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Church Discipline, Part 4

The Bible is replete with language which testifies to the existence both of the Kingdom of God and of the Kingdom of Satan. We read:

- The Kingdom of God/heaven, Matthew 4:17.
- The throne of God, Matthew 5:34; Revelation 7:15.
- The armies of God, Isaiah 1:24.
- The authority of God to rule, Psalm 146:10.
- Captains, Joshua 5:14-15.
- Soldiers, Philippians 2:25; 2 Timothy 2:3-4.
- Warfare, 2 Corinthians 10:3-6.
- Weapons, 2 Corinthians 10:3-6.
- Armor, Ephesians 6:13-20.
- Fiery missiles of the evil one, Ephesians 6:16.

- Angelic clashes with demons, Daniel 10:12-13.
- Military schemes/strategies, Ephesians 6:11.
- A clash between the children of God and the servants of Satan, Revelation 16:13-14.

Ephesians 6:12, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.”

2 Corinthians 10:3, “For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses.”

Truly, there is a war that is raging, a war whose focus and prize not only is the glory, honor, and authority of God but also the souls of men. Now there are times when the kingdom of Satan wins a decisive victory and a member of a body of Christ defects. In this case, what is our responsibility toward the one who has defected? How do we go about reclaiming that one?

This brings us to the issue of the practice of church discipline as we seek to answer these questions.

The Practice of Discipline

It may surprise you, but what we call “formal church discipline” is but one of FIVE different types of discipline referenced in the Bible. For example, in Scripture we read of the discipline of prevention.

The Discipline of Prevention

2 Timothy 3:16-17, “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”

This text describes the four-fold working of the word of God in the life of the believer, a working that clearly involves discipline. God’s word is given for...

- Teaching: which is nothing less than instruction on how to think, live, and believe.
- Reproof: this is discipline. When a child of God is veering from the truth- whether in thought or practice- God’s word issues forth a rebuke in order to convict them of their misbehavior or false doctrine.

Richard Trench, a noted nineteenth century British theologian said this:

[This word refers to rebuking] another with such effectual wielding of the victorious arm of the truth, as to bring him not always to a confession, yet at least to a conviction of his sin.

(MacArthur, 1995, p. 158)

- Correction: which references the restoration of the one who was reproved.
- Training in Righteousness: the word used for “training” is the same word used in the rearing of a child. It therefore is broad in its spectrum but has as its telos the growth and maturation of the individual.

From this passage we conclude that one of the functions of the word of God is discipline. That is why we profess that the preaching of the word of God is a means by which God disciplines His people. How could it be anything less? Right now you all are sitting under the discipline of God.

The Discipline of Tempering

Hebrews 11:17, “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac...”

The word used here for “testing” is the same word translated elsewhere in the Bible as “tempting.” Yet this ought not to confuse us. The word in the Greek (*peirazō*) simply refers to a trial. Now, when Satan brings a person through a “trial” it is always for their downfall, and so the word is translated as “tempt” or “tempting.” This is something God will never do to a child of God.

James 1:13, “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone.”

Any and every trial that God brings to an individual is for their benefit, never their harm. Thus, when the same word is used of God, we translate the word as “testing” or “tempering” as in steel being put in the fire!

1 Peter 1:6-7, “In this you greatly rejoice [the 2nd Coming], even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith, *being* more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire [indeed, God tests us/tries us/temper us], may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” (cf. also 1 Peter 4:12).

Truly, another form of discipline that God gives us are the trials and difficulties of life by which He tempers our faith.

The Discipline of Consequence

The discipline of consequence occurs when a child of God will not give up their sin.

Proverbs 5:22, “His own iniquities will capture the wicked [again, the word for ‘wicked’ here references NOT the unbeliever, BUT the covenant member who will not give up their sin, cf. Ezekiel 33], and he will be held with the cords of his sin.”

How does God do this? The Lord withholds His preserving grace and so allows the child of God to suffer more greatly under the consequences of his sin! Again, that which only makes sin enjoyable on this side of the grave (cf. Hebrews 11:25) is God's preventative grace. Those in hell do not enjoy their sin for there they reap the full consequences of their sin all the time! Sin is pleasurable here only because God withholds the consequences.

Yet in the case of rebellion, the Lord at times will discipline His child by removing His protective grace and allowing them a fuller taste of the wages of their sin in the here and now. That is what is behind God's exhortation in Hosea when he speaks of His unrepentant people.

Hosea 2:6-7, "Therefore, behold, I will hedge up her way with thorns, and I will build a wall against her so that she cannot find her paths. And she will pursue her lovers, but she will not overtake them; and she will seek them, but will not find *them*. Then she will say, 'I will go back to my first husband, for it was better for me then than now!'"

This passage reminds us of the struggle the prodigal had. In his flight from his father, his path was made so difficult that he chose to return to his father. That is what God was doing in Hosea.

The Discipline of Deliverance

This brings us to the discipline of deliverance, also known as formal church discipline. Yet it should be obvious that this is but a small part of the discipline of the Lord.

The Discipline of Death

Some of the members of the church in Corinth had rebelled so grievously against God that He deigned to take them.

1 Corinthians 11:29-30, "For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself, if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep."

Now again, if today we are living in heaven/paradise/the Promised Land, then we might fault God in His treatment of the believer here. Yet if this state is more akin to the wilderness wanderings of Israel, which it is, then we do not fault God for even here He is loving! In advanced cases of rebellion, the Lord at times will choose to take the unfruitful Christian home.

Yet, you say, "That doesn't sound very bad." Such would be our estimation IF the goal in life is simply to get to heaven. BUT if the goal in life is to glorify God, then from the perspective of eternity, this disciplined individual has suffered great loss (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:14-15)!

With this we see the five-fold expression of discipline on this side of the grave. From this we can conclude that all of us in Christ are at all times under the disciplining hand of the Lord. And again

this is not bad news:

Hebrews 12:7: "It is for [or on account of] discipline that you endure..."

Again, is not our greatest desire someday to be in the New Heavens and Earth serving the Lord in glory? Would you not therefore say, "Whatever it takes to get me there, Lord, so do it"?

Brothers and sisters, understand that it is God's plan for each of us to be placed in the crucible of discipline, at least by His word and providences- that our faith might be tempered such that we might live unto the "praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:7b).

Soil of Discipline

With this consider the twofold soil of discipline. The first is redemption.

1 Corinthians 15:22, "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive"

When mankind fell, they went from being co-rulers with God to being the subjects of Satan whom he ruthlessly rules and dominates. Redemption reverses this so that the saved individual once again becomes the child of the living God...

Galatians 4:4-5, "But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons."

This is glorious! In Christ, we have been bought back, redeemed, and now enjoy the status of being sons/daughters of the living God. Now because of this important status, God is well-concerned with our purity, growth, and well-being as individuals and as a people. He is not going to lose one of us.

Hebrews 12:7, "...God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom *his* father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons..."

This is a very important point to keep in mind. The reason we are disciplined is NOT because God is in a bad mood or having a bad day. RATHER we are disciplined because we have become His children; He loves us! The primary tool God, as our Father, uses to discipline the child of God is His word.

Functioning Covenant Community

Now this brings us to a second important prerequisite to God's discipline, a functioning covenant community.

Genesis 12:1-2, "Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you; and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing.'"

One of the hall-marks of the redemption we have received in Christ is that we have been saved unto the body of Christ. While our redemption is individual, salvation is not! In Christ, we have become members of a community. Paul wrote, speaking of the church community this way:

1 Corinthians 12:26-27, "And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if *one* member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it."

In Christ we have become the family of God, a community of believers joined together by the grace of God. Because this is true Scripture exhorts us this way:

Galatians 6:2, "Bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ."

The word for "bear" is a building term used of a buttress or support that is erected to help support a roof or an arch. We are called to play a part in each other's lives. In a church body, we are to come alongside each other and help one another bear the burdens which each one faces. How is this done?

Hebrews 10:24-25, "And 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."

This is the typical verse used to convince someone that it is God's will for them to attend church. And while this verse does support that, it says much more. If you gather with the people of God on the Lord's Day and yet do not "stimulate one another to love and good deeds," you have forsaken the body. God saved you that He might use you to encourage, build up, strengthen, and so support the family of God as they work out their salvation (cf. Ephesians 4:16). A key way that this is done is shown to us in Paul's exhortation to the people of God at Ephesus when he told Timothy this:

1 Timothy 4:6, "In pointing out these things to the brethren [the exhortation He just gave], you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, *constantly* nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following."

We know that fellowship is not a means of grace. However, the substance of our fellowship is the word of God. Now in the providence of God, the Lord places us under the discipline of these things:

- The teaching of the word of God.
- Bitter providences.
- Situations where His grace is withheld that we might reap the consequences of our sin.

What are we to do as a result? Bear one another's burdens! How? Through the fellowship and instruction of the word of God!

This is what a healthy covenant community does! It is in this environment that we are able to "bear one another's burdens!" Yet sadly, this is so foreign today! In fact on the whole, the church in many, many places has become dysfunctional NOT because there is strife BUT because our ecclesiology has gotten so bad that most view the church as

1. A voluntary club,
2. A place that enables people to worship God, or
3. A place you go to hear an inspiring message.

God designed the church to be a fellowship (which involves the best things associated with a family and a community)!

- Things like love, commitment, and care are what we are to do as a body! It is this that must permeate every gathering, fellowship meal, service, bible study, etc.
- Furthermore, the basis and ground of the fellowship we enjoy must be nothing less than the word of God.

That is why it is so important for you to be here, in church, on Sunday listening to the word of God as it is taught both from the pulpit and in study hour. It is through these means you are able to participate in the corporate dialogue of the body of Christ and are in a position to bear each other's burdens.

We tend to think that the formal process of church discipline as outlined in Matthew 18 is the beginning of church discipline. It is not! In the case where we engage in the formal steps, it is the tail end of a process which actually began the moment a person enters into the body of Christ. In fact the more seriously we sit under the discipline of the word of God, the more we labor together to live/think/believe according to the word, the less will be the need for the formal steps of Matthew 18!

Formal Church Discipline, the Discipline of Deliverance

With this, we come to the formal process of church discipline, the discipline of deliverance.

Matthew 18:15-17, "And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen *to you*, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer."

This is not a complicated process though it is specific, containing three steps. The first step is the love of encouragement.

Matthew 18:15, "And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother."

Notice a "lapse" which is the Latin word for "a fall" in a brother or sister's relationship with God. Maybe you see it in...

- The way they have begun to talk.
- The company they have been keeping.
- Their dress.
- Their relationship w/ parent or spouse.

Now the command is not to go to your neighbor and ask if they saw what you saw, or even one of the elders in the church and tell on them. Rather it is to go to the one for whom you are concerned and talk to them and so find out what is going on. If the conversation ends at an impasse where the brother or sister says this; "I don't care what you think or say. I'm going to do what I'm going to do! I'm not going to give up my sin." Then you go to step two.

The second step is the love of group encouragement.

Matthew 18:16, "But if he does not listen *to you*, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed."

Here you invite a brother or sister to join you in another attempt at talking with the struggling Christian. If still they won't listen to you, and they persist in their path of destruction, you go to step three.

By way of note it should be stressed that each of these "steps" are not necessarily one time conversations. Rather, they reflect a dialogue between us and the one who is lapsing. This is not a love check list! Rather the text presupposes that a relationship exists, which involves time, concern, care, and a willingness to get involved. Now if in the estimation of those involved the lapsing brother or sister simply will not give up their sin, then the discipline moves to step three.

Step three is the love of formal pastoral care.

Matthew 18:17, "And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer."

Here the elders get involved and begin a more formal process of pastoral care. If the person continues in their unrepentance, a trial eventually will take place where the child of God is formally charged, tried, judged, and sentenced.

It is at this point, if unrepentance should persist, that the elders come to see that God has already given the individual over to Satan. Thus, the elders say, "Amen" to the will of God, and so follow the Lord's example; the brother or sister is pronounced a non-Christian; which means that they are

removed from the visible body of Christ. Now this doesn't mean that they aren't saved. We don't know; that is up to God. Yet as it pertains to their status as a formal member in the covenant community, they are removed.

It is at this time they are formerly handed over to Satan "for the destruction of their flesh."

The Participants of Discipline

Now this brings us to the participants of church discipline.

Galatians 6:1, "Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; *each one* looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted."

This passage addresses the ones qualified to engage in formal church discipline. Now before we discuss the wording of this text, I want to ask you a question: When it comes to the fellowship we enjoy with one another as members of the body of Christ, who is qualified to participate? Everyone in good standing is qualified to participate. If you are seated at someone's home following the service and a teenager sits next to you, is it appropriate to ask them, "If last week you were living in the light of the truth of the text preached this morning, what difference would that have made?"

What if you didn't know the youth very well? Would it still be appropriate? Most certainly! So it is with everyone of us when it comes to "formal discipline" (in fact, we could define "formal discipline" as intensified, personalized fellowship," nothing more). Truly, familiarity is not a prerequisite. In fact the only qualification referenced here is that the initiator be one "who is spiritual."

The word for "spiritual" (pneumatiko~) refers NOT to a mature brother or sister, BUT simply to any and all who are living in submission to the word of God and so:

1. Walking in the Spirit,
2. Filled with the Spirit, or
3. Manifesting the fruit of the Spirit.

The issue is NOT that of maturity in Christ, BUT ones submission to the Lord. Dr. John MacArthur put it this way:

It should be noted that, whereas maturity is relative, depending on one's progression and growth, spirituality is an absolute reality that is unrelated to growth. At any point in the life of a Christian, from the moment of his salvation to his glorification, he is either spiritual, walking in the Spirit, or fleshly, walking in the deeds of the flesh. Maturity is the cumulative effect of the times of spirituality. But any believer, at any point in his growth toward Christlikeness, can be a spiritual believer who helps a sinful believer who has fallen to the flesh. (MacArthur, Galatians The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, 1987, p. 177)

Anyone who submits to the word of God, whether they've been saved ten minutes or fifty years is qualified to engage in church discipline. I've had people approach me and say, "I'm concerned about so and so." Yet I don't know them so I can't talk to them. The only qualification Paul put on who should or should not approach someone in love for their soul is whether they themselves are submitting to the word of God. If you are at that moment, then you are qualified to talk to anyone with whom you are concerned.

The Aftermath of Discipline

This brings us to the aftermath of formal church discipline.

Matthew 18:17, "And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer."

It is important to note that Christ here doesn't say that the person who has been excommunicated from a church body is not saved. Again we do not know this; that is up to God. Rather what it does say is that the person so disciplined, the person whose standing as a member of the body of Christ has been removed, is to be *viewed* or *treated* as a Gentile/tax-collector.

This implies that the individual under formal discipline will become a special object of prayer and concern especially if they are someone who at one time was part of the body of Christ. So it is with any who have been excommunicated from a covenant community. They no longer have the status of brother or sister of Christ, they are not members of His visible body, but that doesn't mean we wash our hands of them. You say, what about?

2 Thessalonians 3:14-15, "And if anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that man and do not associate with him, so that he may be put to shame. And yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother."

This text classically has been used to advocate a practice called shunning. Shunning is a practice where a family in good standing is not allowed to associate with a brother under formal discipline in any way. If the person shows up at a family gathering, the Christian is to leave. If the person calls or texts, they ought not to be responded to. After all 2 Thessalonians says, "do not associate with him."

Yet this is a misreading of the text! Does the passage say that we are to have no contact with the individual? No! In fact, notice the very next verse:

2 Thessalonians 3:15, "And yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother."

If you are NOT to be in the presence of a disciplined person, how can you "admonish him as a brother"? You can't! In fact, the word for admonish is *nouqetew* which is a primary element in pastoral care. It does NOT imply barking orders, BUT bringing God's word to bear upon the lives of people (it involves a relationship). For example it is used in these places:

Romans 15:14, “And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able also to admonish one another.”

1 Corinthians 4:14, “I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children.”

That is what we are called to do. When Paul says that we are “not to associate with him” we take this to mean two things:

1. Fellowship- which involves a give/take relationship centered on Christ (2 Corinthians 6:14-18).
2. The Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 5:11).

These are the perks of “association” and that which are to be withheld from a Gentile. In fact, the word for “associate” literally means “to mix up with” and references the idea of keeping intimate, close company with. It is used in the Old Testament to prohibit intermingling with non-Christians- as in business or in table fellowship. (Gerhard Kittel & Geoffrey W. Bromiley, July 1985, pp. Vol 2, 852-855) It is in this way that our association is prohibited.¹

And so far from banishment, we want contact! We want continued involvement in their lives that we might be able to engage them in dialogue. Otherwise we won’t be able to “admonish them as a brother.”

Our Confidence

This brings us to the final statement in Christ’s description of formal church discipline, and the basis for our confidence:

Matthew 18:20, “For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst.”

This is an important reminder. As difficult as it may be to be a tool in God’s hand to reclaim a rebellious brother or sister, nevertheless we have the confidence in and through it all that Christ is present with us in and throughout the endeavor. It is His work. Let us therefore not shrink back. But with humility and great trust, let us endeavor to bear each other’s burdens!

End Notes

¹ At this point, advocates of shunning reference 1 Corinthians 5:9-11 which says, “I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I *did* not at all *mean* with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters; for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one.”

Remember at this time that there were many “pleaders with a cause” who went from town to town making money with their mouth. Now on account of the growth of Christianity at the time, many were using the message of Christ to get money. In fact, later when the charlatans became formal, John would warn the body of Christ, “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, **do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting**; for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds.” (2 John 10-11) It was of these types of people that Paul clearly is referencing here (cf. 1 Corinthians 4:7-8, 18); not excommunicated Christians. It was these charlatans from whom Paul exhorted for us to stay away.

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About the Preacher

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