



Biblical Teaching

Discipline, Spiritual Insights

by A.B. Bruce

(The following is excerpted from A.B. Bruce, *The Training of the Twelve or, Passages Out of the Gospels Exhibiting the Twelve Disciples of Jesus Under Discipline for the Apostleship* (pp. 208–210). Originally published in 1871. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc. (1995). Every elder should have a copy of this book and read it on a regular basis!)

The rules here (i.e. Matthew 18:15-20) laid down for the guidance of the apostles in dealing with offenders, though simple and plain, have given rise to much debate among religious controversialists interested in the upholding of diverse theories of church government. Of these ecclesiastical disputes we shall say nothing here; nor do we deem it needful to offer any expository comments on our Lord's words, save a sentence of explanation on the phrase employed by Him to describe the state of excommunication:

"Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. (Matthew 18:15-17 NKJV)

"Let him" (that is, the impenitent brother about to be cast out of the church) "be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican." These words, luminous without doubt at the time they were spoken, are not quite so clear to us now; but yet their meaning in the main is sufficiently plain. The idea is, that the persistently impenitent offender is to become at length to the person he has offended, and to the whole church, one with whom is to be held no religious, and as little as possible social fellowship. The religious aspect of excommunication is pointed at by the expression "as an heathen man," and the social side of it is expressed in the second clause of the sentence, "and a publican." Heathens were excluded from the temple, and had no part in Jewish religious rites. Publicans were not excluded from the temple, so far as we know; but they were regarded as social pariahs by all Jews affecting patriotism and religious strictness. This indiscriminate dislike of the whole class was not justifiable, nor is any approval of it implied here. Jesus refers to it

simply as a familiar matter of fact, which conveniently and clearly conveyed His meaning to the effect: Let the impenitent offender be to you what heathens are to all Jews by law—persons with whom to hold no religious fellowship; and what publicans are to Pharisees by inveterate prejudice—persons to be excluded from all but merely unavoidable social intercourse."

Whatever obscurity may attach to the letter of the rules for the management of discipline, there can be no doubt at all as to the loving, holy spirit which pervades them.

The spirit of love appears in the conception of the church which underlies these rules. The church is viewed as a commonwealth, in

which the concern of one is the concern of all, and vice versa. Hence Jesus does not specify the class of offences He intends, whether private and personal ones, or such as are of the nature of scandals, that is, offences against the church as a whole. On His idea of a church such ex-

planations were unnecessary, because the distinction alluded to in great part ceases to exist. An offence against the conscience of the whole community is an offence against each individual member, because he is jealous for the honor of the body of believers; and on the other hand, an offence which is in the first place private and personal, becomes one in which all are concerned so soon as the offended party has failed to bring his brother to confession and reconciliation. A chronic alienation between two Christian brethren will be regarded, in a church after Christ's mind, as a scandal not to be tolerated, because fraught with deadly harm to the spiritual life of all.

Very congenial also to the spirit of charity is the order of proceeding indicated in the directions given by Jesus. First, strictly private dealing on the part of the offended with his offending brother is prescribed; then, after such dealing has been fairly tried and has failed, but not till then, third parties are to be

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Leadership Principles

Men of Vision (Part 2)

by Jack Spender

We have been thinking about the great subject of vision in church leadership. The previous article pointed out the importance, nature and source of vision in Christian work. An example from the Old Testament - David's desire to build the temple - provided some spiritual lessons, such as the importance of taking time to contemplate needs and opportunities, so that people can grow and God can be glorified. One essential element in this is to understand the relationship between timeless principles and the methods by which they are presented to the people.

In this article, we want to explore that 3rd point which we might describe as the "packaging" or context in which the body life of the church operates. The doctrines of the faith must be contended for and preserved, but they must be lived out in a way that is flexible and relevant to people.

An Important Caveat

A warning is in order here. There is a danger of thinking that men of vision deal only in lofty matters, such as fundamental doctrines or great missions and ministries. Actually, size or outward importance has little to do with it. Good leaders are alert to opportunities and hindrances in the church of any magnitude that will materially affect the health of the work.

As an example, the failure of certain small and inexpensive parts in a car can stop it just as fully as the loss of the engine! It does not take much skill to discover that the engine is missing, but it does take skill to discover a small part that has the potential to cripple the entire vehicle. It is no different in the church. Elders might assume that because doctrines are orthodox and meetings are Scriptural, details don't matter, but this is a mistake.

The Importance of Packaging

In grandfather's day, if you wanted to buy flour, you went to the store and scooped some out of a barrel. Today, everything is packaged and warnings are common that if the package has been tampered with, the consumer should reject the contents for safety's sake.

Packaging can be important. In the church, we must not think only of the content of our provision for the believers, but also of the means or "package" in which we present it. For example, a Bible message may be sound and scriptural, but if the saints can't hear it because of its lack of relevance, there's not much profit.

This matter of the practical relevance

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to people often means the difference between a growing church and one that struggles. For the sake of discussion, let's think about this subject in three closely related categories which together describe how a local church connects with its people. Remember we are not now talking about Bible doctrines or church meetings, but only how we make important things accessible to the people.

I will use the expressions "Physical Environment," "Spiritual Climate," and "Administrative Function." Space limits us to a brief description of each, and a few examples, but this should provide enough to help elders apply the ideas to their own local work. Keep in mind how this relates to vision. We can follow King David's example of contemplating the needs of the Lord's people and the building of the temple (see the last issue of ESN Vol. 11 No. 2), and then ask in our assemblies for wisdom to identify and replace things which make it difficult for people to grow, with things that better serve them.

Physical Environment

All of the material resources we use in the assembly need to be evaluated periodically to make sure they are working well, and that they are appropriate to meet the needs for which we employ them. This would include items related to our meeting space such as heating, seating, lighting, sound system, parking, rest rooms etc., and accessories like

hymn books, musical instruments, kitchen and nursery furnishings, library materials, etc.

But don't limit the list to the obvious! Think of the needs of young people, older saints, single moms and growing Christians. Would a photo copier made available to students be useful? Is there a well stocked first aid kit? Can older folks find a quiet place to sit and rest? Can a visitor find the rest room or get a glass of water? Of what quality are food provisions when used? Some groups have asked that when refreshments are needed, they be home made rather than "store bought" if possible.

Of course there are financial and space limitations to consider, and the idea is not ease and affluence, but simply being alert to ways to encourage Christians by providing an environment that encourages learning, growing and fellowship.

One helpful idea is to consider the four items listed in Acts 2:42 which give the basic functions of the assembly, and ask if each is carried out in the best possible environment within our means. The secret is to not allow anything to be off limits for evaluation. I remember years ago holding Bible studies in a lovely home which before long could not be used, as the owner would not stop the family cat from wandering among the people.

The physical environment in which we gather may be of modest means, especially in some mission fields, but we can remember David's desire that the Lord's house be at least as nice as his own. Obviously, even the most excellent temporal amenities cannot compensate for faulty doctrine or spiritual apathy, but environment is important, nonetheless.

Spiritual Climate

If physical surroundings are important, spiritual ones are more so. This term describes the prevailing attitude or "spirit" which people sense in any group gathering. True, personalities differ, but those in leadership must be sure that a sweet spirit of loving acceptance and forbearance is the norm.

Once again, it helps to think through the various assembly activities one by

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A Lingerin' Fragrance

by Mary Gianotti

It's spring! I step out onto our back deck and marvel. Fresh sights, sounds and fragrances fill the air. The cool breeze brings the unmistakable smell of as small hyacinth that has poked its bright green leaves and brilliant purple bloom through the hard ground. I breathe deeply, it is most wonderful aroma of spring.

My mind goes back to another spring day when a fragrance permeated hands, feet, hair and a home. Imported from East India, Nard was considered one of the most costly and precious ointments in the known world. Finding a vendor selling pure nard was a requirement, she wanted a product not mixed or diluted with inferior scents. The transaction was made, the three hundred coins poured onto the counter and carefully counted, the ex-

pense was staggering.

Mary gave generously. The experience was a bold declaration of her unwavering devotion to her Lord. I wonder if she realized that she would share in the fragrance? The next morning did she wake up, smell her hair, breathe deeply with a satisfaction that she had given lavishly to the one she loved?

As spring fades into summer what will you lavishly give to your Lord?

Maybe it will be your time. Time talking to neighbors, praying that the Lord will open opportunities to speak His name. Taking that family with all the kids from your church on a picnic just to show you care. Picking up a senior saint and going for a drive and ice cream, easing their loneliness. Maybe God will nudge you to sacrifice finan-

cially. That money saved for new lawn furniture could be given to a young person desiring to serve the Lord at camp this summer. Maybe it will be as simple a decision as choosing to spend more time with the Lord before you begin to pull the weeds in the garden.

My prayer is that each of us will be able to awake in the morning, breathe deeply, being aware that we too carry the scent of our Lord.

Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

John 12:3



Men of Vision (cont. from page 2)

one. Is there freedom for young men to participate at the Lord's Supper without getting a stern 'word' from an older person? Are the older men sensitive to how lengthy prayers and flowery orations might discourage younger folks from participating? Are people free to learn at their own pace? Are some informal settings available when they can learn to pray or serve? Do the elders teach the believers how to accept ministry of the Word from younger men?

Obviously, the intent here is not a lackadaisical "anything goes" attitude on the part of the elders. Rather, it is a constant reminder that the assembly is a family and, as such, is a place for people at all levels of maturity. In the home, babies drink from bottles and sit in high chairs but are still cherished members at the table. Kindness, thankfulness and forbearance are not products of the natural man!

This is really an immense subject and one which must be much on the heart of elders. Any bitter or unforgiving spirit, or harsh, judgmental attitude tolerated will absolutely poison the climate for spiritual growth. Churches that have orthodox doctrine and scriptural church order yet fail in this area, will dwindle and die. A careful study of such passages as Phil 2:1-16 and Eph 4:1-16 can be invaluable.

Administrative Function

The third part of the package by which assembly life is made relevant to the people can be described by this term. It simply refers to the manner in which leaders communicate with those who are led. It is too easy to assume that people know what we think or mean or have decided, but in many cases they do not. How clear are the routine communications and policies of your assembly?

All the various functions of what we call "body life" can either be clear and understandable or vague and confusing. Why do we do what we do? How should problems be handled? How are decisions made? What about record keeping?

Leaders should practice a voluntary accountability to the church. Good communication is essential to fellowship. Simple steps of openness foster a sense of security and ownership.

As an example, consider the problem of marital disharmony in an assembly family that becomes known by a few. In the effort to preserve privacy, elders can forget that rumors often travel faster than truth. A simple statement that "the elders are aware of the situation with the Smith family, and value prayer" provides no real detail, yet lets the people know that their shepherds are involved.

Conclusion

Years ago I was meeting with a group of elders who were concerned about the rapid decline of their assembly. Ideas including some of the above material were suggested, and happily the assembly prospered through the mercy of the Lord, good leadership and hard work by the remaining people. But during that initial meeting I remember one elder crossing his arms and retorting with a scowl, "Sounds like big business to me." Not true!

The fact is, every virtue of order, wisdom, skill belonged first to the Lord, all of Whose ways are perfect. If any business or industry has prospered, it is probably because it has borrowed God's principles of orderliness, timeliness, honesty and so forth. The church must never imagine that the Spirit of God is quenched by attention to detail!

David's desire was that people might be helped in every possible way to seek the Lord, and he went to great personal expense to make that vision a reality. Our blessings far exceed his. Should we not give highest priority to the Lord's work, not just in doctrines and church order, but in the important matter of how the flock is helped to appropriate these blessings?



8 Suggestions for Improving a Mega-Church

by Chuck Gianotti

A mega-church looms just down the road—I pass it almost everyday. Criticism (we of “smaller” churches tend to engage in quite freely) has humbly given way to prayer for that church—I discovered the pastor admonishes his congregation to pray for the smaller churches, that they would grow.

People are being saved there and many are serving. To be sure some have shifted churches, but don’t completely discount the good things happening. They have elders, prayer meetings, small groups, Lord’s supper. I know personally some who are growing spiritually there. Thousands of people sitting under the preaching of the word *is* a good thing!

So what do I make of it all—I who embrace biblical teaching of elder plurality, believer priests, gift development and family nature of the local church? Can the mega-

-church do things better? Yes! Here are my suggestions:

- 1) Develop/expand small group (SG) ministry.** People need community, it doesn’t happen in a huge crowd. Goal: everyone committed to a small group.
- 2) Train SG leaders** using, for example, Alex Strauch’s book : *Biblical Elders*. Godly elders are needed for these SGs.
- 3) Equip Christians** in spiritual gifts
- 4) Embrace the Lord’s Supper & prayer** in SGs where more people can participate actively in a family style.
- 5) Remove geographical boundaries**—Allow the Holy Spirit to spread the SGs to other cities and countries.
- 6) Practice distributed leadership.** Empower the SG leaders to exercise authority under leading of the Holy Spirit.

7 Encourage autonomy/independence with SGs observing the Lord’s Supper and Sunday services on their own. Commit them to the Lord and the word of His grace (Acts 20:32).

8) Foster inter-dependence, through shared ministries, mission agencies and regional conferences— which encourages unity and leverages resources.

Yes, these suggestions would improve the ministry of the mega-church down the road. Doesn’t this sound familiar—like the Mega-Church which began in Jerusalem with 3000 people and grew through proliferation of message and seeding of SGs all over the globe. Yes, the Body of Christ is the original, true Mega-Church and we who believe are all members of it.

Side application: never think that you are in just a “small assembly or church.” You are part of God’s Mega-Church! 

Discipline (cont. from page 1)

brought in as witnesses and assistants in the work of reconciliation; and finally, and only as a last resource, the subject of quarrel is to be made public, and brought before the whole church. This method of procedure is obviously most considerate as towards the offender. It makes confession as easy to him as possible by sparing him the shame of exposure. It is also a method which cannot be worked out without the purest and holiest motives on the part of him who seeks redress. It leaves no room for the reckless talkativeness of the scandalmonger, who loves to divulge evil news, and speaks to everybody of a brother’s faults rather than to the brother himself. It puts a bridle on the passion of resentment, by compelling the

offended one to go through a patient course of dealing with his brother before he arrive at the sad issue at which anger jumps at once, viz. total estrangement. It gives no encouragement to the officious and over-zealous, who make themselves busy in ferreting out offences; for the way of such is not to begin with the offender, and then go to the church, but to go direct to the church with severe charges, based probably on hearsay information gained by dishonorable means.

Characteristic of the loving spirit of Jesus, the Head of the church, is the horror with which He contemplates, and would have His disciples contemplate, the possibility of any one, once a

brother, becoming to his brethren as a heathen or a publican. This appears in His insisting that no expedient shall be left untried to avert the sad catastrophe. How unlike in this respect is His mind to that of the world, which can with perfect equanimity allow vast multitudes of fellow-men to be what heathens were to Jews, and publicans to Pharisees— persons excluded from all kindly communion! Nay, may we not say, how unlike the mind of Jesus in this matter to that of many even in the church, who treat brethren in the same outward fellowship with most perfect indifference, and have become so habituated to the evil practice, that they regard it without compunction as a quite natural and right state of things! 

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