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CHURCH DISCIPLINE: THE GREAT OMISSION:

Part One

Philip Mutetei

Discipline in the church is the great omission in most countries today. Leaders fear to discipline because it seems so unloving and may cause divisions within the fellowship. Discipline may lead to the loss of influential and wealthy members. Discipline is feared because the church leaders themselves have skeletons in their closets so they fear to judge others for sins they themselves have committed. There is also great misunderstanding of the meaning, purpose and nature of church discipline. Many see church discipline as condemning and excommunicating rather than lovingly restoring the wayward back into fellowship with believers.

In this article and the subsequent one we publish the careful research of Pastor Philip Mutetei on Church Discipline. In this issue the Necessity and Grounds of Church Discipline will be examined. Part Two will continue the study with the Proper Procedure for Church Discipline.

There are many definitions of Church Discipline but the one by Lawrence Richards in the Expository Dictionary of Bible Words is succinct and meaningful. "Church discipline is the loving action of the Christian community, committed to obedience, intending through the discipline to help the brother or sister turn from sin and find renewed fellowship with God." Church discipline is more than excommunication but involves loving and faithful teaching throughout the Christians' lives so that they are taught to follow the ways of godliness.

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As long as the church of Christ remains on the face of the earth, the exercise of biblical discipline remains a necessity of paramount importance. The necessity of church discipline cannot be overstated, because the church cannot be true without it. The importance of discipline as a mark of a true church may be underscored by the fact that Jesus refers to discipline on one of two occasions in which he mentions the church. It was our Lord who anticipated the power and authority of the church to exercise and maintain discipline (Matt 18:15-20). Therefore, we can confidently say that the need for church discipline was much anticipated by our Lord. This is because the church is a new community called out of the world to live a separate life unto God.

God is holy and he intended his church to be pure, undefiled in faith and life. The Bible says to "expel the wicked man from among you" (1 Cor. 5:13). Jesus designed self-discipline for his followers (Matt 5:22-23; Mark 7:14-23) but when self-discipline fails, then the Christian community is responsible to exercise discipline lovingly.

Therefore, in order to live in a manner worthy of our calling in Christ, we have to live a life guarded by the biblical principles lest we misuse the liberty/freedom in Christ. Furthermore, ours are the last days (2 Tim 3:1-6) and even as our Lord said (Matt 24:10-12), the hearts of many are turning away from God and so need to be called back to God's ways. This requires times of discipline for those among us who are straying from the ways of God.

The writer is much impressed by what the President of Columbia International University, Dr. Johnny Miller, said in response to the question on the necessity of church discipline in the twentieth century:

Yes, church discipline is necessary, first of all because it is biblical. It works for the correction and restoration of the errant individual, and it strengthens the testimony of holiness for the church This age is certainly not any less sinful than the New Testament era, and it may not be any more sinful.¹

Discipline in the church is so essential that Ben Patterson has chosen to call it the *backbone* of the church. Without discipline in the church, the church remains distorted in nature because a true biblical church is always perfected through the execution of discipline for its members who go astray. And of course "to belong to the Lord," as Patterson has said, "is to belong to his church and to

¹ President Johnny Miller of Columbia International University, interview by writer, April 27, 1994, Columbia, South Carolina.

submit to the discipline of his church."² In his analogy of the backbone in reference to discipline in the church, Patterson went on to say that: "A spineless body has trouble standing up for anything."³ This is true of the church – the church that lacks discipline can be trusted to stand for nothing divine, so discipline in the church is essential for her very existence.

Another comment on the necessity of discipline in the church comes from Dr. Titus Kivunzi, the Bishop of the Africa Inland Church (AIC), Kenya:

The health of the church depends on discipline. Therefore, AIC Kenya needs it. Discipline is a positive term whose purpose is to mature believers, and no church is without such a need for maturity. Furthermore, it is commanded that we administer discipline.⁴

A similar response was also given by David Mbuvi, the former Administrative Secretary of AIC Kenya, who said: "Yes, church discipline is very necessary in Africa mainly because the rate of church growth (numerical) threatens the same church if discipline is lacking and the management will be chaotic."⁵

The author agrees with Neil Lines that discipline in the church must be religiously observed and practised to insure her spiritual health. Lines was quick to cite Marlin Jeschke who said:

To abandon discipline because it has sometimes been ill-administered is as unwarranted as it would be to abandon worship on the grounds that it has sometimes been ill-conducted. The relaxation of discipline has often more absurd results than ever attended its excess.⁶

Necessity for the discipline in the church of Christ is of all ages. Church discipline is not a denominational agenda. It is not for a certain group of Christians. Rather it is the requirement of God for the whole church, the true church of Christ. It is a biblical teaching as Robertson McQuilkin says in *Christianity Today*: "The Bible is very clear in teaching that there should be

² Ben Patterson, "Discipline: Backbone of the Church," *Leadership*, 4 (1983): 11.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Rev. Dr. Titus Kivunzi of the Africa Inland Church, Kenya, interview by writer, January 25, 1994, Kenya, Africa.

⁵ Administrative Secretary David Mbuvi of AIC Kenya, interview by writer, January 20, 1994, Kenya, Africa.

⁶ Neil M. Lines, "Church Discipline: Ruination or Restoration," (D Min Dissertation, Western Conservataive Baptist Seminary, 1982), 3.

church discipline and the ultimate discipline is breaking of fellowship or separation. Certain people are to be separated from the church."⁷

THE PURPOSES OF DISCIPLINE IN THE CHURCH

When a church is involved in the discipline of one of its members, it should affirm to itself the purposes of church discipline revealed in the New Testament. God did not leave his people to design the purposes for discipline, rather in his sovereign counsel he has revealed the purposes to the church.

Restoration of the Sinning Believer

The primary purpose of church discipline is restoration, which is winning the brother, helping him, seeking his well-being, reclaiming the fellowship with God and with the brethren. This purpose must always be remembered, lest discipline becomes harsh, cruel, prideful, vengeful, or destructive. This is because God designed discipline as a means of grace, not of destruction. It is to be an evidence of love for each other, not a time to practice hatred and arrogance toward a fellow believer. As McQuilkin says: "Discipline is designed as a means of grace, not destruction; as an evidence of love, not of hate or fear."⁸

To "restore," used in Gal 6:1, means to reinstate the individual to a proper spiritual condition. The word means to "mend that which is torn." It was used in relation to the mending of torn nets or the setting of broken bones. Galatians 6:1 speaks of a brother who has lapsed into sin; those who are spiritual in the Galatian churches are to approach him to restore him through whatever process was necessary. This is a tremendous ministry given to the church by God himself. Regarding the ministry of restoration, Paul George Thyren says: "To restore and forgive a brother is an excellent test of one's spirituality."⁹ If what Thyren has said is true then failure to restore the fallen believers speaks very loudly about the spirituality of the twentieth century church.

In his lecture notes, Dr. McQuay says: "Church discipline, therefore, purposes to awaken a brother to his sin and assist him in returning to his former,

⁷ "Robertson McQuilkin, "Whatever Happened to Church Discipline?" *Christianity Today* 8 (1974): 9.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Paul G. Thyren, "The Pauline Doctrine of Church Discipline," (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1974), 59.

spiritual healthy condition and usefulness in the body of Christ."¹⁰ Paul writes: "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted." (Gal. 6:1).

Other passages which speak of restoration include Matthew 18:15; 1 Corinthians 5:5; Hebrews 12:10,13; and James 5:20. For the purposes of this study, the normative is Galatians 6 in which the apostle gives counsel as to who should and how to do restoration with every caution.

The Purification of the Church

God is not only concerned about an individual believer getting restored but also about the rest of the church body. Again it also concerns his character. Sin is contrary to the very nature of God and he hates it. It is God's hatred of sin that leads to the second purpose of discipline in the church: the purification of the church. According to 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15, putting the sinning one to shame is necessary so that purity in the church may be maintained. This is because sin left alone will permeate the entire church body as a little leaven affects a whole lump of dough. Therefore, godly discipline is necessary to arrest the defiling effect of sin, thereby keeping the Christian community pure. It should be stressed that although we shall never be able to keep the visible church in perfect purity because we are but fallible persons, we must maintain its purity to the full extent of our knowledge and power. Therefore 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15 is a perfect description of what the church ought to do with the unrepentant believer. "The congregation is to restrain their association with the sinning brother for the purpose of putting him to shame."¹¹

It is a sad step for a congregation to take toward their fellow believer but a necessary step for the good of the individual and the body's purity. In 1 Corinthians 5:6-8, it suggests that the purpose for the severity of discipline is to cleanse the church. There are times when the only way to maintain the health of the church is to restrain the persistent sinner from fellowship of the brethren. As Thyren has expressed: "Even at the cost of losing a limb, diseased or dead flesh must be cut from a person's body to keep it from spreading."¹²

¹⁰ Earl P. McQuay, Lecture notes presented as part of the class "Pastoral Ministry" (MIN 61.10) at Columbia Biblical Seminary and Graduate School Missions, Columbia, South Carolina, Spring 1994, p. 302.

¹¹ Thyren, 59.

¹² *Ibid.*, 60.

Yes, it is very difficult to administer such discipline in a congregation. But it is this difficulty that lends itself to the purpose of testing the obedience of a local church or individual to the commands of God. The Scripture that gives evidence of such purpose in discipline is Romans 16:17-20; 1 Corinthians 5:6-8; and 1 John 2:19.

The Deterrent of Sin

Another purpose for discipline in the church is to deter others from sin. This means discipline is aimed at warning other believers of the seriousness of sin, reminding the church that sin and righteousness are serious matters. Therefore, by exercising discipline on the unrepentant believer, believers aim at instilling a healthy fear of God in each member. McQuay has said: "Discipline can be a teaching tool in the church just as it is in the home if used effectively."¹³ Scriptures that encourage such to be practised on persistent sinners are Acts 5:11; 1 Timothy 1:19,20; 5:20.

The Testimony to the World

The last and not the least of the purposes for discipline in the church is a matter of giving testimony to the world. In Matthew 5:16 Jesus says that it is necessary for the world to see our good works and living in sin is not good works. Peter instructed believers to maintain excellent behaviour among the Gentiles:

Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us (1 Pet. 2:11-12).

Church discipline helps to protect the reputation of Christ and his church before the unsaved world. The church that refuses to exercise discipline cannot command respect from the world. Therefore, refusing to challenge known sin brings shame to the church and obviously to the name of Christ, the head of the church. On the other hand, when the world sees a proper response of the church to sin, respect is maintained and the church is cleared of the charge of hypocrisy which always harms the reputation of the church.

¹³ McQuay, 303.

MOTIVATION FOR DISCIPLINE IN THE CHURCH

The primary motivation for discipline is *love for the fallen brother or sister*. It is indeed an act of love, whereby the spiritual believers extend their care and concern toward their fellow believer who has been caught in sin (Gal 6:1). It is a time to be sad about another brother's or sister's situation and not a time to *pride* ourselves over the one caught in sin or living a sinful life. It is a time to show mercy and not a time to come showing how good and law abiding we are. This latter was what our Lord rebuked in the Pharisees when they brought the woman caught in adultery (John 8:3-11). They had no mercy on the woman but prided themselves and though adultery is hated by God, Jesus seeing the Pharisees' attitudes did not condemn but forgave her. A forgiving attitude should dominate our exercise of discipline toward the fallen brothers.

Michael Phillips says: "The discipline of church members demands as much creativity as the discipline of children if not more."¹⁴ What is our motivation in disciplining our children? The perfect example is God himself in Hebrews 12:6-7. He disciplines his children because he loves them. We cannot do it differently and expect it to accomplish its designed goal. God designed it to be done in love. Good parents discipline their children but always in love and the goal is to produce good character in the child.

In our endeavouring to restore/save the fallen believers, love must be the overriding motive. As Dr. Miller says: [In church discipline there must be] "humility (Gal 6:1) and mercy (Matt 5:7), knowing that but for the grace of God, they would be in the same predicament."¹⁵ Mercy and humility is key to doing biblical discipline. The lack of mercy and love produces harshness or neglect of this important ministry in the church.

Caring enough to confront a fellow brother is the true motivation of discipline in the church. The church lacks in this area for it seems that many believers do not care about the well being of their fellow believers. Others may fear to judge. Such fear is not biblically justified, because though we do not take God's place of judging we are obligated to follow the biblical principles in our walk of life.

When the Bible tells us not to judge, it means that we should not take God's place and condemn other people – a caution that we should not assume the right to condemn others. As Richards says: "The faults of others are to

¹⁴ Michael E. Phillips, "Creative Church Discipline Leadership," *A Practical Journal of Church Leaders*, Vol. 4 (Fall 1986): 50.

¹⁵ Miller, interview, April 27, 1994.

occasion forgiveness, not condemnation."¹⁶ The truth of the matter is that we are all sinners; and no human being is able to judge others without becoming vulnerable to the same judgement.

But this does not mean that we are not to use the capacity God has given to evaluate and make judgements. Richards continued to say: "It does not even mean that 'judging' is wrong in every circumstance."¹⁷ Therefore, it seems important to affirm with Rostock when he says:

From the fact that God's judgement threatens man it is often deduced that no man has the right to judge another (Matt 7:1 ff; James 4:11; Rom 14:4,10; 1 Cor 4:5). This does not imply flabby indifference to moral condition of others nor blind renunciation of attempts of true and serious appraisal of those with whom we have to live. What is unconditionally demanded is that such evaluations should be subject to certainty that God's judgement falls also on those who judge, so that superiority, harshness and blindness to one's own faults are excluded and readiness to forgive and intercede is safeguarded.¹⁸

This obviously should make caring believers humble and careful in the ministry of restoration of the fallen believers.

As stated in the author's definition of discipline, relationships with the members of a congregation are so crucial to effective discipline in the church, just as they are crucial within the human family. As Richards has said regarding discipline in the family, the writer believes it is the same principle for the church: "It is important to remember that no discipline can be effective out of the context of loving relationships and that caring enough to let each child know that he or she is truly important."¹⁹

The Old Testament clearly shows that discipline was exercised in the context of close relationships. God urged Israel to view his own discipline of them in a family framework: "Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son so the Lord your God disciplines you" (Deut. 8:5). The New Testament is not different in its approach to discipline either. After all, the church is the family (community) of God. We belong to God and to one another. God has delegated

¹⁶ Lawrence O. Richards, *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 365.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 366.

¹⁸ Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 939.

¹⁹ Richards, 229.

the obligation to individuals and the church to restore the fallen believers and it is all based on our relationship with him and our relationships toward each other.

The writer was impressed by Steve Bradley's thoughts on discipline in the church. Bradley says:

Church discipline has to be based on relationships within the church. The effectiveness of church discipline is in direct proportion to *trust and love* that has been established between the members of the body of Christ. Without this relationship, the person who has sinned will see the approach of another as a judgemental rebuke and not an attempt to restore. Also, without the relationships built on unconditional love, a person will not have the *trust and confidence* to approach an erring brother or sister but will rather 'gossip' about him or her.²⁰

Therefore, exercising discipline in the church is very different from adopting the judgemental and condemning attitude against which Scripture speaks. Discipline in the church is based entirely on the love of God toward sinners. This does not imply cheap grace but rather a serious ministry of the church knowing the prize of the soul as well as knowing the holiness of God. So discipline in the church should clearly portray the loving action of the Christian community, committed to obedience, intending through the discipline to help the brother or sister turn from sin and find renewed fellowship with the Lord.

The overall motivation for church discipline is love for the fallen sister or brother in Christ whom we want to see restored back to fellowship with God and the church. As Neil Lines has said:

The successful outcome is not only dependent upon the right kind of action being taken, but upon the right kind of attitudes exemplified by disciplinarians as well as the disciplined. Attitudes can either make church discipline work or break its redemptive power. Attitudes can create or destroy people.²¹

With this good intention, discipline was given to the church by Christ himself and we should use every necessary means to help restore the many believers living in sin. It is proper to judge the actions of others for we do have the Scripture as guidelines in our hands. Jesus said to do it in Matthew 18:15-20. The apostles did it and so did the early church. In fact, it is total

²⁰ Steve Bradley, "Thoughts on Church Discipline," interview by writer, February 20, 1994, Columbia Bible College, Columbia, South Carolina.

²¹ Lines, 2.

disobedience to our Lord to let fellow believers live in sin while we can save them. Some of the Scripture giving authority to evaluate the actions of the fellow believers include 1 Cor 2:15; 5:12-13; 6:2-5; 10:15; 11:13, and 11:31-32. In fact, in this last passage, Paul says that God disciplines us because we have not evaluated our own actions, recognised them as sin and confessed them. This means God is not interested in judging if we have already searched and confessed our sins. But failure to do so then awaits God's judgement.

QUALIFICATIONS OF THOSE WHO CARRY OUT DISCIPLINE

In Galatians 5:16 we read: "So I say, live by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature." The word, "live by," is in present tense, meaning "go on living" by the Spirit. This is a call to all believers to make their abode in the Spirit habitual and it is those who make their abode in the Spirit that Paul later calls spiritual and calls them to the ministry restoring the one caught in sin (Gal 6:1). Living by the prompting and power of the Spirit of God will make us sensitive to sin in our lives and lives of other members of the church, and the same spirit will give wisdom in handling sensitive situations. If we live by the Spirit we will bear the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22), but if we fail to live by the Spirit we will follow the flesh and no discernment at all. In fact, in Galatians 5:26 Paul warns against becoming conceited, provoking, and envying each other which is the manifestation of the deeds of the flesh in the Christian church. Such Christians as described in verse 26 cannot succeed in exercising discipline on others for they need it themselves.

Earlier our Lord himself challenged the would-be judges of others to watch their lives first:

Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye (Matt. 7:3-5).

Therefore, initially all true believers qualify to engage in the process of restoration of their fellow believers, provided that they are sure that they themselves are not living in sin. Miller says:

Church discipline should be seen in one way as the end of the process. The process begins on an individual level when one caring Christian

confronts another Christian with what seems to be sin (Matt 18:15; Gal 6:1).²²

When discipline is looked upon as a process, it leaves room for all caring believers to help in the process. Sometimes individuals could rescue their brothers without even engaging the whole church. As Dr. Miller said: "Any mature, spiritual, caring, consistent believer is qualified to initiate the process, but only the church or its leaders are qualified to complete the process."²³

Another response on who would qualify to carry out discipline was given by Kivunzi: "Discipline should be executed only by those in good standing."²⁴ I understood Kivunzi's meaning of the term "good standing" in relation to God and the church because he went on to say that "those who live (are living) in sin do not qualify to exercise discipline because they themselves deserve discipline."²⁵ Therefore, we can conclude that the main qualification required in carrying out discipline is purity of life for those doing it. This does not mean they are perfect but it means they should be pure from any known sin and that they be filled with the spirit and so able to extend their hands to restore their fellow brother or sister to fellowship with God and with fellow believers. McQuilkin says:

Before any thought of discipline, there must be, of course, prayer and self-examination (Gal 6:1; Matt 7:1-5) If a person has not given himself to prayer for the brother and if he has not carefully examined his own life he is disqualified because he does not have the love and humility necessary to be God's agent in discipline.²⁶

In this whole endeavour we need to be reminded of the wonderful truth, the way of the cross is to exercise discipline faithfully and with love that chooses to act for the welfare of another even at personal sacrifice. For indeed this ministry can be quite risky. But this is the true nature of any ministry of the church. After all, the church was born not without risks, especially as far as our Saviour is concerned, and we cannot do it differently. It should be remembered that restorative church discipline is an expression of divine love.

²² Miller, interview, April 27, 1994.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Kivunzi, interview, January 26, 1994.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ McQuilkin, 10.

THE GOAL OF DISCIPLINE IN THE CHURCH

We are aware that Jesus did not come to the world to condemn sinners but to save them. This is the teaching of the Word of God. If the Lord has saved in the first place to rid the sinner of condemnation, the restoration of fallen sinners is as well a rescue from sin back to fellowship with himself and the church. This then means the goal of church discipline is redemptive.

Lines says: "The biblical goal of church discipline is to win the erring believer to Christ, not to drive him further away. It is designed by the Lord to restore the fallen, not to ruin him."²⁷

The church as the bride of Christ exists for the glory of God and sin in its member or members does not bring glory to God which is the ultimate purpose of the church. And so discipline in the church is aimed at restoring the fallen so that sin will have no place in the life of the church and God receives his due honour.

Miller says that the goal of biblical discipline is "to honour God by keeping his bride pure for his glory."²⁸ If what Miller is saying is the goal of discipline in the church, then every true church should strive to carry it out as needed. The unrepentant sinners must be brought to the understanding that God deserves his glory in his church. And that as long as they persist in sin, the reputation of God is at stake. When the goal of church discipline is understood, then the church will not fail to take the necessary action to the fallen believers. Instead it will be a priority for all Christians to live above reproach for the glory of our Saviour and our God. It is the prayer of this writer for God to help the church today to strive for the things that are noble and honouring to his name.

THE EFFECTS OF DISCIPLINE IN THE CHURCH

When done in the right spirit, discipline in the church will do four important things for the church:

1. It will provide spiritual care for the church member who has fallen, recovering him as well as bearing his burden until he is able to stand again by himself in the power of God (Gal 6:1-3).

²⁷ Lines, 2.

²⁸ Miller, interview, April 27, 1994.

2. It will also bring cleansing and protection from sin to the Christian community. (This means deterring the church from sin.) As David Pietsch has said: "One of the effects of corrective discipline is that it will prevent others from falling into sin. The corrective discipline exercised on an individual becomes preventive for the rest."²⁹ As taught in 1 Timothy 5:19-20 there are times when public rebuke is necessary in order that the rest also may be fearful of sinning. This tells us that the willingness of the church to take action even against an elder may be the means of keeping other believers from sinning. "By such action, believers are made aware of the seriousness of sin, and the tremendous hatred God has toward sin."³⁰
3. It will maintain the power of the Christian community and as such bear witness to the world. This is because the true power of God in the church is experienced when the church is living a pure life before God and the world.
4. Proper biblical discipline will help the church maintain doctrinal purity in the church of Christ and will also help keep away false teachers who go around misleading people with their unfounded teachings. On this, Pietsch has cited McClain who said: "This is a very plain commandment that the Christian is never to surrender, even for the sake of unity, to any man or woman who brings some teachings contrary to the doctrine we have learned in the book."³¹

But if the church will ignore the practice of biblical discipline, then unfortunately the following will become consequences:

1. The reputation of God through his church will be marred.
2. The world will curse the name of God.
3. The church will have no lasting fruit before God. Instead, she will become another human organisation, whereby men will be striving for success in human terms and so then we can talk of a dead church or a church which has left God's purpose and a church without vision or even perhaps a false church.

²⁹ David D. Pietsch, "Paul's Concept of Church Disciplines and Restoration," (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1975), 16.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

THE GROUNDS FOR DISCIPLINE IN THE CHURCH

Whichever way one looks at it, church discipline takes maturity to implement. The goal and the purpose of this practice is crucial; otherwise, a mistaken purpose may accelerate the believer's indiscipline, causing more unnecessary spiritual damage.

It should be clear that the successful outcome of church discipline is not only dependent upon the right kind of action being taken, but upon the right kind of attitudes exemplified by disciplinarians as well as the disciplined. The question of attitudes is crucial, for it can either make church discipline work or break its redemptive power. This means, for the discipline to accomplish its designed purpose, proper attitudes need to be cultivated by both the offended and the offenders. There is a need to understand that both parties belong to the same family, the family of God. It should be clear that the reason for confrontation is the great concern and care for each other as the members of the same family.

The Apostle Paul, in trying to help the church to understand the uniqueness of the Christian relationship toward each other, used several imageries of which this writer prefers to use two. The first is of Christians portrayed as members of the same body in 1 Corinthians 12. In this imagery, Paul says Christians belong to each other and need each other just as the members of the physical body need each other at all times. Even the less significant member matters so much to the whole well-being of the body. Each member functions differently but for the common good of the whole body as designed.

The second image is that of the soldier (2 Tim 2:3-4). Though the true teaching here is on the general Christian life discipline, it also implies that Christians are God's army on earth, called to proclaim the Gospel of the redeeming love of God and also to guard themselves against Satan's endeavours to undo their faith in Christ. This means Christians have a common enemy, Satan, and so they need each other just as much as any good army. This means if any one of them falls in the hands or trap of the enemy, the rest of the members should do all they can to come to the rescue of their fellow brother or sister in the Lord.

This rescue ministry, especially for the fallen believers, is unfortunately not well practised within the church today. Instead, one can almost say Christians have been the only army on the face of the earth that shoots at their own wounded to kill them. This is done in different ways by ignoring the person's sin or overdoing the discipline.

It has been noted that one of the purposes of church discipline is to maintain purity within the local congregation, because sin spreads, affecting the lives of those who come in contact with it. If this is the case, there is a problem. All believers living on the face of this earth are still imperfect and occasionally commit sin. If church discipline is to be carried out against all who sin and against all kinds of sins, then all church members would have to be disciplined. Thus a line has to be drawn somewhere as to what constitutes grounds for discipline and what does not.

There is no doubt that the question of grounds for church discipline is an extremely difficult one, because even though the Scripture has a list of offences warranting discipline, such a listing is not a complete compilation. There is much more to it than is given.

But we can be sure that the illustrations of the offences that are given in Scripture are enough to give us basic principles to guide in this important ministry. In regard to this matter of a list compilation, David Pietsch has cited Marlin Teschke's comment:

*Numerous writers in the history of Christianity have attempted to compile a catalogue of sins that offers a reliable guide for initiating church discipline. Some have even sought to establish a graduated scale of sins that rather automatically triggers the appropriate response from the church – perhaps from mild admonition through public censure to full excommunication. When a given act is committed, it needs only to be classified in order for church machinery set for proper cycle, to be set in motion. Thus writers speak of sins as grave, flagrant, heinous, notorious, etc., suggesting a scale of degrees of misconduct.*³²

Apostle Paul is one who more than all other apostles speaks on this matter of encouraging action to be taken against an erring believer. But he is careful in speaking of disciplining an offending person to regard the attitude of the sinner. For instance, Paul is concerned not so much with the fact that the man has gotten drunk or has committed adultery as he is with the man's response. The key question which needs to be asked is once he/she has committed the sin, does the man/woman acknowledge it as sin? Does he/she repent and refrain from making it a practice of life? While God is clearly interested in every action of a believer, discipline is to be taken against a person who has not only sinned, but who has not repented of his sin. If a man takes sin lightly or continues in it, that is the grounds for church discipline. Pietsch says:

³² David D. Pietsch, "Paul's Concept of Church Discipline and Restoration" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1975), 24.

"When Paul takes action against a person or commands a church to take action against one of its members, it is because of the attitude of this person as much as it is because of his actions."³³ It should be underscored that the attitude of the offender and his response to warnings are crucial factors in determining the discipline that the church must exercise.

Categories of the Offences Requiring Disciplinary Action

It is vital to keep within the limits of sins clearly indicated in Scripture as those worthy of church discipline, avoiding both legalism and laxity. Sins worthy of church discipline are overt, gross, scandalous, deliberate, and unrepented sins. This includes all manifest transgressions of the Ten Commandments. Thus, disciplinary offences are those that damage the church, weakening its testimony or promoting disunity. Otherwise, the New Testament specifically gives the types of offences calling for corrective discipline. As mentioned earlier, the New Testament does not claim to have given all types of offences needing disciplinary action and so the writer purposes to give a few of these types and not go into great detail but just enough to help with the basic principles in church discipline. The following are classes of sin which warrant discipline.

1 . Heresy. Heresy is departure from a fundamental truth of the faith (such as the deity of Christ or justification by faith). Such a departure from the basic biblical teaching is a serious matter. As McQuay says:

It is a gross departure from the Christian faith, a deviation from the fundamental blocks of biblical truth that comprise "the faith once for all delivered to saints" (Jude 3). It is error in foundational doctrines that destroys the integrity of the Gospel. Heresy should not be tolerated in the church.³⁴

It should, however, be noted that heresy does not involve debates in which earnest Christians differ on questions where Scripture is not clear. Otherwise, taking disciplinary action for a deviation in a doctrine of secondary importance is schismatic and should be avoided as much as possible. Just as Robert L. Saucy has said: "It is obvious from the Scriptural examples that discipline for erroneous teaching concerns fundamental doctrines of the faith

³³ *Ibid.*, 25.

³⁴ Earl P. McQuay, Lecture notes presented as part of the class in "Pastoral Ministry" (MIN 61 10) at Columbia Biblical Seminary and Graduate School of Missions, Columbia, South Carolina, 1994, p. 304.

and not lesser differences of interpretation."³⁵ Otherwise, on non-essentials and sometimes even on interpretation of Scripture, there is room for differences of opinion. And on matters where we are not sure what to say about certain activities by fellow Christians, it is only wise to be more tolerant even as the Apostle Paul admonished the early Christians (Rom 13:19-20,22; 14:1,5). Moreover, discipline is not to be taken on someone who has doubts on some matters of faith. Instead with such we should do as instructed in Jude 22, showing mercy on those who have doubts, and do what we can to clear them from their doubts and save them.

It cannot be overemphasised that the heresy standard has to be more rigid in the case of ministers/pastoral team (pastors and elders) since they are especially responsible for teaching and defending "the counsel of God." They are the ones more responsible to maintaining all the doctrines of Scripture, and are to be disciplined if they fail to do so (1 Tim 3:2,9; Titus 1: 9; James 3: 1). In 1 Tim 3:9, the teaching is that those leading the church must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with clear conscience. Paul made it even clearer in Titus 1:9 that: "the deacon must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it." James warns teachers and points to the great accountability that is theirs as leaders and the great judgement awaiting them (James 3:1). In Gal 1:9b, Paul gives one of the severest condemnations of false teachers in all of his writings when he says: "If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!" Pietsch cites Hendriksen who says:

Here the storm is, unleashed in all its fury. Paul's "Let him be anathema" is not a mere wish, but an effective invocation. The apostle, as Christ's fully authorised representative is pronouncing the curse upon the Judaizers, who are committing the terrible crime of calling the true gospel false, and of substituting the false and ruinously dangerous gospel for the true and saving one.³⁶

In the Pastoral Epistles, the Apostle Paul seriously instructed against false teachers. He never tolerated those people who deliberately taught strange doctrines and the church cannot tolerate them today either. Thus we hear Paul urging Timothy to "instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines" (1 Tim 1:3) and in 4:6-7, he tells Timothy to point out to the brethren the need for rejecting false doctrine and to have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for

³⁵ Robert L. Saucy, *The Church in God's Program* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 121.

³⁶ Pietsch, 42.

old women. In both 1 Timothy 6:3-5 and Titus 1:10-16 he gives descriptions of the men who hold to and teach false doctrine. Therefore false teaching is a serious matter and discipline must be carried out on anyone who is warned and refuses to heed the warning and continues to teach strange doctrines. The Lord Himself rebuked the church at Pergamum for not putting away those among them who held false doctrine (Rev 2:14-16).

2. Moral delinquency (the scandalous living). The early church practised church discipline on those with moral delinquency, and the present-day church is not excused from this duty. It is important to note that along with the sins of immorality, Paul includes covetousness, idolatry, abusive speech, drunkenness, and swindling as sins deserving discipline (1 Cor 5:11). Since Paul lists these other behaviours with immorality, we may argue that more generally other types of moral delinquency should bring discipline. Such things as blatant evil conduct, disorderly conduct, as well as being a busy-body on other people's lives (2 Thess 3:6-15) might be included as well.

Church discipline must be carried out upon a church member who is guilty of unrepented sins as those pointed out by Paul in 1 Corinthians 5:1-13. Here Paul severely condemns the man who was living with his father's wife (incest), perhaps his stepmother. Such misconduct could not be tolerated in the church. This nature of immorality perhaps is not common today, but let the church not be naive to think that it never happens today. But as said earlier, immorality is not the only sin that Paul was condemning because he immediately points to other sins in the same category of moral delinquency. But the case of incest was so obvious that he categorises it first in his list of sins calling for disciplinary action. Though in the beginning of this chapter the writer said that the Scripture does not give us a complete list of sins deserving disciplinary action, one does see in Paul's writings to the churches some very detailed listings of the sins deserving church discipline. Such a listing is especially found in 1 Corinthians 5 and 6 and also Galatians 5. In this regard Earl McQuay has said:

The sins deserving of church discipline may be compiled and defined as follows: 1 Corinthians 5:11 is the list linked with church discipline:

immoral - general sexual abuse, including adultery, homosexuality, and prostitution.

covetous - greedy, avaricious for more and more, lust after things, envying person who schemes to get things that belong to others.

idolater - worship of idols.

railer - an abusive, reviling person, who slanders others with hurtful

words.

drunkard - drunken excesses.

swindler - robber, one who "seizes" or "snatches away," extortioner.

I Corinthians 6:9-10 repeats "immoral," "idolater," "covetous," "drunkard," and "railers," and "swindler" and adds the following categories of sins incompatible with the Kingdom of God:

adulterers - unlawful intercourse with the spouse of another.

effeminate - "soft," used of men and boys who allowed themselves to be used as male prostitutes homosexually.

homosexuals - one who lies with a male as with a female.

thieves - robbers.

Galatians 5:19-20 lists "works of the flesh" that Paul declares "shall not inherit the Kingdom of God." He repeats "immorality," "idolatry," and "drunkenness," and adds the following:

uncleanness - moral impurity.

sensuality - lewdness, wantonness, unchastity.

sorcery - witchcraft, magical art.

enmities - personal animosities.

strife - rivalry, discord.

jealousy - envy, to seek or desire eagerly.

outbursts of anger - stirring emotions, then explosions.

disputes - rivalries, party spirit.

dissension - divisions, splits in two.

factions - sects, preferences, strife.

envying - feelings of ill-will.

carousing - revelling, drinking parties.³⁷

Such a listing of sins warranting church discipline as given by McQuay shows clearly that biblical Christianity undeniably teaches a high standard of conduct and morality. Therefore, the writer echoes Daniel E. Wray in that: "Those who live in habitual violation of biblical morality and refuse to repent when admonished and rebuked must be removed from church membership (1 Cor. 5)."³⁸

³⁷ McQuay, 305-306.

³⁸ Daniel E. Wray, *Biblical Church Discipline* (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1981), 9.

3. Divisiveness. Divisiveness is the fomenting of strife, the sin of an obstinate and insubordinate person who sets out to divide the church by sowing seeds of dissension and disaffection. It needs to be pointed out that this category of sin cannot easily be distinguished from the doctrinal error category. Several passages of Scripture appear to tie the two clearly together. Such passages include Romans 16:17-18 and Titus 3:10-11. Pietsch says: "False doctrine and divisions and schisms in the church are often related."³⁹

As mentioned earlier, the church must not tolerate the causes of divisions among the brethren. McQuay says: "The church is called upon to act against such carnal persons."⁴⁰ He quotes from Romans 16:17-18 for this purpose:

Now I urge you, brethren keep your eye on those who cause dissension and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting (Rom. 16:17,18).

In 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13, Paul portrays chronic trouble-makers with a malevolent disposition and factious spirit who "*captivate weak women*" (v. 6), "*oppose the truth*" (v. 8), and "*deceive*" (v. 13). John condemns Diotrephes, who loved to be first, rejected the truth, and unjustly accused the apostles "*with wicked words*" (3 John 9-10).

Thus Paul gives strong warnings to: Reject a factious man after a first and second warning, knowing that such a man is perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned (Titus 3:10-11) McQuay says:

A self-centred person who constantly brings division and strife to the church must be watched, rebuked (warned twice), and if necessary, removed. He is wilfully rejecting the command to strive for unity, and therefore is self-condemned.⁴¹

This is to say the church does not condemn these persons. They condemn themselves by their actions and the church affirms their characteristics which are contrary to the biblical teachings.

³⁹ Pietsch, 40.

⁴⁰ McQuay, 306.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 307.

4. Difficulties between the members (relational conflict). It is the desire of God that His children (church) live harmoniously. Jesus said that the world will know that we are Christians by our strong relationships (based on the love) that we all cherish with one another. "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34,35). It is not God's desire for church members to live in conflict with one another. Dissension among members and feuding factiously will only cripple the church and lead to schism. It is to be noted that the very first time when Jesus talked about discipline was really concerned about relationships. He took time and detailed how relationships are to be handled between the brethren. In **Matthew 18:15-17**, Jesus presents the three phases for the process of church discipline in the case of a brother who sins against the other. This implies that He strongly desired that they should avoid conflicts with each other. McQuay says:

Matthew 5:23,24 commands the worshipper to first be reconciled to his/her brother before he/she can worship properly. Two persons who attend the same service and partake of the same communion may have enmity in their hearts against each other. This should not be allowed to go on.⁴²

It is the responsibility, especially of the spiritual leadership in the local church or Christian organisation, to help resolve internal strife between the brethren. But Keith McGilligan was right when he said:

One of the most perplexing problems facing the church today is the inability or unwillingness of its leaders (and non-leaders) to handle internal strife. Far too many cases of sinful behaviour/conduct go unattended because the spiritual leadership of the local assembly (or Christian organisation) either refuses to deal with the problem or ignores it, hoping that it will go away.⁴³

Therefore, unresolved conflicts and broken relationships between members of a church should be dealt with by the church, which Christ, the Head of the church, demands. It is in this context that we find Jesus giving instruction that individuals need to confront each other in order to resolve their conflict (Matt 18:15-20).

⁴² McQuay, 306.

⁴³ Keith McGilligan, "The Ministry of Rebuking: As it Relates to Church Discipline," *Journal of Pastoral Practice* 5 (1981): 22.

The early church knew the importance of this ministry of resolving conflict with one another. Paul calls upon the church at Philippi to help two women in the church who were not living in harmony (Phil 4:2,3). When the people of this world are in conflict with each other they take each other to court whereby their grievances are listened to and judged by the judge. Members of the church should not take each other to court, but rather the church should have spiritual members who are able to guide the two (members in conflict) in arbitration. This is what the Apostle Paul instructed the Corinthian Christians and the present-day church is not allowed to do it differently (1 Cor 6:1-8).

Surely if the early church was commanded to build strong relationships and to resolve conflicts among brethren, when the church today fails to help their members who are facing relational conflicts and when they fail to discipline the trouble-making brethren, then they are disobeying God and are guilty.

Extremes in Church Discipline

The following are some of the extremes that have been practised in the name of church discipline.

1. Discipline without instruction. This involves exercising discipline on a person without having taught the person (individual or group) the purpose of discipline, that is, preventative teaching of the Word of God and a clear setting forth of the issue involved. Even if the church had the discipline documented in its church policy (Constitution and Bylaws), it still needs to teach what it is all about and all believers need to be well informed on this important method of helping the church to become like Jesus.

2. Discipline on the basis of rumours. This involves discussing or referring to the person in a negative way before others (or anyone!) that would reflect anything except love and concern for the person. In this regard the writer is referring to the situation whereby the truth is not known but rumours and gossip are entertained and cherished as truth and the person who is the centre of the rumour is victimised without any proof.

3. Discipline as revenge. This involves an attitude of revenge that is reflected by resentment and hostility toward the person who falls into sin. This means we cannot view the situation as if the person has wounded us personally. But many times in dealing with a person who has been caught in a trespass there is a tendency to get into the spirit of revenge and pride upon the fallen person in such a way that he/she will be overwhelmed by our attitude. John MacArthur says:

A pastor once commented, "I have often thought that if I ever fall into a *paraptoma* (trespass), I will pray that I do not fall into the hands of those censorious, critical judges in the church. Let me fall into the hands of barkeepers, street walkers, or dope peddlers, because such church people would tear me apart with their long, wagging, gossipy tongues cutting me to shreds."⁴⁴

As said earlier, the real problem is that when one of their members in the church has sinned, the leaders of the church take it personally instead of seeing the sin as done to God. They look for a way to punish the sinner and not to rescue him/her from the situation; that is very sad. Sin is first of all against God Himself and we need not take it personally because this is not the will of God concerning discipline. As Terry Hulbert says: "He/she has not wounded us but Christ."⁴⁵ And so no one should make it personal in any way.

4. Discipline as punishment only. This involves an attitude of punishment to the person caught in sin. This is the spirit of the day. Many wait for their fellow Christians to fall into sin and are ready to pride themselves in punishing the victims. Hulbert says: "Any discipline should be clearly established as means of restoration and not of retribution."⁴⁶

Therefore, discipline should not be taken as mere punishment by the church leaders. Rather, discipline should be understood as correction or even punishment in one sense but which makes a positive contribution to one's growth in righteousness. This should be the expectation of the disciplinarians. Thus, in one sense, it is okay to think of discipline as punishment but that is not all it is. While punishment is part of discipline, we must remember that discipline is a very positive term. Lawrence O. Richards says:

Moses said to Israel: "Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son so the Lord your God disciplines you" (Deut 8:5). The New Testament makes the point even more strongly: "The Lord disciplines those he loves and punishes everyone he accepts as son" (Heb 12:6). Discipline is an act of love, a parent's gift to a child.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ John MacArthur, *New Testament Commentary: Galatians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1987), 178-9.

⁴⁵ Professor Terry Hulbert of Columbia International University, interview by writer, July 9, 1994, Columbia, South Carolina.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Richards, 172.

If this be the understanding of the disciplinarians and education is given to the one being disciplined, then obviously the discipline must be productive leading to growth in righteousness which is God's desire for church discipline. Of course, these disciplinary experiences are painful, but we must endure the pains for they are meant to produce righteousness and peace in our souls. As Richards has said:

To profit from discipline, we need to endure it, neither making light of it nor becoming discouraged of it. We are to remain committed to holiness. We are to remain aware of God's grace, even when we hurt, so we do not become bitter.⁴⁸

The writer agrees with Richards that

parents who follow the divine example will not draw back from disciplining their children. But they will guard against discipline that is an expression of anger rather than love and discipline that has no goal other than retribution.⁴⁹

5. Discipline as oppression. Oppression mentality is present in some disciplinarians. Many times, some of these leaders may feel their positions are threatened by their juniors who are more capable and of good character. So they look for faults in these juniors in order to destroy their reputation and paint a different picture of the prospective leaders. One can say such leaders suffer from an inferiority complex, but they will not admit it. They work hard to mar the names of the younger, able men in order for them to be removed from the church so that these covetous leaders may continue in their positions.

6. Discipline by one person. This is not discipline but a power show in the church and God hates this in his church. The Apostle John tells of this type of power shown by a man named Diotrephes "I wrote unto the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the pre-eminence among them receive not..." (3 John 9-10). Such people still exist within the church today. The truth is God hates them. They are serving their own purposes and not God.

7. Discipline for trivialities. It is possible that some leaders in the church may pick on the fellow believers on small matters and take disciplinary action upon them. Such a mentality is unbiblical, distorted, and unloving. As Wray says, in biblical discipline "people are not cast out for 'little' sins but for

⁴⁸ *ibid*

⁴⁹ *ibid*

hardening their hearts to repentance."⁵⁰ Otherwise, it is not our job to be looking for sins in other peoples' lives.

8. Discipline in bitterness. This does not accomplish the designed purpose of discipline. Instead, many times such attitudes ruin the wounded person instead of restoring the wounded person (offender). Lines says:

When a church seeks to right wrong by angrily throwing iniquitous members beneath the millstones of church discipline to grind out their confession, she is maliciously taking matters into her hands and out of the hands of God to whom righting of such wrongs belongs.⁵¹

In suggesting a better way to administer discipline, Lines went as far as saying:

It is wrong for a church to vindictively hold anything against a member who has erred. Rather Christ-like attitude compels the church to continue loving the antagonist and to pray for the speedy recovery.⁵²

9. Discipline with favouritism. In a different context, James rebuked the Jewish Christians for showing partiality in their treatment of people. Human tendency is to give respect to the good looking, rich, educated adults but despise the poor or young, underprivileged people. In the church of Christ, we are equal and important in the eyes of God and showing partiality in discipline of the Christians is evil and should be avoided. In African culture there is much respect for the wealthy, educated, and elderly, which is good but sometimes goes to an *extreme*. For instance, when these rich, educated people in *great* positions are caught in sin they are not admonished. They are overlooked while the young, poor, and other underprivileged people are unfairly rebuked and easily excommunicated.

10. Discipline without expectations. Doing discipline without good expectations is useless. Indeed, proper discipline always aims at restoration of the believer. It is useless for any individual or group of people to exercise discipline if they are not expecting the brother or sister to repent from sin. Otherwise, tendencies to want to get rid of the persons without considering their lives at all is unbiblical and sad. There are those who, when they discipline a person even if he repents, still remain distant from him. Discipline in this case

⁵⁰ Wray, 15.

⁵¹ Neil M. Lines. "Church Discipline: Ruination or Restoration," (D.Min. Dissertation, Western Conservative Baptist Seminary. March 1982), 24.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 28.

has lost its purpose. Because true discipline in the name of Jesus Christ must include readiness to forgive, it cannot rejoice in punishment which brings sorrow beyond that which produces repentance. Wray says: "Anyone who goes about to practice any of the modes of discipline without earnestly desiring the true repentance and forgiveness of the offender, is attempting to serve God with a false heart."⁵³

11. Discipline without prayer. Most of the time there is lack of prayerful attitude as disciplinary action is being taken. This is a great weakness in the church. Taking disciplinary action on the people of God cannot be business as usual. The church should be in prayer as they wrestle with issues which may lead to disciplinary action. Alexander Rattray Hay says: "even when the church decides for failure to repent to excommunicate a person, the church should pray for the excommunicated person."⁵⁴ No one should take this ministry lightly.

CONCLUSION

The ministry of restoration of the fallen believer is so crucial today. This is because Jesus did not save for ruination but for fellowship with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. A proper motivation should be maintained in this whole ministry of restoration. There is no biblical reason for believers to boast when their fellow believer is living in sin. Restoration of the fallen believer is a spiritual endeavour and calls for those who are spiritual (Gal 6:1). We should avoid the lame reasons for not doing restoration and also avoid those extremes. Thus, the church of Christ must cultivate the redemptive view of church discipline today.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵⁴ Alexander Rattray Hay, *The New Testament Order of Church and Missionary* (Audubon's New Testament Missionary Union, 1947), 360.