

Church Discipline

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When our Lord said, concerning his church, "the gates of hades shall not prevail against it," he certainly implied, what is elsewhere clearly stated in the Bible, that the forces of Satan would direct their most persistent energies against his church. The powers of good and evil continually meet in death struggle for the mastery. The wide-openness of the door of the Christian church would seem to give the powers of sin an exceptional opportunity to overthrow it. Satan has never been slow to improve this seeming advantage. But our Lord made ample provision for the safety of his church at this point in the exceptional powers and privileges conferred upon the church in dealing with its disorderly members. "I will give unto thee the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (Matt. 16: 19 cf. Matt. 18: 18.) Jesus therefore saith to them again, 'Peace be unto you: as the Father hath sent me, even so send I you.' And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them: 'Receive ye the Holy Spirit; whosoever sins ye forgive they are forgiven unto them; whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained.' (John 20: 21-23) Thus a church of Christ indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and acting upon the Word of God has all the needed power, and is responsible for the proper discipline of her offending members. Whatever within her membership prevents or interferes with the church, being God's co-workers (Cor. 3: 9), Christ's true witnesses (Acts 1: 8), the world's light, (Matt. 5: 14), and Satan's aggressive foe (Eph. 6: 12,) should be corrected at once by the proper use of the church's disciplinary powers. In the light of the Sacred Oracles let us come face to face with

THE DUTY OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

for there is no greater evil afflicting the churches to-day than the failure to maintain a wise, kind and firm discipline among their members.

I. Causes for Church Discipline according to the New Testament scriptures may be specified as follows:

1. Troubles among brethren: Such as persistent enmity and wrong-doing to a church member for which adjustment and reconciliation are refused. Read: Matt. 18: 15-20. Our Lord's word here is very plain. He requires us to discipline an offending or offended member who refuses to settle personal difficulties. So important is this spirit of conciliation to the body of Christ, "that he taught us to pray: 'Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.'" According to Matt. 6: 15 and 18: 35, an unforgiving man is an unforgiven man; then what real connection has such a person with "the body of Christ"? None whatever. The terms of our union with Christ put us under bonds to forgive "even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven" us. And the same spirit of brotherliness and fairness is to be manifested in righting, as far as possible, any wrongs that have been done a brother in the church. If, after due admonition, the offending member continues obdurate, the church must take decisive action: "Let him be unto thee as the gentile and the publican" *i. e.*, excluded from the church. Our Lord gives no warrant for the tardiness and toleration so common among us, in dealing with church members estranged from each other. The sense of self-protection is sufficient to teach the church that it cannot afford to lie passive while bleeding from wounds made and kept open by quarrelling members, who care naught for a languishing church, or a perishing world. Such difficulties are more easily removed at the first than after months and years of strife and bitterness. A bear is never so easily killed as when it is a cub. The evil weed that thumb and finger may remove in May will require the plow in July, and, if left to seed itself in Autumn, may largely occupy the field in a few years. The easiest and best time to settle a trouble between church members is at its beginning.

2. Gross immorality and covetousness demand disciplinary action by the church. A single passage of Scripture will suffice to make this plain. Read 1 Cor. 5: 9-13. Very sweeping indeed is the class of offences here named by the Holy Spirit as intolerable within the Christian church. It may be true that the grosser evils have no place within our churches. But it is to be feared that if "the covetous," "extortioners," "revilers," "idolaters" received the treatment here accorded them there would be some empty pews, and vacant offices even, in our churches. Who ever heard of a person being disciplined in any of our churches for "covetousness" or "extortion"? And yet such persons are the greatest barriers to the progress of the church's work and efficiency. They strangle its benevolences, they cripple her larger enterprises, and they dole out their pinnacles with a miserly boast and grudge for its local work that chills the heart and discourages the burden-bearers of the church. Their whole influence in the community is adverse to the church's growth, and an embarrassment to the efforts of those who seek to save the lost. And yet unless dishonesty assumes a most criminal form—a form that even the world will not allow to go unpunished—such persons are allowed to retain their membership in

the church. But God puts upon every church the duty to cleanse itself from all the evils of this class. "Put away the wicked men from among yourselves." 1 Cor. 5: 13.

3. The inculcation of religious error, the dissemination of false teaching is a Scriptural cause for church discipline. Read Rev. 2: 14-16, also Titus 3: 10, 11; 1 Tim. 1: 19, 20. The particular sin of the men referred to in the last reference, for which Paul says, he "delivered them unto Satan," *i. e.*, excluded them from the church, is disclosed in 2 Tim. 2: 17, 18. The manifest teaching of these Scriptures is that it is the duty of every church to require of its entire membership unswerving allegiance to the teachings of the Bible. While large liberty may safely be given to everyone who accepts the Bible as the word of God, and follows the leading of the Spirit of Truth in interpreting it, yet none whatever should be allowed in the church to those who "teach as their doctrines the precepts of men" Matt. 15: 9, and "lean upon their own understanding," Prov. 3: 8. The solemn duty of jealousy guarding that precious legacy—the Sacred Oracles—is everywhere placed upon the church. Those who after due admonition and instruction continue to inculcate anti-Scriptural doctrines, the church is commanded to exclude from its membership. Fidelity to the Word of God has never failed to give the church large successes, while concessions to error has ever ultimated in disaster, defeat, and disgrace. Look sharp after your pulpits, O ye churches! For the man that is "wiser than God" is abroad in the earth today. "Beware of false prophets!" 2 John 10, 11. Baptist churches must stand or fall, live or die, with the Bible as the infallible Word of God.

4. Disorderly conduct such as factiousness, meddlesomeness, idleness, disregard of manifest family obligations, etc., call for an expression of the disapproval and reproof of the church. Rom. 16: 17, 18, 2 Thess. 3: 6-11. 1 Tim. 5: 8 leave no room for doubt on this point. What can "withdraw yourselves," "turn away from" and regard as "worse than an unbeliever" those causing divisions, busybodies, idlers, wilful non-providers for their families, etc., mean, if not the withdrawal of church fellowship? Persons who are habitually guilty of these things are actually living altogether outside the spirit of that body where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free, but Christ is all in and in all." The Christian brotherhood is one in thought, sympathy and purpose, and the lives of such persons described in these Scriptures are contrary to its spirit and aim. The retention of those in the church who persistently practice such things must prove fatal to its happiness and prosperity. Hence some disciplinary act on the part of the church is necessary for the correction of such evils in the body.

5. Covenant breaking is mentioned in Rom. 1: 31 as a characteristic of the reprobate. Surely there can be no more solemn or binding covenant on earth than that which we take upon us when we are baptized and "added unto the church." Yet is it not plain to every one that there are upon our church membership rolls the names of many who are open and habitual "covenant breakers"? We report them year by year as in "good and regular standing" when manifestly they are "reprobate." If it is "good and regular" for one member of the church to wilfully and constantly refuse to "labor and pray for the temporal and spiritual welfare of this church; to attend regularly to its services, sustain its doctrines, ordinances and discipline," etc., then it is "good and regular" for all to do this. Where, then, would the church be? What wonder that men are asking, "What's the good of joining the church?" Persons there are whose names are enrolled on our church registers who are living in distant parts where they can join churches of "the same faith and order," and "carry out the spirit of this covenant," but who, to escape the restraints and responsibilities of church membership, persistently neglect or refuse to take letters of dismission from the home church for this purpose. How, in the name of honesty, can we report such persons year after year as in "good and regular standing." Surely our Lord is not pleased with this. Brethren, all these evils, specified in God's Word as intolerable within the churches of Christ, call for prompt and decisive action by our churches. How?

II. The Method of Church Discipline is also clearly indicated in God's Word.

1. The twofold object sought by disciplinary action must be kept clearly before the church: The glory of Christ, and the good of the offender. The church is Christ's. A wrong has been done which dishonors him. Church love and fellowship is disturbed. Its respect and usefulness in the community is weakened, if not nearly destroyed, till the sense of right which dwells in every breast is vindicated by such action on the part of the church as will clearly remove the dishonor from our Lord's fair name. The salvation of the offending member is to be sought in all such action. He is to be led not only to see the enormity of his sin, but also, if possible, to be led to repent of it and seek forgiveness. The action should be such as will cause him to feel that his soul is in great jeopardy, being manifestly out of fellowship with Christ and his church. Acts 8: 18-24.

2. Hence a true and tender spirit should characterize all that is done. A wrong spirit at such times is sure to do the church as well as the offender great injury. Never can we need the Holy Spirit more than when exercising church discipline. Gal. 6: 1. All hateful, and revengeful and bitter feelings and motives must be put away, and the spirit of truth, and right, and love prevail through all that is done.

3. Personal effort to correct the evil should precede church action. We promise "to watch for one another's welfare." When a brother departs from the ways of the Lord, the first impulse of every church member should be to "restore such an one" to faith and duty. 2 Tim. 4: 2, Jas. 5: 19-20, 1 Jno. 5: 16. In cases of personal grievances our Lord gives explicit direction to this end to the wrong doer: Matt. 5: 23, 24. Equally clear is his charge to the wronged one in Matt. 18: 15. So we see that both parties to a grievance are under obligation to seek a private and personal settlement of their differences. If that fails, two or more friends should be used as intermediaries and witnesses. Matt. 18: 16. The publicity of church action is to be avoided if possible. If, however, these two private methods fail to effect reform and reconciliation, there is but one thing to do next.

4. Church action must be taken. Matt. 18: 17. But the church should insist, in the case of aggrieved brethren, that the 'personal methods' have been pursued before it will take action. No one should be allowed to jeopardize what harmony there is in the church by suddenly springing his grievances upon the body. Not until the previous steps laid down by our Lord have been taken, can it be safe for the church to proceed to discipline. For the church must act unitedly, and proper, wise, united action is only possible to the church when it conforms strictly to the word of the Lord. Patience, deliberation, strict fairness, and impartiality, should characterize every step that is taken. Should angry feelings be aroused in the church it were better to suspend action, and seek, through prayer, special help from God. For "the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God." Any stirring of the emotions that beclouds or warps the judicial faculties ought to be treated in the same way. Our Lord is first "King of righteousness," and afterward "King of peace," and his wisdom "is first pure, then peaceable." The Word of God should be the standard for every action. That Word is sufficiently broad and plain to meet the necessities of any case of discipline that will ever arise in any Christian church, and a praying church will be guided aright in applying it. Decisions that are thus made are bound to be respected. Matt. 18: 18-20, John 20: 22-23. In cases of flagrant crime or immorality, 1 Cor. 5: 1-13 and similar Scriptures show that the wrong-doer should be promptly excluded without waiting to see whether he repents or not. But if he afterwards gives convincing proof of repentance he may be restored in due time. In all disciplinary action the church should move in such harmony with God's Word as to commend its judgments to every man's conscience. God will vindicate his Word, we are to obey it.

III. The results of such a discipline cannot but be good and healthful in every church.

1. As the life of the body is the indwelling Spirit, so the life of the church is the Holy Spirit. He is the "Spirit of Truth." He abides with and witnesses to the truth. The measure of truth to which the church holds will be the possible measure of its being filled with the Spirit. He abides not with error, ignorance, or disobedience. Doctrinal purity is essential to spiritual health and vigor. If the unity of belief be broken, and sincerity become a substitute for truth in the standard of church membership, the evil one finds an open door through which he is sure to enter with all manner of errors and heresies. Failure to honor God's Word by keeping our beliefs and teachings Scriptural is a mortal mistake. 1 Cor. 1: 10, John 15: 5, 7, 8.

2. The effect of maintaining a high moral standard in the church is always beneficial. Laxity in that matter destroys a large part of the church's efficiency in the community. Respectable worldlings will find it easy to regard Christians as no better off than they are, and lose respect for the church. Hence conversions will be few. Besides, evils winked at by the church will act as leaven within the body. Gal. 5: 9. On the other hand, when it is understood that immorality of every sort, and by any member, is contrary to the spirit of, and will not be tolerated by the church, it will command the respect of every one, and be in a position to exert a helpful influence over men.

3. The eradication of faction, enmities, meddlesomeness, indolence, etc., will produce the same beneficial effects. No one, not even its members, can respect a divided, quarrelsome, gossiping church. Such a church cannot beget or nourish spiritual children. It is a stumbling-block in the path of men to God. But let there be a wise, firm, kind use made of its disciplinary powers to purge itself of faction, hate, slander, etc., and let it present to the world the pleasant sight of purity, unity, and good will among its members, and you have, humanly speaking, the most essential conditions of growth and stability. No true child of God could be driven or drawn away from such a church. Many will

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