Corrective Church Discipline

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The Forgotten and Neglected Means of Grace[1]

1. Introduction

Ephesians 4:7-17 contains one of the clearest statements found anywhere in the Scriptures concerning the fact that the spiritual growth of the individual believer takes place in the context of the corporate life of the church. In other words, God's design for His people is not that they be "Lone Rangers."

Within the setting of a church functioning as a coordinated and well-nourished body, God has placed an activity that has come to be designated as "church discipline." Any reader of these pages who belongs to a biblically ordered church has most likely heard that, as one of the results of the Protestant Reformation, it was generally agreed that there were three undeniable marks of a true church of Christ. Those marks are the faithful preaching of the Word of God, a proper view and practice of the sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper), and the faithful exercise of church discipline.[2]

However, because of the abuses that have periodically marked the practice of church discipline, the very term often draws over itself a dark and foreboding cloud of negative thinking. For many the term brings to mind inquisitions, imprisonment, burning at the stake, and other vicious and dehumanizing activities. In order to dissipate this dark cloud of negativity, we may find it helpful to give a broad definition of what we mean by "discipline" in general, and then to approach the subject under two major categories, namely, Formative Discipline and Corrective Discipline.

A. A Definition

In its broadest sense, the word discipline simply means training. As one has accurately observed, "Discipline implies instruction and correction, the training which improves, molds, strengthens, and perfects character."[3] The Scriptures assume and explicitly assert that every child of God yearns to be conformed to the moral likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ (Mat 5:6; Rom 7:15-25; 1Jo 2:15-17). To this end, the true believer desires to profit from every God-ordained means that will contribute to the perfecting of his character after the pattern of his Lord (1Jo 2:6; Rom 8:29).

B. Formative Discipline

There are other books and booklets that identify and instruct us concerning some of those means which God has ordained for our maturation that constitute "formative discipline." I refer to such things as a covenantal commitment to membership in a confessional and biblically ordered church, coupled with a determination to experience full involvement in the life and ministry of that church (Act 2:42). I also refer to serious Bible reading, private prayer, and the other disciplines essential to personal spiritual growth in grace.

These things and many others constitute God's fingers by which He is molding and shaping us into the image of His Son. For this reason, it is helpful to regard these activities as God's

formative discipline (training) of His children. To ignore or to neglect engagement in any one of them will to some degree impede God's molding work in our lives. The more we engage in and profit from the formative disciplines by the enabling power of the Holy Spirit, the less need there will be for the activities connected with what I am designating as corrective discipline.

C. Corrective Discipline

It is a generally acknowledged fact that one of the greatest sins of churches in our day is their failure to exercise necessary and biblically framed corrective church discipline. I have written the booklet now in your hands in an effort to change this grievous reality. In seeking to grasp the major lines of biblical truth regarding this crucial subject, we shall consider four categories of the biblical teaching concerning corrective church discipline:

- The Necessity for Corrective Church Discipline
- The Purposes of Corrective Church Discipline
- The Major Forms of Corrective Church Discipline
- Some Necessary Warnings Concerning Corrective Church Discipline

2. The Necessity for Corrective Church Discipline

You may already be asking the question, "If the church is to be made up of people who trust in, love, and desire to please the Lord Jesus Christ, as well as love and serve their fellow church members, why should corrective discipline be necessary?"

The answer to that question rests upon two massive pillars of clear biblical teaching.

A. Pillar 1: The Teaching of Christ

The first of those pillars is the clear teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. There are only two uses of the word church among the words of our Lord Jesus Christ recorded in the gospel records. The first of these two is in Matthew 16:18 where our Lord Jesus boldly asserts that He will build His church, a church that will be invincible in overcoming the gates of hell. The second usage is found in Matthew 18:15-18. In this passage, our Lord envisions a specific segment of the church He will build—a segment which we designate as a local church.

Our Lord does not anticipate this assembly being constituted of perfectly sanctified people. Rather, He regards the church in a realistic way as made up of people who still sin—whose sin will sometimes cause breaches in the brotherly relationships of the members of that assembly.

Furthermore, He foresees a situation in which a sinning brother or sister has his sin addressed by the one against whom he has sinned. However, rather than acknowledge his sin, repent, and seek forgiveness for that sin, and thereby restore the marred relationship, the professed disciple refuses to acknowledge his sin, even after it has been addressed again, this time in the presence of two or three witnesses. Refusing to own his sin and to repent of it, the facts of the case are now brought before the members of the church who urgently and lovingly call the man to repentance.[4] Once more he resolutely refuses to acknowledge his sin and to deal with it in gospel repentance.

What then is the church to do with such a man? Jesus makes it very plain that the church is to dissociate itself from him and no longer regard him as a brother. Rather, he is to be regarded as a "heathen man and a publican." He is no longer to be given the special privileges of the children of God bound together in church life and fellowship. Furthermore, the excommunicated man or woman is to be avoided even in normal, mundane social interactions that he might have a taste of what it would be like to be cut off from the people of God forever (1Co 5:11-13; Ti 3:10; 2Th 3:14). He is to be prayed for and dealt with as we would lovingly seek to win a heathen or a publican to the faith of the gospel, but never forgetting that he is not to be treated as an ordinary unconverted person who might be present in our assemblies. He must be made to feel the reality of Paul's description of the discipline exercised upon the sinning man at Corinth, which is described as "this punishment, which was inflicted of many" (2Co 2:6, my emphasis).

During the many years of my pastoral responsibilities, one of the ways we often sought to implement these biblical directives concerning our treatment of the excommunicated person was to require that if he or she desired to come to church, they take their place on the back row after the beginning of the services, and leave the church building during the final prayer.

It is crucial to note that in this passage our Lord does not instruct His disciples to exercise corrective discipline primarily because of the gross nature of the man's sin. The issue began as

a private matter between him and another brother. However, it was the man's stubborn refusal to own his sin, to repent of it, and to seek a restored relationship with the offended brother that ultimately resulted in his being cut off from church fellowship. Stating the issue succinctly, it is accurate to say that there is ultimately only one sin on account of which people are excommunicated: a failure to repent of their sin.

The visible church of Christ is to be comprised of disciples committed to "follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord" (Heb 12:14). When willful refusal to repent of any given sin becomes a fixed pattern of life, even after repeated admonitions and entreaties, the individual committed to such a pattern forfeits the privilege of being regarded as a true child of God (1Jo 3:4-10).

It is crucial for us to understand that, when the church excommunicates one of its members in keeping with the clear precepts of Scripture, this act of excommunication is nothing less than a public sentence from Jesus Christ through the church. This reality is highlighted by our Lord in Matthew 18:18.

The verbs in "go and tell him," "take with thee one or two more," and "tell it unto the church" are in the imperative mood. When Jesus commissioned His apostles, He told them that they were to make and baptize disciples and to teach them "all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Mat 28:20). In the light of this fact, the necessity for engaging in corrective church discipline is rooted in the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, the architect, builder, and sovereign ruler in His church. His clear command to exercise corrective church discipline is part of the "all things" that He commanded. If we refuse to be obedient to Him Who is the head of the church, would He not say to us as He said to some in the days of His flesh, "And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?" (Luk 6:46).

In Revelation 2 and 3, the ascended Lord is addressing seven churches in Asia Minor towards the close of the first century. In these seven letters, our Lord commends the church that exercised corrective discipline (Rev 2:2) and reproved the churches that would not administer corrective discipline (Rev 2:14-15, 20). In the last of the seven letters He says, "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten" (Rev 3:19). In the light of these realities you must ask the question: Would the church of which I am a member receive the commendation or the rebuke of the sovereign Lord and head of His church?

B. Pillar 2: The Teachings of the Apostles

The second of the massive pillars of biblical truth that necessitates corrective church discipline is comprised of the manifold directives and examples of corrective church discipline found in the apostolic writings.

The epistles of the New Testament are the Spirit-inspired documents containing what churches are to believe and practice as the "pillar and ground of the truth" (1Ti 3:15). These letters were written to specific churches or to men involved in giving apostolic directives and guidance to such churches. In a very real sense these letters constitute a record of the apostolic shepherding of real churches living out their life in the real world with real needs and problems. There are numerous references in these epistles to corrective church discipline. A booklet this size makes it impossible to give an exhaustive list and a responsible exposition of the many texts that describe some aspect of corrective church discipline. However, should the reader be questioned by someone as to why he or she belongs to a church that practices corrective church discipline, an acquaintance with the following texts should constitute a helpful means to

answer such a question.

1. Romans 16:17-18

There were some in the church at Rome who were causing divisions and occasions of stumbling—that is, they were engaging in teachings that were contrary to apostolic doctrine and leading people to sin. In writing to the entire church at Rome (v. 17 indicates that these verses are addressed to the "brethren," not just to the leaders), the Apostle Paul commands that such false teachers are to be clearly marked and decidedly avoided. If they are not, their insidious influence will continue to have a negative impact with their smooth words and flattering speech.

2. 1 Corinthians 5:1-13

Among all the apostolic teaching concerning corrective discipline, no text yields more helpful directives than does this one.

The following is a brief summary of the contents of this chapter. Paul has been made aware that a man who is a member of the Corinthian church is engaging in a gross form of sexual immorality. Even though the church is fully aware of this fact, they have done nothing to correct this man. Paul writes, rebuking the church for its indifference and laxity in this matter, and commands them to take immediate action when they are gathered together as a church. Under the leadership of their overseers[5] they are to put this man out of the church by an act of corporate excommunication, delivering the man over to Satan that his spirit might be saved. The last part of verse 13 summarizes the action mandated by the apostle with the words "put away from among yourselves that wicked person."

Among the many critical things conveyed to us in this passage is the fact that the process of dealing with private sin delineated by our Lord in Matthew 18:15-18 is not meant to direct us in dealing with every situation that warrants corrective discipline. This man's sin was not a personal or private offense. It was publicly known. It was grossly scandalous. According to the apostle, the church must take action immediately to excommunicate the man since the fact and the nature of his sin is already an established fact, so much so that Paul could say, "It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles…" (v. 1).

3. 2 Corinthians 2:5-11

This is a key passage in constructing any theology of corrective discipline. It informs us what is to be done when corrective church discipline has been owned of God to effect repentance in the disciplined member. The central thrust of the passage is captured in verses 7-8 where the apostle charges the Corinthians with these words: "So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow. Wherefore I beseech you that ye would confirm your love toward him."

It is crucial to note that Paul did not appeal to the church to manifest "unconditional love" to the man by withholding the necessary corrective discipline while he was yet unrepentant. Rather, the same principled love that moved the church to engage in the unpleasant action of putting this man out of the church was now to be manifested in smothering him with evident tokens of that same love in restoring him to full church fellowship.

4. 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15

Reliable reports had reached the Apostle Paul that there were some members in the church at Thessalonica who were violating as a pattern of life the clear directives of the latter part of the fourth commandment—that is, the divine mandate to work six days. Paul designated such a pattern as "disorderly" or "unruly." In his first letter to the Thessalonians he urged the church members to warn such people (1Th 5:14).

By the time he wrote the second letter, news had come to the apostle that these disorderly brethren had not changed their ways. In the light of this, in 3:6 the apostle gives a clear apostolic command to the entire church that they are to withdraw themselves from these disorderly brethren. Many responsible expositors believe that this command assumes that the disorderly brother has first of all been formally excommunicated. Paul then reinforces this directive for corrective discipline in verse 14 with the words, "And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed."

However, there are other responsible exegetes who see this passage as adding another distinctive and nuanced contribution to our understanding of corrective church discipline. They see it as lending credibility to the idea that there is a form of discipline that is congregational and public in its nature, but falls short of actually excommunicating or unchurching a man.[6] Churches that hold this understanding would designate their disciplinary action as "suspension with public censure and social strictures." These strictures[7] would include such things as exclusion from holding office, coming to the Lord's Table, leading in prayer in prayer meetings, speaking in any group discussions, or extending hospitality to church members.

5. Other Texts

There are other texts that are clear but of lesser weight regarding corrective church discipline. They indicate some form of reproof or admonition that can legitimately be classified as expressions of corrective discipline in the church: 1 Thessalonians 5:14; Titus 1:10-13, 3:10-11; 1 Timothy 1:19-20, 5:20; and Galatians 6:1.

Summary and Application

Having considered the massive biblical pillars upon which the practice of corrective church discipline rests, we should be able to give our hearty "Amen!" to the words of two spiritual giants from bygone generations. The first of these is Jonathan Edwards, who concluded a sermon on this subject with these words:

> But the absolute authority of Christ ought to be sufficient in this case, if there were no other motive. Our text is only one of many passages in the Scripture wherein strict discipline is expressly commanded and peremptorily[8] enjoined. Now, how can you be the true disciples of Christ if you live in the neglect of these plain, positive commands? "If ye love me," saith Christ, "keep my commandments" (Joh 14:15); and, "Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you" (Joh 15:14)…If you strictly follow the rules of discipline instituted by Christ, you have reason to hope for His blessing; for He is wont[9] to bless His own institutions, and to smile upon the means of grace that He hath appointed.[10]

The second voice from the past is that of Robert Murray McCheyne. While yet a very young man, this unusually godly and useful servant of Christ recorded the development of his own convictions concerning corrective church discipline. The following are his words:

> When I first entered upon the work of the ministry among you, I was exceedingly ignorant of the vast importance of church discipline. I thought that my great and almost only work was to pray and preach. I saw your souls to be so precious, and the time so short, that I devoted all my time, care, and strength to labor in word and doctrine. When cases of discipline were brought before me and the elders, I regarded them with something like abhorrence. It was a duty I shrank from; and I may truly say it nearly drove me from the work of the ministry among you altogether. But it pleased God, Who teaches His servants in another way than man teaches, to bless some of the cases of discipline to the manifest and undeniable conversion of the souls of those under our care; and from that hour a new light broke in upon my mind, and I saw that if preaching be an ordinance of Christ, so is church discipline. I now feel very deeply persuaded that both are of God—that two keys are committed to us by Christ: the one the key of doctrine, by means of which we unlock the treasures of the Bible; the other the key of discipline, by which we open or shut the way to the sealing ordinances of the faith. Both are Christ's gift, and neither is to be resigned without sin.[11]

In the providence of God, if you must leave your present church home and are contemplating a transfer of membership to another congregation, it is in the best interests of your soul to inquire as to whether or not the church you are considering joining actually practices (not merely professes a belief in) biblically based, compassionate, and prayerful church discipline. Furthermore, you need to ask yourself whether you are prepared to embrace the oversight and actions of such a church should your spiritual health demand corrective discipline. Some churches require new members to take a solemn vow that they will embrace and submit to the discipline of the church.

3. The Purposes for Corrective Church Discipline

Proceeding in our consideration of corrective church discipline, it is crucial that we understand the purposes for which God has instituted this means of grace. While I must address those purposes in a sequential way, I am not suggesting that I am setting forth a divinely inspired order of importance.

Considering the various passages dealing with this subject, several purposes emerge. Therefore, we must understand that the purpose of corrective discipline is not simple, but complex—it is not one-sided, but multi-faceted. As we consider the purposes, we must not look upon them as blocks stacked one upon another, but rather as pieces of one large pie of divine purpose, with the largest piece of the pie being the one listed first.

In setting forth these biblical perspectives, I acknowledge my great debt to Jonathan Edwards' excellent sermon on this subject found in volume two of his Collected Works, and a very helpful little booklet by Daniel D. Wray entitled Biblical Church Discipline.

According to the Scriptures, there are at least six distinct purposes for the administration of corrective discipline. Though some of them overlap, each is different enough from the others to identify it in a distinct way. These six purposes are:

A. The maintaining of the honor of God in His church

Nothing is more precious to God than the manifestation and the protection of His honor and glory. Just as each individual Christian is to reflect the character of God and to be holy as God is holy, so the church in its corporate life and identity is to do the same (1Pe 2:9-12). Where sin is tolerated among the people of God, then the horrible realities identified in Romans 2:22-24 is the result.

Our Lord describes the New Covenant community that He has come to form as "the light of the world" and as "the salt of the earth" (Mat 5:13-14). However, refusal to deal in a biblical way with sin that warrants corrective discipline obscures the light and neuters the saltiness of the salt. Once again, hear the penetrating observation of Jonathan Edwards:

> If you tolerate visible wickedness in your members, you will greatly dishonor God, our Lord Jesus Christ, the religion that you profess, the church in general, and yourselves in particular. As those members of the church who practise wickedness bring dishonour upon the whole body, so do those who tolerate them in it. The language of it is that God doth not require holiness in His servants; that Christ doth not require it in His disciples; that the religion of the gospel is not an holy religion; that the church is not a body of holy servants of God; and that this church, in particular, hath no regard to holiness or true virtue.[12]

B. The restoration and salvation of the members of the church

The Scriptures clearly teach that all of the true people of God shall be preserved in faith unto the end (Phi 1:6). But, with equal clarity, the Scriptures teach that the true people of God must persevere to the end in the way of faith, holiness, and obedience if they expect to be received with favor in the last day (Mat 7:21; Mat 22:14; Heb 10:38-39).

Therefore, as a means of grace, corrective discipline has as its goal keeping men and women in the way of faith, holiness, and obedience to the end (Mat 18:15-17; 1Co 5:5; Gal 6:1;

2Th 3:14-15).

Seen in this light, biblical corrective discipline is a loving act—an act in which love manifests its principled manliness and grace. It is nothing less than a Christ-like act, the Christ Who Himself said, "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent" (Rev 3:19). Further, it is a God-like act—the God Who says, "My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth" (Heb 12:5-6).

The results of the discipline mandated by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 5 are vividly described in 2 Corinthians 7:8-12. Tucked away in that passage are these precious words: "For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of" (v. 10a).

C. Advancement of the purity and health of the church itself

False living and false teaching have a contagious and defiling effect upon others when tolerated within the church. It is for this reason that Paul admonished the Roman Christians to avoid those who were injecting false teaching into the assembly. Their influence was deceiving "the hearts of the simple" (Rom 16:18). In 1 Corinthians 5:6-8 Paul likens the influence of tolerated evil to the influence of leaven (yeast) within a lump of dough—a little bit goes a long way.

Again, I can do no better than to quote the words of Edwards who underscores this point with these words:

> That the other members themselves may not be defiled, it is necessary that they bear a testimony against sin by censuring it whenever it appears among them, especially in the grosser acts of wickedness. If they neglect so to do, they contract guilt by the very neglect; and not only so, but they expose themselves to learn the same vices that they tolerate in others, for "a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump." Hence that earnest caution of the apostle: "Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled" (Heb 12:15).[13]

D. Deterring others from sin

This principle is clearly underscored by Paul's words in 1 Timothy 5:20. Whether Paul is referring to the sins of men in general, or to sins of elders in particular, the principle is the same. The severe public reproof of one member may be used of God to promote a wholesome fear of sinning in the remaining members.

In Acts 5:11 we read how God's direct discipline of Ananias and Saphira had this effect upon the whole community, both within and outside the church. Church discipline is indeed a wonderful means of grace in deterring people from boldly sinning.

This principle was operative under the Mosaic covenant as well, which can be seen in Deuteronomy 17:12-13 and 13:11.

God does not despise or discount our social consciousness and the fears that grow out of it. Once again, we see the great principle that there is no antagonism between nature[14] and grace —only between grace and sin.

E. The prevention of a judicial judgment of Christ upon the

congregation

After pointing out the specific sin of the church at Ephesus, the risen Lord calls that church to repentance, buttressing that call with this frightening threat: if they do not repent, He will remove their lampstand out of its place (Rev 2:5). A similar ominous threat is issued to the church at Pergamos (Rev 2:16). We must never forget the principles embedded in that historical incident recorded in the seventh chapter of Joshua concerning the sin of Achan and how the sin of that one man crippled the entire nation.

According to 1 Corinthians 11:30, there are times when God will chasten individuals within the church for their unrepentant sins—a chastening, according to this text, that involves unnatural weakness, specific sicknesses, and even premature death. By what stretch of the imagination can it be considered a loving thing to leave our brothers and sisters alone in their sin and impenitence when they may be ripening for very severe disciplinary action from the Lord Himself if they do not repent of their sins?

F. Promoting the effectiveness of our witness to the world

In John 13:35 our Lord said, "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." In the light of this statement, what happens to the church's credibility before an onlooking world when patterns of the sins of lovelessness, internal bickering and backbiting between members, insensitivity to brothers and sisters in need of material assistance, and other such sins are known and tolerated and not dealt with by appropriate corrective church discipline?

According to Philippians 2:14-15, it is by means of manifested corporate godliness that the church shines "as light in the world." Paul goes on to say that such a church may then "hold forth the word of life" with credibility and authority. It is only when the church in its corporate life is manifesting those graces highlighted in the Beatitudes that she truly functions as "the light of the world" and "the salt of the earth."

The penetrating words of Edwards are again in order. He wrote: "The good of those who are without should be another motive…If strict discipline—and thereby strict morals—were maintained in the church, it would in all probability be one of the most powerful means of conviction and conversion towards those who are without."[15]

Having considered these six purposes of corrective church discipline as a divinely instituted means of grace, we will now examine what I have chosen to call

4. The Major Forms of Corrective Discipline

In seeking to reduce the biblical materials into distinct categories, I realize there is a danger of making artificial or arbitrary distinctions. However, I do believe that a thoughtful consideration of the key passages addressing the subject of corrective discipline reflects the fact that there are two basic categories or levels of that discipline: there is the verbal, and the verbal that merges into the social dimensions of corrective discipline. Let me explain what I mean by that terminology and examine the texts which clearly support that distinction.

A. The Verbal Aspects of Corrective Discipline

What I mean by this term is that the discipline does not go beyond the use of words, which are calculated to bring the offender to see his sin, to repent of it, and to reform his life in bringing forth "fruits meet for[16] repentance."

Within this category there is a range of verbal interaction—from the private one-to-one encounter, to a semi-private encounter, and then to the verbal presentation (by the elders) before the entire church membership with reproof, coupled with a verbal call to repentance. In any matter in which the private or semi-private confrontation of an erring brother does not resolve the issue, the elders will obviously give leadership in recommending congregational involvement and action where required by the Scriptures and their particular church order. The following texts very clearly fit into such a category: Matthew 18:15-17a; Titus 1:9-13, 3:10; 1 Timothy 5:20.

Differing views of ecclesiology will result in differing convictions and practices concerning how much congregational information and congregational suffrage are required by the biblical data. While respecting one another's consciences regarding these differences, all should be agreed that the entire church must be committed to ongoing obedience to the verbal aspects of church discipline as clearly enunciated in Matthew 18:15, 1 Thessalonians 5:14, and Luke 17:3.

B. The Social Aspects of Corrective Discipline

At this level, corporate social action is required of the church with respect to the individual who is being disciplined. This social aspect must be preceded by a verbal declaration by the overseers clearly and biblically defining the basis and nature of the discipline as an act of Christ through the church, and the manner in which the congregation is to treat the one disciplined. However, words alone do not fill out the biblical directives for this aspect of corrective discipline.

A consideration of significant texts leads to the conclusion that this aspect of discipline ranges from avoidance to no longer regarding the disciplined man or woman as a brother or sister, and giving to such a one none of the privileges connected with distinctively Christian social interaction. The following texts demonstrate various aspects of the social dimensions involved in the biblical doctrine of corrective discipline: 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15; Romans 16:17; 1 Corinthians 5:9-13; Matthew 18:17; and possibly Titus 3:10 (the word rendered reject could be translated as dismiss, drive out, or avoid).

It is this distinction between the merely verbal aspects of corrective discipline and those that take on a distinctively social dimension, that leads some to believe that a form of "suspension" is like a halfway house between public reproof and admonition and the more radical act of

excommunicating or unchurching an offender. Good and godly men and whole denominations have expressed this understanding in various books of church order, church constitutions, etc.

A classic example of this understanding is expressed by Benjamin Griffiths as follows:

> Suspension is rather to be looked upon to be when a church doth debar a member from communion for some irregularity that he may be guilty of, which yet doth not amount so high as to be ripe for the great sentence of excommunication; but that the person for such irregularity ought to be debarred of the privilege of special communion and exercise of office, in order to his humiliation (2Th 3:6-7, 10-11, 14-15). Such is not to be accounted as an enemy, but to be exhorted as a brother in union, though not in communion; but if such a one remain impenitent and incorrigible, the church, after due waiting for his reformation, is to proceed to excommunication (Mat 18:17), for that would be not hearing the church in the highest degree.[17]

5. Some Necessary Warnings

Thus far in this booklet we have examined the teaching of Scripture concerning the necessity, purposes, and forms of corrective church discipline. It now remains for us to consider some necessary warnings with respect to the proper understanding and wise administration of corrective church discipline. In addressing this aspect of our subject, there are five such warnings that I will issue.

A. Having a detailed manual of corrective discipline

Beware of the natural desire to have a detailed manual of corrective discipline. All of us by nature seek to play God, while at the same time indulging in mental and spiritual laziness. When wrestling with matters relative to corrective church discipline, these tendencies very quickly come to the fore. They express themselves in a careless overreaching of what the church is warranted to do in the name of Christ, or we constantly look for an alphabetically arranged index that will give us a quick road to the precise biblical directives that ought to regulate all and any given case of corrective church discipline.

In the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, God has given us a sufficient written revelation of His mind and will—one that can be adapted to the churches of Christ in all places, for all ages, within all kinds of differing ethnic, social, and ecclesiastical settings. With such a book in our hands, the Holy Spirit dwelling in our hearts, and written documents of church polity from the past and present functioning as a quality control upon our conclusions, we must pray for and seek to discern the path of godly wisdom as we confront specific situations demanding corrective church discipline.

One of the reasons I have freely quoted from writers of past generations in composing this booklet is to give the reader an appreciation for that wonderful body of literature that I have dubbed as a "quality control" upon our understanding of the Scriptures. We are not the first ones to face complex issues in connection with corrective church discipline. We are not the first ones to pick up our Bibles with the conviction that there is indeed an answer to our various questions relative to these issues. However, the itch for simplicity and an easy path to wisdom is still with us. We must not scratch that itch by composing documents that seek to anticipate and give definitive directives for how to deal with every imaginable form of sin which may warrant corrective discipline. We must never forget the truth stated earlier that ultimately the only sin for which one is disciplined is unrepentant sin.

B. Unbiblical extremes in administration

Beware of the carnal tendency to unbiblical extremes in the administration of corrective discipline. The following analogy is attributed to Martin Luther. He is reported to have spoken of a drunken man who, after he fell off one side of his donkey, was placed back in the saddle—only within a short time to fall off the other side of the same beast. Sin has disrupted our spiritual equilibrium and sense of balance. We are often tempted to be like the drunken donkey rider. Under the influence of our native temperament, past training, and dominant influences from others, we all have a tendency to go to one extreme or another as we interact with various facets of God's truth. Our interaction with the biblical data regarding corrective church discipline is no exception. Left to ourselves, we will either go to the extreme of carnal laxity or of carnal

severity.

1. Carnal Laxity

In a soft and sentimental age with low standards of piety and sloppy ecclesiology, or in a situation of reacting against harsh, unfeeling discipline, churches and their leaders are often guilty of carnal laxity concerning corrective discipline. They often act like a man who was beaten and abused with harsh discipline as a child, who then will not administer wise but necessary spankings in the training of his own children—in spite of the clear teaching of such passages as Proverbs 13:24, 22:15, and 29:15.

Many in our day need to adopt the perspective expressed by A. B. Bruce when he wrote:

> If a brother in Christ, according to ecclesiastical standing, may say to me, "You must love me with all your heart," I am entitled to say in reply, "I acknowledge the obligation in the abstract, but I demand of you in turn that you shall be such that I can love you as a Christian, however weak and imperfect; and I feel it to be both my right and my duty to do all I can to make you worthy of such brotherly regard, by plain dealing with you anent[18] your offenses. I am willing to love you, but I cannot, I dare not, be on friendly terms with your sins; and if you refuse to part with these, and virtually[19] require me to be a partaker in them by connivance,[20] then our brotherhood is at an end, and I am free from my obligations."[21]

It was this disposition of carnal laxity on the part of the Corinthian congregation that stirred the Apostle Paul to write in such a strident way in 1 Corinthians 5. He rebuked the Corinthians for their failure to deal faithfully with that sinning man in a way of corrective church discipline. Not only did the Corinthians fail to discipline this man, they seemed to be proud of the fact that they could yet tolerate him as a member in good standing within their assembly (vv. 2 and 6). This was indeed carnal laxity gone to seed.

2. Carnal Severity

On the other end of the spectrum, there is always the danger of carnal severity. This will usually manifest itself after a period when discipline has been tragically neglected, and there is a rediscovery of its wholesome and necessary influence in the church. It is then that churches and church leaders are tempted to adopt the attitude of the patient who doubles the medicine prescribed by his physician, assuming that if one pill is good and helpful, then two will be better! It is interesting to note that the same congregation that was rebuked for carnal laxity in 1 Corinthians 5 had to be exhorted in 2 Corinthians 2 to avoid carnal severity in the restoration of the penitent brother.

The path of church history is strewn with the wreckage that has come by an overzealous application of corrective church discipline. This carnal severity has brought church discipline into disrepute and often effectively immunized churches against any use of this God-given means of grace.

We must aim at expressing a godly balance that reflects the character of the God Who deals with men both in His goodness and in His severity. This balance is demanded of the people of God in a text such as Jude 22-23.

This warning against carnal laxity and carnal severity is beautifully captured in a section found in a New England Puritan document compiled by Cotton Mather and printed in 1680. In a section dealing with corrective discipline he writes as follows:

> In dealing with an offender, great care is to be taken that we be neither over-strict or rigorous, nor too indulgent or remiss: our proceeding therein ought to be with the spirit of meekness, considering ourselves, lest we also be tempted (Gal 6:1), and that the best of us have need of much forgiveness from the Lord (Mat 18:34-35). Yet the winning and healing of the offender's soul being the end of these endeavors, we must not daub with untempered mortar (Eze 13:10), nor heal the wounds of our brethren slightly. On some, have compassion; others, save with fear.[22]

C. Creating artificial categories of sins

Beware of the tendency to create artificial and arbitrary categories of sins with respect to the necessity for corrective discipline. Left to ourselves, we are all Pharisees and Roman Catholics with respect to this tendency. However, when we look at the various sins that are listed in 1 Corinthians 5:11 we see that, amidst the grosser sins mentioned, coveting and reviling are also included. Paul states categorically that a lifestyle characterized by the practice of any of these sins is inconsistent with being included among the true members of the kingdom of God (1Co 6:9-11). Hence, a pattern of willful continuance in any one of these sins, even after admonition and calls to repentance, is grounds for corrective discipline. A similar passage that teaches the same truth is Galatians 5:19-21. It is reported that on one occasion Martin Luther publicly rebuked a man who was to make an unjust gain from the sale of a house, labeling his action as the sin of "extortion."

Further, it is clear that there is no categorizing of the sin which occasioned the process mentioned in Matthew 18:15-17. It is not the nature of the sin which ultimately precipitated formal discipline, culminating in excommunication. Rather, it was the fact that there was persistent impenitence in light of the proof of the sin having been committed, and the sinning brother having been repeatedly admonished and called to repentance. A true Christian does not willfully and perpetually indulge in any sin as a way of life.

R. B. Kuiper issued this warning in a very clear and perceptive way when he wrote:

> The Roman Catholic Church makes a sharp distinction between venial and mortal sins. Many Protestants, too, presume to be able to tell which sins are great and which are small. And so the notion has become prevalent that the church properly resorts to discipline if one of its members holds up a bank or commits premeditated murder, but not if he occasionally, or even frequently, tells a lie. Those who make such distinctions are treading on dangerous ground. Every sin is heinous and, while there are more heinous and less heinous sins, God's judgment of that matter may differ widely from ours. God is not influenced, as we are, by traditions and popular prejudices. The eighth commandment forbids stealing, and the ninth forbids the bearing of false witness. What right has anyone to take the ninth less seriously than the eighth? It follows that in the exercise of discipline the church must take into account not only the seriousness of the offense committed but also, and especially, the attitude of the offender toward his sin. If the murderer gives evidence of heartfelt repentance, he can be dealt with gently. If the slanderer gives no evidence of sorrow but hardens his heart, excommunication may be in order.[23]

D. Isolating issues from their corporate context

Beware of any tendency to insulate the issues of corrective discipline from their corporate

context. It is clear from the many key passages in the New Testament dealing with corrective discipline, many of which have been cited and explained in this booklet, that in almost every case the issues related to that discipline are stated as involving congregational duties and responsibilities, carried out under the leadership of those appointed to "take care of the church of God" (1Ti 3:5). While there is a place for the elders or individual church members to engage in some of the forms of verbal discipline in a private way, the majority of the apostolic directives concerning corrective discipline are given to "the brethren"—that is, the rank-and-file of God's people who constitute the membership of the assembly.

Obviously, the action of the congregation should be carried out in obedience to the precepts and precedents of the Scriptures as they are expounded and applied with wisdom and authority by their God-given overseers and shepherds. In my own pastoral experience, I often had to remind individuals who came to me seeking the involvement of the eldership in a matter of personal offense that they had a responsibility, first of all, to go privately and speak to the offending brother or sister alone in obedience to the words of our Lord in Matthew 18:15.

Once again, there are no "one size fits all" rules. The leadership and God's people must plead with God for biblical and Spirit-taught wisdom in seeking to deal faithfully with the souls of our brethren.

E. Administering discipline apart from other requirements

Beware of administering corrective discipline apart from the biblically required attendant attitudes and activities. It is in the context of the church gathered for discipline that our Lord gives that wonderful promise concerning God's willingness to answer the prayers of those who agree together on earth concerning what they ask (Mat 18:15-20).

As in so many other areas of practical guidance concerning these matters, John Owen is a great help in identifying those "attendant attitudes and activities" that must always accompany biblically administered corrective church discipline. I commend to the reader Volume 16 of the works of Owen, pages 169-170. The attitudes and activities Owen identifies, along with their scriptural support, are prayer, lamentation or mourning, a due sense of the future judgment of Christ, and the nature and end of church discipline—which is always corrective and not vindictive, for healing and not for destruction. The evidence of these attendant attitudes and activities will deter any just accusation that church discipline is an unloving action.

When the Apostle Paul writes his second letter to the Corinthians, he reminds them that in the exercise of his apostolic authority, he corrected and reproved them with a measure of regret and deep personal sorrow (2Co 2:4; 7:8, 12).

Speaking from pastoral experience, we found it helpful to conclude any congregational meeting involving corrective discipline with a season of earnest and love-suffused congregational prayer that God would use the discipline for the salvation and restoration of the disciplined individual, as well as to deter others from sin.

The elders generally followed the congregational meeting with a letter to the disciplined individual assuring him of our concern for the well-being of his soul, and of our ongoing readiness to extend pastoral input if and when he was serious about dealing with his sin.

While the limits of this booklet do not permit my addressing the subject of how the church should restore a penitent disciplined church member, suffice it to say that the richest distillation of biblical material regarding this aspect of the subject is found in 2 Corinthians 2:3-11 and 7:8-12.

6. Summary and Conclusion

If you, my reader, belong to a church that faithfully surrounds you with all the God-appointed means of formative discipline, you are a blessed individual. If that church faithfully practices corrective church discipline, you are doubly blessed to be surrounded with another God-appointed means to keep you in that narrow way which alone leads to life.

I trust that reading this booklet has strengthened your conviction and enlarged your understanding concerning the necessity for corrective discipline, the purposes for that discipline, and the forms discipline should take; and that you have laid to heart the practical pastoral warnings concerning the abuses by which this wonderful means of grace is constantly undermined.

If and when you are entreated by your pastors to join with the congregation in implementing biblical directives relative to issues of corrective discipline, may you demonstrate the reality of your discipleship by obeying their administration of the rule of Christ in His church. Few things bring greater joy to the under-shepherds of a flock of Christ than to see the members supporting them in prayerfully seeking to recover a wandering sheep by means of biblically administered corrective discipline. Paul's testimony of this reality with reference to the Corinthian church as recorded in 2 Corinthians 7:2-16 is a compelling and moving testimony of this fact.

Notes

[←1]

means of grace - instruments God is pleased to use to accomplish salvation and sanctification in the hearts of men: the preaching of the Word, Bible reading and study, prayer, baptism, the Lord's Supper, godly fellowship, and church discipline.

[←2]

The marks by which the true church is known are these: if the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if she maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin; in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the church. Hereby the true church may certainly be known, from which no man has a right to separate himself. (Belgic Confession, Article 29: Of the marks of the true church…, 1561)

[←3]
Everett F. Harrison (Editor-in-Chief), Baker's Dictionary of Theology (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1969), 167.

[←4]

Good and godly men, equally committed to exercising biblical church discipline, differ in their understanding of some of the specific details of how the directives of our Lord in Matthew 18:15-20 are to be implemented.

[←5]

It was the apostolic pattern to go back to the cities where the gospel had been preached and to guide the infant churches in the ordaining of elders (Act 14:21-23). Since Paul and his companions would have visited Corinth in their second missionary journey, and since the text says that they appointed elders for them in every church, we have every reason to believe that elders were in place in the Corinthian church. This apostolic pattern of establishing an eldership in the fledgling churches was obviously carried on when Paul wrote to Titus with these words: "For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee" (Ti 1:5).

In the light of their responsibility to rule (Heb 13:17), to govern (1Th 5:12), to shepherd (Act 20:28; 1Pe 5:2), and to "take care of the church of God" (1Ti 3:5), the specifics of obeying any apostolic directive to the local church would be carried out under the wise leadership of its appointed overseers. In the light of these biblical facts, I believe the leadership of the elders in corrective church discipline is, in the language of the Confession, a truth "necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture"

[←6]
John R. W. Stott, The Message of 1 and 2 Thessalonians (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991), 193-194.

[←7]
strictures - restrictions.

[←8]
peremptorily – without delay.

[←9]
wont - accustomed.

[←10]

Jonathan Edwards, The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. II (London: Ball, Arnold and Co., 1840), 121. Reprint available from The Banner of Truth Trust, www.banneroftruth.org.

[←11]

Andrew A. Bonar, Memoir and Remains of R. M. McCheyne (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1966), 73.

[←12]
Edwards, Works, Vol. II, 121.

[←13]
Edwards, Works, Vol. II, 121; emphasis mine.

[← 14]

nature – what pertains to creation, which God pronounced “very good” (Gen 1:31); not a reference to what sin has defiled in God’s world since creation (Eph 2:3).

[←15]
Edwards, Works, Vol. II, 121.

[← 16]
meet for – corresponding to (Mat 3:8).

[←17]

Benjamin Griffiths, A Short Treatise Concerning a True and Orderly Gospel Church (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Baptist Association, 1743).

[←18]
anent – concerning; about.

[← 19]
virtually – essentially.

[←20]
connivance - consent; pretended ignorance.

[←21]
A. B. Bruce, The Training of the Twelve (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1894), 204.

[←22]

Cotton Mather, The Great Works of Christ in America, Vol. 2 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1979), 230.

[←23]

R. B. Kuiper, The Glorious Body of Christ (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1967), 311-312.