
IS CHURCH DISCIPLINE A BAD IDEA?



Perhaps you have heard the story of Shrek, a Merino sheep in New Zealand who not long ago gained international fame for avoiding his shepherds for six years because he hated to be shorn. Merino sheep need shearing at least once a year. Although the process is not painful, and only takes about ten minutes, Shrek loathed it enough to keep away from the flock by hiding in caves. He tried to become his own shepherd and take care of himself.

Shrek's shepherds hardly recognized him when they finally found him. He had more than sixty pounds of fleece on his body, enough wool to produce more than twenty

suits for men! Having a coat that thick can pose serious health risks for sheep. They have limited mobility, can suffer heat stress in hot weather, and, if their coats become too large, can get stuck on their backs, unable to move. Eventually, they will die of starvation or become a meal for predators.

The story of Shrek, while humorous, makes a great illustration of the importance of church discipline. Like Shrek, we sometimes find ourselves wanting to flee the flock to which we belong, that is, Christ's visible church. Sometimes, we'd rather hide in caves and live as self-feeders. We don't like being held accountable to anyone but ourselves. We want to live autonomously and anonymously. We know it's not right, but the tendency to be like Shrek is in all of us.

Our Good Shepherd knows this about his sheep. That's why, in his love and care for us, he has given us the blessing of church discipline. Here are four ways that church discipline helps us as Christ's sheep.

1. CHURCH DISCIPLINE REMINDS ME THAT I BELONG TO JESUS

As Christians, we do not belong to ourselves. We were bought with a price (1 Cor 6.19-20), the precious blood of our Good Shepherd, who laid down his life for his sheep (John 10.11). I am not, therefore, the lord of my life. Jesus is. His righteousness has made me right with God. His death on the cross cancelled the great debt I owed. He has promised me eternal life in the resurrection. As the Lord who redeemed me and rules me, he gets to say what I am to believe and how I shall live. Church discipline holds me accountable for this. It holds me accountable for my doctrine and life. If I try to wander off in one of these areas, Jesus loves me enough to find me and bring me back. And he uses the loving care of church discipline to do this.

2. CHURCH DISCIPLINE REMINDS ME THAT I AM PART OF CHRIST'S FLOCK.

Christianity is not a solo affair. While one's faith in and relationship to Christ is indeed personal, it is never private. Preaching, baptism, and the Lord's Supper are all public events. When we are baptized, we are brought into the covenant community that Christ has established. We are made living stones in his temple (1 Pet 2.4-10), and members of the family of God (Eph 2.19-22). Christ brings us as his sheep into the safety of his sheepfold, and leads us in green pastures to feed us with the ministry of his Word so that we will grow and mature (Eph 4.11-16). This happens within the context of the local church, a church with pastors, elders, deacons, and members – all of whom enjoy life together as the body of Christ. The New Testament simply has no category for a Christian who thinks he can opt out of church membership and church discipline. Jesus does not want his sheep scattered in caves, trying to be their own shepherds. That is not the model he established. Rather, he has created a real community to which the individual Christian belongs. Church discipline – as it holds me accountable for my doctrine and life – reminds me that I am a living member of that community.

3. CHURCH DISCIPLINE HELPS THE FLOCK STAY HEALTHY.

The Good Shepherd loves his sheep and wants them to stay healthy. He not only uses the ministry of his Word and sacraments to do this, but also the ministry of church discipline. Church discipline applies his Word to our personal lives for the sake of the church's purity, maturity, and spiritual nurture (Matt 18.15-17; 1 Cor 5). When we are tempted to live in disobedience, Christ uses church discipline to warn us about the consequences of our sin (Rom 16.17; 2 Thes 3.6; Titus 3.10). If we go astray, he uses church discipline to correct us and bring us back to feed on his Word and walk in paths of righteousness (James 5.19-20). The goal of all church discipline is not shame or punishment, but restoration. Even in those sad cases when a person stubbornly refuses to repent of their sin and must be excommunicated according to the Word of God, the opportunity for repentance and restoration is still possible. This is why we have the "Form for Readmission" next to the "Form for Excommunication" in the back of our hymnals. Restoration and spiritual health is the objective.

4. CHURCH DISCIPLINE REMINDS ME THAT I AM LOVED BY MY FATHER IN HEAVEN.

As the book of Hebrews reminds us, a father who does never disciplines his children is a bad father. A good father, though, will faithfully and gently discipline his children in love: "God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Heb 12.7-11).

Let us then be trained by church discipline. Rather than despising it, let us give God thanks for it. Let's commit to praying for our elders who have the challenging task of remaining faithful to Christ and his sheep by administering discipline according to the Word of God. Let's hear and heed our Lord's command: "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you" (Heb 13.17). Let's remember the vows we made when we became members of Christ's church. Let's honor our Good Shepherd as the Lord over our lives. And let's not be like Shrek.

Affectionately,
Pastor Brown