

The Membership of the Church of God

David C. Searle
Minister of Larbert Old

Ecclesia. The Church. The Church of God.

We see her, do we not, in her 2000 years of history, rising to great heights in her testimony to her Lord and Saviour, sometimes remarkably blessed by the outpouring of God's Spirit – yet sometimes tossed and beaten by the waves of dissent, division, heresy, unfaithfulness. Nevertheless, always preserved by her Lord, even in the darkest generations. The subject I hope to treat today is the Membership of the Church of God. Perhaps that is too general a title. But I trust that my thesis will become more plain as we proceed.

Stated briefly, I am arguing for a fairly broad basis of membership of Christ's Church; not too broad, but then, on the other hand, not too narrow either. Simply, in accordance with Scripture. There is disturbing evidence that much church polity today, especially in evangelical circles, is adopting a Pietist position in respect to Church Membership. Now some of you, I know, will have been taught, and will still hold, and will continue to hold, long after you have heard this paper, that the Pietist position on Church membership is the correct one. It seems to me that the Reformers in arguing for a broad basis of membership were truer to Scripture than the Pietists who argued for a narrower basis of membership. Perhaps "broad" and "narrow" are inadequate terms. "Exclusive" and "inclusive" might serve us better. My paper, then, is to try and demonstrate that church membership ought to be "inclusive" rather than "exclusive".

I The Church of God

We had better begin by defining our terms. I would suggest that the word "ecclesia" meaning, of course, "an assembly", "a congregation", is used in at least *five senses* in the Scriptures.

(i) *"The whole body of the faithful, in heaven or earth, who have been or shall be spiritually united to Christ as their Saviour"*. In Ephesians 1, Paul is at his most sublime and profound in his description of the Church of Christ. Although he doesn't use the word ecclesia, I don't think there would be any disagreement whatsoever that he is writing about Christ's Headship over His Church which, in the earlier part of the chapter is so wonderfully portrayed in its salvation by the Triune God. Cf Col. 1.18.

(ii) *"The body of believers in any particular place, associated together in the worship of God"*. e.g. Romans 16.1 where Paul refers to the "Church at Cenchreae". There are many instances of this use of ecclesia in its local sense.

(iii) *"A number of congregations associated together in the worship of God"*. The Church of Jerusalem comprised many groups of believers. It must have been so. Acts 2.41 tells us that 3000 believed, and goes on to say that daily the Lord added to that number. So that by 4.4 we are told that the men within the Jerusalem Church now numbered 5000, and in the next chapter, 5.14, we are told multitudes of men and women were added to the Lord. By Acts 21.20, James comments to Paul, "You see how many 1000s (literally, myriads) of Jews there are which believe". Now no one in their mind will suggest that a church of thousands all met in Jerusalem under one roof for the breaking of bread. Thus, clearly, in the NT, ecclesia is used of a number of congregations associated together in the worship of God".

(iv) *"The body of professing believers in any place, as represented by their elders"*. Matthew 18 illustrates this. The Christian with the problem over a fellow believer is instructed by the Lord "to tell it to the church". I think there would be no disagreement that the office-bearers are given authority to act on behalf of the Church of God; and so ecclesia can have this meaning of "those representing the local body of believers".

(v) *"The whole body throughout the world of those who outwardly profess the faith of Christ"*.

Now I have left this 5th use of the word ecclesia to the end quite deliberately. Because it is at this point that we find a very clear division of opinion. I hope those who do not hold the Reformed position on this matter will forgive me if I seem to be presumptuous in setting my own position in the centre, and the Roman view on the one side, with Independent's view on the other side. The point is that Reformed Theology, from Luther on, but more especially from Calvin on, has made a distinction between the Church Invisible and the Church Visible. And it is to that distinction that we must now turn our attention.

II The Church Visible

1. The Problem

Now our question is: Does Scripture really use the term ecclesia to refer to the whole body of believers who outwardly profess faith in Christ as Lord and Saviour. Certainly the Westminster Confession clearly teaches it does:

"The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation, as before

under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children; and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation”.

Now Martin Luther it was who first made this distinction between the Church Invisible and the Church Visible. About the Church Invisible there is no disagreement among Protestants. The Church Invisible, as we have seen, is the whole company of the Elect – those who are truly regenerate by the Holy Spirit. But Luther taught that the Visible Church, the “institution of the ecclesia here on earth” consisted in those who profess faith in Christ and worship Him, with Word and Sacraments being taught and administered in a proper manner. To that Calvin added that there must also be the presence of a proper and Scriptural Discipline. This then is our understanding of the Visible Church:

- (i) Professing Christians worshipping Christ
- (ii) The Word being faithfully taught
- (iii) The sacraments being properly administered
- (iv) Discipline being properly exercised

Now on the one side of that is the Roman teaching. The Romans will not allow any such distinction as that made between the Church Visible and the Church Invisible. Rather, they identify the Church with the Kingdom of God, and state that the true Church is the “congregation of the faithful, professing the same faith, partaking of the same sacraments, governed by lawful pastors under one visible head, the vicar of Christ”. Cardinal Bellarmine (quoted in Latin, p.11 HT Vol.1 Wm Cunningham). I don’t propose to spend time examining the Roman teaching.

What then of the teaching of the “Independents” and Pietists, let me quote Strong’s Systematic Theology. VII.J.1.

“The Church of Christ, is the whole company of regenerate persons in all times and ages, in heaven and on earth. In this sense, the Church is identical with the spiritual kingdom of God; both signify that redeemed humanity in which God in Christ exercises actual spiritual dominion”.

Then Strong goes on to quote H.C. Vedder:

“The Church is a spiritual body, consisting only of those regenerated by the Spirit of God”. Strong comments: “Yet the Westminster Confession affirms that the Church “consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children”. So Strong continues: “This definition includes in the Church a multitude who not only give no evidence of regeneration, but who plainly show themselves to be unregenerate. In many lands it practically identifies the church with the world”.

The key statement is clearly this: “The Church is a spiritual body, consisting only of those regenerated by the Spirit of God”. Now with that we entirely agree as a statement about what we have already defined as the “Invisible Church”. But Strong makes no allowance whatsoever for any use of the term “ecclesia” in a wider, more general sense, in this secondary sense of those who *outwardly* profess faith in Christ.

Who then are right? The Reformers and the Westminster Confession? Or the Independents and Pietists, insisting on a pure church, and seeking – as they do – to admit only those who give tangible evidence or fruits of regeneration?

2. *The Biblical Evidence for a Doctrine of the Visible Church*

(1) The Old Testament

I was brought up in theological pietism. I was certainly taught that the Doctrine of the Visible Church was utterly wrong. Together with this teaching there was added the theology that the Old Covenant was a covenant of works. That when Moses said: “Do this and live”, he actually meant (and therefore God intended us to understand), “Do this – keep all this Law – and you will earn a place in heaven”.

But, and so I was sincerely taught, God knew that man could never ever keep all the Law, and so that injunction was one which He gave to teach humanity a grim lesson: namely that by the works of the Law shall no one be justified in His Presence. It was a command, therefore, not unlike one of the labours of Hercules, needing a god to be able to accomplish it. No mortal man could ever manage to do this and so live,

Yet in my own daily study of God’s Word, without anyone teaching me otherwise, I rebelled against such an understanding of Moses injunction, “Do this and live”. I found that OT saints did not stand in terror under the Law of God. They loved it. They took sweetest delight in it. They found it better than honey, more precious than gold, a light for their pathway, a lamp for their feet. I read with fascination the great messages in Deuteronomy in which there are such rich promises to those living by the Law of God, promises which are all in a context of Love, both the Love of God for His elect people, and the love of His elect in response to Him. And I found it impossible to reconcile that whole ethos of Psalms and Deuteronomy with that view of the Law as a kind of spiritual cat & nine tails.

Not that we do not need the severe chastening of God. We do, and that will always be an integral element in the Law; just as it is an element in the very Presence of Christ (see how Peter kneels down in the boat among

all the fish, even while the boat is actually in process of sinking! and cries, "Depart from me for I am a sinful man"). But the Law was a way of life for the redeemed! That was it! A whole way of life for the redeemed, for those elect, and redeemed by the Passover Lamb and brought from slavery. "Do this and live", meant – not, "Do this and enjoy life".

I became convinced that the OT was not a *dismal record* of failure, a first try at a Covenant, so to speak, just to show mankind his inability (though that is all there – how could it not be); rather was the OT, and the Old Covenant a perfect blue print of the New Testament and the New Covenant.

One thing my earlier teaching HAD brought home to me was the way in which all the intricate ceremony and ritual of the Tabernacle worship was all a pattern of things that were to come. I love that little hint of this in Luke, when he tells how the Lord on the twilight walk to Emmaus beginning with Moses . . . expounded things concerning Himself. If there is a video library in heaven, that's one tape I would love to watch through again!

Now where is all this taking us? Simply to this point: that in the OT we have a *Church within a church*. And that is not, I urge, a bad mistake; but a pattern. Isaiah's remnant points to the regenerate group within a chosen nation, a holy people. Malachi knew the same situation, with the Lord Himself taking note that among all those people, all worshippers, after a fashion stingy givers, sitting lightly on their vows (it could be a description of some Xn denominations we all know) among them was a little group of believers who met for prayer and fellowship, and the Lord Himself took note of them literally in the book of remembrance 3¹⁶. The OT teaches me, therefore, there is a doctrine of a "Visible Church".

Now if that OT pattern is scorned by the theologians who deny any doctrine of the "visible" church, then turn with me now to the NT to see whether or not a different pattern emerges.

(2) The Gospels

At once we met an interesting question: the relationship of the Kingdom of God to the Church of God. However much we may find it hard to agree on what the precise relationship of these two to each other is, two things we will agree on, I'm sure; the first is that the term "Kingdom of God" is essentially eschatological in its reference to salvation-history. The Kingdom is, not just Christ's Rule and Kingship, but Christ Himself. And the parables of the Kingdom focus in an eschatological context on the manifestation of Christ and His Kingship.

The second point of agreement concerns the Church. Because where else is the Rule of Christ present in the world of men today, other than in the Church? I am not forgetting the Sovereignty of God, or denying His control in events of world history, moment by moment, year by year. But the Reign and Kingship of Jesus finds its locus on earth within His church.

Granted then these two premises, what are we to make of the parables of the Kingdom. eg The Sower, The Tares and the Wheat, the Dragnet, The King's Marriage Feast, The Ten Virgins, the Sheep and the Goats, the Talents etc? Do not all of these show that Awesome Judgment of God that begins with the Church of God? Christ separating the genuine from the counterfeit, the true from the false? This is what the Kingdom of God is like, says Jesus. And I can see no other satisfactory theology of the parables than that of the visible church being distinguished in God's Judgment from the Invisible Church.

(3) The Epistles

There is far more material than can be referred to in a paper of this nature. But I select a few sample references, almost at random, to illustrate my thesis that the NT assumes a "Visible" Church as we have defined it.

- (i) 1 Cor 11.19 "for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognised".

The astonishing, almost "throw away" line of Paul's takes us by surprise. I wonder if you have ever even paused over it. The context you will know well enough. The Love-feast in the Church is being abused. Divisions, perhaps of a social nature – the rich as distinct from the poor, or the free as distinct from the slaves – have intruded into the fellowship, and these divisions are being shamefully displayed in that contradictory manner that

too much and are even intoxicated!

Our text suggests that all along Paul has been aware that among the professing Christians are those whose profession was spurious. But he has taken no action, other than to declare fully and faithfully God's Word. Now he sees that cracks beginning to show. Time is working as God's servant; and some of the spurious Christians are being shown up for what they really are.

It would not be impossible to read Paul's words even more poignantly as meaning that the genuine are in the minority. But I shall not go as far as that, and will content myself with asserting that this troubled fellowship, with all its problems, like so many fellowships today – alas, was simply a local branch of the "Visible Church" of God.

We will return to the evident point that no church situation is ever static, but that there is a continuing process of purification going on, as evidenced by the factions in Corinth that are showing up the genuine believers, and

therefore the spurious also. The point is plain that the Corinthian fellowship was a mixed bag, to put it mildly. Yet Paul was willing to write "to the Church of God at Corinth", including in that company *all the fish* the Dragnet had brought in.

- (ii) Phil.3.16-19 "Only let us hold true to what we have attained. Brethren, join in imitating me, and mark those who so live as you have an example in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, live as enemies of the Cross of Christ. Their end is destruction. . ."

Simply to note that Paul is conscious that *many*, as he puts it, once were within the fellowship which he Paul called the Church, but now have fallen by the wayside. Paul sorrows over them. And he warns the believers to whom he is writing. He warns because some of those to whom he is writing may yet backslide and join them. He sorrows, "with tears" because some of them may yet return. He sorrows because he came to love those who have fallen away, treating them as true believers, even though events proved his acceptance of them as Christians to have been mistaken. Mistaken, but not wrong. Of course he was right to accept them as Christians when they made outward profession. But Paul cannot be blamed for making such a mistake. Only God, in the final assessment will make no mistake. Every pastor within the Church of God will make mistakes. Simply because we are not asked to pass that final verdict. So as Paul accepted, we accept, those making their outward profession, and we believe the best of them until they by their lives demonstrate they are not believers.

- (iii) Colossians

Who were the mysterious teachers within that fellowship of Christ who were causing so many problems? They are there like a shadow and attempts have been made down the years to try and identify them. But their identity doesn't concern us at this point. Only their actual presence. To me the astounding thing is that Paul does not go as far as to tell the Colossian Church to exclude them. Their teaching was certainly disturbing the church. Paul refers to it as "philosophy, empty deceit, human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ" 2.8.

Yet the apostle contents himself with simply affirming the great truths of the Gospel, almost tolerating the presence of the troublesome teachers. Dick Lucas, in his recent commentary, tries to grapple with the problem of their identity and suggests they were a primitive "fulness of life" or "second blessing" group within the church. But whoever they were they were wrong, quite wrong. And Paul is emphatic in asserting that.

I do not find his attitude towards these visitors to the Colossian Church at all surprising. Because I find his letters pulsate with the knowledge that there will never be here on earth a pure church. Paul warns that after his departure, fierce wolves would enter the church, not sparing the flock. Worse, from *within* the church, "from among your own selves will arise men speaking perverse things to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20.30). But Paul knew, however afflicted and harassed the Church God might be as the visible Church, the true Church, the Invisible Church, would be presented faultless before God on the final day.

- (iv) Revelation

I pass over the Letter to the Hebrews, the Epistles of Peter and John and Jude, all of which corroborate the comments I have been making thus far and I remind you of the Seven letters of Christ to the Seven Churches of Asia in Revelation 2 and 3. The Churches there, all except one, were impure churches, certainly not composed of the elect alone. The Judgments uttered against some within some of those churches are chilling and uncompromising. And they complete what for me is a picture true to the entire Bible of a doctrine of the Church Visible, that great body of Professing Believers.

Now, lest some of you are wondering why I should spend so long on what you may regard as a matter of mere semantics, we must now press on to work out the practical implications of this doctrine. Doctrine is always important. Often it stands like the foundations of the house, not seen because it dictates the whole design and structure of the building. And in fact that is how it has worked in the church's life today. If we deny any Doctrine of a "Visible Church", then we will attempt to build a pure church, expecting that 99% (allowing for the presence of a single Judas) of our members will be truly born again. Our attitude towards membership will be shaped by that expectation. On the other hand, if we hold the Doctrine of the "Visible Church", we will expect our congregation to be in God's Hands, with Himself as the final arbiter, and we will adopt a more inclusive attitude towards membership. It is now, therefore, to the question of membership of the church that we must turn.

III. Membership of the Church of God

Our first question here is clear: what are the qualifications that Scripture would guide us to use in admitting anyone to membership of a Christian fellowship. Return with me to the four elements in the church which we earlier saw the Reformers emphasised.

- (i) Professing Christians worshipping Christ

There must be a Confession of faith. The whole doctrine of the Confession of faith is an interesting one. It can be traced from the affirmation Israel made in Exodus 24.7, through to the words of Peter at Caesarea Philippi, on to the climax of Christ's "good confession" (as Paul calls it) before Pontius Pilate. On from there

to that “confessing with the lips” faith in Christ to which Paul refers in Romans 10 and so on, culminating in the adoration of Christ in Revelation. R.P. Martin has shown that in Phil 2 we have perhaps the earliest Christian Confession that “Jesus is Lord”.

There is surely a close and necessary bond between the public confession of faith in Christ and the united worship of Him by Christians coming together. This then is the first element we find in church membership – Confessing the Lordship of Christ, and praising Him as such.

(ii) Now such a confession can never be made lightly, and so we have the second element of a *Proper discipline exercised*. The relationship this bears to Church membership is that it looks for fruits of repentance. “If any one is in Christ, he is a new creation . . . all things become new”. “Repent and be baptised”. And to confess Christ is never merely the uttering of some creed, it is a real *identification of the person with the Body of Christ*. Confession of Christ involves *crossing over* to Jesus’ side, and that cannot be done without repentance; and repentance implies a new way of life; and that imposes on the church the responsibility of exercising discipline, that shame may not be brought on the name of Christ by some who may not be giving evidence of repentance.

(iii) The third element is the Word being taught faithfully; clearly, implying a regular pattern of life together in a learning listening context. We would expect, therefore, those asking for membership of Christ’s Church to be ready to sit regularly under the teaching of the Word of God.

(iv) Our fourth element is the administration of the sacraments. Baptism must be administered, and the Lord’s supper is the focus of our devotion and worship and fellowship.

Here then we have four great pillars of Church membership as the Reformers saw God’s word defining them for us.

Now you might have thought that evangelicals, with a sound structure such as that, would surely be united. But we are not, because the interpretation of the first two of these tenets of membership varies widely.

Basically, the difference may be stated as follows:

“With Independents, a *saving belief* in Christ is the only title to admission to the Christian society; and the candidate for admission is bound to bring with him at least credible *evidence to prove* that such a title belongs to him, and that he has been effectually called unto salvation through faith that is in Christ Jesus.

“With Presbyterians, on the other hand, an *intelligent profession of belief in the Gospel* is the title to admission to church membership; and the candidate for admission is only required to show that his conduct and life are in accordance with and accredit his profession”

Jas Bannerman, *Church of Christ*, 1896 p.74

Bannerman then proceeds to four reasons why he regards the Presbyterian position to be the right one. The first three, I pass over, as I think I have already covered the substance of them in what I have already said. His fourth argument is worth noticing. It is that in seeking evidence of regeneration before admitting a person to membership of the Church, those examining the candidate are passing judgments which no man is competent to do. The Presbyterian twofold insistence on (a) a *full knowledge and public confession of faith of the Gospel* and (b) that discipline which seeks to ascertain that there is *nothing in the candidate’s life which is contrary to a profession of faith* remains, Bannerman argues, within Scriptural guide lines and does not lead pastors and elders out into forbidden areas of judgment and assessment which are reserved for God alone.

Now I want to add one or two comments before we leave this subject of membership. First, Bannerman is not mistaken in his understanding of the position of Presbyterians. Listen to Knox in his Book of Discipline:

“Every master of household must be commanded to instruct or else to cause to be instructed, his children, servants and family, in the principles of the Christian religion; without the knowledge thereof aught none to be admitted to the Table of the Lord Jesus. . . . And therefore of necessity we judge it, that every year at least, public examination be had by Minister and Elders of the knowledge of every person within the Church . . . such as be ignorant of the articles of their faith; understand not, nor can rehearse the commandments of God; know how to pray; neither whereunto their righteousness consists, ought not to be admitted to the Lord’s Table . . . For seeing that the just liveth by faith, and that Jesus Christ justifieth by knowledge of Himself, insufferable we judge it that men shall be permitted to live in ignorance as members of the Church of God”

Book of Discipline, 9th Head, Concerning the Policy of the Church (p.241)

Notice also Calvin’s comments on this same subject.

Commenting on the Independents’ insistence that “saving faith” is the qualification, and denying any man can pass such a judgment: “As to the efficacy of the ministry . . . others erroneously maintain that what is peculiar to the Spirit of God is transferred to mortal men, when we suppose that ministers or teachers penetrate to the heart and mind, so as to correct the blindness of the one, and the hardness of the other”. IV 1.6.

But just say, asks some pious son rather petulantly, that we admit an unbeliever to membership of the church? Hear Calvin again (if all we have said about scripture is insufficient): “For it may happen in practice that those whom we deem not altogether worthy of the fellowship of believers, we yet ought to treat as brethren, and regard as believers, on account of the common consent of the Church in tolerating them, and bearing with them in

the body of Christ. Such persons we do not approve by our suffrage as members of the Church, but we leave them the place which they hold among the people of God until they are legitimately deprived of it. With regard to the general body we must feel differently; if they are undoubtedly entitled to be ranked with the Church, because it is certain that these things are not without a beneficial result". IV.1.9

IV. Discipline in the Church of God

Remember that Proper Discipline is essential to the being of the Church of Christ as we have so far tried to define that Church in NT terms. We now outline the levels of discipline which are clear within the Scriptures. I find only three levels of discipline.

1. Excommunication

(1) Excommunication of those guilty of scandalous living.

There are two clear examples of that; the first is 1 Cor 5 where Paul deals with the man who is living incestuously. Such a person is guilty of several sins.

- (i) The sin of immorality.
- (ii) The sin of denying his earlier Christian profession which was in a context of repentance, and a turning from the old life, and a godly resolve to walk in newness of life.
- (iii) The sin of bringing public shame on the church of Christ. The testimony of the Church is marred and dimmed by sin.
- (iv) The sin of defiling the Temple of the Holy Spirit; the Church is the Temple in which God dwells; and those who defile that temple, God will defile them!

Therefore, such a person must be excluded from the Church of God and from the Table of the Lord's Supper.

The second example of what may well be an act of excommunication is found in 1 Timothy 1.20, where Paul states that Hymenaeus and Alexander have been delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme. This is the same expression that Paul used in 1 Cor 5.5 though there he spoke about the flesh being destroyed so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

But note: discipline, even in extreme cases such as these two, is not to get rid of people, but the opposite: it is for the ultimate purpose of winning back to Christ the one who has strayed. Paul will not pass judgment. The man may be a scoundrel whose profession of faith was meaningless; or he may be a genuine believer who has been waylaid by Satan, and needs drastic treatment to bring him back. Both possibilities are held in perfect balance in the awesome discipline that is imposed.

(2) Excommunication for personal and private wrong-doing

Matthew 18.15-17. The difference here between the case the Lord deals with and those in 1 Cor 5 and 1 Tim 1 seems only to be that the one are public scandals, and the other a private offence.

So the Lord in Matthew 18 lays down the procedure. It is to be dealt with first on a private basis; then, failing reconciliation, two or three others are to be brought in; and finally, failing that, it is to be taken to the church. Early church did adopt this practice laid down by the Lord e.g. Titus 3.10 follows the procedure laid down by the Lord in Matthew 18. A "factious person" – creating divisions in the Church – is to be warned once or twice, and then excluded from the fellowship if there is no change of heart.

2. Discipline of Self Examination

The famous passage, 1 Cor.11.28. Robert M'Cheyne made much of this "self-examination". He set a number of questions which he gave to his First Communicants to ponder prayerfully in private before God on their knees.

1. Is it to please your father or mother, or anyone on earth, that you think of coming to the Lord's Table?
2. Is it because it is the custom and your friends and companions ARE COMING?
3. Is it because you have come to a certain time of life?
4. What are your real motives for wishing to come to the Lord's Table? Is it to thank God for saving your soul? Ps 114.12,13. Is it to remember Jesus? Luke 22.19 Is it to get near Christ? John 13.23 Or is it for wordly character, to gain a name, to gain money? Matthew 26.15.
5. Who do you think should come to the Lord's Table?
6. Do you think any should come but those who are truly converted, and what is it to be truly converted?
7. Would you come if you knew yourself to be converted?
8. Should those come who have had deep concern about their soul but are not yet come to Christ? etc. etc.

The questions go on to ask about the meaning of the bread and wine, about the meaning of fellowship and so on. But the point is that McCheyne was seeking to provoke and stimulate self-examination. He did not go on to ask for individual answers to his questions.

3. Discipline by the Word of God

This is the only other form of discipline I can uncover in the Scriptures. I have no doubt in my own mind that by far the most important is this final one. Sometimes, it is a very pointed and pertinent Word. "Those who sin rebuke that others may fear". What an awesome task is the ministry of the Word of God with this heavy

responsibility of rebuke. Of course we do not take it on ourselves – we are commissioned to it by God. But it is easy to shun the real and relevant rebuke, and to neglect this responsibility that is ours.

But the Word of God, faithfully and fearlessly preached, yet lovingly and tenderly preached as well, to men and women whom we love and pastor as those committed to our care, that Word will provide *almost all* the discipline that is needed in the Church.

Not just fearlessly and faithfully preached; that alone will empty a church. But lovingly and tenderly, with pastoral insight and pastoral follow-up that is humble and gentle and overflowing with concern and compassion. Always the two sides. They are both needed. The faithfulness and the fearlessness can be utterly loveless, and see what Paul says about that in 1 Cor 13.

Basically, then, there are three levels of Discipline:

- * Excommunication – the exclusion from the church of those who in one way or another are trouble-makers.
- * Self-examination, which will only be truly done if the third is right.
- * The faithful, loving, pastoral ministry of God's Word.

Conclusion

Now does all this add up to an inclusive kind of church membership? I think it does. Our aim is to bring in as many as we can, not to keep out as many as we can. To include as many as we can within the faithful adherence to Scripture's pattern. Yet, I think we have run the danger of becoming exclusive in our attitude towards those coming to us. I discussed with a group of ministers and Divinity Students quite recently how best they could keep people away from church – that was how we ended up, anyway, though at the time no one quite saw the direction we were taking. The fear was that an unconverted soul might come to the Lord's Table. I heard only weeks ago of a couple from a well-known evangelical church who had moved away and joined another fellowship that had only had a Biblical ministry for a short time. They were hesitating about having their child baptised lest – they said – other babies be baptised on the same occasion where parents are unbelievers. That is the Pietist's fear, not the Bible's fear.

“Our indulgence ought to extend much farther in tolerating imperfection of conduct. Here there is a great danger of falling, and Satan employs all his machinations to ensnare us. For there always have been persons who, imbued with a false persuasion of absolute holiness as if they had already become a kind of aerial spirits, spurn the society of all in whom they see that something still remains . . . egs . . . Others again sin in that respect, not so much from that insane pride as from inconsiderate zeal. Seeing that among those to whom the Gospel is preached, the fruit produced is not in accordance with the doctrine, they forthwith conclude that there no church exists. The offence is indeed well founded, and it is one which in this unhappy age we give far too much occasion. . . . Thinking there is no church where there is not complete purity and integrity of conduct, they, through hatred of wickedness, withdraw from a genuine church, while they think they are shunning the company of the ungodly. They allege the Church of God is holy. But that they may at the same time understand that it contains a mixture of good and bad, let them hear from the lips of our Saviour that parable in which He compares that church to a net in which all kinds of fishes are taken, but not separated until they are brought ashore. Let them hear it compared to a field which, planted with good seed, is by the fraud of an enemy mingled with tares and is not freed of them until the harvest is brought into the barn. Let them hear, in fine, that it is a thrashing-floor, in which the collected wheat lies concealed under the chaff, until, cleansed by the fanners and the seive, it is at length laid up in the granary. If the Lord declares that the Church will labour under the defect of being burdened with a multitude of wicked until the day of judgment, it is vain to look for a church that is altogether free from blemish”. IV.1.13.

We warn, we rebuke, we invite, we instruct, we charge, we teach . . . and we trust the Holy Spirit of God to use His word.

“It is indeed the special prerogative of God to know those who are His, as Paul declares in 2 Tim.2.19. And doubtless it has been so provided as a check on human rashness, the experience of every day reminding us how far His secret judgments surpass our apprehension. For even those who seemed most abandoned, and who had been completely despaired of, are by his goodness recalled to life, while those who seemed most stable often fall. Hence, as Augustine says, ‘In regard to the secret predestination of God, there are very many sheep without and very many wolves within’. For He knows and His mark is on those who neither know Him nor themselves. Of those again who openly bear His badge, His eyes alone see who of them are unfeignedly holy, and will persevere even to the end, which alone is the completion of salvation.” IV.1.8