

INTERVIEW

Church Discipline: Interview with Alfred Poirier

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(April 11, 2023)

PETER A. LILLBACK: *It is my joy today to interview Dr. Alfred Poirier. He is professor of biblical counseling and pastoral theology at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, and we are going to be talking today about his commitment to church discipline. I want to welcome you and ask you if you would open us briefly in prayer.*

ALFRED POIRIER:

Father, we thank you for this day and the opportunity to talk about church discipline. One of the great gifts you have given us as a people made in your image, and, now through Christ, been conformed us into greater likeness to that image. And we pray, may that be used throughout the world as we seek to conform to Christ. In Jesus's name, we pray, Amen.

PAL: *Alfred, please share with us a general statement about your experience in dealing with church discipline. What have been some of the things you have done that have prepared you to do this type of work?*

AP: Being convinced of the authority of Scripture is most important. Before I went to seminary, I had never seen church discipline in the churches I had

gone to. In seminary, I was taught by Dr. Robert Strimple¹ and others that church discipline was part and parcel of what it means to be a pastor. I was pastoring a church, and that was an eye-opener for me to learn my ecclesiology, and particularly this issue of church discipline, which I found difficult. John Calvin was very helpful. I always thank the Lord for Calvin, that not only in his commentaries, but also in his *Institutes* [4.1.9; 4.12.1–13], he actually spends some time talking about church discipline and then practicing it. In my second and third churches, which were Reformed, I had the beginnings of the rules of discipline that would help guide the process. I still find our denominational material wanting, even if you cannot say everything in the rules of discipline. Over the years, particularly with my work through Peacemaker Ministries, I had the wonderful task of refining this, and then refining it in my own church, as we dealt with cases of drunkenness, incest, domestic abuse, and sexual immorality. We also had pedophilia, and we had fornication, adultery, and homosexuality. I saw the good of church discipline, people actually repenting, but also some times where people rejected the faith and did not want to be disciplined anymore.

PAL: *In March 2023, Dr. Christopher Watkins spoke at our conference, “Van Til and the Future of Reformed Apologetics.” At the final plenary session, he was asked, What is the foremost challenge to Christianity in the church today, and how do we answer it? Do you recall what he said?*

AP: One word: “Us.” It is ourselves. We—myself, the church—are the greatest impediment to our witness to the world. Lack of godliness, lack of discipline, and our need of repentance. If you remember, Peter, he alluded to some of the recent abominable—and those are his words—incidents of pastors and churches in the United States. All of us are ashamed for the church and for the witness given to Christ and the disrepute to his name.

PAL: *In light of that, how do we as pastors and elders of Christ’s church practically address the issue of a holy community?*

AP: The Reformers had to ask these very questions. What does it mean to be the church? They spoke about the marks of the church: the right preaching of God’s word, the right administration of the sacraments—and Calvin added a third mark touching on the wellbeing (the *bene esse*) of the church, not the essentials, and that third mark is the discipline of the church.

¹ Robert Strimple had a long teaching career at Westminster in Philadelphia and California; see David VanDrunen, *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine: Systematic Theology at the Westminster Seminaries; Essays in Honor of Robert B. Strimple* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004).



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PAL: *Making discipline a mark of the church might initially cause some pushback from the people who are present. What if they think it is too extreme, with the idea of excommunication, exclusion, or some type of punishment for membership?*

AP: Exactly. If I were to say, “Peter, how was your day?” And you said, “Oh, I have been disciplining my kids.” I would wonder what is going on. Most of us hear the word discipline in terms of its most extreme acts. So, in a family, if the dad or mom says they are disciplining their kids, we think there is corporal punishment or they are sending them off to their room. People think the same way when you talk about church discipline and the church. As you said very rightly, they think of the most extreme, excommunication or cutting people off, as a harsh form of punishment.

PAL: *If you do not see it that way, how would you conceive of discipline for the church?*

AP: One of the passages the Lord has given us is Hebrews 12, which contains a lengthy exposition on God’s discipline of us and much wisdom. One of the chief truths is that God’s discipline of us is fatherly love and discipline. He teaches not to treat lightly the Lord’s discipline and that he disciplines those he loves [Prov 3:11–12]. And so biblical discipline has to be thought first in terms of the covenant context, for God through Jesus Christ is our Father, and we are adopted sons through his Son Jesus. We are to realize that discipline is part of God allowing us to share in his holiness: “If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons” [Heb 12.8.] God disciplines us out of love so that we may share in his holiness and character—in Paul’s language, that we may be conformed to the likeness of Christ [Rom 8:29].

PAL: *So, you really have a much broader view, taking into account the glory of God and the good of God’s people. Is that a proper way to understand your sense of discipline?*

AP: Yes. We need to step back and think of where discipline comes from. God created us for communion with him. Geerhardus Vos says in a beautiful statement that God created us for communion with him.² That communion brings glory to God. We are made in his image. We are made to listen to the Lord and to speak to him and to have real deep intimacy with our God and Creator as sons and daughters. We want not only to commune with him but also to reflect him, to take on his character, and that is what he wants of us.

² Cf. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (1948; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 28.

A Diagram of Church Discipleship/Discipline

by Rev. Dr. Alfred Poirier © 2023

“Go and make disciples ... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you ...” Matthew 28:19-20



General and Formal	General and Informal	Specific and Informal	Specific and Formal
<p>Preaching and teaching by authorized church leaders (1 Tim 3:2; 4:13; 2 Tim 2:24-26; 4.2; Titus 1.9)</p> <p>“Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching” (1 Tim 4:13).</p> <p>“[The elder] must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” (Titus 1:9).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-discipline (Rom 12:1-2; Col 3:5). • Godly counsel, pastoral and from other members (Rom 15:14; Gal 6:1-2; Col 1:28; 3:16). • Small group mutual care and counsel (Heb 3:12-13; 10:24-25) <p>“Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature ... which is idolatry” (Col 3:5).</p> <p>“See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (Heb 3:12-13).</p>	<p>Concerns a specific sin or sinful habit</p> <p>“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over” (Matt 18:15)</p> <p>“Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently” (Gal 6:1-2).</p> <p>“Remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins” (Jas 5:20).</p>	<p>Specific and formal censures</p> <p>“Take special note of him” (2 Thess 3:14-15).</p> <p>“Do not associate with him” (2 Thess 3.6, 14b).</p> <p>“Warn a divisive person one, and then warn him a second time ...” (Titus 3:10a).</p> <p>“After that, have nothing to do with him” (Titus 3.10b).</p> <p>“Tell it to the church” (Matt 18:17).</p> <p>“Treat him as a pagan or a tax collector” (Matt 18:17b).</p> <p>“Expel the wicked man. ... Hand this man over to Satan”(1 Cor 5:2-7, 11-13).</p>

Love undergirds all true discipline.
 “My son, do not despise the LORD’s discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in” (Prov 3:11-12).

I think that is where discipline begins. Discipline does not begin with sin and correction as much as it begins with a covenant that God enters into, as he did with Adam and Eve in Genesis 1 and 2. It is a precious relationship. And he provides a plan or a goal. In Genesis 1, he tells them to rule over the whole earth and to be fruitful and multiply (Gen 1:28). What is God doing? He is discipling us. So I like to talk about church discipleship as well as church discipline.

PAL: *So from the creation account, the biblical theology that unfolds in the rest of the Scripture, is an ongoing concern to disciple or to form children who are obedient in covenant to God. How do you work that out?*

AP: For pastors, it is important to talk about discipleship from the covenant of works, from creation on, not just after the fall. We do see it after the fall, understandably, since there are only two chapters where things are going well. In the rest of Scripture, for the most part, discipline is in the sense of correcting sinners, such as when the Lord had to discipline Cain. Sadly, Cain does not listen to the Lord. I was always amazed at how God knows what is in Cain's heart, and he comes to him and speaks gently, and he says, "Sin is crouching at the door and will devour you. You need to get a grip on it" [Gen 4:7].

God does the same with Noah. Even in the horrible time of great ungodliness of his day, when God is going to send a flood, we see his wonderful grace as he is discipling Noah. He teaches Noah how to build an ark and gives him its precise dimensions.

He does the same with the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. So our God is the discipling God. One of my favorite passages is when the Lord, just before he discloses to Abraham what is going to happen at Sodom, says in Genesis 18:19, "for I have chosen him." He is questioning: "Should we talk to Abraham about this?" And he says, "Yes, for I have chosen him"—Abraham, that is—"so that he will direct and command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him." There is our God, discipling his covenant people.

PAL: *As you look at that verse, there was a need for Abraham himself to be disciplined so that he could discipline those that followed him.*

AP: Exactly. Abraham now is given the task to discipline his children, his household. And that continues throughout Scripture. Moses is given the same task. Moses has to teach the elders. Think of the exodus and the Passover. In the Passover instructions in Exodus 12—what is he teaching

him? Think of Leviticus, with all the Levitical laws, and the Lord keeps saying, “Be holy, as I the Lord your God am holy” [Lev 11:44]. So, God teaches us to be holy, as he is holy, and we, those of us who are pastors and fathers, are called to do the same and to disciple our people that they be holy and bear the likeness of Christ [cf. 1 Cor 15:49].

PAL: *So you are trying to encourage us to see that discipline is not something exceptional. It is ordinary and regular and comes from a full understanding of the Scriptures being taught and encouraged in day-to-day life and Christian worship.*

AP: Exactly. Every time you open the Bible to read it, God is disciplining you. Every time you listen to a sermon or a teaching, God is disciplining you. There is a wonderful passage in Deuteronomy, where Moses looks back to the day where the Lord spoke from Mount Sinai and gave the people the covenant and the Ten Commandments. He says, “Remember”—Deuteronomy 4:36—“out of heaven he let you hear his voice that he might discipline you.” So, discipline is very broad. It is not the extreme. It is one perspective, to use Vern Poythress’s kind of language,³ on the whole of what we are seeing in Scripture. We might say, the Bible is a book about discipleship.

PAL: *Regarding the Great Commission of Jesus, in a previous conversation you said that that form of discipleship is really something that covers this whole process. How do you work that out in a practical way?*

AP: We typically hear the Great Commission as, “Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” [Matt 28:19, 20b]. And we forget that line in between where Jesus says, after you baptize, “teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you” [v. 20a]. That is the great omission. So again, we need to understand that the whole of the Christian life is under discipleship, under discipline.

PAL: *How do you see the phases of discipline working out in light of the Great Commission?*

AP: Pastors need to teach their people that holding one another accountable is not just for pastors or elders, but as Christians, we must hold one another accountable. Hebrews 3:12–13, says, “See to it, brothers, that none of you

³ For an introduction to Poythress’s perspectivalism approach, see Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987).

has a sinful unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God, but encourage one another.” There is the language of “one another.” “Encourage one another daily, as long as it is called today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.” Part of teaching the word of God, what pastors need to teach, is that we all should be committed to this. It is not just the teaching elder that is going to teach you to be disciplined. You must teach one another, and you must hold one another accountable. You must lovingly press into one another.

PAL: *How do you get people to understand that discipline is the work of the entire congregation of believers?*

AP: One of the things I want to communicate to my students here at Westminster is getting the pastors to actually believe that.

Our people will not believe it unless it is coming from the pastors. We have to set an example. In church history, the issue of pastors, the church leaders, and the elders, exercising discipline has always been a struggle. Richard Baxter, in *The Reformed Pastor*, in his own day, around 1650, is crying out, pleading to ministers that they set themselves to the practice of church discipline; and he says the problem is that pastors neglect it.⁴ One of Calvin’s issues with the Roman Catholic churches was that there was no discipline. And we have just heard of a scandalous report in the United States about sex abuse within the Roman Catholic Church. Protestants have similar issues. This is Calvin’s concern, but after Calvin, it is not like the Reformation children listened. Around 1700, Wilhelmus à Brakel, that great Dutch theologian fifty years after Baxter, said,

The exercise of church discipline is almost entirely neglected. There is no longer a model of what the church ought to be. Men are therefore satisfied if many people come to church, and if many members are accepted. Such churches are then referred to as flourishing.⁵

In a recent class on peacemaking for pastors, two pastors confessed, “We do not do church discipline, and we are listening to your lectures, and we are fearful.” And I was able to say, “Listen, you are not unique here; this has been going on from long ago. Almost every pastor has had to wrestle with this—I did—but the question is, what is God saying?”

⁴ Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, ed. William Brown (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 46–47.

⁵ Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, trans. Bartel Elshout, 4 vols. (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1993), 2:72. À Brakel lists three signs of the degeneracy of the church: worldly pastors, worldly members, and the failure to exercise church discipline.

PAL: *If discipline does its work properly, the goal is not to shame or punish someone, it is to bring reconciliation and restoration to a true relationship with God and one another. How do you put that emphasis as you begin this process?*

AP: The goal is to set before your people what God is doing. You need to talk about church discipline in teaching individuals and preaching. Baptism and the Lord's Supper mark us out that we are distinctive people. The distinction is not just "I am a member of the church," but it is "I am holy." There are implicit requirements to being holy: I seek to keep God's commandments, to be humble, to confess my sin, to grant forgiveness. It is clear when Paul states, "We died to sin, we cannot live in it any longer." If we were baptized into Christ, we were also buried with Christ, so that we might walk in newness of life (Rom 6:2–4). So we are to be a distinct and disciplined people. At baptism, you mention to the people who are watching, "Remember, we are a marked-out people." In the Lord's Supper, in my church, we would have the Lord's Supper weekly and would be fencing the table at all times. You are saying, "This is a sacrament unique to Christians that marks us out. And if you are in a conflict with somebody and refusing to be reconciled, refusing to take a first step, please refrain from partaking of the Lord's Supper; rather, talk to us afterwards." After every worship service, we would actually have a pastor and elders praying for people under conviction of sin or in need prayer, for whatever was on their heart or mind. We would also have times during the Lord's Supper, with people coming and saying, "Thank you. I withheld from the Lord's Supper. I am having issues with my husband [or with this brother or sister in the church]. I do not know what to do." We would tell them, "We are not saying you have to have your issues resolved, but if you are refusing to take the first step, you should abstain."

PAL: *In a certain sense, proper discipline needs to have a proper understanding of peacemaking in the church.*

AP: Paul refers to peacemaking as the ministry of reconciliation. In 2 Corinthians 5:18–21, Paul describes his entire ministry as a ministry of reconciliation and his entire teaching and preaching as the message of reconciliation. Paul has a quite expansive understanding of what Christ is doing: He is reconciling us one to another through Jesus Christ: first, to be reconciled to God, and then, to be reconciled to one another. So, if you find out that somebody in your church is fornicating, that person has an unreconciled relationship with the Lord. They violated their conscience, they violated his law, they transgressed it, as well as they have transgressed against another person. They have sinned against the person that they were

fornicating with. Similarly, in a domestic abuse case or drunkenness, there is always a Godward element to it because that is how he made us.

PAL: *At some point, this broader understanding of discipline that you have outlined for us moves into the more narrow expression of discipline, which is when the elders and the pastor become involved. When does that process become appropriate?*

AP: Jesus says the trigger is refusing to listen. In Matthew 18:15–20, Jesus gives us several steps. These are not to be hurried in any fashion, and the first two steps are in an informal appeal to people. “If your brother sins against you”—or “If you see your brother sin”—“go and show him his fault, just between the two of you” (v. 15a). So, you keep that communication very exclusive. If he listens, you have won your brother over (v. 15b). If he refuses to listen—and that would mean that you have probably talked to him multiple times—then Jesus says you still keep it informal. He says, in verse 16, then get one or two others, and those one or two others can serve as mediators, can serve to help to clarify things, can probe more deeply the heart of the brother or sister who is thought to have erred, and if the person really has erred, they eventually will proceed as witnesses. And I think this is very important because in many churches I have seen, somebody misbehaves, and pastors and elders typically either do nothing, which is the general rule, or if they do something, they become quite formal, if not harsh. They send letters or emails, but they do not do the face-to-face. “How can I talk to this person and make a real heart-to-heart appeal?” So those first two steps take the time for gently restoring. However, Jesus says, if you have done that, you have done it multiple times, and it is not working, and the person still is digging in their heels, refusing to listen—and that is Jesus’s special language—the next step, he says, is you will “tell it to the church” (v. 17), and by that I have always understood the leaders of the church. Because if he refuses to listen to the church, you have to expel the person. If anybody is called to rule, it is the elders. Those who rule the church are worthy of honor, and those who teach and preach of double honor (1 Tim 5:17).

PAL: *As you think about this process, there are those in history who have tried to do discipline at the sacraments, and it has actually backfired, and those who are exercising discipline were removed from the church or expelled. That is Calvin’s story. Did Calvin do the right thing? If you are going to try to fence the table, you might not want to do it in light of the challenges. What does that teach us at that point, as you look at that historical moment?*

AP: Sometimes that must happen. If you have censured a member from

participating in the Lord's Supper and they defy that censure and seek to partake of communion, then, Calvin did the right thing and so should we. However, failure to fence the table is a symptom of the larger problem today because many churches do not exercise discipline at all.

PAL: *If there has been such a struggle through history going back to Calvin and other periods with church discipline, dare we really try to restore it? If the church's stories are that it is hard, what encouragement do we have to try to begin to address this issue directly today?*

AP: Again, we go back to Scripture, and what did Jesus say? One of the things he says, in the Great Commission is, "Lo, I am with you always" (Matt 28:20). He has not left us. I told those pastors who were confessing their sin of not exercising church discipline, "Confess it. Just repent to the Lord." They had read the chapters in my book on church discipline⁶ and had listened to my lectures. I said, "Start to implement this. Then, the first thing is you really need to understand and know what God is saying in Scripture. Two, once you have learned it, you need to teach your elders, and you need to press them in this way. If they do not like it, tell them, "It is not a matter whether I like it or not, or whether you like it. We are going to answer before God. He is not going to say on the day of judgment, *Did you like it?*" He is going to say, *Were you a good and faithful servant?*" And of course, Christ gave us Matthew 18 and many other passages we have recalled.

There are three great goals of church discipline. One is God's honor. You want the community around you to be able to look at your church and say, "They do it." Near my church, there was a very large church that had a scandalous situation. One of the pastors had run off with a young girl and the church did nothing. By contrast, we had a reputation in the community for being a reconciling church that practices church discipline. So, we had people that came because we exercised church discipline. In my church, we are going to honor God.

The second goal of church discipline is the purity of the church. "A little leaven," Paul says, "leavens the whole loaf" [1 Cor 5:6]. So, we need to exercise discipline and be holy, because if we are not, our own church will become unholy, impure. I have seen myself through my work in peacemaking that churches have let down their guard and sin has run rampant.

The third goal of church discipline is the restoration of the sinner. Jesus says, "If you see your brother sin against you, go and show to him his fault,

⁶ Alfred Poirier, *The Peacemaking Pastor: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Church Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 220–64, 307–9.

and if he listens you have restored your brother” (Matt 18:15). Our Lord stands behind each of those goals. He wants to glorify his own name by your obedience; he wants to keep his church pure by your obedience and having church discipline; and he wants to restore sinners.

PAL: *We have summarized a number of important points. You have made the point that discipline is broader than just these immediate cases. But what do you say to a pastor or church leader who says, “We have just failed. We have not done this. It has been too hard” or “We blundered in the past. I am afraid to do it”?*

AP: In my book, *The Peacemaking Pastor*, I have two chapters on this issue.⁷ Those would be a good place to start. There I lay out in chapter eleven, called “Church Discipline Principles,” the whole biblical principles of church discipline. And I go into issues such as the keys of the kingdom, authority, and the manner in which we are to exercise church discipline. And then in the twelfth chapter, “Church Discipline Practices,” I deal with the nuts and bolts of discipline. I wrote the book for Bible-believing people who want to follow the word.

PAL: *Romans 6 comes to mind as a force to help us really move in this direction. How would you apply Romans 6:1–4 and get serious about this whole matter in the church?*

AP: Very clearly Paul asks, “Should we go on sinning so that grace may increase?” (Rom 6:1). And he says, *Me genoito*, “By no means” (v. 2). He is shocked that anybody would think such. He says,

We died to sin. How can we live in it any longer? We were baptized into Christ; we were baptized into his death. We were buried, therefore, with him, so count yourselves dead to sin and alive to God through Jesus Christ.

So, we go back to our beginnings. What does it mean to be a baptized Christian when you came to Christ? What did that really mean? It is more than just I am justified and one day when I die, I am going to go to heaven. No, I am united with Christ, and in that union with Christ, I want to walk in newness of life and holiness of life, and I want to be a distinct and disciplined, holy person, with a holy people. Those who have died in Christ are now living for Christ.

⁷ Ibid.

PAL: *Briefly comment for pastors on how your view of discipline, discipleship, relates to the word, the sacraments, their work of leadership, and the church's elders. How does that come together holistically?*

AP: First, one has to emphasize the word. There needs to be so much work in this area. It is like a missing part of Scripture, and it is more than just Matthew 18. Think of Ezekiel 34, where the Lord chided the shepherds of Israel in Ezekiel's day for failing to care for the sheep. So there has to be a strong word ministry. In our new member class, we taught on church discipline. We let people know, "If you join our church, this is the kind of things that may happen; we call it accountability." We said, "Listen, we are a family, and Jesus teaches, 'When one of you is going astray, you leave the ninety-nine, and you go after that one'" [Matt 18:12]. So, there has to be a shepherd's heart that preaches and teaches elders, those in authority, who will have to exercise discipline. Teach your people as well. If the elders know, but the people do not know, they are going to be shocked and surprised. Also, seize the opportunities in baptism. When you teach on baptism, when you teach on the Lord's Supper, there are simple things that you can say. When baptizing an adult or a child, you can say, "This is God's mark, sign, and seal of now belonging to Christ and being set apart to be a holy person," and the church can commit herself with every baptism, anybody becoming a member, and the entire congregation can take a vow to pray for this person and to help this person to live a holy life. So this is where word and sacrament come in. Take the very means of grace and use them to highlight what it means to be a holy people.

PAL: *You have used the expression "fencing the table," which means when you come to the Lord's Supper, you are calling people to exercise personal discipline within their own hearts and lives. Can you please expand on that?*

AP: Paul himself says in the first Corinthians 11:28–29 that we have to judge ourselves when we partake of the Lord's Supper. To the degree that you can shape your liturgy, integrate that element. Because I was the senior pastor, I had quite a bit of responsibility to shape our liturgy. We began to put in a confession of sin, corporate confession, some private confession of sin, and then a promise of forgiveness. So every week, the entire congregation would corporately confess their sins and corporately hear of God's promise of forgiveness. That is important because every week we are telling ourselves we are sinners in need of God's grace through Jesus Christ.

PAL: *What is the good fruit that comes from practicing this kind of serious discipline for the church? What will be the result?*

AP: It is not going to be that there are no problems in the church or no more sin, but people know that they are cared for. I liken it to a fence; I take this from G. K. Chesterton. In his book *Orthodoxy*, he has a wonderful image that discipline is like a fence. He says, imagine children playing soccer—he does not use the word soccer—on a hill overlooking the sea where there is a sharp cliff. If you have a fence, they can play soccer all they want, and nobody is going to fall and hurt themselves. There is freedom, there is joy, they can play. But if you remove that fence, if you remove discipline, the children become fearful, they are huddled. They are no longer running about laughing and enjoying one another.⁸ That is what I found with discipline. You see it in every family. Calvin asks, What society, what family, can operate without discipline? What business could operate without discipline [Calvin, *Institutes* 4.12.1]? We all need discipline, and when a family is disciplined, when a business is disciplined, when a church is disciplined, things run smoothly; we all know our place. We all know what is expected of us and of one another, and we really can be a family church, the household of God.

PAL: *How does the church learn to welcome back someone who has been removed through the disciplinary process? How does that come about?*

AP: In terms of practice, we would always have our church discipline sessions, all members only. In my almost forty-year career as a pastor, I used to exercise discipline publicly on the Lord's Day in the morning worship. A wise brother in the Lord suggested a better way, which is meetings for members only, those that have been taught. So, when we receive people back, when they come back, we call a special meeting. You remind the church that this is part of your process, not only to discipline and censure people publicly but to receive them and restore them publicly. And then you have a meeting and a restoration service. We went through several of these. I remember a classic one. We had a young woman who had had a child out of wedlock, and we were able to have a godly mother in the church to disciple her, and a godly elder in the church to disciple her boyfriend. That boyfriend came to faith in Christ. Because the young woman was pregnant, it was a public sin and called for a public restoration. She was very repentant, and I still can remember that day. The meeting was right after church, and we dismissed everybody except members. Then, we had her stand up with me, and I just addressed the entire congregation, and I said, "This is what happened"—the situation, the sin—"and this person has been repentant. Now we are restoring her fully." She gave such a

⁸ Cf. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908; repr., San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995), 157.

wonderful public confession of sin and apologized to her parents, her siblings. She said, “I have offended God, I offended the elders, I offended you, the congregation. Please forgive me. I am seeking to walk closely with Jesus Christ now. Sister so-and-so is discipling me.” Then, everybody’s heart broke, and so I gave her a big hug, and her parents did, and then I invited the rest of the congregation to come and welcome her back, and they did. They stood in a long line and for almost forty minutes, people came by, just giving her a big hug, and it was so salutary for the entire congregation. People saw the church, because of discipline, as a real family that really cares, and that was the beauty of it.

PAL: *Any final thoughts you want to share with us? I would love you to have the last word.*

AP: We began talking about the way we conduct discipline, and I mentioned Hebrews. So let me finish by quoting that passage where the Lord, who loves us and gave his life for us, speaks to us: “My Son, do not despise the LORD’s discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the LORD reproves him whom he loves, as a Father, the Son in whom he delights” [Prov 3:11–12]. That is discipline—a sign of love.

PAL: *That is wonderful. Well, thank you for your leadership in this regard, and we are confident that as we remember the three marks of the church—the preaching of the word, the faithful administration of the sacraments, and then the calling of the community to live in humble obedience to Christ with support from the disciplinary function of our own hearts, our community, and our leaders—there is a hope for a true holy church, a holy catholic church, and you have been a faithful leader in that. We thank you for your diligence, so may God bless you.*