
Ecclesiastical Discipline as an Impetus for Christian Spiritual Growth in Africa

Yisa Segun Zubairu

Abstract

The need for Discipline in our Contemporary Society cannot be overemphasised. It is the bedrock of progressive development in any Society. No individual or group progresses without exercising some level of discipline and control. This paper is an attempt to study the concept of discipline in Hebrews 12: 5-11 and its implications for spiritual growth in Africa especially the Christendom. It adopts historical, descriptive, analytical and expository methods. The biblical concept of discipline combines the nuances of training, instruction and firm guidance with those of reproof, correction and punishment. The discipline most neglected by Christians of the 21st century is the church discipline. Findings reveal that Discipline is an indispensable tool for maintaining orderliness, moral standard and peace all of which stand as the bedrock of societal development. The church is not to be allowed to drift into worldliness such as: indecent dressing, tribalism, division, injustice, sexual immorality, abortion, kidnapping, terrorism, corruption and materialism. Christians cannot become enmeshed in the world without bringing insult to the name of Christ and exposing the whole church to shame. It concludes that disciplinary actions, carefully and prayerfully carried out by the church in love, can bring the offender back into fellowship and be a means of remarkable spiritual growth. It recommends that, Discipline must not be destructive because the offender also needs help. Discipline has to do with the upholding of Christ-like standards at all levels in the church.

Key Words: Africa, Discipline, Impetus, Spiritual, Growth, Church

Introduction

According to Donovan (2000:2), “It is impossible to solve problems until people acknowledge them and face them openly, honestly and courageously.” Discipline is an indispensable tool for maintaining orderliness and peace in the society, but very unfortunate that the aspect of discipline is being undermined today in the society, when we recognize the rapid growth of evil that is seen daily in our society, we may wonder if the Church has power to make any changes at all. The Church is saddled with the responsibility of reconciling men and women back to God even though her authority is being undermined as to what extent should the church influence the character formation of the society. Eckman (1977:13) opines that:

God created humans in His image (Gen.1:26ff) and established His absolute criteria for assigning value to human beings. Being in the image of God means that humans resemble God. Humans possess self-consciousness, self-will, and moral responsibility, as does God. What human lost in the fall (Gen.3) were righteousness, holiness, and knowledge; these are renewed in the Christian as he is conformed to the image of Christ. Being in His image also means humans represent God. God’s purpose in creating human being in His image is functional (Gen. 1:26-27).

Human beings have the responsibility of dominion over creation and of being fruitful and multiplying. Human beings represent God as His steward over all creation. This concept is emphasized in Genesis 2 and reiterated in the Psalm 8 and 110. Man is God’s vice-regent over all creation with the power to control, regulate, and harness its potential. The fall did not abolish this stewardship. Instead, Satan is the usurper and enemy of humans in this dominion status. Man lives out of harmony with himself and with nature. Created to rule, man

finds that the crown has fallen from his brow (p.13 & Anthony Hoekema, 1986). Men find themselves in a condition of hostility towards God (Rom.5:10), being dedicated neither to his honour and service (Rom.1:18) nor to honoring his name (Rom. 2:24). Their condition is an estrangement from God and a bondage to Satan (Eph.2:2; 6:11-12; Col.1:13), a form of “death” (Eph. 2:1-5; Col.2:13) (Zubairu, 2018: 406).

Frame (2013:855.) observes, “Despite evidences of God’s grace and human faith, sin does not end with the fall of Adam and Eve; after the fall, their children and indeed all later generations of human beings commit sin.” Those who are born in Adam do not merely sin; they are slaved to sin, as an alien power dominates them, they are under its rule and authority. It is vital to understand that sin is a power that exerts control over those who are in Adam. Sin, as we have seen previously, is failure to keep God’s law. But sin is also a tyrannical power that exercises its dominion over those in Adam. It enters the world through Adam’s sin and exercises its sway over all people (Rom. 5:12-19). Sin manifests its reign in the dominion of death (Rom. 5:21). Apart from Christ, people are “slaves” to sin (Rom. 6:6), whereas believers have been freed from the sin that enslaved them and are now enslaved to righteousness (Rom. 6:16-18’ 20, 22) (Schreiner, 2008:128-9). Hence, the need for Church discipline for stability of the relationship between God and man can never be over emphasized.

Discipline, its Definitions and Concepts

The 1969 edition of Webster’s New International Dictionary of English Language gives the definitions of Discipline as follows:

- A Training or experience that corrects, molds, strengthens or perfects especially the mental faculties or moral Character,
- A Punishment, as a chastisement self-inflicted as mortification or imposed as a penance or as a penalty,
- A control gained by enforcing obedience or order,

- A behaviour in accordance with the rules of an organization or a prompt and willing obedience to the orders of superiors,
- A rule or system of rules governing conduct or action,
- A body of laws relating to conduct and Church government, practical rules as distinguished from dogmatic formulations; a body of purely ecclesiastical laws or practices that may be altered to meet new conditions (1969:644-5)

From a careful look at all the definitions above; they affects all facets of the society, so moral discipline is as old as man himself. Good manner, character, proper behavior," it is the differentiation of intentions, decisions, and actions between those that are distinguished as proper and those that are improper (Long et' al, 1987:366). Discipline therefore is the training of people to obey rules or a code of behaviour; training someone to be obedient or self-controlled by punishment or imposing rules; (Soanes & Hawker, 2008:281) that develops character or orderliness and efficiency (B. Guralnik, 1970:401). Discipline implies that these are practices that most often do not come naturally and that need to be sustained and cultivated. Increasingly, the spiritual disciplines are being incorporated into Christian counseling practices, but often the neglect of the discipline or inconsistent practice can contribute to spiritual problems or lack of growth (Collins, 2007: 812-3). Discipline usually refers in the Bible to moral training, which includes the positive aspect of instruction and the negative aspect of correction, sometimes punitive. The result of receiving discipline with humility is wisdom and satisfying and leads to successful live (Prov. 4:13; 5:23; 10:17; 13:18) these various aspects of discipline are intertwined in the spiritual life of the believer and of the Church (York & Clendenin, 2003:426). According to Douglas and Cairns (1978:302)

Discipline in the context of church life, is used to describe the practical methods and rules by which Christ, through the influence of the whole community, seeks to help each member

to be healthy in his own Christian growth and discipleship, and to make his best contribution to the life and witness of the whole body. From the beginning some form of discipline was accepted as an aspect of the Gospel. Christ was regarded as the master whose teaching and example contained patterns for such discipline (cf. Matt. 11: 29; 28:19).

Perhaps the discipline most neglected by Christians of the 21st century is the church discipline. If church members are commanded to be concerned about one another in order to promote love and good works (Heb. 10:24), then we are also commanded to confront one another lovingly whenever a member falls into sin (York & Clendenin, 2003:427). The most acute problem relating to discipline was ensuring that members whose conduct brought offense to the community were challenged about their behaviour and convicted so that they could be restored. Repentance had to be ensured. This problem takes up some space in the New Testament because the church felt it had definite guidance from Jesus on the matter. The offending brother was to be approached privately, and only if he refused to respond was the matter to be brought before the church. If he then remained impenitent, he was to be excluded from the fellowship in the hope of his ultimate return and repentance (Matt. 18:15-17) (Douglas & Cairns, 1978:302).

Divine Discipline (Hebrews 12:5-11)

The biblical concept of discipline combines the nuances of training, instruction and firm guidance with those of reproof, correction and punishment. In Hebrew culture, discipline was an integral element of household life. The father's task was to ensure his children are aware of God's claim for filial obedience, based upon His redemption of Israel in Exodus, and to enforce with integrity the law given at Mt. Sinai, in the knowledge that blessing from God depends upon compliance with His revealed will (Ceda et' al, 1991:128). York and Clendenin observe that, the book of Proverbs speaks of moral training more than any other biblical books:

Its very purpose is to develop wisdom through “instruction in righteousness, justice, and integrity” (1:3). Only an ungodly fool would refuse such training (1:7); which includes instruction in God’s Torah or Law (1:8; 6:23; Deut. 6:6-7; Ps. 94:12; Eph. 6:4). A son must diligently pay attention to his father’s and mother’s discipline (4:1; 6:20; 13:1; 15:5) and a faithful and loving parent must be willing to punish wrong doing as part of a child’s training (13:24; 15:10; 19:18; 22:15; 29:15). One effect of such training should be the development of self-discipline or self-control, an essential characteristic of one who is wise (1 Cor.9:27; 1 Pet 4: 7) (2003:426)

The Bible teaches that one needs moral training and the discipline of self to defeat the natural tendencies to wantonness and sinful selfishness that result from moral depravity resulting from the fall (Gen. 4: 27). Divine discipline is distinct from God’s judgment or punishment. While God’s judgment and punishment is meted out on the unrighteous, God’s discipline is reserved only for His children. The writer to the Hebrews exhorted his readers to be encouraged by God’s discipline in their lives because it serves as the ultimate proof that God is indeed their father (Heb. 12:5-11). Representing God’s gracious intention toward His children, he explained that He (God) does it for our benefit, so that we can share His holiness (vs.10) and that it yields the fruit of peace and righteousness to those who have been trained by it (vs.11) (P.427). God’s children must not despise the chastening of the Lord; they must not make light of afflictions, and be stupid and insensible under them, for they are the hand and rod of God, and his rebukes for sin. Those who make light of affliction make light of God and make light of sin. The best of God’s children need chastisement. They have their faults and follies, which need to be corrected. Though God may let others alone in their sins, he will correct sin in his own children; they are his family, and shall not escape his rebukes when they want them. In this he acts as becomes a father, and treats them like children; no wise and good farther will wink at faults in his own children as he would in others; his relation

and his affections oblige him to take more notice of the faults of his own children than those of others (Henry, 1991:770).

Discipline is the mark not of a harsh and heartless father but of a father who is deeply and lovingly concerned for the wellbeing of his son. Indeed, paternal love and discipline belong together and if this is true of earthly fathers (for what son is there whom his father does not discipline?) the notion of the beneficial fruitfulness of discipline is an ethical commonplace. The roots of discipline are bitter, but its fruit is sweet; outwardly discipline holds sorrow as it endured, but inwardly it holds sweetness because of the good end that is intended. For Christian, the seed of divine Chastisement proved to be wonderfully productive, when our author describes the harvest it produces as “peaceful” the metaphor is still that of the athletic contest, for the adjective bespeaks the rest and relaxation enjoyed by the victorious contestant once the conflict is over (Hughes, 1977:532-33). The trials that God send us facilitate character development if perseverance is allowed to finish its work (Rom 5:3-4; Jas 1:2-4). God uses hardship to produce character, maturity and completeness so that his children will not lack anything in Christ. He disciplined believers as his sons and daughters so that they can share in his holiness, in the fullness of Christ’s righteousness and peace (12:11). Instead of rejecting all suffering, African believers must be prepared to embrace divine discipline as of paramount importance for character formation. It gives us an opportunity to acquire staying power and endurance and equips us to live a peaceful and righteous life in Christ (Adeyemo, 2006:1506).

Church Discipline

Church discipline is one of the functions of the church that have the goal of making the body of Christ holy, Adams, (1986:16) opines “Apostolic Church was strong because it was pure, the modern church is weak because we have compromised our position and condone sin in the members.” The church claimed that Christ had given it the power to

exercise such “binding and loosing of sin in his name (Matt. 18:18-20; John 20:23). We have some indication in the New Testament of how moral advice was given and discipline was affected in early church life. The case of Ananias and Sapphira was exceptional (Acts 5:1-11) (Douglas & Cairns, 1978:302). Paul gives various instructions; especially while he was making his farewell to the Ephesian elders he warned them “keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock which the Holy Spirit has placed in your care.” This was no cheap injunction, and has never been an easy task. The church is not to be allowed to drift into worldliness. It cannot be the church if her ethics, morality, and lifestyle are indistinguishable from those of the unredeemed, whether they are pagan Gentiles or religious Jews. Christians cannot become enmeshed in the world without bringing abuse upon the name of Christ (2 Tim. 2: 4) and exposing the whole church to shame (1 Cor. 5:1) (Gilliland, 1983:237).

Discipline in the first and second centuries seems to have had the forgiveness and winning back of the erring, rather than their punishment, as its aim. It was directed towards the individual. It was not regarded as annulling baptism, and was exercised only with purely spiritual authority (Douglas & Cairns, 1978:304) Because the believer is formed as disciple by what comes out in behaviour as obedient response to what goes in as word (Matt.15: 11), and because a saving faith is evidenced by the fruit of good works (James 2: 17), the church’s disciplining includes active supervision of each member’s conduct (Elwell, 2001:255). Brokke posits:

The contemporary church is faltering, threatened more by impurity from within than by persecution from without and by this the church’s health, testimony and usefulness for the Lord is at stake. To help restore her to the position of holiness to which God called her, discipline must be practiced; it must become a crucial part of the ministry, a responsibility one cannot neglect if one’s obedience is to be complete (1963:91)

The Head of the body requires such “Guardianship” at the hands of church leaders (Acts 20:28) by whatever title designated; and the believer is required to pay heed to their admonition (Heb. 13:17). In this stricter sense disciplinary supervision of members’ faith and life is confessed in the church as a second key to the kingdom. Procedures for the administration of ecclesiastical discipline from loving admonition (Gal. 6: 1) to excommunication (1 Cor. 5:13) are commonly prescribed by denominational polities. They will usually move, as required, from private, personal counsel by representatives of the congregation’s ruling body, through meeting with that body, through announcement to the congregation (usually at first anonymously) with request for urgent supplication, to public naming of the discipline, culminating in eventual excommunication assuming that there has been stubborn refusal to acknowledge sin and pursue amendment (Matt. 18: 15-17). Throughout these steps the recalcitrant member is usually placed under “silent censure,” i.e., advised not to partake of the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:27-32) a separation confirmed, if un-repented, by excommunication (Elwell, 2001:256). Wallace asserts:

The problems associated with discipline from the fourth century, that, discipline began to show undesirable features. More concerns came to be shown for the sanctity of the congregation as a whole than for the expelled individual. The authority to exercise discipline was taken from the congregation and was regarded as residing in the clergy, and often the monarchical bishop alone. The system of penitence began to be concerned too much with trivial offenses. There was partiality in its exercise. Private confession was made compulsory for all. The church began to enforce its discipline by use of civil power (Wallace, 1978:302).

The Reformation saw sincere attempts by Luther to deliver men from priestly ecclesiastical tyranny in discipline, and by Calvin to restore in its integrity the discipline of the New Testament church. Unhappily, in the seventeenth century the pursuit of

discipline became in some quarters more important than the pastoral care of the individual. Severity in certain areas of life was exercised at the expense of slackness in other areas. Discipline tended to stifle growth. Today, in reaction, it is asserted that it is impossible and undesirable within the pluralistic society to set standards to which church members should conform. Our attitude to such an assertion will be determined by our understanding of the Gospel. Christ, in fulfilling the New Covenant on our behalf, presented to God a definite pattern of response into which He seeks to conform up by the spirit. The church cannot decide to ignore this pattern. Moreover, while repentance is not a prior condition of forgiveness, it is inseparable from forgiveness, and it produces signs and fruits that man must look for and encourage (p.303).

The Purpose of Discipline

The purpose of discipline, therefore, is to bring both restoration of the errant person and healing to the entire fellowship (Gilliland, 1983:244). Heaven rejoices with local congregation when the erring one repents (Elwell, 2001: 255). It is just as important to focus on the group as it is on the individual. The tendency to judge the individual alone violates the principle of the oneness of the body of Christ. The defection of anyone is a corporate failure. It is obvious that something was tragically wrong with the church at Corinth, so that the flagrant offense of one member became a symptom of the church's sin. "How then can you be proud?" says Paul. "On the contrary, you should be filled with sadness" (1 Cor. 5:2). The church that has a conscience about the standards of the Christian life and that has built strong bonds of love and has been faithful in teaching will be less likely to have members who backslide (Gilliland, 1983:244). Adeyanju (2013:183) opines, "The church universal is ordained to promote the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ namely preaching and teaching the Gospel as well as healing and helping the social outfits so as to make the world a better place."

According to scripture, the church has an obligation to nurture those who are already believers and build them up to maturity in the faith. Paul said that his own goal was not simply to bring people to initial saving faith but to “present every man mature in Christ” (Col. 1:28). And he told the church at Ephesus that God gave the church gifted person “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:12-13). It is clearly contrary to the New Testament pattern to think that our only goal with people is to bring them to initial saving faith. Our goal as a church must be to present to God every Christian “Mature in Christ” (Col. 1:28) (Grudem, 2003:867-8).

Discipline, carefully administered, is a means of teaching the individual and the group what the standards of the Christian life are. The redemptive purpose of discipline must be kept sacred. The reinstatement of the offender and subsequent growth in grace, forgiveness, and love are rationale for discipline. Teaching and restoration are motives for Paul’s strongest words of discipline (1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:20). Repentance of course underlines the restoration, but this is the work of God’s Spirit. Any notion that stern measures, in and of themselves, enforced on an errant person, will bring about spiritual repentance is wrong. The sin of one should cause grief and humble repentance on the part of all. Such an attitude teaches the meaning of the body of Christ and shows the individual how far-reaching the offense can be in its effects (Gilliland, 1983:245).

Conclusion and Recommendation

Discipline, therefore, must be an act of the majority, not simply a judgment passed by few elders to whom the rest of the body may not agree or show concern. It is unlikely that any discipline will result in repentance and restoration unless the common conscience of the church is really injured by the offense. Even

at that, discipline must not be destructive because the offender also needs help. That conscience needs to be sensitized, so that when the action is taken corporately the purpose of discipline is clear to both the church and the offender. Because it is the entire church that is affected, the church deals with the individual within the context of the church fellowship and in the context only. Allen (1960:124) asserts that:

When one leader or a few individuals are quick to judge offenders and the fellowship is ignored in the process, then in place of redemption we find fragmentation and defeat. We exercise discipline and leave the church undisciplined. He disciplined the church, not individuals. He left the church and it stood, tottering on its feet but still standing; we leave the church without any power of standing at all.

Discipline is not by law but through the teaching of God's Spirit. Man-made laws destroy the basis of the Christian life. The notion that certain offenses deserve excommunication while others are less serious and call for this or that lesser penalty would be anathema to Paul. Even in cases of fornication he resists what would have been the easy way for a Jew. He does not quote laws and punishment (1 Thess. 4:1-8). There is no series of codes or penalties. Even knowing that the Corinthian have been taught, he does not wave a list of consequences before them. He would rather see people surrender themselves to the Holy Spirit, recognizing that he is given to them that they may be holy. It follows, then, that uncleanness carries with it the rejection of the Holy Spirit and incurs the wrath of God (Gilliland, 1983:245).

Discipline has to do with the upholding of Christ-like standards at all levels in the church. Any action taken against offending members beyond counseling and admonishment may be considered discipline. We are dealing with a subject that has brought no small amount of controversy in mission practice. Discipline action, carefully and prayerfully carried out in love, can bring the offender back into fellowship and be the means of

remarkable spiritual growth. This is the intention of discipline. On the other hand, unfairly harsh action taken against a person and carried out in a judgmental, hypocritical spirit can cause much harm. For the individual offender Paul's practice is clearly intended to produce repentance in an atmosphere of support and forgiveness. For the community, to hold its members accountable through disciplinary measures would maintain the moral integrity of the group (Haethorne & Martin, 1993:218). Arguably, no one will experience growth unless it is based on the pursuit of holiness and self-discipline; though spiritual growth has some benefit both for the present and eternal life, it requires personal commitments and self-discipline of all believers. However, to disregard the process will lead to being unproductive in the things of God, which invariably, may lead to incurring his wrath (2 Pet.1:11) (Akintola, 2019:18).

Sources

- Adams, Jay E. (1986). *Hand Book of Church Discipline*. Grand Rapid: Baker Book House.
- Adeyanju, James O. (2013). "The Implication of the Christian 'Golden Rule' for African Christianity in the Context of the Yoruba Concept of Omoluwabi" in *Christianity and African Society: A Festschrift in Honour of Pastor (Dr) Gabriel Oladele Olutola @ 80*. Edited by Samson A. Fatokun. Ibadan: Book Wright Publisher.
- Adeyemo, Tokunboh (eds.) (2006). *Africa Bible Commentary*. Nairobi, Kenya: Word Alive Publishers,
- Akintola, Samuel Olugbenga. (2019). "New Testament Bases for Spiritual Formation." *Spiritual Formation: ICHE Integrated Textbook Series*, edited by Esther O. Ayandokun & Samuel O. Akintola. Ogbomoso: Hirise Celebrity Publishers.
- Allen, Roland. (1960). *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or ours?* London: World Dominion Press.
- Brokke, Harold J. (1963). *The Law is Holy* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship Inc.
- Ceda, Paul et al, (1991). *Mastering the Pastoral Role*. Oregon: Multnomah Press.
- Collins, Gary R. (2007). *Christian Counseling: A Comprehensive Guide. Third Edition*. Nashville:Thomas Nelson. see also Brian E. Eck, "The Exploration of the Therapeutic use of Spiritual Disciplines in Clinical Practice," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 21 (Fall 2002): 266
- Donovan, Wilbur O. (2000). *Biblical Christianity in Modern Africa*. UK: Paternoster Press,

- Douglas, J. D. & Earle E. Cairns (Eds.) (1978). *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House).
- Eckman, James P. (1977). *Christian Ethics in a Post Modern World*. Wheaton: Evangelical Training Association.
- Elwell, Walter A. (2001). *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Second Edition. Grand Rapid: Baker Academic. Frame, John M. (2013). *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief*. New Jersey: P & R Publishing.
- Gilliland, Dean S. (1983). *Pauline Theology & Mission Practice*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.
- Grudem, Wayne. (2003). *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* Secunderabad, India: OM Books.
- Guralnik David B. (Eds.) (1970). *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*. (Cleveland: William Collins World Publishing Co. Inc.
- Haethorne, Gerald F. & Ralph P. Martin. (Eds.) (1993). *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.
- Henry, Matthew. (1991). "Discipline" in *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the whole Bible: Acts to Revelation Volume 6*. USA: Hendrickson Publishers.
- Hoekema, Anthony. (1986). *Created in God's Image*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Hughes, Philip Edgcumbe (1977). *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Long, A. A. et al. (1987). *The Hellenistic Philosopher: Volume 1 Translations of the Principal Source with Philosophical Commentary*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Noah, Webster (1969). *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of English Language*. Springfield: G & C Merriam.
- Schreiner, Thomas R. (2008). *New Testament Theology*. England: Apollos an Imprint of Inter Varsity Press.
- Soanes, Catherine & Sara Hawker (Eds.) (2008). *Compact Oxford English Dictionary of Current English*. 3rd edition, revised. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wallace, Ronald S. (1978). "Discipline in the Context of Church Life" in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Edited by J. D. Douglas & Earle E. Cairns (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House).
- York, Hershael W. & E. Ray Clendenin (2003). "Discipline" in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Edited by Chad Brand et al. Nashville: Holman Bible Publisher.
- Zubairu, Yisa Segun (2018). "A Reflection on Salvation as a Means of Grace and its Relevance on the Ministry of ECWA Theological Seminary, Igbaja" in *God's Grace in ETSI (2013-2018) History of ECWA Theological Seminary, Igbaja*. By Samson Ameh Opaluwah. Ilorin: Amazing Grace Press.