

The Ban and Church Discipline in Holy Communion Summary in Theses

I. What is (Church) Discipline? The Small Catechism as Guide

The English term “church discipline” is a translation of the German term *Kirchenzucht*. The words *Zucht* and *züchtig* appear in the Small Catechism in three important places. *Züchtig* appears in the Sixth Commandment, denoting sexual modesty. *Zucht* appears in the Fourth Petition, denoting citizens submitting to the good laws of the land, thereby safeguarding God’s gift of daily bread. For the Christian, this submission is the result of education and training in God’s commandments, chiefly in the First Commandment. This training and education to a life lived to the glory of God and in service to the neighbor is one of the chief duties of parents, aided by pastors and teachers.

Zucht also appears in the answer to the last question concerning the Lord’s Supper, Who receives this sacrament worthily? The “fine outward training” must be dismissed as a way to salvation, but it should be embraced as a way to a body disciplined especially in view of the Sixth Commandment.

Zucht, therefore, is a term that denotes a life lived in faith and love in accordance with the Ten Commandments. The English term used to translate *Zucht*, discipline, is derived from the Latin term *disciplina*, which in turn is related to the term *discipulus*, disciple, student. Like its German equivalent *Zucht*, it highlights the importance of teaching, learning, and training in the sense of forming men according to the pattern of God’s word. Due to man’s abiding sinfulness in this world, this forming cannot be accomplished successfully without God’s constant assistance according to the Creed, for which we daily pray in the Lord’s Prayer.

In the narrow sense, *Zucht* and discipline refer to the supplemental punitive or coercive measures that aid instruction. While this meaning of the term does not appear in the Small Catechism, the thing referred to is not optional for the Christian.

II. Why Discipline?

Discipline in its narrow and wide senses became first necessary after man’s fall into sin. For by the fall, the moral law in man’s heart became severely disfigured. Furthermore, man’s original obedience to God was replaced by disobedience, distrust, and hatred.

To contain the effects of the fall, God established the civil authorities as agents of his wrath in this world to punish the evildoers and to reward those who do good. Furthermore, God republished the moral law in a written form on Mt. Sinai to correct man’s corrupted conscience.

The coercive powers of the government combined with the republished moral law by themselves accomplish no more than outward obedience to God's law, resulting at best in *external discipline*. External obedience and discipline consist in doing what the law commands in order to avoid punishment or to reap a reward in this life.

Christian discipline, on the other hand, is that discipline that proceeds from a heart willing to do what God commands for God's sake, out of fear and love of God. This discipline requires man's heart to be changed by the Holy Spirit working by means of the gospel. Since man's sinful nature, the old Adam, is still a powerful reality in the Christian, Christian discipline includes battling one's sinful nature.

The Christian rules his sin and drives it out more and more in the power of baptism. The unbeliever is ruled by his sin and is driven by it into hell. Ruled sin is venial sin for it is only by God's mercy in Christ that Christians are considered righteous in the category of relation, while in themselves, in the category of quality and apart from Christ, they remain sinners. Ruling sin is mortal sin because the Holy Spirit and faith will not be dominated by sin. Ruling sin causes man to lose the Spirit and faith.

Teaching and "*making disciples*" (Matth. 28) are identical. If they become separate, all sorts of other means and methods come into play, all looking for a wrong point of contact for God in man, such as a desirable lifestyle or the meeting of this-worldly needs. If this is done, there is little to no difference between what a given congregation does and what a corporation may do to boost sales by promising a rewarding experience.

The only true point of contact for God in fallen is the fact that God's moral law is still written in his heart, albeit severely disfigured. The resultant *passive capacity* for being converted by God's word in law and gospel sets man apart from animals. This passive capacity is not the result of man's striving and efforts. It is the result of God's ongoing creation and is a reality in all men alike.

Promising "a quick fix now" is related to promising the gospel's comfort now and eternal life later in the same way as the devil's church is related to Christ's church, i.e., they are antithetical. Promising the fulfillment of all of one's needs and wants now is antithetical to Christian discipline, i.e., the former makes both heart and body fat, the latter makes both heart and body holy.

III. What Does this Mean for Our Teaching, Preaching, Worship, and Patience in Suffering?

Without being taught God's word in law and gospel, it is impossible to believe and live in a disciplined way. God's word in law and gospel is living and active, leading not only to "head

knowledge” (fides quae) but also to “heart knowledge” (fides qua). Without Christian parents doing their duty in this regard, pastors and teachers labor in vain. Without God’s assistance and prayer, all labor in vain.

Especially in these last days, *our teaching* must identify and counteract crass and subtle antinomianism as a serious threat to the Christian life. Crass antinomianism consists in claiming to be a Christian while not struggling against sin in one’s life, thereby living in mortal sin. Preachers therefore ought to be not just Easter preachers, but also Pentecost preachers. While Easter preachers speak of the forgiveness of sin (justification), Pentecost preachers also speak of the driving out of sin (sanctification).

Subtle antinomianism consists in claiming to be a Christian who is led by the Spirit while pursuing one’s own quest for holiness apart from course established by the Ten Commandments. Preachers therefore ought to preach the second and the third uses of the law among Christians.

While the second use of God’s eternal moral law sternly condemns sinners to hell, the third use of the same law gently exhorts the Christian to do what he by faith truly wants to do, i.e., live as a forgiven child of God. Teaching the law also in the third use requires us to be more specific than just firing off some accusatory salvos. It is important to instruct Christian consciences calmly and gently in what they should do in their daily vocations according to the Ten Commandments. For only the conscience that is well instructed will render a joyful, confident obedience. This confidence is not the same as a false confidence in one’s good works before God.

Specific preaching and teaching according to Luther’s example enables Christians also to examine their daily callings in light of the Ten Commandments. Since God’s law cannot be tamed, the third use cannot be isolated from the second use, which makes the gospel all the more desirable to Christians.

Christian worship is not a plaything for undisciplined imagination, but a tool of the Holy Spirit for the promotion of Christian discipline and holiness. This happens by the word of God itself as that what makes us holy so that we may do holy things. God’s word is read, preached, sung, and heard in many ways in the worship service.

Sturdy orders of worship also serve Christian discipline in that they, like iron bars, restrain the old Adam in the Christian and his constant quest for physical excitement and novelty. Like models, they train the Christian in body and soul to lead the Christian life in faith and love.

To accomplish these training purposes by way of repetition, they need to be changed as often as the text of the catechism, i.e., very rarely. Constancy in worship does not lead to boredom when what goes on in worship is carefully taught. Constancy in worship ensures the orthodoxy of worship since orthodoxy of doctrine requires not only the sameness of the content but, due to man’s sin, also the sameness of formulation.

Teaching and believing God's word lead to *the cross and suffering*. By faith in Christ, a Christian's cross is holy and blessed. It is holy because it makes us holy by leading us to experience the sweetness of the gospel. In this way, it not only teaches us patience in hardship but also enables us to be patient. Thereby, it drives out the old Adam's impatience more and more.

It is blessed and a reason for rejoicing because Christ calls it so and because it is a sign that we have indeed entered on the difficult path to life through the narrow gate as members of God's household.

Suffering is a serious temptation. While God tests our faith for our good, so that we might see our lack of faith and seek the help offered in the gospel more willingly, Satan uses the same trial to drive a wedge between us and God. Prayer is of the utmost importance to rule temptations without being ruled by them.

Suffering is also an important part of our heavenly Father's pedagogy to conform us to his Son who for the eternal joy set before him patiently endured the cross, leaving us an example. Suffering patiently is a form of loving God as it is obedience to God's will. In that we will fall short in patience under the cross, suffering leads us to the gospel and the forgiveness it offers. Suffering is the only time in the life of a Christian when he can truly understand and appreciate the doctrine of eternal predestination.

IV. Individual Discipline

Christ has commanded every Christian to take up his cross and follow him, that is, to practice self-discipline. Self-discipline applies to the Christian's body or flesh. Both body and flesh can refer to one's sinful nature. Both body and flesh can refer to one's physical body.

The Christian's first duty, therefore, is to push back the influence of his sinful nature over his faith and life. This takes place by daily striving to serve God and the neighbor more and more according to the Ten Commandments with the constant assistance of the Holy Spirit requested by constant prayer. This is how sanctification, here understood as man's qualitative holiness, grows.

The Christian's second duty is to train his body so that it may indeed do what is required of it, namely, to glorify God. The means to train the body commanded in Scripture is fasting. Fasting does not mean abstaining from food or drink for a certain period of time, but to abstain from indulging in all bodily comforts such as food, drink, clothing, and rest. Training the body in this way enables a Christian to endure hardships sent by God with greater patience. It also enables the Christian to serve the neighbor in all his vocation. Finally, while it cannot eliminate carnal lust, it aids in the control of lust and is best used in combination with marriage.

Since the battle between the Spirit and the flesh in the Christian is fierce, the Christian needs the help of his neighbor also when it comes to discipline. For self-discipline can and will only be practiced by him who still has the Spirit and faith, that is, as long as he rules sin. Once we lose the Spirit and faith and sin begins to rule us once more, we, like King David, are unable to help ourselves, requiring the assistance of our neighbors.

To help a Christian in that predicament, Christ gave his church a specific order which is contained in Matth. 18:15-18, thereby establishing *church discipline*. The *first step* consists in one Christian rebuking the sin of another Christian privately. The word “sin” here refers to the breaking of God’s word in word and deed. However, it also refers to gratuitously breaking the church’s rules and regulations that are true adiaphora. While the latter are not commanded by God, they have been mutually agreed-upon by Christians, which makes them protected by Christian love. Before all else, Christians, therefore, need to be carefully instructed from God’s word in what is and is not sin.

According to Christ’s word, we should rebuke every sin, not just a sin committed against us personally. For as members of God’s family, we regard any violation of God’s law as a violation of the law of our heavenly Father which we desire to keep and honor.

Furthermore, we should rebuke only the sin of a fellow Christian. We should only rebuke a sin of which we have first-hand knowledge. That sin should not have been committed by a hardened, already convicted sinner or by an ignorant sinner. The former may be rebuked publicly; the latter requires additional teaching and patience. Therefore, the person to be rebuked for a sin is one well instructed in the faith.

Yet that sin must also not be a daily sin of weakness, i.e., a ruled or venial sin. Since we daily sin much out of weakness, rebuking each other for such sins would lead to strife and hatred in the congregation. Therefore, sins of weakness need to be excused and born patiently in love in keeping with the Eighth Commandment.

The sin that is to be rebuked is a mortal sin which need not be “enormous” in itself, so long as it is engaged in deliberately and persistently.

The purpose of rebuking a fellow sinner who has lost his faith is to restore him to faith by leading him first to repentance.

As brothers and sisters of Christ, all believers have the spiritual power to teach God’s word in law and gospel privately and in emergencies such as encountering a fellow Christian who has sinned mortally. What all Christians exercise in private and in emergencies, called ministers exercise publicly on behalf of the whole church, including the office of the keys. “Publicly” means here: when there are more than two or three Christians who have the same right and power.

The *second step* consists in bringing in witness of the sin in question. These witnesses, if the rebuke on this level does not yield the desired result of repentance, also serve as witnesses both of the deed and the rebuke in the last step.

The *last step* before the church is taken only if and when the previous steps have been taken without any success. Because Matth. 18 has to be interpreted in a way that is consistent with the Eighth Commandment, it calls for a mature congregation where even the honor of the publicly rebuked Christian is protected. Therefore, the Eighth Commandment calls for a forum that is not identical to the public worship service where mature believers are gathered with immature believers and unbelievers to hear the sermon that rebukes individual *sins*, not individual *sinner*s. Attempting to introduce the order set forth by Christ without such mature Christians will inevitably lead to disunity and sectarianism in the church.

Where there are such Christians, the nature of such a congregational assembly would be that of a court in which the Christians act as witnesses of the one holding the public ministry, the pastor, judging the case based on the witnesses of the sin and based on God's word. The pastor, due to his call by the church, exercises the keys publicly on behalf of the whole church. By doing so, he exercises a duty imposed on the ministry by God himself.

The early Lutheran criticism of the traditional practice aimed at certain tyrannical abuses by the bishops in violation of Matth. 18, not at the God-given substance of the ministry. Their remedy of those abuses, therefore, consisted in restoring jurisdiction, that is, the power to exclude openly unrepentant sinners from the congregation, to the local pastor. In this way, a sinner is rebuked by the pastor in the presence of the church (1 Tim. 5:19-20) in a final attempt to restore him to repentance and faith prior to excommunication. The best defense against sacerdotalism is to follow Matth. 18 as Christ intended it to be followed, that is, both laymen and pastors doing what God has given them to do in private and in public.

If the sinner does not heed the church as it speaks through the pastor in the presence of the whole congregation, he must be *excommunicated*. Excommunication is not an administrative measure of a local non-for-profit organization. Excommunication is a spiritual act of the holy Christian church by which heaven is locked and hell is opened to a particular sinner. This is why excommunication excludes from communion, that is, the Lord's Supper.

This, the traditionally so-called "small ban," is indeed the greatest ban possible. NT Christians only practice this ban and leave the civil penalties for sin to the civil authorities. The church's rightly imposed excommunication is God's own judgment as much as the church's rightly granted absolution. The one needs to be believed as much as the other to be beneficial to the sinner.

As a word of law, excommunication reveals what is in the sinner already, i.e., mortal sin. As a word of gospel, absolution bestows on the sinner what is in Christ already: perfect righteousness and holiness, the forgiveness of all sins. Both are effective words of God the Holy Spirit which

are spoken by the church to bring about repentance and faith in Christ in an as of yet impenitent sinner. Therefore, the purpose of excommunication is the salvation of the sinner.

Since excommunication is only the public disclosure of a hidden reality in the heart of the sinner, it naturally lags behind that reality. Therefore, a sinner is reunited to the invisible church as soon as he returns to genuine repentance and faith by the power of God's word, even if he is still under the ban. He should indicate his repentance to the pastor so that he might be reconciled to the church also publicly. However, if death prevents such public reconciliation, relatives and friends of the deceased can know that the deceased will rise to life everlasting with Christ.

An unjust excommunication has taken place when Matth. 18 is not followed either in part or as a whole. Therefore, it is not indicative of the spiritual state of the person thus excommunicated.

Sinning pastors are treated in the same way as other Christians in that their daily sins of weakness need to be overlooked in love, patience, and forgiveness. The validity of the means of grace is not dependent on the moral integrity of the minister since he speaks as Christ's representative. However, a minister living in mortal sin does set a bad example for the flock and is bound for hell himself. This should not be tolerated but dealt with according to Matth. 18. This is especially true for persistent doctrinal sinning since this does invalidate the means of grace. A persistent false teacher, if he cannot be corrected according to Matth. 18, must therefore be avoided.

The traditional forum to correct a pastor who is a persistent false teacher and who has been rebuked individually and with witnesses is a church council, that is, a gathering of clergy and laymen in the area affected by that false teaching. The current way of dealing with false teachers in the LCMS represents an attempt to practice Matth. 18 without having the mature Christians necessary for Matth. 18 to work properly. It also represents an attempt to be church and not to be church at the same time. It will lead to more sectarianism, not less.

V. Discipline and Participation in the Lord's Supper

God's word calls Christians to examine themselves prior to participation in the Lord's Supper. Entrenched dissent and disunity in faith and love in a congregation invalidate the Lord's Supper, turning it into the congregants', or rather: dissenters', supper.

This confirms the Small Catechism's assertion that faith alone makes us worthy to partake of the body and blood of Christ. For while faith alone lays hold of Christ and thereby makes us worthy, it is never without striving against the divisive works of the flesh and without displaying in word and deed the uniting fruits of the Spirit.

God's word furthermore calls Christians to judge themselves prior to attending the Lord's Supper lest they be judged by God. Christians are thereby called to lead repentant, self-disciplined lives.

The Christians' duty of self-discipline and self-examination does not eliminate the pastor's duty, as public steward of the mysteries, to teach and examine those who desire to partake of the Lord's Supper. The pastor's teaching and examining extends to both faith and life of those who desire to partake of the Lord's Supper.

Those who do not know the basics of the Christian faith as set forth in the Small Catechism cannot be admitted to the Lord's Supper in good conscience, but need to be taught. Equally, those who live in mortal sin regarding faith and life cannot be admitted to the Supper but must be dealt with according to Matth. 18.

The Lord's Supper and baptism have been established by Christ as a public form of individual absolution that is to be granted to self-disciplined, repentant Christians. Therefore, they are, in a different way than the word of God, the preeminent public marks of the assembly of Christians, the church.

Registration prior to communion attendance has been a godly practice to aid the pastor in his duty of examining the faith and life of his flock. It requires thorough teaching on the importance of worthy communion attendance and the power of sin in man to reestablish some current form of this practice.

Suspension from the Lord's Supper as the pastor's unilateral albeit temporal act of denying communion to one suspected to live in mortal sin is, due to the intimate connection between communion, excommunication, and church fellowship, a less desirable practice of the past. It should be discontinued and replaced with following Matth. 18 as soon as that is feasible without creating sects in the congregation.

VI. Summary

The ban and church discipline in the Lord's Supper have as their necessary context the mature, well instructed congregation. Where this context does not exist, it has to be created by God's word, taught in its truth and purity, in law and in gospel. For it is the pulpit that must sustain, and establish, everything else in the church, including church discipline.

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