

Discipline in an Age of "Human Potential"

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It is not discipline, but self-expression that is the popular concern of our time. Interest is focused on "doing your own thing" and "being yourself" and not on commitment to someone or something beyond oneself. The approach of Lent, however, calls us to reflect on discipline and its place in the Christian life, and perhaps even to preach on discipline in an age of "human potential."

I. To begin with, *we need to reclaim and clarify the word "discipline" for the life of faith.* Discipline has become a negative word in our time. It connotes strict authority, severity, narrowness. The dictionary definition mentions rules, correction, and punishment. Discipline frequently is used to describe some regimen which sets oneself or one's group apart, and which is characterized by an attitude of separateness, if not superiority.

But this has not always been the case, for discipline is essentially a positive word. It comes from the Latin *discipulus*, the same as the word "disciple," and it has primarily to do with following someone or some example, giving oneself over to some person or idea, learning or being grasped by some teaching or influence. At its deepest level, therefore, discipline is grounded in a relationship and takes shape as a response to Another. It is neither self-initiated, nor self-centered, nor self-controlled. Rather, it is contingent upon and defined in relation to something, or better, Someone, beyond the self.

II. *In terms of the Christian life, discipline is always properly understood in the context of grace.* In the best sense of the word, it is neither an ideal which we can or must realize, nor a goal which we can or must achieve. Rather, Christian discipline, understood aright, presupposes the gracious initiative of God in Christ, who calls us into a relationship in which we may grow in grace (and in understanding), to the end that we may know and love as we are known and loved. The presupposition of any proper Christian discipline is, therefore, "justification by grace through faith alone."

This biblical and Reformed doctrine stands guard against discipline of any kind becoming a "work" whereby we seek to justify ourselves. Our piety, our "having faith," our surrendering ourselves to God, cannot properly become a self-justifying discipline. In the section of *Church Dogmatics* on "Justification by Faith Alone," Karl Barth warns against faith becoming a "work":

Because faith is obedient humility, . . . it will and must exclude any cooperation of human action in the matter of man's justification. It will and must be alone in this matter. It will and must be only faith. If it hesitated to be this, if in the recognizing and apprehending of justification, it tried to base itself on any human action which takes place either before faith or in faith or as a result of faith, it would cease to be obedience; it would cease to be the humility of obedience. . . . There would be no real renunciation and No to pride, no real distaste for it, seeing that in addition to the fact that he believes man would still be leaning and relying on himself.¹

The attempt to realize one's full personhood cannot properly become a self-justifying discipline. We can no more save ourselves by some possible technique designed to fulfill our "human potential" than we can by our piety. And the presumption that we can do so is ultimately its own prison or asylum, as Begref-fenfeldt, the superintendent of the insane asylum in Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, testifies. Speaking to the hero of the drama who is so intent on "being himself," Begref-fenfeldt says

Outside themselves? Oh no, you're wrong.
It's here that men are most themselves—
Themselves and nothing but themselves—
Sailing with outspread sails of self.
Each shuts himself in a cask of self,
The cask stopped with a bung of self
And seasoned in a well of self.
None has a tear for others' woes
Or cares what any other thinks.
We are ourselves in thought and voice—
Ourselves up to the very limit;
And, consequently, if we want
An Emperor, it's very clear
That you're the man.²

Not even the discipline of writing an article on discipline for a budding "Preacher's Journal" or preaching on the subject of discipline can justify. Those of us who are tempted to think we have written something definitive which, along with "the Word of our God" shall "stand forever" (Isaiah 40:8), need to heed the humorous but poignantly expressed quotation from Luther which Karl Barth wrote to himself in his own printed copy of the second edition of his *Epistle to the Romans*.

Karl Barth, to his dear Karl Barth, 1922:

If you feel or imagine that you are right and suppose that your book, teaching, or writing is a great achievement . . . then, my dear man, feel your ears. If you are doing so properly, you will find that you have a splendid pair of big, long, shaggy asses' ears. . . .³

"Justification by grace through faith alone" reminds us that any discipline, however well-intentioned, which lands us back in the circle of our own works, or encourages us to curve in upon ourselves, ignores the deeper insight that what we most want and need is not some pious or psycho-religious or theological or ideological regimen behind which we can hide our self-centeredness. What we most want and need is One to whom we can be justified in belonging for time and for eternity, and in relation to whom any discipline in our life and in our life together is judged and redeemed.

III. A third observation follows hard by these words about grace as the norm and context of Christian discipline. It is this: *Christian discipline properly takes shape in and is nurtured by the community of faith*. Christian faith is intensely personal, but it is not private. If the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is the great dramatic symbol of our redemption in Christ, the gathering of

disciples around the Lord's Table, from the Upper Room to the present, underscores the truth that in redemption we are given to one another in the church.⁴ The Christian church is an integral part of the Gospel; it is not an optional "extra." Our forbears used to say *extra ecclesia non salus*, "outside the church there is no salvation." That has been understood and used as a mark of narrowness, judgment, and exclusivism. And that is unfortunate. What this old phrase means in the deepest sense is that the church is God's gift to us. We have been given to one another in and through Christ as the worshiping, believing community in which personal faith is lived, nurtured, and sustained.

Christian discipline in this community offers a way, however imperfect, of getting beyond ourselves. By its very nature, the kind of discipline about which we are speaking here draws one away from oneself toward another (God in Christ, and brothers and sisters in faith) in response and in relation to whom one attempts to live and act as a member of a community of faith. Without this other-directedness both in content and context even the most well-intentioned discipline, as we have seen, can easily become narcissism—just another sophisticated kind of tinkering with ourselves. And yet here again we must say that even at its best, Christian discipline is not finally another technique—not even a technique for getting beyond ourselves. We cannot forget ourselves any more than we can save ourselves. Perhaps, though, we can come to regard Christian discipline as a gift—a gracious opportunity which can become for us an avenue of response to God, in our life and in our life together, whereby we have ourselves with all of our "human potential" taken off our hands and given back again in what is the outworking of Jesus' teaching about losing one's life in order to find it.

IV. In thinking about what Christian discipline in our time ought to emphasize, let me draw on what I have said up to this point and suggest that *we in the church today need a discipline which will support us in a recovery of faith—in a rediscovery of what it means to trust and believe in God*. I say this because I am becoming increasingly convinced that many of the popular currents in the church, despite certain positive insights and helpful judgments which have come from them, have emerged from a theological vacuum. The neo-pentecostal movement, the "technique evangelism" movement, the human potential movement, the process management movement, and psychic research into "life after life," are all the result of a deep-seated crisis of faith in God. They each represent, in their own way, the temptation to overlook too quickly what we have already been given in and through the Gospel and the church, and to search for "something more" in the Christian life. The "something more" may be an emotional experience through which we seek to "know" what can only be believed—a kind of theological lust which seeks gratification apart from the intellectual and personal discipline which any faith/love relationship demands. The "something more" may be a strategy of evangelism whereby the great richness of the Gospel is reduced to a trite, catchy formula ("4 Spiritual Laws" or "How to Give Christ Charge of Your Life"), although the mystery of the grace and love of God in Christ is utterly beyond any "technique." The "something more" may be a psychological technique through which we convince ourselves that we can construct and lay claim to an identity which in truth can only be given by Him who creates and names and redeems us. The "something more"

may be an organizational process by which we seek to manage and control that to which we can only respond. The "something more" may be some new "proof" or "evidence" of immortality whereby we convince ourselves that the key to existence and to life, now and always, is within ourselves instead of beyond ourselves. But whatever "something more" we happen to find, we can be sure it is something *we* have added. For God can hardly give us "something more" than He has already done in the gift of Himself in Christ through whom we are, in turn, given to one another in the community of faith and hope and love. There is only one thing "more": growth in this grace and fellowship as children of God and servants of Christ. And this, I want to suggest, is what Christian discipline is all about.

V. *The best model I can suggest for discipline in the church today is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from his cell in Tegel Prison in 1944, called the "arcane discipline."* By arcane discipline, Bonhoeffer meant a secret, silent, unobtrusive, unselfconscious, unsensational discipline of the worship of God through prayer and meditation, creed and hymn, word and sacrament, in the context of the community of faith. Richard Baxter and Brother Lawrence called it "the practice of the presence of God."

What Bonhoeffer suggested, and what I would commend to us all as something worth recovering in our time, is quite radical, but it is not new. It is radical in that it goes to the root of Christian discipline by reminding us that the focus of the Christian life is the worship and service of God.

This arcane discipline of worship and service is, suggested Bonhoeffer, something precious which grows out of and gives expression to the central event of life, namely, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Like other "formative" events of life, the Christ-event transcends our understanding and resists our control. Moreover, the discipline of worship in which this event is acknowledged is not amenable to sensationalism, trivialization, or gimmickry. It cannot be forced upon people. It cannot be achieved by some technique. It cannot be politicized or co-opted to sanctify some ideology or some momentary agenda within the realm of personal, or even Christian, concern. It is most certainly not to become the way by which we assert ourselves as Christians, or as a Christian community, or set ourselves over against others, whether inside or outside the church.

In short, Bonhoeffer's "arcane discipline" is a thing as unsensational and as unspectacular as our responsible participation in the life of the church. Our identity as children of God and as servants of Christ does not allow us to claim privilege or status, or to set ourselves apart. It is arcane, secret, and not without an element of mystery which we cannot fathom. Therefore, as chosen and elect men and women, we do not make this identity a matter of privilege or the occasion for a separate and distinct religious life on the basis of some "possible" discipline. It is, rather, a part of the mystery of the thing that our lives are instructed, enriched, and blessed by preaching, baptism, and the Lord's Supper, and that we worship, confess, and sing praise within the congregation.

What this "arcane discipline" of worship and participation in the Christian community offers those of us in the ministry, it seems to me, is a new appreciation of the so-called "traditional means of grace" by which God himself works among us. It offers a renewed challenge and encouragement to get on with our

knitting as ministers of the Word and sacrament, as teaching elders, and as pastors. It offers us a much needed reminder that Christian discipline is a gift. "Christian community" said Bonhoeffer (and we can add, Christian discipline), "is like the Christian's sanctification."

It is a gift of God which we cannot claim. Only God knows the real state of our fellowship, of our sanctification. What may appear weak and trifling to us may be great and glorious to God. Just as the Christian should not be constantly feeling his spiritual pulse, so, too, the Christian community has not been given to us by God for us to be constantly taking its temperature. The more thankfully we daily receive what is given to us, the more surely and steadily will fellowship increase and grow from day to day as God pleases.

Christian brotherhood [community, discipline] is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. The more clearly we learn to recognize that the ground and strength and promise of all our fellowship is in Jesus Christ alone, the more serenely shall we think of our fellowship and pray and hope for it.⁵

¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1956), IV/1, 627.

² Cited by George A. Buttrick in *Prayer* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1942), 37.

³ Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 121.

⁴ See William Van Arnold's "The Pastoral Visit Revisited" in the Union Theological Seminary in Virginia publication "As I See It," February, 1977, for an excellent statement of the practical and pastoral implications of this truth.

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), 30.