

Theology Matters

Recovering a Theology of God’s (Gracious) Law

By John P. Burgess

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) continues to experience intense theological and ethical polarization. While we can be thankful that the inflammatory rhetoric and the angry debates of recent years did not dominate the 214th General Assembly (2002), few would conclude that the denomination has turned a corner. This year’s Assembly has given all sides time to rest and take a deep breath, but we cannot be sure what will happen when we return to the difficult issues that divide us.

Just what are these issues? Something more than ethics or polity is at stake for many of us. We worry that basic matters of theology now divide the denomination. As a church we no longer seem to believe the same things about God; we no longer seem able to confess the faith together. While the most contentious question in recent years has been the eligibility of homosexual persons for ordination to church office, deeper doctrinal issues lurk in the background.

Some church leaders point to differing understandings of biblical authority. On one side are those who accept the Scriptures as divinely inspired and therefore as authoritative in all matters of faith and life; on the other are those who approach the Bible more critically, as documents of ancient cultures that the church must reinterpret in light of contemporary knowledge and morality.

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Other observers argue that the basic issue is Christology. Is Jesus *the* way, *the* truth, and *the* life, or simply a wise human teacher who offers us one but not necessarily the only way to God? The 214th General Assembly (2002) affirmed and commended the helpful statement of the Office of Theology and Worship, “Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ.” Yet, the Assembly’s overwhelming vote of support did not necessarily mean that the church had found its way back to a common confession of faith. “Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ” affirms *both* that God offers salvation through Jesus alone *and* that God is free to work his saving purposes beyond the church and the explicit language of faith. Some members of the Assembly acted as though they could have one half of the equation without the other. To them, the document represented a workable compromise but not necessarily a compelling resolution.

While biblical authority and Christology are of central importance, I wish to explore a third issue that lurks behind the church’s debates today: the relationship of law and grace. Since New Testament days, the church has struggled to hold law and grace together. Paul was

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concerned to correct those who interpreted God's grace as an excuse to continue in the life of sin (Rom. 6:15). He was equally concerned to correct those who interpreted God's law as a pretext for legalistic self-righteousness (Gal. 2:15-16). The tendency to oppose law and grace has sometimes led Christians to dismiss the Old Testament, and to appeal to the freedom of the Spirit apart from the guidance of the Word (grace without law). At other times, it has led Christians to engage zealously in inquisitions and crusades, and to forget Christ's way of self-sacrificing love (law without grace).

Too many in the church today regard law and grace as alternative, competing, and even opposing visions of the church's life. Those who call for more "law" worry that the church is drifting towards moral relativism. They believe that the church should recover its moorings in Scripture's unchanging truths, the church's historic standards, and church discipline. Those who call for more "grace" worry that the church has become too intolerant, hateful, and self-righteous. They believe that the church should practice a radical hospitality, openness, and inclusiveness.

Suspicion abounds. Advocates of "law" sometimes dismiss members of the "grace" camp, asserting that they are captive to a secular ideology of individualistic hedonism. Advocates of "grace" sometimes dismiss members of the "law" camp, arguing that their attention to theological and ethical standards inevitably raises the specter of an intolerant, legalistic fundamentalism.

These ways of opposing law and grace are wrong for at least two reasons. First, we rarely pose the church's debates in terms of "standards" versus "no standards;" rather, we argue about *which* standards and *whose* standards. Even those who emphasize the priority of grace over law are quick to affirm that the gracious, loving God calls us to work for justice—and justice implies standards. When the 214th General Assembly (2002) called on Presbyterians to boycott Taco Bell, it argued that God's gracious concern for the poor requires us to hold wealthy corporations accountable to standards of justice. God's grace inevitably directs us towards the right ordering of human relationships.

Second, and more importantly, the rhetorical opposition of law and grace is wrong theologically. One of the key insights of our Reformed tradition has been that law and grace are two sides of the same coin. God's law is God's gracious claim on our lives. God's grace frees us to live by God's law. If overemphasizing law leads to an oppressive legalism, overemphasizing grace leads to what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called cheap grace—"grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate" (*Cost of Discipleship*, 45). Only as law and grace work together can we grow into deeper faithfulness before God and towards each other.

A Reformed View of the Law

What we need today is a renewed sense of a Reformed theology of law. We need to know again that in our Reformed vocabulary, "law" is not a bad, outdated word. God's law is neither a harsh, oppressive taskmaster nor simply a collection of arbitrary rules that we can obey or ignore as we see fit. Because God's law is always rooted in God's grace, God's law shows us the way of life. It helps us deepen our capacity to love God and one another, even as God has loved us. It directs us in ways of faithful discipleship, so that we might grow more fully into the image of Jesus Christ.

German Reformed theologian Michael Welker has recently written that contemporary Christian theology has too often made law and gospel (grace) an abstract opposition—leading, on the one hand, to a general disparagement of the law, and on the other, to "naïve and diffuse forms of legalism" (*Toward the Future of Reformed Theology*, 144). Theology has been pushed "out of the position of a competent participant in debates about powers shaping our ethos and . . . [has] become hopelessly dependent on moral trends" (146).

Welker argues that because Reformed theology has generally avoided these distortions, it can help us today "to understand that the freedom of the gospel cannot be played off *against* the law" (146). In a Reformed theology of law, "the Christological determinacy and the biblical breadth of God's word become liberating powers and acquire 'solid form'" (143). A Reformed theology of law brings to expression "God's entire will and God's revelation" (146).

The Reformed interest in law might not seem to recommend itself to the North American church. We live in a society characterized by endless litigation. We have more attorneys per capita than any other nation of the world. People are taught to stand up for their rights and to seek legal recourse when they feel wronged. Laws help bind us together as a society, but we also feel the law's heavy hand upon us. We are all too aware that the laws of society reflect particular, limited human interests. We have every reason to be suspicious of abstract appeals to "the law."

The heavy hand of the law also makes itself felt in the church. The Presbyterian *Book of Order* grows thicker by the year, yet we are less able than ever to find theological unity. We seek legislative solutions to the problems that threaten to tear us apart but discover that congregations are selective about which church laws they obey. Some church leaders worry about a legislative season; others are frustrated that church law is regularly defied with impunity. We easily become cynical about the nature and purpose of church law.

A Reformed theology of law does not simply reproduce the assumptions of a secular, pluralistic society. What matters here is God's law, and God's law is God's life-

giving will. God's law is not simply a burden, not simply a necessary evil. Rather, it is a source of joy:

Psalm 1: Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. (verses 1-2, RSV)

Psalm 19: The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold." (verses 7-10a, NRSV)

Psalm 119: Oh, how I love thy law! It is my meditation all the day. . . . How sweet are thy words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth. Through thy precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way. Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. (verses 97, 103-105, RSV)

Reformed theologians have joined with the Psalmist in celebrating God's law. (The great Puritan divine Thomas Manton (1620-1677) so loved Psalm 119 that he preached on it verse by verse—and managed to get 190 sermons out of its 176 verses! [see Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship*, 84]). Our confessions too are consistent in their witness:

Scots Confession: We confess and acknowledge that the law of God is most just, equal, holy, and perfect, commanding those things which, when perfectly done, can give life and bring man to eternal felicity. (Chapter XV)

Second Helvetic Confession: The law is good and holy. . . . We believe that the whole will of God and all necessary precepts for every sphere of life are taught in this law. . . . We know that in the law is delivered to us the patterns of virtues and vices. We know that the written law when explained by the Gospel is useful to the Church. (Chapter XII)

Westminster Confession of Faith: [The law] is of great use . . . as a rule of life Neither are the . . . uses of the law contrary to the grace of the gospel, but do sweetly comply with it: the Spirit of God subduing and enabling the will of man to do that freely and cheerfully, which the will of God, revealed in the law, requireth to be done. (Chapter XXI)

Barmen Declaration: As Jesus Christ is God's assurance of the forgiveness of all our sins, so in the same way and with the same seriousness is he also God's mighty claim upon our whole life. . . . We reject the false doctrine, as though there were areas of our

life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ. (8.14-15)

Confession of 1967: The new life finds its direction in the life of Jesus, his deeds and words. . . . The teaching of apostles and prophets guides men in living this life. (9.24)

God's law directs us into right relationship with him and one another. God's law gives us everything we need to know about living the good life that God has promised us in Jesus Christ. Moreover, God's grace makes it possible for us to live by God's law. When we get caught speeding, we hardly exclaim, "How I love thy law!" Society's laws sting. But God's grace makes God's law sweet. If we have truly tasted God's law, we want to attend to it. We believe that it is a Word of life not only for believers in Christ, but for all humanity as well.

Defining the Law

Just where do we find this law? What specifically does it tell us? Can it still be useful to Christians, if we are now justified by faith alone, and not by the works of the law (see Rom. 4)? Does God's law apply to those who do not believe in God, let alone Jesus Christ? Reformed theologians have attended diligently to these questions, especially in their explications of the Ten Commandments.

Human responsibility to God's law

Reformed theology has argued that every human being, whether Christian or not, has an inherent sense of ultimate right and wrong. We have a conscience that knows the fundamental requirements of God's law. Every human should be able to figure out that certain kinds of actions (such as killing and stealing) undermine human relationship and community; other kinds of actions (such as respecting others' rights) enhance our ability to live together.

A classic biblical passage for reflection on these matters has been Romans 2:14-16:

When Gentiles who do not possess the law [i.e., the law revealed to Israel], do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all. (NRSV)

Some Christian traditions—especially classic Roman Catholic theology, as summarized by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century—have spoken of a natural law that

every human is able to discern by his or her reason. The Westminster Standards of the seventeenth century make a similar claim. God gave a “moral law” to Adam and all humankind (Westminster Larger Catechism, question 92).

The Reformed tradition has emphasized that God has written this natural, moral law on our hearts (Westminster Confession, Chapter IV). But the Reformed tradition has also argued that sin has deeply corrupted our ability to know and to live by this law. Even when we do good, our actions are “infected by self-interest and hostility” (Confession of 1967, 9.13).

Nevertheless, the natural, moral law is of continuing value to humans, even after the fall (see Westminster Larger Catechism, questions 94-95). Even in its weakened state, it remains strong enough to remind us of our wrongdoing. We may not do the good, but we know that we ought to. Our conscience, says John Calvin, is “always convicting us of both baseness and ingratitude” (*Institutes* I.VI.15).

Sin can harden us, so that we become indifferent to the pleadings of our conscience. Yet, sin can never eradicate the conscience altogether. As Charles Hodge, the great Reformed theologian of the nineteenth century, wrote:

Almost every man can look back and see many instances in which an unseen hand was upon him, when a voice, not from man, has sounded in his ears, when feelings to which he was before a stranger were awakened in his breast, and when he felt the power of the world to come. The shadow of the Almighty has passed over him, and produced the conviction that God is, and that He is an avenger. (*The Way of Life*, 90)

The place of the Ten Commandments in defining God's will

Because sin has greatly impaired our ability to live by a natural, moral law, we need God's revealed law. We need an explicit statement of God's will directly from God himself. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments set forth this Word of God.

The Reformed tradition has recognized several kinds of law in Scripture: the ceremonial laws of Israel (regulation of temple rituals, holy days, and the priesthood), the political laws of Israel (law codes for defining civil crimes and their punishment), and the moral law (God's declaration of what constitutes righteous behavior). Christ has freed his followers from Israel's ceremonial and political laws. The Christian does not first have to become a Jew, a member of the people of Israel. But the moral laws that God revealed to Israel, then confirmed in Christ, are still in effect—and not only for Jews and Christians.

The moral law revealed in Scripture corresponds to the law that God has already written on our hearts. The Scriptures clarify and confirm the dictates of the

conscience. In traditional Christian theology, the Ten Commandments have been understood as a summary of this natural, moral law. As the Westminster Larger Catechism (question 98) states, “The moral law is summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments.” The law that God gave to Moses on Mt. Sinai was not just a law for Israel, nor was it a new law over and above the natural, moral law. Rather, the Ten Commandments make explicit and give divine sanction to ways of living that we ought to know by reason but that sin has obscured.

Medieval and Reformation Christians associated the Ten Commandments not only with the natural, moral law but also with Jesus' great commandment that we love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and our neighbor as ourselves (Matt. 22:37-39). The first table of the Decalogue (commandments 1-4, in the Reformed numbering) tells us how to love God; the second table (commandments 5-10), how to love our neighbor (see Westminster Larger Catechism, questions 102 and 122). Thus, keeping Sabbath (from the first table) is not primarily about our need to take care of ourselves and get enough rest; rather, it is about finding our true rest in God. Similarly, stealing (from the second table) is something that we should avoid not simply out of fear of punishment, but because not stealing is also a way of loving our neighbor and acknowledging God's adequate provision for us.

The civil use of the law

Reformed thought has argued that God's law has three uses. The law that is written on our hearts and confirmed by God's revealed Word should, first of all, serve to preserve and regulate human society. It has a *civil* use. God's law, whether we realize it or not, is the foundation of every just social order.

Among the Gentiles whom early Christians regarded as knowing “instinctively what the law requires” (Rom. 2:14-16) were civil governors. Christians prayed for the Emperor and other civil authorities because they believed that God had instituted civil government for the good of human society (see Rom. 13:1-7). When rulers “punish those who do wrong and . . . praise those who do right” (1 Pet. 2:14), they make social life possible and therefore deserve our honor and obedience. Rulers help to maintain and guard a basic social order.

Medieval and Reformation Christians argued that civil law should be based on the natural, moral law. The natural, moral law tells us, “do not kill.” The civil law of each nation defines the various circumstances in which killing may occur and the factors that may be more or less mitigating of guilt (e.g., killing in self-defense is generally not punished as severely as premeditated murder). The civil laws of one land need not be identical to those of another (just as Israel's ancient law codes need not constrain Christians today). But if it is to be just, civil law

(like civil authority) must ultimately be rooted in God's will.

Medieval and Reformation Christians typically called on rulers to enforce both tables of the commandments. In the words of the French Confession of 1559 (Chapter XXXIX), "God . . . has placed the sword in the hands of civil authorities to suppress sins committed against the first table of the Law as well as the second." Similarly, the Scots Confession (Chapter XXIV) argues that magistrates "are not only appointed for civil government but also to maintain true religion and to suppress all idolatry and superstition." The Second Helvetic Confession (Chapter XXX) adds, "Let him [the ruler] suppress stubborn heretics . . . who do not cease to blaspheme the majesty of God and to trouble, and even to destroy the Church of God."

Today, in a secular, pluralistic, democratic order, we have good reason to separate church and state. We are reluctant to have the government dictate matters of religion and piety. "We reject the false doctrine, as though the State, over and beyond its special commission [to provide for justice and peace], should and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life, thus fulfilling the Church's vocation as well" (Barmen, 8.23). Even some matters that the second table lists (such as adultery or covetousness) may not lend themselves well to civil, legal regulation. They are serious moral issues, but not necessarily civil crimes.

Nevertheless, most of us would agree that the government does have a legitimate interest in all these matters. The state need not be in the business of suppressing heretics, but it should ensure that the church and other religious organizations have a protected space in which to do their work. The state need not criminalize adultery and covetousness, but it should protect family life and promote social cooperation. As Calvin says, the state is called to maintain honesty, modesty, and "humanity. . . among men" (*Institutes* IV.XX.3).

In other respects, the Ten Commandments remain as applicable as ever. We believe that people, even in a modern, secular society, should have a conscience. They should naturally know that killing, stealing, and bearing false witness are wrong. Because people nevertheless violate these precepts, we call on the state to frame and to enforce civil laws.

These laws apply as much to Christians as to non-Christians. Despite the new life that Christians have received in Jesus Christ, we are not yet perfect morally. The civil law helps restrain our continuing tendency to sin, even as it protects us from others' sinful behavior.

The radical demands of the law

While Reformed theology has recognized and affirmed this civil use of the law, it has also developed two other

uses of God's law that apply specifically to Christians, rather than to society as a whole: *the accusing function* of God's law and *the sanctifying function* of God's law. The Decalogue represents more than just a barebones, minimal legislation for civil society. It is also a summary statement of the new life in Jesus Christ.

Reformed theology has relied on three interpretive moves in order to extend the reach of the commandments beyond the realm of nature and civil life to the realm of the church and the Christian life. First, each commandment has been seen as labeling a category of behavior. "Do not kill" refers to all behaviors that diminish our neighbor's capacity to live a good life. "Do not steal" similarly refers to anything we do to deny our neighbor what is rightfully his.

Second, with the help of the Sermon on the Mount, Reformed theologians and confessions have radicalized each of the Ten Commandments. The commandments refer not only to outward behaviors ("do not kill"; "do not commit adultery") but also to inward thoughts and dispositions ("do not even get angry at a brother or sister"; "do not even lust in your heart").

Third, each negative commandment implies a positive. "Do not kill" also means do everything possible to protect and enhance your neighbor's ability to live well. "Do not bear false witness" includes the duty to promote truthful speech and to protect our neighbor's good name.

Employing these interpretive strategies, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Westminster Larger Catechism offer long explications of each commandment and its relevance to the Christian life. These lists are not so much legal codes as suggestive trajectories. They remind us that the commandments call us to complete transformation—inner and outer, personal and social. They paint a picture of God's kingdom. They draw us into the purity of the spiritual life.

The accusing function of God's law

In this radicalized form, the commandments become a standard by which we continually examine ourselves and confess how far short we fall of God's will. This accusing function of the law teaches us again and again of our need for God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ. We may not be guilty of physical murder, but none of us can say that we have ever done enough to help our neighbor live a good life. We may not steal physical goods from the neighbor, but none of us has ever done enough to ensure that other humans have the basic necessities that they need for a good life.

Martin Luther argued that people had to hear God's accusing law before they would embrace the gospel. Only in their radicalized form could the commandments break humans of their tendency to believe that they could fulfill the law and, fulfilling it, win favor with God ("works

righteousness”). Calvin agreed with Luther but emphasized that the law even in its accusing role was a manifestation of God’s grace. God accuses us in order to save us.

The sanctifying function of God’s law

In contrast to Luther, the Reformed tradition has put more emphasis on the sanctifying use of the law. The commandments help set forth the new life that we have been offered by Christ. This “third use of the law” (i.e., in addition to the civil and accusatory uses) was to Calvin its most important function.

However eagerly [the saints] may in accordance with the Spirit strive toward God’s righteousness, the listless flesh always so burdens them that they do not proceed with due readiness. The law is to the flesh like a whip to an idle and balky ass, to arouse it to work. Even for a spiritual man not yet free of the weight of the flesh the law remains a constant sting that will not let him stand still. . . . But the accompanying promise of grace. . . sweetens what is bitter. (*Institutes* II.VII.12)

If the accusing function of the law can make us feel small and inadequate before God’s holy will, this third use of the law can spur us to make ourselves and human society better, even if we never reach perfection in this life. The commandments teach us how to live out Christ’s claim on our lives.

Luther emphasized that the gospel sets us free from the accusing law; we now live in the freedom of the Spirit and need the law no more. Calvin emphasized that the gospel sets us free to follow the law; the law in its sanctifying role helps shape our way of life and our service to the world. The commandments make Jesus’ way of love clear and concrete. They tell us how God wishes to lead us to greater faithfulness.

How shall we love God? Have no other gods; trust in the Lord alone. Do not take the Lord’s name in vain; speak rightly of God and his mighty acts. How shall we love our neighbor? Do not kill; promote life. Do not commit adultery; practice integrity in all relationships. Do not steal; work for just distribution of goods. Each commandment sends us down a path of righteousness. We learn to love God; we learn to love like God loves.

In the liturgy that he prepared for his congregation in Strasbourg, Calvin placed the reading of the Ten Commandments not prior to the confession of sin (where they would promote self-examination and confession of sin), but after the absolution. The commandments would direct a forgiven people to their ethical responsibilities. Moreover, the members of Calvin’s congregation did not merely hear the commandments read to them; rather, they lifted up their voices together and sang the Decalogue. The law was an occasion for praise.

The Heidelberg Catechism places its explication of the Ten Commandments under the heading of “Thankfulness.” Once we have confessed our sin and received God’s pardon, the Ten Commandments tell us what we can do in joyful, thankful response.

Law and Grace Work Together

This Reformed approach to law and grace has tried to make sense of tensions within the biblical witness. Paul sometimes emphasizes the accusing function of the law (“For ‘no human being will be justified in his sight’ by deeds prescribed in the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin” Rom. 3:20). Other New Testament authors such as Matthew and James emphasize that Christians must do righteous works (“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill” Matt. 6:17; and “So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” Jam. 2:17).

Reformed Christians have joined Paul (and Luther) in opposing a works righteousness by which Christians act as though they can save themselves by moral rectitude. Grace always has priority in the Christian life. But Reformed Christians have joined Matthew and James in calling for us to live out our salvation through works of love, as directed by God’s law. Grace manifests itself in a transformed, disciplined way of life. Law and grace need not contradict each other. God’s grace has truly taken hold of us only when we begin to realign our lives in accordance with the radical demands of Jesus.

Law and grace work together. The accusing law tells us of our need for God’s forgiveness. The sanctifying law responds to God’s grace. Because we know God’s love, we wish to honor God. The law, represented by the Ten Commandments, gives content and direction to our efforts.

In the twentieth century, Karl Barth reclaimed this Reformed insight. Barth argued that God’s law is not in opposition to God’s grace but is a form of God’s grace. God’s commands set us on the way of true freedom. Bonhoeffer developed a similar approach. The experience of God’s grace sets us on a path of discipleship, in which our truest self is defined by the radical injunctions of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus’ commands are not oppressive legal standards but are the way of life that he has made possible for us by his death and resurrection.

In recent years, Craig Dykstra (Presbyterian minister and head of the religion division of the Lilly Endowment) has written from a Reformed perspective about growing in the life of the Christian faith. Dykstra argues that Scripture and the Christian tradition help define key practices that enable Christians to respond to God’s grace. While Dykstra does not explicitly correlate these practices with the Ten Commandments, it is clear that these practices function for him like the ethical trajectories of Calvin’s

third use of the law. The Christian life is a disciplined, directed life that seeks to grow in the way of Christ.

The new Presbyterian Study Catechism is another superb resource. In the manner of classic Reformed catechisms, the Study Catechism begins with an explication of the Apostles' Creed—what God has done for us. Only then does it discuss each of the Ten Commandments—our thankful response to God's gracious love.

As Presbyterians seek their way into the future, we can perhaps agree that the question is not whether we need more "law" or more "grace." God's law is God's grace, and God's grace is God's law. A church that puts law and grace into opposition is a church that understands neither law nor grace.

Even as we debate whether we should enforce church law with greater or lesser rigor, we must remember that God's gracious law calls us to a standard higher than the *Book of Order*. What we must learn and what we can learn, is the way of Jesus Christ. God in Christ has acted to claim our whole self—body, soul, and spirit. Whether a matter of sexuality or economics, Christology or ecclesiology, we must yet grow into deeper knowledge and faithfulness.

The love of Christ that God has poured out into our hearts is a precious gift that we dare not waste. The love that flows so freely from God does not flow out again spontaneously from us. We must discipline it—give it shape, direct it, and deepen it. We need all the help we can get from Scripture and from the church as a community of mutual encouragement and accountability. We need a renewed theology of God's gracious law, for

the sake of reframing the debates that currently rend our denomination.

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The Gift of Discipline

By Paul Leggett

According to the Scots Confession, "ecclesiastical discipline, uprightly ministered, as God's Word prescribes" is one of the three authentic marks of a true "Kirk" or church. Discipline in today's world, to say nothing of the contemporary church, is, if not a bad word, at least a largely ignored one. The abiding response of today's world is, "You can't tell me what to do." The truth is that discipline is largely absent in much of contemporary society. Parents tend to neglect it for fear of

causing some psychological damage to their children. Teachers and employers often avoid it out of fear of possible lawsuits. The very topic itself often seems to be identified with harsh, even judgmental, practices.

This unfortunately is no less true in the church. While the present scandals in the Roman Catholic Church have their own measure of complexity, certainly the absence of Christian discipline seems to have been part of the

problem. In our own Presbyterian Church (USA) discipline also seems to have become an avoided subject. We have certainly had our own share of sexual scandals, a trend which seems to be as old as the church itself as the New Testament makes clear. More recently, we have witnessed open defiance being expressed by some churches regarding more than one provision of our *Book of Order*. Presbyteries have seemed disinclined to act in the face of these statements of defiance. Even this past General Assembly seemed reluctant to adopt even a general statement calling for a measure of discipline. Why is this? The absence of discipline in any Christian church or congregation violates both biblical and confessional standards. Yet this is a subject which a wide spectrum of Christians seem willing to avoid. To deal with this sensitive subject requires us first to look at some basic biblical doctrines. Secondly, we need to consider how discipline “rightly ministered” could help bring health and strength back into Christian denominations including our own.

Basic Doctrine 1: God is Love

It is striking but true that the apparent lack of discipline in many congregations and church denominations comes from a disregard of God’s basic character. Discipline is *not* a sign of God’s judgment. It is rather a sign of God’s love: “for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves” (Heb. 12:6; Prov. 3:11-12). Throughout the Old Testament God makes clear his love for Israel (Ex. 15:13; Deut. 10:15; Jer. 31:3; Hosea 11:1). Yet this love is coupled with a continuing discipline of his people who so often prove themselves unfaithful (Deut. 8:5; Ps. 94:12; Jer. 31:18). The theme of discipline is found equally in the New Testament (Matt. 18:15-18; I Cor. 5:1-13; II Cor. 2:6-11; 7:8-9; Gal. 6:1; II Thess. 3:14-15; I Peter 1:13). The writer of the book of Hebrews reminds us that God disciplines us for our good (Heb. 12:10). The Risen Christ says, “I reprove and discipline those whom I love” (Rev. 3:19).

Discipline in the biblical sense then is a sign of God’s love. We are told even on a human level that an absence of discipline indicates an absence of real love. The parent who indulges a child is hardly showing love. Quite the opposite. How much more is this true of God? One of the problems which arises here is a faulty view of the nature of love. We have all been too influenced by a cultural view which defines love in sentimental terms. Too often our understanding of love amounts to little more than a *laissez-faire* indifference. Love in this sense is staying out of other people’s way, leaving them alone in effect. This concept of love is unknown in Scripture and certainly does not describe the love of God. It is the essence of God’s love to become involved with us whether we welcome his involvement or not. It is because God loves the world that he *sends* his son. This love takes the initiative on behalf of the beloved. God’s discipline is not condemnation (Romans 8:1). It is not punishment in any wrathful or punitive sense. It is God correcting us,

turning us back from our own destructive behavior. This discipline may not feel pleasant at the time (Heb. 12:11). It is however love in action.

Basic Doctrine 2: The Church is One Body

In our contemporary world we have been seduced by the culture of narcissism to the point that we often see ourselves as isolated individuals with little or no connection to each other. One of the primary goals of discipline is to maintain the cohesiveness of the body of Christ. In the famous *kenosis* passage of Philippians chapter 2, Paul admonishes the believers to be of the “same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (Phil. 2:2). The present church, with its many divisions, (both institutional and even within denominations) is a far cry from Paul’s view. One of the key purposes of discipline in the New Testament church, which was barely a generation out of Roman paganism, was the maintenance of church unity. The church sought to preserve its unity in the face of all but the most extreme heresies.

In the absence of discipline we see disunity rather than unity. This is no doubt an overreaction to the abuse of discipline in some cases which may well have been punitive rather than restorative. Paul lifted up the standard of “godly grief” which brought one to repentance (II Cor. 7:10). Paul rightly saw the limits of discipline. He admonishes the Corinthians to “forgive and console” so that the person being disciplined “may not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow” (II Cor. 2:6-7).

In the present, however, we seem to have gone to the opposite extreme. A recent study by the Alban Institute points out that contemporary churches go to almost any length to avoid conflict. Unfortunately this very avoidance tends to lead to more conflict. There are times when we all need to be confronted because of something in our life that needs repentance. Needless to say, in a society which venerates “tolerance” above all else this is not politically correct. Confrontation cannot be used as an excuse to vent one’s anger or to put another down. Yet confrontation is necessary if the body of Christ is to be healthy. Jesus confronts the disciples numerous times for their lack of faith ((Matt. 8:26; 14:31; 16:5-9; Mark 9:19). The Risen Christ confronts the churches of Asia Minor in Revelation chapters 2-3. Paul confronts Peter for his hypocrisy (Gal. 2:11-14). Peter confronts his churches with the danger of false teaching (II Pet. 2).

None of these examples are intended as “put downs.” The goal in each case is repentance and restoration. After confronting the Galatian churches for their numerous failings, Paul admonishes them to restore one caught in sin “in a spirit of gentleness.” He adds, “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:1-2). The problem for most of us today is that we don’t want to be bothered bearing someone else’s burdens. We are content to criticize. However, this

is not discipline. Discipline demands commitment to the person caught in sin. This again is a form of love in action. Without it the church degenerates into a loose association, rather than being the living body of her Lord.

Basic Doctrine 3: Repentance Continues Throughout Earthly Life

As Reformed Christians we have to be faithful to our understanding of sanctification. We do not believe that we achieve any degree of perfection in this life. We are called to holiness but we struggle with temptation, with the world, the flesh and the devil throughout this earthly life. We grow in grace but the Westminster Confession reminds us that we face “a continual and irreconcilable war, the flesh lusting against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh” (*Book of Confessions* 6.076). The Larger Catechism reminds us that we daily break the commandments “in thought, word and deed” (BC 7.259).

This is the reason why discipline is listed as one of the three true marks of the church in the Scots Confession. The value of discipline for all of us is that it keeps us focused on the continuing need of repentance throughout this life. Our sanctification is always imperfect (BC 7.188). Therefore God shows his love for us by disciplining us and keeping us from falling headlong into sin. This is part of the reality of grace in our lives. This grace needs to be demonstrated in a visible way in the life of the church community. We are all at different stages in our sanctification. We are susceptible to different sins. As we experience discipline in a loving but firm manner we are able to keep focused on our walk with Christ. James summarizes this idea when he says, “confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed” (Jam. 5:16). This includes physical as well as spiritual healing.

Without the ongoing reality of discipline in our lives we easily succumb to pride. The flip side of pride is depression. We are burdened with guilt or feelings of failure. Defiance, which we have seen so often on both the individual and church levels, is often a sign of spiritual pride (“We know better than you do”). Yet persistence in such attitudes can easily lead to forms of depression, even despair. Without discipline, we cultivate the idea that we should always be getting our way. The old nature leaps at such opportunities. The net result is that we dig ourselves deeper into our own prideful rationalization. The fruit of the Spirit has difficulty flourishing in such conditions. In an attitude of repentance we should be seeking discipline so that we both as individuals and a body can be more fully conformed to the image of Christ. As Protestant evangelicals we have repudiated the idea of penance. Yet in so doing we may have gone too far and undermined the basic doctrine of repentance as a “saving grace” (BC 7.186). We evangelicals are committed to the renewal of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and rightly so. But such

renewal is not possible without each of us recognizing our own need for repentance. We cannot repent without placing ourselves under discipline.

Many of us in the renewal wing of the Presbyterian Church (USA) have been disturbed by a lack of accountability in our denomination. We see our constitution undermined by, quite frankly, a lack of discipline. Defiance in the face of church standards by either individuals or church bodies cries out for discipline. Without discipline we deny essential truths of the Christian faith such as the fact that God is love, that the church is a body and that we all need to live lives of repentance. The real challenge before us is to seek biblical discipline.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) often seeks to avoid discipline. Stated Clerks, presbyteries, even the General Assembly avoid any real call to carry out discipline. Discipline seems to be identified with a lack of freedom, an absence of trust and a spirit of judgmentalism. The irony is that just the opposite is the case. Without a biblical sense of discipline there can be no trust, no freedom. Ultimately love itself is lacking. In his famous love chapter Paul says that love “does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth” (I Cor. 13:6). This statement cannot be made without a recognition of the vital place of discipline in the Body of Christ. Paul’s thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians is of a piece with his call for discipline in the fifth chapter of the same epistle. Pastors or sessions who ignore sin, or are indifferent to it, are not being tolerant. They are being unloving. They are unloving in the same way that a parent who doesn’t care when a teenager comes home at night is also unloving. The absence of love we have been told is not hate. It is indifference.

When a presbytery confronted with a defiant session or congregation chooses to take no action, that presbytery is saying they don’t care about the defiant church. When the General Assembly excuses itself from having any responsibility for defiant congregations or presbyteries, they are in effect saying they don’t care. The commitment to love, to “bear one another’s burdens” is too much for them. It might help us all if in denying the call of discipline on the local, presbytery or national level, we at least admit to ourselves that we are denying such central doctrines as the love of God, the oneness of the Body and the ongoing need we all have of repentance.

In raising the call for discipline all of us must recognize that judgment begins with the household of God (I Pet. 4:17). If we don’t begin by acknowledging our own need for discipline we are hardly in the place to call for someone else’s discipline. This can place us in the position of judging another and looking for the mote in someone’s eye, oblivious to the beam in our own (Matt. 7:1-5). Above all we must recognize that discipline in the church is a gift. It is part of God’s grace. If God let us all go our merry way we would easily wander from his truth.

If Moses, David and Peter needed to be disciplined, how much more is this true of each of us. The negative history of discipline has far more to do with pride and legalism than it does with the biblical standard of discipline. Discipline is one of God's gifts to the church. It is high time now to reclaim that gift.

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Thank God for Crowing Roosters

By Donn Moomaw

It felt strange to stand in the pulpit of St. Peters-by-the-Sea Presbyterian Church in Palos Verdes, California. After all, it had been four years since I had worn my pastoral robe, four years since I had preached. Although previously I had spoken nearly a half-dozen times a week for over forty years, it now seemed awkward to be back at it again.

I wanted to begin my message with "Testing, testing. I'm testing my voice to see if it still works." Instead I simply said, "Four years ago some friends of mine (members of my presbytery) felt I should take some time to recoup, refocus, and renew my relationship with God, myself and my family." In language from my college days, I said that I had been working out with the team and cheering on the players, but I had been benched. Then one day one of my teammates asked the Head Coach, "Do you think it's time for Moomaw to get back in the game?"

"Yes, it is time," came the welcomed reply.

So Rev. Clayton Cobb, who was chair of the Ad Hoc Accountability Committee assigned by presbytery to meet regularly with me during my four years of forced "ineligibility," looked down the bench and said "Donn, the Head Coach and I think you are ready to get back in the game. How about preaching at St. Peter's Church?"

Rev. Donn Moomaw, D.D. pastored Bel Air Presbyterian Church from 1964-1993. He was President Ronald Reagan's pastor and prayed at both of Mr. Reagan's inaugurations in 1981, 1985. Currently Dr. Moomaw is writing and guest teaching and preaching.

So there I stood, almost four years to the day since I had resigned my 28-year pastorate at Bel Air Presbyterian Church of Los Angeles. The words that day came surprisingly easy as I retold the story of the church's namesake—St. Peter—emphasizing "His Call, His Fall, and His Recall." You know the story: After Peter had boldly told Jesus that he would always be there for him, Jesus said, "I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day until you deny three times that you know me." And after the self-assured and self-deceived fisherman did deny the Lord three times and that rooster did crow, Peter remembered what the Lord had said. He went out into the olive orchard and cried and cried and cried.

The clapper that rang Peter's bell took the form of a *rooster*. My thesis that morning was: Isn't it kind of God to have a *rooster* around when we need one the most?

I stressed that God's *rooster* call of warning and awareness comes in many different ways. It could come in the form of a family intervention, a therapist, a police officer knocking at your door, a sermon, a DUI, a visit from the IRS, a passage of Scripture that leaps off its pages and tugs at your heart—or a committee from your church or presbytery.

My Roosters

There were many people and circumstances—roosters—that God used to make me aware of the seriousness of my sexual misconduct. For over twenty years, I had been meeting regularly with a group of Presbyterian pastors. Ostensibly it was to be a sharing group, where we could express freely any of our personal or ministerial problems. Yet, we seldom got much beyond blaming others or bad-

mouthed the direction of our music programs. But this meeting was different. I had already been confronted by a select group from my church who had heard from a member that my actions with her had been improper. I was beginning to hear the faint crowing of a distant *rooster*. So I took a chance. I shared with my brothers, rather cautiously, some of the darker sides of my personal struggles.

They felt that I should tell my story to representatives of our presbytery's Committee on Ministry (COM), and one of my covenant brothers set up the meeting. Even though I wasn't yet aware of the severity of my pathology, the COM members listened with concern and compassion. Unsure of what to do with my disclosure, they *were* in agreement, however, that I should take some time away from my pastoral duties to receive professional help.

It was becoming clear: I had delayed confronting my questionable behavior long enough. I was hearing the rooster crow—big time!

First Steps

Someone recommended that I call Dr. Ralph Earle in Scottsdale, Arizona. From my first conversation with him, I knew I had been led to the right person. He felt I should submit to three weeks of intensive therapy. *Three weeks! Am I that needy?* Carol, my bewildered but loving wife, accompanied me to Scottsdale and then flew back to Los Angeles the next day.

As Dr. Earle suggested, I began my therapy by joining a group of men early the next morning. At that first meeting with other wounded participants, I again heard the sound of a rooster awakening my slumbering conscience. They simply would not let me get away with *anything!* Right then, I began taking my first steps toward climbing out from behind my previously faulty coping techniques.

It wasn't at all comfortable to admit to myself and others that my arrogance had closed my ears to the counsel of my friends. Success had led me to think I could make up my own rules, and my competitive heart believed I was indestructible and could do no wrong. But now, I was ready to call it what it was: sin.

Those three weeks were truly life altering. It became clear that I was beginning a scary journey of emotional, psychological, and spiritual recovery. After sharing my "challenge" with all five of our children, after a great deal of prayer and conversation with trusted friends and some members of the COM, and after hearing that rumors about me were flying around the church and community, it seemed best that I resign my pastorate. I needed to give full attention to my healing and restoration—the "amends" process—and rebuild my relationship with Carol and our family.

Two weeks after returning to Bel Air, I did leave that church that I loved. And in doing so, I began a journey of unrelenting humiliation, unbelievable sadness, uncharacteristic candor, and unremitting loneliness.

Tough Lessons

The Holy Scriptures were a great source of strength and encouragement—well, most of the time. I found it difficult to agree with Job when he wrote, "Happy is the one whom God reproves" (Job 5:17). Or with the Psalmist, who wrote, "Happy are those whom you discipline, O Lord" (Psa. 94:12). With roosters crowing all over the place it was difficult to imagine any way discipline could make one happy!

But now after ten years of painful yet constructive discipline and life-changing discoveries, I can heartily agree that the fruits of discipline are not all bitter, and to experience anew God's deep and pervading forgiveness, love and mercy awakens peace beyond measure.

What I didn't understand then but appreciate so much now is that to deprive failure of its power, we have to live through it gradually.

In his book *The Song of the Phoenix*, John Lord wrote: "Failure has the paradoxical quality of never being put on the invitation list but always adding something positive when it crashes the party." Yes it does.

But I would add one caveat to this clever statement. Not all failure, pain, sorrow, disobedience or disappointment, makes a better person. Some contrary experiences can make one bitter, resentful, angry.

I believe the author of Hebrews adds a corrective to John Lord's comment: "Discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness *to those who have been trained by it*" (Heb. 12:11). The important phrase here is "trained by it." If we are *trained* by discipline it will yield "the peaceful fruit of righteousness."

God used my brothers in the covenant group, a special small group from the Bel Air, therapy friends from Arizona, a 12-step group of co-dependents, and, of course, the committees and commissions of presbytery to help my family and me move toward restoration and renewal. Also, it is good to be reminded that God has many angels "outside the camp."

The process continued. A Special Disciplinary Committee was assigned the task of studying my situation and reporting back to the COM. Two years after I had resigned my pastorate, at a meeting of the presbytery (ironically, held at the Bel Air Church), the Permanent Judicial Commission made their final report which was fortunately, general in nature. After much discussion, presbytery followed the PJC's recommendation by moving

to censure me. The crux of the discipline was that I would be excluded from any ministering or preaching for four years from the date of my resignation. Among other things, the censure stipulated that I could not attend any Bel Air worship services, on or off the church property.

Tough Choices

Now the roosters were insidiously crowing and I often struggled to perceive how this discipline was “for building up the body of Christ, not for destroying it, for redeeming, not for punishing.” Some presbyters were determined to enforce justice; others, thank God, were eager to demonstrate mercy. I sometimes had to fight the inclination to play the victim.

But as awkward as we all were when the process began, I have many times acknowledged privately and publicly how privileged I am to be a Presbyterian pastor and how grateful I am for the care and nurture I have received from my presbytery. Never once did I consider demitting the ministry or renouncing the jurisdiction of the presbytery. When I was ordained for the gospel ministry, I took very seriously all the things I said I believed and was willing to do. During this testing period, I reaffirmed again and again my positive response (45 years ago) to one ordination question in particular, “Will you be governed by our church’s polity, and will you abide by its discipline?” I believed God had sent the *roosters* and he would get the glory.

After repenting of my sin and affirming God’s complete and unrestricted forgiveness, I sought to make amends wherever possible. I also made certain that isolation was never an alternative and carefully avoided feeling sorry for myself. Instead my relationship with God, Carol and our children grew consistently stronger and healthier.

Some suggestions

How might presbytery and my church have better aided me during my dark journey? They did well, but I might venture a few suggestions:

- If the presbytery is in reality the “corporate bishop,” it needs to pastor the accused’s family as well. It cannot leave them to recover by themselves.
- No church official ought to speak to the media without the consent of the accused person.
- The presbytery should do all it can not only to gather information from the victims; but also to minister to them.
- The presbytery is wise to act as soon as possible in any given case. *The Book of Order* specifies time limits. Because moving with dispatch is crucial for the sake of the church and all the people involved.
- While presbyters naturally will talk *about* the person found guilty, talking *with* him or her is imperative as well. Feelings of rejection and abandonment are two of the most sinister, soul-crippling emotions one can ever experience.
- Discipline should include spiritual as well as psychological treatment, such as an assigned spiritual mentor, required reading, compulsory attendance at pastors’ retreats and, if married, conferences for couples and counseling with a therapist sympathetic to the pastor’s task and the church professional’s family life.
- Before any decision is made public the presbytery should be careful to share the verdict with the person found guilty and the session of the church he or she served.

Many have said, “pain is inevitable but despair is optional.” Like St. Peter, I chose, by God’s grace, to grow through my pain and not attempt any longer to minimize, rationalize, spiritualize, intellectualize or deny my sinful behavior.

I know full well that I will probably again hear the rooster’s crow for some sad reason down the road. Again I will need careful discipline. We all do. But the lessons I learned and the renewal I have experienced lead me to assert again humbly and sincerely, “Thank God for Crowing Roosters!”

Principles of Church Discipline: Preamble

“Church discipline is the church’s exercise of authority given by Christ, both in the direction of guidance, control, and nurture of its members and in the direction of constructive criticism of offenders. Thus, the purpose of discipline is to honor God by making clear the significance of membership in the body of Christ, to preserve the purity of the church by nourishing the individual within the life of the believing community; to correct or restrain wrongdoing in order to bring members to repentance and restoration; to restore the unity of the church by removing the causes of discord and division; and to secure the just, speedy and economical determination of proceedings....” (*The Book of Order*, D-1.0101)

“The power that Jesus Christ has vested in his Church, a power manifested in the exercise of church discipline, is one for building up the body of Christ, not for destroying it, for redeeming, not for punishing. It should be exercised as a dispensation of mercy and not of wrath so that the great ends of the Church may be achieved, that all children of God may be presented faultless in the day of Christ.” (*The Book of Order*, D-1.0102)

“Hello, we’ve got a problem”

By Richard White

Until two years ago the Montreat Church had never elected a woman as elder. We knew we were a dinosaur, but we didn’t feel the need to be fashionably up to date. It wasn’t that we barred women from ordination to office; in fact, women in our church had been ordained to the office of deacon for years.

Although some people were in favor of women elders, and others thought Scripture specifically forbade seating women on the session, we thrived as a church. We lived together with the understanding that if a woman were elected, she would be ordained and installed. But we made no formal effort to wrestle with the issue of women elders. Then one day our presbytery executive called. I’ll never forget his greeting: “Hello, Richard. We’ve got a problem.”

Our problem became apparent when one Sunday a pastor in our presbytery used the Montreat Church in a sermon illustration, noting that we were one of the few PCUSA churches that did not have women elders. “We’ve got a problem” came the next morning.

The presbytery executive asked to speak with our session about our church’s lack of compliance with the *Book of Order*. At our meeting we discussed options and asked the scary “what if” questions.

Our questions centered on the seeming contradiction in the *Book of Order* which says, “every congregation shall elect men and women. . .to the office of elder,” but which also says, “The right of God’s people to elect their officers is inalienable” (G-14.0201 and G-6.0107, respectively). One elder asked bluntly, “Why can’t there be a church in this denomination that doesn’t have women elders?”

Our executive had two things to say. “We have decided.” And, “This is who we are.”

As a result of that meeting our session developed an action plan which was intended to educate our congregation and remove any barriers that we had inadvertently placed in the way of women’s ordination. The presbytery’s Committee on Ministry encouraged us by enthusiastically receiving our plan. We chugged ahead in

the months that followed, distributing materials, pro and con, on the subject of women as elders. We organized a debate. Parker Williamson argued for women’s ordination while a seminary professor of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church argued against it. In many additional meetings the congregation asked questions of session members. Finally, we gave especially careful instruction on the whole issue of women’s ordination to the nominating committee. We studied the Scriptures and the *Book of Order* in much depth.

When the seven-month study time was over, we were all somewhat shocked when a woman was actually elected to the session. We thought it would take years if it happened at all. But Garlene jumped right in and started fulfilling her calling in a wonderful way. The congregation reaffirmed her ministry and leadership a year later by electing her to a full three-year term, since she had been originally elected to fill a one-year unexpired term. We are now a more effective session because of Garlene’s presence. So, in regard to women elders, the Montreat Church is not looking back.

And yet, in fairness to my brothers and sisters in the Montreat Church, I must not paint a simple picture of clear blue skies and bright sunshine. This has been an incredibly painful time for our church. Scattered clouds of mistrust and broken relationships hover in the atmosphere. Several families (on both sides of the issue) left the church. A few vocal opponents of women in leadership claimed the election had been rigged. One woman, the wife of an elder who took a public stand for women’s ordination, had a nervous breakdown.

When I mentioned these things to the Committee on Ministry, folks spoke pastorally. However, they also stated matter-of-factly that these things may have to happen in order for us to be the Presbyterian Church we say we are.

Indeed, even people who welcome the ministry of women elders are not grateful for the process that was single-minded in its purpose for the Montreat Church to be a PCUSA church just like all the rest. I still hear, even two years later, that the presbytery “put a gun to our head.” What if our church had not complied and elected a woman at the first opportunity? Our presbytery executive made it clear that we *could* be disciplined. The presbytery *could* have cleared the session and seated the elders of

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their choice. That's pretty strong medicine for a problem that many people think was slowly working itself out.

As I try to assess all that took place I make the following observations:

As a denomination, we *can* take a definitive stand on an issue. We have eliminated women's ordination as a matter of debate. Even if it brings tears and loss of members, even if gifted people we love end up having to leave the church, we understand that and are willing to abide by that. For Christ's sake, let us now as a denomination go on to take a definitive stand on the issues that are the most central to the peace, purity and unity of the Church.

Some people have asked if the presbytery exercised redemptive or vindictive discipline. Frankly, we received a mixed message. Nevertheless, I am grateful for the patience of the presbytery in allowing our local session to deal with the issue in a manner suitable to our congregation. One woman elder on the Committee on Ministry urged the other members to be patient with the Montreat Church, to let the study take place and to realize that it may be years before a woman would be elected. If there was a proverbial gun to our head, at least no one was trigger happy.

I observe that church membership is like a marriage. We bind ourselves to each other within certain boundaries.

We agree to hold each other accountable in order to preserve our union. Although it was not easy, the elders of the Montreat Church worked hard with our presbytery to abide by the discipline of the PCUSA. We fulfilled our vows and have welcomed women into the ministry.

When I reflect on how we endured this discipline, I wonder where the disciplinarians have gone. Ministers and churches in our denomination willfully disregard the ordination standards "we have decided" as a denomination. Conferences offer keynote addresses which contradict Scripture and our confessions—those documents that say "who we are." Under the guise of opinion, error is espoused as truth. When the "issue" of the singular saving work of Jesus Christ comes under attack, egregious actions and declarations go unchecked by the presbyteries and agencies charged with coordination and review. Apparently it's not the kind of issue they can address. But the makeup of the sessions of churches with memberships under 350 is. When we see and experience that, honestly, it's a struggle to maintain confidence in the integrity and ability of those agencies to justly lead and direct us in the way and truth of Jesus Christ.

Discipline is a necessary part of the church's life, for which we are grateful. However, when the discipline is mainly attentive to process but careless with essentials, we can only say, "Hello, we have a problem."

Bible Study of the Book of Revelation

Study 10: The Book of Revelation Chapters 17-19: Seven Words of Justice

By Rev. Mark Atkinson, Union Church, Lima, Peru.

One of the angels who has carried one of the bowls of judgment now approaches John. Whereas the meaning of the seven bowls was a general judgment upon the world, the angel offers to show John the specific judgment of the great whore who is seated on many waters. Note what we are told about this woman. She sits upon a scarlet beast full of blasphemy. She, like the fearful beasts we have seen before, has the imagery of secular authority (seven heads) and military might (ten horns). She is Rome and at the same time she is every earthly power that sets itself against God's people and his purposes. She is dressed in purple, claiming royal prerogative. She sits upon *many waters*. We are told in v. 15 that these waters symbolize the many peoples and nations she rules over. Her rule is worldwide. She is adorned with precious things, but the

golden cup in her hand holds only filth. She is drunk and the wine of her inebriation is the blood of God's faithful saints. She is the force behind their martyrdom.

What are we to make of this image? Clearly the great whore symbolizes a particular temptation. In v. 6 John tells us that he marvels at her. He too feels the temptation of her lure. He is attracted to her. A whore takes what is good and pure and perverts its purpose. The great whore of Revelation does the same. She is the lure of false religion, taking the good things of God and perverting them. She is the antithesis of the sexually pure ones whom we saw worshiping the Lamb (14:4). In v. 5 she is described as the mother of whores, that is, her falsehood gives birth to all the rest.

In v. 7 the angel tells John to wake up and smell the coffee. The angel will tell John who this woman is. The beast she rides, he is told, is a shadow mockery of God. In chapter 4:8 the heavenly host proclaim of God: Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is

to come. Here we meet the beast that was and is not and is to come. It is important to note that in vs. 8, 12, 15, and 18 the angel reminds John of the specific things he saw. John sees these things. The angel interprets their meaning. This is not the realm of vague feeling or kaleidoscopic impressions. The false religion of the great whore relies upon feelings and desire. Their corrective is revelation and true understanding.

In v. 8 the angel gives to John a very clear statement of the doctrine of election. Those condemned with the woman and the beast are those inhabitants of the earth, whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world. The angel gives John an enigmatic statement regarding the seven heads that John sees. We have already mentioned how this is an allusion to Rome. But the meanings are multiple. The angel tells John that they are also seven kings, five have fallen, one is, and one is yet to come. No one knows for certain what is meant by this. The most common explanations tie the seven to a sequence of Roman emperors, but none is completely satisfactory. I think it best to see it as the power of the Roman state in particular and all governments in general. We are in their midst—five have fallen, one is. Our time is the one that is. We are at neither the beginning nor the end. The seven kings are in a sequence. The ten kings of v. 12 are a federation. They are the forces of power of this world opposed to God's work throughout the world and throughout the ages. Note that the victory accomplished (v. 14) is a victory of the Lamb, not the saints. It is Christ who wins the day.

In v. 16 we are told the unexpected fact that the destruction of the great harlot comes at the instigation of the beast upon which she rides. While unexpected, it is not surprising, for there is a self-destructive quality to evil. It eats its own children. An even deeper truth is seen in v. 17 where we are told that *God has put it into their hearts*. God is sovereign. These are the actions of the enemy, but they are not outside of God's will or purpose.

Babylon Destroyed

When John sees Babylon the Great in chapter 17 he is captivated by her garish appeal. A prostitute dresses in a manner that is eye catching and seductive. John has felt that attraction. Now in chapter 18, John sees another angel coming to announce the fall and destruction of Babylon. John sees Babylon in utter ruin. The glory of this new angel stands out in contrast. His light and glory illuminate the earth and by it John recognizes that what he saw as attractive is in fact the haunt of demons and foul birds (v. 2). Interestingly, v.3 adds an economic dimension to Babylon's crimes.

Verses 4–8 are a summary of the message of the book of Revelation. John hears another voice. The substance of the message this voice brings is a reaffirmation that one

day a just judgment and retribution will fall upon Babylon and it calls God's people to separate themselves from any entanglement with her. God's people are a called out people. Like Pilgrim in John Bunyan's classic, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, we flee the City of Destruction.

Babylon is not without those who mourn her destruction. In verses 9–19 we find a lament offered by those who benefited from her financially. Those who mourn are kings, merchants and sailors and it is the merchants who wail the longest and hardest over her destruction. These verses are a warning to us that all day long we make decisions of eternal significance. Each day we choose again the master we will serve. In the end, the loyalties we affirm may surprise us when we find that the line between good and evil runs through every human heart.

In v. 20 God's people are invited to rejoice in Babylon's fall. God has sent his judgment. Their prayers have been answered.

The Wedding Banquet of the Lamb

Chapter 19 describes the exultation of heaven over the fall of Babylon. It is important at this point to remember that the metaphor of Babylon in the book of Revelation represents, basically, the world as we know it. The world we live in is a world at war with God. The world rebels. It denies God. It rejects him. It hides from his presence. The rejoicing described in chapter 19 is the celebration of the ultimate victory of Christ over the world. This is the first thing John hears after Babylon falls: the declaration of salvation coming from the multitude of God's people in heaven (v. 1). The justice of God's judgment upon the world is affirmed (vs. 2–3) and the totality of God's people, symbolized by the twenty-four elders, and the totality of creation, symbolized by the four living creatures, fall in worship (v. 4).

But judgment is not the last word. The dominant image is celebration and rejoicing in heaven. The destruction of Babylon ushers in the marriage supper of the Lamb (v. 7ff). We know intuitively that the right way to celebrate a significant event is by sharing a meal with those whom we love and with whom we are united. Weddings are invariably followed by feasts. So too are birthdays, anniversaries and holidays. The salvation God granted to the Hebrew slaves was marked by a Passover meal. The salvation Christ offers to his people is marked by the Communion meal. Salvation was accomplished by his sacrifice on the cross. We mark it by a meal. The communion meal we celebrate today is both a remembrance of what is past and a promise of what will come. It points both to the cross as the turning point in history and to the wedding feast of the Lamb as the culmination of history.

The marriage feast of the Lamb is the last of the images of the Sixth scene or cycle of Revelation. Scene One (1:9–3:22), the seven letters focused upon the church in

the world. Scene Two (4:1–8:1), the seven seals offered assurance that God remained in control of history in spite of the suffering experienced by the church. Seven trumpets of warning to the world comprised scene Three (8:2–11:18). Scene Four (12:1–15:4) retold the drama of human history from a heavenly perspective. Scene Five (15:5–16:21) described the punishment poured out upon the world by God’s righteous wrath. Scene Six (17:1–19:10) spoke the declarative word of divine judgment upon the rebellious world. Now, in the next to last cycle of Revelation, scene Seven (19:11–21:8), we will see the veil peeled back to reveal the cosmic drama standing behind human history. Here we will see heaven itself opened and gaze upon the visions of ultimate reality that normally in this life are only dimly perceived and understood.

The first thing John sees when the heavens are opened for him (v. 11) is a cosmic vision of Christ seated upon a white horse and dressed for battle. Salvation comes, but it comes out of war, out of the midst of the battle and in the face of opposition. Christ is described as faithful and true. He is righteous in his judgments. He possesses all authority, being crowned with many crowns.¹ And he is, to us, a mystery, possessing a name (v. 12) inscribed that no one knows but himself. He is the warrior, our

champion, fighting for his church. Significantly, he possesses only one weapon: his Word. The imagery is that of a sword, but not a sword held in his right hand, rather a sword coming from his mouth. The power of Christ is in his Word and in his words. Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Note that there is nothing in the vision John sees that says that the Christ he sees going forth is going forth to the *last* battle. This vision is not of what Christ will one day do, it is of what Christ is doing today. His word goes forth. The message of this vision is that those who oppose him are doomed. The terrible beast whom we met in chapters thirteen and seventeen is now captured. With his fall goes the false prophet who spread lies and deceit. Christ’s Word destroys the power of the world and unmasks falsehood and deceit. The imagery of vs. 17–21 is graphic, but the message is simple and unmistakable: the battle engaged is being won by Jesus Christ.

¹ A contrast no doubt is intended with Satan and the sea beast each of whom possessed only ten crowns.

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