

# A Bride Prepared through Discipline

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“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.”  
*Belgic Confession, Article 29.*

Church Discipline, as seen above, is part of the essence of being a church. According to this article, if your church does not execute discipline, it does not deserve the name church. Why is Christian discipline necessary? There are many reasons why one might not want to have discipline. It is tough. Elders and ministers must spend sometimes many hours a week in the activity of discipline. The disciplined member often requests his papers, ending all contact with the church and rendering all past work fruitless. Excommunication often results in lifelong alienation of the part of the one excommunicated; not only from church, but also from family and friends. Discipline often results in heartache for most of the parties involved. It separates people who might otherwise belong together. These things together tempt us to ask, “Wouldn’t we be better off without discipline?” The answer must be a resounding “NO!” In this essay I shall examine the reasons for Christian discipline from its effect on the Church as an organization, the world as the foe of Christianity, and the true believer.

Concerning the church, discipline is necessary for her purity. Scripture often portrays the church as the bride of Christ. Let us examine the nature of this analogy. Before she is married, while she is yet engaged, she is careful to maintain her chastity for her future husband. She wants to be able to present herself to her husband, on their wedding night, as one who is pure from any defilement. She wears a ring on her finger, which signifies that she is pledged to one man, a “hands off!” sign, if you please. She dedicates herself to her fiancé, thinks about him, strives to please him, even before they marry. She refuses to entertain any thoughts about other men. This must also be true of the church. The church must do all she can to be sure that she can present herself to her husband, Jesus Christ, as one free from the defilement of sin. She takes upon herself the mark of baptism, to show that she belongs to Jesus. She rejects overtures from other suitors, the world and the apostate church. She puts away from herself everything that can possibly defile her. Christian discipline is one of the means by which she does this.

Christian discipline also contributes to the church’s ability to preach the gospel. It is a terrible contradiction when a church preaches the holiness of God and how it must apply to her members and the members themselves walk in evil ways. If the preaching of the gospel is the voice of Christ Himself, church members must assent to that preaching not only with their voice and presence in the church, but also with their daily walk. When a member walks in sin, he is really thumbing his nose at Christ Himself, an action certainly worthy of discipline.

Discipline assures church members of their salvation. It returns wayward members to their place and confirms them in their salvation by their holy walk. When the church excommunicates the impenitent, she is free once again to pursue the calling of holiness “without which no man can see the Lord.” Members see that they really are living the life of the antithesis, that they are indeed separate from the world of unbelief and sin. They become more conscious of the power of God operating in their lives, the power which restrains them from committing the evils for which others are disciplined.

Second, Christian discipline is necessary for the effect that it has on the world. Members who show in their actions and words that they do not belong in the church are thrown back into the world, just as the worthless salt is cast out to be trodden under foot (Matt. 5:13). These members go back to

the world to find their fellowship and life, knowing that they have none in the church. The world also takes them back into its arms and encourages them in the folly of their evil ways. In this way, the world heaps more and more sin upon itself and becomes more ripe for judgment. Of course, even though this happens, the church may not stop praying for that excommunicated member (see the form for the re-admittance of excommunicated persons). If it pleases God to answer these prayers in grace, and bring the one excommunicated back to his godly senses and back into the arms of the church, the world is further condemned as it tries to hold that person back from repentance and faith.

In Christian discipline, the church manifests her purity to the unbelieving world. We may never give any grounds to the world for them rightly to call us hypocrites, as so many do now. When church members break the commandments, Paul's words in Romans 2:24 ring true: "For the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you, as it is written." This is also for the sake of those elect in the world who have not yet come to repentance and faith. When God does finally convince them of their sin and of the mercies of Christ, they will not come to a church whose members walk in every evil way. May we ever keep this in mind as we conduct ourselves in the midst of the world, so that God's Name is upheld and glorified, and that the world may be without excuse!

As the preaching of the gospel, church discipline has the savor of death unto death and life unto life (II Cor. 2:16). Whenever an impenitent member is censured or excommunicated, not only is that person's impenitence condemned, but also the impenitence in which the whole world walks. This, of course, incurs the wrath of the world, for it is declared once again that they have no part in the kingdom of heaven. Through discipline, the antithesis is promoted and honored, something the world cannot stand and continually tries to rub out of existence.

Third, Christian discipline is necessary for the effect it has on every child of God within the church. We see this clearly from the form for excommunication itself:

"In the meantime let everyone take warning by this and such like examples; to fear the Lord, and diligently take heed unto himself, if he thinketh he standeth, lest he fall; but having true fellowship with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, together with all faithful Christians, remain steadfast therein to the end, and so obtain eternal salvation. You have seen, beloved brethren and sisters, in what manner this our excommunicated brother has begun to fall, and by degrees is come to ruin; observe therefore, how subtle Satan is, to bring man to destruction, and to withdraw him from all salutary means of salvation..."

It is important to see here, that the life of the individual believer represents, on a smaller scale, the activity of the church. As the sinful member is reproved and perhaps even excommunicated, so the Christian puts to death his sinful nature. As the church purifies herself by putting out the impenitent sinner, so the individual believer refuses to make any room for the operations of sin within him. As the church excommunicates, her members who are witness to the action examine their own hearts, and make sure that they keep out the very sins for which the excommunication occurs.

As we noted above, faithful members are encouraged in their walk of holiness when another is disciplined. Excommunication teaches believers that the way of holiness is the way of salvation, that there is great reward in the keeping of God's commandments. When they consider the sin of the impenitent, they see the ugliness of sin in general, and make every effort to avoid it. Although we may never say that our works, our walk of holiness will bring us salvation, we cannot be conscious of our salvation if we walk in an evil way. When the church excommunicates an impenitent member, each member of that church gives assent to that excommunication. In this way, each member also passes sentence upon their sins, repents of it, and flees to God for forgiveness through Christ. At the throne of

God, the believer also seeks the grace to continue in the walk of holiness, knowing it is only by grace alone that they are kept out of that same evil way.

In conclusion, since we have seen the need for Christian discipline as it effects three areas, the church, the world, and the individual believer, let us be sure to maintain this third mark of the church and so ensure our claim to the title “Church of Jesus Christ.” ❖

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