

“CHURCH DISCIPLINE”

"By the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established." I have told you before, and foretell as if I were present the second time, and now being absent I write to those who have sinned before, and to all the rest, that if I come again I will not spare-- (2 Corinthians 13:1b-2 NKJV)

The Scots Confession was written by John Knox and five other Scottish reformers and published in 1560 almost 90 years before the Westminster Confession. In it the three marks of a true Church are described as "...first, the true preaching of the Word of God...; secondly, the right administration of the sacraments of Jesus Christ,..; and lastly, ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered, as God's Word prescribes, whereby vice is repressed and virtue nourished." How long ago has it been since you heard of Church discipline?

These quotes come from the theology book we used in Seminary

"Jesus instituted discipline in His Church, when He gave His apostles the power to bind and loose, to declare what is forbidden and what is permitted, and to forgive and retain sins declaratively (Matthew 16:19,18:18; John 20:23). And it is only because Christ has given this power to the Church that she can exert it. Several passages of the New Testament refer to the exercise of this power I Corinthians 5:2,7,15; II Corinthians 2:5-7; II Thessalonians 3:14,15; I Timothy 1:20; Titus 3:10...

...The purpose of discipline in the Church is twofold. In the first place it seeks to carry into effect the law of Christ concerning the admission and exclusion of members; and in the second place it aims at promoting the spiritual edification of the members of the Church by securing their obedience to the laws of Christ. Both of these aims are subservient to the higher end, namely the maintenance of the holiness of the Church of Jesus Christ. *Systematic Theology*, Louis Berkhof; Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1963 p.599

In the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. what if a member or a deacon, elder, or minister is charged with an offense against the law of Christ, is tried by the Session or Presbytery, and is found guilty?

"The degrees of church censure are rebuke, rebuke with supervised rehabilitation, temporary exclusion from exercise of ordained office or membership, removal from ordained office or membership." *Book of Order*

1.) This will be the third time I am coming to you. "By the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established." I have told you before, and foretell as if I were present the second time, and now being absent I write to those who have sinned before, and to all the rest, that if I come again I will not spare-- since you seek a proof of Christ speaking in me, who is not weak toward you, but mighty in you. For though He was crucified in weakness, yet He lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, but we shall live with Him by the power of God toward you.

(2 Corinthians 13:1-4 NKJV)

Throughout this epistle Paul refers to the accusation by some in the church that he is weak. For them, this is reason enough to to discredit him and belittle his admonitions. Over and over and in many ways Paul agrees that he is weak. However, he insists that his authority was given to him by Christ, and Christ is strong.

He announces his third visit. He follows it with a quotation from the Law, "By the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established."

(Deuteronomy 17:6) The context of that quote is sobering:

"If there is found among you, within any of your gates which the LORD your God gives you, a man or a woman who has been wicked in the sight of the LORD your God, in transgressing His covenant, who has gone and served other gods and worshiped them, either the sun or moon or any of the host of heaven, which I have not commanded, and it is told you, and you hear of it, then you shall inquire diligently. And if it is indeed true and certain that such an abomination has been committed in Israel, then you shall bring out to your gates that man or woman who has committed that wicked thing, and shall stone to death that man or woman with stones. Whoever is deserving of death shall be put to death on the testimony of two or three witnesses; he shall not be put to death on the testimony of one witness. The hands of the witnesses shall be the first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hands of all the people. So you shall put away the evil from among you. (Deuteronomy 17:2-7 NKJV)

By referring to this passage in the Law, Paul is declaring that the offenders whom he is coming to discipline have turned against the truth of the Gospel and have embraced false doctrines. Also, he is not acting on rumors or gossip but on the testimony of at least several reliable witnesses. He will not spare in delivering judgment. He is weak, but Christ is strong and He will punish these wicked persons.

2.) Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? --unless indeed you are disqualified. But I trust that you will know that we are not disqualified. Now I pray to God that you do no evil, not that we should appear approved, but that you should do what is honorable, though we may seem disqualified. For we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth. For we are glad when we are weak and you are strong. And this also we pray, that you may be made complete. (2 Corinthians 13:5-9 NKJV)

In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul instructs the believers there to examine themselves before they receive the sacrament of communion and that is the basis for one of our catechism questions.

But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. (1 Corinthians 11:28 NKJV)

Q.97 What is required to the worthy receiving of the Lord's Supper?

A. It is required of them that would worthily partake of the Lord's Supper that they examine themselves, of their knowledge to discern the Lord's body, of their faith to feed upon Him, of their repentance, love, and new obedience, lest, coming unworthily, they eat and drink judgment to themselves.

No doubt there would be some who would be frightened by Paul's threatening not to spare those deserving discipline. Paul's instruction for the believers to examine themselves was meant to bring assurance. It would bring forward in their consciousness that Jesus Christ was in them. If He is in them, they haven't departed from the truth. Those who are true believers in Christ will not do anything against the truth, but will stand for the truth against all its enemies.

Paul is not offended if some think him weak and think of themselves as strong. Paul's prayer for them is that they may become complete in Christ and in His Gospel.

He explains that he is writing all this in a letter, because if he were saying these things in person, he would be sharp, cutting in wielding the authority which Christ gave him for edification and not for destruction.

3.) Finally, brethren, farewell. Become complete. Be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

(2 Corinthians 13:11-14 NKJV)

Most of Paul's letters end with his pronouncing a blessing on the readers. These are used as benedictions at the end of the worship service. At the end of this epistle Paul pronounces a fourfold blessing on the believers in Corinth.

The first is an extended blessing from himself - Become complete. Be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.

The second, he exhorts them to bless each other - Greet one another with a holy kiss.

In the third, Paul communicates blessings from believers in Christ throughout the Empire. - All the saints greet you.

Finally, in the authority given to him when he was made an apostle of Christ, Paul delivers the blessing of God Himself - The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.