

***A Song of degrees of David. Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! (Psa 133:1)***

Words. One of the things that separates the animal portion of God’s creation from mankind and angels is our ability to use words. And as my family will tell you, I maybe too often for their sanity say “words matter”. Words matter because if a person expects listeners to understand their meaning, it is incumbent upon them to use the right words. In our society that element of communication is flipped on its head and listeners are basically expected to read others’ minds on what they actually mean when they use the wrong words – I refer you to the pronoun nonsense so prevalent in our day as one example. Words matter.

Theology and religion are full of important words. Scripture is a collection of the most important words a person can spend their time focused on learning. Satan has used theology and religion to mince words, to confuse plain language and make what is black and white look grey. He uses words to cleverly make good appear evil and evil appear good. He diverts thinking away from the plain words of Scripture and introduces ideas like “we need a new word to describe this thing in Scripture so dumb people can understand it”. Jewish tradition is rife with this behavior, and it can be insidious. Catholicism is one large system made up of these sorts of words.

Take “kosher”, for example. The word doesn’t appear in Scripture anywhere. The Jews simply added the term and a multitude of rules that didn’t exist in the law, around 200 AD, claiming that diasporic life required more structure. In so doing, they make it clear they believe God’s rules are inadequate to keep the people from sin. Unless these really righteous and holy Rabbis don’t step in for Him, people might accidentally go to hell for eating a cheeseburger – which is not even close to forbidden in the law, but they burden the people claiming Moses’ use of judges gives them the right to make these changes.

A made-up word that has found its way into Christian nomenclature in similar fashion is “shekinah”. How many times have we used this word over the years to describe the pillar of cloud and fire that led the children of Israel through the wilderness, covered the tabernacle and filled Solomon’s temple? This is a word created because the Jews refuse to just say “God’s glory” out of some self-imposed, arrogantly prideful refusal to say the word “God”. They openly reject the plain words that we’re given by God, supplanting their own made-up word in the place of them. It seems innocent enough, too, when you go reading the Targum explanations about how inadequate language is to communicate proper reverence of His glory, and when you get solid exegetes like Gill who use it as though it’s a good Bible word, it feels like no big deal.

In the case of kosher, it is absolutely a Satanic burden that gets placed on people that don’t have any need of more burdens, and it’s a gnarled, twisted set of behaviors and

culturally ingrained bits of foolishness that those 144,000 will, I'm sure, struggle to divest themselves of, given how Jewish Christians struggled with the much simpler rules of the law in the early days of the church.

Shekinah is less problematic in the way we use it, but why do we use it? Consider that question not as an accusation of wrongdoing, but as a point of actual curiosity and a need to carefully consider the words we use when working in this vineyard. Do we need a special word for what He describes for us as His glory? Is that not adequate? I mean, especially since 1) we have no experimental understanding of what those pillars looked like and whether this word adequately captures their description and 2) this new word does nothing to help us actually understand it – the word does, after all, sound like a muffled sneeze and has no real meaning for us. Is that more glorious sounding than just saying “God’s glory”? What does it do for us to dispose of the words we’re given by Him to use words made up by men? And don’t gloss over that. If you’re substituting Scripture terms to describe something of God, you by definition are using terms made up by men – those really are the only two options. I’m not suggesting that it is always wrong, but I think being conscious of the words we use to describe the things of God is something to carefully consider.

This is increasingly the view I have of the phrase “church discipline”. The phrase isn’t found in Scripture, so should be suspect. It’s one of those terms that has become common in exegetical nomenclature and general theological discussion to describe the **order and unity** which is found in a true church of Christ. I say common, even though its exercise is rare today, because looking at our expositor friends from the last four or so centuries, it is a rampantly used term and topic that has perhaps hundreds of thousands of pages written on it. But that doesn’t make it the right term to use.

I love these two verses that speak to unity and order:

(Eph 4:13) *“Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.”*

(Col 2:5) *“For though I be absent in the flesh, yet am I with you in the spirit, joying and **beholding your order**, and the stedfastness of your faith in Christ.”*

What this shows is that the **order** of a New Testament church is observable by the senses. Paul **beheld** it, observed it in the church at Colosse. I believe it is observable in this assembly. Out of this order comes the defining characteristic of the Bride of Christ that the world bears witness to

(Joh 13:35) *“By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.”*

Brother Sam spent four sermons in 2017-18 discussing church discipline s in some detail, so I'm not going to cover all that ground. He does a yeoman's job of dissecting this important topic, and I simply hope to add a small point to that work today. Our discipline, not disciplinary acts, draws into focus our love for one another. Our discipline is juxtaposed to the chaos of the world. This is order, the opposite of disorder, and it breeds love for the brethren because we are all seeking to walk in an orderly fashion together in service to Christ.

Bear in mind that this is no small topic, and nothing to take lightly. It is not academic or just a point of minimal difference between various "types" of Christians. It is not some straw man to put up for theological debate or some point of pride. It is a vital topic and a marker that stands as a bold differentiator between those assemblies who do and those who do not follow Christ.

This order is a critical and visible indicator of our being Christ's church. There are cardboard Christian churches that claim to have discipline, but the spirit of it is one of censoriousness and excision, not one of "love one to another". You cannot profess love for the brethren and despise the order of Christ's assembly. Those two things require both to be present for a candlestick to exist in any entity calling itself a church of Christ.

The reason I don't like the phrase "church discipline" isn't one of semantics or just that it doesn't appear directly in Scripture; this isn't some polemic debate for me. This is about directing and narrowing down how we think about core matters as the time draws shorter – is there any more core of an issue than whether this is Christ's house? This is trimming our lamps – doing away with misunderstandings, confusions, trifling notions that impede clear, bright thought and understanding of the things of our God and King.

The hissing of Satan that I hear in the phrase "church discipline" is one that is meant to confuse, divert and deflect members of a body away from order and unity. His fangs latch onto that term "discipline" and rather than seeing it as a way of behaving i.e., in a structured and disciplined manner, he twists it to mean a negative and divisive thing, a way to make us turn on one another when under the distress caused by sin.

Misunderstanding this phrase we don't find in Scripture can leave us metaphorically clubbing each other over the head in the name of "church discipline". That's not the purpose of the order Paul teaches about, and it actually is not disciplined at all.

The phrase "church discipline", if you go searching through books and writings of the "Puritans", "Reformers" and those who we would generally consider kindred spirits in the body of Christ, focus a good portion of their time discussing the need to remove a person from the body. Very few writings discuss what I believe is the primary focus and

a key purpose of this order we keep – that is restoring a brother who has fallen into a sin as part of that love we have one to another.

We're going to focus on a small part of Paul's letter to the Galatians to frame this more sharply:

*(Gal 5:16-6:3) "This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would. But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law. And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. Let us not be desirous of vain glory, provoking one another, envying one another. Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ. For if a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself."*

We desire to walk in the Spirit, and Paul reminds us that this is a non-stop 24x7x365.25 war we are engaged in to do so. Walking in the Spirit is contrary to our natural condition, i.e., walking in the flesh. That contrariness means that sometimes we "cannot do the things that" we would. This is not a get out of jail free card, it is a simple fact. One that we must recognize not only in others, but in ourselves.

We will fall into these works of the flesh. We are sinners. We must own this as fact. Sins are abominable and they are insidious, and if we walk in them constantly, without grace, we will not inherit the kingdom of God. This is also a fact. It is a fact that creates distress and even despair when we see ourselves overtaken in the fault of these works; it can lead us to doubt the veracity of our faith even.

If a brother is overtaken, those that are walking in the Spirit are called upon to restore that brother, as a primary task, in the spirit of meekness acknowledging that we are all of the same flesh. We're not called on to rail, to get angry, to curse, to condemn, to flog, to browbeat or to embarrass.

It is easy to fall into a judgmental and high-minded view of a person who has fallen into horrendous sin and made a massive mess of things. It is easy to get angry with them and want to lash them with your tongue over the stupid, stupid things they did, the

disregarding of counsel, the despising of the things of God, the disengagement and ignoring the needs of others, the thanklessness they have displayed. It is easy to let our tongues rule and vent our spleens all over a person who has done, frankly, a dumb thing. It is easy to hold yourself up and say “look how I don’t do what you did” or present a false doctrine that “God’s people don’t commit THAT sin”; it is also easy in your heart to be saying “thank God I don’t sin like this person and instead do all this tremendous service to the King” (Lk. 18:11-12) and not be Spiritual at all. That leaves you walking in the flesh – just like the person whose behavior is being called into question.

Don’t misunderstand, sometimes a person needs to understand how spiteful, arrogant, prideful, thankless, disengaged, careless, etc., etc., they have been. Sometimes plain words are needed. They need to see it as a matter of fact, however, not as a matter of you expressing your wrath toward them.

The term translated “restore” here is Strong’s G2675 and is used a few other places. Consider these two verses where that same term is used to gather a sense of what our actions should be:

*(Mar 1:19) “And when he had gone a little further thence, he saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who also were in the ship **mending** their nets.”*

*(1Co 1:10) “Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be **perfectly joined together** in the same mind and in the same judgment.”*

I think these verses show where the mindset ought to be. Mending and drawing together, not dividing and pushing away. As the first priority.

When we have a friend in need and we seek the Lord on whatever fault they are taken up in, our first reaction should not be “we must protect the body, shields up, spears out, thrust out this infidel!”. They are not an infidel. They are still a member of the body who has transgressed in their flesh. Just like all of us can (and perhaps all of us will). The first question must be “how do we help them mend”?

We stress to people who resist counsel, who demonstrate some overwhelming sense of pride over some insignificant fleshly thing that they are despising the body. And that can be true. We stress to them that they should value this resource the Lord has provided, and cleave unto it with all their might, running to it in humility and meekness, confessing their fault and falling on the kindness the Lord has provided. That is also true, we should all do that all the time. The body is a refuge and a source of support and guidance especially when the flesh is overtaking us.

I submit to you that there is a two-way bodily function that must be fully exercised in these times of distress. In these moments, the immediate reaction should NOT be -- excise and amputate. It should not be our immediate reaction to shed that body part we said was vital to the Bride, a critical vine in the vineyard until we found out 20 minutes ago they did [*insert vile abominable thing they did here*] and when we walked in we called a brother or sister!

I say that should not be the immediate reaction. It may be where we end up with a true infidel, an unbeliever who will not hear Wisdom and who has worn a mask, seeking to deceive us or walking in a false faith. We can take that action when we need to. My point here does not remove that remedy from our physician's kit.

Paul indeed tells the Galatians later in his letter:

*(Gal 6:7-10) "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting. And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith."*

If we are dealing with a hard-hearted person who is simply unwilling to do anything but sow to the flesh, God will not be mocked. That person will reap what they've sown, but that doesn't mean we operate in the flesh in our behavior toward them. Let us sow to the Spirit and not grow weary in that well doing.

Remember, it is God that will not be mocked. This is **His** body. He is the head from which all else follows. We haven't come together out of our own righteousness or **anything** of us. Every person here has been drawn here for some purpose to fulfill His perfect will regardless of whether you understand that purpose. A member who has fallen into some spot of trouble is not somehow different, transforming into a stick or a foreign object. And just because you aren't in that position today, what will you fall into tomorrow or the next day that puts you in precisely that same position?

Remember, because this is His body, Christ is here with us. He is present right now. If you don't believe that, one wonders why you are here.

*(Psa 46:5) "God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved: God shall help her, and that right early."*

*(Mat 18:20) "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."*

If you struggle with this truth that Christ is present and here with us, consider this truth as a way to help make it real:

*(Exo 13:21-22) “And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night: He took not away the pillar of the cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people.”*

This should be fairly simple to believe, since we have the details of it happening and the evidence of its efficacy. As the children of Israel were fleeing Egypt – with all their neighbor’s wealth, their old, their feeble, their newly born, their spared firstborn, their cattle and all their belongings – **this same God** we worship went before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

Consider another instance

*(Exo 14:19-20) “And the angel of God, which went before the camp of Israel, removed and went behind them; and the pillar of the cloud went from before their face, and stood behind them: And it came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel; and it was a cloud and darkness to them, but it gave light by night to these: so that the one came not near the other all the night.”*

Again, we have direct evidence of the existence and success of God’s glory in keeping the children of Israel safe. It doesn’t require much faith to believe this, unless you simply don’t believe the Bible in its entirety, because Moses leads them through the Red Sea right after this!

I can understand struggling with the idea that Christ is actually present because it is the very definition of faith to believe in what you cannot physically see. What should help you believe and see this as fact, is that Christ led His church then just as He has promised to do now. When He came in the flesh He no longer needed the pillar of fire or cloud to obfuscate His presence. He came in the flesh and rose in the flesh. He still leads even though it is not in the flesh we see Him here.

He did not become a passive God when the pillar last ascended up or when He ascended to the Father’s presence. I say again it is the same God that we worship here in this house today that led in the pillar. He is the Living God. He hasn’t changed.

*(Jer 10:10) “But the LORD is the true God, he is the living God, and an everlasting king: at his wrath the earth shall tremble, and the nations shall not be able to abide his indignation.”*

When Christ tells us He is in the midst of those two or three gathered together in His name, it’s not in a stealth mode, Black Ops mission. He is here as the Head of His church. He guides this proceeding with the Holy Spirit. I can’t stress this enough, that this isn’t a theological abstraction I’m asking anyone to debate. This isn’t some catholic mystical mumbo jumbo. This is core to what it means to be a Christian.

If you don't believe that He is here with us, pointedly I have to ask and believe you need to carefully consider the question "why are you here"? If you profess to be a Christian and don't believe Christ your head is present in your church service, why are you there? That's not worship, that's a stage play.

He leads us perfectly, but that doesn't mean everything I or any elder says is perfect. It doesn't mean that everything the body decides or does is perfect. We are humans, which means we cannot be perfect. He leads us to perfectly accomplish His purposes. Christ told us that the Holy Spirit was sent to care for the body, to teach us what we need to know

*(Joh 14:26) "But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you."*

The care described here means that though we are imperfect in our work because of the imperfection of the flesh, we're not just flapping around without direction. And unless we've miscalculated horribly, the candlestick is here, so we're moving according to His purposes. There is no person here driving the train with undue influence or power or any other element of the flesh. Yes, it could look that way from a certain perspective when you read how the churches in Revelation fall to sin. He could allow us to be led into a bad spot. The body functions in some ways that are similar to individuals - we are imperfect collectively, we can sin collectively, we have a sort of collective faith, etc. We are a body! Not a club. Not a social construct. We are the Bride of Christ!

This might be a very difficult concept to embrace, but I believe it is very important to our growth to meditate upon it and keep a proper perspective. This will be increasingly important as the time grows ever closer to our Lord's return, because the environment in which we live is going to become more pressurized and toxic to these beliefs. Having a firm grasp on this should keep us in a better place. It should mitigate personal conflict both by making us more aware of the sins we need to battle against and making us more patient with each other if mistakes get made.

If Christ is indeed present with us and the Holy Spirit guiding us, He is directing us as a body just as He directs us as individuals. I want to make this as plain as I can here - this means that whatever happens in this body is precisely, to its most infinitesimal detail, exactly what is supposed to happen. You don't like it? Get over yourself and consider why you're struggling with that. You think we've made a drastic mistake? Consider what it is that needs to be learned and communicated – just like you would when you personally make a mistake. Communicate openly and honestly, don't murmur and begrudge.

When we come together to discuss a matter – and I don't just mean some sin, but anything – and you leave out of that discussion with something stuck in your craw, you're not happy with the outcome so you're fretting in your heart or your words about it, I'm warning you to be careful with that arrogance and pride. I'm not going to dance around this or try to use soft figures and metaphors. If you walk out of one of our meetings angry about the outcome, you are resisting the Holy Spirit. Stop it. If you had the right answer in the moment, you should have spoken up and discussed that right answer in the meeting. If you did that and the Spirit led us another direction, submit to it. The time is too short for petty nonsense. Refusal to engage in the active work of the body is a sin. Stop it.

So, I return to what our starting point should be when the body is in distress due to sin:

*(Gal 6:1) “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.”*

I want everyone to consider this fact - when you restore some injured part of your body you restore the whole body to function. If you break your leg and you get that fixed, it returns the rest of your body to balanced operation. Likewise, if you get injured and you get gangrene in the injury, you don't slap some Neosporin and a band-aid on it hoping it will just get better. You of course excise that dead flesh, but it is a painful, emotional, difficult thing to do as a last resort – you didn't move to amputate when you got the initial hangnail!

Furthermore, when a member of the flock slips from the narrow to the wide way, I increasingly believe one of the things we each must look at individually is how it happened under our watchful eyes? What burden did we not bear that allowed this to happen? The answer is not “this is a particularly evil person who is full of subterfuge and deceit”. Are they fuller of subterfuge and deceit than you? Did you really care for them and try to bear their burdens? I know I have failed here and seek diligently to do better. Can you say you've done all you can? Only you can answer that question.

And these are questions we must **ask** and **answer**. When we seek to restore a member of the body, that restoration may and likely does require changes in more than that member, and it's impossible to see those necessary changes if we aren't looking for them. We won't look for them if we don't have a primary perspective of restoring the **body** through restoring our **brother**, not one of putting them on trial. It's work all around.

I've said a lot of things, so I'm going to leave you with these three summary points to consider:

1 – We are all sinners. Just because your most grievous sin today isn't made public and manifest before everyone doesn't mean you are less of a sinner or more righteous than someone whose sin is laid bare before the body. There are no "sinners" and "real wink-wink-nudge-nudge roll your eyes and raise your eyebrows sinners". Your sins are just as specific as those we may be examining in a moment of distress; just as horrific and just as much a reason Christ died. If you are one of His sheep, just like the person under examination, those sins are nailed to His cross. Thank God for that mercy. Consider that in the moment.

2 – When one of us falls into a sin that is exposed and laid before us like a raw, pulsating nerve, our first obligation is to examine the fruits of the person in that moment from an honest and sincere desire to **restore them**. We aren't adjudicating the sin or the facts of the situation. We wouldn't be having the discussion if there weren't some sin made manifest. This is spiritual work that requires us to walk meekly and with Godly fear, knowing that **the body** in that moment is in need of healing. Healing doesn't only mean amputation. If the only way to heal were amputation, Christ would have amputated us all a long time ago. Further, any perceived personal slight coming from that person's sin is nothing compared to the offense caused to God by the sin, so move past that and look to the good of the body not your pride.

3 – Christ is absolutely here with us today and every time we meet to worship Him. He is not here in some abstract, looking through a spyglass from afar sort of metaphorically "here", but really, as in He is sitting in that pew right there, as it were. He has promised it to be so, and His omnipresence makes it so He physically can overcome the physical boundaries of our world, simultaneously be fully invested in our service AND any other gathering of His servants anywhere in the world. The only way to understand that is through faith, and like so many things with faith it is recursive – it takes faith to see it, and the more you see it, the more it feeds your faith. His presence should drive your thoughts and behaviors when you are in this assembly. Put plainly, we stand before a King, and the only purpose of our existence is serving His kingdom. Nothing else matters. All creation has been driven from the beginning toward His taking the throne and fulfilling the Covenant of Grace. Be thankful for and submit to His gracious presence.

We have abundant opportunities in this life to learn and improve. That applies to this body as much as it does to any one of us individually. We have to embrace these opportunities and gain everything out of them that we can, through the assistance of the Spirit.

I leave you with these words:

*(Rev 22:17-20) "And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the*

*water of life freely. For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book. He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus.”*