

To Judge or Not To Judge

ONE aspect of church life in which the tension between the "spiritual and the secular" is felt most keenly is that of discipline. During such periods of tension the exercise of Christian insight and maturity is vital for the preservation of the fellowship. The problems are aggravated in this technological age, and the question of discipline seems increasingly difficult to answer.

The problems confronting the early Christians reveal how little we have advanced when it comes to the art of living in community. As long as we live in communities, even though they be in the process of redemption, it is inevitable that situations will arise in which discipline will be called for and disciplinary action exerted.

One could argue that the twentieth century Baptist Churches in Britain have been somewhat afraid of discipline, at least at the local level; it is virtually impossible at the national level owing to the independent nature of Baptist church government. Much of the modern treatment of Christian Ethics also seems to discourage discipline save for some vague form of self-discipline.

Contrasting the years between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries¹ with the twentieth century, several important questions arise. Were our early forefathers too severe? Did they fail to understand the New Testament emphasis upon love? Are we of the twentieth century too lax in our attitude towards sin and the sinners? What, for instance, would be the attitude of our Baptist forefathers towards a definition of the church suggested in Bruce Kenrick's account of the work of the East Harlem Group in which they reach the conclusion that

the Body of Christ, the church, . . . must accept those who drink, use narcotics, steal, have out-of-wedlock sex experience. The church is set in the midst of the world not to protect its life but to give its life away, that men may know the Good News of a God who loves them.²

It would be easy for us to conclude that the churches during those early years of Baptist history, with their "Discipline Book," were without compassion; the compassion clearly stated in the East Harlem statement. To reach this conclusion, however, is to misunderstand the tension experienced by many during the years prior to the twentieth century. It was tension created in trying to establish a church faithful to Christ and also a church caring for its people. The difference between the East Harlem statement and much of what we discover in early Baptist history, seems to stem from the fact that the modern church now sees compassion as needing to extend to all mankind, thus involving itself with humanity, though this is still

not universally accepted even in the twentieth century. The compassion which undoubtedly existed within the earlier churches, on the other hand, remained, generally speaking, within the boundaries of the church.

Yet it could be argued that the emphasis upon "walking with the Lord" is now unconsciously pushed into the background and the modern demand for a "caring church," though vital, is not the whole gospel. St. Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians, with its tremendous emphasis upon love, has some realistic things to say concerning discipline within the church.⁸ We can learn much from the way in which our Baptist forefathers dealt with the question of Christian discipline, and from their experience we may be the better able to bring to our own judgements a little more spiritual insight and understanding.

In 1838 the church at Pembroke Place, Liverpool, came into existence. C. M. Birrell, who was at that time minister at the Byrom Street church, felt that he could no longer minister in a church that held strictly to the practice of "closed communion." Together with a large number of the Byrom Street members, Birrell left Byrom Street and formed the church at Pembroke Place.

The Minute Book which covers the period 1838-1865 discloses a church grappling with the growing pains of a new community, and not unlike the Corinthian church, having to cope with matters that seemed contrary to the way of God. The cases recorded throw some light on the way in which Birrell and his people met the question of discipline.

The "cases" demanding disciplinary action seem to cover three groups; (i) those failing to attend the "means of grace," (ii) intemperance and immorality, and (iii) insolvency and marriage. From these three division it can be discerned that here was a church concerned with the fact that the Christian life involved the whole of man, and every department of life was seen in terms of its relation to Christ.

(i) *Those failing to attend the "means of Grace."*

One factor stands out in all matters needing disciplinary action, namely, the thoroughness with which Birrell and his church sifted through the evidence of each case in order that they might reach a just decision. Often behind a member's apparent lack of interest there would be a personal problem demanding not judgement but love and understanding. There was certainly no eagerness to strike people off the church roll, neither did the church adopt an attitude of indifference over the matter of worship.

On 21st October, 1840, the first incident was reported to the church. One Jonathan Cooke was reported to have been absent from attendance at the Lord's Supper "and on other occasions being very irregular!" The church was informed that Mr. Cooke's attitude towards "Open Communion" had changed, and that he had requested that his name be removed from the church roll.

This was a straightforward case; not so the others, for they in-

volved not theological problems, but human problems needing careful handling and much compassion.

There was the case in October, 1844 of Mrs. Mary Hodgson who stayed away through fear of her husband's violent dislike of religion. For two years they allowed her name to remain on the roll, until she personally requested that her name be removed.

Then there was a case of complete lack of interest reported in May, 1847. The church attempted to show concern and care, but by 1849 it was obvious that the person in question had no interest whatsoever.

Perhaps the most difficult case in this section concerned a certain David Caig, whose name was brought before the church on April 2nd, 1851. The Minute for 28th May states "it is agreed that it would be best to retain him as a member. It was agreed to adopt this suggestion and that the visitors J. Coward and Geo. Cowper be requested to continue their watchful care over him." It is not until 1853 that we discover something about this unfortunate man's background. The Minute for October 31st says, "Our Pastor stated that some of David Caig's family having been charged with improper conduct, S. B. Jackson and Josiah Jones were appointed to see if David Caig was implicated in any way." Their report to the church indicates a man deeply conscious of his family's downfall, and also reveals something of the tension in which Caig found himself. It was two years since his name had been brought to the church on a matter of discipline, and it would seem that the situation had grown worse instead of better. David Caig was, however, very mindful of the tension it had caused within the fellowship and sought to ease the situation. The visitors reported, ". . . after a very careful examination into all the circumstances of the case, they acquitted him of being in any way a participator in the guilt of his wife and daughter; he had, however, requested them to say that being so nearly allied to the guilty parties he thought it for the honour and credit of the church that he should for the present retire from the church and hoped at some future time he might be in circumstances that would justify his application for readmission."

(ii) *Intemperance and immorality*

The church at Pembroke Place, being deeply concerned about their responsibility towards Christ and His people, took very seriously the matter of non-attendance. It was seen as a "whole church" matter, and the Minutes record a sensitive and compassionate attitude towards those who for various reasons failed in this matter. They were no less serious and compassionate in their attitude towards those who appeared to have broken the code of moral behaviour expected of a Christian. Dissent was often misrepresented as hypocritical on the question of morals during the nineteenth century, especially by such novelists as Charles Dickens. In fact, in the Minute Book of Pembroke Place there appears only one case in which there is no recorded hesitation over an expulsion.

In the course of the nineteenth century nonconformity became closely involved with the Temperance movement⁴ and it was natural therefore that the church in Pembroke Place should frown upon drunkenness. How human this congregation seems to have been; again we see its likeness to the Corinth church. Just when it seemed that the church was well established, the first case of intemperance was reported. The Minute for March 30th, 1842, describes the sense of disappointment; hitherto they had not had to "exercise any painful discipline towards any of our members;" but one Thomas Williams had fallen into the sin of intemperance. William's insobriety was common knowledge and it therefore required "for the honour of our Lord and of the church as well as for the welfare of our brother and the warning of ourselves that it should be publicly dealt with."

After a declaration of repentance, and with the help of the church, Williams kept out of trouble for five years, until 1847; this time his drunkenness caused his exclusion from the fellowship.

Drunkenness was seen as being inconsistent with the life expected of a follower of Christ, and once again in 1842 another case of intemperance was brought to the notice of the church. One can detect in this incident concerning Richard Martin that the church had been exercising discretion and pastoral care. Birrell reported to the church on December 28th concerning the inconsistent conduct of one of the members that "he had understood several months ago that he had fallen into the sin from which it had been hoped he had been fully recovered by the grace of God, the sin of intemperance. Two of our brethren being called upon stated that some weeks before they had been aware of his fall and had entreated him to beware of its evils, but one of the deacons having gone to his house on that morning for the same purpose being also called on, testified that he found him in a state of inebriety accompanied by painful circumstances. Our Pastor offered our earnest prayers for divine direction in this solemn and distressing case; after which he gave it as his view that we were required by regard to the honour of our Lord and to the welfare and recovery of our fallen brother to exclude him from visible connection with the Christian Church on earth."

In many of the dissenting churches Temperance was one of the conditions of church membership. We must not be too hasty in our judgement on the expulsion of one who obviously was an alcoholic; and remind ourselves that even now in the latter part of the twentieth century the alcoholic is still a social outcast. Our forefathers saw drunkenness as damaging to the church's witness to Christ; Birrell, following the pattern of St. Paul, saw expulsion as part of the process towards restoration.

Neither was intemperance the sole province of the male of the species, for on July 24th, 1844, one Mary Eden was accused of drunkenness. She remained in fellowship for a further two years, only to admit finally to the stranglehold of alcohol upon her.

One of the telling arguments used by the advocates of Temperance

is that drunkenness is so often accompanied by immorality. Fortunately for the church at Pembroke Place during the period covered in the Minute Book there are very few such cases presented to the church. However, the cases brought to the church reveal the horror with which sexual immorality was looked upon during the nineteenth century; it was regarded by many as the unforgiveable sin.

On December 2nd, 1846, the case of Jane Baldwin was reported. So delicate was the situation that two ladies were appointed to be the visitors "to investigate the truth of serious charges brought against Mrs. Baldwin." The actual report contains an interesting phrase which suggests that the church, in keeping with the moral climate within Dissenting churches of that day, had placed all sexual misconduct beyond the reach of immediate redemption; it reads that "she had fallen in gross sin and which precluded the church appointing visitors." Though the church had a horror of such offences it is not too difficult to see that they were groping for some spontaneous outworking of compassion, for the Minute recording the inevitable expulsion includes in it the "express hope that the sense of her deprecation may be deepened and that the humiliation which she manifests may be matured into Godly sorrow and lead to her restoration."

The only other case recorded, that of Mrs Anne Fleming, in December, 1861, is only briefly reported, she "had been walking disorderly;" her adultery was clearly established and "she was excluded from the church."

It may well be that such churches as Pembroke Place saw a little more clearly than many in the present age that, when one enters upon this, the deepest of all human relationships, and treats this relationship unworthily, it is to put oneself beyond the capacity of man to make valid judgements; they could only hope that God in His mercy would redeem. To violate another personality is to enter into a new world of relationships and judgement⁵, one in which they were afraid to be lenient for it touched man at the deepest level. Though it could be stated that the modern emphasis expresses more clearly the attitude of Christ towards the woman brought to Him having committed adultery⁶, we do not as yet seem to be quite clear about the sacredness of the human personality.

(iii) *Insolvency and marriage*

The Lordship of Christ means His Lordship over every department of life. It is interesting to see how this church concerned itself with matters not readily accepted today as the province of the church. True, the church is concerned with marriages, but is not expected to interfere on the question of who one should marry! The church judged all matters according to the effect upon the witness to Christ, and in this particular case of the Christian marrying a non-Christian, they pointed to the New Testament and to Paul's injunction "Be not unequally yoked with unbelievers."⁷

It seems somewhat strange to read of the vital interest taken in the matter of bankruptcy; the reason for this interest is simple, it

revealed something of a person's dealings with other people, therefore it concerned his witness to Christ, thus it was the church's province.

In order to have some guidance on such matters, the church drew up two resolutions which were accepted in December, 1842. They read:—

“Resolutions relating to Insolvency and Marriage.

- 1st. That in the event of any member of our Communion stopping payment in his business connections it be regarded as the duty of the church to appoint a confidential enquiry into the circumstances under which the event has occurred and to have the result of that enquiry laid before it as far as shall appear necessary to the pastor and the messengers.
- 2nd. That in the event of any of the members of our Communion entering into the marriage relations with one who is not a member of the Christian church it be regarded as our duty to appoint an enquiry into the circumstances under which the relationship was formed and to have the results of that enquiry communicated as far as may appear necessary to the pastor and the messengers.”

On May 22nd, 1843, the first case of bankruptcy was reported; a Mr. Sharp “had been obliged to stop payments.” By May 31st the visitors were able to report to the church that their visit “was highly satisfactory with respect to integrity and honourable manner in which he (Mr. Sharp) had acted.” In the other cases dealt with the reports are much more severe in their judgement. On December 3rd 1857, George Cowper, who had in 1853 been a visitor in the case of David Caig, was declared bankrupt. The church report is brief and to the point, that “the church concludes to express their grief that they cannot acquit him of a depth of negligence and imprudence which has led him near to what is dishonourable and untrustworthy of the scrupulous integrity of a Christian tradesman but do not consider that they have before them evidence of a kind to justify their doing otherwise than retaining him in their communion.”

In July, 1864, another case is reported, this time in more detail. It is of interest to note that the person in question does not seem to object to the visitors examining his accounts. This suggests that the unfortunate person, a Mr. Thomson, did not regard this an impertinence on the part of the church, indicating that the church had taught well the responsibility of each member for the welfare of the whole fellowship.

The case was introduced to the church meeting in July. Between July and September the visitors made a thorough investigation of Mr. Thomson's books and accounts and were ready to give their report to the Church. In this report they also told how Thomson started his business. Apparently he borrowed the capital and brought a bookshop; according to the visitors it was not the most profitable of businesses. This was in 1851. They seem to suggest that with a not too profitable

business and little, if any, business acumen, Thomson was doomed from the beginning. The report then adds "we are yet of opinion that a highly conscientious man would not have continued to use the property of others so long after he found no profits following his exertions." Though they find no evidence of dishonesty they make a quite severe judgement on Thomson as a business man, "we regret to find a deficiency of that regard for the feelings and interests of others which should belong to a Christian tradesman." This is a harsh judgement yet it indicates a responsible attitude to the stewardship of life. It is not surprising to read that a month later Thomson seeks a transfer to another church.

In the case of Thomson there was one other aspect which caused the church some concern; he was a deacon, and because of this they passed two resolutions: —

1. That the church expresses its thanksgiving to learn that after their prolonged and careful enquiry, the visitors are able to state that they cannot point to any such evidence of dishonest intention as involving the absence of Christian principle in Mr. Thomson's conduct in his business and that it be therefore decided that he be retained in church fellowship as before.
2. That as it is expedient that those only should "use the office of deacon" who have been proved capable of ruling well their own affairs; and the visitors having stated that they have found a marked absence of that ability in Mr. Thomson, whereby others have been involved in loss, the church is constrained to withdraw him further discharge of those duties."

Regarding the problem of marriages between Christian and non-Christian, the church feared, and rightly so, the eventual loss of the Christian partner to the church. They were ready to acknowledge that it was possible for the Christian partner to remain faithful to Christ, nevertheless it was not the happiest of situations and they needed the prayers of the church.

In July, 1844, it was reported that Martha Smith had married a man "whom she does not herself consider a converted character." The church expressed its deep grief and solemn disapproval of the step and would entreat that the Lord might grant unto her due contrition and enable her to walk faithfully in the circumstances in which she is placed.

October of that year another case was reported, this time Sarah Eaton of whom it was written "she manifested a becoming spirit under the circumstances."! The Minutes indicate that the church had earlier tried to persuade Sarah to stop the courtship, and succeeded for a while, but eventually she went back to her first love. Birrell wrote a letter explaining why the church took the view it did on this matter of marriage. There are two main points in the letter, but before he reaches them he suggests, perhaps unfairly in view of what has already been said of Sarah Eaton, "that entry into such a union indicates a very dubious state of personal piety." The two main points

are (1) the church is founded on the principle that its members are separated from the world by uniting with Christ, and (2) Scripture forbids such a marriage.

The problems demanding disciplinary action within the congregation worshipping at Pembroke Place called for the concern of the whole church. One of the first things we find in the attitude of Birrell and his church is that they examine all things in the light of the Gospel of Christ, and ask consistently "how does this action affect the witness to Christ?" This naturally caused tension; concern for Christ and concern for the offender. They did not shirk the responsibility that somehow they had to stand between Christ and the sinner in the same way the prophet stood between God and the nation. E. L. Allen aptly describes that tension, "these men for whom life's two supreme loyalties, to God and to the nation, were so grievously at variance."⁸ This was the situation Birrell and his people experienced. Their final court of appeal was the known will of God revealed in Scripture, and they sought to apply that "known will" as faithfully as they could. We may not accept their understanding of the situation, especially in the cases of adultery, and we may even argue that they needed a compassion which was prepared to hold on to the sinner in spite of his continued sin. Yet they did exercise a Christian principle which is in danger of being neglected in the modern situation.

The church at Pembroke Place exercised discipline within the confines of the church and by so doing made its statement about sin in general. It was as compassionate as it could be but realised that there came a point when it could no longer allow sinful activities to be linked with the name of the church. This, of course, did not mean that the church did not continue to seek to show love and compassion to the sinner *outside* of the church, but Birrell and many of his contemporaries saw clearly that there were situations that could not be allowed to continue *within* the church; after all, they were reminded in the New Testament that judgement would begin within the church.⁹

The truth that Christ's love is a redeeming love, and that this is shown best through a redeemed people, was a truth clearly demonstrated by the church at Pembroke Place between the years 1838-1865.

NOTES

¹ H. W. Robinson, *The Life and Faith of the Baptists*, London, 1946, pp. 42-48.

² Bruce Kenrick, *Come Out The Wilderness*, London, 1963, p. 124.

³ I Corinthians, ch. 5: 4-5.

⁴ E. A. Payne, *The Free Church Tradition in the Life of England*, London, 1965, p. 113.

⁵ I Corinthians, ch. 6: 14-7: 1-40.

⁶ John 8: 1-11.

⁷ II Corinthians, ch. 6: 14.

⁸ E. L. Allen, *Prophet and Nation*, London, 1947, p. 15.

⁹ I Peter, Ch. 4: 17-18.