The Doctrine of the Church

All Scriptures are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

Introduction

This treatise will present an overview of ecclesiology, which is the study of the doctrine of the church. Ecclesiology comes from the Greek term *ekklesia*, which refers to a gathering of citizens who have been called out of their homes to a public assembly or council. The New Testament uses this term to refer to Christians who have been called together by God as an organized body to proclaim the gospel, nurture disciples, and glorify God. This treatise will examine the foundation, nature, and mission of the church, as well as, the headship of Christ, the leadership of the local congregation, the ordinances of the church, and the administration of church discipline.

The Foundation of the Church

The foundation of the church does not rest on human tradition, denominational identity, or cultural expression; according to Scripture, the church is built on the person and work of Jesus Christ, and the teaching of His apostles. This foundation provides a solid and unchanging basis for the church's identity and mission.

The New Testament teaches that Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of the church. In Ephesians 2:19–20, Paul wrote, "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone."

The metaphor of a cornerstone comes from construction. In ancient building practices, the cornerstone was the first and most important stone laid. It set the direction for the entire structure and ensured its alignment and stability. Likewise, Christ determines the shape, purpose, and permanence of the church. Without Him, there is no church.

While Christ is the cornerstone, the church is also said to be "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (Ephesians 2:20). This does not mean that these men were morally superior or spiritually indispensable. The foundation they provided was their inspired teaching about Christ. Their teaching formed the content of the New Testament, which serves as the doctrinal base for the church.

In Acts 2:42, Luke said that the earliest believers devoted themselves to "the apostles' teaching." This was not mere human opinion; it was the revealed truth about Jesus Christ, delivered by those whom He had chosen and commissioned. The church must always follow in the footsteps of this original apostolic doctrine.

In Matthew 16:18, Jesus said to Peter, "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." This verse has sparked much

debate over the identity of “the rock.” A close examination of the original Greek sheds light on the meaning. Jesus used a deliberate wordplay between two terms: Petros, meaning “stone” or “small rock,” and petra, meaning “bedrock” or “large rock.” Jesus said, “You are Petros,” identifying Simon by the name He had given him—a small stone. Then He continued, “and on this petra I will build my church.”

The shift in terms indicates that the “rock” on which the church is built is Jesus, not Peter. This aligns with the consistent testimony of the New Testament. For example, Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 3:11: “For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” So, Jesus is not just the starting point; He is the foundation of the church. Everything that defines the church—its teaching, authority, and mission—all flows from Him. Elsewhere, Peter identified Jesus as the “living stone” rejected by men but chosen by God and precious (1 Peter 2:4–6). The early church never viewed Peter as the foundation.

So, Jesus was saying that He is the foundation—the Rock—on which the church stands. He is the builder, so it is His church, not man’s. It is Christ’s initiative, His authority, and His ongoing work that establishes and sustains the church. Human leaders may serve faithfully, but they are never the foundation.

The promise that “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” shows God’s support. The term “hell” is the Greek word *Hades*, which refers to the grave and the realm of the dead. While persecution and martyrdom may occur, they cannot stop what Christ has founded.

Since Jesus is the foundation, the church must align itself with the teachings of Christ and the apostles. When it departs from this foundation, it loses its spiritual authority and effectiveness. The future of the church is secure; persecution, cultural pressure, or internal problems will not defeat what Christ has established. Christians are united by a common belief that He is Lord and Savior, rather than denominational labels or organizational structures. Therefore, the church must not get distracted by worldly ambitions; it must stay focused on teaching the truth, serving God’s people, and sharing the gospel with the world.

The Nature of the Church

The New Testament defines the church as a group of people who have been justified through faith in Jesus Christ and regenerated by the Holy Spirit. This body is not defined by ethnicity, geography, or denominational label, but by a common spiritual bond with Christ and with one another.

As a result, Scripture frequently describes the church as “the people of God.” For example, 1 Peter 2:9–10 says, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people...”

This passage reveals the identity and calling of the church. God called Christians out of spiritual darkness to be His nation, His own possession, and He called the church for a purpose: to proclaim His greatness.

In Exodus 19:5–6, God told the Israelites at Mount Sinai that they would be His “treasured possession,” and “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,” but here, Peter applies this same language to the church. God has not replaced Israel with the church; He has grafted Gentile believers into His holy nation through faith in the Messiah of Israel.

The New Testament also refers to the church as “the body of Christ.” In 1 Corinthians 12:12–13, Paul wrote, “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.”

The church is one unified spiritual body composed of many individuals, joined together through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. In Romans 8:9, Paul declared: “You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.” Regardless of background, status, or ethnicity, everyone who has received the Spirit of Christ is part of this one body. This spiritual connection creates a common bond with Christ and fellow Christians.

The metaphor of a body implies organic unity, mutual dependence, and a shared life. Christ is the head (Colossians 1:18), and every believer functions as a member under His direction. This analogy refutes the idea of individualism and isolationism. The church is not simply a collection of saved individuals; it is a living, connected body in which every part matters and contributes to the health of the whole.

The New Testament also portrays the church as a spiritual temple. In Ephesians 2:19–22, Paul declared, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”

This passage describes the church as “a dwelling place for God.” The presence of the Holy Spirit among God’s people is not merely symbolic; it is real and active. The church is “being built together” as a spiritual structure in which God lives and works. This emphasizes holiness, unity, and spiritual growth, not merely physical gatherings or structures. The church does not rely on a geographical center or sacred building, because God now dwells in His people through His Spirit. This redefines the idea of worship and draws attention to the corporate identity of the church as God’s household.

The Bible also distinguishes between the universal church and the local church. The universal church includes all true Christians across time and space. Paul refers to the universal church in passages like Ephesians 1:22–23 and 1 Corinthians 12:13. The local church refers to a specific group of believers who gather regularly for teaching, worship, fellowship, prayer, and service to others. Many of Paul’s letters were addressed to local congregations, saying, “To the church of God that is in Corinth...” (1 Corinthians 1:2) or “To the saints who are in Ephesus...” (Ephesians 1:1). Both aspects are important.

The universal church expresses the breadth of God’s redeeming work, while the local church

serves as a visible expression of that work in specific communities. Membership in the universal church is by spiritual rebirth, while participation in a local church is the natural manifestation of that identity.

Only those who have been born again by the Holy Spirit are truly part of the church. In John 3:5, Jesus said to Nicodemus: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” This new birth is not the result of human effort or religious ritual but comes through faith in Christ and the renewing work of the Spirit. Titus 3:5 specifically says: “He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.”

This means that the church is a spiritual community. It is not defined by cultural ties or denominational names, but by the inner transformation that comes through the gospel. The visible church may include some who are not truly born again, but the true church is composed of those whose hearts have been changed by “the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.”

So, the Bible describes the church as the people of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit. It includes all true Christians who have been justified through faith in Jesus Christ and regenerated by the Holy Spirit. It is both universal in scope and manifested in local gatherings. This identity is not merely theological; it is intensely practical, shaping how believers live together, serve one another, and reflect the character of God in the world.

The Mission of the Church

The mission of the church flows from its identity as the body of Christ, so it continues to do the work that Jesus started during His earthly ministry. The church exists as an embassy or colony of the kingdom of God on earth. As such, it proclaims the gospel, nurtures believers to spiritual maturity, and glorifies God in a dark and broken world.

The most direct summary of the church’s mission is found in the words of Jesus after His resurrection. In Matthew 28:18–20, often referred to as the Great Commission, Jesus told His followers: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

The church is not merely called to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom of God. The Great Commission includes making disciples, baptizing new believers, and teaching them to obey what Christ taught. The scope of this mission is global: they must go to “all nations.”

The global nature of the mission also appears in Acts 1:8, where Jesus told His followers: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Here, Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would empower the church to testify about the gospel to the farthest regions of the earth. God uses human instruments to accomplish the Great Commission, but He is

ultimately responsible for the progress of the church.

The church's mission also includes nurturing the spiritual growth and maturity of its members. Ephesians 4:11–13 explains this part of the mission: "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

Christ places leaders in the church to help Christians grow spiritually, equipping them to serve others and remain grounded in the truth. This process continues "until we all attain...mature manhood"—a phrase that points to spiritual maturity, doctrinal stability, and unity in the knowledge of Christ.

In Colossians 1:28, Paul summarized his own ministry and, by extension, the mission of every local church: "Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ." The mission of the church includes proclaiming Christ, correcting error, and nurturing the whole person in truth and holiness. A healthy church is one where the Word of God shapes hearts, minds, and behavior.

Ultimately, the mission of the church is to glorify God in all things. 1 Peter 2:9 described the mission of the church this way: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

The church exists to proclaim the excellencies of God—to make His goodness, truth, and power known. This is both verbal and visible: not only what the church says, but how it lives in holiness, love, and integrity. As Jesus said in Matthew 5:14–16, the people of God are "the light of the world," and they are to let their light shine before others "so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

When the church preaches the gospel, nurtures fellow Christians, and demonstrates the character of God, it fulfills its purpose and brings honor to the Lord. These tasks are not optional. They are grounded in the teaching of Christ, the example of the early church, and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. The church doesn't need to invent a new mission or imitate the world to be effective. Its task is to remain faithful to the teaching of Jesus Christ and the apostles as revealed in Scripture. When it does, the church becomes what it was meant to be: the visible instrument of God's grace, truth, and love in the world.

The Headship of Christ

One of the clearest and most foundational teachings about the church is that Jesus Christ is the Head of the church. This truth determines how the church is structured, how it functions, and what its priorities should be. Christ is not simply an inspiring figure from the past or the founder of a religious movement—He is the governing authority over His people.

Paul directly addressed this point in Ephesians 1:22–23: "And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who

fills all in all." Here, Paul connected the exaltation of Christ after His resurrection to His role as Head over the church. God the Father has placed all things under Christ's authority and appointed Him to lead His people. Paul described the church as Christ's body—united to Him, dependent on Him, and functioning under His direction.

Paul repeated this concept in Colossians 1:18: "And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent." Christ's headship means He is first in rank, in authority, and in purpose. The church does not belong to a human leader or a board of directors. It belongs to Christ, and He alone has the right to rule it.

Because Christ is the Head, the church must submit to Him. This is more than obedience to a set of rules; it is a relationship of trust, loyalty, and honor. Ephesians 5:23–24 makes the following comparison: "For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands."

The picture is one of loving leadership and willing submission. Christ leads His people not by force, but as a Savior—by giving Himself for them and seeking their good. In response, the church follows Him, honoring His Word and aligning its life with His will. This submission to Christ includes obedience to His commands, reverence for His teaching, and trust in His leadership. The church must constantly ask: What has Christ said? What does He want? What honors Him? Any time the church departs from His Word, it fails in its calling.

Christ's headship is not only a position of authority; it involves nurturing and care. In Ephesians 5:29–30, Paul also wrote: "For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body." As the Head, Christ provides everything the church needs for life, growth, and faithfulness. He feeds His people through His Word, strengthens them by His Spirit, and intercedes for them as their High Priest. The church depends entirely on Him. This picture of nurturing and care reinforces the idea that the church cannot thrive apart from Christ. It cannot create its own purpose, sustain its own vitality, or invent its own direction. It is wholly dependent on the One who leads and loves it.

As the Head, Christ's goal is not simply for the church to function properly, but that it be spotless and holy. In Ephesians 5:25–27, Paul provided the following insight: "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish." The goal of His leadership is to prepare a righteous and holy people who are ready to rule with Him in His kingdom. Christ's headship is not only about directing the church in the present—it is about an eternal destiny. Christ is shaping the church into His likeness and preparing it for union with Himself forever.

Several important truths flow from the doctrine of Christ's headship over the church: First, no human leader or institution has final authority over the church; every human leader in the body serves at the pleasure of the Lord and is subject to His over-arching authority. Second, the church must seek Christ's will through Bible study, prayer, and fasting; cultural fads, political

dramas, financial disputes, or religious traditions can't override His teaching. Third, Christians must conform their lives to Christ's direction as part of His body; the Christian life is not independent—it is connected to the Lord and to other Christians in the body as a living organism. Fourth, the future of the church is secure because it is guided and protected by Christ Himself; we can be confident that He who began this good work will bring it to completion (Philippians 1:6).

The headship of Christ is not a theological abstraction. It is a living reality that shapes the identity, authority, and hope of the church. The church belongs to Christ, listens to Christ, follows Christ, and will one day be united with Christ in glory.

The Leadership of the Local Church

The local church is not only a spiritual family but also a visible community that must be led, taught, and nurtured. Scripture presents a clear structure for leadership within the local church, focused on the two offices of elders and deacons. These roles are not inventions of tradition or culture but are appointed by God for the good of His people.

Since Christ is the Head of the church, He established the organizational structure of local churches, and Paul clearly described the qualifications and responsibilities of these offices in the Pastoral epistles of 1 Timothy and Titus. Leadership in the church is not based on charisma, popularity, or personal ambition. It is based on character and calling, as defined by the Word of God.

In the New Testament, the term elder is used interchangeably with overseer and pastor. These terms describe the same office from different angles: an elder is mature in faith, an overseer exercises authority and care, and a pastor feeds and guards the flock.

Titus 1:5–9 gives the following summary: "This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you… For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught…"

So, elders have three main tasks:

First, they must "hold firm to the trustworthy word" and "give instruction in sound doctrine" (Titus 1:9). They are the theological shepherds of the church, responsible to teach truth and refute error.

Second, they are "overseers" (Titus 1:7). They are responsible for the overall direction of the local church. They guide with wisdom, lead with integrity, and care for the spiritual well-being of the congregation.

Third, they administer discipline when necessary. As shepherds, they must confront sin and protect the flock from harm. In Acts 20:29–30, Paul warned the elders in Ephesus to be alert, because "fierce wolves will come in among you… speaking twisted things."

The apostles appointed multiple elders in each congregation so they could not act alone but would lead together in a plurality (Acts 14:23; Philippians 1:1). This distributed form of leadership guards against favoritism or abuse and forces elders to build a consensus in decision making.

While elders lead through teaching and oversight, deacons serve by meeting practical needs and supporting the ministry of the Word. The Greek word *diakonos* means “servant” or “minister,” which describes someone who carries out duties that help the congregation function smoothly.

The clearest description of their role appears in Acts 6:1–6, where men were appointed to oversee the distribution of food to widows so the apostles could devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word. While the term “deacon” isn’t explicitly used, this passage does provide an example of servant leadership.

Paul outlined the qualifications for a deacon in 1 Timothy 3:8–13: “Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain… Let them also be tested first… For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith…”

Deacons must be godly and trustworthy. Although they are not responsible for teaching or governance, their faithful service strengthens the whole congregation.

In both offices, the emphasis is on character, not talent. The qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 focus on personal godliness, integrity in relationships, and maturity in faith. Leaders in the church must practice what they preach. The New Testament consistently calls for leadership that is above reproach, both publicly and privately.

Throughout the New Testament, the apostles and their delegates directly appointed new leaders (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5), although the congregation could make recommendations (Acts 6:3). This balance of divine calling, elder oversight, and congregational affirmation continues to guide churches today. Leadership is recognized, not seized.

The leadership of the local church is a divine appointment, not a human invention. Elders are responsible for teaching, governing, and shepherding the flock. Deacons serve to meet practical needs and support the church’s mission. Both roles require maturity, humility, and faithfulness. When leadership reflects Christ’s character and follows His design, the church is built up, protected from error, and equipped for every good work.

The Ordinances of the Church

Christ gave the church two specific ordinances—baptism and the Lord’s Supper. They are essential for salvation because God promised to confer the benefits of the New Covenant on believers who participate in these ordinances with faith and repentance.

Both were commanded by Christ and practiced by the early church, and they continue as vital aspects of the New Covenant because they are outward signs that declare spiritual realities.

They point to the work of Christ and express faith and obedience toward Him.

Baptism is a covenant ratification ceremony that makes one part of the body of Christ. It is an outward act by which believers declare their personal repentance and confess their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. It is also a public sign of being united with Christ in His death and resurrection.

Matthew 28:19–20 records Christ's command: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."

The early church took this command seriously. On the day of Pentecost, when the apostles testified to the crowds in the power of the Holy Spirit, those who accepted the gospel were immediately baptized. Acts 2:41 says: "So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls."

Baptism symbolizes the believer's death to sin, burial with Christ, and resurrection to new life. Paul wrote in Romans 6:4: "We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."

Baptism isn't a mere ritual performed for the sake of tradition. It is an act of obedience and a testimony, demonstrating that a person has died to their old way of life and now belongs to Christ.

Baptism is an essential step in personal salvation. God has promised to forgive those who are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ and give them the Holy Spirit. Baptism brings a believer into the New Covenant and makes him part of the church.

Acts 2:37-38 says: Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

In Acts 22:16, Ananias said to Saul, "And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name."

The New Testament consistently shows that baptism only occurs after faith in Christ and repentance for one's sins. The example of the early church clearly supports the practice of believer's baptism, rather than infant baptism. A person must be mature enough to make a serious, lifelong commitment to Christ, which is as important as getting married. Baptism is not for children, and in most cases, is not even appropriate for teenagers.

Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper during His final Passover meal with His disciples, saying: "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19).

Paul explained the significance of this command in 1 Corinthians 11:23–26:

> "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and

> said, ‘This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”

Paul said that Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper on the night that He was betrayed; that was on the 14th day of the Hebrew month Aviv, the day before the Feast of Unleavened Bread. He also said that Christians should repeatedly eat this bread and drink this cup to proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. Thus, the Lord’s Supper is an annual memorial of the death of Jesus Christ, our Passover lamb, who was slain for our redemption.

In 1 Corinthians 5:7-8, Paul wrote, “Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.”

According to church history, the apostle John and Phillip the evangelist taught the churches of Asia Minor to observe the Lord’s Supper every year on Passover. People called these Christians Quartodecimans, those who observe the 14th day of Aviv. They followed this apostolic practice for centuries despite opposition from apostates who no longer kept God’s Sabbaths and biblical festivals.

In 1 Corinthians 11:27–29, Paul warns that those who participate in the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner will bring judgment upon themselves. Therefore, this ordinance calls for self-examination and re-dedication to the Christian calling.

The bread and cup are symbolic. They represent Christ’s body and blood, but they do not actually become them. The significance lies not in the physical elements, but in what they denote: the sacrifice of Jesus Christ that makes salvation possible.

The Lord’s Supper is an essential part of personal salvation because Jesus has promised to give eternal life to those who partake of the elements.

In John 6:53-56, Jesus told the crowds, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.”

So, the Lord’s Supper is a reminder that Christ abides in a believer; it is also a pledge that Christ will raise him up on the last day and give him eternal life.

The Lord’s Supper is a reminder of timeless truths that bind the church together. It looks back to the cross, proclaiming Christ’s atoning sacrifice. It looks at the present, unifying individual believers as one body in the Messiah. It also looks ahead, anticipating Christ’s return when He will drink this cup once again with His people in the kingdom.

Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are visible declarations of God’s New Covenant promises. Baptism portrays personal identification with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, while

the Lord's Supper portrays an ongoing commitment to Christ. Baptism is a one-time event that brings a believer into a New Covenant relationship with Christ, while the Lord's Supper is an annual reaffirmation of that covenant.

Jesus commanded the church to observe these ordinances, and the apostles and the early church practiced them as a source of spiritual encouragement and a visible display of the gospel to the world around them.

Church Discipline

Church discipline is the process by which a local church seeks to correct sin among its members in a spirit of love, truth, and humility. Though often misunderstood or neglected, it is a necessary and biblical aspect of church life. Discipline is not about punishment for its own sake; it is about restoration, holiness, and the honor of Christ's name.

The clearest teaching on church discipline comes from Jesus Himself in Matthew 18:15–17: "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you… If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

This passage outlines a clear process:

1. The first step is private confrontation with the goal of gaining the person back.
2. The second step is small group involvement to establish the facts through witnesses and to encourage repentance.
3. The third step is congregational involvement to call the person to repentance before the entire body.
4. The last step is removal from fellowship; if all appeals are rejected, he is excluded from the congregation and treated like an unbeliever.

Discipline is always motivated by love. As Hebrews 12:6 says, "The Lord disciplines the one he loves." The church follows that same model of loving correction.

Paul applies this principle in 1 Corinthians 5, where a man in the church was involved in blatant sexual immorality, but the congregation had failed to act. In verses 1–2, Paul wrote: "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you… And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you."

He continued in verses 6–7: "Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven… For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed."

Sin that is tolerated spreads throughout the body like an infection. The purity of the church matters because it represents Christ.

Later, Paul explained that the goal of discipline is restoration. In 2 Corinthians 2:6–8, he said: "For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive

and comfort him… reaffirm your love for him."

The goal is not exclusion but healing. When repentance occurs, forgiveness must follow.

Church discipline serves several important purposes:

- First, to restore a wayward believer. Galatians 6:1 says: "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness."
- Second, to maintain the purity of the church. Just as a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough, public sin without correction will infect the entire body (1 Corinthians 5:6–7).
- Third, to deter others from sinning. 1 Timothy 5:20 says, "As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear."
- Fourth, to uphold the reputation of Christ. Titus 2:14 says that the church should be "zealous for good works." A corrupt church undermines its credibility in the world.
- Fifth, to obey the Lord's command. In Matthew 18:17 Jesus ordered the church to remove those who refuse to repent. Ignoring sin in the body is disobedience toward Christ.

Elders have a unique role in matters of discipline. They must guard the flock against both doctrinal error and moral failure. In Titus 3:10, Paul warned Titus: "As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him."

Church discipline applies to clear, unrepentant sin, not disagreements over minor issues. Leaders must exercise patience, fairness, and courage, always seeking the good of the person and the glory of Christ.

At times, discipline includes removing someone from any fellowship with the congregation. This is done not in malice, but with deep sorrow, prayer, and a continued invitation to return through repentance and faith.

In a culture that often avoids confrontation and idolizes tolerance, church discipline may seem harsh or outdated. But biblical love tells the truth, and genuine fellowship requires honesty. Discipline is a sign that the church takes God's holiness and grace seriously.

It is not the opposite of grace—it is an expression of grace, a willingness to speak truth in love for the sake of the church and the name of Christ.

Conclusion

The doctrine of the church is fundamental to understanding God's redemptive plan for humanity and His ongoing work in the world. The church is not a human institution but a divine body, established by Christ, guided by His Word, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Its mission is to make disciples, nurture believers, and glorify God in all things.

The headship of Christ means that the church is always under His sovereign leadership, while the leadership of elders and deacons ensures faithful care for the congregation. Through baptism, the Lord's Supper, and church discipline, the church visibly represents the gospel,

maintains its purity, and reflects God's holiness. Understanding these biblical principles strengthens the church and encourages faithful living among believers.

As the church carries out its mission on earth, it does so in the light of Christ's return, when the church will be presented to Him as His spotless bride. Until that day, the church's role is to faithfully uphold the gospel, practice love, pursue unity, and remain faithful to its divine calling.

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