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Worshipping a Harsh God: Does Church Discipline Make Relationship with God Harsh and Conditional?

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Introduction

In short, the answer is "No." Church discipline, properly conceived and administered, presents neither a harsh God nor a relationship to God that is conditional. There are, however, several issues to sort through before this is as evident as it should be.

First, church discipline must be placed in a cultural context in each age. As we shall see, methods of instruction and correction that now seem horrific were taken as normal and normative in previous times and other cultures. Second, church discipline needs to be put in a larger theological context that begins with God's discipline of God's

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people, moves through the question of life itself as an instrument of God's discipline, looks at the issue of self-discipline and self-control as practices of freedom, and only then comes to church discipline as practices of freedom and peace in the community of God's people. Only so can we develop principles of discernment that allow us to distinguish godly discipline from human abuse that can reach even the level of the demonic.

I. God's Discipline in the Old Testament

The usual Hebrew terms for discipline, *isr* (verb) and *musr* (noun), paralleled in Greek by *paideuw* and *paideia* in the Septuagint and New Testament, have their origin in the education and correction of children within a family, usually by the father. As a number of verses (such as Deut. 21:18, Prov. 13:24 and 22:15) make clear, the use of corporal punishment, including beating with a rod or stick, was a normal part of this educative process, perhaps more in Hebrew culture than in Greek. But even so, this concept of correction or reproof always has the emphasis on the educative function of fatherly love, not retributive punishment.

This is the prevailing metaphor for God's disciplining of the covenant people. All sorts of disasters brought upon Israel could be interpreted not so much as retributive punishment by God, but rather as loving correction with an educative purpose. Thus, anyone who is chastised by God is fortunate or happy, because God is treating him or her as a beloved child (Job 5:17; Ps. 94:12). This is true for nations as well as individuals; however severe the discipline, it is "to be accepted as evidence of God's enduring love."[2] While the same terms applied outside the family context could mean pure punishment (I Kings 12:11), God's own discipline is always presented as an expression of fatherly love for one who is within the covenant promises, a love that is unconditional, even if it sometimes "tough" in allowing the consequences of foolish or sinful actions to play themselves out.

Torah, the law, is thus not a burden, but a joy, a sign of God's special fatherly favor. As the source of internal discipline within the covenant people, Torah is also the archetype of "church discipline."

[2] P. E. Davies, "Discipline," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible,* ed. George A. Butrick *et al.* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), V. I, 896.

Officers of the covenant community, priests, prophets, kings, are called upon to administer not any old justice, but a just application of Torah, God's loving discipline and instruction of his people. Any other system of law or punishment would be sinful and abusive.

Although God is presented as able and willing to administer discipline directly to the covenant people, there are also several points at which God, much like a modern parent, simply allows the natural consequences of behavior to play themselves out, hoping that the result will be a learning opportunity for the nation or individual in question. Thus, life itself, in all its ordinary course of events, becomes a primary instrument of God's discipline. Perhaps the clearest example of this use of "natural consequences discipline" is in the book of Amos, where God says of a series of nations, including Israel and Judah, "For three transgressions of _____ and for four, I will not revoke the punishment." Or, as my Old Testament professor, Harvey Guthrie, translated "I will not stop it."

II. Discipline in the New Testament

Both Hellenistic culture with its attitude towards education of children and the personality and teaching of Jesus lead to an even greater emphasis on the educative purposes of discipline and a de-emphasis on chastisement, although various forms of *paideuw* can be used to refer to scourging.[3] This is very much in line with Jesus's attitude towards Torah in general—that it is not abrogated in the kingdom, but may point to even deeper purposes of God embedded in it in a manner that calls for an even more profound and radical obedience. The various sayings that have the form "You have heard it said . . . but I say to you" have this impact on later Christian thinking, in the case of the teaching on divorce and the *lex talionis* a quite specific impact. (Mt. 5:31-32; 37-39) Indeed, while both have been seen as re-legislating something in Torah, each case is more accurately interpreted as calling for a deeper loyalty to the principles embedded in Torah, the sanctity of marital unity and keeping revenge distant from justice. Even the most powerful descriptions of the disciplines of the common life of the new Christian community, found in the Sermon on the Mount of Matthew 5, culminating in the

[3] Ibid.

Beatitudes, have this shape and intent. If read as requirements for entering the community of the saved, they appear as an impossible burden; but seen as descriptions of the Spirit-empowered behavior of the community of the redeemed they become practices and consequences of true freedom and peace.

This is the key to interpreting one of the most significant scriptural texts on church discipline, found in Matthew 18:15-18. Here Matthew portrays Jesus as giving instructions on fraternal correction that can indeed sound harsh, and undoubtedly provided justification in later years for an abusive use of the power of excommunication by the hierarchy. But the true intention is well captured by Paul Waddell:

> Jesus's words indicate that the purpose of fraternal correction is for reconciliation with the wronged party and restoration of the relationship. However, if someone consistently refuses to accept responsibility for his behavior, the well-being of the community demands that he be removed from its midst until he is willing to accept the correction and amend his behavior: "If he ignores even the church, then treat him as you would a gentile or a tax collector." (Mt. 18:17). To many, Jesus's words sound harsh. But if the Church is to live the peace of Christ it cannot afford to tolerate behavior that is consistently at odds with the life and example of Christ.[4]

It is important not to lose sight of the always-open door for return to the community if amendment of life and behavior become evident. The now excluded person is still a member of the community, and salvation has not been made conditional, any more than providing a "time out corner" for a recalcitrant child calls into question that child's membership in the family or enjoyment of its love. Indeed, such discipline, precisely as an act of fraternal correction, must be an act of fraternal charity, an act of love, however "tough." When it becomes anything else, it is no longer godly discipline and has crossed over into abuse. We shall explore these themes in greater depth subsequently, but even here it is important to notice the irony of Matthew 18:18 in a gospel ascribed to a redeemed tax collector: it is precisely converting gentiles and repentant prostitutes, sinners, and tax collectors who find a privileged place at Jesus's table and enter first into the Kingdom. Human freedom requires that human refusal

[4] Paul Waddell, "Discipline and Trust," in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2004), 300. (Hereafter *BCCE*)

of salvation be granted a "time out corner" for as long as needed, but does not make salvation conditional. The door is always opened by unconditional grace whenever refusal freely yields to acceptance. It is not the grace of salvation that is conditional, but the freedom of human response.

This same pattern appears in the teaching of St. Paul, which, it is important to remember, as a written witness to the discipline of the early church is older than the gospels. In particular, Paul always puts questions of church discipline and indeed of all ethical expectations in the context of a Eucharistic community established by Baptism. The pattern is well established in Romans 5 and 6; to paraphrase: Once you were slaves to Satan and hence to the sinful passions of the body. But now, in Baptism, you have died with Christ in a death like his, and are now being raised by the Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, to a new life in Christ. So, act like it, act like people who now serve God in freedom, showing forth the gifts and fruits of the Spirit rather than the sinful works of the flesh. Because you are a Eucharistic community grounded in Baptism, all together the risen Body of Christ, even your table manners at our common meal should show forth this new risen life in how the poor are treated at our common table. (I Cor. 10:17-32) That is, the ethical requirements of the Christian life are not a condition or requirement for salvation, but a consequence of that salvation, a participation in the perfection of God because of our being in Christ by the power of the Spirit through membership in his Body, initiated by Baptism and nurtured in Eucharist. This under girds the pattern we have seen: The Church as the Body of Christ is responsible for fraternal correction of its members, even to the extent, in serious cases, of excluding them from the community and "handing them over to Satan" (I Cor. 5: 1-5); even this extreme action, however, is always for the sake of the salvation of those excluded, and such discipline must never become abusive punishment by foreclosing the possibility of reconciliation. (II Cor. 2:5-8) The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, puts this exceptionally well:

> . . . Paul, discussing matters of behavior, regularly appeals to the fact of baptism and what is learned in preparation for baptism: the fundamental truth about the Christian is that he or she has died to the slavery of falleness and been raised to the life of Christ. Behavioral priorities follow from this, not from any general argument about the good life. Baptism is the point of transition between lives,

> even identities, the place where transparency to God's otherness begins in earnest as both a fact and a project that is shared, talked about, explored, and consciously worked at.[5]

One further issue does require some particular comment at this point. Hellenistic philosophical culture, the Jewish ethics of Torah that Paul inherited, and his sense of the ethical impact of Gospel as just described, all coalesce in a harmonious view of the virtue of self-control or temperance (*egkrateia* in Greek).[6] This ability to tame the wilder impulses of the animal nature of humans, the desires of the flesh, whether by Stoic philosophy, Torah obedience, or response to grace, is seen as a key practice of peace and freedom. While not a requirement for salvation, it is, for Paul, one of its key manifestations, and most of those things he condemns as works of the flesh are taken from standard Jewish lists of sins that represent a failure of such self-control. In consumerist cultures such of those of the modern West, where freedom is defined as unhindered access to fulfillment of all desires, this seems very strange. But all three classical cultures (Hellenistic and Roman Stoicism, Jewish Torah ethics, and early Christian ethical expressions of new, resurrected life) would have viewed such consumerist freedom as mere self-indulgence, a sign, not of freedom, but of enslavement to the "lower", fleshly desires and instincts and a kind of incarceration of the mental and spiritual dimensions of human being. It is precisely this kind of enslavement from which Paul believes the Christian is emancipated by saving grace, with self-control being the major resulting virtue of an expression of the new freedom in Christ. Where such self-control fails, it must be confronted with fraternal correction, even, if need be, to the point of exclusion from the Eucharistic community, but always with a door open to repentance, return, and reconciliation.

III. Discipline in the Early Church

This biblical pattern was maintained in the life of the subapostolic church (in the *Didache*, for example) and early patristic period, with a growing emphasis on a factor that is not so much new as it is an outgrowth of the emphasis on self-control just discussed.

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5 "Afterword," *BCCE*, 495-98.

6 This cultural background and coalescence is well and thoroughly discussed by Wayne A. Meeks, *The Moral World of the First Christians* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986).

This is the emergence in Christianity, first in the praise of martyrdom in the periods of early persecution and then in the birth of monastic culture especially after Constantine, as the Roman Empire becomes the structure for an emergent Christendom, of discipline as *askesis*. Recent scholarship has emphasized the continuity of this development with ascetical tendencies in Hellenistic stoic circles, heterodox Jewish sects, and both pre-Christian and Christian Gnostic circles. The literature on this point is vast, changing, and contested,[7] and beyond the scope of this essay, but there does seem to be general agreement on one point: the ascetical emphasis on disciplining the sexual desires even to the point of considering celibacy superior to marriage as such (and not merely for eschatological reasons as in Paul) is genuinely new in contrast to mainstream Jewish and early Christian ethical thought. As this culture developed, self-control now interpreted as *askesis* could result in penitential practices meant to suppress all fleshly desires and mortify the flesh, using methods most of us would now view as abusive even when self-imposed. When Christian communities began to impose such discipline even on the unwilling, grounds were laid for a church discipline that could become not only abusive, but truly demonic.

As this ascetical culture developed in emergent Christendom, principles of such discipline were read from scripture, but even in very early texts, in quite different ways depending on the ascetical interests of the author, which should prevent us from a monochromatic interpretation of this phenomenon. A key study on this point is Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity*.[8] In a central section, Clark distinguishes three ascetical attitudes, each with a quite different interpretive approach to reading ascetical discipline from scripture. The issue is the relationship between Christian ethics, now interpreted through an ascetic lens, and the Hebrew/Jewish approach that had preceded it. An extreme moral rigorist (indeed, misogynist) such as the North African Roman St. Jerome, for example, read the scriptural texts about discipline through an interpretive strategy that emphasized

[7] See for example, a review of issues and developments in the field in the new introduction to the second edition of Philip Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church in the Age of Jerome and Cassian* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010).

[8] (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

the contrast between past Hebrew carnality and Christian ascetical virtue. The more moderate Byzantine St. John Chrysostom, especially as his pastoral experience with prominent married Christians in Constantinople grew, tended to minimize this contrast. In typical Alexandrian fashion, the catechetical theologian Origen gave an allegorical interpretation that provided a transhistorical reading.[9] These exegetical strategies were or became typical of the communities in the three locations (North Africa and Rome, Constantinople, and Alexandria), and each gave birth to a consequent expression of monasticism. Looking at interpretations of such key texts as I Cor 7, other Pauline passages, and the Pastoral Epistles, we see that a wide variety of exegetical strategies yields an almost bewildering family of interpretations.[10] There is, however, a surprisingly common outcome, promoting "a thoroughly asceticized Christianity."[11] I think we can take two points forward into our thinking. One is to note that reading issues of Christian ethics and church discipline off the body of scripture is no simple and obvious task, but one related in complex ways to exegetical strategies arising from cultural peculiarities and particular theological interests of interpreters and interpretive communities. We should expect, therefore, what we find: a variety of approaches to discipline in later Christianity all making a scriptural case and all seeking to be faithful to the Gospel and its implications. We need to be wary of seeing our own interpretations as the only faithful ones, especially if we insist on denial about the way they have been influenced by our own cultural and theological biases. A charitable reading of the interpretations of other faithful Christian communities, especially those quite different from our own, can enrich rather than threaten our own. That said, we must locate much of what we now see as the harshness of subsequent church discipline in this transition from *egkrateia* (self-control or temperance) to *askesis*, and the tendency to impose practices of mortification even on the unwilling and as if they had inherent spiritual and ethical value as such, particularly in their more extreme expressions.

9 Ibid, 153-174.
10 Ibid, 259-370.
11 Ibid, 370.

This same pattern of differing exegesis can be seen in approaches to the mechanism of church discipline that emerged during the patristic period. Frans van de Paverd identifies two patterns.[12] The more rigorous views of Rome and North Africa, as represented by Tertullian, and of Alexandria, represented by Origen, advocated a strict discipline based on coercive excommunication and "shunning," though in Origen's case there is a clearer statement of the possibility of subsequent repentance and reconciliation. The Cappadocians, Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa, representing the growing tradition of Constantinople, show a more generous discipline that is codified as a kind of proto-canon law. Here there are specified set times between the initial excommunication and the possibility of reconciliation. The result, believes van de Paverd, is ultimately the same in both systems: a coercive excommunication and expulsion from the community with a possible later reconciliation, and the beginnings of a penitential period of discipline and "*akoinonia*" in between. This pattern develops in different ways in East and West, but in both cases with an expansion of penitential discipline in the "middle" period into an entire system of penance.

While the Reformation and Free Churches ultimately rebelled against excessive codification and other abuses of this system as it developed, this should not be taken as a rejection of the need for church discipline. "A platform of church-discipline: gathered out of the word of God, and agreed upon by the elders and messengers of the churches assembled in the Synod at Cambridge in New-England: to be presented to the churches and General Court, for their consideration and acceptance in the Lord, the 8th month, anno 1648 [i.e., 1649]";[13] "A treatise of church discipline, and a directory: Done by appointment of the Philadelphia Baptist Association, by Samuel Jones, D.D.;[14] "A discourse on the nature and importance of church-discipline": addressed, originally, to the First Christian Society in Southampton, Long-Island, Lord's-Day, Dec. 28, 1794, By Herman

12 "Disciplinarian Procedures in the Early Church," in *Christian Life: Ethics, Morality, and Discipline in the Early Church,* ed. Everett Ferguson (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), 267-92.

13 Cambridge Synod (1646-1648): Cambridge, Mass. (Boston: Printed and sold by John Boyles, in Marlborough-Street, MDCCLXXII. [1772])

14 (Philadelphia: Printed by S.C. Ustick, no. 79, North Third-Street, 1798).

Daggett, M.A., and Pastor of the church in that place;[15] and "Doctrines and discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America The Methodist discipline of 1798: including the annotations of Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury"[16] are but a few of the primary texts that show the ongoing concern of the protestant churches for the problem of church discipline, and the wide variety of attitudes and approaches. Indeed, the tension between rigorist and generous provisions played itself out through the years in the Jansenist/Jesuit conflicts in the Roman Catholic Church, and the Puritan/Broad Church conflicts within the churches of the Reformation, a tension that continues in many of the ethical arguments of our own time.

Appropriate Church discipline thus has several legitimate purposes, all of which should reflect the loving and educative nature of God's own discipline of God's people, individual and community alike. One is teaching and keeping as intact as possible those structures of self-discipline necessary for the formation of Christian character in the process of spiritual growth; this aspect of church discipline grows directly out of the church's catechetical responsibility, the task of preparing people for Baptism and helping them learn to live the new resurrected life appropriate to it. As Waddell has pointed out,[17] these functions require trust and truthfulness among the other gifts and fruits of the Spirit, with a genuine pastoral concern behind all fraternal correction on the side of the church, and genuine humility and a desire to practice self-control on the part of those receiving discipline. All need this loving guidance, and at all times through our lives. The trick for those administering it is to do so in a manner that is efficacious for reform. The second major function of church discipline arises when this process breaks down through the recalcitrance of the recipient. When necessary, the Body of Christ must be purged of toxins that could seriously wound its ability to carry out its catechetical function and its evangelistic mission. Here again, the trick is to do so in a manner that leaves open and indeed encourages ultimate reconciliation and spiritual growth on all sides. That is to say, there are two primary foci

15 (New-London [Conn.]: Printed by Samuel Green, 1797).

16 (Rutland, VT : Academy Books, 1979)

17 Loc. cit., 298-99.

of church discipline: the spiritual health of the individual members, and the functional health of the common life of the Body. Both must be honored in any sound approach to discipline, and maintaining the balance has always been a difficult task for church officers.

There are two further problems that can lead to abusive church discipline to the extent that it ceases to be godly and loses a deep sense of the educative purpose of God's discipline and of the fraternal charity with which it should be administered. The first difficulty is that the only available officers for the administration of church discipline are themselves sinners, as the conclusion to the ancient rite of penance makes clear "Go in peace, and pray for me a sinner." Church officers, especially when they begin to see themselves as above the discipline they administer, are subject to all the ills of cruelty, greed, lust, and the rest, of those they govern. No system of church discipline has been perfect enough to eliminate the abuses that flow from this fact, and all forms of church discipline require checks, balances, and forms of appeal and redress to deal with it. Perhaps the most notorious offenders are those who actually see themselves as righteous in the administration of discipline to the point of abuse, and these are the ones who, since they claim to be administering God's discipline so immediately, most give God's fatherly discipline a bad name.

The second difficulty is structural and theological, and in our time has best been delineated by Paul Tillich.[18] When the Spiritual Presence (Holy Spirit) appears in the common life of the Spiritual Community (the ground of the churches), the unambiguous life, eternal life experienced now, has entered the world. If the church is to fulfill its mission, however, it must, in order to be fully incarnate like its Lord, manifest in concrete human communities as social institutions, subject to all the ambiguities of life and history. That is, even the truly unambiguous life (the goal of all fraternal correction for the individual and all community discipline for the common life of the Body) will always appear ambiguously in this life. This is inescapable if the churches are to be, as they must, in the world. The truly demonic appears whenever the churches claim to embody the

18 *Systematic Theology,* III (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1963), 162-282 is the key section.

unambiguous life unambiguously, as if the Church were the Kingdom of God and not merely its sacrament. Discipline administered in this demonic context will almost by definition be abusive and hence itself demonic, reflecting not the harshness of God, but the character of the Enemy. Tillich sees this "fall" as at least unavoidable in the only history we know, if not actually necessitated by the dialectic itself, making the Protestant principle of *semper reformanda* (always to be reformed) an ongoing necessity in the life of the church, even as it embodies "Catholic substance" in the structures of its common life. The question always, then, is "Who will discipline the officers of discipline, who will pastor the pastors," knowing that in the world as we know it this defines an ongoing task that will never be perfectly performed and requires constant vigilance.

In a recent book I wrote the following:

> My own experience in a variety of contexts suggests that the number one problem, the most common source of resistance to both evangelization and spiritual growth in Christian terms, is the angry, punishing father-god of patriarchal oppression. It is something of a mystery to me that this God concept, so foreign to the actual contents of the Gospel and Jesus' picture of his Abba, should be assumed by so many to be what in fact Christianity offers, and the degree to which it remains embedded in Christian literature and art. Furthermore, I find this problematic image deeply infecting all "brands" of Christianity, from the most anti-ecclesial charismatic/evangelical to Catholic to liberal. I do not mean they all deliberately teach it, but rather that all are somehow infected by it, one way or another, indeed have embraced it, even in rejection of it. Many have abandoned or rejected Christianity because their affective and intellectual development has rendered this notion of God intolerable, and they do not know and indeed often cannot imagine that Christianity has something else to offer. Intellectual conversion will mean, as Shug says to Celie in *The Color Purple*, first, you gotta get that angry old white man out of your head.[19] It will then mean finding truer images of God in the tradition itself. For most of us this will obviously also include some psychological sorting out of our own family/childhood issues.[20]

What I now wish to add is that the more faithfully and charitably we read church discipline off of scripture, the more we administer it humbly with a full recognition of all the problems of personal sin and institutional ambiguity, and the more we emphasize the educative and

19 Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, large print edition (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1986), 166-73.

20 Robert Davis Hughes, III, *Beloved Dust: Tides of the Spirit in the Christian Life* (New York and London: Continuum, 2008), 217.

reconciling purposes of godly discipline, the less we shall reinforce this false image of a harsh God offering a conditional salvation. Then, grounded in the Baptismal Covenant and the table fellowship of the Eucharist, the more we shall all be able to accept truthful and loving fraternal correction within the Body of Christ as an essential practice of spiritual growth for the individual and of peace within the community of faith, as essential structures of mission to the world.

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