

The Ecclesiastical Discipline as a Catalyst for Spiritual Growth among Nigerian Evangelical Christians

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Abstract: Nigeria has a large number of leaders that are obviously morally repugnant, yet they are powerless to halt the widespread immorality in their country. Given the speed at which evil is proliferating in our culture, it is reasonable to wonder if the Church can effect any change at all. Paul was saying goodbye to the elders in Ephesus and advised them to "keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock which the Holy Spirit has placed in your care." It has never been an easy task, and this injunction came at a high cost. The church must resolutely oppose the pull of worldliness, which encompasses a wide range of issues such as indecent attire, consumerism, terrorism, sexual immorality, disunity, and tribalism. It is impossible for Christians to integrate into society without dishonoring Christ's name and putting the church as a whole in disgrace. The author uses analytical, descriptive, and historical writing techniques. Maintaining orderliness, moral standards, and social harmony all depend on discipline. The church needs to understand that she is essentially Christ's presence in the world; she is his body. The church is now a summary of Christ's holiness, moral ethic, and standard of conduct. Therefore, lovingly and thoughtfully applied disciplinary action by the church can help the offender regain fellowship and can also be a powerful tool for spiritual development. Key Words: Ecclesiastical, Discipline, Impetus, Spiritual, Growth, Church, Worldliness.

Keywords: Ecclesiastical Discipline, Spiritual Growth, Evangelical Christians

INTRODUCTION

According to Donovan, "It is impossible to solve problems until people acknowledge them and face them openly, honestly and courageously." (2000: 2) Maintaining order and peace in society requires discipline, which is a crucial tool. However, it is regrettable that discipline is being undermined in today's society. Given the daily manifestation of evil, we may question whether the Church can effect any change at all. Though there is debate over how much the church should impact society's character development, it is nonetheless the church's obligation to bring men and women back to God. Eckman opines that:

Humans were made in God's likeness (Gen. 1:26–ff), and He established the only standards by which they should be valued. Humans are like God since they are made in his image. Both God and humans are capable of moral responsibility, self-awareness, and self-will. When a person is transformed into the likeness of Christ, they regain the righteousness, holiness, and wisdom that they lost when they fell (Gen. 3). Since people are made in God's image, they also symbolize God. God made humans in His likeness for practical reasons (Gen. 1:26-27). (1997:13).

It is our duty to rule over creation and to procreate and increase in number. As stewards of God's creation, humans serve as His representative. Genesis 2 emphasizes this idea, while Psalms 8 and 110 restate it. Man is the vice-regent of God over the entire creation, endowed with the ability

to govern, regulate, and utilize it to its fullest. This stewardship did not end with the fall. Instead, under this dominion state, Satan is the human race's opponent and usurper. Man lives in conflict with both nature and himself. Man, who was made to reign, discovers that the crown has fallen off his forehead (Eckman, 1997:13). People are in a hostile state toward God (Rom. 5:10), and they are not committed to upholding his name (Rom. 2:24) or to his honor and service (Rom. 1: 18). Their situation is akin to "death," as they are cut off from God and held captive by Satan (Eph. 2:2; 6:11–12; Col. 1:13) (Zubairu, 2019:406).

Frame noted that "sin does not end with the fall of Adam and Eve; after the fall, their children and indeed all later generations of human beings commit sin," despite proofs of God's grace and human faith (2013:855). Those who are born in Adam do not merely sin; they are enslaved to sin, as an alien power dominates them, they are under its rule and authority. It is vital to understand that sin is a power that exerts control over those who are in Adam. Sin, as we have seen previously, is failure to keep God's law. But sin is also a tyrannical power that exercises its dominion over those in Adam. It enters the world through Adam's sin and exercises its sway over all people (Rom. 5:12-19). Sin manifests its reign in the dominion of death (Rom. 5:21). Apart from Christ, people are "slaves" to sin (Rom. 6:6), whereas believers have been freed from the sin that enslaved them and are now enslaved to righteousness (Rom. 6:16-18' 20,

22) (Schreiner 2008:128-9). Hence, the need for Church discipline for stability of the relationship between God and man can never be over emphasized.

Discipline, its Definitions and Concepts

The 1969:644- edition of Webster's New International Dictionary of English Language gives the definitions of Discipline as follows:

1. A Training or experience that corrects, molds, strengthens or perfects especially the mental faculties or moral Character,
2. A Punishment, as a chastisement self-inflicted as mortification or imposed as a penance or as a penalty,
3. A control gained by enforcing obedience or order,
4. A behaviour in accordance with the rules of an organization or a prompt and willing obedience to the orders of superiors,
5. A rule or system of rules governing conduct or action,
6. A body of laws relating to conduct and Church government, practical rules as distinguished from dogmatic formulations; a body of purely ecclesiastical laws or practices that may be altered to meet new conditions.

Moral discipline is as old as humanity itself, as can be seen by closely examining each of the definitions listed above, which include every aspect of society. "Good manners, character, and proper behavior" refers to the ability to discriminate between wrong and proper intents, decisions, and acts (Long, *et al.*, 1987:366). Discipline therefore is the training of people to obey rules or a code of behaviour; training someone to be obedient or self-controlled by punishment or imposing rules; (Soanes & Hawker 2008:281) that develops character or orderliness and efficiency (Guralnik, 1970:401). Discipline implies that these are practices that most often do not come naturally and that need to be sustained and cultivated. Increasingly, the spiritual disciplines are being incorporated into Christian counseling practice, but often the neglect of the discipline or inconsistent practice can contribute to spiritual problems or lack of growth (Collins, 2002:266). Discipline usually refers in the Bible to moral training, which includes the positive aspect of instruction and the negative aspect of correction, sometimes punitive. The result of receiving discipline with humility is wisdom and satisfying, successful live (Prov. 4:13; 5:23; 10:17; 13:18). These various aspects of discipline are intertwined in the spiritual life of the believer and

of the Church (York & Clendenin, 2003:426). According to Dictionary of the Christian Church:

In the context of church life, discipline refers to the realistic techniques and guidelines that Christ uses to support each member in his or her own Christian growth and discipleship as well as in making the greatest possible contribution to the life and witness of the body as a whole. This is done through the influence of the entire community. Discipline of some kind has always been acknowledged as a component of the gospel. Christ was revered as the master, providing models for this kind of discipline through his teachings and behavior (cf. Matt. 11: 29; 28: 19) (Douglas & Cairns, 1978:302)

Church discipline is arguably the one that Christians in the twenty-first century overlook the most. If churchgoers are expected to care for one another in order to foster love and good deeds (Heb. 10:24), then we are also expected to compassionately confront one another if a member transgresses (York & Clendenin, 2003:426). The most acute problem relating to discipline was ensuring that members whose conduct brought offense to the community were challenged about their behaviour and convicted so that they could be restored. Repentance had to be ensured. This problem takes up some space in the New Testament because the church felt it had definite guidance from Jesus on the matter. The offending brother was to be approached privately, and only if he refused to respond was the matter to be brought before the church. If he then remained impenitent, he was to be excluded from the fellowship in the hope of his ultimate return and repentance (Matt. 18:15-17) (Douglas & Cairns, 1978:302)

Divine Discipline

The biblical concept of discipline combines the nuances of training, instruction and firm guidance with those of reproof, correction and punishment. In Hebrew culture, discipline was an integral element of household life. The father's task was to ensure his children are aware of God's claim for filial obedience, based upon His redemption of Israel in Exodus, and to enforce with integrity the law given at Mt. Sinai, in the knowledge that blessing from God depends upon compliance with His revealed will (Ceda, 1991:128). York and Clendenin observe that:

The book of Proverbs speaks of moral training more than any other biblical books. Its very purpose is to develop wisdom through "instruction

in righteousness, justice, and integrity” (1:3). Only an ungodly fool would refuse such training (1:7); which includes instruction in God’s Torah or Law (1:8; 6:23; Deut. 6:6-7; Ps. 94:12; Eph. 6:4). A son must diligently pay attention to his father’s and mother’s discipline (4:1; 6:20; 13:1; 15:5) and a faithful and loving parent must be willing to punish wrong doing as part of a child’s training (13:24; 15:10; 19:18; 22:15; 29:15). One effect of such training should be the development of self-discipline or self-control, an essential characteristic of one who is wise (1 Cor.9:27; 1 Pet 4: 7). The Bible teaches that one needs moral training and the discipline of self to defeat the natural tendencies to wantonness and sinful selfishness that result from moral depravity resulting from the fall (Gen. 4: 27) (York & Clendenin, 2003:426)

Divine correction is not the same as God's wrath or penalty. God's discipline is only for His children, while His judgment and punishment are meted out to the unrighteous. God's discipline in their life being the best evidence that God is, in fact, their father, the writer of Hebrews urged his readers to take heart from this (Heb. 12:5-11). He emphasized that God does it for our benefit so that we can partake in His holiness (v. 10) and that it produces the fruit of peace and righteousness for those who have been schooled by it (v. 11), representing God's benevolent aim toward His children (York & Clendenin, 2003:426).

Ecclesiastical (Church) Discipline

One of the ways the church works to sanctify the body of Christ is through church discipline. According to Adams, "the modern church is weak because we have compromised our position and condone sin in the members." The Apostolic Church was strong because it was clean (Adams, 1986:16). According to the church, Christ had granted it the authority to carry out this kind of "binding and loosing of sin in his name" (Matt. 18:18–20; John 20:23). The New Testament gives us some idea of how moral guidance was offered and discipline was applied in early church life. Ananias and Sapphira's situation was unique (Acts 5:1-11) (Douglas & Cairns, 1978:302). Paul gives various instructions; especially while he was making his farewell to the Ephesian elders he warned them “keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock which the Holy Spirit has placed in your care.” This was no cheap injunction, and has never been an easy task. The church is not to be allowed to drift into worldliness. It cannot be the church if her ethics, morality, and lifestyle are

indistinguishable from those of the unredeemed, whether they are pagan Gentiles or religious Jews. Christians cannot become enmeshed in the world without bringing abuse upon the name of Christ (2 Tim. 2: 4) and exposing the whole church to shame (1 Cor. 5:1) (Gilliland 1983:237).

Discipline in the first and second centuries seems to have had the forgiveness and winning back of the erring, rather than their punishment, as its aim. It was directed towards the individual. It was not regarded as annulling baptism, and was exercised only with purely spiritual authority (Douglas & Cairns, 1978:302). Because the believer is formed as disciple by what comes out in behaviour as obedient response to what goes in as word (Matt.15: 11), and because a saving faith is evidenced by the fruit of good works (James 2: 17), the church’s disciplining includes active supervision of each member’s conduct (Elwell, 2001:255). Brokke posits:

The contemporary church is faltering, threatened more by impurity from within than by persecution from without and by this the church’s health, testimony and usefulness for the Lord is at stake. To help restore her to the position of holiness to which God called her, discipline must be practiced; it must become a crucial part of the ministry, a responsibility one cannot neglect if one’s obedience is to be complete (1963:91).

Regardless of the title assigned, the Head of the body demands "Guardianship" from church leaders (Acts 20:28), and believers must heed their warnings (Heb. 13:17). The church confesses disciplinary oversight of members' lives and religion as a second key to the kingdom, but in a stricter sense. Denominational polities typically establish methods for the administration of ecclesiastical discipline, ranging from kind exhortation (Gal. 6:1) to excommunication (1 Cor. 5:13). If necessary, they will typically proceed as follows: first, they will meet with the ruling body of the congregation; then, they will announce the discipline to the congregation (usually in secret at first, asking for urgent prayer); finally, they will name the discipline publicly, which will lead to excommunication if there has been a persistent refusal to admit sin and seek correction (Matt. 18: 15–17). The refractory member is typically subjected to "silent censure" during these procedures, which entails being warned not to partake in the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:27–32). If this separation is not repeated, it is confirmed by

excommunication (Elwell, 2001:255). Wallace posited:

The problems associated with discipline from the fourth century, that, discipline began to show undesirable features. More concerns came to be shown for the sanctity of the congregation as a whole than for the expelled individual. The authority to exercise discipline was taken from the congregation and was regarded as residing in the clergy, and often the monarchical bishop alone. The system of penitence began to be concerned too much with trivial offenses. There was partiality in its exercise. Private confession was made compulsory for all. The church began to enforce its discipline by use of civil power (Wallace, 1978:302)

The Reformation saw sincere attempts by Luther to deliver men from priestly ecclesiastical tyranny in discipline, and by Calvin to restore in its integrity the discipline of the New Testament church. Unhappily, in the seventeenth century the pursuit of discipline became in some quarters more important than the pastoral care of the individual. Severity in certain areas of life was exercised at the expense of slackness in other areas. Discipline tended to stifle growth. Today, in reaction, it is asserted that it is impossible and undesirable within the pluralistic society to set standards to which church members should conform. Our attitude to such an assertion will be determined by our understanding of the Gospel. Christ, in fulfilling the New Covenant on our behalf, presented to God a definite pattern of response into which He seeks to conform up by the spirit. The church cannot decide to ignore this pattern. Moreover, while repentance is not a prior condition of forgiveness, it is inseparable from forgiveness, and it produces signs and fruits that man must look for and encourage (Wallace, 1978:302)

The Purpose of Discipline

The purpose of discipline, therefore, is to bring both restoration of the errant person and healing to the entire fellowship (Gilliland, 1983:244). Heaven rejoices with local congregation when the erring one repents (Elwell 2001:255). It is just as important to focus on the group as it is on the individual. The tendency to judge the individual alone violates the principle of the oneness of the body of Christ. The defection of anyone is a corporate failure. It is obvious that something was tragically wrong with the church at Corinth, so that the flagrant offense of one member became a

symptom of the church's sin. "How then can you be proud?" says Paul. "On the contrary, you should be filled with sadness" (1 Cor. 5:2). The church that has a conscience about the standards of the Christian life and that has built strong bonds of love and has been faithful in teaching will be less likely to have members who backslide (Gilliland, 1983:244)

According to Adeyanju, "the mission of the church universal is to further the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ, which includes sharing the gospel, healing, and aiding social groups in order to improve the state of the world." (2013:183). According to scripture, the church has an obligation to nurture those who are already believers and build them up to maturity in the faith. Paul said that his own goal was not simply to bring people to initial saving faith but to "present every man mature in Christ" (Col. 1:28). And he told the church at Ephesus that God gave the church gifted person "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:12-13). It is clearly contrary to the New Testament pattern to think that our only goal with people is to bring them to initial saving faith. Our goal as a church must be to present to God every Christian "Mature in Christ" (Col. 1:28) (Grudem 2003:867-8).

Discipline, carefully administered, is a means of teaching the individual and the group what the standards of the Christian life are. The redemptive purpose of discipline must be kept sacred. The reinstatement of the offender and subsequent growth in grace, forgiveness, and love are rationale for discipline. Teaching and restoration are motives for Paul's strongest words of discipline (1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:20). Repentance of course underlines the restoration, but this is the work of God's Spirit. Any notion that stern measures, in and of themselves, enforced on an errant person, will bring about spiritual repentance is wrong. The sin of one should cause grief and humble repentance on the part of all. Such an attitude teaches the meaning of the body of Christ and shows the individual how far-reaching the offense can be in its effects (Gilliland, 1983: 245).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Therefore, discipline cannot be the result of a few elders passing a decision that the rest of the body

disagrees with or finds objectionable. Rather, discipline must be the act of the majority. It is doubtful that any form of punishment will lead to repentance and restoration unless the offense truly damages the church's common conscience. Sensitization of that conscience is necessary so that the church and the transgressor understand the aim of discipline when it is applied collectively. The church only deals with the individual in the framework of the church fellowship because it is the entire church that is impacted. Allen asserts that:

When one leader or a few individuals are quick to judge offenders and the fellowship is ignored in the process, then in place of redemption we find fragmentation and defeat. We exercise discipline and leave the church undisciplined. He disciplined the church, not individuals. He left the church and it stood, tottering on its feet but still standing; we leave the church without any power of standing at all (Allen, 1960:124)

Discipline is imparted via the teachings of God's Spirit, not via legal means. Laws created by humans erode the foundation of a Christian life. Paul would object to the idea that some crimes are so heinous they should result in excommunication, while other sins are not so bad and should just carry a lighter punishment. He refuses to follow the simple path that a Jew would have taken even in such situations. He doesn't cite 1 Thess. 4:1-8 rules and penalties. There aren't any rules or sanctions. He does not hold a list of penalties in front of the Corinthians, even though he is aware that they have been taught. He would want to see individuals give themselves up to the Holy Spirit and acknowledge that he has been given to them in order for them to be holy. Consequently, being unclean brings about the Holy Spirit's rejection and provokes God's wrath (Gilliland, 1983:245).

Maintaining Christ-like standards within the church at all levels is the goal of discipline. Discipline may include any measures taken against members who violate the rules beyond simple counseling and reprimands. We are discussing a topic that has generated a great lot of debate in mission practice. When applied with caution, prayer, and love, discipline can help the offender reintegrate into society and can lead to amazing spiritual development. Discipline is meant to do this. However, unjustly severe actions performed against someone and done so in a judgmental, hypocritical manner can be very harmful. Paul's approach is obviously meant to elicit repentance

from each individual offender in a supportive and forgiving environment. The community's moral integrity would be upheld if its members were held accountable through disciplinary action (Haethorne & Martin, 1993:218). Though spiritual growth has some benefits for both the present and the afterlife, it demands personal commitments and self-discipline from all believers. It may be argued that no one will experience growth unless it is based on the pursuit of holiness and self-discipline. But if the procedure is disregarded, one will be unproductive in God's goods, which will inevitably bring God's anger (2 Pet.1:11) (Akintola, 2019:18).

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