

Interview

Tom Pennington

By Art Azurdia



Tom Pennington is Senior Pastor of Countryside Bible Church in Southlake, Texas. Over the last few years we have had the privilege of preaching together at various conferences and, in so doing, I have come to respect him as a man of genuine integrity – a pastor faithful to the instruction and application of God's word in all areas of ministry. Last July I happened to be in Dallas, so I contacted Tom to see if we might meet for breakfast and an interview on behalf of this issue of TSFJ. Despite his busy schedule, he warmly agreed.

Art Azurdia: Church discipline is a foreign concept to many American evangelicals, please tell us why this ministry is important to the well-being of a congregation.

Tom Pennington: First and foremost, I believe it's an issue of obedience. As elders, we must display submission to God's will before our people. Every Sunday we exhort the church to respond to the word of God in obedience. What kind of model is set if we are not faithful to the difficult commands of Scripture? It comes down to a basic form of discipleship that we are modeling for our people: that Christ is the head of the church, we're under His leadership, and we're going to follow all of His commands. We cannot ignore God's commands simply because they are difficult or countercultural. Secondly, we must consider the priority of maintaining church purity through restoration. Church discipline is the tool God has ordained to restore an individual who has chosen a rebellious path back to Christ and to His church. What pastor or group of elders don't want to see that happen? Christ Himself put this plan in place and the goal is *always* restoration.

AA: So its emphasis is remedial, not punitive?

TP: Absolutely. Another benefit of church discipline is its function in maintaining the purity of the congregation. If church discipline isn't practiced, sin is allowed to run rampant and our people will not be as serious about examining their own lives or confessing their sins. In light of this, we exercise church discipline in conjunction with communion. Together, they serve as a helpful reminder of our sinfulness and the importance of confessing our sin. Not only does it keep the church pure in the sense that the person who is rebelliously sinning is cut off from communion, but it also purifies in the sense that it is a constant reminder that I must deal with my own sin, just as the people of the church have to deal with theirs.

AA: So it promotes self-examination?

TP: Yes, in a significant way. Unfortunately, church discipline does not always result in the restoration of the person who is the object of discipline. However, I believe it does something within them even if they don't return to the church (as far as we know). It doesn't allow them to embrace the idea that everything is okay between themselves and Christ and His church while continuing in a pattern of sin. Rather, Christ commands us to treat them as unbelievers, declaring the gospel to them and questioning whether they are in Christ.

AA: As parents, most of us can identify with this concept. We chastise our children for remedial reasons - not punitive reasons. However, it seems difficult for people to understand this when thinking about church discipline. And yet, this is why Jonathan Edwards referred to church discipline as "gospel discipline."

TP: I absolutely agree with that; in fact, we've seen it just this year. There was an unmarried young couple in our church who became sexually involved. They were stubbornly resistant through the entire process of church discipline, all the way up to the fourth step. Finally, we put them out of the church. About a year later, however, a good friend of theirs died and they were brought face-to-face with their own mortality. They returned to us and testified that as a result of the work we had done with them, and the love that had been expressed for them, they came to truly understand the gospel. Following that declaration, we went through an extensive process with them. One of our elders met with them for a number of weeks, discipling them in order to discern whether their profession was genuine. We had a wonderful time restoring them during a communion service and welcomed them back into the church. There is no question that church discipline works for the purposes God intends it to work - whether we see the results we're hoping for or not. Of course, it is exciting to see it work for the salvation of individuals who have been through the process.

AA: Tom, as you speak about the benefits to the congregation, the passage that comes to my mind is Matthew 7 . . . in particular, the phrase about taking the log out of one's own eye. Therein is the benefit when dealing with disciplinary issues-it forces all of us to take a look inward.

TP: It does. In fact, that's always how I handle church discipline because I don't want anyone to develop some sort of overly righteous false piety, and to imagine-even for a moment-that any of us are exempt from making sinful choices. I always end a statement of discipline with a reminder to the congregation of how easily our own sin can be allowed to move toward rebellion. We cannot allow sin an inch in our lives. When it comes we must, by God's grace, immediately confess and repent of it. Frankly, I love the fact that we do this with communion because it reminds us that atonement has been provided for our sin – and for the sin of person we're disciplining – and that if we turn from it in repentance, Christ will receive us.

AA: As you know, the reformers refer to church discipline as "the third mark of the church," following the preaching of the gospel and the proper administration of the sacraments. How are these three marks interrelated? Do you see them as mutually dependent?

TP: I really do see them as not only related, but in one sense, each proceeding out of the others. It starts with the Scripture – the emphasis on the preaching of Scripture. Where the Scriptures are properly taught, the sacraments (the ordinances) will be performed. This, of course, begs the question: who is going to participate in this community of believers? Who is allowed to be here and to fellowship where the word is taught, where God's people are worshipping, where baptism is practiced, and where the Lord's Table is observed? This is where discipline comes in. While we can't remove all the tares from the church, we can at least set up a fence between the field that is primarily wheat and the field that is primarily tares.

AA: Would you please walk me through your understanding of Matthew 18, discussing some of the practical implications involved? How do you understand the unfolding of the process?

TP: The process is very clearly comprised of four-steps. If you know someone who has sinned against you or against the Lord in a way that is potentially debilitating to that person's life and spiritual growth, it cannot be ignored. Now, of course, we sin against one another all the time - if you're married you understand that – and there must be a spirit of forgiveness that overlooks a wrong suffered and moves on. But there are sins in our lives and in the lives of others that are potentially spiritually debilitating and destructive. When we see those sins we are commanded to go to that person privately. The **first step** is between the person with the knowledge of the sin and the person who sinned. Approaching the person who has sinned with the right attitude is crucial, and it must not be done in an arrogant or proud spirit. Rather, Galatians 6 makes it clear that this confrontation is to be done in a spirit of humility, considering oneself first. This manifests itself in a statement such as, "Brother, I understand. I see my own sin and I know how this happens but I'm very concerned." Unless a blatant act of sin was witnessed first-hand, it is

important to avoid the assumption that all the facts are known. Rather, begin by asking questions such as, "I saw this . . .", "that really troubled me . . .", or "what was going on?" Don't be naïve, however. Obviously a person involved in sin is going to be quick to excuse it and to come up with explanations. But, at the same time, don't assume you know everything. Go in with a gracious and humble spirit, raising your concerns, and asking for explanations. If you do uncover legitimate sin, confront them. I urge people to use biblical terminology to identify sin and avoid ambiguity.

AA: Would you please provide an example or illustration?

TP: A couple came to meet with me about their daughter. She was struggling with rebellion. However, as the parents described her sin they called it everything but rebellion. They made statements such as, "She struggles with this problem, and she doesn't see things the way we see them." Much of their terminology was cultural and worldly. Not once did they call her sin what the Bible calls it - rebellion, something that would have gotten her stoned during the days of the Old Testament. Once I helped them identify the sin in biblical language it made it much clearer – that her actions were against God. Before approaching someone, you must be able to clearly identify the sin. The good thing about requiring this of yourself is that sometimes you may realize it's not a sin at all. Perhaps it is a matter of conscience about which good Christians disagree. Force yourself to ask: "In what biblical sin is this person involved?" This really helps to clarify the confrontation. It reveals that the issue is not primarily about you and that person; it is about God and that person.

AA: So you have that first step: confrontation.

TP: Yes; and if they respond in repentance then you have won your brother as Christ says; it's dropped at that point and you move on. There ought to be forgiveness and reconciliation because the sin is in the past, just as our sins are with Christ. If, however, they maintain a defensive posture and refuse to repent, or if the evidence is unclear, then perhaps you need some additional help. This is where the **second step** comes in – you return to the person with two or three others, witnesses not of the original sin but of this second confrontation. These people can help you establish whether there is, in fact, a sin and what type of response is necessary. If the person in question is a leader in the church (an elder or a deacon), I think it's important that the others involved at this stage also be elders if possible. Again, if there is repentance, it's dropped and forgiven and you move on. Discipline is only ratcheted up if there is hard-hearted rebellion against the will and purposes of God.

However, if the witnesses agree that the person who has been confronted stubbornly refuses to repent of their sin and continues to manifest hard-hearted rebellion against the will and word of God, then you must engage the **third step** – taking it to the congregation. The Scriptures indicate that the elders must bring the issue before the church and make a statement such as, "We've exercised the first two steps of Matthew 18 with a brother in our church and yet he has remained stubbornly resistant to God's word. So, we're bringing it to you." How much time we allow to elapse between steps depends on the nature of the sin and the mitigating circumstances. But remember – God is incredibly patient. Read about the four hundred years He parked His people in Egypt while the sin of the Ammorites ran its course and you realize the extent of God's patience. Of course, we're not to wait four hundred years, but it ought to mean that we're willing to give people time as we pray for the work of the Spirit in their hearts. So, that might be one or two months between when we as the elders learn about the sin and initially confront, and when we actually move forward to step three, publically informing the church.

AA: Theoretically, this person may still be coming to church. In the event that a person remains hard-hearted, how would you explain your implementation of step three publically?

TP: Before the public announcement of step three, the elders send this person a registered letter with a return receipt so that we know he received it. The letter would reinforce our love and concern for him, specifying the biblical sin and urging him to repent. It would also make clear that if he fails to do so by a particular date, we will move forward with step three as our Lord commands in Matthew 18. With this knowledge, he would have an opportunity to inform us of a change of heart, right up to the last moments. Because we take communion in our morning services, we practice the same discipline on the person in

both services. I typically transition from the message by asking everyone to bow their heads, taking a moment for self-examination. I write out my comments ahead of time, keeping them brief and clearly defining the sin biblically. I avoid spelling out the details, or making conjectures or assumptions as to what may have been his motive. It is extremely important to say only what is verified. This serves as a legal protection. Additionally, it's crucial that your discipline process be spelled out in your church constitution, and that every member and regular attendees are exposed to that discipline policy. In addressing the church I typically say something such as, "Unfortunately, as we take of the Lord's table today it is our sad duty as elders to tell you that there is a member of our church who has chosen a path of unrepentant sin. It is 'so and so.' He has divorced his wife without biblical grounds. If you know him, please pray for him and urge him to turn back to the path of blessing and repentance. And, of course, this reminds us to examine our own hearts." It is a brief statements, but these are the key points I would make. Then I would call everyone to silent prayer, both for the person involved and then themselves. All of this happens with their heads bowed as they practice self-examination. Then I pray, closing the time of self-examination and confession with a prayer of confession, including a prayer of supplication for the person who has just been disciplined in this third step.

AA: And again, how much time do you allot between the third and fourth steps?

TP: I think there has to be some latitude there. If, because of the nature of the influence of this person, it is someone who is a risk or a danger either physically or spiritually to the church, we don't want too much time to pass, lest they sow discord with the groups they know. Generally, however, one or two months are allotted, and on rare occasions perhaps three months, depending on the circumstance of what we see and hear.

AA: In the event this person continues in his defiance, what will the final step look like?

TP: The **fourth step** involves the same process. We try to contact the person again individually, urging him to repent. Regardless, he would be sent a letter in which we articulate the biblical process, explaining that we are delivering him over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, and that we no longer assume he is in Christ because he has persisted in his sin through the entire process. The date for the upcoming communion service would also be specified, allowing him time to respond. In the service itself, the announcement would once again be made in conjunction with communion, but my statement would be a bit different. Likely, it would sound something like this, "We are now following our Lord's command, and by this fourth step putting 'so and so' out of the church. We are no longer to consider him a part of this church; nor are we to consider him a brother or sister in Christ. For all intents and purposes, because he has chosen to sin through this entire process outlined by our Lord, we have to assume he is not in Christ. He may be; however, we must pray that he'll come to faith in Christ.

AA: Historically, some have said that this fourth step means that the disciplined person can show up for Sunday services but must refrain from partaking of the Lord's Supper. Others have been a bit more strict and have said that the disciplined person is not welcome to attend Sunday services unless they want to repent.

TP: I would be somewhere in between. I think all would agree that a disciplined person shouldn't be coming and involving himself in the life of the church as if he were a believer. However, I do think it is appropriate to allow him to attend for a period of time to be exposed to the truth, but we certainly don't want others to get the impression that his is a part of our believing community.

AA: After the fourth step has been exercised, what happens if such a person returns with some expression of repentance?

TP: At this point we are treating him as an unbeliever. And so to make sure that everyone clearly gets the word that he is to be received back as a result of genuine repentance, we ask him to come to the front with the elders gathered around. I make the announcement that he is repentant and that we trust the Lord will continue His work in his heart. I welcome him back and encourage the congregation to receive him back, love him, and care for him. Generally, there is a wonderful time of fellowship that follows the

service, in which members express their love for the one who has been received back. In this case, more needs to be made of the restoration because more has been made in the process of putting him out.

AA: Tom, what connection is there between church discipline and formal church membership? Are those two things tied together in your mind?

TP: Yes and no. I think they ought to be. I'm a strong believer in church membership. It's clear that the early church knew who was a part of the church and who wasn't. Of course, I'm not arguing that they managed church membership exactly the way we do. But there were certainly parameters; they knew who belonged to the flock they were shepherding, and the people being shepherded understood their connection to a particular church. Everyone who is part of a local church ought to be formerly connected to that church and, therefore, discipline would be automatic for any who fall into sin. Unfortunately, however, not everyone is formerly connected to a church, so church leaders are faced with the question of what to do when a "regular attendee" falls into sin. I believe we bear the same responsibility and obligation to them that we do to those who are formal members. In order to ensure that people understand our views on discipline, we periodically run an insert in the bulletin, making it clear that it affects regular attendees in our church as well as regular members.

AA: How would you describe your own emotional ebbings and flowings through the process of church discipline, especially as you get nearer to the more public steps? Do you face internal challenges or struggles?

TP: Oh, absolutely; there are several things that cause consternation. First and foremost, I want to be so careful to ensure that we're right. I don't want to be disciplining someone in the church when their circumstance doesn't warrant it, when there isn't sin, or there's not provable sin. I don't want to take such a serious step without the confidence that we've done due diligence to discern the truth. If there's any doubt I would rather wait; there's no harm in waiting and praying the Lord would make it plain. That's always part of my soul because I'm a door checker – I check the door three times to make sure it is locked. The other issue I deal with is intense sadness. There is in pastoral ministry, and you know this as a pastor, sadness because you see how a rebellious person's decision is wrecking his life and the lives of those around him. You know family members, and the church as a whole, are going to be affected by their decisions. I feel an increased hatred not only toward their sin, but toward my own because I see what it does and how it wrecks lives. The experience is a serious and sobering call for self-examination. I don't want to be tolerating an unbroken pattern of sin in my own life while I'm addressing it in someone else's. How hypocritical would that be? Of course we all sin, but are we fighting? Are we repenting? Are we confessing? Are we seeing progress?

AA: It seems to me that the thing we want to avoid is doing this with a sense of self-righteous glee. There's always a sense in which this is done with a broken heart. Something would be intrinsically wrong if someone took a kind of sadistic delight in humiliating people publically or kicking them out of the church.

TP: Absolutely; in fact, if people sense anything but a broken heart and humility when you stand up to mention these people publically, then you've failed. If it is done with a sort of measured coldness, it's not reflective of the heart of God.

AA: Let's think for a moment about young pastors – guys who are new in ministry. What are the potential landmines you would strongly encourage young men to avoid? What are the typical mistakes they could easily make?

TP: Well, just based on the sheer numbers, I would say that the chief landmine is failing to practice church discipline.

AA: Pastors are being passive?

TP: Yes; they are being passive and ignoring the Scripture. But beyond that let's assume – as I think you're assuming – that these are men who want to do what the Scripture says. Being too rushed in the

process would be a significant temptation particularly in our youthfulness. Young pastors need to remember that sometimes details come out in the process of time that were previously unknown. They must be careful to identify the biblical sins and only confront the biblical sins. They need to be able to discern issues of conscience (or lack of wisdom) from actual sin. As has already been discussed, young pastors must also avoid exercising discipline in the wrong spirit or doing it with coldness or callousness.

Beyond these things, young pastors are likely to underestimate the typical response to discipline. When you're young and idealistic in ministry, you assume that because something is biblical, the people to whom discipline is being administered are going to love you. In actuality, they are likely to lash out and attack you, accuse you, make a scene, and threaten to sue the church. Those are all very standard responses when you're practicing church discipline. Early on, that was the biggest shock for me. I had no idea that I would get everything from physical threats to slander in the course of this process. It's shocking to discover that people will hate you because you're confronting their sin.

A pastor called me recently who was very concerned. It was the first time he'd practiced church discipline and lady being disciplined threatened to show up on the Sunday of church discipline with a scarlet "A" sewn to her dress and a bucket of rocks for people to throw, alluding to John 8!

AA: Finally Tom, , would you please talk about a discipline situation that ended in repentance and restoration?

TP: I've seen that twice this year. I mentioned one earlier that culminated in true conversion. The Lord used the discipline process and the death of a friend to bring the couple to Himself. I look out now on Sunday mornings and see them sitting there and learning the truth, growing and prospering. That is very encouraging. Another man was pursuing the divorce of his wife with no biblical grounds, by his own admission. After the third step, when we were prepared to send the fourth step letter, he came back and said that he was going to take divorce off the table and was going to be reconciled to his wife. Based on the history with this man we have every reason to believe that is true. He's been honest with us at every stage, he's never tried to deceive us as to what his intentions were; it looks like this is the real thing. He's contacted the attorney and withdrawn the divorce papers, and has made overtures to his wife to get back together. At the next communion service, Lord willing, we will be welcoming him as well.

AA: So church discipline is a means of grace?

TP: It is an expression of God's grace to His people.

AA: Thank you for the time, Tom; thank you for the insights. I appreciate them very much

TP: Thanks for giving me the opportunity.