



# CHURCH DISCIPLINE – SEMPER REFORMANDA IN REFORMATION PERSPECTIVE

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**ABSTRACT**

Church discipline – is *semper reformanda* in a time and space warp? Church discipline has become an anachronism in the life of the Christian faith community. In part, this results from a misunderstanding of the fundamental meaning of the term. Its early emphasis was on spiritual nurture, discipling people into the faith and into a relationship with one another and God. By the time of the Reformation, it took on a legalistic and rigid form that militated against its earlier approach. This resulted from a misunderstanding of key reformers from the Reforming tradition such as John Calvin and John Knox, who were concerned to build up individuals within the Christian community to become responsible members of society. In this way, discipline is transformative of individuals and society. The work of discipline was closely related both to pastoral care and Christian education and offered a corrective to Medieval discipline, where the concept of discipline was distorted when the use of punitive discipline as a last resort was elevated to become the norm. This situation was replicated in the post-Reformation period. Consequently, it now needs to be rehabilitated in the form of discipling or mentorship in order to restore its usefulness as an educative tool in the process of the pilgrimage towards the kingdom of God.

**INTRODUCTION**

I was brought up within the Church of Scotland, where the understanding and practice of church discipline might be described as follows:

*On the occasion of a quinquennial visitation [to a congregation] when the question of discipline is reached there is generally a hush during which the Minister explains that he looks to these things privately and confidentially and that unless in some exceptional case no report is made to the Session and nothing appears in the minutes. It is good that this should be so, so long as some gross scandal is not simply ignored. The sinner can be made ashamed of his conduct without needing to declare his penitence in face of the congregation, and there is more hope for his regeneration if he remains within the fellowship of the congregation than if he is thrown on the rubbish heap of the excommunicated.*

(Heron 1995:240; cf. Weatherhead 1997:63; McNeill 1951:284; Bulloch 1961:322)

In one sense, church discipline might be regarded as no longer practicable or desirable as the result of

*[t]he disunity of the Church and the extreme individualism, relativism, moral indifference and permissiveness of modern culture together with a false notion of love and tolerance as well as other factors*

(Confession of Faith, UPCSA 2007 2:26)

If this is indeed the case, it might be helpful to ask if these are adequate reasons. Yet, in some way, discipline has to be related to minimal standards, 'otherwise it would have lost its distinctiveness and been rendered ineffectual for its mission' (Macquarrie 1967:90).

Then, in 1978, I came to South Africa to be ordained a minister in the Bantu Presbyterian Church of South Africa, where discipline was viewed in a very different manner. Here it was largely a matter of punishing young single girls who had become pregnant as the result of a form of immaculate conception where no evidence was ever provided of male involvement in the matter. These girls would inevitably be excluded from the sacrament for a period and deprived of its saving graces though still required to pay their dues to the Deacons's Court.

Then again, in 1988, I was inducted to the ancient and historic charge of 'Cumbernauld: Old' in the Church of Scotland. Members there took delight in showing me the 'cutty' stool or stool of discipline where offenders were traditionally seated during public worship 'raised up on small platforms called pillars' (Millar & Mitchell 1988:24; cf. Spinks 2008:24) while the minister would describe their sins in gross detail and lambast them for their fall from grace (MacGregor 1959:101f). This leads me to agree with Tedder (2008:2) that '... a very significant contribution to this popular disdain stems from sheer misinformed ignorance relating to the nature of church discipline, especially as it relates to Christian discipleship'.

There is indeed a time and space warp when it comes to exercising discipline within the church context.

**THE MEANING OF THE WORD**

One of the problems is that the word 'discipline has a multiplicity of meanings [see below] some of which are not related to the process of discipling' (UPCSA 2007:18.1). However, in our usage, discipline comes from the Latin *discipulus*, a learner or apprentice or disciple and is a derivative of *discere*, to learn, and involves the process of 'inner education' (Oden 1983:234). In the Hebrew *talmid*, it refers to a learner with the emphasis on participating in a reflective process inculcating both theory and practice i.e. praxis (Groome 1980: xvii, n.1). 'The Christian concept of discipline has the same breadth as the Latin *disciplina*, which signifies the whole range of nurturing, instructional, and training procedures that disciple-making requires' (Packer 1993:220). It also has an element of chastisement and correction (cf. Proverbs).

It refers to approaches that emphasise character formation, the teaching of self-discipline and acceptable behaviour.

From the study of Ascetical Theology, we learn that discipline is 'concerned with the development of the Christian life, and in particular with training in self-discipline and prayer' (Waddams 1967:18). It deals with 'ordinary' ways and can only occur within the sacramental fellowship of the church. It is connected to attitudes and practices. Therefore, it is linked with human behaviour (original sin). It is holistic because it depends on unity with the Father in Christ from whom 'true Christian behaviour can alone derive'. (Waddams 1967:18-19). It is ultimately life in communion with God and the Christian fellowship manifested in a living relationship.

## EARLY BEGINNINGS

Jesus personally called people into discipleship, taught and nurtured them towards apostolicity and sent them out with the assurance of his constant presence. 'The call is followed by careful instruction, personal guidance, interpersonal dialogue, and the gradual clarification of the divine purpose' (Oden 1983:60). One thing becomes abundantly clear with Jesus and that is that discipleship opposes any doctrine of sinless perfection in the present life. Training in discipleship for Jesus came through touching people 'at their roots, activating their hope-principle and making them dream of the kingdom, which is not an entirely different world but this world completely new and renewed' (Boff 1978:79).

Discipline is both preventive and purifying. Preventive discipline is the development of self-discipline (1 Cor 9:24-27). It is part of character formation. Paul reminds us that if Christians would exercise self judgment, then the chastening judgment of the Lord would be rendered unnecessary (1 Cor 11:31). Failure in this regard leads to purifying discipline for the sake of the spiritual health of the church and the good of the offender. Purifying discipline is associated with catechetical instruction.

## THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

During the Medieval period, a situation had arisen where the church and her people had become bound by a myriad of 'regulations and requirements' (Burnett 1991:438), which led Martin Bucer to plead 'that we correct the abuses of feast days, that we more frequently give and hear sermons, that we apply some kind of discipline' (Horton 1550:180 in Burnett 1991:438). He condemned 'medieval disciplinary practices as perversions of what had been established in the early church' (Burnett 1999:454) where early medieval bishops

*had found it easier to establish fixed penalties for specified sins than to apply penance according to each individual's needs. The commutation of these penances for a fee had then led to the development of indulgences. The voluntary confession of sins which troubled the conscience, as recommended by the church fathers, had been twisted by the pope's requirement that everyone, whether penitent or not, must make a yearly confession. Excommunication, necessary to protect the church from contamination and to produce shame and repentance in a sinner who otherwise would not heed admonition, had been turned into a method of extorting payment of debts and tithes.*

(Burnett 1991:455)

By comparison, Bucer's vision of discipline was founded on a desire to promote the individual Christian's progress in piety, to strengthen the church community, and to result in a Christian transformation of society.

## THE REFORMATION

'Reformed spirituality runs counter to the spirit of our time. It insists that the human spirit must be nurtured and directed by the community of faith' (Rice 1991:121). This has an historic foundation with its basis in the unreformed Medieval church and

its corrupt lifestyle. As we have noted, discipline was prominent in the life of the Early Church; yet, its transformation into the legalistic confession of the Medieval church had contributed to the degeneracy of Christianity which, in turn, occasioned reform. So at the point of the Reformation, the issue of discipline became crucial to the ethos of the church and even one of its distinguishing marks in a new context, where the essential weakness of humanity required a given acknowledgment along with a recognition that Jesus came that 'they might have life, and may have it in all its fullness' (John 10:10) through 'a still more excellent way' (1 Cor 12:31):

*Church discipline was one way in which individuals were brought to repentance and change of life. Its purpose was not only maintaining the purity of the whole church ... Its goal was the reconciliation and healing of the persons involved, not their punishment. The practice of discipline in the church was revived by Calvin after a period during which it had nearly disappeared. It was one method adopted by Calvin to exercise pastoral care.*

(Rice 1991:122)

It was related to the 'key of doctrine', touching the affective domain, rather than the key of discipline employed to deal with humanity's outward actions (MacGregor 1959:103-104), which became the hallmark of Reformed discipline and a corrective to medievalism.

## Huldreich Zwingli

For Huldreich Zwingli, the church's

*holiness rests upon the redemptive work of Christ; when we firmly believe in this work ... we are marvellously transformed ... Church discipline is interwoven with the life of the Christian state.*

(McNeill 1957:78)

In his sermon, *The Pastor*, '[h]e urges faithful preaching of repentance, and not less the direct guidance of individuals and loving devotion to their upbuilding' (McNeill 1954:79). True Christian shepherds 'complete the good work with God which he has begun with them (cf. Phlp 1.6)' (Zwingli 1524:84). They are the teachers of the people whose duty is to lead them to holiness:

*he is the true pasture and food, and in addition, the leader or shepherd who has led us out of the dark stall of ignorance and the bondage of human teaching into the light of divine wisdom and the freedom of sons.*

(Zwingli 1524:86)

For Zwingli, the appropriate qualities of pastors were a vital and exemplary component in the formation of the laity. In all this he must be the imitation of Christ: 'he must deny himself ... That happens only at the cross' (Zwingli 1524:88). 'When now the shepherd ... empties himself ... then the next thing is to be filled again with God, that is, he has all his confidence and consolation in God' (Zwingli 1524:89).

He should begin to preach as Christ began:

*'Repent!' (Matt 4: 17) ... the recognition of sin ... drives us to the mercy of God ... Here are the gospel and repentance connected; for no one really rejoices in the gospel who has not previously rightly recognised the disease of sin.*

(Zwingli 1524:90)

The pastor is indeed the teaching elder of the Reforming tradition, continuing the theme of the imitation of Christ through exemplary leadership. In describing the role of the bishop (reformed pastor), he states:

*He must also be firm or tenacious in the doctrine of the true faith so that he can comfort and admonish in right, wholesome doctrine and draw out and rebuke the contentious ones.*

(Zwingli 1524:111)

The source of his teaching and mentoring authority is absolutely clear: '... the shepherd can well learn that it is his duty to stand firmly with the word of God' (Zwingli 1524:100). Zwingli warns those who are not gifted in this area:

*Above all they are not worthy to be called shepherds who cannot teach, or if they could teach, are not strong enough to withstand strongly those who oppose them.*

(Zwingli 1524:112)

*... the shepherd must prove himself to be an educator ... He sees to it that they are trained into undefiled lives, friendly, harmless, seemly in all things, and fleeing all intemperance ... if they practice those things which they teach from God, then that living example teaches more than a hundred thousand words. Thus the shepherd must represent a model ... of those things alone which God teaches and demands of us.*

(Zwingli 1524:92)

This is a practical demonstration of integrity as saying what you mean and meaning what you say. The pastor's role is to develop a spirit of discernment and self awareness as a basis for personal growth through an acknowledgment of unworthiness and helplessness:

*... the shepherd is to bring his charges to an understanding of their infirmity. If they understand that and perceive that they cannot be saved out of their power, then he should point them to the grace of God so they let themselves trust fully in it.*

(Zwingli 1524:92)

But Zwingli (1524) does not allow his pastor too elevated a position, despite his teaching role for all have sinned.

*Therefore set your hopes elsewhere, namely in God, the comforter of all hearts. He wants to bring you into his knowledge that you humble yourselves under the powerful hand and cross of Christ and be saved with all believers.*

(Zwingli 1524:124)

## John Calvin

A necessary corrective is required for the assumption that for Calvin, 'the church is ... [*inter alia*] where strict discipline (censure and excommunication) is exercised' "correctly". The aim was to impose order on society' (Wolmarans 2008:155). Discipline does emerge as a corrective to the failure of the Christian life but it is far more than that; it 'transformed society in many ways' (Wolmarans 2008:155).

Although Calvin is often 'credited' with the institution of retributive discipline, an examination of his writings reveals a different picture. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, another picture emerges. The marks of church, preaching of the word and celebration of sacraments, produce spiritual fruit. This gives authority to the church through discipline, whereby 'he feeds us with spiritual nourishment, and provides us with whatever is conducive to our salvation' (IV:i.10). Calvin's primary concern is with the development of a spiritual discipline that is this-worldly and practical: 'the object of regeneration is to bring the life of believers into concord and harmony with the righteousness of God' (III:vi.1):

*... we must be holy, because 'God is holy' (Lev 19:1; 1 Pet 1:16). For when we were scattered abroad like lost sheep ... he brought us back again to his own fold.*

(III:vi.2)

Here, the preaching of the word, the celebration of the sacraments and the exercise of discipline are integrally related (MacGregor 1959:217).

Calvin does not deny the reality of original sin. He refers to our calling to glorify God, but acknowledges that 'we have degenerated from our true origin' (III:vi.3). However, he promotes a positive view of the Christian life:

*... we should make it our endeavour to show forth the glory of God, and guard against the defilement of sin. Ever since our soul and body were destined to heavenly incorruptibility and an unfailling crown, we should earnestly strive to keep them pure and uncorrupted ... These ... are the surest foundations of a well-regulated life.*

(III:vi.3)

1. In fact, the exercise of discipline is only implied in Calvin's marks of the church (*Institutes* IV:1.7). It is stated explicitly by Knox (see below).

The overall aim is the attainment of perfection and although this is a somewhat proleptic approach, 'God uniformly recommends integrity as the principal part of his worship' (III:vi.5). The spiritual life begins by looking towards God through social concern for God's children: '... the spiritual commencement of a good life is when the internal affections are sincerely devoted to God, in the cultivation of holiness and justice'. In this, Calvin uses the image of a journey and advises: '... prosecute the journey once begun. No one will travel so badly as not daily to make some degree of progress' (III:vi.5).

Calvin explains his leading principle of discipline as 'a perfect rule of conduct (Rm 12:1)'. We are God's and not our own, therefore 'let us live and die to him (Rm 14:8)'. This means that we 'abandon ourselves, and devote the whole energy of our minds to the service of God', which leads to our 'transformation' i.e. 'yield complete submission to the Holy Spirit, so that the man himself no longer lives, but Christ lives and reigns in him (Gal 2:20)' (III:vii.1).

*Then the Christian will be so trained and disposed as to consider that during his whole life he has to do with God ... so he will religiously direct his whole mind to him*

(III:vii.2)

The well-ordered life, as demonstrated in Titus 2:11–14, consists of denying ungodliness and worldly lusts (III:vii.3). Part of this process is self examination: '[t]hen by a diligent examination of our faults, let us keep ourselves humble' (III:vii.4). This teaches the self-denial of gratitude and discipleship (III:vii.8), 'doing the will of God which means that we put the interests of others before our own' (De Gruchy 1991:171). The end result is that

*... whatever happens, knowing that it is ordered by the Lord, he will receive it with a placid and grateful mind, and will not contumaciously resist the government of him, at whose disposal he has placed himself and all that he has', [ i.e. that will lead to the necessity of formal discipline].*

(III:vii.10)

All of this prepares the way for formal discipline of those who have gone astray and are intransigent, i.e. failure in the development of the spiritual life.

For Calvin, there is no area of church life that is not subject to discipline as a matter of spirituality: '[t]he whole jurisdiction of the Church relates to discipline', which is 'spiritual government' (IV:xi.1). This consists in preaching the word, which expresses the totality of ministry:

*The power of the keys is simply the preaching of the gospel ... it is not so much power as ministry ... Christ did not give this power to men but to his word, of which he made men the ministers.*

(IV:ii.1)

Referring to the discipline exercised in the Early Church in 2 Cor 10:4–6, he describes it as: 'a practical declaration of what Paul teaches concerning the spiritual power of pastors' (IV:ii.5).

Calvin separates clergy (those who exercise a public ministry) and people in his discussion of discipline though they are all part of the *laos* of God. Yet, he admits to a discipline for all!! This is necessary for order being 'its sinews', that which holds it together, its integrating unifying force. Therefore, discipline is a vital component for the existence and life of the church. Consequently, Calvin cannot permit a situation where 'each does what is pleasing in his own sight' (Dt 12:8). Discipline is 'a kind of stimulus', 'a kind of fatherly rod' with which the people are 'chastised in mercy with the meekness of the spirit of Christ'.

Lack of discipline produces 'a fearful devastation in the Church' and arises out of 'lack of care and managing the people' (IV:xii.1). Calvin begins by relating this to ecclesiastical discipline, possibly because he assumes the worst in people. For him, the first foundation is private admonition which amounts to declaring 'all the counsel [purpose] of God' (IV:xii.2). He quotes Augustine, who claims that 'such things are ... removed by teaching ... by admonition' (IV:xii.13). In agreement with Zwingli, he refers to spiritual jurisdiction as 'the best help to



sound doctrine, the best foundation of order, and the best bond of unity' (IV:xii.5). But the initiative remains with God: '[w] whenever it seems good to Him, the worst are changed into the best; aliens are ingrafted, and strangers are adopted into the Church' (IV:xii.9). Therefore, '[e]cclesiastical discipline ought to have regard to the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace [Eph 4:2]. This the apostle commands us to keep by bearing mutually with each other'.

*The remaining part of discipline, which is not, strictly speaking, included in the power of the keys ... [consists of] other exercises by which the people may either be aroused to duty, or kept in duty and obedience ... exhort the people to public fasting and extraordinary prayer ... [It] tends to the common edification, that all, by openly confessing their sin, may render praise to the divine justice, and by their example mutually encourage each other [in times of calamity, for example].*

(IV:xii.14)

This inevitably leads to Calvin's discussion of the Lord's Supper. For Calvin, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper

*is the ultimate focus of Christian life. The norm of membership in the Church is fitness to be admitted, without profanation, to the mystery of the sacrament, in which 'we are made partakers of the body and blood of Jesus Christ, His death, His life, and all His benefits,' and are 'joined in true peace and fraternal unity'.*

(McNeill 1954:139; cf. Institutes IV:xvii.11)

This is the means by which God is:

*continually supplying the food by which he may sustain and preserve us in the life to which he has begotten us by his word. Moreover, Christ is the only food of our soul, and, therefore, our heavenly Father invites us to him, that, refreshed by communion with him, we may ever and anon gather new vigour until we reach the heavenly immortality.*

(IV:xvii.1)

The sacrament is 'intended to nourish our spiritual life ... Invigorate and keep alive the soul ... to foster, refresh, strengthen, and exhilarate' (IV:xvii.3).

Again we note here the necessity of self examination,

*that each individual should descend into himself, and consider, first, whether, with inward confidence of heart, he leans on the salvation obtained by Christ, and with confession of the mouth, acknowledges it; and, secondly, whether with zeal for purity and holiness he aspires to imitate Christ; whether, after his example, he is prepared to give himself to his brethren and to hold himself in common with those with whom he has Christ in common [i.e. charity] ... because it behoves us to contend and seek, with all our heart, daily to increase our faith.*

(IV:xvii.40)

In sum, Calvin offers us the aim of discipline in his Ecclesiastical Ordinances of Geneva (1561): 'let them be reconciled to the church from which they had been separated by their fall' (Hall & Hall 1994:154, para. 172).

## John Knox

John Knox was the first reformer to clearly demarcate the three reforming marks of the church: the Word preached, the sacraments celebrated and

*ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered, as God's word prescribed, whereby vice is repressed and virtue nourished ... We affirm that in all these things necessary to be believed for the salvation of man.*

(Scots Confession XVIII in Cochrane 1966:177; cf. Articles Declaratory, Church of Scotland, VII in Cox 1976:391)

In this, it is the role of the Holy Spirit to 'sanctify and regenerate us' (Scots Confession XII in Cochrane 1966:172).

Following the approval of the *Scots Confession* in 1560, Knox presented to parliament a proposal for the organisation of the Reformed Scottish church in the form of the *First Book of Discipline*. Here discipline refers to the totality of the common Christian life lived out within a reforming context as well as the

manner in which the church deals with offenders (Weatherhead 1997:62) and disciplines its members. The book included a polity for the church along with

*schemes for poor relief, the repair of derelict churches, and the provision of universal compulsory education, free to the poor, from parish school right up to university for all who showed ability to profit from it.*

(McEwen 1961:2)

Therefore church government is an 'integral and crucial part' of discipline (Heron 1995:238). Its order is 'the form that the life of the Church takes in its conformity to Christ through His Word and Spirit, and in obedient fulfilment of its mission of reconciliation' (Wotherspoon & Kirkpatrick 1920:103). This is a matter of both polity and spirituality.

In Knox, the link between the sacrament and church discipline had little foundation in either legalism or moralism (McEwen 1961:59). Rather, it was concerned with the protection of the element of the numinous in the Lord's Supper which must not be degraded or desecrated. For Knox, 'the whole discipline of the Kirk, were directed to one end – the protection of this central element of the church's life' (McEwen 1961:60). This required a repentant attitude:

*For the end of our coming thither is not to make protestation that we are upright and just in our lives, but contrariwise, we come to seek our life and perfection in Jesus Christ.*

(Knox's Works IV:193 in McEwen 1961:60)

The seriousness with which Knox approaches the sacraments is fundamental as derived from the *Scots Confession's* delineation of the marks of the church – the Word preached, the sacraments celebrated and discipline rightly exercised. These are the very foundations of the church – 'the Word completed and fulfilled by the action of Christ in the Sacrament' (McEwen 1961:57), for the sacraments are 'seals and visible confirmations of the spiritual promises contained in the Word' (Knox 1560:3).

## First Book of Discipline (1560)

Apart from its official need for the young church, the *First Book of Discipline* was for those who 'look for participation with Christ Jesus' (Knox 1560:2) 'for the instruction of the kirk, and to make the man of God perfect' (Knox 1560:2). Here we see the link between teaching and spiritual growth.

Education was one of the three prerequisites in every Scottish parish:<sup>2</sup>

*... of necessity it is that your honours be most careful for the virtuous education and godly upbringing of the youth of this realm, if either ye now thirst unfeignedly [for] the advancement of Christ's glory, or yet desire the continuance of his benefits to the generation following. For as the youth must succeed to us, so we ought to be careful that they have the knowledge and erudition to profit and comfort that which ought to be most dear to us – to wit, the church and spouse of Jesus Christ.*

(Knox 1560:12–13)

*The fruit and commodity hereof shall suddenly appear. For, first, the youth and tender children shall be nourished and brought up in virtue, in presence of their friends; by whose good attendance many inconveniences may be avoided, in the which the youth commonly fall, either by too much liberty, which they have in strange and unknown places, while they cannot rule themselves; or else for lack of good attendance, and of such necessities as their tender age requires. Secondly, the exercise of the children in every church shall be great instruction to the aged.*

(Knox 1560:13)

The poor are to be equally catered for and the wealthy are counselled to educate their children to be other than profligate. Education is to include religious formation aiming at admission to the Lord's table. 'And, therefore, these principles ought and must be learned in the youth' (Knox 1560:13). Thereafter, the three existing universities of St Andrew's, Glasgow and Aberdeen are to complete the education process.

2. Along with a church and hospital.

Discipline aimed to bring the church of God to purity (Knox 1560:20) i.e. 'all estates within this realm' (Knox 1560:23),

*that boldly ye may punish vice and maintain virtue within this realm, to the praise and glory of his holy name, to the comfort and assurance of your own consciences, and to the consolation and good example of the posterities following.*

(Knox 1560:33)

The impenitent is to be 'brought to a knowledge of himself' through the ministrations of those 'to call to God for the conversion of the impenitent' leading to repentance and salvation (Knox 1560:21). This can only happen through a 'feeling of his great mercy, by the operation of his Holy Spirit' though it is necessary that he be 'reasonably instructed in the knowledge of Jesus Christ' (Knox 1560:22). This responsibility belongs to the church at large, but also to 'every master of household' (Knox 1560:26), the reason being:

*for seeing that the just lives by his own faith, and that Christ Jesus justifies by knowledge of himself, we judge it insufferable that men shall be permitted to live and continue in ignorance as members of the church of God.*

(Knox 1560:26)

## Andrew Melville

### Second Book of Discipline (1578, 1561)

Andrew Melville refined and developed the thinking of the *First Book of Discipline*. He separated the powers of the magistrate and minister, with the latter having responsibility for 'inward affections and external actions, in respect of conscience, by the word of God', whereby obedience is sought by 'the spiritual sword and spiritual means' i.e. discipline, both punitive and educative (Melville 1578:3). The latter role is assigned to the doctor (of theology) who

*is to open up the mind of the Spirit of God in the scriptures simply ... to the end that the faithful may be instructed, and sound doctrine taught, and that the purity of the gospel be not corrupted through ignorance or evil opinions.*

(Melville 1578:7)

His role is different from that of the pastor who is endowed with 'the gift of wisdom, to apply the same, by exhortation to the manners of the flock, as occasion craves' (Melville 1578:7). This will contribute to providing an 'example and pattern of good and godly order to other nations' (Melville 1578:17) so that:

*God shall be glorified, the kirk edified, and the bounds thereof enlarged, Christ Jesus and his kingdom set up, Satan and his kingdom subverted, and God shall dwell in the midst of us, to our comfort, through Jesus Christ, who, together, with the Father and the Holy Ghost, abides blessed in all eternity. Amen.*

(Melville 1578:18)

The exercise of discipline as understood in the Early Church context was revived during the 16th-century Reformation. In this, the Reformers succeeded in their *ad fontes* approach. Sadly, a type of Medieval approach to discipline was revived in the seventeenth century which was to endure until the twentieth century and was often marked by religious hypocrisy and self righteousness as epitomised in the eighteenth century Burns's (1788) satirical *Holy Willie's Prayer* of an obsequious elder of the kirk:

*Lord, bless thy chosen in this place,  
For here Thou hast a chosen race!  
But God confound there stubborn face,  
An' blast their name,  
Wha brings Thy elders to disgrace  
An' open shame.*

*Lord, mind Gaw'n Hamilton's deserts;  
He drinks and swears an' plays at cartes,  
Yet has sae mony takin arts,  
Wi' great an' sma',  
Frae God's ain priest the people's hearts  
He steals awa'.*

*And when we chastened him therefore,  
Thou kens how he bred sic a splore,*

*And set the world in a roar  
O' laughing at us;  
Curse thou his basket and his store,  
Kail an' potatoes.*

## THE MODERN CONTEXT

As we have seen one of the significant problems with the term 'discipline' is the negative connotation it has acquired, particularly since the Reformation, and it is difficult to rehabilitate it in a postmodern context, which commonly rejects absolutes. Foster (1980:iii) describes discipline in contemporary use as 'the path to spiritual growth' through meditation, prayer, fasting, study, simplicity, solitude, service, confession, worship, guidance, celebration. These spiritual disciplines aim at 'the total transformation of the person' (Foster 1980:54). They provide a 'means of setting us before God so that he can give us the liberation we seek ... of drawing us closer to his heart' (Foster 1980:96–97). Discipline is 'a consciously chosen action that brings us under the shadow of the Almighty' (Foster 1980:127), involving a willingness to:

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God.*

(Col 3:16)

In this sense, it might be described as a 'journey to wholeness' (Maddocks 1986:n.p.) for it aims at a 'higher perfection in the Christian life' (Leech 1977:69), which is reconciliation with the creator (Clinebell 1966:223). It also has a sacramental significance as we have seen already in Calvin and Knox as an 'anticipatory sacrament of a healed creation' (Maddocks 1986:95) giving it a further ecological dimension. It is *koinonia* with God: 'himself who called you to share in the life of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord ...' (1 Cor 1:9) and with others (Acts 2:44–47).

Foster (1980:150) makes it abundantly clear that 'Church councils and denominational decrees are not of this reality'. Pastoral and spiritual care by committee is bound to fail, because they tend to be too impersonal and fail to take the particular needs of individuals and groups into account. Their strength may be in corporate policy making but implementation is not their forte: 'The aim of God in history is the creation of an all-inclusive community of loving persons, with Himself included in that community as its prime sustainer and glorious inhabitant' (Willard in Foster 1980:162).

Following the *Second Book of Discipline*, 'Christian discipleship will be helped to relate the inner and outer worlds in a spiritual direction which takes account of the movement of human liberation in our time' (Leech 1977:28–29; cf. Melville 1578:3). In this process, the role of the spiritual director is important though it is not common in the Reforming tradition despite being somewhat akin to the role of the doctor for: '[t]he director is an educator and teacher, and this involves submission, though it is submission which derives from humility' (Leech 1977:70) and this ministry derives from 'a life of prayer, discipleship and the struggle for holiness' (Leech 1977:xviii). In this sense, discipline is an integrating force that operates in a positive sense through repentance, restoration and reconciliation.

The contemporary context has changed radically from Calvin's time as we have already seen. In contemporary South Africa:

*[f]or many Reformed churches, the concept of Church discipline is extremely limiting, both in terms of theology and practice. The practice of discipline within most congregations ... is largely a matter of censure [if even that] whereby offenders are debarred from participation in the eucharist for a specified period of three or six months.*

(Van der Water 1991:95)

However, if such discipline is not supported by and in a warm counselling context it is unlikely to be effective or to be taken seriously. If discipline resorts to exclusion, this is likely to have a long term effect however long or short the term of exclusion. In this sense it is a disintegrating force. Leaving the membership of any institution can be extremely easy – returning is never so

simple, especially if the exclusion was fostered by bitterness and resentment in one or both parties. Hence, the plea for discipline to be reconceptualised to conform to its earliest forms which were reaffirmed during the Reformation and which still have a current relevance. Having mentioned that the church exists in a postmodern climate which is destitute of ideas and attitudes, it is a moot point whether this should be determinative of the church's attitude towards discipline in a punitive sense.

## CONCLUSION

The argument here is that punitive ecclesiastical discipline would be obviated to a large extent if we took seriously the divine provision for self discipline – understood as control of the self 'by the aid of the Spirit' (Harrison 1985:167) – as has been attested by a survey of some Reformation views of discipline. From a 20th-century, Roman Catholic, perspective it is salutary to note: 'we are never more than "becoming" Christians through ongoing conversion and reform' (Groome 1991:444), 'transforming humanity from within and making it new' (Groome 1991:445).

... the church ... reflects human goodness and sinfulness in its individual members and in its corporate structures ... members are called to ongoing conversion and as a community to constant reformation 'semper reformanda' ... the church must also create and propose new possibilities in faith for its members, for its own reformation, and for its contribution to social transformation.

(Groome 1991:446)

Discipline is a 'necessary means of grace and an integral part of pastoral care' (Confession of Faith, UPCS 2007 2:26), which has an exemplary role despite its imperfections. It is a life-long process as can be seen from Reformation sources. We are continuously involved in the disciplinary practice of becoming what God has intended us to be and this makes it still of the essence of the church where John Knox prayed, (*Book of Common Order* [BCO], Works VI:297 in Mc Ewen 1961:106):

Convert us, O Lord, and we shall be converted ... Though the great multitude remain rebellious, and although there remain in us perpetual imperfections, yet for the glory of Thine own name, and for the glory of Thine only beloved Son Jesus Christ, whose truth and evangel Thou of Thy mere mercy hast manifested among us: may it please Thee to take us under Thy protection and in Thy defence, that all the world may know that, as Thou hast begun this work of salvation among us, so of this same mercy thou wilt continue it.

(*Book of Common Order* [BCO], Works VI:297 in Mc Ewen 1961:106)

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