

DISCIPLINE IN THE ASSEMBLY

(Discipline in the House of God)

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When we talk about discipline in the local assembly, we ought first to consider ourselves.

I am a poor sinner saved by the mercy of God, standing in Jesus Christ having accepted Him as my personal Saviour. It is an awful thing to take discipline into my hands, or for it to be put into the hands of elders.

Who can judge save God?

I read in Scripture that I am to esteem others better than myself, and I must not set a brother at nought. I must remember my sinfulness and nothingness before the Lord and the thought of disciplining another is very solemn. Who am I to do so? Who are you to do so? Let us esteem each other more than ourselves. We must not set a brother at nought and say anything about him that is unkind, wrong, questionable or defamatory.

Even in matters of discipline, the prerogative must be love. No discipline can be exercised if there is hate, jealousy or no irrefutable and neutral proof of any alleged indiscretion; and the accused must be there to answer any such claims and the whole assembly must first be made aware of the charges and all the proof showing that such claims are proven before any disciplinary action is taken.

Look at such matters in the light of the Lord Jesus. He loves you and we are instructed to love the brethren. The moment we forget this, or fail to obey it, anything we do subsequently is monstrous.

Discipline must be totally characterised by love to maintain righteousness. We are always to have a watchful care over each other.

We see the character of discipline in our Lord Jesus when He took a scourge to drive people out of the Temple because of their desecration of it. But note well, He saw it for Himself. This was irrefutable proof.

Sometimes discipline is sadly motivated by the dislike of the brother concerned, which brother may have gifts from the Lord that makes others jealous of him. He may be popular; he may be a threat to someone who wants to build his own empire within the assembly. Although this wrongly disliked brother's doctrine is sound, as is his life, he may not express himself as the rest of the company might and, therefore, could be regarded unfairly.

If you have a brother in a meeting with a wooden leg, do you not treat him the same as a brother with two sound legs? If you have a brother who speaks a little differently from the rest of the company do you reject him even though he is both sound and a fellow believer who loves the Lord?

In all matters of discipline, love must be observed and clearly demonstrated. Discipline is not to be judgemental, for who are we to judge? Even if the case be proved against the offender, all that follows must be in love and with restoration the sole objective not excommunication and consequential avoidance. The idea to have nothing more to do with him is contrary both to Scripture and contrary to the love we are to continually show. We are told to love our enemies and so it must follow that we are to love each other and that love would include a brother who may have gone astray.

The discipline of Matthew 18 refers to a wrong done to a brother. It is not said that this is an occasion to put a brother out of the assembly. Luke 17 makes it clear that if the offending brother repents, you are to forgive him. There is the sovereignty of grace to forgive, even to seventy times seven. I am to go to that brother and tell him that he has done me wrong. If he will not listen to me, I go to him again with two or three witnesses. If that fails, I take it to the whole assembly. If the assembly finds in my favour with the evidence of the witnesses, and then the offending brother takes no heed, my responsibility is still to endeavour to restore him to fellowship.

If the brother repents and makes amends, that is to say if he is gained, then that is the end of the matter. It goes no further; it is not brought up again; the assembly is to know nothing of it. Where there is any failure of brotherly love, that will affect the assembly's fellowship with God and with each other.

All discipline must be in love with grace and truth. It is not to be a means to get rid of a tiresome brother or a brother that is disliked and it does not, thereafter, extend to treat that brother with disdain and discourtesy. It is not to be means for another brother, and perhaps his wife and family, to take over the assembly in their desire to be a Mr and Mrs Diotrephes

There is a vital verse in 1 Corinthians 5. 12, "Do ye not judge those that are within (the assembly)? Those that are without (the assembly) God will judge".

There have been cases when a brother has left the assembly. He may have caused some offence; he may be entirely innocent of any indiscretion; he may have been wrongly accused by the elders in the assembly, but if he leaves the assembly then the assembly cannot hold a meeting about him or speak against him in any way whatsoever and for any reason. He is not to be judged.

There is the discipline of the Father; there is the discipline of the Son over His own house. The local assembly cannot take the place of, or represent either the Father or the Son. The elders of any assembly have no superiority. If they are spiritual men then they must go and restore the brother. If necessary, they must reprove, rebuke, and exhort with all long-suffering (2 Timothy 4. 2) but the object is restoration not discipline.

Church discipline is, sadly, sometimes necessary as in the case of the assembly in Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 5, these young and somewhat wayward Christians were loathe to exercise discipline, but the apostle tells them that they must exercise discipline but in grace and truth. But discipline should be avoided, if possible, so as not to bring the evil before the whole assembly. Love covers a multitude of sins, reads the Scripture.

If it is seen that a brother is committing a sin not unto death, which sin usually refers to matters denying the Deity of Christ, the brother is to be prayed for and visited in love and gentleness. The assembly cannot take disciplinary measures until the offence is proved beyond doubt. The testimony of two members of the assembly, even if they are elders, is insufficient. The sin of the believer must be identified and proved beyond doubt. There must be fatherly care even to the accused brother and it is essential that the discipline must prove the sin beyond doubt, but any proceedings must be lead by the Lord Himself.

There may be suspicions and talk of fornication within the assembly, but such talk and suspicion is not proof of sin. Therefore, there can be no disciplinary action. If a saint gets into trouble, he is still Christ's. If the rumours become rampant then it may be wise for a couple of brethren to visit him and, in gentleness and love, graciously discuss the matter with him without accusation, aggression or vitriol.

The discipline of the Son over His own house is shown in the matter of Judas Iscariot.

Firstly, if spirituality dwells in the believer, evil cannot continue for long. It is impossible that hypocrisy, jealousy or dislike to another brother can exist. Whatever assessment we make of Judas, we read the Lord saying that, "he that eateth bread with Me, hath lifted up his hand against Me". Judas went out.

Discipline never acts where proof is doubtful or not clearly manifest.

If, as an elder, I see a young brother in danger spiritually, I go to him in a spirit of meekness and gentleness. If necessary, I exercise fatherly discipline with grace and do not circulate this information. I have to behave towards him in faithful love.

It is sad to record that much church discipline with an alleged wayward brother is totally unnecessary. Nine-tenths of discipline is unnecessary and not to be the corporate act of the assembly since the Church ought not to take it up. So any resultant court of justice in the name of the assembly itself is a disgrace to the Body of Christ. If the assembly is spiritual with spiritual elders it would purge out hypocrisy, defilement and everything that is unworthy without any judicial action. Nothing is so abhorrent than judicial action in God's house based on dislike for a brother, jealousy, hypocrisy and false or unproved allegations. If such bad feeling and falsity existed in our own houses, then there is corruption within the family. Perhaps the reprobate might have to leave but he is still a member of our family. But how abhorrent it is to put him out. How abhorrent it would be if his name were not mentioned again. What common shame! What anguish!

There is nothing more abhorrent to the Lord than a judicial process within a local assembly.

If the action against the accused brother has the smallest doubt or if it contains error or mistake, however unintentional, then that action is abhorrent to the Lord and those who make, and support the action, are not displaying spiritually and have offended both the Lord and the brother concerned and need to put the matter right with true repentance including a public withdrawal of the allegations.

We are not to publish a false report. We are not to bear false witness. We are not to set a brother at naught. If we say we love God and hate, or dislike a brother, we lie and the truth is not in us. Where there has to be Church discipline it has to be in love and for the sole purpose of justice and restoration. The act of putting out, that is to say excommunication, is not really discipline but saying that the assembly failed in matters of discipline.

Consider the case of a father going to turn out a wicked son and the other children of the family saying, "We have a right to help our father in turning our brother out of the family". What an awful thing! We find the apostle Paul having to face the Corinthians to exercise discipline when they were not disposed to do so. He says, "There is sin among you and you are mourning that he that has done this wicked deed might be taken away from you, and so now put away from among yourselves that wicked person".

But note well, the Church is never to exercise discipline without irrefutable proof of the sin that has been committed. If they do act without unquestionable proof, then that sin becomes the sin of the assembly.

The suspicion of a brother committing fornication is not a sin or a disciplinary matter until the offence is proved beyond doubt. If that mere suspicion becomes a disciplinary matter and that brother is excommunicated, then the sin is that of the assembly.

In the assembly where there is proved sin, it has to be taken before the whole assembly. "Them that sin rebuke before all, that others may fear". (1 Timothy 5.10) but also read, "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye that are spiritual, restore him".

Discipline is not punishment; it is restorative. It is not to get rid of a brother and ban him from any possible return.

And, again, we must consider ourselves. Who are we to judge? We are all poor sinners. Our righteousness is as filthy rags! We stand in the mercy of God having accepted the Lord Jesus as our Saviour.

It must be remembered that Satan wants to sift us like wheat. He will do anything he can to stumble believers. He will encourage our animosity towards a brother who is not in favour; he will sharpen our jealousy, encourage our hypocrisy, lessen our grip on spirituality and even encourage false discipline against another. He will rejoice in our false accusation and lack of love towards another. He will triumph in our wrongful excommunication of an innocent brother.

The Devil loves discord among the saints and revels in the teaching that a vilified brother cannot engage the help of another assembly to obtain justice for himself, since many assemblies believe in autonomy which means their decision stands even if it is wrong.

It has been said that a brother who leaves an assembly even, perhaps, because of a dispute excommunicates himself. This, of course, is not so. A brother can leave a meeting for various reasons, his moving away, ill health or having to care for another. His leaving may be God's will, or it could be a device of Satan so that some non-Scriptural regime or practice be set up, or that there may be some empire building within the assembly where one man can now take the lead contrary to the teachings of the New Testament.

The Lord must rule His own house and every assembly. In all things, He is to have the pre-eminence.

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Dr David Wright adds, "When a Jew was found guilty of sin, he had to lay at the door of the synagogue for one service and, in order to gain access to the synagogue everyone had to step over him. He was referred to as the salt which had lost its savour... hence the words of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 5. This laying at the door of the synagogue was a one-off and thereafter the matter was forgotten".