

Church Discipline: Part 1

By David de Bruyn

In the fourth century A.D. a controversy broke out in the early church known as the Donatist controversy. In those days, the church had been through some vicious periods of persecution. Most often in the Roman persecution, Christians were given the opportunity to deny Christ and Christianity to spare their own lives. During this time, the blood of martyrs flowed deep.

However, there were those who, under pressure, denied Christ. They committed what came to be known as *traditio*, the act of handing over. It is, in fact, the root of the word treason.

Now, Jesus Himself taught that someone ashamed of Him in a final sense, someone who loves their own life more than Christ, was not His disciple. We understand that someone like Peter failed by denying Christ, but we must add that Peter did indeed die as a martyr later in life.

So, in those dark times, believers had good Scriptural reasons for regarding those who had committed the act of denying Christ as unbelievers. Unless there was real repentance, believers could regard men who had committed *traditio*, but were now coming back into the church as if nothing had happened, as mere hirelings – unconverted men who use the church for power and gain.

About this time in the fourth century, there was a church leader who had committed treason by denying Christ. However, he was allowed to continue in the church, and was instrumental in ordaining another man into church leadership. A section in the church objected to this – they said that such a man's ordination was invalid because of the presence of a traitor in his ordination.

This faction argued over how an unsaved man could truly ratify the selection of leadership for God's church, and so the controversy broke out. Those who were arguing for the exclusion of traitors were known as the Donatists, after one of the outspoken leaders of that group – Donatus.

Opposing Donatus was the mainstream, an increasingly state-controlled church. Augustine wrote many letters against the Donatists. Essentially, the debate raged around this fact: should the church focus on unity or purity?

The Donatists argued that by not disciplining the traitors, the body of Christ was being polluted. They said that the true church was to be a holy and pure church. Their opponents argued that this was not loving. Augustine actually said: *"That the good and faithful Christians, certain of their won salvation, may persevere to dwell in unity with the corrupt when it is beyond their power to punish."*

The opponents of the Donatists appealed to those passages and parables which speak of the separation of the good and bad being reserved to the last day. They basically took the road many take today, saying, 'We cannot be the policemen, God will sort it all out some day.'

The Donatists replied that Christ himself taught that the field is the world, not the church, and the church was supposed to purge out the leaven from among itself. In essence, the Donatists believed in church discipline, and their opponents did not.

While church history often paints favourably or unfavourably the people it mentions due to the persuasion of the historian, this much is certain: those who followed the thinking of Augustine increasingly tolerated more and more heresy, dogma, and unbiblical tradition.

The unwillingness to exercise church discipline did nothing but further corrupt and pervert the church of the Middle Ages. Interestingly, while the Donatists had their own problems, many of their churches survived and continued to preach the Gospel, though they were viciously persecuted and many were wiped out by Moslem invaders in the 7th and 8th centuries.

In some ways, that same debate continues today. Unity or purity – what is more important? Should we focus on building the unity, the sense of oneness, or should we exercise church discipline to preserve holiness and sound doctrine? For that matter, does church discipline destroy the unity?

Almost all the same arguments are circulating today as back then. Those who are against church discipline usually say the following: "Who are we to go around policing other people's lives? We're supposed to be loving each other, not hurting each other. Besides, Jesus said we're not supposed to judge."

On the other side, we answer: "True love and unity is based upon walking in the light together. If someone is walking in darkness, then we are already out of fellowship with them. Church discipline is a method of restoring someone, and if they will not repent, maintaining the purity and good name of the church of Jesus Christ. It is actually unloving to refuse to exercise church discipline."

Sadly, however, those who reject church discipline end up with the same problems that plagued those who embraced that position over a thousand years ago – a church filled with unbelievers masquerading as believers, a church where immorality and sin is tolerated, a church where the power of God is absent, because the church is impure.

Church discipline is increasingly becoming scarce and unknown in the modern church. When people read Matthew 18, they reason it away, or claim it was for Jews only, or worse, say that it is too harsh and unloving. With previously unknown editorial powers, they delete Matthew 18 from the Bible, and carry on in rebellion to God's design.

Indeed, what is increasingly happening today among evangelicals and fundamentalists is that we preach against sin, but do nothing about it. People hear what is wrong, but the church never lifts a finger to enforce what it has taught. When this is done, people begin to divorce the preaching from reality.

We have the same results we see today in parenting. Parents are permissive – they never correct, never discipline, because political activists like Dr Benjamin Spock told us all that this is wrong. So even Christian parents spurn the Bible's advice, and essentially allow children to have their own way their whole lives.

When these children grow up into wayward rebels against God's law, the parents are surprised – 'What did we do wrong? We took them to church, and tried to help them know God!' The answer is also a question – what did you do to enforce what you taught? As **Proverbs 29:15** puts it, *"The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame."*

Much of the thinking today is: 'Leave children to decide for themselves.' No, **Proverbs 22:6** insists you must provide the direction: *"Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it."* **Proverbs 23:13-14** is also hated by humanists, but it's in the Bible: *"Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell."*

See, any parent who simply speaks but does not ensure there's obedience, and never provides some form of corrective action if there's disobedience, is not child-training. They are simply living with a child.

The same is true in churches today. Because people regard the church as a nice community centre, perhaps as a friendly social gathering, as a place to meet friends, but with no more power over them than the local sports club, they see no contradiction in attending church on Sunday but living immoral lives during the week. They clearly do not regard the church as having any kind of corrective power at all.

And yet, this is exactly what Christ insisted the church is to do, to help train believers in righteousness. Of course, the other extreme. There is the spiritual abuse that happens when a Diotrophes is in leadership. When a wicked, proud man, who is probably abusive with his own family, gets into leadership – you will find the other extreme.

Over-discipline in the church is discipline that is cruel, harsh, and done in the wrong way for the wrong reasons. Diotrophes was being malicious in the pulpit, speaking evil against those who had left his church, and he threw out those he didn't like. Sadly, there are many Diotrophes alive and well today. And sadly, there are all too many Corinthians who allow for this kind of man to continue on the pulpit.

Paul said to the Corinthians, *"For ye suffer, if a man bring you into bondage, if a man devour you, if a man take of you, if a man exalt himself, if a man smite you on the face,"* (2

Corinthians 11:20). Yes, there exists church discipline done by ungodly men for ungodly reasons. Yes, there is the extreme of such discipline being cold, and all too close to the abusive child discipline of some misguided parents. But the existence of extremes like that does not mean that church discipline is not Biblical.

Church discipline is as biblical as child discipline. There are many good reasons for it:

1. It purifies the church.

Ecclesiastes 9:18 says: *"...but one sinner destroyeth much good."* And Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 5:6**: *"Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?"* If we do not enforce righteousness and discipline sin, it will spread.

2. It causes accountability between members.

James 5:16 says *"Confess your faults one to another."* When all believers are involved in correcting one another, we feel the wholesome, healthy sense of pressure to be right with God so that we can be right with each other. It causes openness and transparency among Christians.

3. It also keeps the leadership accountable.

1 Timothy 5 teaches us that church discipline applies to elders as well. There is no exemption from church discipline.

4. It reflects God's glory to the world.

Matthew 5:16 has Christ telling us to allow our lights to shine before the world, that God may be glorified. Peter says that when the world sees our good works, they will glorify God in the day of visitation. That only happens in a pure church.

5. It increases the love and tenderness between believers.

Proverbs 27:5-6 says: *"Open rebuke is better than secret love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful."* This is for the sinner's good. Sin destroys, discipline does not.

Discipline is a corrective action – it's a restorative action, a preventative action, a preservative action. We seek to prevent sin from swallowing up that believer and them reaping the bitter harvest of sin. Sin blinds, and deceives, and if it were not the local assembly of believers, we would go far astray under the guidance of our own self-righteousness

See, the debate comes about because of a misunderstanding of Scripture. Church discipline does not destroy unity among believers. Sin and false teaching destroys the unity. Look up every Scripture that deals with divisiveness in the church, and you will

see that the trouble always comes from sin and false teaching that is tolerated, not from righteousness that is enforced. Schismatics are always proud, selfish people who insist on having their way.

Discipline is in fact a means of preserving unity, encouraging love and oneness, not destroying it. Discipline is clearly seen as carried out by the church. We see Paul commanding it in **1 Corinthians 5**, **2 Thessalonians 3**, **Titus 3**, and **1 Timothy 1:20**. We see examples of it in Paul confronting Peter, in the actions of the Corinthians against the sinning member, in Paul's actions against Alexander and Hymenaeus.

We also see John speaking about it in **1 John 5:16**. We see Paul speaking of Divine discipline on **1 Corinthians 11**. And of course we have the Divine discipline of Ananias and Sapphira in **Acts 5**. So this is not a peripheral, unimportant doctrine ignored by the apostles and early church. It is a vital part of a healthy local church.

The objections against church discipline usually have no Biblical substance. But sometimes people try to pull Jesus' words in **Matthew 7**:

Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye?"

Matthew 7:1-4

Now, firstly, it is poor Bible interpretation to take some words of Jesus and try to make them stand in opposition to other words of Jesus. God does not contradict Himself. Therefore, we do not play Scriptures off each other, we harmonise them. So if Jesus told us to practice church discipline while at the same time telling us not to judge, you can be sure that they are not mutually antagonistic ideas.

What does Jesus mean then? He means, 'Do not pass sentence on another man's motives. Do not try to be the discernor of hearts and hidden thoughts.' Except where Scripture reveals the motives of a man, like it does in the case of false teachers, we are not to suspect, or think evil of, another person. Paul echoed this thought when he wrote:

Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts: and then shall every man have praise of God.

1 Corinthians 4:5

There are things that God only knows. Yes, as Scripture puts it in **1 Samuel 16:7**: "For man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart." So Christ is saying, if you are harsh and critical of other people's hearts, this is wrong. Don't go around questioning the hearts of others without first examining your own, He says.

However, please notice something often not quoted, in Christ's words in **Matthew 7:5**: *"Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye."* Jesus says that you ought to clean up your own life – not so you can ignore your brother's sin, but so you can see it clearly without bias and deal with it.

If the beam is out your own eye, Jesus specifically says, you can now cast the speck out of your brother's eyes. One of the goals of personal holiness is the clarity it brings to be able to rebuke others. The kind of judgment Jesus forbids is the proud, hypocritical, judging of another's motives without knowing their hearts.

The fact of the matter is, we are to judge the actions of others. Indeed, it is not us that does the judging, it is the word of God. If we see another believer sinning, then the Bible has judged them to be guilty of sin. We simply take the judgment God gives us about their actions and use it to try and restore them.

Since love thinketh no evil, we do not judge their hearts and motives, but we are responsible to agree with the Bible's judgment on their actions. Yes, we cannot see their hearts – but we can see their deeds. And we are instructed to declare their deeds, good or bad, on the basis of the Word of God.

How ridiculous to see people living in fornication, and turn around and say, 'We mustn't judge them.' The Bible has already judged them. Indeed, to act like calling sin sin is unloving flies in the face of how Paul described love:

And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment; that ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ.

Philippians 1:9-10

Paul does not see love and judgment as opposites. He writes to command that love may increase, and be increasingly discerning – more mature, more able to approve what is right and declare what is wrong. The mark of the mature is their ability to make distinctions – to discern between good and evil – and judge it to be so.

For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

Hebrews 5:13-14

Mature believers are better able to discern between good and evil, less mature believers often are not. What a twisted, warped mentality is in the church today that insists that it mature not to judge! How different are Paul's words in **1 Corinthians 2:15**: *"But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man."* We should

also note that when Jesus discusses church discipline, He does so in the context of these verses:

For the Son of Man is come to save that which was lost. How think ye? If a man have a hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray? And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that sheep, than of the ninety and nine which went not astray. Even so, it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish.

Matthew 18:11-13

Does that sound unloving? Does it sound uncaring? Does it sound indifferent? Jesus prefaces his teaching on church discipline with the analogy of a loving shepherd finding a lost sheep! Church discipline is anything but unloving. Indeed, it is actually unloving to refuse to discipline.

People who refuse to discipline their children reveal that they love themselves more than their children; they love their own comfort, their own ease, their own laziness more. In **Leviticus 19:17** we find a remarkable statement: *"Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him."*

God says that you must not hate your neighbour. What would that mean? God explains by giving the opposite of hating him in the next commands. What are they? Rebuking your neighbour, so you do not allow sin in him! In other words, to hate your neighbour is to refuse to rebuke him, and allow sin. To love him is to rebuke him and help him.

Sin is what will destroy him, not your correction. If he hates you because of your correction, then that is sad – but worse than that is allowing him to walk off the cliff of sin without a warning. Church discipline is not too painful – the consequences of sin are too painful. So why doesn't church discipline take place more often? The answer is twofold:

- **One, there is a lack of desire in church leaders to implement it.**

The fear of losing people and of appearing to be negative scares off many who know they ought to practice it. Likewise, there is often simply a lack of knowledge, as to how, when and why to apply it. Sometimes the abuse of the practice by warring church members with a grudge against each other makes church leaders avoid it altogether.

- **Two, there is a lack of passion for holiness in believers in general.**

You need to deal with sin in your own life to get a passion for holiness in other's lives. Jesus specifically linked the removing of the beam from your own eye as being crucial to see clearly in order to remove the speck in your brother's eye.

It's the beams in our eyes that harden our hearts, numb us to the zeal Christ had in cleansing His Father's house, and cause us to enter into a deep spiritual slumber.

From a place of guilt, we begin to reason, 'We're all sinners. Let's just leave each other alone, and work out our own salvation.' But that is not wisdom talking, that is the deceitful heart that wants to be left alone. The nature of sin is that it always wants to hide, to walk in darkness, to cover itself.

It is as we grow spiritually, and have a real, fervent passion for sanctification, for growing into the image of Christ, that we will desire the same happiness for others. We will have the heart of **1 John 1:7**: *"But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin."*

Christ was so holy that He physically cast people out of the Temple. A zeal for God's holiness, the kind that caused Phinehas to drive a spear through a sinning Israelite, comes from personal holiness. Sin casts us into a deep slumber, a slumber of indifference, a slumber of intentional blindness, a slumber of rationalising and ignoring sins.

Righteousness wakes us up to the pleasure of purity, to the happiness of holiness, and causes an energetic, enthusiastic desire to see the same in others. The source of church discipline is not pride, it's not trying to exalt ourselves, it's not trying to get back at a brother or sister you don't like. Its motives are for the joy of the other. Churches that tolerate sin in their midst will lack the real presence, power and pleasure of God.

In Part 2 of this series on church discipline, we will examine the procedure Jesus describes in **Matthew 18** to understand when and how we must practice church discipline.