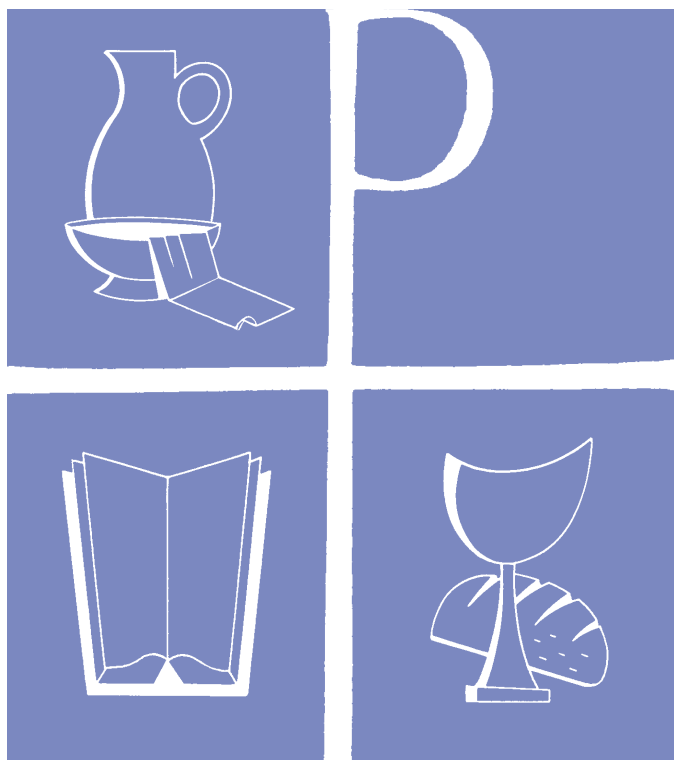


# Ordinary and Extraordinary Discipline

Charles Wiley



Office of Theology and Worship  
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*Ordinary and Extraordinary Discipline:  
Mutual Accountability in the Reformed Tradition*  
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# Ordinary and Extraordinary Discipline:

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## Introduction

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**J**ohn Calvin was clear: “Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists” (Institutes, 4.1.9). John Knox added a third “mark” of the church: “ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered, as God’s Word prescribes, whereby vice is repressed and virtue nourished” (Scots Confession, 3.18). Whether discipline is considered a central reality of the church’s life, as with Calvin, or an essential mark of the church, as with Knox, Reformed church life has always been characterized by careful attention to the community’s responsibility for shaping faithful Christian life.

Discipline in Reformed church life has sometimes been overstressed, sometimes neglected, and often institutionalized. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s *Book of Order* gives modest space to proclamation of the Word and celebration of the sacraments, but devotes one of its three parts to the “Rules of Discipline,” including an appendix of fifty-one “Forms for Judicial Process (Plus Dissent and Protest).” The life of the PC(USA) is now consumed with matters of church discipline. Permanent Judicial Commissions at every governing body level are called on to adjudicate serious matters of faith and faithfulness, and the need for discipline in the church’s life is debated by groups within the church.

What is “uprightly ministered” church discipline? What does church discipline shaped by God’s Word look like? What is the role of the church’s discipline in inhibiting vice and nourishing virtue?

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In *Ordinary and Extraordinary Discipline*, Charles Wiley explores the nature of mutual accountability in the Christian community. His range covers the tradition, from Calvin's Geneva to the contemporary PC(USA), to provide a theological, ecclesial, and pastoral understanding of discipline that opens new possibilities of faithfulness.

The original form of *Ordinary and Extraordinary Discipline* was delivered as an address to a meeting of the Presbyterian Coalition in October 2002. Publication in the Office of Theology and Worship's "Church Issues Series" reflects our conviction that Dr. Wiley's insights are important for the whole church.

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Joseph D. Small  
Coordinator, Office of Theology and Worship

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# Ordinary and Extraordinary Discipline: Mutual Accountability in the Reformed Tradition

“We teach best what we need most to learn.”<sup>1</sup>

## Mutual Accountability

What is the nature of our mutual accountability within the Christian community? It is a question vexing our church. I read headlines about a constitutional crisis, the lack of discipline in the church, and calls for submission to the will of the church. Many are angry that discipline is not being applied the way they think it should be. Others are angry that discipline is not being exercised against those who dissent. On this we should agree: discipline is not working the way it should. Discipline in the Presbyterian Church is atrophied because we have failed to exercise a comprehensive and biblical notion of the role of discipline in the Christian life.

In exploring the theme of mutual accountability, I will use some lessons learned from the Reformation period in Geneva as a window into the history and theology of discipline in the Reformed tradition. In the past twenty years there has been extensive research on the role of discipline in the Genevan Reformation under Calvin. This research has been spearheaded by Dr. Robert Kingdon of the University of Wisconsin. For too long the picture of discipline in Calvin’s time has been dominated by episodes such as the burning of Servetus—the, *perhaps*, heavy-handed use of discipline to enforce doctrinal and moral purity. But that picture turns out to be horribly incomplete. Earlier translators of the Registers of the Consistory were not interested in the everyday exercise of discipline; instead, they picked out the most salacious stories and ignored the vast majority of more ordinary disciplinary cases. Kingdon and his team have done us a great service by translating all the records, thereby giving us a representation of the everyday practice of discipline in Calvin’s Geneva.<sup>2</sup>

## Why Discipline?

*The recovery of the exercise of church discipline in a biblical, Reformed manner is vital to the future of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).*

As you may know, John Calvin's first effort to reform the church in Geneva was less than successful. One of the principal causes for opposition to Calvin's reform was his insistence that the people take communion every week in worship—under the previous Catholic regime the people only received the elements once a year. Because of deep-seated resistance to a reformation of all of church life, Calvin departed for Strasbourg, France, where Martin Bucer mentored him. Under Bucer, Calvin grasped that a reformation of the church called for a retrieval of discipline for all people in the church.

A few years later when the situation in Geneva became desperate, the city fathers called Calvin back to continue the reform of the church. In preparing to return Calvin pressed for a number of concrete reforms. Again he requested weekly communion, but this time he insisted strongly on disciplinary practices around the table. The city leaders balked at the extent of Calvin's demands. Calvin finally relented on weekly communion, against his better judgment, but he would not compromise on the establishment of a Consistory that would ensure a baptismal discipline around the table.

While the faithful proclamation of the Word and the right celebration of the sacraments were at the center of church practice for Calvin, he recognized that discipline was necessary for holding these practices together. In his famous reply to Cardinal Sadeleto, Bishop of Carpentras in Southern France, Calvin wrote that discipline held the church together: "For the body of the Church, to cohere well, must be bound together by discipline as with sinews."<sup>3</sup> Because discipline was vital to give space for Word and Sacrament to work in the church, Calvin fiercely defended its exercise:

Of all the institutions he built it was the one he defended with the greatest tenacity. He even threatened to resign his charge and to leave the city at times when its authority was challenged. He was completely convinced that it was not enough for a community to arrange for true Christian doctrine to be taught. It was also necessary for a community to require that true Christian precepts be lived.<sup>4</sup>

Central to the Reformed tradition from its very inception is a commitment to the faithful living of Christian faith coupled with an admission that such faithfulness is not possible alone. In the church we need each other, accountability with each other, to live faithful lives.

The church in our own time is entering a new age, perhaps in the end as dramatic a shift as the Reformation was in its time. After four and a half centuries of ascending importance within our culture, our church is fast becoming a minority church. As we enter this new time, our identity is at stake, not for its own sake, but for the sake of being faithful to our Savior, Jesus Christ. In such a time, an attention to what makes us *us* is vital. And thus a biblical practice of discipline is required.

### Ordinary Discipline

*The great achievement of our Reformed forebears was the recovery of ordinary discipline.*

Ordinary, not extraordinary, discipline was the preoccupation of the Reformers like Calvin. Since I have coined the terms *ordinary discipline* and *extraordinary discipline*, I will expand on what I intend by them.

*Ordinary discipline* is the practice of the church to assist Christians to stay true to their deepest desires, desires given to us by God—to live a faithful Christian life, to stay true to the vows we make at baptism. *Extraordinary discipline* involves either holding someone to their vows against their wishes or resolving a dispute between parties where there is no agreement on the good.

Ordinary discipline was Calvin's preoccupation, although he clearly believed and practiced extraordinary discipline. Preceding the time of the Reformation, discipline was primarily exercised in two ways. The first was extraordinary discipline of heresy trials and the like—people who were accused of opposing the church's teaching or standards. The second was special discipline for those in religious vocations (monks, nuns, and those in religious orders) that went well beyond what was expected of the average Christian. In fact, the



extraordinary discipline of the late medieval period has significant continuity with that exercised by the Reformers. It was in the second realm that there was a great change.

Calvin took the special discipline restricted to those in religious vocations and extended it to every believer. He rejected the notion that only those who had taken vows of celibacy were to live truly disciplined lives. In a real sense, Calvin extended the monastery to the whole church, expecting every Christian to submit his or her own life to Christ in all aspects of life.

Rather than describing further the practice of ordinary discipline in Geneva, I will illustrate it with an account from Geneva in 1542, the account of “Master Michiel the Saddler and His Nephew.” [The text is from the minutes of the Consistory, the body of ministers and elders that exercised most cases of discipline in the church—it is not composed of polished, complete sentences.]

Why he and his nephew have been in conflict for a long time, and various other questions. Answers that he pardons his said nephew although he has caused him much pain, and that he will never be in his company, and that he has not taken Communion three or four times because of this quarrel, and that he took it last time. The Consistory, the preachers having given the said Michiel strict admonitions, exhorted him to pardon his said nephew entirely according to the commandment of God for the offenses his said nephew has committed against him for the honor of Jesus Christ. Answers that for the love of God he pardons him entirely for the injuries he has done him. And also that he go to the sermons, and answers that he can hardly go there because he is ill.

The nephew was asked what grudge or resentment he has felt against his uncle for a long time, and other things. Answers that he carries no hate against his uncle and that he does him all the favors he can, but that he is not pleased with him and does not care about him, and that he does him all the honor he can and has begged mercy on his knees from his uncle and he wants to pardon him also, and promises that he will never give any displeasure either to him or his aunt. And they pardoned each other and embraced and expressed love for each other and left together.<sup>5</sup>

This account of Michiel and his nephew is far more typical of discipline in Geneva than heresy trials or other spectacular tales. It was not the arena of burnings at the stake or banishment from the realm: it was the pastoral process of helping people to reconcile with one another in Christ, even uncles and nephews who cannot speak to one another.

Ordinary discipline is the role of the church community reminding us of what we truly want. Augustine described the Christian life in this way, “Love God and do what you will.”<sup>6</sup> This was not a statement underwriting an “anything goes” account of the Christian life. No—the foundation for church discipline is, ironically, the freedom we have in Christ. Not that we need to reign in freedom so we behave correctly, but rather that in Christ we are emancipated from our slavery to sin and are free to obey. Discipline becomes a help, a boon to us in exercising our freedom to live godly lives.

It was this *ordinary* discipline that was at the center of Geneva’s ecclesial practices. For Reformed Christians, there is no extraordinary discipline without the practice of ordinary discipline. Extraordinary discipline is only practiced as an outgrowth of ordinary discipline.

Much has changed since the time of the Reformation, but God still calls redeemed sinners to live faithful lives. And we still cannot answer that call on our own strength. We need the life of a disciplined community surrounding us to give us strength to follow.

## **Reconciliation**

*Ordinary discipline is local, relational, and restorative. The goal of this exercise of discipline is restoration and reconciliation.*

It is ordinary discipline that should be at the heart of our practice: ordinary discipline is congregationally focused, principally carried out by pastors *and* elders together who know their people. Martin Bucer said that discipline was best handled between friends. Ordinary discipline is not the sole province of pastors, but is a mutual ministry of pastors and elders. A great first step to transform a congregation would be to transform the session from a board of directors for the church

corporation to a body of elders with responsibilities for the spiritual life of that congregation: counseling with those to be baptized, accepting people into membership, being responsible for the service of the Table. Too often these vital responsibilities are handled in a pro forma manner.

This mode of holding one another accountable is characterized by discernment, not an adversarial legal system. Unfortunately, the system for discipline in the Presbyterian Church is often adversarial. I do not know when the adversarial legal system became part of our disciplinary procedures, but it was in place at least by the time of the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversies in the 1920s.

This distinction between ordinary discipline and extraordinary discipline is reflected in the preamble to the “Rules of Discipline” in the *Book of Order*:

**D-1.0103 Conciliate and Mediate**

The traditional biblical obligation to conciliate, mediate, and adjust differences without strife is not diminished by these Rules of Discipline. Although the Rules of Discipline describe the way in which judicial process within the church, when necessary, shall be conducted, it is not their intent or purpose to encourage judicial process of any kind or to make it more expensive or difficult. The biblical duty of church people to “come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court . . .” (Matthew 5:25) is not abated or diminished. It remains the duty of every church member to try (prayerfully and seriously) to bring about an adjustment or settlement of the quarrel, complaint, delinquency, or irregularity asserted, and to avoid formal proceedings under the Rules of Discipline unless, after prayerful deliberation, they are determined to be necessary to preserve the purity and purposes of the church.<sup>7</sup>

The irony is, of course, that this ordinary discipline described in the preamble is easily forgotten as we wade through the careful rules of an adversarial system laid out in the Rules of Discipline. Almost everything I have heard or read about discipline in the PC(USA) over the past few years has focused solely on extraordinary discipline, completely overlooking the more dominant pattern in our tradition.

In the story of Michiel and his nephew, did you note the asking of forgiveness, the embrace, and the leaving together? Almost every case

of church discipline during this period ended in touch appropriate to the relationship of the parties involved: a hug between spouses, a handshake between business partners, etc. Ordinary discipline is not about “getting” each other or holding each other’s feet to the fire. In ordinary church discipline we care enough about each other to treat one another with respect, with love, and with the will to risk helping each other grow in Christ.

The ordinary discipline that we must exercise is local, restorative, and reconciling.

### **Worship at the Heart**

The exercise of ordinary discipline is irrevocably related to the worship life of the church: the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. It is in the practice of baptism that we have the foundation for ordinary discipline. When we witness a baptism we hear something like:

In embracing that covenant, we choose whom we will serve,  
by turning from evil  
and turning to Jesus Christ.

Do you renounce all evil,  
and powers in the world  
which defy God’s righteousness and love?  
**I renounce them.**

Do you renounce the ways of sin  
that separate you from the love of God?  
**I renounce them.**

Do you turn to Jesus Christ  
and accept him as your Lord and Savior?  
**I do.**

Will you be Christ’s faithful disciple,  
obeying his Word and showing his love,  
to your life’s end?  
**I will, with God’s help.**

Will you be a faithful member of this congregation,  
share in its worship and ministry  
through your prayers and gifts,  
your study and service,  
and so fulfill your calling to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?  
**I will, with God's help.**<sup>8</sup>

In response to the grace of God offered to us in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, we make these vows, these promises. They are promises that recognize our being bound to God and the bonds we have with one another in the church. In the Reformed tradition baptism functions as the “visible vehicle for incorporation” into the church.”<sup>9</sup> In a real sense the exercise of ordinary discipline does not require us to commit ourselves to any further accountability than the vows we make at baptism.

In Calvin's time and for a long time thereafter, the primary locus of examination of living out these vows was in preparation for coming to the Lord's Table. This was an admirable move, to “discern the body” before communing at the Table. However, in time the system devolved from a mode of discernment to a more technical requirement to have acquired a Communion token to be admitted to the Table. In our day we must recover the notion of self-examination and corporate discipline around the Table, but not in a mechanistic, legalistic fashion. Instead, it must grow out of mutual love, forbearance, and accountability.

Discipline was not a third mark of the church for Calvin, but instead provided space for working of the two marks, the Word and Sacrament. Calvin believed that God had promised to work when the Word was faithfully preached and heard and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, “For it is certain that such things are not without fruit.”<sup>10</sup> Discipline is a human activity done in obedience to God that allows us to better hear the Word and receive the grace of God promised in the sacraments.

One significant worship practice that embodies ordinary discipline is the passing of the peace. More than just a chance to say “howdy,” the passing of the peace in worship gives space for reconciliation. I became a Presbyterian at Blacknall Memorial Presbyterian Church in Durham,

North Carolina. One of the most profound parts of that fellowship for my wife and me was that we reconciled with each other and with others during the peace. It is not a place for extended mediation for disputes. But to look someone in the eye with whom you are not at peace, extend your hand and say, “The peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you” —that is the fruit of the gospel.

It is no mere historical argument that ordinary church discipline is connected to the practices of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. One of the grave dangers of the exercise of church discipline is that it can become terrifying—an exercise of power obsessed with mere moralism. We have more than enough examples in the historical record of the overreaching of church discipline to back up this fear. By clearly connecting discipline to the grace offered by God to us in word and sacrament, we make it more difficult for it to descend into mere moralism.

To be faithful to the Scriptures and to the best of our tradition, we must clearly connect the practice of discipline to the worship life of the church, the hearing of the word, the engrafting into the church in baptism, and the continual feeding on Christ at the Lord’s Table.

## **Grace in the Mundane**

*In ordinary church discipline most cases are mundane.*

When people were brought before the Consistory in Geneva, the most common “offense” was not adultery, or prostitution, or heresy, or the other “good ones.” It was hate. Hate was the presenting issue in the story I presented of Master Michiel and his nephew. When discipline is solely focused on extraordinary discipline and high-profile offenses, we lose the ability to realize it is in our everyday lives with each other that our sin seeps out.

In another account from the Consistory in Geneva, we read again of the nephew of Michiel, but this time in relation to his aunt, Claudaz, the wife of Michiel the saddler:

Asked to give an explanation of her faith and about the quarrel between her husband and Mermet, their nephew, and why she has a grudge. Answers that the said Mermet said vicious things to her

but that she wishes him no harm and that she wishes him no harm sic and pardons him freely. Said the Lord's Prayer in her native tongue not very well, and says she knows the confession in Latin, and that she always takes Communion for the love of God. The Consistory advises that she be reconciled with her nephew Mermet. And touching the faith, that she frequent the sermons and come to catechism on Sunday with the others. And that she be admonished about the hypocrisy of her peace with her nephew Mermet. And that Monsieur Pierre Viret, Britillion and Frochet be assigned to reconcile them and that they be remanded to Monday after the sermon at the Magdalen so they can live in peace together.

This ordinary discipline is simply the mundane working out of our desire to be faithful to our Savior. Here the goal of the ordinary discipline is so "they can live in peace together"; further, that this peace be lived out and not just for the sake of appearances. Ordinary discipline concerns just these sorts of mundane aspects of daily living.

This connection between reception of grace and holy living is expressed well in the French Confession of 1559:

By faith we receive grace to live holy lives in awe and reverence for God, for we receive what the gospel promises when God gives us the Holy Spirit. So faith does not cool our desire for good and holy living, but rather engenders and excites it in us, leading naturally to good works.<sup>11</sup>

Because ordinary discipline is centered on the good works that naturally grow from God's grace working in our lives, it is centered on the mundane aspects of our lives. Considering discipline primarily as the extraordinary cases obscures this important aspect of the Christian life.

### **We are all implicated.**

*In an appropriate exercise of ordinary discipline, we all are implicated.*

Ordinary discipline implicates those that defy the constitution and those who bring charges against them. Ordinary discipline implicates people of questionable character and successful pastors. Ordinary discipline implicates deacons in a small church and General Assembly staff. We are all implicated. All of us

have lived for ourselves,  
and apart from [God].  
We have turned from our neighbors,  
and refused to bear the burdens of others.  
We have ignored the pain of the world,  
and passed by the hungry, the poor, and the oppressed. <sup>12</sup>

## **Moving Forward**

In sum, our task is to reclaim a biblical doctrine of the church. The church is not simply a collection of like-minded individuals. When the church is ordered correctly “pure doctrine can be maintained, vices can be corrected and suppressed, the poor and afflicted can be helped in their need, assemblies can be gathered in the name of God, and both great and small can be edified.”<sup>13</sup>

If we look at the debates in the church over discipline, in print, on the net, in conversation, the discussion focuses exclusively on the practice of extraordinary discipline. The question for all of us in the church is whether or not we, as individuals in Christian community, as churches, and as sessions, are faithfully exercising ordinary discipline—a discipline of all of life rooted in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and guided by the Scriptures. Are we committed to a discipline marked by the grace of a community of forgiven sinners? Will we engage in discipline marked by a loving community, not by formal charges in an adversarial system? If we are not exercising ordinary discipline, then why are we so interested in extraordinary discipline?

Jesus said: “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much. . . .” (Luke 16:10)



## ENDNOTES

- 1 Richard Bach, *Illusions: Handbook of a Reluctant Messiah* (New York: Dell, 1994).
- 2 See Kingdon, Robert M. "A New View of Calvin in the Light of the Registers of the Geneva Consistory," in *Calvinus Sincerioris Religionis Vindex: Calvin as Protector of the Purer Religion* (eds. Wilhelm H. Neuser and Brian G. Armstrong, Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1997).
- 3 John Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises on the Reformation of the Church*, trans. Henry Beveridge, vol. I. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1958), 117.
- 4 Robert M. Kingdon, "Calvin and the Family: The Work of the Consistory in Geneva," *Pacific Theological Review* (1984), 5.
- 5 Kingdon, R. M., T. A. Lambert, and I. M. Watt, eds., *The Registers of the Consistory of Geneva at the Time of Calvin*, vol. I (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 45-46.
- 6 *Ama Deum, et fac quod vis.*
- 7 *Book of Order* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2002), D-1.0103.
- 8 *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press), 407-409.
- 9 John W. Riggs, "Emerging Ecclesiology in Calvin's Baptismal Thought, 1536-1543." *Church History* 64, no. 1 (1995), 42.
- 10 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), IV.i.9.
- 11 "French Confession of 1559," trans. Ellen Babinski and Joseph Small (Louisville: Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1998), para. 22.
- 12 *Book of Common Worship*, p. 54.
- 13 "French Confession of 1559," para. 29.