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Church Discipline, Part 3

Today, even in the church (much less our culture), church discipline is represented as the hypocritical actions of a religiously arrogant people. Consider the *Scarlet Letter* written in 1850 by Nathaniel Hawthorn.

Hawthorn set the story in 17th century Boston, named Hester Prynne, who committed adultery with her pastor, Arthur Dimmesdale (although the identity of “her lover” is not revealed until the very end of the book). The novel details the awful treatment that the woman receives as

well as the relentless pursuit of her offended husband in his quest to discover his wife's unknown lover. The husband clearly corresponds to the self-righteous Christian who does not see his own sin, but only that of others. Early on he suspects the pastor and for seven years torments him ruthlessly — even moving in with him! The story climaxes when the ailing pastor took his place on the very platform where Hester was shamed seven years earlier. Here he revealed his identity as the father of Hester's child. By the end of the story, the reader cannot but help to cheer for the two unfortunate "sinners" whose love was thwarted by Hester's self-righteous husband. In fact, Pastor Dimmesdale's parting words included a plea for the forgiveness of the sins of *Hester's husband!* Truly, the villain in this story is Hester's arrogant, self-righteous husband who in the name of God lived for his own vengeance and vindication!

Now if that is what church discipline is about, I want nothing of it! Yet we have already seen that this most certainly is NOT what church discipline is about.

The foundation upon which this biblical calling rests is the kingdom of God. There is currently a warfare between the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Satan. And secondly, upon the nature, purpose, and function of the Keys of the Kingdom- which is the authority that God gives to the leadership of a church in their pastoral care of the body.

We are going to turn our attention to the purpose of Church Discipline. While God has ordained this pastoral tool, the question is why? What is God's intent behind this difficult calling? The Bible gives us at least six reasons for this tool. So, why ought we discipline an unrepentant brother or sister?

Discipline preserves the honor of God. Nehemiah 9 contains the prayer of the spiritual leaders of Israel at the time,

Nehemiah 9:32b-34. "Do not let all the hardship seem insignificant before Thee, which has come upon us, our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers, and on all Thy people, from the days of the kings of Assyria to this day. However, Thou art just in all that has come upon us; for Thou hast dealt faithfully, but we have acted wickedly. For our kings, our leaders, our priests, and our fathers have not kept Thy law or paid attention to Thy commandments and Thine admonitions with which Thou hast admonished them."

Then there is Daniel's prayer which he offered to God seventy years after the exile.

Daniel 9:4-7a, "And I prayed to the Lord my God and confessed and said, 'Alas, O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments, we have sinned, committed iniquity, acted wickedly, and rebelled, even turning aside from Thy commandments and ordinances. Moreover, we have not listened to Thy servants the prophets, who spoke in Thy name to our kings, our princes, our fathers, and all the people of the land. Righteousness belongs to Thee, O Lord, but to us open shame, as it is this day...'"

Why throughout the Bible are God's people so concerned to confess their sin *publicly*? Because

when God disciplines His people for their sin, the genuine child of God wants the world to know that God is NOT unjust in the ill-treatment. IT IS MAN WHO IS TO BLAME. That is why Joshua exhorted Achan when Achan was found out to be guilty of sin.

Joshua 7:19, "Then Joshua said to Achan, 'My son, I implore you, give glory to the Lord, the God of Israel, and give praise to Him; and tell me now what you have done. Do not hide it from me.'"

Truly, when God deigns to deliver one of His children over to Satan for "for the destruction of his flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (1 Corinthians 5:5b), and we keep quiet, we risk dishonoring the Lord when the world sees God's treatment of what *appears* to be a child of God in good standing. In this context we see that church discipline preserves the honor of God!

Notice secondly, church discipline guards the reputation of the gospel.

2 Corinthians 6:1, 3, "And working together *with Him*, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain... giving no cause for offense in anything, in order that the ministry be not discredited."

Family of God we must understand that the gospel is proclaimed NOT only by what we say, BUT also by what we do! If we lead an ungodly and unprincipled life, we in essence preach a message to the world, "*This is what the Gospel promotes!*" Considering this I love how Richard Baxter put it:

As long as men have eyes as well as ears, they will think they see your meaning as well as hear it; and they are apter to believe their sight than their hearing, as being the more perfect sense of the two. All that a minister doth, is a kind of preaching; and if you live a covetous or a careless life, you preach these sins to your people by your practice. If you drink, or game, or trifle away your time in vain discourse, they take it as if you said to them, 'Neighbours, this is the life you should all live; on this course you may venture without any danger.' If you are ungodly, and teach not your families the fear of God, or contradict the sins of the company you are in, nor turn the stream of their vain talking, nor deal with them plainly about their salvation, they will take it as if you preached to them that such things are needless, and that they may boldly do so as well as you. (Baxter, 1999, pp. 84-85)

Galatians 2:17, "But if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have also been found sinners, is Christ then a minister of sin? May it never be!"

Paul here nailed it on the head. When in Christ we live in unrepentant sin, the world has a right to ask these questions:

- Is Christ a minister of this sin?
- Is this what Christianity does in the life of the religious?

- Does Christ give him free access to sin?

Yet that is the message that is proclaimed when we allow one of our own to live in sin. When this occurs, in the words of Romans 2:24b, "...the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

Truly, another important role church discipline plays in the outworking of the Kingdom of God is that it guards the reputation of the gospel. Accordingly, you must see that there is no option when it comes to unrepentant sin. We must address it!

Notice a third reason for church discipline: It preserves the effectiveness of a church body.

2 Timothy 2:21, "Therefore, if a man cleanses himself from these *things*, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work."

There is no question in Scripture; the fruit of a person or a church's ministry comes directly from God (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:6-7). That is why sin is such a burden when it comes to a covenant community. Where sin is tolerated ministry is hindered! We see it in Joshua. God explained to Joshua why Israel did NOT succeed in their attempt to fulfill the calling of God.

Joshua 7:11-12, "Israel has sinned, and they have also transgressed My covenant which I commanded them. And they have even taken some of the things under the ban and have both stolen and deceived. Moreover, they have also put *them* among their own things. Therefore the sons of Israel cannot stand before their enemies; they turn *their* backs before their enemies, for they have become accursed. I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy the things under the ban from your midst"

I love how Robert Murray McCheyne put it:

How diligently the cavalry officer keeps his sabre clean and sharp; every stain he rubs off with the greatest care. Remember you are God's sword, His instrument- I trust, a chosen vessel unto Him to bear His name. In great measure, according to the purity and perfection of the instrument, will be the success. It is not great talents God blesses so much as likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God. (Spurgeon, 2008, p. 8)

After mentioning many of the blessings which accompany citizenship in the Kingdom of God, Jeremiah said this:

Jeremiah 5:25-26, "Your iniquities have turned these away, and your sins have withheld good from you. For wicked men are found among My people..."

Don't miss it! A church body that is content to endure sin in each other's lives, is a church body which God will NOT bless! To the church in Thyatira, God said this:

Revelations 2:20-23, “But I have *this* against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray, so that they commit *acts of* immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. And I gave her time to repent; and she does not want to repent of her immorality. Behold, I will cast her upon a bed *of sickness*, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds. And I will kill her children with pestilence; and all the churches will know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts; and I will give to each one of you according to your deeds.”

We do NOT take this passage personally or individually (unless of course we are under discipline). Yet we must take it corporately. The church that endures sin is the church that will NOT know the blessings of the Lord. And ironically, in John’s day this was understood by “all the churches”! And so forget what things we’d like to see God do through us! Never mind our passion for the lost or our hunger to make Christ known!

If we be NOT for God against our sin, then we cannot expect God to bless our ministry! That brings us to a fourth reason for church discipline, it is the means by which the Lord preserves His people.

Galatians 6:1a, “Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness...”

Let us begin by recognizing that this is NOT a suggestion, BUT a command. Endeavoring to “restore such a one” is the obligation that comes with membership in the Kingdom of God! Yet how specifically are we to do this? Christ gives us the answer in Matthew 18 (which we’ll consider next time). However for now, notice what Paul wrote here, “...[our discipline is to be] in a spirit of gentleness.”

The word “gentleness” is πραΰτης (*prautēs*) from which we get the word “meekness.” It refers to having a strength that is completely under control. It is how Isaiah described the ministry of the Christ, “A bruised reed He will not break, and a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish...” (Isaiah 42:3a)!

The idea here is that we apply as much encouragement/exhortation that is needed to bring about biblical change. Regardless, from this I want you to see a very important truth when it comes to the purity and fidelity of the body of Christ. The Lord brings it about through the pastoral love and devotion of the people of God toward one another.

Hebrews 3:12-13, “Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is *still* called ‘Today,’ lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”-

As the song goes, we really do need each other! In fact, to fail in this regard is to be guilty of forsaking the body of Christ. The Hebrew writer describing what this looks like wrote this:

Hebrews 10:24-25, "...let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, // not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near."

It is true that when the people of God miss a formal gathering of God's people they are "forsaking" the body of Christ. Yet and more fundamentally, if you show up and fail to engage another individual when it comes to their walk or fail to "encourage one another," you are just as guilty of forsaking the body as those not in attendance! In this regard let me exhort you. Today the church is filled with consumers who attend or chose not to attend church gatherings based on what's in it for them. This is such an abuse of the ministry. The biblical standard and pattern is to attend with the sole purpose of encouraging another in Christ. Outside of worship, that is the purpose of every gathering of the church!

Yet today we view things like Sunday School, Sunday afternoon fellowships, congregational meals, Bible studies, mission trips, prayer meetings through the lens of entertainment or self-help. No wonder why so many are struggling in the church today! We've lost our vision for ministry! Understand, a fourth reason for church discipline, it is the means by which the Lord preserves His people!

Notice a fifth reason for this tool is that it sobers the body unto vigilance in their walk. In the context of an elder who has refused to give up their sin, Paul instructed Timothy this way;

1 Timothy 5:20, "Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also may be fearful *of* sinning."

Did you get that? Church discipline has the net effect of sobering those in the body of Christ! In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul exhorted the Corinthian church to discipline one its own. Notice the impact this discipline had on the rest of the body:

2 Corinthians 7:11a, "For behold what earnestness this very thing, this godly sorrow, has produced in you: what vindication of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what avenging of wrong!"

A little leaven most certainly can leaven the whole lump of dough (Galatians 5:9)! Yet when sin is NOT endured in the body, the result is a synergistic passion on the part of the church when it comes to holiness, love, and service! It is as John Bunyan taught in the *Pilgrim's Progress*. Toward the end of Christian's pilgrimage, that time when he was able to get some rest at the Delectable Mountains, we read this passage:

Then I saw in my dream, that in the morning the shepherds called up Christian and Hopeful to walk with them upon the mountains. So they went forth with them, and walked a while,

having a pleasant prospect on every side. Then said the shepherds one to another, 'Shall we show these pilgrims some wonders?' So when they had concluded to do it, they had them first to the top of a hill called Error, which was very steep on the farthest side, and bid them look down to the bottom. So Christian and Hopeful looked down, and saw at the bottom several men dashed all to pieces by a fall that they had had from the top. Then said Christian, 'What meaneth this?' The shepherds answered, 'Have you not heard of them that were made to err, by hearkening to Hymenius and Philetus, as concerning the faith of the resurrection of the body?' They answered, 'Yes.' Then said the shepherds, 'Those that you see lie dashed in pieces at the bottom of this mountain are they; and they have continued to this day unburied, as you see, for an example to others to take heed how they clamber too high, or how they come too near the brink of this mountain.' (Bunyan, 1989, p. 137)

And so we see another purpose for discipline in the body of Christ. It is given to sober the people of God- in the words of Timothy, "...so that the rest also may be fearful of sinning." That is the effect that church discipline has on the body of Christ.

In contrast, what is the tendency when sin is NOT addressed? The tendency is to endure sin!

Ecclesiastes 8:11, "Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil."

Psalm 12:8, "The wicked strut about on every side, when vileness is exalted among the sons of men."

Truly, church discipline is an important tool in the body of Christ, for it sobers us unto diligence and fervency in our walk!

References

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