

Church Discipline

Colleagues,

Only once in my life—almost 70 years now—did I experience a case of church discipline. I was hardly a major player in the event. But I was present—as an uncomprehending child—in the Sunday morning service 60 years ago when a member was formally excommunicated from Trinity Lutheran Church in Coal Valley, Illinois. Asking my dad what that was all about, I can remember only that “he left his wife and ran off with another man’s wife, and after we did all we could with him, he wouldn’t repent of this sin. So he was put out of the congregation.”

Rare as such practice may be these days in US Lutheranism, or even in other mainline churches, it is not unknown elsewhere in world Lutheranism. It was on Dave and Darlene Schneider’s agenda when we visited them earlier this year in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Schneiders have been missionary teachers for the past nine years at the Lutheran Theological Seminary Enhlanhleni. [To pronounce Enhlanhleni, by the way, identify the four syllables and clear your throat to pronounce each “h.”] Their daughter Carolyn is a Crossings board member and a regular contributor for the text studies on this listserve. Church Discipline is practiced in the seminary’s denomination, the Lutheran Church in South Africa. So it’s part of the course in Pastoral Theology that Dave teaches. Through the years he’s seen how it is done in the LCSA, and sees the need for that practice to be re-grounded in the Gospel.

He says;

“First of all, apparently the only sin for which a member is disciplined is that of getting pregnant outside marriage, and usually the man involved is left out of the disciplinary process. Even if the sinner repents, she is not immediately

absolved and restored to the Lord's table of Holy Communion. That happens only after the birth and Baptism of the baby."

So he's done Bible study on the topic with his students "wondering to what extent I should lead my students to be critical of the prevailing system in the Church. After all, a Seminary is not supposed to be a place of revolution. Or is it?"

What follows is basically the results put together by a committee of students who took the best from the papers of the whole class. Dave took these theses, "reshaped and expanded them a bit" and presented them as "Ideas for Discussion" at the May meeting of the pastors and missionaries of the KwaZulu-Natal Diocese. Did the students ever get mentioned in Dave's presentation? It's not clear. His comment when sending us the text was: "The pastors need to know what is being taught at the Seminary. If there is hot discussion, let it come to me, rather than to the new Seminary graduates."

Peace & Joy!

Ed

CHURCH DISCIPLINE: IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The goal of church discipline is not to punish, but to restore the sinner (Galatians 6:1), win back the brother/sister (Matthew 18:15), welcome back the penitent sinner (Luke 15:24), find the lost (Luke 19:9), save the sinner's spirit (1 Corinthians 5:5).
2. The work of church discipline is done in a gentle manner, helping the sinner to carry the burden. (Galatians 6:1-2)
3. Church discipline is done inside the Church, with Christians who have sinned (1 Corinthians 5:12-13).

Although the Law and Gospel proclaimed to someone outside the Church (Luke 23:42-43) is the same Word used in Church Discipline, the aim of evangelizing the outsider is to bring him into the Church. The aim of Church Discipline is to keep in the Church some one who has sinned.

4. Sins to be disciplined include: sexual immorality, greed, idolatry, slander, drunkenness, swindling. (1 Corinthians 5:11)
5. If the brother sins, go and tell him his fault privately. If he listens (repents), you have gained the brother. (Matthew 18:15)
6. If he doesn't listen, take one or two witnesses. If he hears (repents), you have gained the brother. (Matthew 18:16)
7. If he doesn't listen to you and the witnesses, take the matter to the church (congregation). If he listens to the voice of the church, you have gained him back. If he refuses to listen to the congregation, expel him from the congregation and from the special privileges of membership, but not from hearing the Word of God. (Matthew 18:17, 1 Corinthians 5:13)
8. If the sinner is restored, won back, the Church makes a joyful celebration, as God and the holy angels do in heaven. (Luke 15:7, 10, 22-24)
9. Sin confessed by a penitent sinner is absolved immediately-the same day. (John 8:11, Luke 19:9, Luke 15:21-24, 2 Samuel 12:13)
10. A repentant sinner who has been forgiven and absolved may participate in the Sacrament of the Altar as soon as it is offered by the Church. Only manifest and impenitent sinners are excommunicated from the sacrament and fellowship of the Church. (Smalcald Articles Part III, Article IX)
11. According to the Gospel, the punishment of sin has been

carried by Christ. (Is. 53:4-6, 1 Cor. 15:3). The Church has no right to punish a penitent, absolved sinner.

12. Church leaders need to be concerned also about the "older brother/sister" who may become angry about forgiveness. (Luke 15:28-32)
13. Church discipline is the work of God. It concerns His wrath (not our personal anger) about sin and His gracious forgiveness. We church people are only His earthly instruments, to accomplish His purposes. (John 20:21-23, Matthew 18:18-20)
14. Even after Absolution and forgiveness, there may still be earthly results of sin (Luke 23:39-43), or even some further lesson from God (2 Samuel 12:14). But the forgiveness of God stands sure.

David Schneider
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