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# Biblical Presuppositions for Church Discipline

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## I

**S**PEAK unto all the congregation of the Children of Israel and say unto them, Ye shall be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy." (Lev. 19:2)

In this brief statement may be found a comprehensive outline of the revelation of God in the Scriptures and of the engrossing story of God's ways and dealings with men. Here are all the elements: (1) The holiness of God; (2) the love of God. He manifests a personal concern for His people, He is "your God," and He has chosen for Himself a "congregation"; (3) the people of God, a historical phenomenon among the nations, i. e., the Children of Israel, the descendants of Jacob, frail, self-willed, errant, stumbling, yet the continual objects of the love of the holy God; (4) the desire of the holy God to establish and maintain communication and communion with the people of His choice; (5) the requirement of holiness on the part of these people that they may be in unbroken fellowship with God; (6) the unceasing and unshrinking readiness of God's people to accept the holy God's way of holiness for them and to abhor and excise all that is unholy.

The unqualified holiness of God is a basic theme of God's revelation. If we attempt to define holiness, we soon discover our inability to do so. It completely escapes our own experience. We can only attempt a description by means of negatives. We should have to say that the absolute holiness of God excludes all that is incomplete, unclean, impure, all that suggests moral limitations or deficiencies of any kind. In massive emphasis the Scriptures depict the holiness of God. God is holy in His being, in His attributes, in all His works, and in all His dealings and judgments. The holy God created a world that was "very good." He made man in His own image, in righteousness and true holiness. He desired to keep man holy and expelled him from Paradise when

he fell. God's devastating judgments on the wickedness of men are plain for all to read in the record of the Flood, Sodom and Gomorrha, the Canaanite nations, yea, the humiliation and exile of the very people of God, the demolition of arrogant pagan powers, the leveling of the Holy City, and the oft-repeated punitive invasions of man's history to the present day. Above all, the crucifixion and abandonment of the Son by the Father drives home with shattering force the ineluctable reality of the holiness of God.

"Who is like unto Thee, O Lord, among the gods?" asks Moses in his lofty poem after recounting the marvelous deliverance that God provided for Israel from the might of Egypt and the waters of the Red Sea. "Who is like Thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?" (Ex. 15:11). Nor would God have His people ever forget His holiness. On a golden plate fastened to his miter the high priest carried the constant reminder "Holiness to the Lord" (Ex. 28:36). In ever-varying contexts the psalmists and prophets take up this constant refrain: "God reigneth over the heathen. God sitteth upon the throne of His holiness" (Ps. 60:6). "Thy testimonies are very sure; holiness becometh Thine house, O Lord, forever" (Ps. 93:5). "Let them praise Thy great and terrible name, for it is holy" (Ps. 99:3). "Thou art holy, O Thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel" (Ps. 22:3). "There is none holy as the Lord; for there is none beside Thee" (1 Sam. 2:2). "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name" (Ps. 103:1). Isaiah thunders denunciation against Israel because it is a "sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corruptors. They have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger" (Is. 1:4). And so in many other places.

The New Testament continues the same stress. At the threshold of the new aeon Mary sings of the mighty God, who "hath done great things, and holy is His name" (Luke 1:49). Looking into eternity, the aged seer of Patmos beholds the perfected saints before the throne of God and hears them singing, "Who shall not fear Thee, O Lord, and glorify Thy name? for Thou only art holy" (Rev. 15:4). There is profound significance in the fact that the prayer which God's children are taught to address to Him instructs them to pray, first of all, that His name be hallowed.

Not only is God Himself holy, but only what is holy can be in His presence. God will allow nothing unholy to appear before Him. Not only were Adam and Eve banished from God's presence at their first fall from holiness, but God made elaborate provisions that all uncleanness be removed before His people could approach Him. The mass of minutely detailed prescriptions of ritual and ceremonial legislation leave one with a single overpowering impression — no trespassing against the holy God! "For I am the Lord, your God. Ye shall therefore sanctify yourselves, and ye shall be holy, for I am holy. Neither shall ye defile yourselves" (Lev. 11:44). "Sanctify yourselves therefore, and be ye holy, for I am the Lord, your God. . . . And ye shall be holy unto Me, for I, the Lord, am holy and have severed you from other people that ye should be Mine" (Lev. 20:7, 26). "They shall be holy unto their God and not profane the name of their God" (Lev. 21:6). See also the great Deuteronomy passages. "Thou art an holy people unto the Lord, thy God; the Lord thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto Himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth" (Deut. 7:6; cp. 14:2; 26:19; 28:9). The concept of cleanness as against uncleanness looms large in this connection. Ceremonial washings and sprinklings play a large part in all the everyday affairs of God's people. Symbols of purification confronted the Israelite at every turn.

However, like the men of Beth-Shemesh, stricken because they had presumed to gape at the holy ark of God, we ask: "Who is able to stand before this holy Lord God?" (1 Sam. 6:20). Who, indeed? "Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?" (Job 14:4). "They are all gone aside, they are altogether become filthy. There is none that doeth good, no, not one" (Ps. 14:3). In the presence of the thrice holy Lord of hosts Isaiah exclaims with trepidation, "Woe is me! For I am undone because I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips, for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." (Is. 6:5)

There is only one source of holiness for sinful men — the holy God Himself. He provided a way of holiness through His eternal plan of forgiveness and salvation. The holy God is also "merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth . . . forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin" (Ex. 34:6, 7). The

holy God takes the initiative. By His grace He creates for Himself a people, His own possession, holy, separate, and provides a way by which this people may enter into communion with Him. The sacrifices and ceremonies are the effective symbols of God's gracious promises to cleanse the unclean so that they might be clean from all their sins (Lev. 16:30).\* "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord. Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (Is. 1:18). "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean. From all your filthiness and from all your idols will I cleanse you" (Ezek. 36:25). Thus a foreign, imputed holiness becomes the treasure of God's people.

But God is a jealous God. He will not give His glory to another (Is. 42:8). He will not share the homage of His people with anyone else. He demands the undivided devotion and worship of His people. There is no room for anything false, idolatrous, unclean beside Him. To His people God said: "I am the Lord, thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Ex. 20:2). He looks for a wholesouled response of holiness from His people in faith and in life. "Ye shall be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy." "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me." "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord, thy God, in vain." "Thou shalt love the Lord, thy God, with all thine heart and with all thy soul and with all thy might" (Deut. 6:5). No perfunctoriness, no dead formalism, no indifferent ritualism, will satisfy God. From generation to generation Israel is to keep the memory of the great, wholly unmerited, saving acts of God alive (Deut. 6:6-12). Coupled with this singlehearted loyalty to God must be an abhorrence and scrupulous avoidance of all defilement with the idolatry and immorality of the heathen nations; for these things were an abomination to the holy God. The regulations which God imposed on His people were a heavy burden, but they also were a wall of protection to keep them conscious of their apartness.

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\* It may be argued that this cleansing refers only to *ceremonial* uncleanness and sin. However, for the Israelites such a distinction could hardly have the significance which it properly has for the New Testament believer. To the Israelite the Torah with all its provisions was the will of God for him and any infraction was sin.

The tragic history of the covenant people is an overpowering commentary on the bleak truth that the heavenly verities will not mix with falsehood in worship and life, that one cannot dally with the unholy with impunity. "God is not mocked." "The Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name in vain." Nor can there be an attitude of benevolent neutrality, a halting between two opinions (1 Kings 18:21), a divided heart.

This is true by no means only of the Old Testament. The New Testament represents a continuance and, of course, a transcendence, of the Old. The same eternal, almighty, gracious, holy God is in action. The focal point of all history, all redemptive history, all the mighty acts of God is Christ, at once the Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last, the *terminus a quo* and the *terminus ad quem*. The new, radical, eschatological aeon did indeed burst upon history when the eternal Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. Here is the definitive reality of which all former times were but the insubstantial shadows. Yet it is the one unchanging God revealed in redemptive action. Again the holy God creates a people for Himself, a people deeply rooted in the old covenant nation, and also a supranational "nation." The faithful remnant of Israel *κατὰ σάρκα*, the little minority of all the seed of Abraham, is transformed into the Israel *κατὰ πνεῦμα*. The Aaronic priesthood, representative and intermediary of the nation's holiness before God, becomes the universal priesthood, of which St. Peter speaks: "Ye, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ. . . . Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people" (1 Peter 2:5,9). The symbolism and external ceremonies of cleansing find their antitype and fulfillment in the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit. The congregation of God's people becomes the *ἐκκλησία*. As always, so also now God wants a holy people, a people in whom the Holy Spirit dwells, a people washed and sanctified, called to be saints, a people wholly separate, denying all that is false, unclean, idolatrous, and unholy the right of existence.

It is God, and God alone, who procures and provides a perfect holiness for His people through the atoning substitution of His Son Jesus Christ. He is the Lamb of God that takes away the sin

of the world, the one offering by which He has perfected forever them that are sanctified. For God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them, for He hath made Him to be sin for us who knew no sin that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:18). "The blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanseth us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). All who believe in Him are justified. They are the ἄγιοι, the saints, the ἕθνος ἅγιον, who through justification by faith stand pure and fresh and sinless in God's holy eyes, and, being justified by faith, have access to God and blessed fellowship with Him.

Now they are the temple of the living God, "as God hath said, I will dwell in them and walk in them, and I will be their God, and they shall be My people" (2 Cor. 6:16). By virtue of the imputed righteousness of Christ the believers already are completely holy because all sins are forgiven. In their life, however, the Christians, even the best of them, are far from holy. The more they advance in Christian experience, the more conscious are they of their woeful imperfection. But what the believers are already by justification, God wants them to strive to become also in sanctification. The gulf between the holiness by faith and the unholiness in life, doctrine and practice, willing and doing, is to be progressively narrowed. Therefore the Scriptures abound in earnest and urgent admonitions to sanctification, to holy living. "This is the will of God, your sanctification" (1 Thess. 4:3). "I beseech you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God" (Rom. 12:1). "As ye have yielded your members servants to uncleanness and to iniquity unto iniquity, even so now yield your members servants to righteousness unto holiness" (Rom. 6:19). "Put on, therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, long-suffering" (Col. 3:12). "As He which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation" (1 Peter 1:15). "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). God "hath chosen us in Christ before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love" (Eph. 1:4). We have been "delivered out of the hand

of our enemies" so that we "might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him, all the days of our life" (Luke 1:74, 75). "Having therefore these promises . . . let us," says Paul, "cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1). And what God has in mind for individuals applies to the body of all believers: "Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the Word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish." (Eph. 5:25-27)

Thus justification, which imputes full holiness now, and sanctification, which is a constant striving toward the goal, involve the whole man, body and soul, in his relation to God and the neighbor, in his worship and walk of life, in faith and in love, in doctrine and practice. There is no room for a neoplatonic gradation of soul and body. It is a question of an attitude which manifests itself from the outset in that, as a matter of principle, it is never satisfied with halfway measures, with a halfway goodness, but is concerned always with desiring what is perfect, conforms to the will of God, and is wholly pleasing to Him, an attitude that knows full well that the goal of perfection is unattainable in this life and yet says with Paul, "But I follow after. I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." (Cf. Phil. 3:7-14)

## II

In the New Testament the fellowship of holiness between the believer and God, with all the implications of this relationship for purity of worship and conduct, is powerfully emphasized also in the *κύριος-μαθητής-δοῦλος* relationship. According to Luther, the entire content of the second article of the Creed is summed up in the statement: Jesus Christ is my Lord, who has redeemed me . . . that I may be His own, and live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. The proper relation between the holy God and sinful man focuses in *Ἰησοῦς κύριος*. The climax and goal of St. Peter's Pentecost sermon is the statement that "God has made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36).



God has highly exalted His obedient Servant and has given Him a name that is above every name that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow . . . and every tongue should confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father. "God hath put all things under His feet and gave Him to be the Head over all things to the church" (Phil. 2:9-11; Eph. 1:22). He is King of kings and Lord of lords.

The implications of confessing Jesus as Lord are simply incalculable and inexhaustible. If Jesus is Lord, then He has full authority. His is the unquestioned right to command and to expect complete compliance. His Word is decisive and His will determinative. "If any would come after Me and be My disciple, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me." Having become a disciple, i.e., having come to acknowledge Jesus as Lord, a man has ceased to have an independent existence and to be his own master. By his profession he has yielded all self-will, all self-decision, all independent thought and action. It is not for him to determine what to believe or how to live; it is not for him to pick and choose among the commandments of the Lord, accepting or rejecting as he likes, adapting, compromising, emasculating, as his flesh may dictate or the expediency of the moment may require. No, he is a δούλος Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, ready to bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5), committed to observe all things whatsoever He has commanded. To be a disciple of the Lord Jesus means, on the one hand, a total dedication to the claims of His lordship and, on the other, a total renunciation of all that would conflict with, or abridge or violate, that lordship, such as false prophets, heresies, denials, infidelity to His Word, ungodly life. As a disciple I simply cannot countenance any rejection of the Lord's Word.

As I thus practice the disciple relationship, I will become aware of tensions. The Lord's requirements of purity of faith and holiness of life will inevitably conflict with my own or my neighbor's opinions and desires. The Lord's directives concerning His disciple's obligations to all men, as well as the limitations within which these obligations must be met, will at times appear contradictory and mutually exclusive. The disciple will be tempted to give one-sided or exclusive emphasis to one phase of his disciple obligation

at the expense of another. To do conscientious justice to all implications of his discipleship will result in more than one unpleasantness for the disciple, but that is part of his self-denial and crossbearing.

### III

Against this background of the holiness of God, which permits nothing unclean or unholy in His presence and which, therefore, has provided an imputed holiness through Christ, and also keeping the implications of the total lordship of Christ in mind, let us now consider a specific application of these truths in the matter of the church's discipline on the basis of Matt. 18. To understand the passage, it is necessary to see it in its setting and to absorb the scope and thrust of the entire chapter.

The chapter begins with a manifestation of the proud, self-willed ambition of the disciples. "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" This selfish pride was coupled with a contempt of, and lack of concern for, the little ones in the Kingdom. Our Lord opposes this attitude by placing a child in their midst and calling for a selfless humility and loving concern in relation to "these little ones." At the same time He threatens dire punishment to those who cause them to stumble. True greatness lies in self-forgetful love for others, especially also for the little ones, the frail and defenseless members of God's kingdom, who enjoy the protection of God's mighty angels, and whom Jesus Himself had come to save. Should even one of them go astray, there must be an all-out, concerted, determined, inexorable effort at recovery, as the Lord illustrates by the parable of the shepherd devoting himself with sacrificial zeal to the finding of one lost sheep. All men are precious to God. He does not want even one to perish. Then follows the *locus classicus* on church discipline, of which more will be said later.

Coupled with loving concern there must be intercessory prayer in Jesus' name, prayer that has the promise of His mighty and effective presence.

Our Lord's solemn remarks concerning the ultimate disposition of the case of one who has gone astray and resists all efforts at being brought back ends with the prescription of drastic separation: "Let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican." We

are startled a little by the reaction of the disciples. Peter asks: "Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?" Had not the Lord spoken about exclusion? How can Peter speak of forgiveness? But the Lord does not say that Peter missed the point. On the contrary, Peter showed keen theological insight. The Lord encouraged him to go even farther and to set no limits to his readiness to forgive. And finally, to clinch the matter, the Lord brings the graphic illustration of the unmerciful servant whose attitude was the exact opposite of that which the Lord looks for in His disciples. "So likewise shall My heavenly Father do also unto you if ye from your hearts forgive not everyone his brother their trespasses."

There is, therefore, a powerful unity of thought and purpose in this chapter, of which the specific section on church discipline is an integral part. To deal in the right way with an erring brother, one must be quite clear on the goal and the way to that goal. One must aim at "gaining the brother," do it in the proper spirit and have the proper motivation. One must eschew every trace of selfishness, of selfish ambition, pride, condescension, contempt, self-righteous rigor, or self-justification. On the contrary, one must be sincerely humble, animated by a holy love for the brother, and one must prayerfully apply that love, in the complete giving of self and the subordinating of self, yea, the sacrificing of self, to the uttermost for the straying brother.

"If thy brother shall trespass" — remember, he is your brother, the brother for whom Christ died. The words "against thee — εἰς σε" have poor manuscript support. Their absence makes the case even stronger. Many adopt an attitude of indifference to another man's sin, so long as that sin is not directed against them. It is so convenient and comfortable to say, "It's no concern of mine." But the Lord reminds us that it is. All men are my concern, even as they are God's. What they say and do is my business. Hence I can never be indifferent to another's wrongdoing, above all, to the action of a brother. His sin demands from me a definite course of action. I cannot ignore it if I would be a true disciple. I must deal with the brother. "Tell him his fault between thee and him alone," etc. The goal in the whole series of dealings is to "gain" the brother, i. e., to divert him from his evil way and

restore him to the family of God for his final salvation. To "gain" a man is to save him, as St. Paul demonstrates in 1 Cor. 9:19-22. He is willing to adapt himself to all manner of men "that I might gain the more," that is to say, "that I might by all means save some."

And the way to that goal is the way of love, a love that will not be denied, that will not let the sinning brother go, that will not spare him the ultimate decision of genuine repentance, even though that means the application of the shock treatment of expulsion from the church as one bound by God in heaven for his impenitence in faith (heathen man) or life (publican). Yet love, withal. The successive grades of admonition indicate loving concern in keeping each level as private as possible. The sinner is not to be publicly humiliated if that can possibly be avoided. The increasing number of people drawn into the case manifests the rising temperature and tempo of the fervent love exerted on behalf of the sinner's forgiveness and restoration.

#### IV

This brief summary of one specific application of the church's discipline stands, I would suggest, in intimate relation to both the concept of God's holiness and the concept of the lordship of Christ. The holy God will permit no uncleanness in His people; it must be removed by covering that uncleanness with the perfection of Christ. The Lord Jesus will brook no diminution of His total claim on His disciples. This must control the attitude and action of God's children and Christ's disciples.

But the holy God still desires the sinner's salvation. He has provided complete cleansing in the blood of His Son. He wants the straying sheep restored to the fold. The Lord Jesus Christ is the Savior, who came to seek and to save the lost. This, too, must determine the action of God's people.

From this we may properly draw a number of valid inferences. Of course, not every deviation that may confront us will be precisely like the one described in Matt. 18. Hence the externals of our treatment will vary. But we are concerned with objectives and attitudes, and these should be constant. They should find their application whether we are dealing with a situation involving a member within the congregation, or another congregation in our fellowship, or churches of another confession.

1. That which is unholy or unclean in the church of God dare under no circumstances be ignored. It must be removed, either by bringing the manifest sinner to forsake his sin through sincere repentance or, if he persists and refuses to repent, by removing the offender from the congregation of God's saints.

2. The purpose of the church's discipline is not a Donatistic brand of purity, not an attempt to be rid of a troublemaker, not to wreak vengeance or impose penalties, not to dispose quickly of an embarrassing problem.

3. Rather the purpose of all disciplinary dealing is correction, restoration, gaining the brother. *Κερδαίνειν* has the force of *σώζειν*. Not excommunication but forgiveness is the heart of the matter.

4. This already suggests the methodology and the motivation, saving love. This love is far from being a weak sentimentality, an emotion that spends itself in spineless tolerance, that lacks the courage to see anything through. On the contrary, this love is a tough, inexorable quality that relentlessly pursues its goal, a love that is ready to spend and be spent, to sweat and sacrifice. Just as God's love at times takes on the appearance of what Luther called "wrathful love," so the love of God's children to their fellow men can present a formidable front that will not suffer an abridgment of the Lord Christ's total claim. Paraphrasing Jacob's tenacious dictum, the Christian in his concern for his fellow sinner has the blessed stubbornness to say: "I will not let you go unless you come clean with your God."

5. So much depends on the right spirit. I do not want to prove myself right, but I want to give God the glory and prove Him right in His judgment and in His mercy. I want to approach my brother in complete self-distrust and sober humility, restoring him in a spirit of meekness, considering myself, lest I also be tempted, ready to help bear my fellow sinner's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. If I truly love my brother, I must not be afraid to let my love show in demeanor, words, and deeds.

6. It will be necessary to disabuse men's minds of wrong notions concerning love and tolerance. People must be led by our conduct to see that doctrinal intransigence is not arrogance and lovelessness, as little as it is lovelessness to deter a man from following a way

that we know can only end in disaster. Conversely, people must learn not to mistake for love polite indifference to, or sentimental approval of, doctrinal divergence. How can a *laissez faire* attitude toward false doctrine and unholy life ever be applauded as good, as praiseworthy ecumenicity? How can the approval of sinful men compensate for the censure of the Lord Jesus?

7. There is always only one sin that excludes from the fellowship of God's people, and that is not the specific sin that first evokes our concern. It is rather the sinning brother's unwillingness to "hear" the pleas and admonitions of his brethren, the sin of persisting on the sinful course and of refusing to come to repentance.

In conclusion: It seems to me that the principles enunciated are basic prerequisites for any meaningful approach to the church's disciplinary obligation in matters of faith and life. Ignoring these principles can only lead to Pharisaism and legalism, on the one hand, or to a complete breakdown of discipline, on the other.

Truly, this matter is no child's play. It involves the majesty of God's holiness and of Christ's lordship. It involves the ineffable glory of God's love and of the atoning Passion of the Son of God. It involves letting God be God, submitting unreservedly to His will, carrying forward His soteriological purposes, animated by His Spirit, that in all things His name be hallowed, His kingdom come, and His will be done, to His glory and man's eternal salvation. May God endow us to that end with humility and self-forgetfulness, courage and kindness, steadfastness and love, persistence and prayer, patience and holy zeal, and the cheerful optimism that is willing to leave the results in the hands of the Lord of the church.

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