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

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“I think that’s outrageous!” “I think it is going to make people quit the faith.” “They might not want to go back to church because they won’t feel accepted.” “Other people might be alienated from the church.” “It pushes people away from the church.”¹ These are actual quotations published in a local newspaper in response to a church leader’s statement that parishioners who do not believe the church’s teachings in opposition of gay marriage should refrain from accepting Holy Communion. In this article, several individuals stated that they disagreed with the church’s teaching in opposition to gay marriage but would continue to attend church and take Holy Communion in direct contradiction to their leader’s statement. If the leader, of this church formally disciplines these outspoken members of his church by withdrawing Holy Communion or excommunicating them what will be the resulting image of God? Would church discipline in this situation create the image of a conditional and harsh God?

It is very likely that the individuals who made the above statements already view God as harsh and conditional. Does this mean that Church Discipline should not be applied? The potential is great that the application of church discipline in this case will increase the

¹ Abbott Koloff, “Catholic split on gay marriage” Hackensack (New Jersey) The Record, 26 September 2012, p. 1

perception of God as harsh and conditional among the members of this congregation and the surrounding community.

It happened in Seattle, Washington. A church member refused a Church Discipline Contract because he viewed the terms harsh and inappropriate. He decided to share his story with a blogger which led to regional and national exposure. The results have been divisive. Many members of the church and other Christians agree that this Church Discipline Contract was harsh while others feel it was Biblically appropriate. Ruth Graham writing for the Slate Online Magazine published an article entitled, “A Shunning in Seattle” with the following byline, a powerful megachurch’s harsh tactics raise questions about how much control churches should have over their members’ lives. She also writes: “Ugly, divisive cases like this one can make the entire concept of “church discipline” seem medieval.”²

Should Church Discipline be wholly abandoned in this day and time as a way of redeeming the name and character of God from the label of harshness and conditional? Herein is the tragic paradox of church discipline today. It cannot be denied that the history of the church reveals that Church Discipline has been practiced in ways that paint a picture of a harsh and conditional God. Neither can it be denied that Church Discipline as practiced in some churches today paints a picture of a harsh and conditional God; while contributing to a church environment where some parishioners may believe that they are worshipping a harsh and conditional God.

“How did this happen and what can we do about it?” is a question that those who know God as loving, kind, patient, merciful and gracious must ask and answer. Hebrews 12:6 (GW) says: “The Lord disciplines everyone he loves. He severely disciplines everyone he accepts as his child.” Could it be that the Divine intent of Church Discipline, as revealed in scripture, is to make the human relationship with God a spiritual parent to a child love relationship that produces victorious holiness in the child and the body of Christ/Church? Yes! I contend that the Divine intent of Church Discipline is twofold. First, the Divine Intent of Church Discipline for the individual is reconciliation, salvation, forgiveness and unconditional redemptive

² Ruth Graham. (February 10, 2012). A Shunning in Seattle. In Slate Online Magazine. Retrieved October 4, 2012, from <http://www.slate.com>.

love. Second, the Divine intent of the practice of Church Discipline by the church is the continuous pursuit of Holiness for the body of believers. I further acknowledge that many churches are administering and implementing Church Discipline in ways that contribute to the perception of God as a loving parent, teaching his children how to live victoriously holy lives. However, affirming a different Divine intent and its limited practice will not resolve today's paradox where church discipline as implemented by some churches contributes to making the human relationship with God harsh and conditional.

Certainly, it is time for church leaders and members to take an introspective look at Church Discipline. This article seeks to resolve the paradox of church discipline, (making the relationship with God harsh and conditional) by uncovering some of the underlying veiled factors that significantly influence how church discipline is administered and implemented. By acknowledging and addressing these factors, through dialogue, introspection and prayer, the implementation of Church Discipline can be returned to its Divine Intent.

Can we learn something from the understanding and practice of Church Discipline in the past that can help resolve today's paradox? Phillip Schaff in his classic work "The History of the Church" specifically addresses Church Discipline within specific timeframes of Church history. Schaff argues that, during the Apostolic Christianity Period CE 1-100, Church Discipline was an absolute necessity to ensure the survival and growth of the Church. A careful study of the New Testament epistles will reveal that they were written to the churches and individuals for the explicit purposes of solving problems, establishing right doctrine and encouraging righteous living. There were conflicts, infighting, power struggles, doctrinal battles and blatant, open, sin committed by members in the early church. Nevertheless, the pursuit of holiness if not holiness itself has always been an identifying mark of the true Church.

Schaff states: "The apostolic church, as to its membership, was not free from impurities, the after-workings of Judaism and heathenism and the natural man. But in virtue of an inherent authority it exercised rigid discipline and thus steadily asserted its dignity and holiness. It was not perfect, but it earnestly strove after the perfection

of manhood in Christ, and longed and hoped for the reappearance of the Lord in glory, to the exaltation of his people." ³

Schaff's work reveals Church Discipline in the Apostolic Church period as a necessity for the health and growth of the Church and its individual members. He states: "For the church, it is a process of self-purification, and the assertion of holiness and moral dignity which essentially belong to her. To the offender it is at once a merited punishment and a means of repentance and reform."⁴

Schaff also gives us a description of how Church Discipline was administered during the Apostolic Church period. "The means of discipline are of various degrees of severity; first, private admonition, then public correction, and, finally, when these prove fruitless, excommunication, or temporary exclusion from all the means of grace and from Christian intercourse. Upon sincere repentance, the fallen one is restored to the communion of the church. The act of discipline is that of the whole congregation in the name of Christ ..."⁵

Schaff sees significant changes in the implementation of Church Discipline during the Anit-Nicene Period AD 100 – 325. Its goals and objective remained the same, but there were two significant events that affect the implementation of Church Discipline in this period. The first were the severe persecutions experienced at the hands of Romans Emperors and the establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. Schaff describes this progression of persecution and its resolution as follows: "All former persecutions of the faith were forgotten in the horror with which men looked back upon the last and greatest: the tenth wave (as men delighted to count it) of that great storm obliterated all the traces that had been left by others. The fiendish cruelty of Nero, the jealous fears of Domitian, the unimpassioned dislike of Marcus, the sweeping purpose of Decius, the clever devices of Valerian, fell into obscurity when compared with the concentrated terrors of that final grapple, which resulted in the destruction of the old Roman Empire and the establishment of the

³ Schaff, Philip, (1910). History of the Christian Church, Charles Scribner's Sons (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.) 1997. Retrieved October 2012 from the Database © 2004 WORDsearch Corp.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Cross as the symbol of the world's hope.”⁶ Persecutions created a crisis for Church Discipline because many individuals avoided suffering and in some cases death, by renouncing their faith in Jesus Christ. On the other hand, numerous Christians suffered and died. After the persecutions ceased, many of those who renounced Christ to avoid persecution sought reinstatement as members of the church. The Church divided into two fractions over this issue. Those who believed strict discipline should be applied to offenders and those that believed that lenient to no discipline should be required of the offenders. As the church survived persecution and became established as the Empire's religion under Constantine, Church Discipline was transformed because of the church's union with the state. A mixture of Church Discipline and legal actions by the state was the result. Cases of Church Discipline could now result in the death of an individual offender. Schaff states: “The ancient church was distinguished for strict discipline. Previous to Constantine the Great, this discipline rested on purely moral sanctions, and had nothing to do with civil constraints and punishments. A person might be expelled from one congregation without the least social injury. But, the more powerful the church became, the more serious were the consequences of her censures, and when she was united with the state, ecclesiastical offenses were punished as offenses against the state, in extreme cases even with death.”⁷

In this period, there is no doubt that Church Discipline made the individual's relationship with God harsh and conditional. Consider Schaff's description of the restoration process of that day and time: “Before they could be readmitted to the fellowship of the church, they were required to pass through a process like that of the catechumens, only still more severe, and to prove the sincerity of their penitence by the absence from all pleasures, from ornament in dress, and from nuptial intercourse, by confession, frequent prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and other good works. Under pain of a troubled conscience and of separation from the only saving church, they readily submitted to the severest penances.”⁸ Yes, during this

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

timeframe in the history of the church many individuals must have felt that their worship was being offered to a harsh God. During the same time frame in some churches discipline was not being applied when it should have been, negatively affecting the witness of the church to the unsaved.

These two trends in Church Discipline continue through the Nicene and Post Nicene Periods CE 311-600. Discipline declines in churches who embrace the union of church and state because of the harsh consequence of its application to leading clergy and civil authorities. While churches practicing strict Church discipline (characterized by their corresponding desire to be independent of the state), are essentially separated from those that do not. This decline in Church Discipline continues over time and eventually deteriorates into penance via the payment of money, the inquisitions that resulted in the terrorization and brutal execution of numerous women and men accused of witchcraft, the moral corruption of clerical/church leaders, and the sale of indulgences.

This tragic decline of Church Discipline contributed to the Protestant Reformation. The renowned reformer John Calvin sought to restore a scripture based practice of Church Discipline to the churches he presided over. However, the administration of Church Discipline by the Church's Consistory created an image of an extremely harsh and conditional God. Dancing, gambling, drunkenness, the frequentation of taverns, profanity, luxury, and excesses at public entertainments, extravagance and immodesty in dress, licentious or irreligious songs were all officially forbidden by the church and offenders were punished by censure, fine, or imprisonment. Attendance at public worship was mandatory. The following are examples of the implementation of Church Discipline in Calvin's church. Several women were imprisoned for dancing. Three men were imprisoned for three days for laughing during a sermon. A girl was beheaded for striking her parents. A man was executed for repeated adultery. A man was imprisoned for four days for calling his child Claude (a Roman Catholic saint) instead of Abraham, as the minister required. Men and women were burnt for witchcraft. Men were beheaded or burnt at the stake for sedition, atheism, heresy, and blasphemy. While Calvin's intentions to return scripture based Church Discipline to the practice of the church were noble it cannot be denied

that the administration and application of Church Discipline by the Consistory of his church created an environment where members felt that they were worshipping a harsh and conditional God. Their experiences of Church Discipline undeniably made their relationship with God harsh and conditional.

In defense of Calvin, Schaff states: “He must be judged by the standard of his own, and not of our, age ... Tolerance is a modern virtue.”⁹ Schaff is right! The prevailing Cultural mores are contributing factors in the positions taken by the Church and its practice of Church Discipline in any given timeframe. The hostile and pagan culture of the Apostolic period of Christianity influenced the use of Church Discipline in that timeframe. The hostile cultural environment of the Anti-Nicene period affected Church Discipline. In a less hostile environment would the renunciations of Jesus Christ been so easily forgiven? The union of the church with the state during the Nicene and Post Nicene periods up to the reformation introduced culture influences that affected the administration and implementation of Church Discipline. And as we have presented above the post Reformation protestant church under Calvin’s leadership was influenced by cultural factors.

The church has always been and will always be in dialogue with culture. Church Discipline is in the center of that dialogue. The influence of the church on culture is widely acknowledged; however, the influence of the culture on the church and Church Discipline has not been readily acknowledged. Nevertheless, the culture has an impact on the church and the church makes an impact on culture. The perceptions of God held by people in and outside of the church and the extent that those perceptions impact their behaviors are indispensable parts of culture.

The administration and implementation of Church Discipline influences the perception of God held by the parishioners of the church and the surrounding community and thereby impacts culture. Church leaders sincerely believe that their administration and their implementation of Church Discipline are rightfully based on scripture. However, many are unaware and blind to the influence of the culture they live in on their interpretation of scripture. Calvin is an excellent

⁹ Ibid.

example. He believed he was being faithful to the scriptures in his church's administration and implementation of Church Discipline, but, he was blind to the harshness of the discipline applied because tolerance was not a part of the culture of his day and time. Calvin's desire for the church to be a spotless body and a bright light shining in a dark and corrupt culture aided his justification of severe punishments that a different interpretation of scripture would have prohibited. If Calvin had held a more positive view of the culture in his day and time, the exercise of Church Discipline by his church would have been much softer. The influence of culture on the interpretation of scripture and the resulting administration and implementation of Church Discipline, by the church, is subtle and will be manifested in the positions the church takes in relationship to culture whether pro or con, without acknowledgement.

Richard Niebuhr in his classic but time tested book, "Christ and Culture"¹⁰ provides useful handles that will help us grasp how the view of church leaders toward culture affect their interpretation of Scripture which determines how they implement Church Discipline. Niebuhr posits the following five handles for understanding the relationship of the church with culture:

1. Christ Against Culture
2. The Christ of Culture
3. Christ Above Culture
4. Christ and Culture in Paradox and
5. Christ the Transformer of Culture.

While it is beyond the scope of this work to provide detailed explanations of the theological and anthropological issues addressed in considerable detail by Niebuhr, I offer condensed and simplified descriptions to help us address the cultural issues that affect Church Discipline.

The "Christ Against Culture" model is essentially one of separation. To live a faithful Christian life you must separate yourself from non-Christian society. The church must be the center of your life and the sole influencer of your thoughts. People outside of the church are viewed as members of an ungodly decaying and ultimately

¹⁰ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco), 1951

doomed civilization. Their institutions, values, mores, ethics, traditions and standards are to be rejected as in total opposition to God. Niebuhr describes them as anti-cultural radicals.

This view of Christ and Culture creates an interpretation of scripture that would be primarily focused on the moral aspects of scripture including purity of thought. The scriptural teachings of love would be primarily applied exclusively to the membership. Evangelism would have a stronger, “flee from the wrath to come” than “Jesus loves you” flavor. Strict Church Discipline would be required to protect the purity of the church from the evils of the world. Extensive demonstrations of repentance would be required by offending members and excommunication would be used without delay for any offense viewed as threatening the purity of the church. In today’s society church leaders who see the world from this perspective despite their good intentions could easily use Church Discipline in ways that would make a relationship with God harsh and conditional.

The Christ of Culture model is one of amalgamation, an unapologetic harmonious mixture of Christian principles and cultural developments. Prevailing cultural phenomena are to be understood as the progressive work of Christ/God in the world, for the betterment of the church and society. Modifications, alterations, and exclusions of previously held Christian principles should readily and unapologetically be made to promote harmony between the church and culture. The adherents of this view have been described as accommodators of Christ to culture.

Those who hold this view interpret scripture through the lens of culture. They believe God speaks through the realities of culture. They harmonize their interpretations of scripture with culture and tolerance. Their interpretation of scripture would focus more on love, grace, and mercy than holiness, justice or repentance. Church Discipline would primarily take the form of counseling and/or treatment. Beyond interventions group and corporate Church Discipline would be rarely used, if at all.

The Christ Above Culture model can be described as a synthesis model. It stresses the believer’s individual responsibility to live for Christ without making any Spiritual accommodations to the culture while simultaneously believing that God is also at work in the culture.

Because God is at work in the culture, there is the potential for good in the culture. Therefore, there is no need to separate from or transform the culture, and at the same time there is no accommodation of Christ to culture. The individual Christian is to live a faithful Christian life within the culture and can cooperatively work with nonbelievers toward worthwhile achievements in pursuit of culture based goals and objectives. The Christ Above Culture model accepts the differences between Christ and Culture while holding that it is God's plan that Christ and his followers be simultaneously at work to produce good in both the church and Culture.

Those who hold this view of culture will pursue an interpretation of scripture that blends the holiness and righteousness of God with repentance and redemption. They desire a scripture based balance of God's justice and punishment with God's grace and mercy. This view of Christ and culture encourages an interpretation of scripture that leans more toward strict individual responsibility for holiness, and righteousness than the protection of corporate purity. The church as a corporate entity, while separate from the world, is also united with the world. This model would encourage an implementation of Church discipline that focuses on the parable of wheat and tares where the church is the field, and the separation can only be done by Christ and the angels at the end of time. Therefore, Church Discipline would be used sparingly if at all. Confidential Pastoral/leaders counseling suggesting private, personal confession, repentance and cleansing would be the primary way of dealing with issues of morality. Unforced, voluntary withdrawal from the congregation would be the desired result for serious offenders.

The Christ and Culture in Paradox Model can be described as dualistic in the sense that Christ and culture are opposites that exist and must be experienced in a paradoxical union. Culture is inherently godless and subject to God's wrath while at the same time subject to God's redemptive mercy. Those in Christ who have been redeemed by God's grace must continue to live life in the godlessness of the culture. There can be no separation of these two existences. The redeemed must live among the condemned until God resolves the paradox at the end of time. The works performed in culture by Christians may be positive and uplifting but are temporal and have no redemptive effects for culture. Niebuhr compares the position held by

the adherents of this model to the widely held view that science and faith cannot be in complete opposition nor can science and faith be in positive agreement with each other. They must forever exist in a paradoxical relationship.

This view of Christ and culture encourages an interpretation of scripture that leans more toward individual responsibility for holiness, and righteousness than the protection of corporate purity. The church as a corporate entity, while separate from the world, it is essentially trapped in the world. It is the work of God to convert individuals into believers and members of the church. Therefore, Church Discipline would be used sparingly if at all. Confidential Pastoral/leaders counseling suggesting private, personal confession, repentance and cleansing would be the primary way of dealing with issues of morality.

The Christ the Transformer of Culture Model can be described as a conversion model. This model views the church as being in the world and not of the world. More importantly those who adhere to this model believe that Christ uses the Church to transform the culture. They believe the Divine intention and ongoing work of Christ in culture is the transformation of culture from godlessness into Christ centeredness. Those who hold this view come to scripture with the desire to maintain the holiness, righteousness, justice, punishment, and sovereignty of God in balance with the redemptive grace, mercy, forgiveness, and regenerative work of the Holy Spirit. The corporate witness of the church as it exists in culture is just as valuable as individual witnessing by members.

The adherents of this model are always concerned about the image of the church in the culture and will use Church Discipline carefully and in moderation. The last thing they want to do is use Church Discipline in a way that presents God as harsh and conditional, however, they also feel compelled to defend the holiness and righteousness of God. They will use Church Discipline to redeem offenders whose offenses become public embarrassments that might be detrimental to the witness of the church. Pastoral counseling and treatment will be used for less severe offenders. Any use of Church Discipline will be focused more on redemption than punishment.

Did you identify yourself as an adherent of one of these models of the relationship between Christ and Culture? Acknowledging the

influence of culture on our interpretations of scripture will shine a light on the blind spots we all have when it comes to administering and implementing Church Discipline. The influence of culture on our interpretation of scripture and Church Discipline is worthy of discussion and prayerful introspection. What are your intentions? Are you getting the results you desire, that God desires? Are we using Church Discipline in a way that creates an environment where our parishioners perceive themselves as worshipping a harsh God who relates to them harshly and conditionally? Are we being poor stewards of the keys of the kingdom by not using Church Discipline when it is necessary? Are we interpreting scripture in a way that allows Church Discipline to present God as the loving and caring Parent motivated by unconditional love for the long term and eternal betterment of His child? Are we interpreting scripture in a way that allows the administration and implementation of Church Discipline to be experienced and viewed by those outside of the church as acts of redeeming love taken by a Spiritual Parent to produce victorious Holiness in His child and the body of Christ/Church?

As an adherent of the Christ transforming Culture Model, I am sure that you have already identified and experienced cultural biases. Having acknowledged the source of the cultural influences that affect my interpretation of scripture let me share with my interpretation several periscopes I consider worthy of consideration in a rethinking or formulation of Church Discipline today. May my propositions on the Divine Intent of Church discipline serve as a starting point for a much needed dialogue and rethinking of Church Discipline today.

Matthew 18:15-20 is undoubtedly one of the most referenced passages of scripture when it comes to Church Discipline.

Matthew 18:15-20 (NRSV): 15 "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. 16 But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 18 Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

The clearly stated goals of the actions prescribed in this passage are reconciliation and congregational purity. There are five steps of

progressive actions prescribed in this passage. The first step is an individual private discussion of the offense with the offender. The second step is private discussion of the offense with a small group of additional members. These first two steps can be performed with a successful resolution without the involvement of church leaders. The third step is a congregational forum or church meeting with the offender. The fourth step is excommunication from the congregation. The fifth step requires the entire congregation begin relating to the excommunicated offender as they would relate to an unbeliever. All five steps of Church Discipline in this passage have the spiritual health, salvation and wellbeing of the offender as their primary goal and objective.

The fourth step of excommunication is an action taken to ensure the church's continuous pursuit of Holiness. However, the use of excommunication is not based primarily on the sin or offense as some might think. Excommunication is based upon the person's refusal to confess, repent and seek cleansing from their sin as prescribed in 1st John 1:5-10.

1 John 1:5-10 (NRSV) 5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. 6 If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; 7 but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. 8 If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us."

The fifth step should be understood from the perspective of the Great Commission; we are to seek the salvation of the lost and their reconciliation with God the Father. We should remember that this periscope is preceded by the parable of the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep and goes into the mountains in pursuit of the one lost sheep. Likewise, this periscope is followed by a periscope in which Jesus instructs Peter to forgive a Brother for sinning against him the proverbial seventy times seven. This universally accepted scriptural basis for Church Discipline should be understood within its context of reconciliation, salvation and forgiveness and most of all unconditional love. Church Discipline based upon this passage can only be implemented effectively with unconditional love.

While scripture gives us many examples of the application of Church Discipline consistent with Matthew 18:15-18 one of the most severe example is found in 1st Corinthians 5:1-13. This passage details the excommunication of a man who was living with his father's wife from the church in Corinth. It is evident that he was eventually led to repentance, confession and salvation or reconciliation by members of the church. 2nd Corinthians 2:5-8 records Paul recommendation for his forgiveness and renewed fellowship. In this case, Church discipline achieved its scripturally based goal and objectives including the purity of the church. Clearly Paul was concerned that the acceptance of this man's behavior could be a barrier to the church's effectiveness in reaching the unsaved and unchurched in Corinth by presenting the church as a more immoral community than the pagan communities of that day and time. Another example of Church Discipline is described by Paul in:

Galatians 2:11-14 (NRSV) 11 But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; 12 for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. 13 And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. 14 But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

In this passage, Paul uses Church Discipline to correct the hypocritical behavior of Peter and Barnabas. Clearly, excommunication was out of the question. Nevertheless, the sin of hypocrisy committed by Peter and Barnabas may have been more damaging to the cause of Christ at that time than the sins of 64 people recently excommunicated from a local church for gossiping.

Consider another example of church discipline recommended by Paul to the church in Philippi.

Philippians 4:2-3 (NRSV) 2 I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. 3 Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

This is church discipline for it is evident that the disagreement between Euodia and Syntyche had come to Paul's attention while he

was a prisoner under house arrest in Rome. It is evident that Paul viewed the situation as potentially having a negative impact on the church. While he loved and appreciated both Euodia and Synthe as his Sisters in Christ, he expresses his concern that the situation be corrected as soon as possible before the church, and the cause of Christ is diminished by a lack of unity and peace. Once again excommunication is not a desired outcome. Euodia and Syntyche with the help of the members of the church are to work out their disagreements and grievance with one another and restore peace and unity of the church.

In our last periscope, Paul is recommending church discipline to the Church in Thessalonica. The financial resources of the church were unfairly being drained by members who refused to work and support themselves:

2 Thessalonians 3:6-15 (NRSV) 6 Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. 7 For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, 8 and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. 9 This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. 10 For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. 11 For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. 12 Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. 13 Brothers and Sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right. 14 Take note of those who do not obey what we say in this letter; have nothing to do with them, so that they may be ashamed. 15 Do not regard them as enemies, but warn them as believers.

In this case, Paul's recommendations include all five steps of Church Discipline, including excommunication. However, he stresses that the relationship after excommunication be that of a believer with an unbeliever instead of that of an enemy of the church and the cause of Christ. For Paul, the relationship of believers with unbelievers is based on love, and the prayerful desire, to see the unbeliever come to faith and life in Jesus Christ. After all in 1 Corinthians 9:22-23 (NRSV) Paul says: "To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. 23 I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings."

Clearly Church Discipline, though recommended and used liberally by Paul, was consistently done in pursuit of reconciliation, salvation and forgiveness, while being performed with unconditional love.

The importance and influence of Church Discipline deserves greater appreciation by our churches than it has received in the past. Take an introspective look at how Church Discipline is being administered and implemented by your church. Examine the nature of the dialogue between Christ and culture that your church is consciously or unconsciously involved in. Determine how culture is influencing your church's interpretation of scripture, and how your church's interpretation of scripture is affecting its administration and implementation of Church Discipline. If necessary, prayerfully begin a dialogue with others and develop a corrective course of action. Our parishioners should not perceive of themselves as worshiping a harsh God and our use of Church Discipline should not make relationships with God harsh and conditional.



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