

# DISCIPLINE AS A MARK OF THE CHURCH

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THE phrase 'Church discipline' is used to refer to those measures which have been employed in the Christian Church to secure its own purity and the well-being of its members.

## AN EXAMINATION OF THE SCRIPTURAL TEACHING

In contrast to the generality of churches now, the Church in New Testament days believed in discipline. This was partly inherited from the Old Testament Church in such incidents as the severe punishment of Achan, whose sin caused the ignominious defeat of Joshua's forces at Ai. One of the most direct passages on discipline in the New Testament is in Matthew xviii. 15-18, where the power of binding and loosing is mentioned. To begin with, in verse 15 there is the 'individual remonstrance' which is the gentlest form of discipline. 'Go, shew him his fault between thee and him alone.' If this should fail in its object of bringing the offender to repentance, then we are to take one or two others with us. 'Take with thee one or two more, that at the mouth of two witnesses or three every word may be established.' If this 'collective censure' is no use, then he is to be brought to the church, and if this again fail, the offender is to be excluded from its fellowship. 'Let him be unto thee as the Gentile and the publican,' until he repents, and then the binding may be loosed.

In considering this great aspect of the subject we should also remember the power of the keys committed to the Church. It does not only mean the opening of the Kingdom to all believers, but also that ecclesiastical jurisdiction by which the fellowship of the Church is closed to the impenitent and opened to the penitent.

In the letters of Paul to the Corinthian church, the subject reappears. In 1 Cor. v. 5, in a case of flagrant sin, a man is to be put out of the fellowship of the church, back into the world. This seems to be the simplest meaning of the phrase 'deliver such a one unto Satan'. The Corinthian believers were not even to have social dealings with such a man (verse 11). Nowadays, of course, the question is much broader, for many churches have in their membership persons who do not even accept the historic faith of the Church. Such surely ought to be excluded.

In 2 Cor. ii. 7, the apostle instructs the church to readmit the repentant offender, lest his sorrow prove too severe for him to bear. Satan is ready to take advantage of such a situation (verse 11), so, lest he succeed, they are now to confirm their love to the offender and grant him forgiveness (verse 8).

One can assume that the primary function of discipline was carried out, namely, the observing of the standards recognized for admittance to the fellowship (and the sacraments). One cannot imagine that they had our indiscriminate administration of baptism (whether paed- or otherwise). No doubt a 'credible profession' of saving faith was required.

Professor Harold Browne, in his work on *The Thirty-Nine Articles*, sums up the Scripture proof under two headings:

1. That the Church is divinely authorized to excommunicate offenders, and to restore them to communion on their repentance.
2. That certain persons in the Church are judges; having authority thereto;

firstly, the apostles, then pastors like Timothy and Titus (1 Tim. v. 19-21; Tit. iii. 10, 11), and then the chief officers of the Church. (For an abuse of this power, see the case of Diotrephes in 3 Jn. 10.)

We see then in the New Testament that discipline was the reaction of the conscience of the Church against a fault that was gross and palpable. What then of the Church in later days?

### PRE-REFORMATION TIMES

Roughly speaking, one can divide this period into three sections:

*The first three centuries*, when the main features included the development of penances to be performed for sins committed after baptism, penances such as fasting, periods of prayer and abstinence from pleasures. Such penance might last several years, depending on the seriousness of the offence. We find too the distinction being made between venial and mortal sins. For the latter there was no hope of restoration. Tertullian lists them as murder, idolatry, theft, apostasy, blasphemy, fornication and adultery. Lastly, in this section, arises the problem of the 'lapsed', that is those who have denied the faith in times of persecution. The North African Church tended to be stricter than the Roman Church with these people.

*The next eight centuries*. Again, there are three main features. Firstly, civil penalties began to be used for ecclesiastical offences, following the alliance of Church and state. There was confiscation of goods, banishment, fines, imprisonment and sometimes even death. Secondly, we note that Augustine, who at first was inclined to restrict discipline to spiritual measures, later used these more unspiritual measures, justifying his action by the verse 'Compel them to come in'. Thirdly, we note that the pope became the supreme disciplinarian, using the weapon of excommunication, often couched in violent terms; for example: 'Let him be damned in his going out and his coming in! The Lord strike him with madness, blindness and mental insanity.'

*From the thirteenth century onwards*. Penance now involved confession to a priest. The Roman Church, wielding both swords, temporal and spiritual, used any means to maintain its authority. This confusion of using 'civil power' to enforce church law persisted during and after the Reformation.

### THE REFORMATION AND AFTER

In the *Institutes*, Calvin lays down three objects of discipline:

1. To purge away impurities. 'That those, who lead scandalous and flagitious lives, may not, to the dishonour of God, be numbered among Christians.'
2. To ensure the safety of other believers. Here he quotes the words of the apostle: 'A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.'
3. To bring offenders to repentance. (Perhaps he should have made this the first object.) Again he refers to Paul's words: 'If any man obey not our word, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed.'

These views were shared by Knox. 'There was nothing in which the Scottish reformers approached nearer the primitive church than in the rigorous and impartial exercise of ecclesiastical discipline, the relaxation of which, under the papacy, they justly regarded as one great cause of the universal corruption of religion . . . .' (McCrie's *Life of John Knox*).

Similar statements of discipline may be found in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, in the *Thirty-Nine Articles* and in the writings of John Wesley. Here is, to close this section, a striking testimony from the Rev. Murray McCheyne: 'When I first entered upon the work of ministry

among you, I was exceedingly ignorant of the vast importance of church discipline and thought that my great and almost only work was to pray and preach . . . . A new light broke in upon my mind, and I saw that if preaching be an ordinance of Christ, so is church discipline. I now feel very deeply persuaded that both are of God — that two keys are committed to us by Christ: the one, the key of doctrine; the other, the key of discipline. Neither is to be resigned without sin.'

## GENERAL AND PRACTICAL OBSERVATIONS

Many godly men today are not convinced of the worth of discipline. Some fear losing members. Others again argue that people will be driven away from hearing the gospel. Some even protest that we have no right to judge our fellows. Truly, discipline is a kind of Cinderella doctrine even amongst evangelical ministers and clergy.

One may fairly say that these points of view are specious but not convincing. If discipline is scriptural, it ought to be exercised, whether success follows or not. We might experience what one humorous minister described as 'helpful subtractions' from our congregations. But a tree must be continually pruned if it is to bear fruit. A knife must be sharp to cut. A wick must be trimmed in order to give light. It is probable that the use of discipline would bring about greater blessing in the Church — perhaps revival would be brought nearer. Certainly, the 1859 revival in Ulster began in a congregation which had rigorous oversight and discipline. Whatever be the case with regard to revival, it is certain that the modern Church needs discipline. For, as Cowper says,

*We are become so candid and so fair,  
So liberal in construction, and so rich  
In Christian charity (good natured age!)  
That they are safe, sinners of either sex,  
Transgress what laws they may.*

Discipline is a mark of the true Church, says Calvin, along with the preaching of the Word and the administration of sacraments. Can we then afford to be without it any longer?

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## International Friendship Campaign

The I.V.F. are organizing a campaign in September in London to welcome Overseas Students who are arriving in the country for the first time. We are using British students, from a number of universities, who will be requiring accommodation in London during some part of September. We would be very grateful for any help that G.F. members can give in offering such hospitality to these students who will be helping in the campaign. Fuller details will be supplied by the G.F. Secretary. If you cannot help by hospitality, any gifts to assist some to live in London would be most gratefully received.