

The Discipline of the Assembly

— its Ground, Nature, and Object.

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"Thy testimonies are very sure: holiness becometh Thy House, O Lord, for ever" Ps. 93: 5.

Here we have, plainly set before us, the real ground of discipline in the assembly. The place of God's presence must be holy: "Be ye holy, for I am holy." It is not upon the miserable principle of "stand by thyself, I am holier than thou." No, thank God, it is not this. It is not upon the ground of what we are, but what God is, that discipline is exercised. To allow unjudged evil, either in doctrine or practice, in the assembly, is tantamount to saying that God and evil can go on together — which is simply wickedness of the highest and most daring character.

But some persons maintain that we are not to judge, and Matthew 7: 1 is quoted in proof. We reply that the passage has nothing to say to the assembly: it simply teaches us, as individuals, not to judge motives. Further on in the chapter, we are told to beware of false prophets. How can we beware, if we are not to judge? "By their fruits ye shall know them." So that, even as individuals, we are to judge conduct. We are not to judge motives but fruits. In 1 Corinthians 5, the assembly is peremptorily called to judge and put away an evil doer.

"In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." And then, at the end of the chapter, we read: "Do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person."

This is clear and conclusive. The assembly is solemnly bound to exercise discipline — bound to judge and put away evil-doers. To refuse to do so is to become a leavened lump; and, most assuredly, God and unjudged leaven cannot go on together.

Mark, we speak of *unjudged* leaven. We know, alas, that there is evil in every member of the assembly; but if it is judged and refused, it does not defile the assembly, or hinder the enjoyment of the Divine Presence. It was not the evil in the man's nature that caused him to be put away, but the evil in his life. If he had judged and refused the sin in his nature, the assembly would not have been called to judge and refuse him. All this is as simple as it is solemn. An assembly that refuses to judge evil, in doctrine or morals, is not an assembly of God. There may be children of God in it, but they are in a false and dangerous position; and if the assembly persists in refusing to judge the evil, they should, with firm decision, turn away from it. They are solemnly called upon to do so: "Let every one that nameth the name of the Lord depart from iniquity."

But there are many who do not understand the truth as to the assembly, or its discipline, and they bring forward Matthew 13: 30 as a proof that evil-doers are not to be put away from the assembly, or the Lord's table. The tares and the wheat are to grow together until the harvest, they say. Yes; but where? In the assembly? Nay; but in the field, and "the field is the *world*" — not the Church. To argue that, because the tares and wheat are to grow together in the world, therefore evildoers are to be knowingly allowed in the assembly, is to place the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ, in Matthew 13, in direct opposition to the teaching of the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians 5. Hence, this argument cannot stand for a moment, but must be flung to the winds. To confound the kingdom of Heaven, in the Gospel

of Matthew, with the Church of God, in the Epistles of Paul, is to mar the integrity of the truth of God, and plunge the Lord's people into utter confusion. Indeed, no human language could adequately set forth the deplorable consequences of such a system of teaching. But this is a digression from our subject, to which we must return.

Having proved from the plainest statements of Holy Scripture that the assembly is solemnly bound to judge those that are within, and put away evil-doers, we shall now proceed to consider the nature, character, and spirit of the discipline which the assembly is called to exercise. Nothing can be more solemn or more affecting than the act of putting away a person from the Lord's table. It is the last sad and unavoidable act of the whole assembly, and it should be performed with broken hearts and weeping eyes. Alas, how often it is otherwise! How often does this most solemn and holy duty take the form of a mere official announcement that such a person is out of fellowship. Need we wonder that discipline, so carried out, fails to tell with power upon the erring one, or upon the assembly?

How then should the discipline be carried out? Just as 1 Corinthians 5 directs. When the case is so patent, so clear, that all discussion and deliberation is at an end, the whole assembly should be solemnly convened for the special purpose — for, most assuredly it is of sufficient gravity and importance to command a special meeting. All should, if possible, attend, and seek grace to make the sin their own, to go down before God in true self-judgement, and eat the sin offering. The assembly is not called to deliberate or discuss. If there is any demand for discussion, the assembly is not called to act. The case should be thoroughly investigated, and all the facts collected by those who care for the interests of Christ and His Church; and when it is thoroughly settled, and the evidence perfectly conclusive, then the whole assembly is called to perform, in deep sorrow and humiliation, the sad act of putting away from among themselves the evil-doer. It is an act of holy obedience to the Lord's command.

We cannot but feel that, were the assembly's discipline carried out in this spirit, we should see very different results. How different is this from the formal reading out of a notice in the course, or at the close, of an ordinary meeting — a notice often unheard by many. It is an entirely different thing, and it would be attended with very different results, both as to the assembly and the person put away. There would be a much more profound sense, on all hands, of the gravity and solemnity of the assembly's discipline. And oh, what urgent need there is of this in all our assemblies! We are sadly prone to be light and trifling.

We would repeat, and emphasise the statement, that the putting away of a person from the Lord's table, as well as the reception, must be the act of the whole assembly. No one has any right to tell another to remain away from the table. If I know of any brother who is living in sin, I should seek to exercise his conscience in a pastoral way. I should warn him, and seek to lead him to self-judgement. If he persists, I should bring his case before those who really care for the honour of Christ and the purity of His assembly. Then, if there be no hope, and no possible ground for demur, the assembly should be called together to act, and the occasion might be used for setting before the consciences of all the solemnity of the ground occupied by the assembly, and the holiness that becometh the house of the Lord forever.

We cannot too strongly protest against the idea of the whole assembly being called to discuss cases of discipline. We may well say, "Doth not even nature itself teach" the unseemliness of bringing the details of a case of immorality, for example, before a promiscuous assembly? It is contrary to God and contrary to nature.

In conclusion, one word as to the object of the assembly's discipline. The inspired apostle tells us,

in 1 Cor. 5, that it is salvation — "that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." This is very precious. It is worthy of the God of all grace. The man is delivered to Satan for the destruction of that odious thing which has caused his humiliating fall, *that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.*

Let us never forget this. We should ever be on the lookout for this precious result when any one has to be put away. We should wait much on the Lord to own the action of the assembly in this way. We should not put away evil-doers in order to get rid of a disgrace or a trouble to us, but to maintain the holiness of the Lord's house, and for the ultimate salvation of those put away.

And here we may remark that the discipline of the assembly can never interfere with the unity of the body. Some persons speak of cutting off the members of the body of Christ, when any are refused or put away by the assembly. This is a grave mistake. The man in 1 Cor. 5 was a member of the body, and nothing could touch that blessed membership. He was put away, not because he was unconverted, but because he defiled the assembly. But the discipline was used for the ultimate blessing of a member of the body. No member of the body can ever be cut off. All are indissolubly joined to the Head in Heaven, and to the members on earth, by the Holy Ghost. "By one Spirit we are all baptised into one body."

This is divinely simple and clear, and moreover it is a conclusive answer to the statement so constantly made, namely, that, provided a person is a Christian, he ought not to be put away or refused by the assembly. No such question is ever raised. To put away a person for not being a Christian is opposed to the spirit and teaching of the Word of God. Even under the Old Testament economy people were not put outside the camp for not being the seed of Abraham, or circumcised members of the congregation, but because they were ceremonially defiled. See Num. 5.

But we must close this paper with a brief reply to a question often raised, namely this. Has any assembly, now, power to deliver a person to Satan? This question is distinctly answered by the far seeing wisdom of the Holy Ghost in 1 Cor 5. For, as if anticipating it, He sums up His teaching at the close of the chapter, not by repeating the command to deliver such an one to Satan, but by adding another; Wherefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.

This is most striking, lest any should raise an objection on the score of power, the Holy Ghost gives us distinctly to understand, that is not a question of *power*, but *obedience*.

P.S. There is a character of discipline presented in 2 Thess. 3 which demands our serious attention: "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye *withdraw yourselves* from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us.... If any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother."

This is what we may call personal discipline in private life — a very important thing, much needed, alas, but not generally understood. It is not a case calling for the action of the assembly, but for faithful personal dealing. The disorderly walking referred to is a brother not working, but going about as an idle busybody. Such a one was to be admonished, and avoided. Now we cannot help thinking that this form of discipline is much called for. There are many whose ways, though not of such a character as to call for excommunication, do, nevertheless, demand faithful dealing: for example, persons going in debt, living beyond their means, dressing in a vain, fashionable style, unbecoming a Christian; and many other things inconsistent with the holiness, purity and solemnity of the Lord's table and the assembly. If all such cases were dealt with according to the apostolic command in 2 Thess. 3, we believe it would prove a real blessing to many.

We need hardly add that it needs much grace, much spiritual wisdom, much of the mind of Christ, much nearness to God, to carry out this sort of discipline; but we are persuaded it demands the prayerful attention of Christians; and we may confidently count on the grace of God to enable us to act for Him in this matter.