

Paper 3. Pastoral Care and Church Discipline

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The third mark of the church is discipline. It is essential but difficult. What principles and guidelines can we establish?

There are many different denominations in the UK and in the world today. Which are true churches of Christ? In Old Testament times and initially in the New Testament age there was only one true church. Later separations occurred. For example there was a division between the Eastern and Western church (the Great Schism 1054). The sixteenth century Reformation led to a major break with the Roman Catholic Church. With the rediscovery, translation and printing of the Bible many divisions occurred. The Reformers emphasised the priesthood of all believers, the right of private judgment and the duty of all to search the Scriptures for themselves. It was not for the church and Pope to claim the sole right to interpret the Bible. First, there were three groupings: the followers of Luther (the Lutherans), the followers of Zwingli and Calvin (the Reformed) and also the Anabaptists. As the Reformation spread there were different churches in the different countries with their own independent leaders and special distinctives. Over time in the different national churches there were further divisions and so many more denominations began. Which denominations should we recognise as true churches of Jesus Christ?

Protestantism generally has regarded the visible church of Christ as having three distinctive marks: the preaching of the Word, the right administration of the sacraments and church discipline. For example the Belgic Confession states: 'The marks by which the true Church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if it maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin; in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church. Hereby the true Church may certainly be known, from which no man has a right to separate himself' (Article 29). So, traditionally, discipline has been an important distinguishing mark of the true church.

Albert Mohler calls church discipline the missing mark of the church today. He writes: 'The decline of church discipline is perhaps the most visible failure of the contemporary church. No longer concerned with maintaining purity of confession or lifestyle, the contemporary church sees itself as a voluntary association of autonomous members, with minimal moral accountability to God, much less to each other. The absence of church discipline is no longer remarkable—it is generally not even noticed. Regulative and restorative church discipline is, to many church members, no longer a meaningful category, or even a memory. The present generation of both ministers and church members is virtually without experience of biblical church discipline' (www.the-highway.com).

That is a terrible indictment of modern churches and sadly it has affected many of the reformed churches too. Discipline is increasingly absent in society in general, for example, in the family. There is at present a move in Scotland to ban parents from smacking their children – to make smacking a criminal offence. Modern society rejects God's creation of the world and of man but, even more so, rejects the biblical teaching of the Fall of man. The whole idea of original sin and the total depravity is scorned. Society at large believes that children are born good and only learn evil from their environment. Sadly what society believes soon affects many of the churches. Biblical teaching is clear. 'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked' (Jeremiah 19:9). David says 'I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me' (Psalm 51:5). Because of this, Scripture states that parents who do not discipline their children, do not love them: 'He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes' (Prov.13:24). In Hebrews we are told: 'Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?' (Heb.12:6-7). Every loving family will be one where there is strict and loving discipline. Otherwise children grow up spoilt. God sees discipline as very important in his family too. No normal parent enjoys disciplining their children neither do church officers enjoy this part of their duty. Nevertheless it is essential for the glory of God, the good of the church and the salvation of the individual member.

Institution of Discipline

Christ is the King and Head of the church and he alone has the right to set up the ordinances in his church. At Caesaria Philippi he asked his disciples, 'But whom say ye that I am?' Peter replies with the great confession, 'Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God' (Matthew 16:16). Jesus responds, 'Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon

this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven' (vv17-19). The rock on which he builds his church cannot of course be Peter, because he was a fallible, sinful man who in verse 23 has to be rebuked, 'Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men'. Christ himself, the One whom Peter confessed to be the Son of the living God, is the sure and solid foundation on which the church is built and on which it will stand forever. The many attacks of Satan and the wisdom of the gates of hell cannot possibly overcome a church which is built on Christ.

Jesus then refers to the keys of the kingdom which are given to Peter as a representative of the rest of the disciples and the future leadership of the church. Those whom he binds on earth will be regarded as bound by heaven and those whom he looses on earth will be regarded as loosed by God. Here Christ is clearly instituting church discipline. Peter, as a representative of the rest of the apostles, is given the power of the keys, that is the authority to exercise church discipline. The church leaders are expected to bind and loose, to excommunicate and to lift excommunication, in accord with the directions of Christ in his Word.

Just prior to his ascension the Lord gives a similar injunction to all the disciples: 'Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained' (John 20:21-23). Here he clearly indicates that all the apostles, as the church leaders at that time, have this authority to bind and loose.

Aim of Church Discipline

The ultimate aim of church discipline is of course the glory of God. Everything the church does, or which the officers of the church do, must be to glorify God. However, the particular aims of church discipline are the following:

1. The first aim of church discipline is the holiness and purity of the church before God. He is looking for a holy church to worship him. In Old Testament times holiness and cleanness and purity were greatly stressed. For example there were clean and unclean foods. Illnesses could render one unclean, for example leprosy or an issue of blood. The temple was a holy place, Jerusalem a holy city and Israel a holy people. The basic idea in holiness is separation from sin unto God. This holy God has not changed. The writer to the Hebrews exhorts, 'Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord' (Hebrews 12:14). The Church in Thyatira tolerated immorality but Christ writes to her: 'I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not. Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds. And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works' (Revelation 2:21-23). These stern words show how God demands purity in His church. The Corinthian church was one where discipline badly needed to be exercised. It is fascinating to notice how Paul addresses them in beginning his epistle to them: 'Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both their's and our's' (1 Corinthians 1:2). There is a huge emphasis on the fact that they have been sanctified and are called to be saints. He states his great aim with regard to the Corinthians in his Second Epistle, 'For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ' (2 Cor.11:2). They must be pure.
2. *The Practice of the Free Church of Scotland* states that with regard to the discipline of the individual, 'The aim is evangelical, redemptive and restorative. In loyalty to Christ and in the spirit of love, effort is made to win the erring to repentance and to restore to the fellowship of the church. So assurance of the continuing love of God is conveyed to the penitent, for there is no security in love which is morally indifferent, and there is no security in love which does not desire and seek the purifying of those to whom it is directed (*The Practice of the Free Church of Scotland*, 1995, p.88). It seeks the recovery of the sinner.
3. Discipline provides a warning to others who may be tempted to similar sin. It has a deterrent effect. It would be unjust to discipline simply in order to deter, but deterrence is a beneficial side effect. Paul writes to Timothy, 'Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear' (1Timothy 5:20).
4. Discipline also preserves the good name of the church. The church cannot keep all its members from ever sinning but if it deals appropriately with scandals and misdemeanours then the offence caused is reduced. Excusing or covering up public scandal leads to greater harm as has happened in recent times with the Roman

Catholic Church. The church is to be the light of the world (Matthew 5:14) and in a very real sense the world has no light but the church and if church members are doing the works of darkness it becomes a synagogue of Satan.

For what sins is Discipline to be Administered?

We are all sinners and sin constantly in thought, word and deed. As individuals we must daily pray, 'Forgive us our trespasses'. Church discipline, however, takes to do only with such sins as are scandalous and flagrant breaches of God's Word.

1. Such open sins as drunkenness, adultery, fornication, perjury, Sabbath breaking, fighting and stealing demand church discipline.
2. Another category requiring discipline is heresy, the teaching serious error, eg. denying the Trinity, the atonement, justification by faith, the authority and infallibility of the Scriptures or eternal punishment. 'A man that is an heretic after the first and second admonition reject; knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself' (Titus 3:10-11). The one who teaches false doctrine causes division. John writes: 'If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: for he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds' (2 John 10-11).
3. A third category is backsliding, for example when a member becomes cold or worldly, drifting away from the church and failing to attend regularly the means of grace. 'Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching' Hebrews 10:25). Paul tells Titus: 'Wherefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith' (Tit.1:13).

How is it to be administered?

1. Private rebuke. The aim is to restore and get the individual concerned to repent. If done timely, kindly and prayerfully this often is all that is required. Jesus gives very important teaching to the disciples on the subject of discipline: 'Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them' (Matthew 18:15-20). Notice that in the first instance this refers to a brother sinning against you. It is referring to a personal offence. This is often forgotten. Spurgeon, in the Downgrade Controversy, stated that folk complained against him for not going and speaking privately to those he was accusing of heresy. But he responded that the heretics were not acting in ignorance. They knew his views and were actively rejecting them. Further, they were publishing their heresies, so these things couldn't be kept in a corner. Their sin had become public and required a public response. We could add that when Paul required the disciplining of the immoral man in 1 Corinthians 5, the Corinthian church rightly did not respond by saying, 'But have you spoken to the man who was guilty of fornication, privately first?' The action of the man was public. Everyone knew about it. It could not be kept secret. Christ in Matthew 18:15-20 is not referring to a public and scandalous sin. He is dealing with your response to someone who has sinned against you and hurt you, for example, by slandering you, or stealing from you. However we can also extrapolate from this to other private sins, ie. those which only you and very few others know about, or false teachings which are beginning to emerge, or the start of backsliding. In this situation every effort is to be made to show the sinner his sin privately and bring him or her to repentance. If success is achieved, this is a matter of great rejoicing. James writes, ' Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins' (James 5:19-20).
2. If unsuccessful initially in privately pleading with the sinning individual Jesus advises taking another Christian or two with you to plead with the backslider. Two or three witnesses can sometimes be more effective.
3. If private admonition does not have the desired result, tell it 'to the church'. By the church here the local eldership or leadership in the church is meant. They must then give serious consideration to the problem and

the individual should be brought before them. If the person admits his or her fault and if it is of a minor and private nature, then he or she is to be rebuked and admonished

4. If the person denies the accusation it is the duty of the eldership to investigate and if there is evidence which proves the guilt of the person, then the individual must be dealt with according to the fault.
5. In the case of more serious faults and scandalous sins the individual should be suspended from membership, either for a set time if the person shows penitence, or indefinitely till the individual acknowledges his or her sin and gives evidence of repentance. Sometimes the individual is hardened in their sin and will not respond to the citation to appear before the eldership. Such a person must be suspended from membership for contumacy, ie. an unwillingness to submit to the authority of the church.
6. In more extreme cases where no repentance is shown eg. a person persisting in adultery or teaching serious heresy, the person is to be excommunicated ie. delivered to Satan, as Paul did to Hymenaeus and Alexander: 'Of whom is Hymenaeus and Alexander; whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme' (1Timothy 1:20). This would involve reading out a statement to the assembled congregation stating the sin of the individual and the discipline imposed. There should be a cutting off of the individual from the fellowship of the church, making plain the seriousness of the offence, and the impossibility of continuing the friendly relationship as before. There should be no harshness in this but a firm informing of the person that our hearts desire would be to receive him or her back but as long as he or she persists in sin this is impossible.
7. As in all the actions of the church, but particularly here, it cannot be sufficiently stressed that prayer is vital. Pray that the church officers will have wisdom and the right words to speak and pray for grace to carry out the discipline in a loving and God-glorifying way and pray that the individual disciplined will be given grace to repent and so be restored.

Misuse of Discipline

1. Heavy shepherding takes place in some churches where there is interference in the day-to-day lives of members of the congregation. Some pastors tell people where to live, what to study, what jobs to do, who to marry etc. This is wrong and there is no basis for it in Scripture. People must be given freedom to live their own lives and make their own choices. Discipline should not be used to micromanage people's lives or to interfere in the private concerns of individuals or families.
2. Disciplining on the basis of man-made laws or human traditions is obviously wrong and yet sometimes practised. In New Testament times the Jews put people out of the synagogue for associating with Jesus. One could imagine them also disciplining folk for healing on the Sabbath or plucking grains of wheat that day. They did not seem to have any concept of works of necessity or mercy which are appropriate and legitimate on the Sabbath day. I have heard of one church disciplining members for taking public transport to church on Sunday. It is wrong, for example, to make a disciplinary issue out of styles of hair or fashions of clothes.
3. Inquisitorial searching of the private lives of individual members is also wrong. Spying on people or setting traps for them is contrary to the Scriptural injunction to love one's neighbour and think more highly of others than of oneself.
4. Cases must be thoroughly investigated and the individual given every opportunity to explain and defend themselves. People are not to be presumed guilty, or condemned on the evidence of one witness. Sometimes one hears of cases where a minister or pastor pronounces discipline without careful consideration of the evidence or consulting of others. Patience must be exercised even when the pastor feels exasperated and outraged. The individual must be given an opportunity to defend themselves.
5. A harsh, bitter and hateful spirit in church officers involved in discipline is wrong. The aim must never be to get rid of someone. It should always be administered in love, with grief and with tears. The church is a body and if one member suffers, all suffer. We are to grieve over the fallen brother or sister and show them that we care deeply for them.
6. Sometimes there is a failure to restore the individual when they have repented. Paul writes in his second letter to the Corinthians asking that the immoral man whose discipline he demanded in the first epistle be

restored: 'Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many. So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow. Wherefore I beseech you that ye would confirm your love toward him' (2 Corinthians 2:6-8). It is not always possible to restore the person to office in the church, but all should be restored to membership following repentance. Elders must be 'blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach ... Moreover he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil' (1Timothy 3:2, 7). A person may fall in such a way as that his reputation in the world has been damaged and people will naturally have difficulty in trusting him. Such a person cannot be restored to the pastorate.

7. Sometimes there is a failure to continue care for the individual after suspension and excommunication. There ceases to be a concern to see the person restored. This is obviously wrong because one of the great aims of discipline is the recovery of the one who has fallen.

A Biblical Example: 1 Corinthians 5

In order to understand the principles and guidelines for church discipline it will be useful to look at one case given in Scripture. In the Corinthian church there was a man involved in immorality with his step-mother. This troubled Paul deeply and was one of the major reasons for his writing the first letter to the Corinthians.

Verse 1 'It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife'. Paul had heard the rumours and knew it was not just rumour. Everyone was talking about it. It needed to be dealt with. Even the outside world, the heathen, were scandalised. The unbelievers regarded it as reprehensible. The witness of the church in the eyes of the world had been compromised. This is very serious. The church has to be a light to the world.

Verse 2 'And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you'. The Corinthians seemed to justify the way they were handling this case. No doubt they were quoting such words as that they are 'not under the law, but under grace (Rom.6:14). They are not legalists. They were emphasising liberty, boasting indeed of their tolerance. We can imagine them speaking of grace and love as over against law and legalism. But God requires holiness. If we are regenerated we are to be new creatures. How can we say that we are born again if we live in the old lusts?

Verse 3 'For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed'. Paul, though absent, was judging, and it was right of him to judge. Sometimes people say that you shouldn't judge others. But when Jesus says 'Judge not, that ye be not judged' (Matthew 7:1) he is not referring to the work of elders but rather the hypocrisy of private individuals who criticised others for doing what they themselves also did, secretly. They were using a different, harsher standard for judging others than for themselves. Jesus states, 'For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again' (Matthew 7:2). Elders have a duty to judge, just like Paul.

Verse 4-5 'In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus'. This sin was so serious and scandalous that the individual must be immediately excommunicated. Paul was hopeful that such action would lead to the restoration of the man concerned. Though seemingly harsh treatment, it was excellent advice in this situation. As we saw, 2 Corinthians 2:6-8 implies that the man did repent and was therefore to be restored. So the discipline was wonderfully effective.

Verse 6 'Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?'. If scandalous sin is tolerated in the church it will spread like yeast in dough. Sadly the yeast of sin is spreading in the church today through failure to take action. There is a fear of seeming unloving and harsh. Discipline is unpleasant, so folk sweep the problem under the carpet and hope that it will go away and meanwhile to yeast is spreading. It does not take much leaven in the beginning to cause eventually a major problem.

Verses 7-8 'Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth'. Before partaking of the Passover meal every Jewish home had to be carefully cleaned and swept to remove all yeast. In the same way the church is to remove this offending member. Only when there is a thorough purging will their worship be acceptable to the Lord. God is seeing the sin which we are tolerating and is grieved. Why are we not seeing revival and blessing? He tells us: 'Behold,

the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear: but your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear' (Isaiah 59:1-2).

Verse 9 'I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators'. The church of Christ is to be a holy gathering. Corinth was notorious for its immorality. Many of the church members had previously been fornicators, adulterers, homosexuals, lesbians, thieves, drunkards and idolaters. 'But ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God' (1 Corinthians 6:11). Be different, dead to sin and alive to God. Church members are called to be separate from the world.

Verse 10 'Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world'. The church, because it is in the world, will always have some association with the immoral. We are constantly mingling with sinners in day-to-day life, and cannot escape that. We are not to become hermits or to enter a monastery. We are to live in the world.

Verse 11 'But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolator, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat'. Paul's concern here is not with the outsider but with the one who professes to be a brother. If such a one is clearly guilty of these sins and will not repent then he is to be cut off from the fellowship and there is to be no eating with him. How often is this practised today?

Verse 12 'For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within?' Our business is not to be judging the outsiders but rather demanding consistent holy lives of ourselves and from those who are members of the church.

Verse 13 'But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person'. The scandalous sinner who will not repent is to be put out of the fellowship.

Conclusion

Discipline is a mark of a true church. Where there is no discipline the world takes over the church and the church is mixed up unhealthily with the world. The loving, prayerful practice of church discipline is a means of grace and a blessing to the whole fellowship. The backslider is restored, the heretic is corrected and the immoral person is brought to repentance. Believers who are tempted, fear to sin. The world sees the church tackling problem members and has to acknowledge that right and consistent procedures have been followed.

Do we practise church discipline in our church? It is a means of grace? Are we seeing sinners and backsliders repenting? Are we proper caring New Testament churches?