



THE
TRANSFORMING COMMUNITY
 THE PRACTISE OF THE GOSPEL IN CHURCH DISCIPLINE
 MARK LAUTERBACH



Reformation & Revival Ministries
CHRISTIAN FOCUS





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Dedication

**To the congregation of El Camino Baptist.
Thanks for joining the Lord in becoming a
transforming community.**





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Preface

A Church for Our Times

I shall start, then, with the church, into whose bosom God is pleased to gather his sons, not only that they may be nourished by her help and ministry as long as they are infants and children but also that they may be guided by her motherly care until they mature and at least reach the goal of faith. . . . so that, for those to whom he is Father the church may also be Mother.

John Calvin

When we built our first house in the Arizona desert, the contractor labored on the foundation. I used to go out for visits and became impatient with the process. It seemed as though weeks passed with not much visible result. Some wood framing established the lines of the concrete pour. Plumbing was roughed in and electrical supply routed through





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a pipe. Then long pieces of steel were laid out like a grid through this space. It took days for the rebar to be put in place. One day I found the result – this concrete slab stretched out, with various pieces of pipe protruding from its flat terrain. That was it.

What I did not know was that all this work was essential to the home we would inhabit. Contractors had learned some lessons. They had always taken care with foundations, but this was different. Invisible layers of silt lace their way through desert soils. During rainy seasons, these layers shift and slide. Tucson's valley floor moved endlessly. When layers migrated, the concrete resting on them gave way. People found their homes divided. One man told us of the crevasse which formed in his living room, the tearing up of carpet, and the drilling for new concrete piers to support his divided home. Lawsuits later, builders learned to reinforce the slab, weaving thick metal rebar throughout the poured cement.

I have come to believe that people are like concrete, fairly secure in times of stability, but fragile in times of change. They need reinforcement. We live in such times. In previous centuries the culture provided reinforcement for breakable human lives. Everyone agreed: marriage was inviolable, families stayed together, and honor was shown to the elderly. A man's word was his bond. Sexuality was covered and private. Certain public behavior was shameful. A clear and ordered world of truth and certainties wove itself through the fabric of our souls, providing strength for the





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shifting soils of their day. Such conditions produced persons with some measure of social integrity and fixed principles.

In the West such convictions are a faint memory. One American author has even written of the death of character. James Davison Hunter believes that the culture we inhabit cannot produce great character.

Dr. Hunter has argued that the desire to cultivate integrity is little more than a pipe dream for the twenty-first century citizen of the western world. The environmental conditions, which breed people of character, are gone. Rejection of all truth claims, the assertion of personal self-determination, the iconoclasm of the new generation, the dissolution of marriage and family: these coalesce in a foul soil, good for nothing but the worst of weeds. This is where we live!

I have a growing sense that Hunter is right. The reinforcements of culture, which kept us from being brittle, are gone. We are fragile people. People's choices brutalize their own souls. Their exercised freedom leaves pain in its wake. The unbelieving are not naïve about evil. They have tasted its power and rule.

At the time of my ordination, my friend and mentor in ministry pulled me aside. "Mark," he predicted, "in your ministry years, you will see more sin in a year among Christians than I have seen in thirty. Be prepared for the battle." My friend was not an historian, but he understood the times. That was over twenty years ago. He was not a prophet but he was correct.





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Here are some of the sins I have faced in twenty plus years of pastoral ministry: adultery in leadership, incest, abuse of wives and children, rape, embezzlement, drug and alcohol abuse, sex change surgeries, fornication, and homosexuality. Rather than being infrequent occurrences, these are regular happenings. I have seen these evils in all ages and stages of life, at all levels of maturity in believers. I have watched elders resign over trivial differences, staff members depart in dishonorable ways, charter members lead a movement against a new pastor, and lawsuits filed by missionaries against a mission. These are not the sins of the pagan world but of God's people. I have said at times that I would rather face persecution rather than a deceptive leader or divisive member. Friendly fire is far more painful.



The good news is that these have provided a context for learning, a laboratory for the application of Scripture to the order of church life and the mending of sin-torn lives. I am glad to report that God's Spirit still does his work in human lives, no matter how intense the sin and how damaging. I am sorry to report that when the church ceases to be the church and functions as a corporation or a club, few lives are touched by the Spirit of God.

As a pastor I ask: what does it mean to be the people of Jesus Christ in such a world? How effective are we in penetrating the lives of those around us with the Good News of Jesus crucified and raised? What does it mean to be the bride of Jesus in this time?





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I believe Christianity is robust enough to face these days with confidence and effectiveness. I believe that the church is called to be a unique people in all cultures and at all times. We are the blood-bought new human race, in Christ, under the Gospel, waiting the day of consummation. We live in the last chapter of the old order.

I write to pastors who have given up hope and jettisoned an ordered pursuit of holiness from their churches. Lay leaders should read as well, for pastors cannot go it alone in seeking to bring order to a local church. In addition, members should read and support their leaders by obedience.

Here is the problem. We need a model that suits our times. Moreover, I think that model is buried in the Scriptures. It has died for want of attention.

Where I live in America two options currently present themselves. First, there are churches addicted to a style of ministry that was designed for a different society than our own. It is controlled by concerns about image, putting on a good face, seeking to recover the golden era of post World War America, when men were men and women knew their place. Back then, it is believed, people were moral and honest. These churches live in an illusion. They are not places where people may confess their sin safely. They believe that perfect lives are the best commendation for the Gospel. They are filled with believers who work out their salvation with desperation. Everyone else seems to be so together, and they are not. These churches are fewer in number than a decade ago, and this is good news.





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Second, there is a growing population of churches seeking institutional fixes by creating more attractive billboards. These churches follow a corporation model of focused vision and purpose, defined program and activity. There is usually a higher priority to reality in these local assemblies, and people are freer to confess their failings. Support groups for all manner of addictions are available and attendance is encouraged.

This is a step in the right direction. However, often these churches jettison the type of tough love discipline and admonition that is crucial to true holiness. Confession and support are great for our needs. But is there accountability? If you are a member of such a church, let me ask you this: when was the last time you knew of someone being rebuked for their sins? Alternatively, when was someone removed from the membership because of persistent unrepentant transgressions?

Both models are extremely institutional and call upon pastors to be CEO's. Both channel ministry through the conduit of program, and secondarily through relationships. I think there is a better option and have seen its effectiveness.

So, what's the church to be? Are we to be perfect communities of smiling saints who look past each other on the Lord's Day? Should we be shocked when believers stumble into sin? On the other hand, should we design new programs where we can talk to people's problems without getting involved, leaving them to figure it out on their own after the lecture hall empties? Should we hand over





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all the real messiness to the professionals and keep the church out of the muck?

I am not an idealist. I have been in the trenches for two decades. I am quite aware that there are no perfect churches. Every church has problems. However, I am also aware that people use that as an excuse for the status quo. Every church has problems. Not all problems are equally serious. It is like marriage. Some are on the edge of divorce, and others work out their problems daily or weekly.

My concern is not that we create perfect churches but that we have in place the right metrics for assessing where there are problems and the right principles for addressing them. I believe the model of Scripture is adequate. It speaks realistically and redemptively to the lives of saints. It addresses the “how to” of forming a growing and honest community of believers.

I believe that a local church, pursuing biblical fellowship and ordering its life under Scripture, is powerful in the hands of the Spirit to change lives. I have seen this at work. The church has all the rebar of Gospel truth needed to reinforce the brittle concrete of people’s lives.

The church should be a place that engages with people’s lives. Everything about a local church should be “real.” We should have a sign over our door that reads: “Bring your problems with you.” We must be places that get our hands dirty. Pastors and elders must emerge from their studies and be involved with people personally. We need more shepherds and fewer ranchers.





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I think Jesus is our model for ministry. Throughout his ministry they brought to him the lepers, the diseased, the demonized, the paralyzed, the blind and he had compassion on them and healed them. He taught publicly and rebuked privately. He was a physician of the soul.

This is a portrait of all of us. Thanks to Adam's sin, we are all lepers. I know no healthy persons, only lepers. Spurgeon noted that we are all a little off balance. How true. Jesus miracles were the one normal thing in a world of the abnormal.

This is what the church, his body, is to do in every local congregation. The ministry of the church is the application of the Gospel in truth, compassion, and engagement. Compassion is the only godly response to a world of lepers, ruined by sin. Engagement means we cease to minister at a safe distance, instead we touch people's lives. We call them to holiness and we do so face to face.

I believe all the grace of Jesus Christ can be mediated through a functioning body of believers. Members can be encouraged to move past programs and wade into the mess of life with each other. This is not to be problem-centered, self-obsessed ministry. It is Christ-centered, compassionate, holy, and engaged with life. "Let's encourage each other on the journey of holiness." It is not simplistic sloganeering (just stop being depressed, pray about it and move on), but the simplicity of Christ shoulder-deep in human complexity. Through the sweat and toil of that kind of community Jesus will work in people's lives.





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Some say, “Just preach the Word and all will be well.” Richard Baxter long ago proved that to be a flawed method. It is not enough to preach. Baxter found that few remembered his preaching. However, when he came close and worked with families and individuals, permanent change took place. There must be engagement by pastors who cease to be CEO’s, but this too is not enough.

Wesley and Whitfield both preached, but one left a movement that has endured for two hundred years. Wesley brought converts together in cells where tough and humbling questions were asked, faults were discussed, and specific sins were confessed. This is engagement by members with each other.

I believe in the local church. I believe in it as a redemptive, healing community. As a pastor I have seen deep bondage broken by a church being the church.

I have watched elderly people surround an alcoholic friend with tough love and prayer. He had returned to his drunkenness in his retirement, while his wife was suffering deeply. They stepped into his life and God used them. The church prayed. Today he is free.

I watched a group of ladies become the intercessors for a woman diagnosed with Multiple Personality Disorders. Today she is a functioning believer in a local church. I have seen a man confess to felonies before a church, shameful sexual indecency. Today he is walking with Jesus.





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I have also witnessed the long term effects of church life where people hide their sin, sweep conflicts under the rug, ask dissenters to leave, and refuse to make confession and restitution where there is wrong. They live to protect their reputation and each others egos. Their motto: "It's in the past, it's behind us."

The result of such self-protective disobedience is a church infested with mistrust, indirect communication, gossip, and power plays. No one dared step forward for help and no one would do the tough work of accountability. Pastors were program managers. Few lives were changed. It reminded me of country clubs where I played golf as a child and teenager.

Jesus clarified the nature of the local assembly in his earliest words about the church, in Matthew 18. This is the passage about church discipline. I think of it as the passage that tells how to maintain the health of the body of Christ by treating the diseases of sin that arise, sometimes even to the point of removing a cancer. However, in so many cases there will be life-changing repentance when we face sin and apply the resources of Christ and His body.

We will begin with the big picture. For three chapters we will consider a satellite shot of the church. What is she? What is the mission of the church? What attitudes should govern us? Knowing who we are in Christ determines why we should pursue these practices.

We will then move piece by piece through the passage on church discipline in Matthew, taking it





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apart, setting it in its broader context, and working out application. The danger is to find in it a simplistic formula. It is not.

Each of the chapters of this book is like a self-contained sermon. This means that it has an interest in focusing on a particular point but also gives the whole picture to keep faithful to the plan of God and keep that before the reader. Bear with the repetition that may be necessary.

However, there is a great deal of difference between a set of directions and skillful implementation of them. My children obtained a swing set many years ago. I had to assemble it. The directions were clear and quite simple compared to some. Still, it was three hours before I had assembled anything that looked like a swing.

I called for a friend, experienced and gifted in such things. Within a half hour of his arrival, it was ready for us. It was not the directions that made the difference; it was his experience he brought to bear on the parts.

It is the same with church discipline. My goal is to help others assemble the parts in ways that are more helpful. I wish to do this by using the realities of church life as I have known it or observed nearby.

I want to describe the method of Christ for dealing with troubled lives and show that it is anything but institutional. It is intensely hands on. It is not a program, but a personal involvement with each other. However, we need to know what





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that looks like. There is much talk today about the church being a community. I hope to show what it will look like in practice.

This could be seen as a book on Church Discipline. It is really a book about Spirit-empowered Community. Church discipline is not something we “do” to someone in sin. Church discipline is the constant activity of a church where holiness and love are pursued. We should always be watching over each other, encouraging each other daily against the possibility of a hardened heart, stimulating each other toward love and good works. We should always be facing sin head on in the Gospel. Such a pattern was the function of the apostolic church where people came from similarly messed up lives as we face today. God used them. We must be realistic about the mess and hopeful because of Christ.

I have great hope. The church is an emergency room for the sin-sick souls that live in the twenty-first century. Local bodies are the instruments of the Spirit for ministering the redemption of Jesus. The church should be a safe place where the believing can come and not have to put on their Sunday best. Those who admit sickness should find help.

They should come and find brothers and sisters who welcome them in the name of Jesus and point them to Jesus. The leaders should assure the members that the church is a place to face the troubles of their own souls and to be strengthened in godliness.





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Such churches do not just happen. Building such local assemblies will take courage and work. Most of all, it will take a vision of the beauty of Christ's body and bride.

