

## Church Discipline

We may as well as admit it—this series on church discipline is probably not the most popular that has ever been given. It seems like such a negative matter. And, after all, people are supposed to feel good about church, are they not? The subject of church discipline may seem perhaps to be something that is appropriate for those engaged in specialized studies or those with a particular academic interest in the topic, but certainly not something which should be of interest or importance to a layman or to the church as a whole. We could go further than that, and suggest that this topic might be viewed not merely as quaint or outdated, but with horror—why, the very idea that the church would seek to have a restraining influence on its members, or might even cast people out of the church for behavior and/or belief not deemed proper, seems so undemocratic. Indeed, this attempted infringement on personal liberty might be regarded as downright wicked.

In response, let me note that discipline itself is not always negative. Discipline has a formative aspect as well as a corrective aspect. The whole notion of making a disciple is related to the concept of discipline—it's the same root word. Discipline in the positive sense entails training, education, and edification.

But also, negative things are important and necessary. In the church, we speak of sin, and death, and hell. Similarly, there must be the penalizing of misbehavior. In the church, we do not use corporal punishment, but, we do employ the keys of the kingdom.

Discipline belongs to the church as a whole. While not everyone has to be familiar with certain technical details of discipline, nevertheless, the art of making disciples and of being disciplined belongs to everyone in the body. We have an obligation to build each other up. We also have an obligation, when necessary, to rebuke those who are straying from the proper path.

Whether in school, or civil society, or any organization at all, order must be maintained, and there must be a penalty for those who do not abide by the rules. It is precisely in times of looseness in the society that there must be an emphasis on discipline.

Furthermore, please remember that discipline is carried out at the direction of the Lord Himself. The King and the Head of the Church has given us rules. In the kingdom of heaven, God is not elected. The church is a monarchy, not a democracy. As a matter of fact, it is the despising of church discipline, not its use, that is downright wicked.

In Matthew 18, the context is that of the disciples' question, Who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven? This question was the occasion of much quarrelling and strife among. Jesus puts a little child in their midst and tells His disciples that they must be humble and receive the kingdom as a little child. He gives warning against those who would offend one of the little ones who believe in Him; He says it would be better for a millstone to be hung around the neck of such a person and he be drowned in the depth of the sea. He warns them not only about not giving offense to one of these little ones, but also warns them about not giving offense to God through a sinful lifestyle (vv. 8-9): "If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire." Jesus then expresses love and concern for people as seen in the parable of that one lost sheep. In verses 11 and following, we read: "For the Son of man

has come to save that which was lost. What do you think? If a man have a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains to seek the one that is straying? And if he should find it, assuredly, I say to you, he rejoices more over that sheep than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray. Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.”

With that as a context, Jesus, in vv. 15-18, tells His followers what is to be done when offense is given to them. He says that discipline should occur. This instruction is fully in accord with the Old Testament law. In Leviticus 19:17, we read, “You shall not hate your brother in his heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him.” The second part of this verse does not say, “You should make him feel good.” No, you should rebuke him and call him back. In other words, you should be concerned about the one who is wandering astray, and therefore go after the lost sheep.

Our text, Matthew 18:15-18, will be considered under this theme: Jesus instructs His disciples regarding the purpose, procedure, and power of church discipline.

Remember, as we go through these various points, just like all of Scripture, this passage should lead us to the Lord Jesus—who He is, what He has done for us, and what He continues to do for us. Never forget that as we consider this topic of church discipline.

There are three basic purposes for church discipline: one, restoration and reconciliation; two, the purity of the church; and three, the honor of Christ.

The first theme, restoration and reconciliation, certainly forms the context for our text, as well as in other places. And part of the foundation for this consideration is humility. The apostle Paul says, “Let each esteem the other better than himself.” Does this mean the one who has offended you? Yes—“let each consider the other better than himself!” Did not Jesus speak about being careful about trying to get the speck out of your brother's eye, when you have a beam in your own eye? So, the notion of humility is foundational for restoration and reconciliation.

Not only humility, but also the removal of obstacles—not putting obstacles in the way, such as causing one of these little ones to stumble.

And furthermore, there is to be loving concern. In vv. 10 and 14, we read, “Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven”; and, “Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.”

The point of confrontation is not to win the argument, or to show how much you know or how superior you are. The point of confrontation is to win your brother. The Bible tells us that a soul is a precious thing, and there is great gain in saving it. Proverbs 11:30 says: “The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he who wins souls is wise.” The point of confrontation is to win your brother, for there should be unity and harmony in the body; there should be no schism, and the members of the church would love one another.

This idea of winning your brother, of restoring your brother, of reconciling with your brother, of loving your erring brother, is emphasized in numerous Scriptures. In II Corinthians 2, we read about the man

who had needed to be disciplined; however, now that discipline has been carried out, we read, “And I wrote this every thing to you, lest, when I came, I should have sorrow over those from whom I ought to have joy, having confidence in you all that my joy is the joy of you all. For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you, with many tears, not that you have should be grieved, but that you might know the love which I have so abundantly for you. . . . This punishment which was afflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man, so that, on the contrary, you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow. Now whom you forgive anything, I also forgive. For if indeed I have forgiven anything, I have forgiven that one for your sakes in the presence of Christ, lest Satan should take advantage of us, for we are not ignorant of his devices.” You see, the devil likes to take good things and turn them into evil things. Church discipline is a good thing. But the devil can turn it into a bad thing. That's why Paul in verse 5 says “not to be too severe.”

In I Corinthians 5, Paul writes, “Deliver such a one to Satan, for the destruction of the flesh”—not that he may be lost or cast away, but why?: “that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” Galatians 6:1 says, “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” In I Timothy 1:20, Paul writes of “Hymanaeus and Alexander, whom I delivered to Satan”—why?: not so that they may be destroyed, but so “that they may learn not to blaspheme.” Titus 1:12-13 speaks of the Cretans being “always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons”; Paul says, “This testimony is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply that they may be sound in the faith.” James 5:20 says, “Let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.”

Therefore, one of the prime purposes of church discipline is the restoration of the one who is in sin; it is the restoring of the relationship to Christ and to the body of Christ—perhaps even the conversion of the person, since the individual may not have been truly converted to start with.

Now secondly, what is the purpose of church discipline? It is the purity of the church. We have already noted that no organization will last without an effective method of discipline. And the church must be able to protect itself. Heretics must not be allowed to spread their false, damnable errors. Titus 1:10-11 speaks to this issue. We read there, “For there are many insubordinate, both idle talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision”—and that is a reference to the Judaizers who were attempting to mix works in with faith as a means of salvation—“whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole households, teaching things which they ought not, for the sake of dishonest gain.” Heretics must be stopped—they must not be allowed to spread their false, damnable errors. Likewise, immoral people must not be allowed to influence the rest. In I Corinthians 5:6-8, we read, “Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” Put a little leaven in there, what's going to happen to the bread? The whole loaf is going to be affected. Therefore, don't allow the church to be affected by immoral people when they are living that lifestyle.

We would also note that the saints must be taught. I Timothy 5:20 says, “Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear.”

And so, there is the idea of the purity of the church, and of the church protecting herself against those

who would lead her astray. But purity here is also in the sense of honor. The church is called the bride of Christ. And for her to tolerate false teaching or gross sins brings reproach upon the bride.

And that leads us to the third purpose for discipline, and that is the honor of Christ. My friends, He is the Head of the church. He is identified with His people, His bride. And if her garments become soiled, this gives opportunity for the enemies to blaspheme. I Timothy 6:1 says, “Let as many bondservants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and His doctrine may not be blasphemed.” In accordance with His honor, the Lord Jesus Christ will execute His own judgments.

I have four basic points of application regarding the purpose of church discipline. The first is this: love must permeate the exercise of discipline. A genuine love that is willing to call to repentance. But a genuine love that also puts the offender first; that doesn't come with a sense of superiority, but comes with a sense of humility, and says, “My dear brother, my dear sister, let me help you in terms of this.”

Secondly, discipline is necessary for the existence of the church. It is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the church. It is one of the marks of the church, along with the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. Without discipline, you don't have a genuine church.

Just over a century ago, the *Titanic* met its doom in the icy waters of the North Atlantic. That luxury liner was a glamorous vessel, but it became a shipwreck. Similarly, there are many apostate denominations within Christendom which may have begun gloriously, but which, through the proclamation of false doctrine and/or the coddling of greatly immoral behavior, such as sexual deviancy, have become shipwrecked.

Discipline is necessary for the existence of the church. But, of course, while it is easy to take potshots at liberal churches, we must be reminded that evangelical churches and denominations also need to be warned. There are many places within the evangelical world where church discipline is not taken seriously.

That leads to the third point of application, viz., the church that does not carry out discipline experiences loss. One commentator has put it this way: loss of purity, loss of power, loss of progress, loss of purpose.

In terms of the loss of purity, I mentioned a moment ago about the yeast in the bread. Or we could talk about the “rotten-apple syndrome.” Just one rotten apple in a barrel of apples will soon result in all the apples becoming rotten. The good apples are not going to impart to the bad apple—the rotten apple—goodness. Rather, that rotten apple needs to be removed from the barrel.

Regarding the loss of power, remember what happened to ancient Israel as recorded in Joshua 7. Because of the sin of Achan, the people of God were not able to carry out their function, and were defeated in battle. This was due to their being sin in the camp.

Regarding the loss of progress, we read in Revelation 2:5 where Jesus says to the church of Ephesus, “Remember therefore from where you have fallen: repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent.” And Revelation 3:16 warns the church of Laodicea, “So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will

vomit you out of My mouth.”

And the loss of purpose entails losing the sense of being the people of God—of being a special people set apart, or a holy people. In I Peter 1:14-16, Peter writes: “as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, 'Be holy, for I am holy.'” In the next chapter, we read: “But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praise of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy. Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation.”

The final loss is the loss of Christ's presence. The church that does not carry out discipline experiences loss, including the loss of Christ's presence.

The fourth point of application is this: never forget that it is the ascended Lord who has implemented and who uses discipline. It is the ascended Lord, the ascended Christ, who uses discipline, not out of hatred, but out of love. The same Christ who seeks that one lost sheep is the one who exercises discipline. May we indeed worship this great Savior who cares enough about us to wield the rod of discipline in order to correct and cleanse and protect us.

Now having seen the purpose of church discipline, we turn to the procedure of church discipline. Notice that the context is that of the dispute being a private quarrel—that is, if a brother offends you, or affronts you, or puts contempt or abuse upon you, or violates the laws of charity, justice, or relative duties with regard to you. The context is that of a private offense. Nevertheless, the principles of procedure that are laid out here have broader application. It is not absolutely necessary, in the case of a public scandal, to confront your brother first in private. If it's already in the public, then there's no sense of trying to keep it private. As a matter of fact, public rebuke may be quite necessary in order to correct the problem—even as we see the apostle Paul, in Galatians 2, strongly rebuking Peter for the offense he had given with regard to the believers. But, even in sins of a more general nature, love does cover a multitude of sins.

Now notice that this passage has to do with a brother or a fellow Christian or a professing Christian at least. So, what is the procedure then?

Well, first of all, private confrontation by the one who believes the brother to be at fault. The Bible teaches the importance of reconciliation. In the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5:23-24, Jesus says, “Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” Furthermore, the Golden Rule says that we should care for those who have fallen into sin. In Galatians 6:1, Paul writes: “Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.” James 5:19-20 says, “Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.” Jesus here in Matthew 18 says, “Go!,” for the purpose of reconciliation; “Go, and reprove him.” Now this word “reprove” can mean “bring to light,” “expose,” “convict or convince someone of something,” or “reprove or rebuke.” This term indicates

that rebuking entails telling the individual what you have observed him doing or saying, and then showing him from the Scriptures the sinfulness, the inappropriateness, of it. Jesus says, If he hears you, you have won—you have gained—your brother”—that is, if he listens with understanding and repents. And there, the matter ends. Don't spread it about! That's gossip. The whole point about private conversation is to make it private and direct, rather than behind-the-back railing about someone—which, of course, only causes hard feelings, is not fair, and involves you in the sin of character assassination. You may have heard the old saying, “Forgive and forget.” That's what Jesus is saying—if you've gained your brother, you forgive him, and you put it behind you.

But now we come to the second step of the procedure of church discipline, which is corporate confrontation—that is to say, confrontation by more than one: “But if he does not hear you, take with you one or two witnesses, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’” Reconciliation having failed at the first attempt, another effort is to be made—believing, hoping, that this can yet be successful; in faith, in love that hopes and believes all things, that this second step can indeed result in the desired repentance. Jesus here quoted from Deuteronomy 19:15—and that does tell us something about how the Old Testament is to be applied; how the principles of the Old Testament are still applicable. So Jesus used that text in order to make this point.

Now there are several reasons why it is important to have one or two more at this stage of the process. The first is that it helps to make sure that the complaint is not a silly one or a trivial one. You know, sometimes people give offense inadvertently. It's possible, isn't it? Just in the very nature of the case, there's going to be friction at times. The clash may be more due to personality differences than to any moral defect. Furthermore, a person may not feel that he has done anything wrong. So, it is important to make sure that the offense is not a trivial one, for sometimes people give offense inadvertently.

But furthermore to this point of whether the offense is trivial, the person who has been offended must ask the question, How important, how significant, is this situation, especially now that I have it off my chest. Now that I have expressed this to this person, now that I have let him or her know how he or she has offended, should that perhaps be the end of it? Do I have to leave anything further simply in the hands of God, and not pursue this anymore? Also, can I get one or two others to agree with me on this, and on its seriousness? We read in Proverbs 25:8-10, “Do not go hastily to court; for what will you do when your neighbor has put you to shame? Debate your case with your neighbor, and do not disclose the secret to another; lest he who hears it expose your shame, and your reputation be ruined.”

So, first of all, why are there one or two others at this second stage of discipline? To make sure that the matter that is being debated is not trivial.

Secondly, one or two others can give assistance to the argument, and their numbers may lend moral suasion in order to convict the person. Maybe the person who has offended you does not really respect you, or does not really want to listen to you. But if you have one or two others, it is a little hard to ignore that counsel and that advice.

Thirdly, why one or two others at this point? Because they can help to establish proof. Normally, proof requires two or three credible witnesses. This was true of the civil law in the Old Testament, and it still characterizes proceedings at law today, although, we also recognize that circumstantial and documentary evidence can be used. This point emphasizes the fact that ecclesiastical courts function in much the same as civil courts. That is what a court is. It decides cases. It swears in witnesses.

It takes testimony. And it metes out appropriate punishment, including, censure for those who would testify falsely.

In Deuteronomy 19:15, we read, “One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established.” Such is the law of God.

And we find something of this from Ezra 10, a fascinating chapter which sets forth judicial process. You see that this was dealt with in a very deliberate fashion. People were summoned to appear. If they did not appear, if they did not obey the summons, they would have certain penalties attached to that—their goods would be confiscated. People were examined, were questioned, regarding this offense of Jewish men who had taken pagan wives. Later in the chapter, there is a list of those who had been convicted—here is a public, written account, not only of the proceedings, but also of the outcome. Here we have a written list of all these men's names—Hanani, Zebediah, Maaseiah, Elijah, Shemaiah, Jehiel, Uzziah, and so forth—that is recorded to their everlasting shame.

That leads us to the third stage of discipline, viz., the public stage. The first two steps of discipline having failed in their intention of reconciliation and restoration, now we come to the public stage, where Jesus says, If the man refuses to listen to them. The verb “refuses to listen” is a stronger verb. He has, as it were, shut his ears; he has held up his hands to his ears. Therefore, this final level of process becomes necessary. “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.” Now, this is one of only two places in the Gospels where the word *ecclesia* appears, the other being Matthew 16, where Jesus says, “I will build My church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.” Here, where Jesus is using the word “church,” it refers to the representatives of the church. In some sense, the whole congregation, the whole assembly, participates in this discipline. Any charge that is brought is done in the name of the church. But it is done representatively: the elders conduct the trial and pronounce judgment. Therefore, it is a church court that is in view. Voting in this case is done by the elders, not the entire people.

As we take an overview of the procedure of church discipline, let us note, first, that the prosecution of a case is a serious matter. It must not be taken lightly by either the accuser or the accused. Furthermore, when discipline is carried out officially, it is done with greater solemnity and greater authority. And generally, whenever a trial is conducted, its proceedings are open to the public.

And secondly, there are safeguards in the system to guarantee a fair trial. For example, adequate notice must be given, and the charges reduced to writing. If nothing else, this is simply an application of the Golden Rule. Also, witnesses are sworn in and their testimony is recorded. Further, as we have noted from Ezra 10, there is a subpoena power—an ability to compel testimony and to compel the appearance of those who have been charged. A spouse may not be compelled to testify against his or her mate, because they are one flesh. Nor may the accused be forced to testify. Also, a voluntary accuser who fails to prove his case may be censured as a slanderer of the brethren. In Deuteronomy 19:16-19, we read, “If a false witness rises against any man to testify against him of wrongdoing, then both men in the controversy shall stand before the Lord, before the priests and judges who serve in those days. And the judges shall make careful inquiry, and indeed, if the witness is a false witness, who has testified falsely against his brother, then you shall do to him as he thought to have done to his brother; so you shall put away the evil from among you.” The court must carefully consider and weigh the evidence. For example, the court must deal with the authenticity and the relevancy of any document. In Jeremiah 32, the prophet Jeremiah buys property, and it is all properly recorded and

sealed, to show the authenticity of that transaction. The court must also consider the believability of any witnesses. It must consider any confirmatory evidence—even as when David cut off the skirt of King Saul and then produced that evidence before Saul to confirm David's profession of innocence. The court must consider whether the charge is proved. Furthermore, there is an absolute right to be heard in one's defense. In Psalm 35:11-13, we read, “Fierce witnesses rise up; they ask me things I do not know. They reward me evil for good, to the sorrow of my soul.” There is an absolute right to defend one's self, and to say, “I didn't do it! I have no knowledge of it.” There is also the right of appeal, from the local to the broader or higher court. In the Old Testament, we see the gradation of courts, where one can appeal from someone who has authority over a few to someone who has authority over many. We see this principle in Acts 15, the council at Jerusalem, sometimes referred to as the church's first general assembly.

I want to make four points of application at this point. The first is this: discipline is important in that it reflects the holy character of God. I Peter 1:16 says, “Be holy, for I am holy.” In the next chapter, we read, “But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.” In Ephesians 2:10, Paul writes, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.”

The second point of application is this: discipline must be carried out in a proper spirit. For example, it must be carried out by those who are truly walking with the Lord. That is why Paul writes in Galatians 6:1, “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in any trespass, you are spiritual”—that is, you who are animated by the Holy Spirit—“restore such in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.” Not only gentleness, but also humility and patience, must be exhibited. The next verse says, “Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” II Timothy 2:24-26, we read, “And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will.” A proper spirit also means that discipline must be done without bias or partiality. I Timothy 5:21 says, “I charge you before God and the Lord Jesus Christ and the elect angels that you observe these things without prejudice, doing nothing with partiality.” Deuteronomy 1:17 says, “You shall not show partiality in judgment; you shall hear the small as well as the great; you shall not be afraid in any man's presence, for the judgment is God's. The case that is too hard for you, bring to me, and I will hear it.” My friends, how often is this not the case. I have too often, in my ecclesiastical career, witnessed injustice in church courts. Let me give a few examples: not allowing the defense to call witnesses; not formally charging someone but still carrying out discipline; not informing a person that he or she had been excommunicated; not following the standards, particularly the doctrinal standards, of the church; increasing censure against a person without a further judicial proceeding; not allowing the defense to show the unlawfulness of the order upon which the charges were based (this was the situation regarding J. Gresham Machen and others who were charged for violating an order by the Northern Presbyterian General Assembly); having a person judge a case when there was personal animosity toward the defendant and/or his counsel; lying and misrepresentation of the facts; trying to proceed without a record of the case; simply cutting people off without process (which is not only not fair but is also not loving, since in discipline, there should be the demonstration to the accused of why he or she is in sin); trying to use judgments in civil courts as the basis for charges in church courts; not being consistent, such as not thinking matters through logically, or being irrational, or even being swayed emotionally; deferring to the popular or the powerful; and not



conducting judicial business in the light of day, but hiding behind closed doors. Regarding this last point, it is instructive to note that because of the experience through which Machen and others went, in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, in most cases, trials may not be held behind closed doors. Or, to use the historic words of American Presbyterianism from the eighteenth century, in order for the judicial actions to have weight and moral suasion, they must have “the approbation of an impartial public.” In other words, discipline must be carried out in a public fashion.

But in addition to humility and gentleness and patience, and in addition to an eschewing of bias and prejudice and improper proceedings, a proper spirit also entails love. In I Thessalonians 5:14-15, Paul writes, “Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all. See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all.” In I Timothy 5:1-2, we read, “Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort him as a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, with all purity.” In II Timothy 4:2, Paul says, “Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.” And Ephesians 4:15 reminds us, “but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ.”

The third application is this: discipline is to reflect the behavior of God Himself. He is the one who disciplines and chastens His children. Hebrews 12 tells us: “My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives.” Similarly, church discipline is to be carried out in love, so that, even as the Lord uses scourging for our good, even so church discipline may be used to lead us in the right way, even the way everlasting.

The fourth application is this: even in matters of injustice in church courts, we are reminded of what Jesus suffered. That is no excuse, of course, for injustice! No excuse at all! It's horrible; it's wicked; it's awful! Nevertheless, that is a reality of the visible church in a sin-cursed world. We sing in Psalm 35 about fierce witnesses that rose up, who rewarded the psalmist evil for good. The psalmist confessed: “But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was my sackcloth; I humbled myself with fasting; and my prayer would return to my own heart. I paced about as though he were my friend or brother; I bowed down heavily, as one who mourns for his mother. But in my adversity they rejoiced and gathered together; attackers gathered against me, and I did not know it; they tore at me and did not cease; with ungodly mockers at feasts they gnashed at me with their teeth.” We know that someday the Lord Jesus, who is the victorious Savior, will set all things right, and that He is able to do so because He Himself suffered the mocking of the ungodly jesters in the feasts.

+++++

Having considered the purpose and the procedures of church discipline, now we want to look at the power of church discipline. But before I do that, let me remind you of the three-fold purpose of church discipline: reconciliation and restoration of the one who is in error; making sure that the church is not corrupted—i.e., the purity of the church; and the glory and honor of God, especially the Lord Jesus Christ, as the King and Head of the church. In terms of the procedure of church discipline, we noted that discipline is positive as well as negative; that discipline involves shaping and molding. But what should be done if you are offended by a fellow believer? First, go to him privately; then secondly, take one or two others with you; and finally, bring the matter to the church—that is, to the elders of the church.

With regard to the power of church discipline, we need to see that that is linked to the idea of the keys of the kingdom. We find this concept in Matthew 16:19, where Jesus said to Peter, “And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” These two keys are discipline and doctrine.

In a special way, the apostles, not just Peter, were commissioned by Christ to lay down the church's teaching. They did so by their example; they did so by the writing of Scripture. And preaching—that apostolic proclamation of the gospel—unlocks heaven's gates. Think of a door—you need a key to unlock that door. Or think of handcuffs—you need a key to unlock the handcuffs. That's the picture that you have here. Apostolic preaching centers on Jesus—His person and work. And the Holy Spirit takes that proclaimed word to a person's heart. The captive then is set free by the liberating word of the gospel. And so Jesus says to Peter, “And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.” The power is in the Word; the power is in the gospel.

The second key is that of discipline. But this is related to doctrine. It is based on true teaching, not on our own ideas. More than that, discipline is the application of correct teaching. Both doctrine and discipline are rooted in the Word of God.

“To bind” means to bind, as in captivity; “to loose” is to set free.

How, then, is this key of discipline to be used today?

Notice, first of all, the type of censure. It is spiritual in nature. It is not temporal; it is not physical. The church's jurisdiction is totally moral and spiritual in character. It cannot threaten people with fines, corporal punishment, nor imprisonment—a certain small city-state near Rome, Italy, notwithstanding to the contrary. It seeks to persuade people of the truth with words, not with physical force.

There are several kinds of censure available to the church.

Regarding officers, there are the censures of suspension (which is a temporary barring of the person from exercising that office) and deposition (which is the stripping that person of the office—a defrocking or divestiture). With regard to any church member, there are admonition, rebuke (a stronger form of admonition), suspension from the Lord's supper, and finally excommunication. “Let him be,” Jesus says, “as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer”—that is to say, have no discourse with him.

In Titus 3:10-11, we read, “Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned.” II John 10-11 says, “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine [i.e., the doctrine regarding Christ], do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds.” In I Timothy 1:19-20, Paul writes: “having faith and a good conscience, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck, of whom are Hymanaeus and Alexander, whom I delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.” With a view toward delivering their souls, Paul has delivered these two men to Satan—he has cut them off.

What then is the effect of discipline? It is spiritual and therefore it is powerful. One should not succumb to the notion that the church's jurisdiction is *only* spiritual in nature. One must not

underestimate the power of ideas and moral suasion, and especially when the Holy Spirit accompanies the declaration. You see, the very power in church discipline is one of the reasons why people often shun or reject the notion of discipline—because it is scary. It is also why such care and caution must be used. Church discipline should be a rare occurrence, and it should be done only by those who know what they are doing.

Last time, I mentioned some of the inconsistencies and injustices that I have witnessed in the courts of the church. And I have often compared church discipline to dynamite. You handle such things with care. You would not want someone handling sticks of dynamite unless that person knew what he was doing. The same is true regarding church discipline. It is explosive; it is powerful; and people need to know what they are doing.

To reiterate, church discipline is spiritual—and *therefore powerful!* Indeed, it is more powerful than sticks of dynamite.

Notice also that discipline is the recognition and ratification of heaven's decree.

In the King James and the New King James, the translation of this phrase in Matthew 18:18 is not as clear as it could be. “Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” It is possible to read that phrase as implying that whenever the church exercises discipline, that then heaven ratifies whatever the church has done. Whatever you do here on earth, then heaven is going to do it. That is a totally wrong understanding. In the original, that is, in the Greek, the verb in both cases—“will be bound in heaven” and “will be loosed in heaven”—is actually a perfect passive participle. The meaning therefore is “shall have been done.” In the first instance, it means “shall have been bound in heaven”, and in the second instance, “shall have been loosed in heaven.” In other words, when the correct action is taken by the church, it is not as if the church is forcing heaven to take some action. Rather, when the church carries out discipline in the proper way, it reflects that which already has been done by God in His unchangeable decrees.

This is not to say that the church is infallible. The body of Christ can and does make mistakes. Instead of carrying out discipline, the church may fail to bind that which has been bound. Instead of loosing people and admitting them to membership, the church may regard as bound those whom God in point of fact has set free. And the church itself is not able to grant or withhold salvation.

But it is to say that the discipline carried out here on earth by and large parallels what has been done in heaven—indeed, what has been determined by heaven.

A church's pronouncement of excommunication is always provisional—a person might repent and in that case would be welcomed back to the fold. But when an excommunicated person dies unrepentant, there is not much hope for him.

Please note that all forms of discipline—of punishment—serve as reminders of the final judgment. John Calvin, in his commentaries on the minor prophets, pointed out that the execution of criminals was a foretaste of God's slaying of the wicked. So especially does excommunication paint the picture of eternal judgment for us. My friends, please do not underestimate the significance and power of excommunication. In my 35 years of being a minister of the gospel, I have only had to pronounce two formal sentences of excommunication. The one that I remember the most is one in which you could

have heard a pin drop on the carpet. This had to do with a young man who ended up marrying an unbeliever; and several years later he was killed in an automobile accident. My friends, church discipline is serious business; there is power behind it.

The power of discipline is seen not only in terms of the keys of the kingdom, but also with regard to the presence of Christ.

Notice the fact of His presence, where Jesus speaks of two or three being gathered in His name. Even if only two or three are present, Jesus says, "I am there!" Genuineness and sincerity are not measured by numbers. Here, God's people are gathered together in Christ's name, by prayer, for worship or for the exercise of discipline. And Jesus says that when such is the case, "there am I in the midst of them."

This is equivalent to the shekinah glory of the Old Testament tabernacle, as in Exodus 40:34, where a cloud covered the tent of the congregation, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Similarly, in II Chronicles 5:14, at the dedication of the temple, the glory of the Lord filled the house of God. It is a manifestation of God's special presence. Here, Jesus is saying, in an even more real way than that shekinah cloud, "I am in the midst of them!"

His presence confirms and seals the promise of Matthew 18:19, where Jesus says, "Again, I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it shall be done for them by My Father in heaven." That promise is that God the Father will do according to the prayers of His saints as they are gathered in Jesus' name to effect discipline.

What is the effect of this discipline? It is that the Lord Jesus is present in His judgment. It is His justice which He Himself is measuring out. He is the judge. And the church officers are merely His servants, His ministers, carrying out His sentence. In Psalm 82, we read that God stands in His own congregation, and He judges. In Psalm 101, we read of King David, who was a forerunner of King Jesus, who speaks of cutting off the evildoers from the city of the Lord. I Corinthians 5:4ff says, "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." II Thessalonians 3:6 says, "But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us." In the book of Revelation, we read of the Lord Jesus who walks among the candlesticks, representing the churches. Friends, it is Jesus who stands in each congregation and judges.

And then, we exercise discipline after the court convenes in the name of the Lord Jesus. The convening of the court is not only in the name of, but also by the authority of, and with the power of, and before the presence of, the Lord Jesus.

But please note that His power, His presence, here is not only in terms of judging, but also with regard to comfort. "And lo, I am with you always," Jesus says, "even to the end of the age." Engaging in discipline is never a pleasant task. Here, Jesus promises to be in the midst of His people as they faithfully undertake disciplinary measures.

We can apply this message regarding the power of discipline in several ways. First, as you may be aware, there is a contemporary attack on church discipline—an attack on the church which attempts to

prevent the church from carrying out church discipline. And this attack is quite serious.

First of all, it is an assault on the validity of contractual agreements. A person who voluntarily becomes a member of a church, voluntarily submits to the government and discipline of that church. There are rights and prerogatives, and there are duties and responsibilities, with regard to said membership. A person therefore has voluntarily agreed to be subject to church discipline, including censure, sometimes even publicly administered. To attempt to punish a church in a civil court for its attempting to carry out its duty of discipline is not only odious, but it also forms another instance where a person's word is no longer binding.

More deeply, it is also an assault on the God-ordained social order. God has ordained that there be several spheres of authority, handling church and state. The civil courts historically have resisted the temptation to get involved in adjudicating matters of spiritual discipline. Currently, however, there is a trend for the state to be all-encompassing, to act as God, and thus to claim jurisdiction over the church. This is an attack, therefore, on the church and her courts.

Take away the ability of the church to discipline its members, and the ability of the church to function is greatly impaired.

But even more than that, the church's unique role as a divine institution is destroyed. Without this power, the church becomes nothing more than a country club or a social society. Its meetings turn into group-therapy sessions; its teaching becomes not much more than the sharing of private opinions which are in no way binding.

But more than that, this attack is a not-too-subtle attack on Jesus Christ. The church is a bride, and He is a jealous husband. This attack is an attempt to minimize His just rule in the church and in society.

Please note three corollaries to this point.

One, the church is a public institution. It is not a private society; it is a public institution, in which people publicly profess their faith in Christ, in which we share with the world what we are doing in the church, in which, to use the old phrase, "the approbation of an impartial public" is necessary for the moral suasion of church discipline. The church is a public institution, not a private one.

Two, resignation from the church, even it doesn't carry the pronouncement of excommunication, still cuts a person off from the bride of Christ. It is a serious matter.

Three, you may not simply walk away from the church. You may transfer membership to another church, but you may not walk away from the kingdom of Christ.

The second point of application has to do with the fact that discipline is a mark of the church. Without discipline, the organization is not a true church. The bride must be jealous for her Husband, too, even as He is jealous for us. A willful neglect of casting out those who bring disgrace upon Christ's name is an indication of a lack of love and grace. This does not mean that punitive measures by every organization calling itself a church necessarily is genuine discipline. The discipline must be biblical, based solidly on the word of God. There are so-called churches that go through the forms of discipline without having the genuine article. Organizations often cut off people who are trying to get them back on track. This includes people such as those who refused to support missionaries who tried

to combine Christianity with pagan religions. Another example is those who refused to support benevolence agencies because funds were being used to pay for abortions, or, to pay for Communist guerrillas. When these organizations exercise what they call church discipline, they are merely turning the keys of the kingdom against themselves, demonstrating that they are synagogues of Satan and not the true church.

The third point of application is this: church discipline is of benefit to the society. Judgment begins at the house of God. And while it is true that the world can have a negative impact on the church—while it is true that the church is influenced by the world—the opposite is also true: the world often apes or mimics the church. And when the world sees hypocrisy in the church, this is cause for blasphemy among the people of the world. Furthermore, the world does not then have a visible standard by which it can measure up and administer justice. There is much injustice in the civil and criminal courts of the United States of America, and one of the reasons why there is such injustice is because of the hypocrisy in the church, and the failure of the church to have its own house in order with regard to the failure to exercise discipline with respect to notorious lawbreakers.

The fourth point of application is this: church discipline serves as both comfort and warning. It serves as comfort for those who are in the church. The knowledge that discipline is carried out is comforting, for it shows that the church cares enough to exercise discipline, and to protect the people from false practices and false doctrines. It is also comforting to have under-shepherds who watch for your souls, as those who must give account to the Head Bishop, Jesus Christ Himself. To those outside the church, there is the acknowledgement that there is just judgment on earth.

In this regard, let me note that the Council of Constantinople in AD 381 provided that though doctrinal charges against bishops should be brought only by those who were in good standing in the church, and not by those who, for example, were convicted of heresy, non-doctrinal charges could be brought by anyone. While an accuser on theological matters had to be examined and found himself to be doctrinally sound, the council made the following provision: “If . . . any one shall bring a private complaint against the Bishop, that is, one relating to his own affairs, as, for example, that he has been defrauded, or otherwise unjustly treated by him, in such accusations no examination shall be made, either of the person or of the religion of the accuser; for it is by all means necessary that the conscience of the Bishop should be free, and that he who says he has been wronged should meet with righteous judgment, of whatever religion he may be.”

But there is also the warning. There is a warning for those who are within the church. For church discipline is a hedge, and it comes as a warning to you and to me, as it came to that young man whose excommunication I had to pronounce. It comes to you and to me—walk properly!; walk rightly!; walk as you ought to walk!—lest the keys of the kingdom be turned against you.

For those outside the church, there is a warning as well. For there is no ordinary possibility of salvation outside of the visible manifestation of the body of Christ. Jesus has established the church and its discipline. In the walls of the church, you hear proclaimed the good news of salvation. Within her organization, you are admitted to the sealing ordinances—the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. To despise the church is to despise its leader, Jesus. In Isaiah 22:22, we read, speaking prophetically of Christ, “The key of the house of David I will lay on his shoulder; so he shall open and no one shall shut; and he shall shut and no one shall open.” And in Revelation 1:18, John writes, quoting the Lord Jesus, “I am He who lives, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death.”

Having set forth in a positive way the purpose, the procedure, and the power of church discipline, I want to spend some time illustrating how church discipline should not be administered, via looking at the life of a man who was subject to unjust discipline for his having stood up to false doctrine. That man is J. Gresham Machen, who founded the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

Born July 28, 1881, Baltimore, Maryland, John Gresham Machen was a premier twentieth-century Presbyterian scholar. His writings and actions impacted not only the church scene, but also American politics.

Avid mountain climber and railroad enthusiast with an infectious sense of humor, Machen grew up in privilege. His father was a renowned attorney whose legal prowess was legendary. Machen's mother was from a moneyed Central Georgia family (the Greshams) which counted Georgia poet laureate Sidney Lanier as among their friends; her father was a banker and sat on railroad corporation boards. He was raised in a Southern Presbyterian congregation, and professed faith there.

After graduating from Johns Hopkins University (1902), he attended prestigious Princeton Theological Seminary (1902-1905) and studied in Europe for a year. His post-graduate interaction at Marburg University with noted liberal scholar Wilhelm Herrmann (who taught Karl Barth and Rudolph Bultmann) challenged his faith, and he wrestled with the veracity of orthodox Christian belief. His childhood catechetical training in the Westminster Standards, which had permeated his thinking, helped him to withstand the skepticism of those who embraced naturalism and denied the miraculous.

In 1906, he returned to Princeton Seminary, becoming a Greek instructor. His mastery of that language is evident by the publication of his *New Testament Greek for Beginners* (1923)—still a standard grammar. In 1914, he was ordained in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (PCUSA, also known informally as the Northern Presbyterian Church) and became a New Testament professor at Princeton. In 1914-1915, his study on the New Testament for Sabbath school classes was published by the denomination.

Machen's elevated position at the seminary illustrated his becoming settled in his theology, and marked a new confidence—a boldness which would manifest itself in both ecclesiastical and political realms. Machen initially opposed American entrance into World War I, and he came out against a peace-time draft. He did go overseas during the war, not as a combatant, but as a YMCA volunteer.

Returning home, Machen showed himself not to be an ivory-tower theologian, but a churchman who was willing to battle modernism. He used his brief stint as Stated Supply at Princeton's First Presbyterian Church to attack liberal theology. In a 1923 sermon, "The Issue in the Church," Machen pointed out that "interpreting" historic doctrines so that they mean their opposite is nonsensical. The next year, he published *Christianity and Liberalism*, which was hailed even by those who did not share his theological views as having couched the issue brilliantly. In his view, liberal Christianity was neither "liberal" in the classic sense (that is, of being open-minded to contrary ideas) nor Christian, in that it denied foundational doctrines of the faith; indeed, according to Machen, modernism (as he preferred to call it) is not even the same type of religion, since it is anti-supernatural. Here are some choice quotes from *Christianity and Liberalism*. In dealing with the views of Jesus set forth by H.G. Wells, Machen wrote: "Mr. Wells may find it edifying to associate Jesus with Confucius in a brotherhood of beneficent vagueness. But what ought to be clearly understood is that such a Jesus has nothing to do with history. He is a purely imaginary figure, a symbol and not a fact" (p. 34). "It is

vain, then, to speak of reposing trust in the Person [of Christ] without believing the message. For trust involves a personal relation between the one who trusts and him in whom the trust is reposed. And in this case the personal relation is set up by the blessed theology of the Cross. Without the eighth chapter of Romans, the mere story of the earthly life of Jesus would be remote and dead; for it is through the eighth chapter of Romans, or the message which that chapter contains, that Jesus becomes our Saviour to-day” (p. 44). “True religion can make no peace with a false philosophy, any more than with a science that is falsely so-called; a thing cannot possibly be true in religion and false in philosophy or in science. All methods of arriving at truth, if they be valid methods, will arrive at a harmonious result” (p. 58). “Modern liberalism has lost all sense of the gulf that separates the creature from the Creator. . . . But it is not only the creature limitations of mankind that are denied. Even more important is another difference. According to the Bible, man is a sinner under the just condemnation of God; according to modern liberalism, there is really no such thing as sin. At the very root of the modern liberal movement is the loss of the consciousness of sin” (p. 64). “All the ideas of Christianity might be discovered in some other religion, yet there would be in that religion no Christianity. For Christianity depends, not upon a complex of ideas, but upon the narration of an event. Without that event, humanity is lost under the guilt of sin. There can be no salvation by the discovery of eternal truth, for eternal truth brings naught but despair, because of sin. But a new face has been put upon life by the blessed thing that God did when He offered up His only begotten Son” (p. 70). “Christianity is founded upon the Bible. It bases upon the Bible both its thinking and its life. Liberalism on the other hand is founded upon the shifting emotions of sinful men” (p. 79). “Once affirm that Jesus was sinless and all other men sinful, and you have entered into irreconcilable conflict with the whole modern point of view” (p. 88). “Liberalism regards Him [Jesus] as an Example and Guide; Christianity, as a Saviour; liberalism makes Him an example for faith; Christianity, the object of faith” (p. 96). “No product of sinful humanity could have redeemed humanity from the dreadful guilt or lifted a sinful race from the slough of sin. But a Saviour has come from God. There lies the very root of the Christian religion; there is the reason why the supernatural is the very ground and substance of the Christian faith” (p. 105). “Reject the miracles and you have in Jesus the fairest flower of humanity who made such an impression upon His followers that after His death they could not believe that He had perished but experienced hallucinations in which they thought they saw Him risen from the dead; accept the miracles, and you have a Saviour who came voluntarily into this world for our salvation, suffered for our sins upon the Cross, rose again from the dead by the power of God, and ever lives to make intercession for us. The difference between those two views is the difference between two totally diverse religions. It is high time that this issue should be faced; it is high time that the misleading use of traditional phrases should be abandoned and men should speak their full mind. Shall we accept the Jesus of the New Testament as our Saviour, or shall we reject Him with the liberal church?” (p. 109).

“Christianity will indeed accomplish many useful things in this world, but if it is accepted in order to accomplish those useful things it is not Christianity. Christianity will combat Bolshevism; but if it is accepted in order to combat Bolshevism, it is not Christianity; Christianity will produce a unified nation, in a slow but satisfactory way, but if it is accepted in order to produce a unified nation, it is not Christianity; Christianity will produce a healthy community; but if it is accepted in order to produce a healthy community, it is not Christianity; Christianity will promote international peace; but if it is accepted in order to promote international peace, it is not Christianity” (p. 152).

In 1926, Machen forayed into the political realm when he testified before a joint Congressional committee against the establishment of a federal department of education. He declared that if you give the bureaucrats the children, you might as well give them everything else! His testimony comported with his overall political philosophy, which could be described as Jeffersonian—that is,



state's rights, decentralized, anti-standardization, anti-bureaucratic. In the 1930s, Machen expressed concern about the increasing barbarism and the loss of freedom in Western civilization, both in Germany and Italy and in the U.S.

Meanwhile, the war between fundamentalists and modernists within Northern Presbyterianism heated up in the 1920s. In 1929, the church reorganized Princeton Seminary, so that modernists were included on its board. Machen, decrying the changed nature of Princeton, resigned from the faculty and formed Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. The ecclesiastical controversy reached its climax in the 1930s when the denomination suspended from the ministry Machen and others who could not conscientiously support the official missions program, and who had instead supported the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions. Instead of the liberals being forced out, many conservatives were forced out, because the moderates in the middle preferred peace to purity.

Upon being drummed out in 1936, Machen and a small following quickly formed a new denomination, now known as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

Among Machen's writings are *The Origin of Paul's Religion* (1921), in which he defended the New Testament against its anti-supernaturalistic critics who denied the historicity of the events regarding Jesus and Christianity; *What Is Faith?* (1925); *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (1930), which is still the classic explanation and defense of the doctrine of the virgin birth; *The Christian Faith in the Modern World* (1936); *The Christian View of Man* (1947); and *God Transcendent* (1949).

Machen is significant for American history in at least three ways.

First, though his views were far deeper and broader than the stereotypical fundamentalist, his defense of foundational Christian doctrine led him to become the intellectual champion of American fundamentalism.

Secondly, he epitomized the conflict between traditional values and modernism, both religiously and politically. Perhaps this point is best illustrated by an address he gave to a group of ministers in November 1933, in which he noted the dangers of statism in Europe, and in the U.S. He used his avid interest in mountain climbing as a way of making points about the rise of totalitarianism at home and abroad.

Can the love of the mountains be conveyed to those who have it not? I am not sure. Perhaps if a man is not born with that love it is almost as hopeless to try to bring it to him as it would be to explain what color is to a blind man or to try to make President [Franklin] Roosevelt to understand the Constitution of the United States. . . . .

. . . I for my part refuse to acquiesce in this relativism which refuses to take stock of the times in which we are living. It does seem to me that there can never be any true advance, and above all there can never be any true prayer, unless a man does pause occasionally, as on some mountain vantage ground, to *try*, at least, to evaluate the age in which he is living. And when I do that, I cannot for the life of me see how any man with even the slightest knowledge of history can help recognizing the fact that we are living in a time of sad decadence—a decadence only thinly disguised by the material

achievements of our age, which already are beginning to pall on us like a new toy. When Mussolini makes war deliberately and openly upon democracy and freedom, and is much admired for doing so even in countries like ours; when an ignorant ruffian is dictator of Germany, until recently the most highly educated country in the world—when we contemplate these things I do not see how we can possibly help seeing that something is radically wrong. Just read the latest utterances of our own General Johnson, his cheap and vulgar abuse of a recent appointee of our President, the cheap tirades in which he develops his view that economics are bunk—and then compare that kind of thing with the state papers of a Jefferson or a Washington—and you will inevitably come to the conclusion that we are living in a time when decadence has set in on a gigantic scale.

What will be the end of that European civilization, of which I had a survey from my mountain vantage ground—of that European civilization and its daughter in America? Will Luther prove to have lived in vain? Will all the dreams of liberty issue into some vast industrial machine? Will even nature itself be reduced to standard, as in our country the sweetness of the woods and hills is being destroyed, as I have seen them destroyed in Maine, by the uniformities and artificialities and officialdom of our national parks? Will the so-called “Child Labor Amendment” and other similar measures be adopted, to the destruction of all the decencies and privacies of the home? Will some dreadful second law of thermodynamics apply in the spiritual as in the material realm? Will all things in church and state be reduced to one dead level, coming at last to an equilibrium in which all liberty and all high aspirations will be gone? Will that be the end of all humanity’s hopes? I can see no escape from that conclusion the signs of the times; too inexorable seems to me to be the march of events. No, I can see only one alternative. The alternative is that there is a God—a God who in His own good time will bring forward great men again to do His will, great men to resist the tyranny of experts and lead humanity out again into the realms of light and freedom, great men, above all, who will be the messengers of His grace. There is, far above any earthly mountain peak of vision, a God high and lifted up who, though He is infinitely exalted, yet cares for His children among men.<sup>1</sup>

Thirdly, he lost: he lost the most prestigious theological seminary in the world, and he lost the Northern Presbyterian Church. When the denomination turned him out, mainline Protestantism took a decided leftward tilt—an inclination which increasingly had political ramifications. This phenomenon includes the attempt within the Northern Presbyterian Church to eliminate the provision in the Westminster Confession of Faith which allows for just war to be waged by the civil magistrate. Moreover, the entire intellectual discussion went in a significantly leftist direction, as a result of the mainline body having been captured by the modernists.

In the bitter cold of December 1936, though worn out by the ecclesiastical battles, Machen nevertheless traveled by rail to preach in congregations in rural North Dakota. There he contracted pneumonia and died, January 1, 1937, in Bismarck. His last words were a telegram to colleague John Murray: “I’m so thankful for active obedience of Christ. No hope without it.” In his death, Machen was hailed by those who agreed with him theologically, and even by some who did not. Included in this latter group was the noted skeptic H.L. Mencken, who expressed admiration for his keen intellect and

---

<sup>1</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *Mountains and Why We Love Them*, paper read before a group of ministers in Philadelphia, November 27, 1933. The General Johnson to whom Machen referred was Hugh Samuel Johnson, a U.S. Army brigadier general who was tapped by President Roosevelt to head the National Recovery Administration.

consistent thinking.

And yet, even though Machen lost, he also won. Given how soon he died after being defrocked by the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., he became a martyr to the cause of consistent Christianity. His books and writings are still among the most brilliant on their respective topics. And, while his detractors are largely forgotten, we are still talking about him today. So, even in losing, he won. And he wears the victor's crown.