

THE FORGOTTEN MARK

The Biblical Concept of Church Discipline

by Rev. Randy Oliver

INTRODUCTION

Historically, Reformed believers have taught that there are three marks of a true church: faithful preaching of the Word, faithful administration of the sacraments, and the faithful exercise of discipline. Although the church struggles to maintain integrity in the practice of all of its marks, it is the last mark — discipline — where the church most often finds itself deficient.

Discipline is a neglected practice in many churches today. The permissive attitude of the world toward sin has even infiltrated Christian homes. What has been the result of such permissiveness? Inside and outside the church, men do “that which is right in their own eyes” (Judg. 17:6). Rather than condone or exercise such permissiveness, however, Christians must recognize that the Westminster Divines correctly concluded the Bible’s teaching on this matter: “The Lord Jesus, as King of his Church, hath therein appointed a government, in the hands of Church officers” (WCF 30.1).

The members of a local New Testament church often refer to themselves as “the church family.” Now, the more self-discipline there is in a home, church, or society, the less need there is to enforce institutional discipline. Conversely, as confusion and disaster may result from lack of discipline in a home, so tragedy may come to a church which has no discipline. Havoc may also result from the mishandling of disciplinary matters, or from improper attitudes by those in authority who administer the chastening. Therefore, we need to consider the proper handling of church discipline and the occasions for its use.

THE WHAT OF DISCIPLINE

As the Book of Church of the Presbyterian Church in America rightly states, “discipline is the exercise of authority given to the Church by the Lord Jesus Christ to instruct and guide its members and to promote its purity and welfare” (PCA BCO 27-1).¹

¹I recognize that the Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America is a document subscribed to by a fairly small denomination. However, I believe in the case of church discipline that it has rightly understood the Bible’s teaching.

This essential mark of the church can be understood both proactively (as the church exercises its regular care and control over its members) and reactively (as the church judicially responds to error).

“The terms ‘disciple’ and ‘discipline’ obviously have a common Latin source. The source is a word family that has to do with education. Discipline is inextricably linked to education.”² Discipline is a means of education in the ways of God. As God is a God of righteousness, order and peace, his church must reflect these characteristics. Discipline is the means by which God’s people are trained in godliness: “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age” (Tit. 2:11-12).

THE WHY OF DISCIPLINE

Why do we exercise discipline? We do it because God commands we do it! The sovereign Creator and Sustainer of the Universe has called us into covenant relationship with him. As God will not and cannot tolerate sin or rebellion in his presence, those who would be in covenant with him must seek to reflect his holiness. This reflection does not occur without struggle: the residue of sin yet remains in us, and we often fall far short of God’s righteous standard. However, we are not left without remedy when we stumble and fall. Discipline is a gift that both sustains us in righteousness, and restores us when our actions and attitudes are not righteous.

Why do we exercise discipline? We do it that God may be glorified. Not only is he glorified through our joyful obedience, but as his church reflects his nature, his glory is more clearly seen in the world.

Why do we exercise discipline? We do it so that the purity of his church may be maintained: “Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14). The Corinthian church was to expel a man before his malice and wickedness should further infect the whole body of believers and prevent God’s blessing (1 Cor. 5:8-13). In Joshua 7, we see God’s attitude toward sin in general and toward Achan’s sin in particular: the entire nation of Israel suffered the consequences of undisciplined sin.

Moreover, it represents the broader Reformed tradition with which it agrees on this subject.

²Adams, Jay, *Handbook of Church Discipline* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 13.

Why do we exercise discipline? We do it so that those who fall into sin might be restored to right relationship with God and his church: “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently” (Gal. 6:1).

Why do we exercise discipline? We do it so that others in the church may be restrained from falling into the same sin of one undergoing judicial discipline: “Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning” (1 Tim. 5:20).

THE WHO OF DISCIPLINE

Every Christian is subject to the discipline of the church: “All baptized persons, being members of the church are subject to its discipline and entitled to the benefits thereof” (PCA BCO 27-2). It is the responsibility of the elders of the church to instruct its members in discipline, and to carry out judicial discipline should the occasion arise (see PCA BCO 27-4).

THE HOW OF DISCIPLINE

There are some preliminary principles that must be acknowledged before discipline is exercised. First, spirituality, humility, and meekness are to characterize those who deal with a fallen brother (Gal. 6:1). We must remember that no matter how biblical its objectives, discipline administered in the wrong spirit is ineffective and undesirable. Never undertake hypocritically to deal with the sin of another until you have first dealt with your own: “You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye” (Matt. 7:5). Proceeding with discipline in this manner will keep it from being too harsh.

Second, take a firm, uncompromising stand against sin. God is holy. He cannot tolerate sin, and neither should his church! Jesus sternly rebuked sin when he drove the money-changers from the temple (Mark 11:12-16). Similarly, Paul commands that elders and teachers be rebuked before all, that they may be sound in the faith and that others may fear (1 Tim. 5:20; Tit. 1:13).

Third, love the brethren who are in sin. Discipline should not be exercised vindictively, but with the intent that the erring brother or sister may be restored.

Fourth, forgive those who repent and confess their sins: “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him” (Luke 17:3-4). Paul warned the Corinthians that harboring an unforgiving spirit would give Satan the advantage over them (2 Cor. 2:7-11). If we do not forgive, neither may we expect to be forgiven (Matt. 6:12).

An often-forgotten aspect of discipline is the self-discipline which arises from attending to the means of grace (e.g. the preaching of the word and the sacraments). Paul instructed the Galatians that “the fruit of the Spirit is ... self control” (Gal. 5:22-23). It is the responsibility of the elders to instruct the congregation in the Word of God on a regular basis, and to see to it that the sacraments are exercised in such a way that the participants understand their full import. It is the responsibility of the Christian to heed the word of God (Ps. 119:11), and to remember the salvific significance of the sacrament (1 Cor. 11:28-29) as a means by which his personal discipline may be maintained.

Matthew 18:15-19 provides us with the method by which discipline is exercised when sin has been committed. Verse 15 says, “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.” At this level, discipline is carried out informally. The one aware of the offense approaches the offender to challenge and convict him to repent of his sin. At this level, privacy is to be maintained at all costs. “When the offense is between two persons, and between them alone, no others should be brought into the picture if it is possible to bring about reconciliation without them.”³ Almost all personal disagreements between church members can be settled if they are dealt with in light of this teaching.

The goal of such an action is reconciliation of the offender and the removal of the offense. However, should the offending brother refuse to reconcile, the brother should be approached again. This time, the person attempting to restore the brother should bring with him one or two others (Matt. 18:16). Perhaps one of these persons should be an elder of the church. Such a step is necessary not only because the additional people may have a greater persuasive force over the erring brother, but to ensure additional witnesses should the situation necessitate more formal action. We must avoid the urge to trounce upon the offender or rush to judgment. However, if it becomes apparent that the offending brother refuses to repent of his sin, the ones attempting to restore him must “tell it to the church” (Matt. 18:17). This does not mean that those attempting to deal with the offender are to announce his sin to the congregation, but that the offender is to be brought before the elders of the church. It is at this point that discipline ceases to be informal, and becomes an official action of the church. There are cases of notorious sin (as the man involved in incest in 1 Cor. 5) where discipline will have to begin at this level.

It may be necessary, particularly if the one accused of sin maintains his innocence, to conduct an investigation or trial to determine the facts of the situation. The results of this fact finding, and the response of the one accused, will determine the type of censure to be inflicted on the offender. Should the offender be found guilty as accused and repent of his sin, he is to be admonished: “Admonition is the formal

³Adams, 52.

reproof of an offender by a church court, warning him of his guilt and danger, and exhorting him to be more circumspect and watchful in the future” (BCO 30-2). Should a person persist in his sin, it may be necessary to suspend that person from the sacraments (BCO 30-3). As the Book of Church Order teaches, such suspension is to be of indefinite duration (cf. 1 Cor. 5). The Bible does not teach or provide an example of suspension from the sacraments for a definite period of time. If the offender is an officer of the church (elder or deacon), it may also be necessary to suspend the erring officer from his office (cf. 1 Tim. 3; Tit. 1). The Reformed tradition has suggested that this suspension may be either definite or indefinite, depending on the nature of the offense (e.g. BCO 30-3).

The final, and more serious, censure that can be inflicted by the elders is excommunication. If a person has reached this step, he has proven himself “incorrigible and contumacious” (BCO 30-4). As with the situation of the incestuous man in the church of Corinth (1 Cor. 5), the one excommunicated is judicially removed from the fellowship, as well as from the divine protection enjoyed by those in covenant fellowship with God, and he is rendered subject to the torments of the devil: “Hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord” (1 Cor. 5:5). This action must be accompanied with much prayer and tears. As one of the goals of discipline is that others in the body may be warned (1 Tim. 5:20), the congregation should be informed of the action of the elders. As another of the goals of discipline is that the offender may be reclaimed and restored (1 Cor. 5:5), the congregation should be informed of only that which is necessary in order that they may be able to act accordingly should they encounter the excommunicated person (e.g. limiting conversation to exhortations to repent), and in order that they may forgive and receive him more readily when and if he repents and is restored to the church.

CONCLUSION

Those churches that neglect “the forgotten mark” do so to their peril. Such neglect is indicative of capitulation to the spirit of this age. It also might indicate that the church’s exercise of the other marks of the church (e.g. faithful preaching of the Word, and faithful administration of the sacraments) should be called into question. The marks of the church are interrelated “gifts,” given by God to his people to help us achieve our chief end, namely “to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever” (WSC 1). In order for any of the marks to be faithfully exercised, the other two marks must likewise be faithfully exercised. It is by the obedient exhibition and exercise of these marks that God is glorified. We must then acknowledge, in conclusion, that if God is to be glorified, his Word must be proclaimed, his sacraments must be administered, and his discipline must be maintained.