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A HEALTHY BODY - PREVENTION AND CURE

Revd David Phillips

Spiritual sickness in the body of Christ can manifest itself in a wide variety of ways but broadly speaking it can be divided into two types, wrong living and false teaching. Prevention is always better than cure, but often the disease takes hold and action is required.

PREVENTION - This has been described as the positive side of discipline:

Prevention - or positive discipline - begins with the preaching of the word. When the Bible is faithfully taught this will necessarily include instruction on how believers should keep spiritually fit and healthy. Self-control, discipline of the body (1 Cor 9:27), repentance, prayer, etc, are all part of Christian discipleship. Such fitness is not the means of our salvation, rather, through Christ we are healed of the terminal illness of sin and therefore able in loving response to live for God. If the bible can be said to contain a programme of spiritual fitness then preachers are in a sense fitness instructors - spiritual Mr Motivators!

Preaching is essential but it must be built on. John Calvin is reputed to have said that preaching on its own is 'throwing words into the air'. To be effective it needs to be combined with real pastoral care. All Christians share this responsibility, all should exhort one another to love and good works. However, there is a special role for those who are called to the office of 'pastor and teacher'. It is not enough to be a preacher, the teacher must also be a pastor, one who cares for the sheep. Pastoral ministry requires spending time with people, listening, caring, guiding and admonishing so that they become fitter and stronger spiritually.

Spiritual fitness like physical fitness is best taught by practical demonstration. Those who are older in the faith, and in particular those who are appointed to the pastoral office ought to set an example to others so that they say 'do as I do' and not just 'do as I say'.

CURE - The negative side:

No matter how good the preventative measures taken by a Church there will always be times when cure is necessary. Poor positive discipline will lead to a flabby church which is more prone to spiritual sickness. Such curative measures have been described as negative discipline.

Where a person offends against another this ought to be dealt with privately in accordance with Jesus' teaching in Matthew chapter 18. However, if it is unresolved it must be brought to the Church. Where a matter is public from the start, it must be dealt with publicly by the Church. Discipline is an act of the whole Church, not just its leaders, though the elders may have a particular role in the same way that Timothy was instructed by Paul to rebuke sinners (1 Tim 5.20). The various way in which this has been worked out historically is too big a subject for this article.

The preventative measures of teaching and private admonition should already have taken place and therefore the next step will be public rebuke. Even the Apostle Peter was rebuked sharply and publicly by Paul. It needs to be public so that all will learn from it (1 Tim 5.20) and, we might add, so that by being open there is less scope for misunderstanding or later gossip distorting what was said.

A public rebuke is intended to bring a person to their senses. Sadly, more drastic measures are sometimes needed. The most commonly mentioned action in the New Testament is the breaking of fellowship (for example Mtt 18.17, Rom 16.17, 2 Thess 3.6 etc.). Churches have often developed this so that there is an intermediate step of exclusion from the fellowship meal (cf. 1 Cor 5.9). However, the force of the biblical teaching is that offenders should be excluded from all fellowship. This is hard, but it is what is expected of a Church that is faithful to scriptural teaching.

Restoring health

Cures can be unpleasant and painful but the intention is always to restore full health to the body. There are three goals to discipline:

The first goal is to restore the errant member. Church discipline is not an act of retribution but of love (2 Cor 2:7) and is intended to help someone see the error of their ways (2 Thess 3:14; 2 Tim 2:26) so that they can repent. Breaking fellowship (often called excommunication) is a warning of the consequence of persisting in sin - separation from God forever. Discipline is therefore exercised out of concern for a person's salvation (1 Cor 5:5).

In the eyes of many people the restoration of the errant member is the sole aim of discipline. Because of this, and because many people imagine that being too harsh will make restoration harder, discipline is rarely practised in the churches today. By acting in this way people are not only being disobedient to the teaching of the Bible, but also failing to understand that restoration is not the only goal of genuine discipline.

The second aims to stop the disease spreading, to protect the rest of the body (Gal 6.1). A diseased toe can soon affect the whole leg or even kill the body if left untreated. Godless activity or false teaching has all too often weakened and damaged the church because it has not been dealt with: a little leaven leavens the whole lump (1 Cor 5.6). This is true in the Church of England today.

The third is to honour God. If the body is riddled with false teaching and ungodliness it can only become offensive to its holy Head. In addition it becomes a scandal to those outside making the task of proclaiming the gospel far more difficult and causing people to pour scorn not only on the church but also on Christ. 'The name of God is blasphemed among the nations because of you.' (Rom 2.24).

Poor positive discipline leads to a flabby, unfit Church which is unable to resist spiritual sickness. Moreover, to leave a contagious disease untreated is cruel, irresponsible and offensive. Why then is application of biblical discipline so neglected in the church today?