

Discipline in the Church of Christ.

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IN the Form of Process drawn up and ratified by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1707 it is stated in Chapter 1., sec. 1, that “Our Lord Jesus Christ hath instituted a government and governors ecclesiastical, in His house, with power to meet for the order and government thereof; and to that purpose, the Apostles did immediately receive the keys from the hands of their Lord and Master Jesus Christ, and did use and exercise the same upon all occasions; and Christ hath from time to time furnished some in His Church with gifts for government, and with commission to exercise it when called thereunto, and has promised His presence to be with them to the end of the world.” It is further added in section 3: “Church discipline and censures, for judging and removing offences, are of great necessity in the Church, that the name of God, by reason of ungodly and wicked persons living in the Church, be not blasphemed, nor His wrath provoked against His people; that the godly be not leavened with, but preserved from, the contagion, and stricken with fear; and that sinners who are to be censured may be ashamed, to the destruction of the flesh and saving of the spirit in the day of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Nothing, according to the same authority, ought to be admitted by any Church judicature as the ground of a process for censure, but what has been declared censurable by the Word of God, or some act of universal custom of this National Church (Church of Scotland), agreeable thereto. The importance of discipline in the Church of Christ is apt to be underrated and owing to the difficulties connected with it exercise there may be a natural disinclination to deal with the offending parties. Such disinclination on the part of office-bearer in the Church of Christ is culpable and shows a want of realization of the great end for which discipline was set up in the house of God. Every Presbyterian minister in Scotland, at least at one time, was asked the question: “Do you promise to submit yourself willingly and humbly, in the spirit of meekness, unto the admonitions of the brethren of this Presbytery, and to be subject to them, and all other Presbyteries and superior judicatories of this Church, where God in His providence shall cast your lot; and that, according to your power, you shall maintain the unity and peace of this Church against error

and schism, notwithstanding of whatsoever trouble or persecution may arise, and that you shall follow no divisive course from the doctrine, worship, discipline, and government of this Church” Our forefathers chose these words with care and one would have thought that however elastic the clerical conscience may be, and the history of the Church in Scotland has proved it to be extremely elastic, that it would be impossible to answer that question in the affirmative by men who had not the slightest intention of acting on it. Common honesty demanded that they would act up to what they promised and had they done so the professing Church of Christ in Scotland would be in a very different position today. Elders, as office-bearers in the house of God, have also come under solemn promise to exercise discipline and God-fearing men in the kirk-session who valued the truth of God and appreciated order and holiness in His house are a strong support to any minister who wishes to be faithful to the solemn promises he has made. A minister who is a servant of Christ, and not a servant of men, with faithful elders to strengthen his hands, is a power for good in a congregation. Even a time-serving minister may be held in check by men who do not love nor are actuated by his temporising policy. On the other hand, office-bearers who, for one reason or other, are continually siding with the delinquents are a tremendous drag on those who wish to see order maintained in the house of God. Of them it is true, as confidence placed in an unfaithful man in time of trouble, they are like “a broken tooth and a foot out of joint.”

The exercise of discipline is one of the most difficult matters that falls to the lot of office-bearers in ruling in the house of God. There are so many questions arising in the matter so serious as to demand action? if it is, what will be the consequence if action is taken? The answer to the latter question is simple enough. If the matter demands action, then the question of consequences is not to act as an impediment. That trouble will follow is what one may naturally expect and one may make up one's mind at the outset that he may expect trouble. Wrong motives may be imputed, harsh things may be said and he may find himself placed in the place of the delinquent by the delinquent's sympathisers. This is quite a common experience in exercising discipline and if any minister or elder find themselves in such a situation they need not be too much cast down as though some new thing was happening to them. However culpable a delinquent may be we must always reckon on him having sympathisers and one need not be

over dismayed if the opposition threaten to use even the strong arm of the civil law.

Another reprehensible feature of the delinquent is that notwithstanding he may be manifestly in the wrong he will give no end of trouble by agitating and appealing for sympathy. How often has this been illustrated in Scotland. Men who were out of all sympathy with the doctrines of the Church to which they belonged kept up a turmoil in the Church courts breaking the unity and harmony of the Church and insidiously sowing not only the poisoned seed of discord but false doctrine.

The aim of discipline is to keep the Church pure and to maintain order. Anything that is taught inconsistent with the creed of the Church which has been accepted as founded on Scripture ought to be dealt with by the courts of the Church. It was failure to put this into practice which caused the tremendous land-slide in doctrinal matters in the larger Presbyterian Churches in Scotland. Once a church lightly esteems the power of discipline in doctrinal matters there is no saying where it will end. As God is the God of order so ought there to be order in His house. Any practices or line of action inconsistent with and contrary to the received practice of the Church which has been accepted as founded on Scripture ought not to be overlooked by the Church courts. It is the duty of office-bearers to see to it that uniformity of worship be maintained. "Open questions" may be allowable in politics in the house of God they have proved a source of endless trouble. It was the policy of having "open questions in the pre-Union Free Church of Scotland that brought no end of confusion into that Church. The existence of the Church demands that there should be unity in belief and practice founded on Scripture and anything that breaks that unity is not be lightly overlooked by the Church courts whose duty is to maintain discipline in the house of God.

It has been charged against the Free Presbyterian Church that it errs in being too strict in its discipline -- that it would tend more for the usefulness of the church and the extension of its activities if a little more scope was given to its office-bearer and members. In an age of laxity when the discipline of Church courts is almost negligible it need not cause any wonder that such a charge should be preferred against us. If our discipline is exercised along Scriptural lines we need not be unduly concerned with what men of broad views think or say. The Free

Presbyterian Church has not hesitated to deal with her ministers, elders, members or students when their conduct was inconsistent with the practice of the Church and though in the exercise of their disciplinary powers her Church court may have been involved in trouble for a season it was generally found in the end that the policy of the line of least resistance would have involved them in more trouble. The saintly MacCheyne tells us that at the beginning of his ministry he had a natural reluctance to exercise the disciplinary powers committed to the Church but as time went on he saw that it was an ordinance of God and when exercised for His glory it was likely to bring a blessing in its train. The idea that seems to exist in the mind of some that laxity in practice is a mark of grace and indicates superior spirituality is right in the face of Scripture.