

CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Properly speaking, an article on 'Church Discipline' should concern itself with discussing the whole government and rule of the church. But the concern of this article is with one aspect only of this rather complex subject. We are not here dealing with formative or preventive discipline, but with **corrective discipline** — that is, with attempts to restore straying sinners at the local church level. We are considering those acts by which the local church, in the name of Christ, authoritatively admonishes, suspends or even excommunicates one of its members, with a view to his spiritual restoration.

To approach this subject aright there are three things which we must bear in mind.

The first of these is the Scriptural doctrine of the final perseverance of the saints.

We do not believe that any elect, called, justified sinner, can ever be lost. At the same time we do not believe that there are any grounds for maintaining that a person can be a child of God unless he continues and perseveres in the faith until the end.

The second is that the *means* which God has provided to keep us persevering is the life and ministry of the local church.

The New Testament pattern is that converts are to be baptized and joined to a church. There they partake of the various means of grace, such as Biblical teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and times of prayer. Each one of these is necessary for spiritual perseverance. So also is church discipline, exercised for the erring. Like the other means of grace it is to be exercised in, and part and parcel of, local church life. It is not to be viewed as a last resort, but is to be as much an integral part of church life as the other means of grace. It is one aspect of the church's expression of its brotherly love.

Thirdly, we must ever bear in mind the headship of the Lord Jesus Christ over His church.

By what authority do church officers and the church itself exercise any of the means of grace which we have mentioned? **By His authority!** Each of them is to be received as from Him. The mouths which speak, and the hands which administer, are those of sinful men; nonetheless both word and deed are to be received as from **Him**. The same holds good in regard to church discipline.

It is not something we are free to omit, for it has been divinely instituted. Just like any other means of grace, when it is exercised scripturally, it is to be received as from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Head of the church. It is a discipline exercised in His Name.

When these considerations are kept in mind, they will ensure not only that this important work gets done, but that it gets **done with the right motives**. It will be done **out of love** to the erring member, and with the knowledge that the eternal salvation of a straying member is linked to his **spiritual restoration**.

Church discipline will be exercised as a means of grace, not of destruction; as an evidence of love, not of hate or fear. There will be the recognition that it is for 'cure of sinners' [Richard Baxter, 'Reformed Pastor']. It will be done in the knowledge that 'Church censures are necessary for the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren' [Westminster Confession]. With such love for the offender as the driving force, the work will be free from malice, revenge, spite or a spirit of superiority. 'The wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.'

(I). Having laid down the lines of approach to the subject, we must next consider what corrective discipline actually involves. The Scriptures reveal three ways of reclaiming wandering sheep, and we shall briefly examine each of them in turn.

1. ADMONITION The chief means of keeping heavenly pilgrims in the way, but the most neglected, is admonition. This is to be used by every church member when the issue is a private dispute; and by the spiritually mature in general, and the oversight in particular, when the issue is spiritual deterioration.

PRIVATE DISPUTES The passage of Scripture relevant at this point is Matthew 18:15-17, which deals with private disputes, although it teaches principles which have a wider bearing, as we shall see later. The teaching of this passage is that **if a brother offends against you, you are not to disclose his offence to anyone at all**, for that would be a sin against the law of love. Rather, **you are to go to see him privately. This is an obligation resting upon you.** You are as much bound to do this, as he is to receive your admonition. The purpose of your visit is to endeavour to convince him of his fault, and to restore mutual good relations.

We must thank God that things usually end there! But we should solemnly note that the clear implication of the passage is that if your offending brother will not hear you, it is not at all likely that he will hear others. How we need to be able to accept the private admonitions of brethren!

If your brother will not hear you, you are to return with one or two others, in order that all that is said may be witnessed according to the requirements of Scripture [Deuteronomy 19:15]. It is still **you** who is trying to win your brother. It is not a case of multiple pressure. Naturally those you have taken will do their part in seeking to gain your brother. But the main purpose of their presence is so that they can bear witness should the issue come to court – namely, the church.

If your brother will not hear you, and those whom you have brought with you, then, and only then, is the matter to be brought before the church. If he is proved to be in the wrong, and continues to be obstinate and impenitent, Christ directs the church to exclude him – to treat him as if he had never been part of it. How you will be reprimanded by onlookers if you do that! 'What!', will be the exclamation, 'you expelled him for **that?**!' But it is not so. You would gladly have restored him from his fault.

But he has treated the Body of Christ with contempt, and this is indicative of something deeper. It is, as Calvin put it, to hold God and His tribunal in derision. It is indicative of a hardening of the heart, and a root of bitterness springing up, which is a sign of 'failing of the grace of God.' The offending brother does not, **in practice**, acknowledge that he has to submit to the judgment of the church of Christ, or that he is part of it. So the church is to treat him accordingly. **It is to be noted that the constant aim has been to restore the person concerned.** But he refuses to be restored. He is guilty of contumacy, and thus is no longer to be considered a part of the Body.

SPIRITUAL DETERIORATION But we move on to consider the case of a member of the Body who has fallen into a fault, such as stealing or immorality, of which another member has knowledge. It is not a private dispute, so the passage in Matthew 18 is not applicable.

What, then, is the 'other' member to do? Is he to tackle the sinning member himself? We answer – no, not as a general rule, unless he is recognized as a man of obvious spiritual stature in the church [Galatians 6:1].

This is a task for the divinely-appointed oversight. They are bishops, or overseers, who have been appointed to rule. They are pastors, or under-shepherds, appointed to feed and to guard the sheep. They have been commissioned to watch over the souls of others, for which they must give account. They labour amongst the flock, and are over it in the Lord; and to admonish and *principal* warn is a part of their work [1 Thessalonians 5:12-13].

The task of elders is to take note of signs of spiritual deterioration, and, as good pastors, to speak plainly to those in whom they see them. They are to examine the charges made by others, to summon witnesses if the offence is not admitted, and to take appropriate action. The New Testament makes it clear that it is their principal task to keep pilgrims in the way. This involves plain speaking to those whose lives are not what they should be.

The New Testament does not call for the inauguration of 'witch-hunts', but it does insist that under-shepherds watch over their flocks. Admonition is the chief means of correction used by a good father, and elders are to be such fathers, who exercise the same authority, with the same spirit, in the church. They are explicitly forbidden to engage in the lording and bullying which passes for admonition in the world, and are exhorted to be examples to their flocks. Their oversight is to be willing and unconstrained; not for personal profit or as mere 'duty', but of a ready mind; and the clothing of humility is to be theirs as they exercise this responsibility. Such commands are intended to prevent admonition from being tyrannical.

How *can* an oversight fulfil its calling if there is no face-to-face correction in words? Sometimes a winsome word is needed, sometimes a stern rebuke. Some people need to be wooed, others warned. The Great Shepherd of the sheep did both, and under-shepherds must follow His example. False teachers most certainly need stern treatment, as Titus 1:13 and 3:10-11 make clear. But one who is weak in the faith will need different treatment, ***although it is still authoritative correction.*** To make this sort of distinction is basic to the pastoral office.

2. SUSPENSION Besides admonition, the Word of God reveals another measure designed to reclaim erring brethren, namely, suspension. The passage we need to consider is 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15. Here Paul is **talking about people whom the church still had definite grounds to consider as truly regenerate,** and thus brothers in the Lord [vs 6, 15]. But these people were guilty, not of one single lapse or fall, nor of spiritual deterioration which had gone on mostly unmarked, but of some manifest, overt, known irregularity. **Their lives obviously did not match the Gospel.** They had received clear apostolic instructions, but had refused to obey them [vs 7-8, 10-12, 14].

Paul instructed the church to withdraw from such persons [v 6]; not to have company with them, that they might be ashamed [v 14]; but not to count any of them as an enemy, but rather as a brother to be admonished [v 15]. The offender was to be treated as a Christian who needed to be restored. Social intercourse with him was to be suspended, that he might be ashamed. But when church members did have contact with him, they were to admonish him for his sins – precisely what they already had been commanded to do in 1 Thessalonians 5:14.

What does this mean in practice today? We cannot stop disobedient Christians coming to church, for most of our places of worship are registered as such, and so the doors must be open for all who wish to enter. We cannot turn them away unless they have committed a breach of the peace, or something similar. The New Testament church may have been able physically to withdraw from suspended members, but we cannot do so. How then can we put the principles of 2 Thessalonians 3 into practice today?

The very least we can do is this: we can remove such persons from all positions of responsibility in the local church, whatever they might be. We can suspend them from active participation in church ordinances, such as the Lord's Table, church-meetings, prayer-meetings, discussion and so forth. And we can end all normal social intercourse with them.

But our purpose in all such behaviour is that when the person involved sees the Body smarting and being pained, he may realize that he is responsible, that he is the cause, and may be ashamed of the way he is living [v 14]. Hence **the purpose is restorative**. Genuine spiritual concern moves the church, under the direction of its oversight, to act in such a way, in order that the offending brother may be repentant and restored to full fellowship as soon as possible.

But what about the person who, having been thus suspended, and regularly admonished by the members he meets, shows no change of heart? Week after week goes by, and the church hopes and prays for his repentance and restoration; but he remains unchanged. He stubbornly refuses to hear the church. Once more it is a case of contumacy. So here too the principles of Matthew 18:17 come into operation. Such an unrepentant man is to be excommunicated.

3. EXCOMMUNICATION We have seen that if either admonition or suspension, or both these measure of discipline, continue unheeded, the church of Christ is directed to exclude the offending person. We must again stress that this measure, like the others, is still designed to reclaim wandering sheep. **Its intention is restorative**. It is totally unlike the death penalty sanctioned by some in the past. The church uses 'keys', not a sword. It is a spiritual measure, and is designed to secure spiritual ends. It is best referred to as **expulsion**, but is usually known as **excommunication**. There are several references to it in the New Testament, but the most comprehensive is found in 1 Corinthians, chapter 5, to which we now turn.

Vs 1 In the church of Corinth a **known** sin was being perpetrated. It was proved beyond dispute. It had been going on for some time. It was a sin which was repulsive even in the world's eyes. It appears that a church member was guilty of an immoral relationship with his father's young second wife. Shame, great shame, must have been brought on the Gospel!

Vs 2 The church at Corinth was somewhat proud of itself and its achievements. It should, rather, have been grieving over this heinous offence. But it had not even crossed their minds that it was their duty to remove this offending person from the church.

Vs 3 Although Paul is at a distance, he cannot view the situation with complacent indifference. He tells them what he, in his own spirit, has done with the offender. He tells them this to make it clear to the church what needs to be done; what **must** be done.

Vs 4 'It is **you** who must do it', he says, 'you, the local church at Corinth, gathered in the name of the Head of the church, and with His power . . . I shall be with you in spirit . . .'

Vs 5 '. . . you, the local church, must deliver this unrepentant man to Satan, for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved at last . . .' [Note how solemn and grave excommunication is; and yet its purpose is **still restorative**, remedial, healing, saving].

Vs 6 'It is useless to engage in boasting, and to be so proud of yourself as a church. Cannot you see what will happen if no action is taken? A little leaven will leaven the whole lump.'

Vs 7 'The Jews purged out leaven from their houses before they sacrificed the Passover. But Christ our Passover has already been sacrificed for us, and yet the old leaven of sin in the community of God remains. Purge it out.'

Vs 8 let us keep continual festival, but let there be no trace of leaven among us. **Out** with malice and wickedness! It is to have no place in the Christian church. **In** with sincerity and truth!

Vs 9 'I am not telling you anything new. I have already told you not to keep company with fornicators.'

Vs 10 'This cannot apply as far as your living in this world is concerned, otherwise you would have to leave it!'

Vs 11 'But as for professing Christians, it is a different matter. If **they** live in fornication, you are to have nothing whatever to do with them. You are to end social intercourse with them to the point where you no longer even eat with them. And the same applies to professing Christians who commit parallel sins.'

Vs 12 'Those outside the communion of the church are beyond my jurisdiction, but it is **your** responsibility as a local church to discipline members who do not walk worthy of the Gospel that they claim to profess.'

Vs 13 'Outsiders are not subject to the church's discipline; God alone deals with them. But the wicked person in your midst must be put out of fellowship.' [The plural verb shows that Paul is asserting that this act is something in which everyone in the Body is to share].

Thus, briefly, runs the thread of 1 Corinthians 5. The chapter inculcates principles which shine out clearly.

The first is that **excommunication is the prerogative and duty of the gathered local** church, and not of the civic power, or any external authority. It is something inflicted by 'the many' [2 Corinthians 2.6]. Other New Testament references seem to indicate that an apostle could excommunicate. But this is not what happened here, for Paul tells the Corinthian church that it should have acted without any prompting from him. Although he gave the church the benefit of his own spiritual judgment, he did not come to conduct the excommunication, but commanded **them** to do it. Just as the local church is the admitting body, so also it is the expelling body. 'Excommunication without consent of the church is a mere nullity', said John Owen. It is an act of the gathered body.

Further, the chapter teaches the **precise meaning and import of excommunication**.* [Those who want to know more should read Jonathan Edwards' Works, volume 2, page 118, where there is an excellent sermon on 'The nature and end of excommunication'.]

Paul puts it in five different ways. It is a taking away from among the Body [2]; a delivering unto Satan [5]; a purging out [7]; an ending of social intercourse [11]; and a putting away from among themselves [13]. Most of these descriptions are readily understandable, except for the phrase 'to deliver such an one unto Satan . . .' in verse 5, which has caused much difficulty.

To understand this expression we must remember that all men and women are either under Satan, or in Christ. When we receive a person into church membership we are declaring that we have sufficient grounds; to believe his profession to be a Christian. We are aware that only 'the Lord knoweth them that are his'. Yet we declare that as far as man can ascertain, he has the marks of a regenerate man. We therefore welcome him into the fellowship of the church.

By that act we do not **make** him a believer, nor do we deliver him from Satan unto Christ. Rather, we **declare** that we have sufficient grounds to receive him as a brother in Christ, and do so. This does not necessarily mean that everyone in our church is regenerate. But we receive him because we hold that we have sufficient grounds for **believing** him to be regenerate.

Excommunication is obviously the exact opposite of this procedure. By it the church pronounces the offender to have sinned so grievously against the law of Christ as to forfeit the right to belong to the fellowship of the church. We declare that as far as we are able to judge the matter, he has ceased to show the marks of a regenerate man.

In the act of excommunication we do not *make* him an unbeliever, nor do we deliver him from Christ unto Satan. Rather, we ***declare*** that we do not have sufficient grounds to continue to receive him as a brother in Christ, and act accordingly. We no longer consider him to be one with us.

This does not necessarily mean that everyone expelled from the church is unregenerate, for, if it did, Paul's words in verse 5 would be meaningless. But we expel him because we do not hold that we have sufficient grounds for ***believing*** him to be regenerate.

Hence, excommunication is not a dogmatic declaration as to a person's eternal destiny. But it is an act of expulsion, and the most grave and solemn censure the church can exercise, done in direct obedience to the Word of God.

As before, its intention is in no way punitive, but restorative. The church hopes that such action will awaken the expelled person to the dreadful danger of his position, and prays that the excommunication will be the means to bring about his repentance, and his return to the Saviour, the Head of the church.

In 1 Corinthians 5:5 Paul is teaching that as long as the man concerned is linked to the church, he is under the restraints of its admonition and so forth. But when he is put out, it is as if he had never been part of it [Matthew 18:17]. The restraints of church fellowship cease to operate. Paul's hope is that the misery and disastrous effects of unrestrained sinning will cause the prodigal to come to his senses, and to return to his Father's house and be ultimately saved.

When, then, is excommunication to be effected? It is to be used when a person, having committed some gross sin which has been proved beyond dispute, remains impenitent [1 Corinthians 5]. As we have also seen, it is to be used when admonition and suspension fail to cause the erring member to renounce his iniquity. In addition, it is to be used when a person is found to be heretical in some fundamental point of revealed truth, and will not be corrected [1 Timothy 1:19-20, Titus 3:10].

All this is, in summary, the work of corrective discipline. It is not the work of the magistrate, but of the brotherhood. It cannot possibly be done unless each church member is aware of his responsibilities. The immediate need in our churches is that pastors should give clear teaching on this subject to their congregations, and then seek to implement the instructions of Scripture. To reverse the order would be to court disaster and to create divisions.

(II). We must now give attention to the manner or spirit in which this work of corrective discipline is to be done. Our attitude is all-important. Ours is a ministry of restoration and healing. We must not do the right thing in the wrong way.

First of all, we *must be clear as to the precise areas in which corrective discipline may operate.* The church is not an autonomous body making its own laws, but is the servant of Christ, called upon to apply ***His*** laws. This means that nothing can ever be the subject of admonition, suspension or excommunication unless it is indisputably contrary to the law of Christ as stated in the Scriptures.

Corrective discipline cannot therefore be used to infringe another Christian's liberty. Restrictions on Christian liberty are to be self-imposed. A man is to reflect on what his own conscience will allow, on the good of his brother, and on the effects of his actions on unbelievers. The most we can do is to bring such considerations before him.

The final issue lies with him, and not with us. His continuing enjoyment of his liberty cannot be the cause of any censure, even if it should be unspeakably distasteful to us personally, and contrary to local custom or church tradition.

We have no mandate to implement discipline unless what is being done is inherently sinful. We must avoid legalism at all costs. We must also avoid laxity. A believer may drink, but he may not become a drunkard. Should he do so, or should something parallel occur, we have Scriptural authority to act [1 Corinthians 5:11].

Nor can corrective discipline deal with inward sins, but only with those which are outward and manifest. The Word of God thunders against covetousness, pride, selfishness and envy. But unless these inward sins lead to some outward shame there is nothing that can be done about them, except by the formative discipline of Biblical preaching. It is only against outward sins which are clearly wrong beyond all argument that action can be taken. This includes all manifest transgressions of the Ten Commandments, such as idolatry; blasphemy; witchcraft; profanity; desecration of the Sabbath; dishonour to parents; murder; adultery; theft; and lying.

In addition, corrective discipline may move against errors in foundation doctrines which destroy the integrity of the Gospel [Galatians 1]. But we must be careful to realize that not all doctrinal differences threaten the integrity of the Gospel. Here there must be forbearance. It is useful for a local church to have a confession outlining what it considers to be the fundamentals of the faith. Those who cannot subscribe to this are not to be admitted to fellowship, and those who cease to subscribe are to be excluded.

Finally, there is contumacy, and all else that sets out to divide the Body by sowing seeds of dissension and disaffection. Men who engage in this are carnal men, who will not inherit the kingdom of heaven, and the local church is to act against them.

It is vital to keep within these limits, avoiding both legalism and laxity. If this is not done, corrective discipline becomes a means of oppression, a perpetrator of harm, and a stimulant to bigotry. It becomes an inquisition, and an undue meddling in private affairs. If it is confined to manifest sins which *beyond argument* are condemned by Scripture, its administration becomes 'plain and easy' [John Owen].

Secondly, we must be clear as to precisely what spirit the Scriptures do demand of us as we give ourselves to this work. We must underline again that the purpose and object of corrective discipline is the restoration of the offender. When this is forgotten we usurp God's prerogatives stated in Romans 12:19 and 14:4, and become ministers of vengeance, appointing ourselves as judges over others.

This work is to be done with meekness, 'considering thyself' [Galatians. 6:1]. We approach the restoration of another conscious of our own failures and inconsistencies, our own likelihood to fall into temptation, and our own continuing weakness. We are not beyond falling, and we are not to give the impression that we are. But neither are we to drift into laxity by letting the knowledge of our own weakness keep us from the work which Christ has commanded us to do!

As our object is edification, and not destruction [2 Corinthians 10:8], it is absolutely essential that we do not treat each erring brother alike. There is the greatest possible difference between the young believer and the hardened anarchist, between the doubter and the heretic. A harsh rebuke may be needed to help one, whereas even a mild rebuke to another may fill him with overmuch sorrow. 'And of some have compassion, making a difference' [Jude 22].

Even those who have committed identical sins cannot be treated in exactly the same way. We need to take into account our brother's temperament, his standing in grace, his family circumstances, his intellectual grasp, and countless other things.

Our purpose is to gain *this* brother! Different treatment to different people must not be regarded as 'favouritism' or 'partiality'. Our people must be taught this; and the integrity of office-bearers dealing with individual cases must be strenuously defended from such accusations.

No doubt we shall err a great deal as we seek to do this work. **Let us determine that we shall always err on the side of charity.** It is better to deal too kindly with one who needed a sterner rebuke, than to quench the smoking flax or to break the bruised reed.

And let us realize that all that we do is utterly fruitless without the blessing of God.

The work must therefore be done with **much prayer**. We must constantly be at the throne of grace, beseeching the Saviour of sinners that this means of grace, by His blessing, may be effectual to the restoration of the person involved. The sign of restoration is that the brother **hears** and repents. If he is under suspension, or has been excommunicated, he is to be immediately restored. Christ's Body must not be slower to receive the penitent than Christ Himself is!

The New Testament does not teach that any public confession or ceremony is to accompany or follow restoration. Public confessions of sin are undoubtedly hurtful, both morally and spiritually. 2 Corinthians 2:6-8 is the only passage bearing directly on the subject of restoration, and there the emphasis is that the church is to receive the penitent, and to confirm its love toward him – the love which all along has led the church to proceed with the practice of discipline.

Restoration is only a problem where censure has been done in the wrong spirit. No rules need be given for it, any more than a family needs rules as to how it should treat a wayward member who returns, or a father needs rules as to how he should receive a repentant son. Where there has been love for the offender all along, embarrassment or awkwardness when he is restored is quite out of place.

(III). What may a church which implements corrective discipline expect?

It would not be difficult to give specific examples of what follows, but we shall confine ourselves to general statements.

It may expect *misunderstanding*. Because most Christians are ignorant of the nature and intentions of church discipline, very many will assume that the church has engaged in something punitive. It will not occur to them that brotherly love has been the motive, and that restoration is the object. 'The ban is a great work of love; notwithstanding, it is looked upon by the foolish as an act of great hatred', wrote Menno Simons. Where sin is unchallenged, churches are sometimes commended by others for their love! But where there is love enough to warn an erring brother, and, if necessary, to discipline him, cruel misunderstandings may abound.

It may expect a *broken heart*. Some whom it trusts the most will bring it the most grief. Some whom it has valued supremely will be the very people it will have to excommunicate. Those who have sensitive spirits may find that the pain of seeking to restore erring members may permanently affect their health. In this work there is a price to pay, and a burden to bear. Even today there is such a thing as losing one's life for Christ's sake and the Gospel's.

It may expect *opposition*. Did not Jonathan Edwards suffer greatly for taking his stand over the Lord's Supper? We shall not fare differently. Those who refuse to hear the church as it seeks to correct are often those who afterwards seem to have only one resolve – to ruin the church; and to bring down its office-bearers in general, and its minister in particular. There are few who are able to withstand such opposition unmoved.

Despite all this, the church may expect *joy!* Who can tell the joy which is brought to a congregation when a disciplined member evidences godly sorrow, and is fully restored? Who can tell the joy brought to the oversight, which has prayed and worked hard and long for such a result? There is balm enough in the restoration of a single sinner to heal all the wounds inflicted in the course of exercising corrective discipline.

IV. Where, then, are we to get the will-power to ensure that this important work is done?

Concern for the glory of God should give it. God has designed the church on the pattern of His own character. It is to reflect His glory. It cannot do this if it is indifferent to sin, and if it is making no attempt to restore its sinning members.

Concern for the purity of the church should give it. Do we really want to see the visible Body of Christ filled with heresy, hatred, immorality, and all kinds of wickedness?

Concern for the good of men's souls should give it. To separate an offending church member from the warmth and light of church fellowship is a grievous thing, a bitter medicine given in the hope that renewed spiritual health will result from its use. The action of the church is the outcome of love.

These three concerns should give us the necessary will-power. The difficulty is that we are not always concerned in depth. Consequently the work does not get started, or is done only intermittently. The only true starting-place is a recovery of the fear of God, and of our future accountability. 'Every one of us shall give account of himself to God' [Romans 14:12],

but ministers will have to give a particular account as to ***how they have watched for their people's souls!*** [Hebrews 13:17].

We need constantly to call to mind that our Lord requires that we do this work, whether we are praised or opposed. Nothing less can give us sufficient impetus to carry the work through. Nothing else will generate the necessary moral fibre, resolution and determination.

We need to labour that we may be accepted of *Him!*

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