**Calvin’s *Institutes of Christian Religion***

Lesson 38: Church Discipline (Book 4, Chapter 12)

Calvin now leaves his discussion of church power and returns back to the doctrine of the church. Having talked about the church having power in the area of church discipline, Calvin now talks about the benefits and steps of church discipline.

**Chapter 12: The Discipline of the Church – Its Chief Use in Censures and Excommunication**

1. Calvin on the necessity of church discipline: “If no society, indeed, no house which has even a small family, can be kept in proper condition without discipline, it is much more necessary in the church, whose condition should be as ordered as possible. Accordingly, as the saving doctrine of Christ is the soul of the church, so does discipline serve as its sinews, through which the members of the body hold together, each in its own place.”
2. “Discipline is like a bridle to restrain and tame those who rage against the doctrine of Christ; or like a spur to arouse those of little inclination; and also sometimes like a father’s rod to chastise mildly and with the gentleness of Christ’s Spirit those who have more seriously lapsed. When, therefore, we discern frightful devastation beginning to threaten the church because there is no concern and no means of restraining the people, necessity itself cries out that a remedy is needed. Now, this [church discipline] is the sole remedy that Christ has enjoined and the one that has always been used among the godly.”
3. The first step is private admonition: “if anyone does not perform his duty willingly, or behaves insolently, or does not live honorably, or has committed any act deserving blame— he should allow himself to be admonished; and when the situation demands it, every man should endeavor to admonish his brother. But let pastors and presbyters be especially watchful to do this, for their duty is not only to preach to the people, but to warn and exhort in every house, wherever they are not effective enough in general instruction.”
4. Paul did this in Acts 20 when he says he went from house to house teaching privately and admonished everyone night and day with tears (Acts 20:20, 31)
5. If the person “scorns” the private admonition by “persisting in his own vices”, then the person should be admonished a 2nd time in the presence of witnesses. If that still does not prevail upon the person then he should be called before the Church, and Calvin says specifically the assembly of the elders [the session] who are the tribunal of the church. Finally, if that does not prevail then the person is considered a “despiser of the church” and should be removed from the fellowship of believers (Matt. 18:15-17).
6. Next Calvin distinguishes between concealed [secret] sins and open sins. In the case of concealed sins, it should be handled between the parties involved according to Matthew 18. However, if the sin is an open sin and widely known, then it should proceed immediately to be solemnly rebuked in the presence of the church. “As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.” --1 Timothy 5:20. Paul followed this example in Galatians 2 when Peter was publically sinning. Paul rebuked him publically rather than pulling him aside and doing it privately. In other words, the way discipline is handled should correspond to the nature of the sin (secret or open).
7. There’s also to be distinguished “light” and “grave” sins. Calvin says the former are “faults” and the latter are “crimes or shameful acts.” For example, Paul not only chastises the incestuous Corinthian with words but goes straight to excommunication (1 Cor. 5:1-5).
8. “Now, therefore, we begin to see better how the spiritual jurisdiction of the church, which punishes sins according to the Lord’s Word, is the best support of health, foundation of order, and bond of unity. Therefore, in excluding from its fellowship manifest adulterers, fornicators, thieves, robbers, seditious persons, perjurers, false witnesses, and the rest of this sort, as well as the insolent (who when duly admonished of their lighter vices mock God and his judgment), the church claims for itself nothing unreasonable but practices the jurisdiction conferred upon it by the Lord.”
9. “that no one may despise such a judgment of the church or regard condemnation by vote of the believers as a trivial thing, the Lord has testified that this is nothing but the publication of his own sentence, and what they have done on earth is ratified in heaven. For they have the Word of the Lord to condemn the perverse; they have the Word to receive the repentant into grace (Matt. 16:19; 18:18; John 20:23).”
10. Calvin says there are 3 ends (purposes) in view for corrections and excommunications:
    1. “They who lead a filthy and infamous life may not be called Christians, to the dishonor of God, as if His holy church (Eph. 5:25-26) were a conspiracy of wicked and abandoned men. For since the Church itself is the body of Christ, it cannot be corrupted by such foul and decaying members without some disgrace falling upon its Head.” (theological reason)
    2. “That the good be not corrupted by the constant company of the wicked, as commonly happens. For (such is our tendency to wander from the way) there is nothing easier than for us to be led away by bad examples from right living.” (ecclesiological reason)
    3. “That those overcome by shame for their baseness begin to repent. They who under gentler treatment would have become more stubborn so profit by the chastisement of their own evil as to be awakened when they feel the rod.” (salvific reason)
11. But we must be careful and balance severity and mildness when it comes to church discipline. “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.” –Galatians 6:1; “so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.” –2 Cor. 2:7
12. So the remedy could become a vehicle for destruction, so we need to “take a rule of moderation.” Calvin writes, “when a sinner gives testimony of his repentance to the church, and by this testimony wipes out the offense as far as he can, he is not to be urged any further. If he is so urged, the rigor will now exceed due measure.”
13. Calvin also encourages us not to give up when someone is excommunicated and still refuses to repent. He writes, “However, if they also display more stubbornness than gentleness, we should still commend them to the Lord’s judgment, hoping for better things of them in the future than we see in the present. Nor should we on this account cease to call upon God in their behalf. And (to put it in one word) let us not condemn to death the very person who is in the hand and judgment of God alone; rather, let us only judge of the character of each man’s works by the law of the Lord.”
14. We also need to remember that the extreme remedy of excommunication is not a declaration of “everlasting ruin and damnation” but a warning of that which lies ahead if there is no repentance. It is corrective and a verdict of damnation as long as there is no repentance. This is different from “anathema” which is a verdict of condemnation without pardon. Here we think of Paul declaring the heresy of the Judaizers (salvation by faith + works) as anathema because it is “another gospel” and not the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
15. We also have to guard against excess in church discipline. Calvin quotes the church father Cyprian approvingly: “Let a man mercifully correct what he can; let him patiently bear what he cannot correct, and groan and sorrow over it with love.”
16. Interestingly, Calvin then begins to discuss fasting in the rest of this chapter. He conceives of fasting, both public and private fasting, as a part of discipline.
17. The church should be called to fasting in times of great need, struggle, or perplexity and it is right for pastors to urge “the people to public fasting and extraordinary prayers.”
18. There are 3 purposes of holy and lawful fasting according to Calvin:
    1. “To weaken and subdue the flesh that it may not act wantonly”
    2. “That we may be better prepared for prayers and holy meditations”
    3. “That it may be a testimony of our self-abasement before God when we wish to confess our guilt before Him”
19. They key to fasting is sincerity of heart. Our motives matter and when fasting is done out of sincerity, outward practice follows.
20. We frequently see in Scripture prayer joined with fasting. Acts 13:3, 14:23, Luke 2:37, Nehemiah 1:4, 1 Corinthians 7:5
21. Calvin defines fasting like this: “we do not understand it simply as restraint and abstinence in food, but as something else. Throughout its course, the life of the godly indeed ought to be tempered with frugality and sobriety, so that as far as possible it bears some resemblance to a fast. But, in addition, there is another sort of fasting, temporary in character, when we withdraw something from the normal regimen of living, either for one day or for a definite time, and pledge ourselves to a tighter and more severe restraint in diet than ordinarily. This consists in three things: in time, in quality of foods, and in smallness of quantity. By time, I mean that we should carry out those acts of fasting for the sake of which that fast is appointed. Quality consists in that all elegance should be absent, and that, content with common and baser foods, we should not whet our palate with delicacies. The rule of quantity in this is that we should eat more sparingly and lightly than is our custom; only for need, not also for pleasure.
22. Calvin ends this chapter by warning against the notion that fasting somehow earns us more merit or favor with God. He warns us against hypocrisy in fasting, and especially rails against fasting during the season of Lent. He also spends 7 sections critiquing the practice of “priestly celibacy” practiced in the Roman Catholic Church.