THE CHURCH AND CHRISTIAN DISCIPLINE

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The time is ripe for the Church of Jesus Christ to concentrate its attention upon the matter of Christian discipline. Not only does a disordered and confused world need the rule of the gospel, but the theological, ecclesiastical, and sociological life of the church of the past seventy-five years has now reached the point where renewed emphasis upon Christian discipline can bear rich fruit. The last quarter of the nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century saw the church, smitten by its callousness toward the depressed classes, rising to new concern for social righteousness. The Social Gospel was proclaimed to a world which knew all too well the rule of injustice. Yet the very breadth and success of the Social Gospel emphasis revealed in the time of crisis a lack of theological depth and a pride in the capacity of man which the events of the twentieth century proved to be completely unjustified.

In the new crisis, the church recovered a sense of the scandal and foolishness of the cross of Jesus Christ, who was sent to redeem a fallen race. Men like C. H. Dodd discovered again the *kerygma*, the apostolic preaching, with its message of Jesus as the crucified and risen Messiah who had been prophesied in the Old Testament. A church whose faith in progress had been shattered rejoiced in the strange new world within the Bible. Preaching, the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ, once again assumed its biblical role in the twentieth century.

Now, however, the element of the sanctifying power of the gospel must be placed next to the proclamation of the gospel and the exercise of righteousness. The heavy emphasis placed upon the last two to the neglect of the first during the past decades has caused Christian society to understand God's love as a sort of smiling divine benevolence and the love for one's neighbor as little more than mutual toleration and community togetherness. A society which no longer understands the meaning of discipline wonders about the relevance of preaching which proclaims forgiveness. If the world is to take seriously all of the discussion about social righteousness and the preaching of the scandal of the cross, then it is first necessary for the church to seriously apply these to the disciplining of its own life and the lives of its members. When the three elements, proclamation, justification (in the OT sense of the word), and sanctifica-
tion, all take their rightful place, one may expect the church to exhibit in its life the full power of the Word. The time is now ripe for a return to a biblical balance at this point. In order that this balance may be gained it is important that the church consider what discipline is.

I. CHRISTIAN DISCIPLINE IS CO-JUDGING WITH GOD

The church of the New Testament was conscious of the fact that in its discipline it was co-judging with God. This is especially clear in the locus classicus, Matt. 16:18-19, and in 18:15-20. In Matt. 18:18-20, we read, "Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven, For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." Without entering into a discussion of all the difficulties and ramifications of these texts, it is for our purposes sufficient to note that the basis for the binding and loosing in heaven is that Christ is in the midst of his people. Judgment on earth is a co-judging on the part of Christ and his people. Only on the basis of the fact that Christ is in its midst may the church bind and loose.

The problem concerning who on earth has been entrusted with the binding and loosing has constantly exercised biblical scholars. The New Testament church seemed to understand discipline to be the function of the apostles, but also of the church council and of the whole congregation. Thus, in Acts 5, it is Peter who speaks the word of judgment to Ananias and Sapphira. In Acts 15, however, Peter’s voice is just one in the council, which makes its judgment known that the Gentiles are to abstain from three things. Here again the element of co-judging comes to the foreground: "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things" (Acts 15:28).

In the first letter to the Corinthians, the congregational aspect of discipline is in the foreground. In urging them to avoid lawsuits in the courts, Paul reminds them to allow these questions to be decided by "the saints." "Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, matters pertaining to this life!" (I Cor. 6:2-3.)

Paul further insists upon the necessity of discipline, for to neglect this duty is to impugn the pure sacrifice of Christ. "Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be fresh dough, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed" (I Cor. 5:7). "But rather I wrote to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother
if he is guilty of immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber — not even to eat with such a one” (I Cor. 5:11). If these words are to be carried out, it is imperative that the discipline be that of the whole congregation, rather than that of a few office bearers.

It should also be noted that Paul applies his thought to those who are members of the church rather than to those outside. “For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. Drive out the wicked person from among you” (I Cor. 5:12-13). In limiting discipline to those within the congregation, Paul does not mean to imply that nothing may be said concerning the lives of those outside the church. As a student of the Old Testament, he knew that the prophets and psalmists had often spoken words of judgment to the heathen. But the point is that such judgment is not the work of the church. It is not the church, but God himself who is the sole judge over the heathen, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them” (Rom. 1:18-19). Thus Paul, standing in the tradition of the prophets would say that while the church is to speak prophetically to all men, it is to recognize that its function of judging in these last days is to be limited to its own members.

A mark of true discipline is compassion for the erring member. The sickness of one member affects the whole body, and all must help to bear the burden of guilt. Discipline is quite different from censoriousness! “Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:1-2). “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (I Cor. 12:26).

At this point the question arises how this compassionate attitude is to be reconciled with Paul's commands, “Drive out the wicked person from among you” (I Cor. 5:13), and “Let him who has done this be removed from among you” (I Cor. 5:2). Paul’s answer would be that the erring member must be isolated in order that his presence may not infect the whole body with the germ of his sin, but that the body of Christ must apply to the fullest extent the healing ointment of the blood of Christ, and by its prayers and loving ministrations nurse the sinner back to health. As the whole family suffers when the leper must for a time enter into isolation, so the church suffers the isolation of one of its members until the day of his return. In this spirit, Paul writes, “you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (I Cor. 5:5).
In spite of the necessary role of discipline in the life of the church, and of the fact that such discipline is a co-judging with God under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the New Testament clearly indicates that such judging is a very serious matter. Thus Paul was careful to indicate that such co-judging did not mean complete identification of his words with those of Christ. Certain words were the words of the Lord, other precepts were stated by Paul (I Cor. 7:10-12). It is imperative that the church which disciplines observe this Pauline caution in its judgments.

Furthermore, the words of Christ in Matt. 7:1-3 have made a profound impression: “Judge not that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?” (cf. Romans 2:1; 14:13-23.) Here Christians are warned that in judging they themselves may come under judgment. In a day which takes such words seriously, a church which is conscious of its own shortcomings is tempted to refrain from discipline. Paul’s commands to the erring church in Corinth are a sure indication, however, that Christ’s words are intended to point to the proper type of judgment rather than to refrain from discipline. Discipline, although dangerous, is necessary to the proper proclamation of the Word.

II. DISCIPLINE AND PREACHING

Having seen how discipline is a co-judging with God, it is now important to note that discipline in the church is imperative if the preaching is to be seriously spoken and heard. Preaching proclaims that the eternal weight of sin and guilt can be removed only by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Discipline indicates both to those inside and to those outside the fellowship that the Spirit of God cannot and does not simply overlook the sin and rebellion of men. Discipline indicates that Jesus Christ is the message of the forgiveness of sin, rather than a message of the unimportance of sin and of God’s simple tolerance and acceptance of sinners.

It is for this reason that in the Bible those who were most emphatic in their proclamation of Christ were equally strong in their message of judgment. It was John the Baptist who called the Pharisees a “brood of vipers” (Matt. 3:7). Only from the lips of Jesus himself do we read that the evil ones will be thrown “into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth” (Matt. 13:53; cf. Matt. 24:51; 25:30, 46). As already indicated, it was the Peter who preached at Pentecost who spoke the final words to Ananias and Sapphira. Such words and deeds displayed to the church and world of the first century that one neglects the preaching of the gospel at his peril. The gifts of the Spirit are the first fruits of the Kingdom, and the discipline of the church is a sign of the judgment that
is to come. He who learns that the discipline of the Lord is a serious matter and places one in danger of the eternal judgment also knows that the word of forgiveness spoken by the church is a message of eternal joy and peace. The church which neglects to speak the word of judgment over itself and its members will eventually discover that the word of forgiveness which it speaks is empty and irrelevant to a world which watches the life of the church with discernment. Even worse, the world may come to regard the prophetic message of the church which refuses to discipline itself as an uncharitable and arrogant hypocrisy which sees the speck in the other's eye, but not the beam in its own eye! Only the church that disciplines itself has the right to speak the prophetic message of justice and forgiveness in the world.

III. DISCIPLINE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The Protestant church of the twentieth century seems to have largely lost its power of discipline. In the light of much of the harsh discipline of preceding centuries, and the necessary emphases of the past seventy-five years, one can understand how the present situation came about. Perhaps it was even necessary that for a time the church should ignore the problem of discipline. But at this moment, the emphasis on sanctification in life is again imperative for a world which has lost its sense of restraint and propriety. "For the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God" (I Peter 4:17).

It must be confessed that many problems beset the church in the matter of discipline, and that such discipline remains as dangerous now as it was in the days when Christ spoke about the speck and the beam. In order that we may begin to have some clarity in this matter, we now propose a few points as the way to discipline in our age.

1. **Christian discipline requires a sense of the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit.** Valuable though the Christocentric emphasis in theology has been in the past several decades, the time has come to recognize that it is inadequate in providing the church with an adequate sense of discipline. Because of its Christocentric approach, it has been forced to regard the preaching and life of the church in terms of witness to him. The Word of Christ which was proclaimed was God's Word of judgment over all religion, including Christianity. God's judgment was the crisis for all man's activity, and man was to repent and return to Christ. The Scriptures were seen as a witness to Christ. Whatever standpoint one took concerning such questions as higher criticism, relation of the Bible to science, and the infallibility of Scripture; the witness, the *kerygma*, was clear in the proclamation of the once-for-all Christ-event. Scripture was the record of *heilsgeschichte* rather than any merely human history.
This Christological approach did not give to the church a sense of the abiding and continuing presence of the Holy Spirit. In its emphasis on the incarnation, cross and resurrection, the ascension of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit were not properly understood. In emphasizing that the Word of God must again and again break through into our sinful lives, it was almost forgotten that Pentecost is also a once-for-all event in the *heilsgeschichte*. The Christological consideration of the Scriptures as a witness to Christ was carried out to the almost complete neglect of the fact that the presence of the Holy Spirit with that of Scripture indicates that the Bible is not only a *witness* to revelation, but also a *means of revelation*. The Holy Spirit not only provided for the inspiration of Scripture, but also for the illumination of the hearts of those men and of the church which read the Word. It is thus not only true that God’s revelation comes to us in the hiddenness of the flesh, but it is also true that the Holy Spirit has made this a clear and sure Word to the eye of faith, so that he who runs may read and understand.

For the sake of discipline, the church must recover this sense of the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit who by means of the Word leads and guides the church and the believer to make certain and true judgments, so that discipline becomes a co-judging with God, neither adding to nor taking away from the Word (Rev. 22:18 and 19). The church must gain from its life in the Spirit a new courage to carry out the discipline of the Lord. Our age calls for courage to withstand the siren call of a self-indulgent church and world, to proclaim the sober discipline of the Spirit. The recovery of the sense of the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit will also make it possible for the church to exercise again compassion in its discipline and preaching. There are multitudes in the church today who in their hearts know that they are living in guilt. To such persons who are known to be continuing without repentance the Protestant churches of today try to speak the word of God’s forgiveness without paying due respect to his discipline. Yet the unrepentant church member realizes that he does not yet have the forgiveness of God. If discipline is not carried out in the time of the unrepentant heart, then the word of forgiveness will lose its effect when it comes from the lips of the church in the time of forgiveness. On the other hand, when the church has had the courage to make its discipline known to the unrepentant sinner, its word of forgiveness and renewed fellowship will provide sweet peace to him in the moment of repentance. If it is seen that the church means its word of discipline, the word of forgiveness will also be understood.

2. Effective discipline requires a renewed searching of the Scriptures. It is particularly necessary that the church come to a proper understanding of the law of God as *torah*, as God’s teaching, as a rule of thankfulness.
It must be seen that Christ came to fulfill the law, to establish it, for in dying under the law he displayed how seriously God regarded his own teachings. Christ, God's love, is the fulfillment of the law. Fulfillment is not the same as the abolition of the law! It is the opposite of abolition. Love is the fulfillment of the law, and love has not yet gone out of date. Love is the content and power of the torah; torah is the channel of love!

Furthermore, the historical character of the law must be recognized. The Old Testament as law is God's teaching for Israel, which occupied a particular time and place in the world. It was before Christ, and therefore the whole atmosphere of sacrifices and offerings was different from what it is in our day. Since the veil of the temple was rent, we no longer sacrifice in the Old Testament sense of the word, yet this is not to say that the Old Testament teaching about sacrifice is no longer relevant for us. The same may be said in a different way concerning the civil law, the laws concerning marriage and divorce, even the moral law and the ten commandments, which must be interpreted anew under the guidance of the Spirit in each time and place.

The lack of appreciation for the historical character of the law has militated against church discipline. Particularly in the right wing of the church has there been a tendency to a hard-hearted legalism which regards the letter of the law as eternal. Such interpretation has often made discipline a travesty of justice. He who would interpret Scripture and the law literally must interpret it historically! Discipline requires that the law be historically interpreted, in order that it may be literally applied.

3. Effective discipline must be ecumenical discipline. It must be the discipline of the whole church.

This means that discipline must be done at the local level where the congregation worships. As in the earliest times, discipline is entrusted to the office bearers, the ambassadors or representatives of Christ, who have been anointed by the Holy Spirit. It is the elders who must investigate, counsel, and pronounce judgment. Here it must be noted that discipline must begin as quietly as possible (Matt. 18:15-20). It begins with the discussion between the wronged person and the one who has committed offense. Only when that fails may others be brought into the case. Then only is it to be brought before the church council, which is to admonish after investigation. Discipline does not always mean excommunication. On the contrary, in most cases, discipline means nothing more nor less than a gentle reminder or rebuke spoken under the guidance of the Spirit. Only in the case of refusal to repent does the church proceed to the final point of cutting off fellowship. The true indication of the presence of discipline is to be found in the daily, loving admonitions among Christian
brethren rather than in the number of excommunications. Regular admonition may save many from loss of fellowship.

Furthermore, discipline carried out by ministers and elders must be chiefly in regard to the things of the Spirit. Unfortunately, most of the discipline today seems to be in regard to the organization of the church, whether one attends regularly, pays his offerings, obeys the rulings of the church council. These things are important, but too much emphasis upon them indicates that the church may be more eager to perpetuate itself as a worldly institution than as the body of Christ.

Effective and proper discipline must also be carried out by the whole congregation. Not only must the elders admonish and pronounce judgment, but the congregation should concur in it. Otherwise the church will give a divided testimony and the discipline will assume the appearance of personal animosity. To reach such agreement, it is necessary that the whole congregation be educated to judge on the basis of Scripture. This is not to say that the elders must always wait upon the congregation before pronouncing judgment, but the elders must recognize that only when it is the congregation which with great compassion breaks fellowship with the unrepentant sinner that discipline can be effective.

Ecumenical discipline of excommunication is public discipline. Not only the breaking of fellowship, but the compassionate and healing care and prayer can only be accomplished with the cooperation of the whole congregation. This must be done also under the guidance of the Spirit, without any sensationalism, in order that in the day of repentance and forgiveness full fellowship can again be enjoyed.

Discipline can be effective only when it is not only the local congregation, but the world-wide church which participates in it. It must have an ecumenical character, so that the admonition of one congregation may not be refuted by the praise of someone else. The breaking of fellowship in one place is the breaking of fellowship with the church of Jesus Christ. Discipline which is recognized only by the Reformed, or only by Methodists or by Presbyterians is not really discipline. So long as it remains possible for the person under discipline in one denomination to be accepted in good and regular standing in another, the church of Christ cannot expect its discipline, or its preaching, to be understood as occurring under the full guidance of the Spirit.

Recognition of the ecumenical character of discipline can strengthen several points in the work of the church. First, discipline will again be carried out at the essential points of faith, rather than at the point of personality conflicts or denominational and congregational programs. A rule of discipline will be seen as a rule for the whole church rather than as
the rule of a social club of Christians, which independently establishes its own rules.

Secondly, the ecumenical movement, which to date has not even really considered the matter of discipline, will acquire new depth. The real test of unity will not come at one or another point in a creedal or social pronouncement, but at the point of discipline. The church of today is speaking many “prophetic” words about all sorts of things. The world listens to all of the beautifully worded statements with interest, but also with suspicion. Does the church really mean what it says? If so, then why does it not have the courage to pronounce words of judgment and discipline over its members who disagree and act in opposition? Should the world listen if the church does not admonish and discipline? Ultimately, the ecumenical movement is concerned not only with preaching, and social righteousness, but also with sanctification and discipline.

Recognition of the relation of discipline to the ecumenical movement will at the same time force those now in the ecumenical movement to become more sober in their ecumenical activities and those who now stand aside with suspicion to enter the discussion with new purpose. It is one of the anomalies of our time that those who are least concerned about discipline are most interested in the ecumenical movement, while those who demand discipline remain outside the discussions. Yet it is precisely at the point of discipline that the church has so much to gain by the ecumenical movement in its witness to the world. Not merely spiritual unity, but organizational unity is imperative for the sake of discipline!

In conclusion, we remind ourselves of the hope of Paul: “that you may be blameless and innocent children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world” (Phil. 2:15).

“That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow . . . and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:10-11).