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# THE PROPER PROCEDURE FOR DISCIPLINE IN THE CHURCH

## *Part II*

***Philip Mutetei***

*In the last issue of AJET Philip Mutetei presented a foundational study on church discipline, showing the necessity and basis for it. Unfortunately, some churches discipline members without following biblical procedures. In this second part of this study on church discipline Pastor Mutetei demonstrates from Scripture the appropriate procedures for exercising church discipline and seeks to apply these principles to a particular context in which he serves.*

Before any serious discussion about the proper procedure of church discipline, we need to be reminded of the unique relationship of those who have called upon the name of the Lord for salvation and are indeed saved. These now belong to God as his beloved children. This was the context into which church discipline was introduced by Christ (Matt 18:15-20) and practiced by the early church.

True family implies responsibility and accountability, whereby each individual does things in consideration of the other and cares for one another accordingly. In an ideal family, love controls what is done, no one is a reject, each member takes care of the other and does everything for the common good.

As J. Robertson McQuilkin has said:

God designed the church to be a true family; the eternal blood ties of Calvary are even stronger than human blood ties. It is in the context of this koinonia or loving mingling of life that God does his work of building Christians into the likeness of Christ (Eph 4:11-16). This is no superficial Sunday-club relationship. God intended an intimate sharing of life on the pattern of the character of God, the Trinity. To have such family solidarity, there must be discipline. Fellowship without purity of

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**Philip Mutetei** graduated from Scott Theological College with a Diploma in Theology in 1982. He later earned his B.A., M.A. and M.Div. from Columbia International University. He is a candidate for the D.Min. from Columbia. Presently Pr. Mutetei serves as Principal of Mulango Bible Institute in Kenya.

faith and life is flawed at its core. Unity and purity are interdependent elements of a single relationship. Just as in the family so it is in the Church that where either love or discipline is missing, the children will be greatly handicapped.<sup>1</sup>

The church that is growing spiritually has healthy relationships developing within her members. The members feel with each other in good and bad seasons. They have the same goal—that of glorifying Christ. Donald L. Bubna says: "Effective discipline takes place in the context of these relationships. And from Proverbs 27:6—'Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.'"<sup>2</sup>

The words of Jesus (Matt 18:15-17) outline clearly the biblical pattern for discipline in the church. However, it is unfortunate as Bubna observes that:

too often, leadership within the local church (body) charged with the responsibility of discipline in the church, either is unfamiliar with the instructions or treats them as irrelevant.<sup>3</sup>

Failure to obey Christ's instruction on the matter of discipline has serious consequences but obedience leads to a healthy and visionary church.

However, McQuilkin cautions the disciplinarians to the understanding of their own sinfulness (vulnerability) and so the need for an examined attitude:

Before any thought of discipline, of course, there must be prayer and self-examination (Gal 6:1; Matt 7:1-5). If a person has not given himself to prayer for the brother/sister and if he has not carefully examined his own life, he is disqualified because he does not have the love and humility necessary to be God's agent in discipline.<sup>4</sup>

But when prayer and self-examination is present, then the words of Jesus should control and guide us in this matter of discipline of an erring believer.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Robertson McQuilkin, "Whatever Happened to Church Discipline," *Christianity Today* 8 (1974): 8-10.

<sup>2</sup> Donald L. Bubna, "Redemptive Love: The Key to Church Discipline," *Leadership Journal* 2:3 (Summer 1981): 78.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>4</sup> McQuilkin, 10.

In the initial stage of our dealing with a sinning believer,<sup>5</sup> the Scripture instructs a private visit to the erring brother or the one suspected to be living in sin or behaving sinfully. One of the reasons for such a private visitation is a matter of clarification, for the person who feels offended may have misunderstood the whole situation. On this, Bubna says: "This is the time to gather information and to learn. It is not the time to gossip, an act which brings injury to the church family."<sup>5</sup>

This step of going to see the erring or the suspected offender is what is usually called confrontation. The goal of confrontation is to bring the persons close to each other after confrontation. The aim of confrontation is not to get one's own way or intimidate other people. Unfortunately, many times confrontation causes isolation and intimidation and this should not be the case. When confrontation results in isolation or intimidation of people, it has failed. The writer of this project suggests that the reason for this failure is perhaps the lack of courtesy on the side of the confronters. Above all other reasons is the failure to follow the biblical pattern and the choice to follow our wisdom and short cuts. Other reasons include arrogance, an assumption that others are wrong and we the confronter are always right. Such an assumption is misleading and unbiblical. It should be remembered that Christians' confrontation of each other is not a contest but a ministry. Quoting Watch-Man Nee, Dr. Johnny Miller asked: "What do we do if we prove our brother wrong, except to hurt our brother."<sup>6</sup> Surely hurting the brethren is not the reason for confrontation even though in the process the person may be hurt, but the overall reason for confrontation is to win/rescue the person. Therefore, in a healthy church, this ministry of confrontation is essential.

## **THE OBJECTS OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE**

It is necessary as a prerequisite for one to understand both the types of church discipline and its manner of execution, that one be familiar and have clearly in mind who the objects of church discipline are or to whom church discipline is directed. First it should be clearly understood that church discipline is concerned with and applies only to the professing believers, those who have named the name of Christ. It is only over the professing members of the body of Christ that the church has any spiritual jurisdiction and against whom the principles of discipline can be applied. As Paul H. Schwarze has said:

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<sup>5</sup> Bubna, 81.

<sup>6</sup> Johnny Miller, "Confrontation," President's Chapel Message, Columbia International University, April 5, 1994.

It is impossible for a church and its rulers to exclude from their fellowship a person who never belonged to the society. We cannot possibly put out a person who was never in. Excommunication, therefore can take no effect on a pagan, a Jew, or person making no profession of Christianity, or even upon the member of another Christian church. A sentence pronounced in the circumstances is simply null and void, and that on two grounds, first that the rulers pronouncing sentence have no jurisdiction, and secondly that it is impossible to deprive a man of what he never possessed.<sup>7</sup>

This means the church is not obligated to discipline non-Christians. In other words, to put away or reject a person because he is not a Christian is in direct antithesis to the spirit and teaching of the word of God. It is against the teaching of love and compassion which Christ himself taught and attempted to instill in the lives of his followers. The example of the early church bears testimony to this truth:

The Primitive Church never pretended to exercise discipline upon any but such as were within her pale, in the largest sense, by some act of their own profession, and even upon these she never pretended to exercise this discipline so far as to cancel or disannul their baptism. But discipline of the church consisted in a power to deprive man of the benefits of eternal communion, such as public prayer, receiving the Eucharist, and other acts of divine worship. This power, before the establishment of the church by human laws, was a mere spiritual authority, or as St. Cyprian terms it, a spiritual sword, affecting the Soul and not the body.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, it should be noted very clearly that the disciplinary power which was committed to the church and which was wielded to maintain the purity of the people and the holiness of God's house, was exercised only against the sins which were committed by her members. These may have been sins committed either against God or against the Christian society as a whole. Thus the scope of church discipline involves only those members who make up the body of Christ. Unbelievers are excluded from the discipline of the church. Whereas unbelievers are concerned only with the keeping of the civil law,

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<sup>7</sup> Paul H. Schwarze, "The New Testament Criterion of Church Discipline" (MA thesis, Wheaton Graduate School, 1954), 27.

<sup>8</sup> John McLentock and James Strong, *Encyclopaedia of Biblical Theology and Ecclesiastical Literature*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 816.

professing Christians, living on an a higher ethical plane and concerned not only with fulfilling the civil and governmental laws are also constrained in the maintenance of the purity and wholesomeness of the church of Christ.

## THE FOUR PROCEDURAL STEPS TO CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Instructions concerning the procedure for church discipline in Matt 18:15 are: "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over." The parallel in Luke 17:3,4 says: "So watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him."

Lonzo Sellars Taylor comments:

In one short teaching Christ gave the essential principles that are to prevent and heal breaches in the relationships between believers. With salvation and humility as a base, a believer is to walk circumspectly so that he will not cause others to stumble and when he is sinned against, being anxious to forgive, he is to institute measures to bring his brother to repentance.<sup>9</sup>

In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus gave four steps to be taken as the situation requires in discipline process. The four basic steps include private reproof, private conference, public announcement, and public exclusion.

Though the author is aware of other passages where believers are instructed to discipline the erring believers, places including 1 Cor 5:1-13; 2 Thess 3:6-15; 1 Tim 5:6,8,20; 1 Thess 5:14; 2 Cor 2:5-11; 2 Tim 2:24-26; Titus 3:10; 1 Thess 5:12-14; he has chosen to concentrate on Matthew 18:15-17, a passage in which Jesus outlined for the church the proper procedure for confronting her members for the purpose of restoring a sinning believer.

### The Offended and the Offender Alone (vs. 15)

This first step in the discipline process is designed to heal a breach between the two believers. As Taylor says: "The offended party is to go and reprove the offender privately. Christ's purpose in giving this procedure is that sin be quickly and quietly removed."<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that Christ desires that

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<sup>9</sup> Lonzo S. Taylor "An Exegetical Study of Important New Testament Passages Dealing with Church Discipline" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1974), 6.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

sin among his followers be dealt with immediately. Thus, he commands the wronged brother to go and reprove the offender. This accomplishes several things. First, the people who can do something about this sin are brought together. This avoids the gossip that can so easily lead to hard feelings and even friction among believers. Second, it brings the issue into clear focus. The offender might be quite unaware of his sin if he is not confronted with it or he may feel that he had adequate provocation to do what he did. Also, this may prove that there is no real offense but only a petty complaint on the part of the offended party. Third, it provides a clear means of ending the problem created by sin. The truth is the offended is in the best position to do something about the sin because he does not have to face the spiritual and emotional battle of admitting his fault that the offender has. Also, if the offender is a proud man, there may be a resultant unwillingness to admit that he is wrong. Again, the offender may fear the response his confession may bring and thus be reluctant to come to the offended party.

The offended party does not have most of these emotional roadblocks. He has only to guard his heart from hardness toward his brother and to open his heart in brotherly love to such a degree that he is willing to risk reproofing his brother. It is unfortunate that this instruction in many cases of church discipline is overlooked. Many times the people claiming to be offended prefer telling other people instead of going to see the brother or sister concerned. It is our duty to reprove others when sin has been committed against us or when the tendencies to sin are evidenced in their behavior. As Carl Laney has said: "Reproof is a Christian duty. But it must first be in private as indicated by Jesus' words 'between you and him alone.' Any discussion of sin must be with the offender, not behind his or her back."<sup>11</sup> It is a great sin for a Christian to see another Christian living in sin and fail to go to him/her for reproof.

The Greek word for reprove used in Matt 18 is *elegcho*, which means "to bring to light, expose, convict, or convince someone of something." In Matthew's context, the word "reprove" simply means to show someone his/her fault. This means the most biblical and loving thing one can do for a sinning brother/sister is to reprove, demonstrating to him/her the fault with the truth and the solution for the sinful conduct. Christ's purpose in the instruction was a call to show our love to the sinning person(s) by going to see and talk the matter over with them. William Barclay writes:

At its widest what Jesus was saying was: "If anyone sins against you spare no effort to make that man admit his fault, and to get things right

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<sup>11</sup> Carl J. Laney, "The Biblical Practice of Church Discipline," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, vol. 143 (1986): 358.

again between you and him." Basically it means that we must never tolerate any situation in which there is a breach of personal relationship between us and another member of the Christian community.<sup>12</sup>

This ministry of reproofing others is so delicate and yet so important. Sometimes people afraid to confront the sinning brother have committed great mistakes in writing letters to express their feelings about a situation or even to *reprove*. There may be good reasons for writing a letter instead of going to see the person but one must be very cautious as he/she writes, otherwise if at all possible going to the offender is the best thing. Of course, our Savior instructed us to go and did not say to write a letter to the person. Barclay writes:

More trouble has been caused by the writing of letters than by almost anything else. A letter may be misread and misunderstood; it may quite unconsciously convey a tone it never meant to convey. If we have a difference with someone, there is only one way to settle it and that is face to face. The spoken word can often settle a difference which the written word would only have exacerbated.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, we see that according to the prescription of Matthew 18:15, true biblical disciplinary procedure begins with an encounter between two individuals and what takes place in this encounter is often termed as "*reproof*." If we see our brother in sin and we do not take the initiative in reproofing him we do not love him at all. And we have violated the commandment of Christ, the head of the church, who has commanded us to love one another (John 13:34). Laney reports that:

In his sermon entitled *Reproof, a Christian Duty*, Charles Finney remarked, "If you see your neighbour sin, and you pass by and neglect to reprove him, it is just as cruel as if you should see his house on fire and pass by and not warn him of it."<sup>14</sup>

Such a statement tells of the significance of the ministry of reproofing one to the other in love. Pointing out someone's fault is risky for there is no way of knowing how he/she will respond. But if done gently and graciously, the offender will be more likely to recognize the error than become stubborn and bitter. This is what might be called the loving, caring confrontation between the believers.

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<sup>12</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 187.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>14</sup> Laney, 358.



The last clause of Matt 18:15 reveals the potential results of this first step. The offender might listen, implying he/she might see his/her sin and repent. If that happens then we have gained our brother or sister and the will of God is done and so we will rejoice together with the restored brother or sister.

### **Witnesses to the Attempted Reconciliation**

Jesus anticipated that in some circumstances a brother or sister may be unwilling to listen (repent) and respond to the private reproof. So he sets forth the second step in church discipline. In Matthew 18:16 we read: "But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses."

Jesus drew on the Old Testament requirement that a person may not be convicted of a crime on the basis of a single witness (Num 35:30; Deut 17:6, 19:15). At least two witnesses were required to ensure that the testimony was truthful and unprejudiced. Numbers 35:30 states: "Anyone who kills a person is to be put to death as a murderer only on the testimony of witnesses. But no one is to be put to death on the testimony of only one witness." It seems that the witnesses in the Old Testament were supposed to have witnessed the event in order to testify about it. In contrast, Matthew 18:16 does not seem to indicate that to be the purpose of the one or two witnesses accompanying the offender person. Alfred Plummer writes:

Yet these are not witnesses of the original wrong-doing but of the wronged person's attempts at reconciliation and the response which the wrong-doer makes to them. They will be to certify that the one has honestly tried to bring the other to a better mind, and that the other has or has not yielded to his efforts.<sup>15</sup>

These men are to be witnesses not judges. Christ seems to be anticipating the need for confirming testimony if this matter is not settled and must go before the entire church. The word mouth in this case is used metaphorically for testimony. The testimony of these witnesses will confirm every fact that the offended party brings to the attention of the church. Their testimony helps give the church adequate information on which to stand united and demand the offender's repentance.

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<sup>15</sup> Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: Robert Scott, 1909), 253

The additional witnesses, therefore, serve a threefold purpose. First, they bring additional moral pressure to bear on the offender so that he may be encouraged to repent. Second, they bear witness of the offender's response to the reproof so that if necessary they can testify before the church. They can also hear the evidence and determine whether or not an offense has really been committed in the first place.

Robert H. Gundry says:

Matthew leaves no indication that the one or two others shall have witnessed the sin committed against the one who takes them along. Therefore their going does not have the purpose of establishing the original charge (the truth of which is taken for granted or of enabling them to act as witnesses before the church in case of a second refusal but of strengthening the reproof with a view toward restoration).<sup>16</sup>

Thus, while the witnesses may serve to bring new objectivity to the situation, it appears that their primary purpose is to strengthen the reproof and thus lead the offender to repentance. Surely bringing a matter of sin to a brother's attention in the presence of witnesses may sound like a threatening or intimidating situation, yet the purpose is not to threaten or intimidate the sinner into repentance. The intent is to help the offender realize the seriousness of the situation. Donald L. Bubna acknowledges "Although moving into the group process is scary it does improve the attention level."<sup>17</sup>

It is hoped that the offender will take the reproof before the witnesses seriously and repent. If he repents, then the brother is won back and reconciliation takes place.

### **The Public Announcement (Tell it to the Church)**

The third step in the process of discipline is revealed in Matt 18:17: "And if he refuses to listen to them (witnesses), tell it to the church." It should be noted that up to this point in the process the disciplinary procedure is to have taken place in private. But now an unresponsive saint requires strong public action. The congregation is the final court of appeal in such disciplinary matters. It is interesting that the Lord himself advised that Christians should take their disputes to the church and not to the secular courts. Here is a great teaching about our relationships as Christians. We cannot take each other to the secular

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<sup>16</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literacy and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 367.

<sup>17</sup> Bubna, 81.

court, instead we are supposed to settle disputes with each other in the church and not to accuse the other before the secular court. Persons may think that their legal disputes are personal, unrelated to spiritual affairs. But that is far from the truth, because whatever disputes we may have as Christians, they belong to the community of God. In 1 Cor 6:1-5, Paul criticizes the believers of Corinth for using the secular courts to resolve disputes between members of the Christian community:

If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life! Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church! I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers?

The church is gifted by God with men with much wisdom and He expects them to settle their disputes among themselves. Paul went on to say the church will ultimately judge the angels and if so it should be a small thing to judge disputes amongst themselves. To take each other to the secular courts brings shame to the church. It destroys the witness of fellowship and unity. Robert L. Buzzard says:

In fact, it is so disgraceful that it would be better to be defrauded than to go to courts. Defrauded! That is a powerful language. It assumes that one may have been ripped off, cheated, abused. Yet it would be better to suffer wrong and loss than to destroy the role and witness of the church.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore the Lord said to take disputes to the church.

On this third step, it is possible that the church is to be represented by its leaders (elders) but it seems that Matthew 18:17 and 1 Corinthians 5:4 include all true members of that specific local church. This means that even though any mature/spiritual, caring consistent believer is qualified to initiate the church discipline process, only the church or its leaders are qualified to complete the process. The local church is the final authority in disciplinary matters.

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<sup>18</sup> Robert L. Buzzard, *Tell It to the Church* (Elgin: David C. Cook Publishing Co., 1982), 32-33.

### **The Public Exclusion (Excommunication)**

Jesus presented the final step in the discipline of an impertinent sinner. He said, "if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector" (Matt. 18:17b). When the church leaders and congregation have made every effort to bring the sinner to repentance without results, they must then disassociate the offender from the church fellowship.

While Christ was the friend of tax gatherers and sinners, he still recognised them as sinners. Christ looked at them as classes of people who were morally defiled. Taylor writes:

The primary force of Jesus' words seems to be that believers are to maintain limited contact with the unrepentant offender (sinner). To treat one as a Gentile was to see him as a source of defilement and, therefore, to limit contact with him.<sup>19</sup>

It is suggestive here that the offender may first need repentance toward God for salvation before he can establish proper relationship with the church. Perhaps this person never had any personal relationship with Christ which is the basis for relationships in the church. Maybe this person is still a Gentile (unsaved)--that is why his heart is hardened. Gentiles and tax gatherers would, for the most part, be outside of God's salvation. To treat an offender like an unbeliever may suggest that that may be his spiritual state. It is possible that the offender may be saved, but his conduct puts his calling into question. By his conduct, then, he has excluded himself from the church and is no longer to be considered a part of the local assembly.

Paul in his letter to the Thessalonians exhorts them to excommunicate certain disorderly brethren. "If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed" (2 Thess 3:14). He also exhorted the Corinthian church to excommunicate the immoral person:

I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people--not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or

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<sup>19</sup> Taylor, 19.

greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat (I Cor. 5:9-11).

The object of excommunication may be discussed along two lines of thought, each equally important. First, the effect upon the church and second the effect upon the individual excommunicated. The effect desired with respect to the church as a whole is the preservation of the church's spiritual testimony, particularly before the unbelievers. And the effect upon the individual (excommunicated) is to help him come back to his senses and repent of his sins before God. Taylor said:

Even this action is a final attempt to cause the man to face his sin and repent. It also protects the church from his corrupting influence and removes a person from the church who would provide reasons for non-believers to ridicule the church.<sup>20</sup>

This action is often viewed by many as punishment. The punishment perspective is not the biblical intention for excommunication, though sometimes the disciplinarians as well as the one disciplined may think it that way. A more biblical perspective is evidenced by Donald L. Bubna:

This (excommunication) means that you treat the person as a non-believer, because he is not walking as a believer. It means to keep loving him as Jesus loved the publicans and sinners. It means to reach out to him in witness, but not to relate to him as a member of the body of Christ. Like all evangelistic outreach, the goal is to bring a soul to Christ and back into the functioning body.<sup>21</sup>

Part of what is involved in excommunication is denying this person communion at the Lord's table, any leadership participation in any capacity in the worship service, singing in the choir and the person should even be told that his monetary offering is not acceptable. Once again it should be remembered this is an act of love. The church is caring enough to deny her member a meaningful fellowship with a view that he will repent. Paul Schwarze says:

Although the church has taken drastic action against this obstinate member, yet the church is not to give him up and let him go without any further effort to restore to their fellowship, but rather unceasing prayer

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<sup>20</sup> Taylor, 20.

<sup>21</sup> Bubna. 82.

should be made for him so that in the end he may be restored as a member of good standing in the Christian church.<sup>22</sup>

This means the one excommunicated is to be treated and regarded as being like the rest of the unbelieving world, a Gentile and publican (Matt 18:17b), and though unworthy of Christian fellowship, yet love and Christian sympathy should be extended to him even as Christ manifested this same compassion to those still outside of the kingdom of God. We should avoid personal hatred. In excommunication there is no room for personal vengeance. After all, the person has sinned against God and vengeance belongs to God.

### **SUGGESTED GUIDELINES FOR APPLYING NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH DISCIPLINE PRINCIPLES IN A KENYAN CONTEXT**

Merely understanding what the Scripture teaches about church discipline will not edify the church. To be doers of the Word and not hearers only, application is essential. And application must be specific to the circumstances in order to be effective. So now the question is raised, "How should the Kenyan church discipline its members?" There are three aspects to the answer: the attitude of the church, when to teach about church discipline and who should practice it.

#### **Attitude of the Church**

The New Testament concept of discipline parallels that of the Old Testament. Thus it is not a new concept peculiar to the New Testament. In the Old Testament, God is the Father to his son Israel. As a loving father, He was obligated to discipline whenever Israel went astray. Moses wrote:

Be careful to follow every command I am giving you today, so that you may live and increase and may enter and possess the land that the Lord promised on oath to your forefathers. Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. Your clothes did not wear out and your feet did not swell during these forty years. Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you (Deut. 8:1-5).

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<sup>22</sup> Schwarze, 36.

The concept of God's love in discipline is clearly portrayed in Solomon's words. "My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in" (Prov. 3:11,12).

According to the above passage, the basis for God's discipline is His great love for His children. Love is the attitude behind proper biblical discipline. Richards has said: "God rebukes, and even His punishment flows from love. God accepts the parent's responsibility: he will discipline (train) his sons."<sup>23</sup> God disciplines because He loves. In reality, though discipline arises because of a brother's need for correction, it finds its precedent in God's gracious dealing with His children individually. Robert L. Saucy has said that:

The discipline of the church rests upon the fact that God Himself disciplines His children. No true believer is without the chastening hand of God. "For whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth" (Heb 12:6). God disciplines His own directly concerning matters of their family relationship to Him. But He has also ordained mediate discipline by the church concerning those affairs that concern the life and walk of the corporate household of faith.<sup>24</sup>

God disciplines in order to produce good character in His sons. He disciplines because He accepts persons as His sons. The church should exercise discipline because it cares for the fallen person--because of their acceptance of the person and not because of hatred.

The key New Testament passage for the understanding of the character of discipline is Hebrews 12:4-13. The author points out four basic characteristics of God's discipline:

1. Divine discipline is evidence of God's love not of anger or abandonment. The hardships related to the discipline serve to remind us that God is simply treating them as sons. (Heb 12:6-7--"because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son. Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?")

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<sup>23</sup> Lawrence O. Richards, *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 228.

<sup>24</sup> Robert L. Saucy, *The Church in God's Program*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 119.

2. God disciplines for the good of His sons. He has a specific goal in His sons' discipline. His specific goal is that they might become holy as He is. (Heb 12:10--"Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.")

3. To be sure, the disciplinary experiences are painful but are meant to produce for the ones (sons) disciplined a life of righteousness and peace. (Heb 12:11-- "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.")

4. To profit from discipline, one needs to endure it, neither making light of it nor becoming discouraged. There is a need to be aware of God's grace in those times, even when one is hurting, and avoid becoming bitter about the discipline of the Lord.

The church today can benefit much by understanding the purposes of God's discipline. Ted Kitchens has said: "The church should understand God's purposes for the exercise of corrective discipline, and understand that it must be done in faith."<sup>25</sup> The understanding of the characteristics of New Testament discipline should help to clarify the purposes for practicing church discipline. It should also help with the formulation of the comprehensive definition of church discipline. Church discipline properly includes the whole work of educating, training, admonishing, and correcting the members of the church in all things that pertain unto life and godliness as well as the exclusion of members who are disorderly and refractory.

## **WHEN TO TEACH BELIEVERS ABOUT CHURCH DISCIPLINE**

Discipline is so important to Christians that delaying to teach about it is as bad as delaying disciplining one's children. As early as the time of conversion, discipline should be introduced to the new converts. Any discipleship process that fails to introduce the importance of discipline as a guide into spiritual maturity denies the new convert a very important truth about the Christian life. As Neil M. Lines has said:

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<sup>25</sup> Ted Kitchens, *Aftershock: What to do When Leaders (and Others) Fail You*. (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1992), 242.



Church discipline is a part of the Church's disciplining program and must be seen as a means of helping to develop Christ-like attitudes in the lives of disciplinarians as well as the disciplined.<sup>26</sup>

Introducing discipline to new converts at an early stage in their Christian life should not be difficult. The persons who have decided to place their lives in Jesus are aware that they have a new disposition. Paul made this clear in his letter to the Corinthians. He wrote:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5:17-21).

And as said earlier, these new converts belong to a unique family--the family of God. Therefore, God has set for them good standards whereby they will know what is expected of them in the new disposition. Richards remarks that "Scripture is given by God for 'teaching,' rebuking, correcting and training (discipline) in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16). We need the guiding words of the Bible to correct us and to point us toward holiness.<sup>27</sup> New converts need to be taught to obey God who by His sovereign grace has called them to salvation. Peter made this clear in his letter to the scattered Christian saints. He wrote: "As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance" (1 Pet. 1:14). The benefits of obeying as children need to be taught clearly as well as the consequences of disobedience. God will bless the obedience (Deut 28: 1) but a curse will fall on the disobedient children (Deut 28:15).

Since the exercise of church discipline is so crucial for the health of the church, the writer suggests the following guidelines regarding where church discipline might be taught.

### **The Church Constitution and Bylaws**

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<sup>26</sup> Neil M. Lines, "Church Discipline: Ruination or Restoration" (D.Min. Dissertation, Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, 1982), 117.

<sup>27</sup> Richards, 229.

There is a need for an official statement in every church constitution and bylaws. The church's position on discipline should be stated clearly in the constitution or other official documents. There are several reasons why it is wise to include a clear statement about church discipline.

1. Scripture clearly commands a local church to be involved in the process of restoration of fallen believers and of purifying the church. Since a constitution is to reflect the way in which the church intends to carry the commands of Scripture, it is only logical that it be included.
2. The members need to know what to expect from the church whenever they adopt a lifestyle contrary to the Scripture.
3. The church needs to make an official commitment to its members. If stated in the constitution, the church will be forced to make an effort to follow through when sinful behavior is noticed. If there is no statement, it will encourage the tendency to do nothing.
4. If an unrepentant person insists on taking the church to court, a constitution limits the chances of being sued for exercising biblical discipline. Paul made it clear that the church has its own jurisdiction and that Christians should not take each other to secular court (1 Cor 6:1-5). As Lynn Robert Buzzard has said, "The church has jurisdiction not simply over religious litigation, but over all disputes between believers."<sup>28</sup>

We can learn from the following example of the First Evangelical Free Church, as their "Constitution and Bylaws" state:

#### B. Discipline of Members

1. All members of this fellowship are expected to conduct their lives according to the standard set forth in the Scriptures. Such conduct includes moral purity (1 Cor 6:18-20; 1 Thess 4:1-7), personal honesty (Eph 4:25), and biblical fidelity (Jude 20 and 21); 2 Tim 3:14-17). Our lives are to be consistent examples of authentic Christianity as we walk in the light (1 John 1:6-7), emulating the character of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22-23; Eph 5:15-21; 2 Pet 1:5-8).
2. Should any members willfully depart from this scriptural standard and engage in conduct which conflicts with biblical principles of holiness, the

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<sup>28</sup> Lynn Robert Buzzard, *Tell it to the Church* (Elgin: David C. Cook Publishing Co., 1982), 32.

procedure set forth in Matthew 18:15-16 shall be followed for the purpose of leading the erring individual to repentance and, ultimately, to full restoration. This shall be done in a spirit of humility and gentleness (Gal 6:1) as well as loving honesty (Eph 4:25). If after these steps of reproof are taken there is no repentance, one of the pastors, with at least one elder, shall confront, counsel, and pray with the person. Should there still be no evidence of repentance, the person shall be removed from the membership and fellowship of this church (Matt 18:17; 1 Cor 5:11; 2 Thess 3:14-15).<sup>29</sup>

### **In the Catechism**

Whenever catechism is taught to new believers before water baptism they should be introduced to the biblical truth of church discipline. Church discipline should be introduced then as one of the important doctrines which the church believes.

### **Bible Schools and Bible Colleges**

Almost every denomination has Bible Schools or colleges, training centres or theological education by extension. The main objective of these institutions is to train workers (pastors and other church workers). Church discipline should be taught in these institutions as a subject, perhaps in the area of church polity, with a view that when the students in these institutions graduate and are back to pastoral work they will teach the believers church discipline as an important part of Christian life.

### **Acceptance of New Members**

Any time the church is accepting new members to the fellowship it is proper to ask them to sign statements of commitment to the doctrinal positions. Also, a statement of subjection to the church discipline process of the local church should be signed by the new member. This way the church will be obligated to care and take necessary actions toward any member when needed.

### **Church Conferences**

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<sup>29</sup> First Evangelical Free Church, "Constitution and Bylaws," facsimile received from Executive Assistant, March 30, 1994, Fullerton, California.

The planning of the subjects/topics to be discussed in various church conferences, both national and regional, should occasionally include the discussion of church discipline. This should be done with sincere motives, without referring to any known situation unless it is necessary to speak regarding a known situation. In other words, the writer sees the need to discuss the subject because of its importance whether or not there are current disciplinary issues in the church.

### **Bible Studies**

Many of those who attend Bible studies are sincere Christians who are desiring to grow in the Lord. From time to time a Bible study could discuss the importance of church discipline--what it does to an individual and the whole body of believers when faithfully exercised and what happens to an individual and the church where discipline is neglected.

### **Youth Camps**

Church discipline should be taught at youth camps. This way the young people will grow up with a better understanding of the biblical teaching on discipline. If the youth, the leaders of tomorrow, understand God's purposes for discipline, there will be a great hope for a dynamic church.

### **The Pulpit Ministry**

Though the pastors have so many important subjects to preach on, surely church discipline is not any less important. Therefore, faithful preachers should occasionally prepare and preach on the subject of church discipline.

Because of the continued depravity of man, these suggestions may look impractical, but the writer believes they could be practical. After all, the whole matter of church discipline is to be done in faith, trusting God to bring the fruit of righteousness in His blessed church so the church should not shy away from this important subject and ministry.

## **WHO SHOULD PRACTICE CHURCH DISCIPLINE**

Christians are responsible to each other. Where true church growth is taking place the accountability of believers to each other is cherished. When it comes to the practice of church discipline all believers can begin the process. Johnny Miller, president of Columbia International University, made these remarks:

Church discipline is the end of a process. The process begins on an individual level when one caring Christian confronts another Christian with what seems to be sin (Matt 18:15; Gal 6: 1). If that contact confirms the sin but does not effect repentance and restoration, then the second step is to widen the circle to one or two other mature, consistent believers. The third step is to include the church (Matt 18:17; 1 Cor 5:4). It is possible that the church is to be represented by its leaders (elders), but it seems to me that both the above noted passages seem to include all those who are a regular part of the fellowship of the church. Therefore, any mature/spiritual, caring, consistent believer is qualified to initiate the process, but only the church or its leaders is qualified to complete the process.<sup>30</sup>

In the case of the local church, the council of elders is responsible for completing the process. Gordon F. Schroeder says:

In many constitutions the governing board had the final say unless the individual wanted to make an appeal. He could appeal to the congregation and then the voting members of the church had the final authority.<sup>31</sup>

It seems there is a potential problem when the entire church is involved. In a sense, it is difficult to see how a sense of peace could be maintained if it was brought to the entire church. It seems more proper to have fewer mature Christians completing the process if possible and keeping the peace of the whole church.

Any believer living an inconsistent Christian life or living in sin should be disciplined accordingly. This may be a young man, girl, older man, a woman, a leader in the church, or even a political leader who is a believer and a member of the given local church. There should be no respect of men's personality or position in carrying out church discipline; for God is not a respecter of men and will not be happy if the church showed favoritism in this matter of church discipline.

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<sup>30</sup> President Johnny Miller of Columbia International University, interview by writer, April 27, 1994, Columbia, South Carolina.

<sup>31</sup> Gordon F. Schroeder, "An Analysis of the Current Practice of Discipline Among Churches Pastored by Graduates of Dallas Theological Seminary" (D.Min. Dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1986), 137.

## CONCLUSION

It has been the intent of this study to call the universal church and more specifically the churches in Kenya back to the responsibility of being actively and profitably engaged in the practice of biblical discipline. Church discipline should always be viewed redemptively. This redemptive mission, outlined in Matt 18:15-18, if it is to reach a satisfactory conclusion for the offended as well as the offender, must be administered in the right spirit. As Lines writes, "Just as right behavior determines right feelings, so right attitudes will result in restoration of the fallen and the magnification of Jesus Christ."<sup>32</sup>

The following observations emerged during the study on the biblical practice of church discipline:

1. Discipline, regardless of the nature or type, is always exercised in the spirit of love and long-suffering.
2. Discipline has as its immediate goal the spiritual benefit of the individual, the welfare, and purity of the local church, and ultimately the testimony of God and the promotion of the program of the whole universal church of Christ.
3. Though the proper ecclesiastical officers are to preside over the matters of the church as appointed representatives there is no evidence in the New Testament that there is to be an ecclesiastical hierarchy.
4. There are varying degrees of severity in the sundry types of disciplines to be employed, and the exercise of discipline is to be enforced accordingly.
5. Church discipline applies only to the erring and disorderly within the boundary of the Christian church; unbelievers are not apprehended through the exercise of church discipline.
6. While church discipline deals with the spiritual relationship of men with one another and their attitude and action toward God, civil authorities, and all in power deal with transgressors of the governing laws of the given land.
7. The truth is that God has endowed the church with a self purifying process and when used for its God-given function it enables the church to educate, train, admonish, and correct the members of its body.

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<sup>32</sup> Lines, 117.

It is an amazing truth. The practice of church discipline is a God given privilege to His church. If practised in true obedience to God and according to His guidelines, it must prove a total blessing causing the church as a corporate body as well as individual believers to maintain a spiritual dynamic. As Paul Schwarze has said: "The church discipline must be maintained in order to assure not only the purity of the church, but also the dynamic of the church, for where there is a mixture of the pure with impure there can be no spiritual power." So many churches are powerless today because proper discipline is lacking. No wonder God insists that His people maintain a purity and a holiness of life and thus, to that end, have the principles of discipline, its function, and its application being instituted with a view that his people "may share in his holiness" (Heb 12:10).