

Third Sunday of Easter – Epistle

CHURCH DISCIPLINE?

First John 3:1-7

Third Sunday of Easter

Analysis by Eric W. Evers

1 See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. 2 Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. 3 And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure. 4 Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. 5 You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. 6 No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. 7 Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.

[Author's note: Ah, the rigorists will love this text! "No one who abides in him sins!" Now, at last, we'll get some "serious" Christianity! Isn't that what we're told? Set the standards high, and you'll see your congregation grow? It's those congregations that expect a lot of their members (usually a lot of externally-measurable things) that are booming. So let's bring on the discipline! Well,... I do agree that the Office of the Keys is a God-given tool for church renewal. But let's see how that might really look, through the eyes of First John.]

DIAGNOSIS: Discipline in the Church?

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Disobedience*

There can be no doubt that there is a great deal of cultural Christendom alive and (un-)well in our church. Whether we see what Luther might call “despising” of worship and the sacrament (a low percentage of our members at weekly worship), or a lack of concern for the poor, or simply a lack of Christian conviction displayed in thought, word, and deed, our congregations often do not look like they are populated with the “children of God.” Children, yes, but children whose hearts are relentlessly self-focused. We care about our comfort, our wants, and our ease. We tolerate no external regulation or controls on our whims. Justice for the poor, sacrificial stewardship, creating hospitable space for the stranger, all of these commands of God are too discomfoting for us.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Dislocated*

Of course, the problem isn't one of action or inaction. External behaviors are but symptoms of a deeper reality: unbelief. John would call it “not abiding” in Christ. The rigorists might cry out for a stronger proclamation against the “lawlessness” of cultural Christians who simply want their preferences baptized. And in a sense, how can we blame them? No one who sins (who does not show love to the other, see 4:8) abides in Christ! We are lawless because we are not grounded in Christ; our identity does not flow from him. In Johannine terms, we abide in the world instead of in Christ, and thus our words and deeds are not discernibly different from the world's.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Deceived*

But even the most zealous disciple must eventually find the accusation of lawlessness turned back on him- (or her-) self.

“Let no one deceive you... Everyone who does what is right is righteous” (v. 7). And surely it is right to show mercy, to gently correct those who have strayed, and to build up those who are weak. Yes, the hypothetical rigorist is right: we are awash in cultural Christendom at the expense of faithfully abiding in Christ. But the rigorist is equally wrong: he fears this disobedience (and thus wants to “protect” the church from it), which shows he does not possess that Godly love which drives out all fear (4:18). Thus, even the one who is aware of sin has reason to fear judgment. One may feel superior, but such a person is only “deceived.” Both the rigorous and the lawless face far more than church discipline. They face the righteous wrath of God.

PROGNOSIS: Church Renewal

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal solution) – Declared

“See what love the Father has given us!” Or perhaps more accurately, “see what kind of love the Father has given us.” What kind of love? Love that declares deceived, displaced, disobedient pew sitters to be children of God. Love that seizes us in the midst of our self-righteous judgment of others. Love that declares mercy. And in case we don’t get it, John repeats it: “And that is what we are.” Despite our sin, despite our undeserving, unfaithful hearts, we are God’s children because in Christ, God has declared it to be so. Mercy trumps disobedience.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – (Rightly) Divided

And the news is so good, it bears repeating again: “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed.” Now, in spite of our dislocation, Christ has claimed us as his own. And if we are searching for true renewal of the faith in our churches, this is the key. Instead of dividing the congregation up into “faithful” and “unfaithful” (since the

accusation always rebounds on the accuser, eventually we'd all end up in the latter category; see above), every believer is divided: simultaneously saint and sinner. The destination of sinners—those declared to be God's children—is not the outside of the church by way of church discipline, but instead it is a glory that has not yet been revealed. We are works yet in progress; the law still puts the old creation to death, and Holy Spirit is still quickening new life. We're on the road to unspeakable glory. And so instead of obedience fueled by fear of discipline and death, we can live faith and love empowered by the hope of our freely-given future.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Dedicated*

And “all who have this hope purify themselves” (v. 3). This purification has cultic overtones: rather than washing, think of it as being set aside for special purpose. Rather than wanting our own comfort made the priority of the church, and rather than sitting in judgment over others, those who have the hope of a glorious future are dedicated to God's purposes. We will be like Christ is! That reconciling work is God's, and he calls us to commit our hearts and minds to being instruments of his Holy Spirit's labor in the church and world. We serve, we worship, we study Scripture, we pray, not because we fear the scrutiny of the church disciplinarian, but because of the future God has prepared for us in Christ. Use of the Office of the Keys for church renewal involves the Law, yes; we must go through Steps 1-3. But it cannot end there, leaving all of us dead. The gracious declaration of mercy that makes us God's adopted children and gives us the hope of a new future sets us apart for God's purpose, which is ultimately the Spirit-empowered renewal of the Church for the reconciliation of the world in Christ. May the Gospel claim and dedicate all of us in that hope!