

1

What Is Church Discipline?

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.

But the kind of education of which the Bible speaks, and from which church discipline takes its impetus, is very different from the sort of education with which we are now familiar in America. The educational model from which the idea of church discipline stems once was known in our country, but it became extinct as the result of the successful spread of the permissive, self-expression practices advocated by John Dewey and others in an earlier generation. Biblical education, from which ideas of church discipline flow, is education with teeth; it is education that sees to it that the job gets done.¹

¹I can remember once upon a time my schoolmates and me singing, "School days, school days, good old golden rule days."

The Old Testament word *musar* and the New Testament word *paideia* set forth this idea of education backed by force. As Hebrews 12:5-11 makes clear (here the New Testament writer uses *paideia* to translate the Hebrew *musar* into Greek), such education is not always pleasant and at the time can be quite painful:

Of course, all discipline (*paideia*) seems painful rather than pleasant for the moment, but later on it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it (Hebrews 12:11).

But notice the purpose of discipline: it functions in the educational process to produce righteousness as its fruit, a fruit which, when you bite into it, tastes like peace.

Righteousness (rightness; conformity to Christ's standard of conduct) has the flavor of peace because, wherever it is found, it produces harmony and order. Where there is conformity to God's will, there is structure; where there is biblical structure the prime condition for learning is present: peace.

Without peace, learning is impossible. Education depends on order. That is one of the major reasons why in the recent past, and even up to the present, there has been such poor learning in our schools—peace, a chief factor in the learning situation, has been missing. Where there is no peace, there is no learning; where there is no discipline, there is no order; where there is no order there is no peace. Discipline is, at its heart and core, good order.

But why should we be thinking about education? How is it that church discipline connects with education? Because the very term that Christ uses concern-

reading and writing and arithmetic, taught to the tune of a hickory stick . . . " What could be more foreign to today's public schools?

ing the church indicates that He conceives of it as an educational institution. When Jesus beckons to us, inviting us to find refreshment in Him, He does so in educational language:

Come to Me, all who labor and are heavily burdened, and I will refresh you (the word in the original is a verb, not a noun, as the *KJV* has it).

Put My yoke on you and learn from Me; I am meek and humble in heart, and you will discover refreshment for your souls.

My yoke is easy to wear and My burden is light.

(Matthew 11:28-30)

Here the great Teacher describes conversion as the experience of enrolling in His school and learning how to live from Him. Conversion involves becoming a *disciple* (student) of Christ. One does not take some six-week course to qualify for entrance into the church, graduate from the course, and cease being a student. No, there is nothing like that in the Bible. Rather, the entire course of one's Christian life is described as a learning experience in the school of Christ.

Notice the educational language in Christ's invitation: "learn from Me," "Put My yoke on you." The latter expression was used by the Jews to describe one's submission to a teacher as he became his disciple (cf. Lamentations 3:27; Sirach 51:23-26; 6:24). In Sirach 51:23, 26, for instance, we read, "Draw near to me, you who are untaught, and lodge in my school. . . . Put your neck under the yoke, and let your sons receive instruction. . . ." (*Apocrypha*, RSV).

Moreover, when Jesus gave what is called the "Great Commission," He really issued a command to recruit students for His school. Again, we meet educational language throughout: "disciple (recruit and train students from) all nations, . . . teaching them to

observe . . ." (Matthew 28:18, 20). When we are baptized into the church, we thereby matriculate into Christ's school. Then, for the rest of our earthly life, we are to be taught (not facts alone, but also) to obey the commands of Christ. This is education with force, education backed up by the discipline of good order that is necessary for learning to take place. And of those recalcitrant students who grow restive under His tutelage, Jesus says, "I convict and discipline these about whom I care" (Revelation 3:19a).

If when the preacher says, "Let me read from God's Word, . . ." only some listen, but others walk down the aisle to the collection plate and put their money in, some go outside for a break, some sing a hymn, some start talking, and some begin praying, you have chaos. Suppose the same disorder continued throughout the sermon. There would be precious little learning occurring!² In the church service all things must be done "decently and in order" (1 Corinthians 14:40); various rules for order and discipline in the conduct of worship are given in the chapter.

But what is true of the church service is also true of the entire life of the church as a body. All must be done with order and decency. God will have no chaos in His church (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 11). In the last verse of the preceding parenthesis, Paul speaks of those "among you who are living in a totally *unstructured* way" and writes some strong words, to which we shall return later, about how to discipline them if they fail to heed His orders.

So, God is running a school in which He expects learning to take place. To bring about that learning,

²This is probably the sort of thing that Paul was describing in 1 Corinthians 14:26, when he speaks of everybody interested in "doing his own thing."

He has ordered His church to enforce strict rules of discipline. That she has failed to do so in recent days accounts for much of the ignorance and gullibility found among so many Christians in our time. If words from the pulpit are not enforced by action from the congregation and the elders, members will learn that the church does not really mean what it says. They may learn facts for the next Bible quiz, but not how to "observe" (obey) Christ's commands.

Discipline brings "peace." That is another reason why there is much unrest in many congregations, homes, and lives. Where there is chaos rather than the disciplined, structured, orderly living that comes when a church enforces Christ's commands, unrest of every sort arises. And the irony is that, apart from church discipline, there is no way to settle it down. One finds rest, refreshment, and peace in Christ's school only when learning is enforced through His rules of order.

Thus, discipline is not, as many have thought, simply the negative task of reading troublemakers out of the church. Rather, first above all, it is God's provision for good order in His church that creates conditions for the instruction and growth of the members. Discipline has a positive function.

As you can see already from the few references cited, discipline is not an option, something that "might be nice if we decide we want it." It is commanded by Christ and is, therefore, the right and privilege of every student. How can a student be expected to learn to observe Christ's commands in the midst of an undisciplined, disorderly, unstructured congregation? He can't. When he enters such a harum-scarum situation as exists in so many churches today, he is immediately deprived of his Christ-given right to learn in a truly educational atmosphere. It is time that we recognized the importance of discipline to good order and learn-

ing in the church. Today we talk a lot about church growth; but growth is impossible in the lives of members apart from church discipline.

While the positive purpose of discipline that grows out of its educational emphasis is good order, it is also the case that this good order leads to the honor of God, the welfare of the church, and where possible, the reclamation of the offender.

The honor of God is a consistent theme throughout the Bible. We see the necessity for discipline in the Old Testament, even before a formal church was organized as such. Abraham pointed out to Lot that it was not proper for their herdsmen to fight over the watering holes and the grazing territory, because, as Moses noted, "the Canaanite and the Perizzite were then living in the land" (Genesis 13:5-8). God's name would be besmirched before the heathen. That emphasis persists throughout the Bible.

The welfare of the church is at stake when there is need for discipline. If 1 Corinthians 5 teaches anything, it teaches that. The leaven was to be cleaned out; the undisciplined offender was to be put out of the church for his refusal to repent of his sin lest his influence for evil permeate the whole.³ Already many were acting arrogantly (v. 2) and even boasting of their liberal-mindedness (v. 6).

Moreover, the consistent theme of church discipline is concern for the offender.⁴ His repentance and

³White/Blue, in their book *Healing the Wounded* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1985), pp. 65-66, are surely wrong when they differ from the interpretation that equates cleaning out the leaven with removing the offender (v. 2), delivering him to Satan (v. 5), and putting him out of the midst (v. 13).

⁴Remember Christ's words in Revelation 3:19, "I convict and discipline those about whom I care" (*philo*). He does this through

reclamation are always to be a hoped-for expectation, and much of the effort expended in properly conducted discipline is directed toward that end. That goal is expressed clearly in Matthew 18:15ff. and in 1 Corinthians 5:5. And, as we shall see in a chapter later on, the restoration of an offender should be made a joyous occasion of great importance to the church.

So, church discipline is not only required and necessary to the good order of a church that bears Christ's name, but it is the source of peace in the church leading to learning and every other good thing. God is honored by church discipline, rightly administered, and is greatly dishonored by its absence. How often is the unbeliever able to sneer at the church, to its shame, saying of one of its undisciplined members, "He's a deacon in the church, but they do nothing about him in spite of the well-known fact that he runs around with women and gets drunk."

Problems between members and in homes often are quickly resolved by church discipline, but they persist and get worse when it is not applied. When did you last hear someone say, "I've done *everything* to save my marriage," when, in fact, the person has done virtually nothing? The spouse has not even initiated the first steps of discipline set forth in Matthew 18, because no one ever told him to do so and he has never seen such a thing happen in his congregation. Discipline is important, then, and cannot be dismissed so readily as it has been without great peril to the church, to the offender, and of greatest importance, to the name of Christ.

His Word (cf. 2 Timothy 3:16, where "convicting" and "disciplining" are said to be two of the four "uses" of Scripture).