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No. 1.

SCRIPTURAL

CHURCH DISCIPLINE,

FORMATIVE AND CORRECTIVE.

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SCRIPTURAL CHURCH DISCIPLINE

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It is assumed that Discipline is founded on the teachings of Scripture. My present purpose is to discuss *General Principles* rather than specific applications of principles. If I shall lead any to a higher estimate of the breadth and importance of true church discipline, my desire will be accomplished.

The principles involved are few and simple; properly and faithfully applied, they may become a tremendous power for good to the churches of Jesus Christ.

I. What then is the DESIGN of Church Discipline?

Speaking generally it is Threefold, viz: the good of the *individual*, the good of the *church*, and the *Glory of Christ*. It aims to develop Christian character in its broadest sense, helping a disciple to make the most of himself as an example of holiness and servant of his Divine Master. Its design is also to shield, restrain, and on occasion correct him. For the church, its design is to promote purity, unity, efficiency; to preserve unstained

the name and honor of the church, and to remove any reproach which may come upon it; to prevent strife and heal dissensions; to cast out hindrances to piety and increase spirituality. And, by holy men and women, and a holy aggressive church, Jesus Christ shall be exalted and glorified before the world.

II. What is the Scriptural conception of *Church Discipline*?

According to the Scriptures it includes Formative Discipline, or Training, and Corrective Discipline for those in whose cases formative discipline has not secured its desired result.

1. In its noblest statement, *Discipline* is *Formative*, is *Christian Training*. As practically held and applied it is too often a thing far different. The popular conception is something like this—when a brother has violated his covenant with the church by some neglect, or overt act, especially by flagrant immorality, he is to be summoned before the church and a case made out against him. The offender must then confess and forsake his sin and resume his walk with the church; or he must be cut off. Now, while this is discipline, and is Scriptural so far as it goes, it is not all there is of it. The conception is far too narrow; these are only final steps, too often made necessary simply because previous steps have been sadly neglected. Let me give a definition which is very much *broader* and more fully Scriptural. “Discipline in a

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church is the regular, vigorous application of the principles, doctrines, and rules of divine revelation in promoting the purity, knowledge, order, peace, and efficiency of each of the members, and of the entire body," and "Is designed to increase, concentrate, and direct the agency of Christians in the conversion of the world." (Crowell, p. 221.) This is vastly more than merely dealing with delinquencies and transgressions. This formative discipline deals *primarily with the heart*; it seeks first of all the *spiritual development* of the Christian who joins the church. Its mission is to cultivate and establish the graces of piety; to develop a Christian man who will live right toward his Redeemer and Lord, and who will also fill his place well as a member of Christ's ordained, visible, and local church. The true idea of the nature of discipline is a training of disciples *into* Christ, training them *for* Christ, training them to *serve* Christ in and through his church. The popular idea, which mostly means bringing a member to account for positive or negative misdeeds, is only a final and extreme application of a much wider principle. Really, it is of the nature of an exception; it results from the failure of previous discipline to do its work.

Let me further enlarge upon the nature of this formative discipline; for it is of the utmost importance that we have just, Scriptural views of the subject at its foundation. Christians are *Soldiers* of Christ. A church is a

company of enlisted soldiers, organized for spiritual warfare. To make them worthy of their calling and effective, there must be thorough and continual training in the doctrine of personal submission and accountability to authority, and the cultivation of every soldierly quality and power. The church is also a *School*. The pupils are learners of Christ; are students of the mysteries of his grace; students of his requirements, taking lessons in personal and public duty—lessons in Christian service, in Christian love, in the manifold graces and obligations of piety. Nearer still, the church is a *Family*. This is the highest Scriptural conception of it, unless we speak of it as the “Body of Christ.” A church is a household of faith, that is, a household of believers who, as children of one Father, having “one Lord, one faith, one baptism,” are to live in the bonds of peace as brethren. Each member of the household is to have a tender concern for the welfare of all the rest; and the rest, singly, and as a body, are to be watchful and careful for his welfare. Loving and gentle as brothers and sisters, the elder members must interest themselves to lead along the younger ones in all Christian duties and privileges, teaching them the way of the Lord more perfectly; encouraging the faint-hearted, bearing up the weak, admonishing if need be; and in all showing patience and long suffering. (1 Thess. v. 14. Revision.) The younger members should be teachable, eager to learn, quick to meet duty,

faithfully walking in Christ in all wherein they have learned his will.

But every organization has its laws. The family in Christ has its divinely given regulations, its restraints, its corrections and penalties, the same even as those of the earthly family. Government, sovereign authority, corrective discipline, are essential to the family life in both cases; in both alike, God has wisely ordained them for the orderly training and useful growth of each and all members of the household.

Church discipline, is hence, in practice, both a training and a restraint; it is an education and a correction. But the *chief* of these is *education*. To be Scriptural, or, to be efficient for either the member or the church, it must begin with training disciples into a just understanding of Christian privileges and responsibilities as members of Christ's local church. They must also be trained into a faithful, lovingly loyal discharge of these in their widest range. When shall this educational process begin? Begin when the convert is baptized into the fellowship of the church. Indeed, it should begin before he is received for baptism. How long shall it be maintained? From that hour throughout his Christian career until church fellowship shall be dissolved. By whom shall he be thus educated for God? *All must help*. Each member of the household has a duty to perform in shielding from evil and in building up in all Christian virtue every

other member. Yea, in this way he becomes himself trained and confirmed in piety and powers. The pastor, as leader and overseer, has a first responsibility for instructing the flock. The deacons must do their part, as being next in responsibility; the maturer members must do their part; and so also must the younger, and less prominent and less gifted ones assist in training up into Christ this one member of the spiritual brotherhood.

There is a word, more familiar to the fathers than to many of us of the younger generation, which aptly expresses the thought at this point. It is "*watchcare*." Beyond the teaching of Biblical doctrines, educational discipline is mostly a watching over and a caring for the member in his varied experiences and emergencies as they arise. Taking the young Christian at his entrance into the church, it throws about him those timely encouragements and gentle restraints, those manifold helpful influences that will develop true piety, strengthen faith, confirm hope, and increase joy; which will help him to withstand temptations, conquer besetting sins, and bring him safely over difficult and bewildering portions of the spiritual highway; will establish in noblest virtue and manliness; will develop love for Christ and for his church which cannot be shaken; will incite to worthiest Christian ambition and inspire with steadfast zeal; make him thoughtful, earnest, liberal on behalf of the church and all work for God; a training, in short,

which will cultivate and maintain Christian character and graces of life up to their very best. A lifelong discipline to holiness and holy service.

This Formative discipline is *Preventive*; it saves from falling into error, negligence, sin; it educates away from the wrong, it confirms in the right. Such discipline should ever be the chief aim and work of the church.

2. But discipline is also *Corrective*. It enters when formative, preventive discipline, fails. It comes in as a last effort to save if possible, by reclaiming the brother. It is still educational, but seeks to train and preserve by another process, and by other agencies.

(a) Corrective discipline is *Necessary*. Soldiers sometimes lose their loyalty for the flag, and chafe under authority and restraint; but they must be taught the supremacy of law, otherwise the army will become a lawless, ineffective mob. Now and then pupils forget their duties to themselves and to the school as students; yet it will not do to allow them the liberty of their personal whims and caprices. Without system, order, discipline, the school and all attempts at instruction become failures. Even children sometimes lose interest in the common home and its welfare, and are disposed to cast off proper authority. In such cases one thing is evident—the offender must either be led back to obedience and helpfulness, or, be dismissed from the family circle and its privileges. So of a church: it cannot be either truly

united, or pure, or prosperous and efficient, if any part of its members neglect or refuse to co-operate with the rest for the common good, or become covetous, or depart from the common faith, or lead impure or worldly lives. Whenever a brother steps aside, failing by omission or by overt act, to keep his freely-made vows, that moment the treatment should change. Efforts to win him back are in order. In all sincerity and frankness, by exhortation, warning, entreaty, by arguments appealing to self-regard; regard for the church, whose sacred principles he professes and whose good name he shares; regard for solemn vows; and above all regard for his loving and dishonored Redeemer; by every argument and labor which love to God, his cause, and his erring disciples, can suggest, we must try to win the brother from his evil ways. This we must do as brethren, seeking personally to save him from sin, and to save him to godliness. If we fail, then the divinely-given authority of the church as a body should be brought to bear upon him. He must be made to see, not only that he is a transgressor, but that his evil course, if persisted in, must needs bring upon him God's prescribed penalties; that his sin will compel his exclusion from the household of faith.

(b) Corrective discipline is *Imperative*, as well as necessary. It is not left to our discretion. The teachings of Jesus in the 18th of Matthew, and of the Holy Spirit by Paul in his epistles to the churches and to Timothy, and

by Peter and John, and elsewhere, leave us no alternative. The church must do its best to win and save; but if a brother chooses to persist in sin, he must be cut off. The spiritual family should live in peace; but peace to be worth anything must come through order, submission to Christ's authority as vested in his church, and the proper relation of each member to his proper sphere, and to the body as a whole. Peace with righteousness is the only peace allowed of God in his churches. True prosperity is not consistent with "corrupt allowance of all disorders." As it has been well said, "one of the alarming symptoms of our time is that it can endure so little discipline"; that it is in every direction so much disposed to accept "peace at any price"; that rather than hold an erring brother firmly up to Christ's rule, even to exclusion from fellowship, churches are so ready to tolerate almost any degree of unchristian spirit or conduct, short of downright, signal crime. But this laxness is disloyalty to the Head of the church. It is flagrant disobedience to orders. Having deliberately chosen to continue in sin, nothing remains but to sever him from the spiritual family, whose divinely imposed laws he spurns. "Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear." (1 Tim. v. 20.) "I have a few things against thee, because thou hast them that hold the doctrine of Baalam." (Rev. ii. 14.) "Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out,

Therefore, the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump." (1 Cor. v. 6, 7.) "If he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican." (Matt. xviii. 17.) "Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person." (1 Cor. v. 13.) The unity, purity, and welfare of the church and the honor and command of Jesus Christ,—alike compel us to this extreme, final step. We have no alternative, no liberty of choice.

III. Consider now, the SPIRIT of Scriptural discipline—especially when it is corrective.

Nothing relating to the subject is more important or needs closer, more prayerful attention, than the spiritual tone and temper in administering for Christ against offenders. It goes without saying; that, for training Christians in gospel doctrines and duties we ever need the Holy Spirit's aid. How much more, then, do we need it when, everything failing to hold a brother to Christ, we would persuade him to return; or when, failing to reclaim, we must cast him off as unworthy of a place in Christ's holy church. If ever fallible disciples need wisdom from above and the temper of Jesus, it is then.

1. Pre-eminently it should be in *A Christian spirit*. I say a Christian spirit because it is so very easy for us to let a different spirit, a worldly-wise, an undevout spirit control us. "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault,

ye which are *spiritual* restore such an one in the spirit of meekness." (Gal. v. 1.) Both as regards the end sought by discipline, and the means and method by which we seek it, let it be transparently manifest that Christian principle and love control us.

2. *It must be brotherly*: "Considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted." (Gal. vi. 1.) Let the offender feel that it is no personal affair; that there is not the least purpose or desire to do him an injury; that to each and all it is an unpleasant *duty*; that the sole aim and motive is the honor of Christ and of his cause, in obedience to his solemn command.

3. It should also be a *patient*, gentle, forbearing spirit. A spirit which not only fervently desires to see the brother return to duty, but is willing to wait, and *wait*, so long as there are the least signs of penitence and returning. The spirit of tenderness and gentleness with which one would converse with a young convert of his new found love and peace and joy in Jesus; the spirit of the Divine Master himself when dealing with the erring and the fallen. The method of procedure, as well as aim and motive, should be so intensely Christ-like that he will feel, if severe measures are finally taken, it is because he compels them—the *responsibility is solely and solemnly his own*. It is the failure to have Christ's spirit when dealing with erring ones, and the apparent presence of an opposite spirit—something less

than the honor of God—that often causes extremest discipline to come short of its true object.

IV. It remains now within my purpose, to specify some items of *LOSS* and *GAIN* in connection with discipline and its neglect.

1. The *Losses*. (*a*) It is a loss to the *brother* who is permitted to neglect duty and to do evil unrebuked and unmolested. The church, by neglecting to train and correct, wrongs the brother. While it is true that he has destroyed himself, it is also solemnly true that the church has not done what it could to save him. For this cause thousands of souls in our churches are suffering tremendous spiritual losses. (*b*) The *church* is a heavy loser. Each member stands for a certain amount of spiritual power and efficiency. These gifts will grow by training and use. Young Christians of to-day will, if properly cared for, become strong, noble Christian men and women, ten or twenty years hence. But if through false notions of duty, or sheer cowardice on the part of the church, they be allowed to drop out of their places and to enter into evil paths, the church suffers irreparable damage. (*c*) There is also serious *financial* loss. A young member, able now to give very little, will perhaps years hence become a liberal and able giver. Nearly everything, as regards liberality and fidelity in contributing for Christian uses, depends upon the training received. Even bounteous givers will, if left to fall away through

neglect of proper watchcare, ere long withhold their offerings. And those naturally holding the purse-strings tightly, if never trained in the duty and grace of giving, if allowed to feel that the sin of covetousness will be overlooked, will live and die in the church and never be of much use. Of the truth of these propositions almost every church furnishes sad and striking illustrations. In this direction alone the cause of Christ is constantly suffering enormously.

(d) And finally on the debit side, if the member and the church lose through neglect of discipline, how much more does *Christ* lose? It is a sin and shame that, by reason of our neglect of this plain duty, our Lord should be thus robbed of his just dues.

2. *But there are Gains resulting from faithful discipline.* All that was before lost is now gained. (a) To the member is saved what of character, reputation, spiritual power, service, he would lose in case the church were to neglect its sacred duty. He gains also the increased spiritual qualities and powers, character and influence, nobility of life and of service, which come to him through the ministries of a faithful church. (b) What the member gains is equal gain to the church. Both what is saved from decay and waste, and what is wrought into him of personal power and effectiveness, become solid additions to the associated power of the body. The gain is spiritual and it is also material. (c) There is also a *supple-*

mental gain, in the form of *Tone* and *Habit* of life, coming to the members of a church which is faithful in applying corrective discipline. Given a church faithful in this, which is prompt, courageous, thorough, gentle but firm in administering gospel discipline in all its bearings, and you have a church whose members are "*apt*" to be faithful. They grow into habits of fidelity. They well know that fidelity to every covenanted obligation is expected, and will be required of them. You have shut out from each and all a most potent incentive and temptation to backsliding, waywardness, neglect of the church and its ordinances, penuriousness, and manifold other seductions from God and duty. The one likely to sin is he who knows he can sin and not be called to account. Hence the very certainty of receiving severer discipline when deserved, is a divinely appointed safeguard to the flock.

(*d*) And what the member and the church gain is gain to Christ. Saving his servants and his cause from reproach is adding to his honor. Cultivating the gifts and graces, increasing the spiritual and material resources and efficiency of the church, you enhance the glory of Zion's King.

We conclude, therefore, that his honor and advantage should spur every disciple and every household of faith to the utmost carefulness in *doing*, and *in teaching to observe* "all things whatsoever he has commanded." The

churches of Jesus Christ need a large increase of Christian love and spiritual power, moving them to a clearer discernment and fuller discharge of sacred duty to Christ, themselves, and their members. May the Holy Spirit awaken us to a nobler, more devout disposition and purpose in regard to this important subject. Taking hold at the true beginning, which is gospel training in doctrine, life, and duty; pursuing with right aim in the true gospel method and spirit—may we not stop one whit short of the prescribed gospel limit. And in all, and always, may we humbly seek counsel and direction of the Holy Spirit, who is pledged to lead us into all truth and to bless us in the discharge of every duty.

God grant to his churches a genuine revival of Scriptural church discipline in its broadest meaning and application; discipline, first formative, and then, if necessary, corrective.