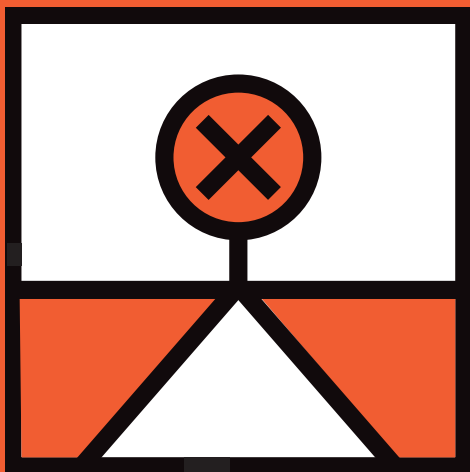


IX 9Marks

Is It Loving to Practice Church Discipline?



**Jonathan
Leeman**

Church Questions

Endorsements for the Church Questions Series

“Christians are pressed by very real questions. How does Scripture structure a church, order worship, organize ministry, and define biblical leadership? Those are just examples of the questions that are answered clearly, carefully, and winsomely in this new series from 9Marks. I am so thankful for this ministry and for its incredibly healthy and hopeful influence in so many faithful churches. I eagerly commend this series.”

R. Albert Mohler Jr., President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Sincere questions deserve thoughtful answers. If you’re not sure where to start in answering these questions, let this series serve as a diving board into the pool. These minibooks are winsomely to-the-point and great to read together with one friend or one hundred friends.”

Gloria Furman, author, *Missional Motherhood* and *The Pastor’s Wife*

“As a pastor, I get asked lots of questions. I’m approached by unbelievers seeking to understand the gospel, new believers unsure about next steps, and maturing believers wanting help answering questions from their Christian family, friends, neighbors, or coworkers. It’s in these moments that I wish I had a book to give them that was brief, answered their questions, and pointed them in the right direction for further study. Church Questions is a series that provides just that. Each booklet tackles one question in a biblical, brief, and practical manner. The series may be called Church Questions, but it could be called ‘Church Answers.’ I intend to pick these up by the dozens and give them away regularly. You should too.”

Juan R. Sanchez, Senior Pastor, High Pointe Baptist Church, Austin, Texas

Is It Loving to
Practice Church
Discipline?

Church Questions

How Can I Love Church Members with Different Politics?, Jonathan Leeman and Andy Naselli

How Can Our Church Find a Faithful Pastor?, Mark Dever

Is It Loving to Practice Church Discipline?, Jonathan Leeman

What If I Don't Desire to Pray?, John Onwuchekwa

What If I Don't Feel Like Going to Church?, Gunner Gundersen

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Why Should I Be Baptized?, Bobby Jamieson

Why Should I Join a Church?, Mark Dever

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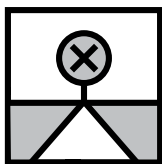
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No discipline seems pleasant at the time,
but painful. Later on, however, it produces
a harvest of righteousness and peace for
those who have been trained by it.

Hebrews 12:11 NIV



Do you remember the first time you heard the phrase “church discipline”? Perhaps it felt a little jarring. You didn’t expect those two words to go together, just like you don’t expect the pairing of “painful friendship” or “conditional grace.”

After all, churches should represent love and mercy, not judgment or discipline. Right?

How much stranger, then, would it sound for me to suggest that church discipline is actually loving. Would that throw you for a loop?

Yet that’s what this booklet will suggest. I want to show you what church discipline is and

how it works. But more than that, I want to help you see that it *is* loving and that it even shows us something about the love of God. Still sound strange? Perhaps we need a better understanding of church discipline—and a better understanding of love.

Church Discipline Is Not Always Loving

To be sure, church discipline is not always loving. Maybe, like me, you read Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* in high school. Set in seventeenth-century New England, the novel tells the fictional story of a strong and beautiful woman who becomes pregnant out of wedlock. She never gives up the father's name, which only enflames the town where church and state are blended to the point of being nearly the same entity.

The governing authorities discipline her first by requiring her to wear an embroidered scarlet letter "A" on her dress. The "A" stands for adulteress. Then they require her to live outside the town in a wilderness cabin, like an "unclean"

Israelite excluded from the camp in the Old Testament.

Meanwhile, we (the readers) learn that her partner in crime, the newborn's father, is the town pastor. The only thing worse than the town and church's judgment is the pastor's hypocrisy in letting the unwed mother take the fall alone. Love in this book, it turns out, shows itself only in the ostracized woman and the young daughter she raises.

To contemporary ears, Hawthorne's story of church discipline, with its soap-opera storyline, can feel a bit cartoonish. Yet we also need to face the reality that churches are not always loving or wise in practicing church discipline. Sometimes churches bind consciences where Scripture does not bind them. Sometimes they blame the wrong parties. And sometimes they even show favor to the leaders and prejudice toward the hurting member.

We need to acknowledge the difference between loving church discipline and unloving church discipline. Abusive church discipline,

like abusive parents or police officers, does great damage. It's hateful, and God hates it.

Church Discipline Grows a Church in Righteousness and Peace

But we cannot throw the baby out with the bathwater, like throwing out the whole idea of marriage because you witness a bad one. Jesus himself gave us church discipline, as we'll see in a bit. Loving church discipline yields life, health, holiness, and growth. It helps our churches stay healthy and furthers the witness of the gospel.

Scripture teaches that discipline and love are actually closely connected: "The Lord disciplines the one he loves" (Heb. 12:6). God doesn't regard love and discipline as being at odds but teaches that love motivates discipline. The author of Hebrews continues, "God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (vv. 10–11

NIV). That phrase “harvest of righteousness and peace” makes me think of golden fields of wheat, only I imagine that those fields are righteousness and peace in a church. Doesn’t that sound like a beautiful picture?

In the same way that correcting a student’s math mistakes grows the student, so loving discipline grows the church. It grows the individual involved as well as everyone who participates.

I remember one trusted sister in Christ saying to me in a straightforward manner, “Jonathan, you can be really selfish.” That little informal act of discipline helped me. I honestly didn’t realize I was as selfish as she said I was. She helped me to see my error and grow.

I remember another occasion when our elders stood before our church and informed us that a member had left his wife and children. They were asking for our help in calling the man back from his sin and informing us of the possibility of removing him from the church. A couple nights later I had dinner with David, a younger man in the church. Before dropping him off at his house, he turned to me and said,

Does the phrase *church discipline* sound like an oxymoron? Many people believe that the church's message is centered around grace, and discipline seems contrary to this message. In this booklet, Jonathan Leeman presents biblical answers to questions about the nature and application of church discipline, illustrating how Scripture presents it as loving and necessary for yielding life, health, holiness, and growth in the local church body.

Church Questions is a series that seeks to provide ordinary Christians with sound and accessible biblical teaching by answering common questions they have about church life. Each volume offers biblical answers and practical applications with the goal of nurturing healthy church practice and commitment.

Jonathan Leeman (PhD, University of Wales) is the editorial director for 9Marks. He is the author or editor of over a dozen books and teaches at several seminaries. Jonathan lives with his wife and four daughters in a suburb of Washington, DC, and is an elder at Cheverly Baptist Church.

CHURCH RESOURCES

