

CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Ezekiel 33. 7-11

Romans 13. 8-14

Matthew 18. 15-20

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

‘Church discipline’ is quite possibly the most unhappy topic in all of Christianity. Today, church discipline brings to mind images of witch trials, public humiliations and damning excommunications. It conjures up notions of tyrannical and authoritarian kinds of abuse. For some, it represents everything that is wrong with organised religion. This is unfortunately the case because church discipline has often been exercised so poorly. There are many victims of church discipline gone bad; and indeed, the heart of the Christian Church should be mourning over this tragedy

However, as the old slogan goes, the abuse does not cancel out the use. That is, even though church discipline has gone wrong far too often, it is still something that the Christian Church should practise, if we take our appointed reading from St Matthew’s gospel seriously. But in order to take this reading seriously, we must first situate it in its proper context.

In this text, our Lord’s intention was not to give general rules concerning personal relations, but rather to provide the church with rules for Christian congregational life. Jesus had one particular concern, and that was for those individuals who were guilty of serious sin and who remained unrepentant; he knew that these people would often have a disruptive effect on the life of the church.

As we read Christ’s words, I imagine that most of us are very surprised. We (like others before us) are inclined to see our sin as a matter between ourselves and God;

or at most, as a matter between ourselves and the person who has wronged us. But the thrust of our Lord's words is very clear: our behaviour as individual Christians not only has an effect on us; it also affects the Christian congregation to which we belong. We Christians are bound together in community.

The procedure for church discipline that is outlined in Matthew's text involves a four-step process.

In the first step, the process of church discipline begins on an individual level. Jesus says, 'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.' Here, an individual believer is to go to an offending church member privately and confront him or her in a spirit of humility and gentleness. The private conversation between the offended and the offender is to avoid embarrassment. If the offending person repents in response to the private confrontation, he or she is forgiven and restored.

In the second step, if the one-to-one encounter leaves the offending party unrepentant, the offended member attempts to resolve this problem by taking one or two fellow members of the congregation as 'witnesses',¹ in order to ensure that there is no misrepresentation on either side. The presence of additional witnesses is as much a protection for the one being approached as it is for the one who is approaching. The witnesses need to confirm whether there is a heart of repentance or one of indifference or rejection.

At this point, it should be hoped that the one or two who are brought along to confront the offender will not have to become public witnesses against him or her before the rest of the church. Ideally, their presence will be sufficient to induce a

¹ Cf. Deut 19. 15.

change of heart in the offending person. If this change of heart does occur, the person is forgiven and restored, and the matter is dropped.

If the offending person refuses to listen and respond to the confrontation of the witnesses after a period of time, those witnesses are then to tell it to the church. This is step three, and is most appropriately done by bringing the matter to the attention of the church leader, who will then in turn oversee its communication to the assembly as a whole. Again, it is hoped that this potent procedure will elicit repentance and obedience; in which case the offender is forgiven and restored.

If the offending person does not heed the congregation's earnest request, he or she is then removed from the congregation.² This is step four.

The language used in this text (particularly in step four) seems strangely harsh to us, especially since Christ is recorded as having befriended tax collectors, sinners and Gentiles.³ The process of excommunication also seems strange, given our Lord's injunction (provided earlier in Matthew's gospel) to avoid judging others. Jesus's words are clear: 'For with the judgement you make, you will be judged; and the measure you give will be the measure you get' (7. 2).

It is clear, however, that if the early church did not already have a procedure for disciplining dangerously offending members, one is given here by Christ. According to this text, the Christian community as a whole is concerned with the ethics of its individual members, and it is to intervene in a spirit of love and forgiveness to take pastoral action that is more than mere advice. The goal is not just to maintain the 'holiness' of the insiders; it is to bring straying members to an awareness of their sin, to repentance, and ultimately to restoration.

² This procedure was recommended by Paul to the church in Corinth, in the case of an incestuous relationship (1 Cor 5. 4, 11-13); and more generally to the church in Thessalonica (3. 14-15).

³ Cf. Mt 9. 11; 11. 19.

At the end of Matthew's text, our Lord states that the authority given earlier to Peter to make authoritative decisions pertaining to Christian life in the life of the Church (16. 19) is given here to the individual church congregation in matters of its own discipline. In this context, individual church members are encouraged to pray together, especially concerning disciplinary matters; and they are reassured that Jesus is with them as they take such decisions.

We may wonder if this text was only initially intended for the members of the early Christian Church who were the first beneficiaries of Matthew's gospel, that is, Jewish believers. Indeed, the step-by-step procedure for reconciling an offending member of the church probably reflects the practice of Matthew's community.

Yet it must be said that the implications of Matthew 18 for life within the Christian Church today are great. The text we have studied outlines a clear procedure that is designed to help serious offenders recognise their sin and return to the community. Churches – both their leaders and their members – must learn to live transparently in the gospel, meaning that we confess our sins to one another and rejoice in the grace that God gives.

What does it mean to love one another as Christ has loved us? It means loving mercifully and forgivingly. And doing that means confessing our sin to one another so that we can be forgiven. This is how we live transparently in the gospel. It is this kind of corporate life together that shows the world that we are disciples of our Lord.

Amen.