

I. The Nature of the Church as the Kingdom of God

1. Jesus' perfect life and death won entrance into everlasting life in a new creation. This new-creation eternal life is referred to as the "kingdom of God" in the Scriptures (Mark 14:25; John 3:3-5; 1 Cor 6:9-10, 15:50; Gal 5:21). Jesus' resurrection is the firstfruits (Col 1:18).
2. This new-creation eternal life is given to the people for whom Christ died as the gospel is preached, causing Christ's people to be born anew, granting them faith by which they are united to Christ, resting in him and receiving benefits.
3. These persons are gathered together into local assemblies where the blessings of the new-creation, won by Jesus, are declared and distributed in word, sacrament, and other means of grace. The church is all about Jesus Christ. He is its king, its head, its source, its founder, its confession, its hope, and its greatest love. *The church of Christ is therefore the kingdom of God in the present age.*

II. The Nature of Church Membership

1. Since the church is the kingdom of God in the present age, *membership in the church means that you are claiming a right of inheritance to the kingdom of God in the future age.* You are a co-heir with Jesus Christ, the head of the body (Rom 8:16-17; Col 1:18).
2. Baptism is the symbol of new-creation life, dying and rising with Christ, and thus it is the individual's public profession of faith in Christ and his promises, and it is the church's placing of the triune name of God on that person, *marking them out visibly as a brother*, a child of God, and an heir of eternal life in the new creation (Rom 6:3-5).
3. The Lord's Supper is the communal and collective confession of the Christian church in the present age that Jesus' body and blood constitute our covenantal right and title to eternal life in the age to come. We proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.
4. Church membership is voluntarily requested, but not voluntarily accomplished. Exercising authority given by Christ himself, the church (the congregation through its elders) admits and remits members. No one can join the church by their own authority. Likewise, No one can leave the church by their own authority.
5. Saying you are a church member does not make you one. The church admits you to its membership. Saying you are no longer a church member does not remove you from the church. The church removes you from its membership.
6. Thus, when asked to determine whether or not to receive a candidate into membership, the church is not asked to determine whether or not that person is elect (which is unknowable by man), but whether that person makes a credible profession of faith and demonstrates a valid claim to heaven.

Objective and Invisible:	Election	Regeneration	Saving Faith
Subjective and Visible:	Church Membership	Evidences of Regeneration	Profession of Faith

7. Admitting and dismissing church members have the same value, and are judged based on the same criteria. We admit those who demonstrate a credible profession of faith. We exclude those who nullify or reject their profession of faith.

III. The Nature of Church Discipline

1. The Premise of Church Discipline Stated

The church is the temple of God. As no unclean thing was permitted in the sanctuary of Eden or the temple of Israel, and as there will be no unclean thing in the new Jerusalem, so also no unclean thing is to be permitted in the church (1 Cor 6:9-10; Gal 5:21). We would not receive into membership, therefore, one who either makes no profession of faith, or one whose profession of faith is nullified in some way. The church also removes uncleanness from its midst through its members putting sin to death in their lives. But when a professing believer does not simply fall into sin, but *practices sin without repentance* (1 John 1:10; 3:8-10), an inconsistency exists between that person’s public identity as a “brother” and their sinful actions.

2. The Process of Church Discipline Explained

Matthew 18:15-20 teaches us that we are to pursue the eradication of sin in all those who are accounted brethren, seeking repentance and restoration at every step. If repentance is not achieved, then those who were once accounted “brethren” are now to be accounted as “Gentiles and tax collectors,” i.e., as unbelievers that are hostile to God. The church is to make a public declaration about that person.

The first step of public discipline temporarily revokes the privilege of coming to the Lord’s Supper. If the Supper is the church’s collective confession and enjoyment of the Lord’s death as our right and title to heaven, and if the church collectively prohibits you from joining with it in such an action, what does it say to you? It says, ***“Insofar as we can determine, based on human judgment and Scriptural criteria, your unrepentant sin evidences that you are not a born again Christian and that as a result you have no right to join with us in our celebration of our heavenly inheritance won by the death of Christ.”*** That is serious.

In the case that such a person persists in unrepentance, the next and final step is to bar such a person from joining with the church in its celebration of Christ’s death (i.e., communion), indefinitely, and to publicly remove the name “brother” from them. This is an equal and opposite action to baptism, and it is judged by the same criteria. The church places the name “brother” on those who show evidences of the new birth and profess faith in Christ. Likewise, the church removes the name “brother” from those whose evidences indicate an unregenerate state and contradict a profession of faith (whether the person still makes one or not).

3. The Principles of Church Discipline Applied

<i>Remove</i> those whom we judge to be believers/sheep			<i>Excommunicate</i> those whom we judge to be unbelievers/goats (Matt 18:15-20)			
Death	Transfer	Wayward, but foolish	The “Christian”	The Lingerer	The Destroyer	The Seducer
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remove from regular local communion. Retain the name “brother”. Interact as brethren. 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bar from communion indefinitely. Revoke the name “brother” and assign to Satan’s dominion. Interact with wisdom (Acts 8:21-23; 1 Cor 5:11; Titus 3:10-11; 2 John 9-11). 			

Given the identity of the church as the kingdom of God in the present age, it is necessary to distinguish the ways in which members depart from the local church. Some depart as brothers (left side); some are expelled and the name of “brother” is taken away from them (right side).

Those whom we judge to be believers and true sheep can be removed from our membership by death, by transfer to another gospel-preaching church, or released from our accountability for wayward and foolish reasons (2 Thess 3:14-15). In each of these cases, we no longer join at the table with such persons, but we do not call into question their “brotherly” identity. We would continue to interact with these individuals as brethren.

As we come to excommunication, we need to clarify our thinking and our language. Theological jargon and terminology can get blown out of proportion in our minds. Many people think of excommunication in terms of Amish shunning, as though such a person were dead to us. But that is not biblical. We need to distinguish between the command to excommunicate, and the wisdom of how to interact with those who have been excommunicated.

The principle that we must obey is that of Matthew 18 which gives us a clear command. Unrepentant sin is to be disciplined, and all unrepentant brethren are to have that name removed as they are expelled from the church. ***Excommunication permanently bars such an individual from the Lord’s Supper and removes the name “brother” from them.***

People tend to think of excommunication purely in terms of human relationships (again, like Amish shunning). We need to shift our perspective to the kingdom of God. Excommunication is an action within the church, within the kingdom of God. The consequences of excommunication for human relationships are important, but far more important are the implications for one’s eternal destiny. This is so because ***excommunication is to declare someone outside the visible kingdom of God in the present age, thus stating that unless they repent they will not be in the kingdom in the age to come.*** And we are to perform this action against all those who bear the name “brother” and persist in unrepentant sin. Furthermore, to view excommunication as an intent to shun misses its God-designed purpose to restore and save (1 Cor 5:5). It is judgment with hope.

With this general principle, we can proceed to seeing how it should be applied to specific examples, consistently (each of these cases assumes that preceding attempts have been made, unsuccessfully, to restore the individuals). And then we can consider how we should employ wisdom as we interact with those examples, limiting interaction with some while intentionally maintaining interaction with others.

First, we would remove the name “brother” and bar from communion the so-called “Christian” who may not renounce his profession in words, but has renounced it in deeds. This would be like the man in 1 Corinthians 5. He bore the name “brother” but everyone saw the contradiction between his actions and his “Christian” identity. It was precisely because they judged him to be a goat that they were to excommunicate him. They removed the name “brother” from him. In wisdom, how should we interact with this person? We shouldn’t even eat with them (1 Cor 5:11).

Second, there are some who conclude that they do not believe in Jesus Christ, and desire to exit the membership of the church. The “lingerer” is the one who, despite denying Christ, wishes to remain with the people of God and wishes to hear the word of God. The church must revoke the name “brother” and bar the person from the Lord’s Supper. But, while the “lingerer’s” action is not to be taken lightly and makes them culpable of severe and greater judgment before God, such a person is permitted to remain among the people of God because in God’s mercy it appears that they still have some measure of realization that they need to hear God’s word. We should interact with such a person as one who has denied Christ, seeking opportunities to exhort them to repent of their denials, but we should not refuse to associate with them.

Third, there are some who bear the name “brother” that vehemently and ardently deny Jesus Christ. They are “destroyers” who spew fire and hatred as they go. They deny Jesus Christ in word and deed, but the church alone can remove them from membership. Their denial of Christ makes this action all the clearer. As the individual has denied Christ, now the church will deny Christ to the individual. The name “brother” is to be publicly removed, and they have no right to celebrate the Lord’s death with the church. We should interact with this person as one who hates Christ with fury, avoiding them in general if they will not listen to entreaties (Titus 3:10-11).

Fourth, there are some who bear the name “brother” that quietly deny Christ and wish to depart from the church. They deny Jesus Christ in word and deed. Their denial of Christ makes the church’s response clear. This person is to be removed from the church by removing the name “brother” and by barring them from the celebration of the Lord’s death. They manifest no evidence of a right and title to heaven, but only a “fearful expectation of judgment.” Intentionally or not, this person is a seducer, and perhaps the most dangerous case of all when compared to the rest. The so-called “Christian” is an obvious contradiction, to be avoided. The “lingerer” remains under the word of God, and is perhaps even a positive example of hope. The “destroyer” leaves blatant devastation in their departure. The “seducer” however, if not directly exposed, reduces the sensitivity of the saints’ to apostasy and belittles the majesty and holiness of the name of Christ.

Consider what they have done. The “seducer” quietly tramples underfoot the Son of God, treats his blood as worthless, outrages the Spirit of grace, contradicts and renounces a former profession of faith, denies and discredits everything the Bible says about Christ, and chooses Hell over Heaven in spite of having tasted the powers of the age to come (Heb 6:4-8, 10:26-31). Is there a greater sin than this? And to do so quietly and without any outward appearance of fear, reservation, or concern, is one of the most terrifying thoughts to contemplate. Interacting with such a person, proceed with caution and do not be desensitized by their appearance of nonchalance and disregard.

The excommunicant is in a worse state than one who has never joined the kingdom. And for that reason, they are to be regarded with double care and caution. We ought to pray for them “that, if possible, the intent of [their] heart may be forgiven [them].”²³ For I see that [they] are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity” (Acts 8:22-23). We are not to cease loving them as our neighbor, nor are we to cease loving them as family members, but we are to love Christ and his church so much that our love for all others appears as hate by comparison (Luke 14:26).

Concluding Summaries

1. We are to be patient, merciful, and kind to those who doubt and struggle, seeking restoration at every step of church discipline, but all those who refuse repentance and restoration are to be excommunicated from the church publicly (Gal 6:1; 1 Thess 5:14; Jude 22-23; Matt 18:15-20).
2. The church alone has the authority to include or exclude members. No individual has this power. All those who are baptized, *bear* the name “brother” until the church removes it from them (Matt 18:15-20, 1 Cor 5). There are only two ways to depart from a local church: retaining/revoking the name “brother.”
3. Excommunication is revocation of the name “brother” and prohibition from the Lord’s Supper.
4. Excommunicants are in a worse state than the unbeliever who never joined the kingdom. Nevertheless, they are not to be shunned as though they were dead to us. We retain familial and neighborly relationships and responsibilities towards them. And we should employ wisdom in our interactions with such persons.