formative discipline and corrective discipline.”¹⁵ As such, churches do well in not separating discipline a great distance from their pursuit of discipleship, recognizing that the former is a crucial aspect of the latter.¹⁶

Formative discipline means order is maintained in the church through measures such as regenerate church membership, the right preaching and teaching of Scripture, proper administration of the ordinances, and observing the many “one another” commands contained in the New Testament.¹⁷ Formative church discipline, according to Don Cox, “is broader than corrective discipline and refers to the nurture of believers through instruction and their shared life in the body.”¹⁸ While many churches enact these kinds of practices, it is often not referred to as formative church discipline, though this may help to give a particular mindset to the life of the church. This type of discipline is exercised in the Christian community as the members express genuine concern for each other and become dynamically involved with one another in deep interpersonal relationships, recognizing that God holds all accountable for their stewardship of life.¹⁹ Thus, the purpose of formative discipline is to enlighten, encourage, support, and sustain one another in the discipline under which they live and in the fulfillment of their divine mission.

Discipling the Brother; Knuteson, *Calling the Church to Discipline*; Laney, *Guide to Church Discipline*; Lauterbach, *Transforming Community*; Leeman, *Church Discipline*; Oden, *Corrective Love*; South, *Disciplinary Practices in Pauline Texts*; Wray, *Biblical Church Discipline*.

13. Kingdon, “Discipline,” 450.

14. Leeman, *Church Discipline*, 27.

15. *Ibid.*

16. See Schreiner, “Biblical Basis for Church Discipline,” 105.

17. For a more thorough study of this type of discipline, see Cox, “Forgotten Side of Church Discipline,” 44–58.

18. *Ibid.*, 44.

19. See *ibid.*, 44–45.

While a crucial component of the disciplinary process, this work will focus on the corrective aspect of church discipline, which deals with the direct confrontation of sin. A forthright approach to the process of discipline is elucidated by Jesus, which helps to form a pattern for how one should approach these kinds of situations (Matt 18:15–20).²⁰ Jesus states that one should go directly to the person who sinned against them to see if they can restore the relationship. If reconciliation does not take place, one or two witnesses are to be brought along in order to restore fellowship. If there is no reconciliation at this point the matter is brought before the church so that the sinner can be confronted corporately. If this does not achieve the goal of reconciliation the person is to be removed from the membership of the church and treated as a “Gentile or tax collector.”²¹ In each of these steps, love and forgiveness are to be extended, since the goal of discipline is ultimately reconciliation.

This last step of the discipline, known as excommunication, is more rare in church settings, since issues typically are dealt with in the first or second step. Nevertheless, this area of discipline demands our attention. Piggin astutely defines this aspect of discipline:

The most extreme disciplinary measure of the church, excommunication is the exclusion of an irrevocably rebellious sinner from the communion of the faithful. In most periods of the church’s history, excommunication has been understood primarily as a medicinal measure, to recall to repentance and obedience. A secondary purpose is to safeguard the community’s purity. When excommunication is rightly understood, punishment has never been the object.²²

This step of discipline does not mean that a person cannot attend a church service; rather it involves a removal of that person from the membership rolls and the exclusion of the person from partaking of the Lord’s Supper. Church members must also know that they are to treat the excommunicant

20. It should be noted that this pattern may not necessarily apply in all cases. One can see this as evidenced in 1 Cor 5 where Paul calls for the immediate excommunication of the sinning member without going through the other steps as seen in Matt 18.

21. More detail will be given later regarding this phrase from Matt 18. At this point it is sufficient to say that Jesus appears to be saying that a congregation should treat one who is excommunicated as if they were an unbeliever. As such, it is crucial to note Marlin Jeschke’s exhortation and note that church discipline is nothing less than a “renewed presentation of the gospel message to the impenitent persons in that it confronts them with the truth.” Jeschke, *Discipling in the Church*, 88. As such, church discipline has both ecclesiological and soteriological concerns.

22. Piggin, “Excommunication,” 256.

as if that person were an unbeliever, based on a lack of repentance.²³ This understanding of excommunication is needful in embracing both the love as well as the holiness of God, noting that both attributes are exercised in this practice.

Eschatological Judgment

While fiercely debated from a number of vantage points,²⁴ the concept of final judgment is thoroughly biblical and intrinsically connected to the concept of church discipline. Motyer depicts final judgment and states, “The Lord Jesus spoke plainly about the dreadful aspects of the last day (Matt 10:28; cf. 5:29; 23:33; Luke 12:5), and placed himself at the center of the eschatological events. His coming signals the ingathering (Mark 13:26–27) and ‘out-gathering’ (Matt 13:41–42).”²⁵ He continues, “All will stand before him, to receive either eternal life (Matt 25:34, 46) or eternal fire (Matt 25:41, 46).”²⁶ There are no exceptions; this truth applies to all people in the earth throughout the course of history (2 Cor 5:10). Eschatological judgment, therefore, denotes a reality that all of humanity will face, though not all will face the same eternal destiny.²⁷

When surveying the passages detailing the final judgment, it should be noted that individuals are judged according to what they have done (e.g., Matt 25:31–46; 2 Cor 5:10; Rev 20:13). As such, to be completely accurate to Pauline language, we are justified by faith and judged according to works.²⁸

23. Dever and Alexander, *Deliberate Church*, 71. Again, this statement does not infer that the church is the final authority regarding one’s salvation; however one must take seriously removal from a local church, since this serves as a warning of potential final judgment and serves as a means by which the saints are called to persevere in their faith.

24. One need only recount the firestorm of controversy that erupted over Rob Bell’s book *Love Wins*, which questioned the traditional doctrines of hell and God’s final judgment. Two of the better known responses to this work are Chan and Sprinkle, *Erasing Hell*, and Galli, *God Wins*.

25. Motyer, “Judgment,” 615.

26. *Ibid.*

27. For another helpful source dealing with the final judgment see Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, 261–87.

28. See Ortlund, “Justified by Faith,” 323–39. Ortlund provides a helpful taxonomy of views regarding this thorny matter, and ventures to understand this difficult tension via a robust understanding of our union with Christ. See also Thiselton, *Life after Death*, 178–79, who makes use of speech-act theory and asserts that while Christians are sinners “within the realm of law and history,” God looks upon them as put right with God in the “framework of eschatology and Christology.”

This reality, though it remains a difficult paradox to explicate exhaustively, is what connects church discipline to the perseverance of the saints. Believers are called to persevere in a faith that works itself out in love (Gal 5:6), for it is this kind of life that demonstrates true faith (Jas 2:14–26). Conversely, if a church member is not persevering in this kind of faith, and instead indulges in habitual, unrepentant sin, the disciplinary process should be applied.

Horton makes this point and contends that in this time where the kingdom of God has been inaugurated, “the business of the church is receiving and delivering the gift of salvation, not contributing to the gift, negotiating its terms, or determining its content.”²⁹ Thus, the message proclaimed by the church is encapsulated in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the keys granted by Christ to the church (Matt 16:18–19; 18:15–20) designate the church’s authority to bind and loose, to receive in and to shut out. As such, Horton continues,

Through preaching, baptism, and admission (or refusal of admission) to the Communion, the keys of the kingdom are exercised. After all, it may be said that the “binding and loosing” involved in church discipline is at issue in every liturgical absolution, sermon, baptism, and Communion. On all of these occasions, the age to come is breaking into this present age: both the last judgment and the final vindication of God’s elect occur in a *semirealized* manner, ministerially rather than magisterially. The church’s acts are not final—they do not coincide univocally with the eschatological realities, but they are signs and seals. Christ’s performative speech is mediated through appointed officers.³⁰

As the church, therefore, seeks to maintain its doctrinal fidelity and pursue holiness, it must be willing to remove a sinning, unrepentant member from fellowship, participation in the ordinances, and also “from the company of players if not from the play itself.”³¹ In other words, the practice of church discipline, specifically excommunication, warns of the eschatological reality of divine judgment, and thus while one is justified by faith alone, it is crucial to also note the importance of the obedience that comes from faith (Rom 1:5).

29. Horton, *People and Place*, 242.

30. *Ibid.*, 243; italics in original.

31. See Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 425.

Perseverance of the Saints

One final category to define is the biblical concept of perseverance. Understood simply as enduring in one's faith until the end, there is disagreement over whether apostasy is a genuine possibility for believers. Schreiner observes, "The debate centers particularly on the severe warnings in the NT that threaten judgment for those who apostatize (e.g., Rom 11:22; Gal 5:2-6; 2 Tim 2:11-13; Heb 6:4-8; 10:26-31). . . . Preserving the tension between assurance and warnings is necessary to be faithful to the biblical witness."³² This tension is key in not allowing believers to become lethargic in their faith, and also not living in constant fear and doubt.

Schreiner and Caneday survey four differing views on the topic of perseverance.³³ First, there are those who would assert that it is possible for believers to lose their salvation and apostatize from the faith. They maintain that the Bible's warnings and admonitions make it clear that heirs of God's promise can fail to persevere in faithfulness, and thus forfeit the inheritance of salvation. Current proponents of this view would include I. Howard Marshall³⁴ and Scot McKnight,³⁵ who would both be classified in the Wesleyan/Arminian camp. While it may appear that this reading may be the most straightforward as it relates to these warning passages, it seems to do away with the tension that must be held between warning and assurance, as stated previously.³⁶

Schreiner and Caneday document three other views: the loss of rewards, test of genuineness, and hypothetical loss of salvation. The first and third, while advocated by a number of proponents,³⁷ do not seem to do justice to the tenor of the biblical texts. Neither seems to deal with the force of these texts in a satisfactory manner.³⁸ The test of genuineness view

32. Schreiner, "Assurance," 71.

33. These four views can be found in Schreiner and Caneday, *Race Set Before Us*, 21-38. See also Schreiner, "Perseverance and Assurance," 32-62.

34. Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*.

35. McKnight, "Warning Passages of Hebrews," 21-59; McKnight, "Apostasy," 58-60.

36. For an excellent example of how one can refute the Arminian reading of Heb 6, arguably the most difficult warning passage for non-Arminians to explain, see Grudem, "Perseverance of the Saints," 133-82.

37. For the loss of rewards view, see Eaton, *No Condemnation*; Hodges, *Gospel Under Siege*; Kendall, *Once Saved, Always Saved*; Wilkin, *Confident in Christ*. Regarding the hypothetical loss of salvation view, see Kent, *Epistle to the Hebrews*; Westcott, *Epistle to the Hebrews*.

38. While outside the purview of our immediate discussion here, one can analyze the arguments more definitively in Schreiner and Caneday's work.

advocates that biblical warnings are addressed to people who profess faith in Jesus Christ, but who prove to be false in their confession. Supporters of this view, such as John MacArthur,³⁹ maintain that perseverance in holiness is essential for salvation, because perseverance is the necessary evidence that belief is genuine.

Schreiner and Caneday's own view is most similar to the position just mentioned, though unique in its own right. They assert that God's promises and warnings do not conflict; rather, "the warnings serve the promises, for the warnings urge belief and confidence in God's promises. Biblical warnings and admonitions are the means God uses to save and preserve his people to the end."⁴⁰ They also seek to hold the tension of an already / not yet salvation, wherein we are already saved and we still await eschatological salvation. As such, they seek as much as possible to do justice to the biblical texts with a view to understanding them within their textual and canonical context.

While a complex discussion and worthy of much inquiry, Schreiner observes that, regardless of one's interpretation, all would agree, "good works are *evidence* of genuine saving faith." He also understands good works as a fruit of faith, which are necessary for eschatological salvation (cf. Jas 2:14–26).⁴¹ This dissertation will adopt the view of Schreiner and Caneday, understanding the warnings in Scripture to serve as means for believers to persevere in their faith. This understanding appears to best fit with the biblical data, and also helps to make sense of the tension one sees in church discipline and final judgment. Discipline serves a redemptive purpose, but, if not properly acknowledged by repentance (i.e., lack of perseverance), it can be a strong indicator that those under discipline will not inherit eschatological salvation at the final judgment.

UNIQUENESS AND CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

Ecclesiology is often a category of theology that is overlooked due to its seeming "secondary" status. When broaching this topic, however, one can see how matters of ecclesiology can directly bear on matters related to the gospel and salvation. Thus, the importance of church discipline can be seen not only in an academic sense, but also on a practical and pastoral level. First, this topic will show the connection that should be made between this aspect of ecclesiology and specific areas of soteriology (e.g., perseverance) and

39. MacArthur, *Gospel according to Jesus*.

40. Schreiner and Caneday, *Race Set Before Us*, 40.

41. Schreiner, "Assurance," 71.

eschatology (e.g., judgment). This reality calls for greater care and attention in implementing the practice of church discipline in local congregations. As such, the significance of this study is evident, since right understanding of this crucial aspect of ecclesial discipline will in turn give greater determination in implementing and exercising discipline when necessary.

As a contribution to the fields of biblical and systematic theology, this study will endeavor to trace data from both the OT and NT in apprehending the nature and importance of church discipline. In seeking to investigate OT data, an example will be given of how one can best understand varying degrees of continuity and discontinuity between the Testaments. This understanding will be beneficial as one seeks to understand the relationship between Israel and the Church, and how God interacts with these groups within the framework of redemptive history.

This work will also demonstrate how various loci of theology can and should be thought of in relationship to one another. Often, distinctive aspects of theology are considered in isolation, thus allowing for greater depth of research. However, this does not necessarily foster the kind of rigorous interaction that could yield more fruitful results. While working primarily in the area of ecclesiology, this study will show that considerations from the fields of soteriology and eschatology enrich one's understanding of the church and its role and function in ecclesial discipline. Finally, pastors can benefit from this work, not primarily in better understanding how one practically implements church discipline within a local congregation,⁴² but why they should do so theologically. It is hoped that this study will serve as a catalyst for loving discipline within churches for the good of God's people.

In the way of originality, a search of pertinent dissertations on the area of church discipline revealed that while a number of works have been written on related areas of discipline, none seem to address directly the fact that it is a warning of potential eschatological judgment and a means by which the people of God are called to persevere in their faith. Many of these dissertations focus on a historical era or figure in delineating the role church discipline played in that particular milieu.⁴³ Others center their attention on exegetical concerns, seeking to explicate the pertinent passages relating to the practice of discipline.⁴⁴ One dissertation focused its attention on the subject of excommunication in relation to the particular *Sitz im Leben* of

42. For more on this topic, see esp. Leeman, *Church Discipline*, 67–124.

43. See, e.g., Bezzant, "Orderly but Not Ordinary"; Burnett, *Yoke of Christ*; Goncharenko, "Importance of Church Discipline"; McMullan, "Church Discipline"; Oberholzer, *Delinquent Saints*.

44. See Kitchens, "Church Discipline"; Pascuzzi, *Ethics*; Smith, *Hand This Man Over*; South, *Disciplinary Practices in Pauline Texts*.

each community.⁴⁵ Two more recent works have shown both the role of over-realized eschatology in church discipline,⁴⁶ as well as how discipline manifests God's fatherly love.⁴⁷ While these works all make contributions in their own distinctive way, it appears there is ample room for a study that incorporates the ideas of eschatological judgment and perseverance in the faith in relation to ecclesial discipline.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This dissertation will seek to build on the evidence in a logical and progressive fashion, beginning with Scripture. The issue of discipline and exclusion from the covenant community is a rather broad biblical topic. Often, however, when the issue of church discipline is discussed from a biblical perspective, relatively few texts are considered.⁴⁸ This is an unfortunate practice and can often cause a shortsighted understanding of all that is actually involved in church discipline. The intention of this dissertation is to avoid such a limited approach. This study will consider the subject by taking into account the broader canonical context of the Scriptures and its contribution to the topic, though admittedly not in an exhaustive manner. When one takes this broader context of Scripture into account, it can be seen that discipline plays a fundamental role in the storyline of the biblical narrative.

Unlike many studies regarding church discipline, this study will begin with the OT, noting several trajectories that point forward to NT discipline: exile from Eden, expulsion from the camp of Israel, and ejection from the land of Israel. These three examples provide a helpful foundation in understanding NT discipline, as they model how God deals with those who persist in their sin within the covenant community. The focus of this work will then shift to the NT, looking at pertinent texts in the Gospels as well as Pauline literature. This will allow for an opportunity to bring the seemingly disparate ideas of the various texts together into a cohesive understanding.

After this study of the various biblical passages, three historical figures will be analyzed, demonstrating that this perspective on church discipline

45. Storm, "Excommunication."

46. Canham, "Not Home Yet."

47. Bargerhuff, *Love That Rescues*.

48. Although other passages of Scripture certainly are cited, the texts that are typically appealed to are Matt 18:15–20 and 1 Cor 5. One example of this is found in the overall structure of Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline*. Here Matt 18:15–20 is given precedence as the guiding framework of how to approach church discipline, which is certainly appropriate, though not exhaustive.

also contains sufficient historical warrant. The data culled from the previous chapters will then be brought together for a coherent theological synthesis, noting the relationship between ecclesial discipline, eschatological judgment, and the perseverance of the saints. This synthesis will inevitably demonstrate the ways in which discipline should directly affect the practices of the church today. Church discipline must be understood theologically, but always with a view to proper application within the local church so that the church may be presented to Christ "without spot or wrinkle or any other blemish" (Eph 5:27). Thus, the research methodology will begin with exegetical study, then compare the findings to historical precedents, leading to a theological formulation, which in turn serves as the basis for practical application.