

Striking at the Vitals of Religion The Courage to Discipline Theological Error

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One of the marks of a genuine church of Jesus Christ has, for centuries, been the proper biblical discipline of those who sin and live in that sin in an unrepentant state. The PCA *Book of Church Order* (BCO), as well as several other communions of like faith and practice, explains that discipline is intended for good. For example, the BCO states, “In its proper usage discipline maintains: a. glory to God, b. the purity of His Church, [and] c. the keeping and reclaiming of disobedient sinners” (27-3). In the same paragraph one reads, “Discipline is for the purpose of godliness (1 Timothy 4:7); therefore, it demands a self-examination under Scripture.” Finally, the church maintains discipline for the following ends or purposes: “so far as it involves judicial action, are the rebuke of offenses, the removal of scandal, the vindication of the honor of Christ, the promotion of the purity and general edification of the Church, and the spiritual good of offenders themselves” (27-3). From these select citations one can hardly conclude that discipline is harsh or inquisitorial.

It is likely that most discipline cases that emanate from the lower court of the church—that is, the session or elders of the local congregation—will deal with moral lapses or failings such as fornication, adultery, slander, and other such sins that disturb the purity and unity of the local church. The Scriptures detail a number of such sins in different contexts. For example, the Apostle Paul writes, “Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 6:9, 10). Similarly, the Apostle John condemns “sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood” (Rev. 22:15).

Discipline of Doctrinal Falsehood

While these offenses are described as “outside” the church and past tense for Christians, the Bible affirms that believers do (at times) fall into sins even of the most heinous nature, as described in the afore cited passages. Paul calls the church to lovingly deal with such sinners who are within the church as such sins become known. Among those sins listed are not just those that we think of as moral failings but also falsehood, including *doctrinal* falsehoods. We know this from passages like Galatians 1: “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you let him be accursed.... If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him

be accursed” (Gal. 1:8, 9). John similarly writes of those who have been among us and yet depart from the truth concerning Christ Jesus and His person in relation to the Father (1 John 2:18–25 and 4:1–6).

What are we to do with those who practice wrong teaching(s) or falsehood(s)? Paul says, “If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother” (2 Thess. 3:14, 15). Again, Paul warns the elders of the church at Ephesus: “from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:30). It is obvious from these select passages that anyone who teaches, or practices wrong doctrine is to be dealt with or disciplined. The church is to do so with a “spirit of gentleness,” with the goal of restoring the brother to moral and/or doctrinal purity (Gal. 6:1–5).

Lessons from History

Those who fall into doctrinal error include ordained men as well as the general membership. American Reformed history tells us of the startling story of Anne Hutchinson who became a popular teacher and practitioner of antinomianism in the Boston context during the early colonial period. In response, church rose up and dealt with her aberrant teaching. Sadly, she refused to repent and was excommunicated and ultimately forced from Massachusetts into the theologically amoral region of Rhode Island. The church had taken its role as guardian of truth seriously and stood in the gap to safeguard the sheep of Boston from her deadly doctrine.

Sadly, American Presbyterians offer a number of examples of failure to properly act against departures from sound doctrine. Two examples must suffice to show how leaven of the wrong kind can lead to further doctrinal downgrade in a church. In the 1930s a popular pastor in the Presbyterian Church, United States (PCUS) began promulgating aberrant doctrine through his preaching and published pamphlets. Once his teachings on evolution and other matters became widely known, the General Assembly (through proper channels) was called upon to have Hay Watson Smith’s home presbytery investigate his apparent errors. The actions culminated in his presbytery exonerating him and future assemblies refusing to take up the concerns on the grounds that both the courts of closest jurisdiction (synod and presbytery) had heard the case. This case set the precedent for future assemblies to recognize the lower courts as supreme, even in doctrinal cases.

Another example of a further polluting of the purity of the church is seen in the Abel M. Hart case in the 1960s. A. M. Hart was denied ordination in one presbytery and synod. After lengthy back and forth in the synod and General Assembly (during which time he served a PCUS church from 1962–65), he gave up his case in one synod to accept a call to another synod where he was welcomed, even with his aberrant views on the nature of

Scripture and denial of the historicity of Adam and Eve. He would serve as a minister in good standing in the PCUS the remainder of his life. The PCUS declined subsequently and became a haven for liberals of various shades.

Discipline of *both* moral matters *and* doctrine is essential for a church to maintain her purity and unity. Once allowances are made, the church is poised for downgrade. Oftentimes the reason for moral and doctrinal decay is due to the inactivity of good men under a banner of “peace.” We should own our vows and call others to keep theirs for the glory of Christ, the sake of gospel witness, and the reclaiming of sinners. There is no genuine peace where doctrinal purity and unity is neglected.

For a full treatment of this episode see David D. Hall, ed., *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636-1638* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990).

For easily accessible summaries of these cases, see Morton H. Smith, *How is the Gold Become Dim*rd ed. (Greenville, SC: Southern Presbyterian Press, 1973), 84, 85.

See *Ibid.*



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