

The Nature Of Biblical Discipline

Is There A Problem?

It would seem, to the writer at least, that it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain and profitably administer biblical church discipline.

In general terms the problem does not appear to be so much with an "in principle" commitment on the part of office-bearers to administer biblical church discipline, or of members to receive it. But when we move from the "in principle" to the application things become precarious. There we discover a problem. The office-bearer is often met by a resistance of authority and a reluctance to render submission. Flowing from that, office-bearers struggle to know how profitably to administer discipline in such a climate. Often the issue requiring loving discipline is lost sight of in the resultant crisis caused by rejection of the office-bearers authority. Discipline seems, increasingly, to be viewed as an authoritarian evil to be resisted in general, and tolerated only as a last resort when things get really desperate - and even then with conditions attached. Even some faithful members of long standing seem to find the concept of authoritative discipline in the name of Christ hard to accept.

The teaching that church membership always and necessarily involves submission to biblical church discipline seems to shock some and amuse others. And sadly, we have learned that resignation often results from discipline, even the mildest, most careful, and gentle form. In short, to take discipline seriously is to open the church up to the charge of being "a church that abuses".

This problem is felt as "pressure" by the eldership. Obviously, they will not find it easy faithfully to administer discipline in such circumstances. The elders, wanting to avoid conflict and keep open the lines of communication with an erring member, feel pressure to either neglect discipline or let things slide - lest the members be offended and perhaps even leave. In this climate, many "reasons" can be found as to why it is not expedient to seek out the erring member with discipline; especially if they have been inclined to resist biblical church discipline and have reacted negatively in the past. The fact that our congregations are, for the most part, small and struggling adds to the pressure - after all, we can't afford to lose members. If discipline causes trouble - and it often seems to - would it not be "wise" to allow things take their own course until there is absolutely no option but to act? That is the direction of the pressure.

Yes, it would appear that there is a problem. Further, it is the writer's considered opinion that this problem is not isolated, and it may well be gathering momentum. If, after prayerful consideration, the brethren wish to disagree with this analysis then they are encouraged to write to the Editor.

If what has been described here describes our reality, we need honestly to ask the question: We believe in biblical church discipline - don't we? Is There A Cause?

When we look for a cause, or causes we can begin by acknowledging the need for honest self-examination. We would be wise to compare our present attitudes and practices with Holy Scripture and the practice of the faithful church of ages past - and be willing to change in order to bring ourselves into line where necessary. We are called by our King and Head, Christ Jesus to be a reforming church. And while we are at it, we would be wise to focus our attention upon the quality of instruction we provide in the duties and responsibilities of the eldership before men are ordained into office, and church membership before members are received into the communion and discipline of the church. All our Sessions ensure that such instruction is received - do they not? If not, it may well be that we have, in large part, created our own problems. If so, immediate remedial action is required.

One senses, however, that there is more at work than this - something deeper yet - something so subtle in its workings that we would barely even notice it, unless we began to notice its corrupt fruits. To this "leaven in the lump" we now turn our attention. But first a few thoughts to prepare the way.

The church militant must study the times, recognise the particular sins of the age in which she lives, and engage the enemy on that front - with vigour. Especially against the characteristic sins of our age we must fight, for these will be the things that worm their way into the minds and hearts of us all. Our weapons, as always, must be prayer and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. The church that fails to engage the enemy at the point of attack, no matter how grand and orthodox her confession may be, will become like a dead fish - belly up, going with the flow. If the church teaches nothing the world teaches everything.

Now, let us apply this truth to the discipline problem. Our post modern era is characterised by relativism and religious pluralism. Having shaken off God, his authority, his word, and all absolutes, the spirit of the age is one of disrespect and disregard of authority.[1] Every individual claims the "right" to do what is right in their own eyes, for each person is now their own standard and authority. From our Parliamentarians' refusal to submit to God through his law, through teenagers who laugh at parents and shout profanities at the police, to the little toddler screaming rebellion at its mother from the shopping trolley - our society petulantly stamps its foot and shouts: "No, I will not submit." Unchallenged freedom to do

what is right in our own eyes is the spirit of the age.

Now, if the church was quietly being conditioned and conformed to this spirit, the fruit would begin to show.

It would show in the home. The relationship between parents and children would be compromised, for parents would be disinclined to require honour and obedience of their children, and they would be very reluctant to apply the rod of correction to their erring child, for it is so far abhorrent to the spirit of the age.[2] The baptised members of the church, would grow up with a view of authority, submission, and discipline that is conformed to the spirit of the age. This would immediately be evident in their attitude and conduct to discipline in the life of the church.

It would also show in our attitude toward the office-bearers God places in authority over us. It would show in our reaction to their faithfully applying God's word in discipline to us - would it not? We would find ourself disinclined humbly, respectfully, and with godly fear to submit under the word of God brought to us by the elders. Rather, our immediate inclination would be to dig in and resist the authority. That would be "natural" to us. We would do so without even realising what we were actually doing. We would, perhaps, even imagine it was right and noble to do so. The spirit of the age, in alliance with our remaining corruptions, would be well and truly belted into the driving seat - would it not? Then the spirit of the age would be alive and working within the church. It would be VERY difficult to administer biblical church discipline to such a person, would it not? But this, I suggest, is exactly the situation we face, and which, by God's grace, must overcome.

So, is there a place for biblical church discipline in such an age and situation? Oh yes! There most certainly is. What Do We Confess?

Notwithstanding the godless spirit of our age: "We still believe in biblical church discipline"

In respect to discipline, that is what the church militant, the true church of Jesus Christ in the world must continue to confess till the Lord returns.

Our Lord could not have been clearer when he declared of the church which he builds on the rock of a good confession: "on this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:18-19). The keys of biblical church discipline are given to the true visible church in the world. It belongs to the true church to exercise these keys in the preaching, teaching, and discipline of the authoritative word of God.

The exercise of biblical church discipline is one of the marks, or notes, of the true church which distinguishes her from the false. So we confess in the Scotch Confession of Faith 1560: "The notes therefore of the true church of God we believe, confess, and avow to be, first, the true preaching of the word of God, in which God has revealed himself to us, as the writings of the Prophets and Apostles do declare. Secondly, the right administration of the Sacraments of Christ Jesus, which are annexed unto the word and promise of God, to seal and confirm the same in our hearts. Last, ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered, as God's word prescribes, whereby vice is repressed, and virtue nourished. Wheresoever then the former notes are seen, and of continue (be the number ever so few, about two or three), there, without all doubt, is the true Church of Christ ... " This truth we also confess together in our Westminster Confession of Faith: "Unto this catholic church Christ has given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of his saints in this life, to the end of the world; and doth by his own presence and Spirit, according to his promise, make them effectual thereunto" (WCF 25:3). Among the "ordinances" of the church is biblical church government - the rule and discipline of Christ through his word, by his office-bearers.[3]

This same confession is made in the Belgic Confession of Faith, article 29: "We believe ... the body and communion of the true church must be distinguished from all sects, who call themselves the church. The marks, by which the true church is known, are these: if the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if she maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin; in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church. Hereby the true church may certainly be known, from which no man has a right to separate himself." Though particular churches may be more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them; a true church is a church that is striving faithfully to exercise biblical church discipline. In such a church, Christ rules by his Word, through office-bearers (John 10:27, Matt. 28:18ff, 2 Timothy 4:1-2, Titus 1:5, Hebrews 13:17, Acts 20: 17,28, 1 Cor. 12:28, Eph. 4:11-13). Within the true church there is discipline from Christ the Head, through His Word, administered by duly called and ordained office-bearers. What Do We Practice?

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Australia upholds the place of discipline in the life of both office-bearers and members. All her ministers, being under the spiritual oversight of Presbytery, make solemn vow to submit to biblical Church discipline in response to the following question: "Do you promise to submit yourself willingly and humbly, in the spirit of meekness, unto the admonitions of the brethren of this Presbytery, and to be subject to them, and all other

Presbyteries and superior courts of this Church where God in His providence shall cast your lot; and that according to your power, you shall maintain the unity and peace of this Church against error and schism, notwithstanding of whatsoever trouble or persecution may arise, and that you shall follow no divisive course from the doctrine, worship, discipline, and government of this Church?â€•[4] To this question a man must answer â€œyesâ€•, freely, and without mental reservation in order to be accepted into the pastoral office as a minister of the word and sacraments. A man can not be minister in the Church unless he both confesses to believe in biblical Church discipline and solemnly promises to uphold and practice it.

Ruling Elders and Deacons, upon their ordination, are also required to affirm their commitment and submission to the government and discipline Christ has placed in his Church, in answer to this question: â€œDo you own and acknowledge the Presbyterian Church Government of this Church, by Church Sessions, Presbyteries, Provincial Synods, and General Assemblies, to be the only government of this Church, and do you engage to submit thereto, concur therewith, and not to endeavour, directly or indirectly, the prejudice of subversion thereof?â€•[5] And Elders and Deacons, together with all their fellow members of the local congregation, upon profession of faith, have given a well considered answer to questions, like: â€œDo you promise, at all times to conduct yourself conformably to this doctrine faithfully, honourably, and beyond reproach, and to adorn your confession with good works.

Do you promise that you will submit to admonition, correction and Church discipline in the event (which God forbid) that you may become delinquent either in doctrine or in life?â€•[6] It is evident, therefore, that as a church the EPC of Australia, every minister, elder and member is committed, willingly and freely, to maintain and practice biblical Church discipline.

So, do we believe in biblical church discipline?

Yes, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Australia believes discipline is vital to a true church, for it is one of the marks of a true church.

We believe that this must not only be confessed but also faithfully practiced. The very constitution and practice of the Church embodies it. We have all freely agreed, and bound ourselves by solemn oath to uphold and submit to the rule of Christ through his authoritative word.

And we are now engaged in striving to live up to that good confession. That is no easy calling. We are engaged in the struggle of the church in all ages - striving to maintain and live up to our good confession of the truth.

Having said this, it would be helpful to consider something of the nature and blessing of biblical church discipline.

â€œOh no, the ELDERS want to visit us! They are COMING! What terrible thing has happened? Or, what have we done wrong?â€•

Where the exercise biblical church discipline is viewed in this negative way, something is amiss. It may be that the membership misunderstands discipline, and the way it is to be exercised. Or, it may be that the Session has a wrong understanding and has been sending all the wrong signals by the way it exercises discipline. When discipline is predominantly reactive it creates problems.

Given that Sessions find it increasingly difficult to maintain biblical discipline in our age of individualism and relativism, the tendency is to adopt the hands off approach until discipline becomes absolutely necessary. Then discipline becomes predominately reactive. It is always corrective and connected to a crisis. If this continues, reactionary discipline can become the accepted practice. Discipline, like the dreaded headmasterâ€™s cane, is dragged out to administer punishment. It is unavoidable that discipline is associated in peopleâ€™s minds with punishment and problems. If this is the way we experience discipline, it is no wonder elders visitations are a frightening - even terrifying - prospect.

But this is NOT what biblical church discipline is designed to be. It is a sad caricature of a means of grace appointed by the Good Shepherd within his church.

The true character and purpose of biblical church discipline is discovered when it is viewed as â€œdisciplingâ€•. The discipline of the true church is an integral part of her discipling work through the official ministry of the Word. It is discipline that discipless; and discipling that disciplines.

The church is commissioned to â€œdiscipleâ€•. â€œGo,â€• commands our Lord, â€œ... teach (literally - disciple) all nations .. them to observe all things I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the worldâ€• (Matthew 28:19-20). Discipling is by means of the word. That is clear from this passage, where â€œteachingâ€• explains the way in which the commission is to be fulfilled. By lively, evangelical preaching of the gospel, and faithful teaching of the whole council of God, the church is to â€œmake disciplesâ€•. Through his word, Christ is with his church effectually gathering, instructing, and preserving his elect in the life of faith and thankful obedience (Luke 9:23, John 14:15). Christ is present with us also as a church, by his Spirit, as we preach his gospel. He is present to effectually call his elect. He is with us as we teach to

effect true growth in knowledge and grace in his saints. He is with us as we apply his word for discipline to effectually admonish, convince, and restore his erring saints. This promise we must believe, and in the light and strength of it our elders must exercise biblical church discipline.

Biblical discipline is most emphatically the authoritative discipline of God's WORD. The church must limit itself strictly to declaring the word of God with authority in all matters of faith and life. This is essential, because the authority of the church is purely spiritual and ministerial. The elders have no authority or discretion of their own, and are merely ministers or servant to carry out the will and execute the appointments of Christ.[7] Christ's word has authority with the true believer. It has power to convince the mind, bend the will and bind the conscience - so as to draw out true submission and humble obedience from the disciple of Christ. Under the powerful operations of the Holy Spirit, Christ's word is effectual unto salvation - also in discipline. The church must believe this, and have real confidence in the word as the power of God unto salvation, if it is to be faithful in bringing that word in season and out of season. This is especially true when that word must be brought to those who initially "withdraw the shoulder, and harden their neck and will not hear" (Neh. 9:29). Certainly the elders may lack confidence in themselves, but they must not lack confidence in their God and his irresistible grace.

Biblical discipline is loving discipline. It is a warm, personal, and practical means of grace. Biblical discipline lovingly approaches the errant church member as a fellow saint, one who is "sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saint" (1Cor.1:2). A sinning saint, perhaps; but a saint nonetheless. Discipline reaches out in love and concern to bring the strengthening, restoring word of God. It comes to apply that word right were and when it is most needed - in the spiritual warfare, when we are in danger of being overcome.

Therefore, at times, it may, of necessity, need to be "tough love." It may need to confront, rebuke, and chasten with varying degrees of severity - but it will be in love and always with a view to restoring us into the way of faith and obedience (Hebrews 12:5ff, Psalm 119: 67, Proverbs 3:12). Discipline recognises that sin destroys the soul and leads inexorably to hell - it responds in love for the soul, and faithfulness to Christ and brings the means that are adapted by Divine wisdom to deliver from the blinding power of sin and restore the soul into the way of life through repentance.

Biblical discipline is Christ's authoritative "disciplining" through his word. There is no "ordering it over" the God, and no authoritarian tyranny either implied or allowed in truly biblical discipline. Rather, Christ disciplines the members of his church, by his word, through the elders (Acts 20:28). This is not to say, that in the communion of the saints there is not a mutual brotherly discipline to be exercised one toward another in love. Martin Bucer[8] rightly said:

"Discipline in life and manners consists in this, that not only the public ministers of the churches (though these principally), but even individual Christians should exercise a care for their neighbours. By the authority and magistracy of our Lord Jesus Christ, each person should strengthen and advance his neighbours, wherever this is possible, and urge them to progress in the life of God as his disciples, in his faith and knowledge. And if any fall into error of doctrine or some vice of life or manners, whoever can should with utmost zeal recall such persons from all false doctrine and depraved activity, both for the purity of Christian doctrine and the diligent conformity of all life to the will of God."[9]

This being true, there is also a public and authoritative discipline to be maintained and exercised within Christ's church: then we must understand that "the power of discipline is entrusted solely to elders." [10] When private member's faithful efforts come to nothing, that member is commanded by Christ to "tell it to the church," (Matthew 18:17). The "church" is the elders assembled as Session. It belongs to the church institute, through her elders, to bind and loose with authority, in the name of Christ (Matthew 16:19). To bind involves depriving an errant member of access to the privileges of membership. This binding allows for various steps or degrees of censure ranging from a mild rebuke through to excommunication from the sacraments; and ultimately the greater excommunication, by which an unrepentant sinner is excluded not only from the privileges but also from the membership in the Christian Church. To loose is to restore the member, upon repentance, to the privileges of membership. The power of the keys also requires that the assembly of elders (Presbytery) authoritatively declare the will of God in Holy Scripture to settle matters of dispute in the church, as did the Jerusalem assembly (Acts 15).

The eldership must be faithful to exercise discipline in life and manners (Acts 20:20,21,28), correction and restoration of those who fall into sin (1Cor. 5:4-9, Matthew 18: 17-18), and guarding of the sacraments (1Cor. 11:31-32).

The faithful exercise of biblical discipline has two important aspects. First, there is discipline that could be called the general and regular. This is the normal practice of disciplining referred to earlier. This takes place in the regular life of the church as week by week the word is ministered by the elders both publicly and from house to house. Here the apostle Paul's example in Ephesus (Acts 20) is most instructive. His example is held before the eldership as the pattern: "Ye know, from the first day that I came to Asia, after what manner I have been with you at all seasons ... how I kept bay nothing that was profitable unto you, but have showed you, and have taught you publicly and from house to house." Clearly, it belongs to the regular and ordinary duties of the eldership to visit the families of the church in their homes; bringing the word preached publicly into the home, there to apply it to the particular needs of each family and its various

members. Faithfulness at this level keeps discipline in its right perspective - all see it to be loving discipling of Christ, through his elders, by his word. This blessed means of grace builds up all the members, and is adapted to prevent spiritual problems before they arise, or at least before they become major crises. When this ordinary exercise of discipline is wanting it is unlikely that corrective discipline can be profitably administered. But where the blessings of faithful discipling by the elders has been experienced, both elders and members alike are prepared against the time special corrective discipline may be required. Secondly, as circumstances require, there must be the exercise of formal, corrective discipline. Here the purpose is to correct and to restore the erring member through repentance and faith. The eldership must proceed formally at times to: "seek that which was lost, bring again that which was driven away, bind up that which was broken, and strengthen that which was sick, (Ezekiel 34:16). The Blessing of Biblical Church Discipline

Ongoing, ordinary, discipline in life and manners is a great blessing for members of a true church.

As the teaching and ruling elders are busy with prayer and the ministry of the word, and with personal oversight, and regular family visitation, all the members and families of the congregation will be shepherded lovingly and firmly in the ways of true godliness and holiness of life. This is a great blessing; for it hedges us in and protects us, while at the same time strengthening us and equipping us to stand fast against temptation and sin.

It is also a great blessing to have faithful elders who manifest the love and concern of the Good Shepherd who leaves the ninety and nine and goes out to seek, find and restore the one lost sheep to repentance (Luke 15:3-7). Faithful discipline continues even when there is a fall into sin. Indeed, we ought to say, it must continue especially when there is a fall into sin! True believers can, at times, become so ensnared by the deceitfulness of sin that they wilfully deny their conscience, resist the admonitions of God's word, and are inclined to separate themselves from the means of grace. At such times Christ sends the undershepherds he has placed in the church to seek that soul out with restorative discipline. At times that will require nothing more than a quiet, gentle rebuke through the word and call to repentance. But at other times it may require a sharp rebuke, and even the chastening rod of formal discipline with its various steps of private and public censure. But whatever it may involve - it is required. It is required in the nature of the case, and it is required by the Lord Jesus Christ who will have his redeemed restored to his fellowship. Is There An Application?

Fellow teaching and ruling elders, consider with me an admonition from the reformer Martin Bucer:

"Those whom the Lord has put in charge of his sheep should ponder seriously the fact that from their hands will be required whatever sheep perish by their negligence. They should thoroughly think over what the Lord said to them and threatened them with through that prophet Ezekiel (3:17-18).

Let them carefully consider and ponder what the Lord complains about the shepherds who do not strengthen the weak sheep, or heal the sick, or bind the broken limbs, and do not lead back the ones separated from the flock, or seek those which have perished (Ezek. 34:4). Let that grave admonition of Paul to the elders of Ephesus sound in their hearts: "Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). Likewise, that which he commanded (Titus 2:15): "These things speak and exhort, and rebuke with all authority. Let no man despise thee."

Fellow members of the Church of Jesus Christ, you have a clear calling here also. Be sure you elect and call only those men who possess the spiritual qualifications of an elder equipped by Christ (1 Timothy 3:2-7). To do otherwise is to rob the church of her spiritual integrity, and yourselves of this vital means of grace. And when Christ has given you elders, encourage them and pray earnestly that they may be unflinchingly faithful in this weighty matter of discipline; for they must one day answer to Christ for their conduct and actions. "... for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account..." (Hebrews 13:17). And if you need another reason to pray, then remember that the threatenings of God upon unfaithful ministers and elders are utterly dreadful! "Son of Man, I have made thee a watch man unto the house of Israel: therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me. When I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; and thou givest him not warning, not speakest to warn the wicked of his way, to save his life; the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand" (Ezekiel 3:17-18). And when you rise off your knees, set yourself to positively encourage your elders. Do so by honouring, submitting to, and obeying them in the Lord as they come faithfully with God's word. This will be a joy to them, and most profitable to you.

Brethren all, do not neglect your own heart attitude in prayer. Do remember that, notwithstanding the rebellious godlessness of our age, we are all required to submit humbly to biblical church discipline as part of our holy calling. Do remember, that should we foolishly attempt to shake of Christ's hand from our shoulder and refuse to listen to his word of rebuke, then our blood will be on our own hands - not the faithful elders' against whom we have so foolishly reacted (Ezekiel 3:19). Be aware of the evil spirit of our age - individualism, relativism and anti-authoritarianism. Do not allow yourself to be conditioned by it. Fight against it as living members of the church militant. It will never do to fall into line with this spirit, to snap and snarl at the under-shepherds, or huff and puff about resigning; for Christ's word has authority, authority that can not be ignored, shaken off, or escaped. You must recognise and submit to the authority of Christ. His word does call us all to holiness of life, and it does discipline us when we turn aside into the way of destruction. Under the authority of that blessed word of life we must all humbly bow.

Remember them that have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation. Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day and for ever. ... Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves; for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you (Hebrews 13:7-8,17).

We have considered the fact that biblical Church discipline is a mark of the true church, and something of its nature and blessing. We want now to begin looking at some of the procedures of discipline in the church according to our church practice. We begin by showing the ordinary way in which a sin ought to be brought from the congregation to the Session.

Tell It To The Church

How ought private sins arrive at the door of the Session?

Should the Session have its ear straining for reports or rumours that can be followed up to see if they are true? Session enter into matters via second or third hand accounts? What is the correct procedure?

Our King and Head gives us clear instruction in Matthew 18:17: and if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church... Here is clear instruction for both the membership and church Session. Steps That Lead To Session

Christ establishes the procedure with respect to private sins. That procedure originates with the membership not with the Session. Public and scandalous sin warrants a different procedure; then a Session may take the matter in hand directly. Not so with private sins. Private sins must come into the Session through the doorway of Matthew 18.

Obviously, this procedure applies only to trespasses; that is, the transgression of God's law. It is not addressing the weaknesses or niggling aggravations within the fellowship that love should cover. This is evident, for if the brother refuses to repent the process ends with excommunication, (verse 17). Matthew 18 conveys only unrepentant sin into the hands of the Session.

It is evident also that the passage treats private sins. In verse 15, where we read: Moreover if thy brother sin against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. Brother has sinned against brother. The matter is not public. Its scope and effect is limited. It is not known by, nor does it affect, the whole congregation as a public scandal. Therefore it is to be dealt with privately. The principle at work in this process is that love covers all sin. For the good of the sinning brother the matter is kept strictly private - while it is being addressed. Love's covering of sin is of great practical importance. Our practice explains why:

.....that the spreading of scandal may be prevented; and it may be removed by private admonition, according to our Lord and Saviour's rule, Matthew 18:15, which, if amendment follow, is the far better way of gaining and recovering a lapsed brother, whereas the needless spreading of a scandal does sometimes harden the guilty, grieve the godly, and is dishonourable to religion [11]

Matthew 18:15-17 requires three steps that lead to Session. First, the offended party must go privately to his erring brother and tell him his fault between thee and him alone (v:15.) If the brother will not hear, he is to take one or two witnesses with him, that every word may be established. Then, if the brother still does not hear, he is to tell the church - not his friends and fellow members - the Session. As far as possible the private sin is still private. Every attempt has been made to ensure that only the brothers, the confidential witness(es) and the Session, a private court, know of it.

Thus, the case arrives at the door of the Session by way of Matthew 18.

It comes through an orderly and righteous process. It comes after, the sin being covered in love, every effort has been exhausted privately to restore the erring brother. It comes first hand. It comes with witnesses who can establish every word of what transpired. Therefore, it comes in an objective and righteous manner out of love for the erring brother.

Telling The Session

The brother who is following our Lord's rule will bring the unfinished matter to the Session for resolution. He has done all he can, he now hands it on to the Session. He may do so by letter or by meeting with the Session. The wisest procedure includes both. An account of all that has transpired, the nature of the sin, the steps undertaken and their results, is written and sent to the Clerk of Session with request to speak with Session about the matter. He must faithfully tell it to the church. This is most necessary, as it is the way the matter is to pass from his hands into the hands of Session. Received By The Session

The next step is for the elders of the church to consider the reception of the matter into Session.

The Session will first consider whether or not the offence, in light of the circumstantial report, is proper for them to take

up by way of discipline. "Nothing ought to be admitted by any Church judicature as the ground of a process for censure, but what has been declared censurable by the word of God." [12] If it is not such a matter, Session may not receive it. If it is, the Session can receive it, and proceed to consider whether or not it has been brought in the correct manner as required by Matthew 18. If not, the member who brings the report must be instructed and admonished to go back and humbly follow the steps required before bringing the matter to Session. If it does come in the correct way, the case may be received into Session as a matter to be taken up.

The case may now be taken in hand by the Session in the knowledge that, thus far, the means ordained by Christ have been faithfully applied. Now the Session may take up the case in the knowledge that Christ has ordained their labours also as a means of grace and restoration for his sinning saints.

Consider too the challenge and blessing this brings to us as members and office-bearers of Christ's church.
People Of Integrity

A church without spiritual and biblical integrity will be a disappointing and cruel place. It may boldly declare the whole counsel of God; but when it is required to do that word in biblical church discipline it goes to water. It lacks integrity, it lacks conviction, it disappoints, and by leaving sin undisciplined, it becomes cruel to all concerned. The Lord gives the only way of integrity and love.

In Matthew 18, Christ calls us all as members of his church to integrity in the Christian life. He calls us to honesty, true conviction of mind, the courage of our convictions, and unwavering obedience. He looks for us to be doers of his word and not hearers only. He looks for integrity from every member and office-bearer when it comes to maintaining his discipline in the church.

Integrity requires that each member takes up his/her responsibility to the erring brother. If he sins against us, we must love him enough to go privately to him with the words of his Lord and call him to repentance. This is where Christ begins his discipline of private sins. As we are faithful to his word, and thereby to one another, we become means through which Christ will disciple the sheep that has gone astray. We may not shirk our duty and say: "Let someone else do it" or "Session handle it." If God's providence so orders it that your brother trespasses against you, Christ holds before you a solemn duty. He requires integrity of you: "...go and tell him his fault.... etc." Integrity will take up that duty in obedience to Christ.

Christ requires this. Integrity requires it. The Sessions must require it of all church members. And members must require it of one another. An Unexpected Bonus

By requiring every offended brother to "go tell him his fault between thee and him alone" our Lord forbids tale bearing and backbiting. If sin has its way the offended brother will tell his wife and children, friends and relatives far and near. The offended brother becomes a talebearer, and so does each one who passes the story on, and so on down the line until a private sin becomes a public scandal. But Matthew 18, by requiring us to cover sin, brings healing. He that covers a transgression seeks love: but he that repeats a matter separates very friends (Proverbs 17:9).

This principle applies whenever it becomes apparent that a brother or sister is passing on a report that reveals rather than covers sin. We must have integrity here as well. Our duty is to stop them and hold before them the principle of love covering sin as required in Matthew 18 etc. They should also be lovingly rebuked for the sin of tale bearing and called to repent of that sin. Then, that person may also be called to go privately to the erring member who passed on that tale to them, and do the same for them. And so on up the tale-bearing chain until integrity meets the offended member who, though perhaps very upset and hurt, failed to go with integrity to the offending brother privately - but has set the church ablaze with his tongue.

If the membership of the church has the integrity to apply Matthew 18 in this way, much strife and contention will be healed and love and peace will be able to flourish.

There is no need for a congregation to live with, and be plagued by the sin of tale bearing. "Where no wood is, there the fire goes out: so where there is no talebearer, the strife ceases" (Proverbs 26:20).

Rev. Chris Connors
The Evangelical Presbyterian

Volumes 15, 16 & 17 January 2000, July 2000 & January 2001 FOOTNOTES 1. Relativism recognises no absolutes. Everything is relative - open to change and contradiction. Having denied God and his infallible, authoritative word, there is no basis for absolutes in truth, religion, morality, or any thing else for that matter. Each person becomes his own ultimate standard. Discipline based upon the supreme authority of God's word is inconceivable.

Religious pluralism joins in, claiming the right of all to their own god, religion, doctrine, worship and way of life. Especially in matters "spiritual" discipline can have no place! "Do not judge" society and the apostatising church cry in unison. Add to this the practice of the fragmented Reformed and Presbyterian churches (neglecting discipline and striving for church growth), to embrace refugees from discipline - no questions asked - and all is in place. The member who is

sufficiently conditioned, still refusing to submit to the discipline of God's word, can continue in sin and find a home within another professedly Reformed church. It is sad that churches would willingly allow themselves to be used this way.

And, let us not forget the most powerful influence of all - our remaining corruptions. It is the most natural thing in the world for the old man of sin to be offended by faithful discipline, to rise up in self-justification and rebellion, and then to strive to hold onto sin while enjoying the privileges of church membership. It is natural for our old man to embrace the spirit of the age with glee and apply it to life in Christ's church. From the thoughtless, carnal, or backslidden church member there is little or no resistance. These things, all working together exert immense pressure on the thinking and attitude of the people of God. It is almost inevitable that we are conditioned - little by little - to modify our attitudes and practices to reflect the world in which we live.

2. In several Australian States it is now illegal for schools, even Christian schools to administer corporal punishment. In Tasmania, there are moves to make it illegal for parents to spank their children.

3. That discipline is included among the ordinances mentioned in our Confession, The Sum of Saving Knowledge makes clear:

“The outward means and ordinances, for making men partakers of the covenant of grace, are so wisely dispensed, as that the elect shall be infallibly converted and saved by them; and the reprobate, among whom they are, not to be justly stumbled. The means are especially these four. 1. The word of God. 2. The sacraments. 3. Church government. 4.

Prayer. ... By church government, he will have them hedged in, and helped forward unto the keeping of the covenant” (2:1).

4. Constitution of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Australia, p. vii.

5. Constitution.... p. vi

6. Wording is taken from the questions put to those making public profession of faith in the Launceston Congregation.

7. James Bannerman, The Church Of Christ,: Banner of Truth, 1960, Vol. 1, p. 219.

8. Martin Bucer 1500? - 1551 was a prominent Lutheran leader of the Reformation in Strassburg and throughout Southern Germany. Bucer laboured together with Calvin in Strassburg from 1538-1541. Later, due to persecution, he removed to England, where he assisted in the revising of the Prayer Book and died.

9. On The Kingdom Of Christ, cited from Melancthon and Bucer, Editor: Wilhelm Pauck, Westminster Press, p. 241.

10. Porteus, Jesus Christ, King of the Church, James Begg Society, 1999, p. 213.

11. P. 163, The Form of Process, Chapter II, section 1.

12. Ibid, p. 162, The Form of Process, Chapter 1, Section 4.