

Discipline and Discipleship: Accountability in the Life of the Church

David H. Sutton

Galatia Presbyterian Church, Fayetteville, North Carolina

Several years ago a fundamentalist congregation made national headlines when it disciplined one of its members and expelled her from the church. The woman brought suit against the church for its action. Nightly news broadcasts featured interviews with church leaders who quoted scripture to explain their actions and with allies of the woman, who complained that the church had no business making her personal life a matter of public discipline in the church.

The matter of discipline and accountability among Christians was visible in the mass media again in the fall of 1987 with the visit of John Paul II to the United States. Perhaps the greatest media coverage of the visit was given to the disagreement of many American Roman Catholics with the positions of their church on such issues as abortion, sexual ethics, and the place of women in the church. Not unexpectedly, but nonetheless disappointing to some American Catholics, John Paul held firmly to the responsibility of church members to abide by their church's teachings and authority.

Though usually not as publicized as either of the examples above, all churches from time to time face questions of accountability in the life of the church. Churches address issues of accountability in various ways, many by some formal constitution, discipline, or order. Additionally, there are informal systems of accountability based upon local tradition, mores, and power structures. Usually these systems of accountability are perceived as, at best, convenient and efficient means of ordering a church's life. At worst, they are perceived as irrelevant to the real business of the gospel. Missing from both perspectives is a sense of any fundamental connection between what the scriptures teach and accountability in the church, between disciplined church life and discipleship.

Is there a relationship between what scriptures teach and accountability in the church's life? Is there a relationship between discipleship and the disciplined life of the Christian church? I believe that there *is*. Discipleship and a disciplined, accountable community life go hand in hand. That this is the case can be seen by a careful look at what may seem an unlikely source: the synoptic gospels.

We who preach and teach in the church do not usually turn to the synoptics for biblical grounding of discipline and accountability in the church. Other New Testament books form our grounding: Acts, with the Jerusalem Council, the ordaining of deacons, or Paul's farewell to the elders of Ephesus; Ephesians, with its grand theological affirmations of the church; later epistles such as I Timothy, with obvious, tightly structured direction for order and accountability in the church's life. These books show that as the need for order and

accountability arose, the church responded. But do not the synoptic gospels also address needs that arose in the church as years passed following Jesus' departure? Yes. Collecting and editing their sources, the gospel writers sought to bring the words and deeds of Jesus, now Risen Lord, to bear upon the lives of their churches. Examining their redaction shows that discipline and accountability were among those needs.

Among the synoptics the Gospel of Matthew is a good place to focus. Matthew is thought to be the latest of the synoptics, so, if a need for order grew as time passed, Matthew would likely address the need. Due to its concern for discipleship in community, scholars have called Matthew "a community book"¹ and "the gospel of the church."²

Within Matthew the material in the eighteenth chapter will be our point of departure. This is one of five discourses of Jesus in the gospel. Both in material unique to Matthew and in shared material, the gospel writer's concern for accountability and discipline here becomes clear.³

To confirm Matthew's concern for discipline and accountability in the community of faith, look at the material that is special to Matthew in chapter 18. It begins at Matthew 18:15-17. These are words of instruction to disciples about what to do if your brother sins against you. It reads like a manual of conduct:

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

It is obvious that behind these words there is an awareness of the *ekklesia*, the "church." There is a concern for relationships between church people, a concern for order in dealing with broken relationships, that is careful of the persons involved but that upholds the integrity of the church as well. As we shall see below, it is significant that if all attempts at reconciliation in the community fail, the offender is to become like a Gentile and a tax collector, two "outsiders" to those with Jewish-Christian roots in the first century.

Significant, too, are the words that continue after verse 17:

Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

Not only is the community of faith given instruction for accountability in dealing with broken relationships, that instruction is given divine sanction by Jesus' promise that what the church does is confirmed in heaven and that the Lord is with them!

Lest anyone get the idea, though, that the church has carte blanche sanction to lord it over transgressors, Matthew goes further in the narrative. Peter

asks how often his brother shall sin against him and be forgiven. In answer to his own question, Peter suggests what he believes to be a very merciful number: seven times. Jesus corrects him with an outlandishly merciful number, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven." Recall that prior to this, at 16:18, Jesus has given Peter his name and promised that on him, the *petra* or "rock," Jesus would build his church. Other than in 18:17 it is the only other use of the word *ekklesia* in Matthew. So Peter's question is significant not just for him, but for the community of faith, the church.

Matthew has shaped this material in a way that clearly teaches disciples (and the church) about divinely sanctioned discipline and accountability in the community of faith (18:15-20). That accountability is clearly tempered, though, with the gospel of forgiveness (18:21-22). Not only that, but the parable of the unforgiving servant which follows (18:23-35) serves as a warning to disciples (and the church) that as their debts are forgiven by their Lord, so they must forgive one another's debts.

An examination of material in chapter 18 that is shared with Mark and Luke shows further signs of the evangelists' concerns for shaping their communities. Matthew 18:1-9 parallels Mark 9:33-50 and Luke 9:46-50, 17:1-2. There are some telling differences, though. Both Mark and Luke follow the disciples' question about who is the greatest with John's statement that the disciples had forbade an outsider who was casting out demons in Jesus' name. Jesus responds in similar fashion in both Mark and Luke, "Do not forbid him; . . . he that is not against us is for us." "Do not forbid him; for he that is not against you is for you." Matthew, however, omits the episode. There is in Matthew no such inclusive statement. In fact, in another context, Matthew 12:30, there is a reversal of the statement on the lips of Jesus.

Mark and Luke tie this scene closely to the passion prediction and a concern that disciples realize they are joined to Jesus in a life and death struggle against evil. Anyone who joins that struggle, whether he be "one of us" or not, is not to be excluded. Matthew, however, ties the scene not to a struggle against evil, but to teaching about the community of disciples, the church. Therefore, Matthew has no need for including outsiders. In fact, as we saw above, those who will not be reconciled to the community are to be considered "outsiders" (18:17).

Further, introducing the sequence of parallel passages, Mark portrays the disciples as secretive. Jesus has to ask them what they were discussing, and they hide the fact that they were talking about who was the greatest. Mark then portrays Jesus calling the disciples to him and saying, "If anyone would be first, he must be the last of all and servant of all." Only then does Jesus take the child and continue his words.

Contrary to this, Matthew introduces the sequence with an open, honest question to Jesus from the disciples about who is greatest. Instead of Jesus having to call the twelve together, Matthew has the disciples coming to Jesus on their own initiative. Too, Matthew omits Jesus' words about servanthood and proceeds immediately to the child, having Jesus speak about "turning and becoming like children to enter the kingdom."

Mark's emphasis, as in his whole gospel, is on servanthood. He does

address the need for disciplined life among disciples (and church), but with an eye toward disciples (and church) who do not understand and need prodding to be about their discipleship. Matthew, on the other hand, using the same material minus the servanthood saying, addresses willing disciples (and church) and stresses not servanthood but humility in the community.

With Luke, Matthew shares a unique strand of tradition, the parable of the lost sheep (Matthew 18:10-14, Luke 15:3-7). In Luke it is the first of three parables told in the hearing of murmuring Pharisees and scribes who do not like Jesus receiving and eating with sinners. Luke repeats the words "rejoice" and "joy" to press home the point that God is gladdened by the "repentance" of one "lost" sinner, not by many righteous persons.

The Matthaean setting for the parable is not in contention with religious authorities; rather, it is set in instruction to disciples. At issue is not Jesus' ministry, but the fate of "little ones" who are community members. Where the sheep in Luke is "lost," in Matthew the sheep has "gone astray" or been "led astray." In Luke the return of the lost sheep is likened to a sinner's repentance, while in Matthew neither sin nor repentance is ever mentioned—only the fact that the Father does not will that one of the "little ones" should perish.

The contrast is evident. Luke is concerned to defend before hostile religious authorities the mission of Jesus (and the church) to seek and save the lost, to lead sinners to repentance. Matthew uses the same parable to teach disciples (and the church) the importance of maintaining and protecting the community, of shepherding every "little one" who is a member of the community of faith.

It is clear when looking at Matthew chapter 18 and parallels that the synoptic gospels share a strand of tradition concerned for a disciplined life and accountability in the community of disciples. Each evangelist shaped the tradition and used it to address particular concerns. Matthew's redaction of the tradition and use of his own special material shows the most intentional collecting and editing aimed at nurturing, maintaining, and protecting a community of the faithful through accountability and ordered, disciplined life.

There is, then, a relationship between what the scriptures teach and discipline and accountability in the life of the church. That relationship consists of at least three things. First, discipline and accountability of the community of faith are not an adjunct of the gospel proclamation and mission, they are a constituent of that proclamation and mission. The traditions lying behind the synoptics arise from the teachings of Jesus to disciples about how they should conduct themselves individually and collectively in following him in the world. The writers of Matthew 18 and parallels were not primarily writing instructions to churches needing rules; they were telling the story of Jesus teaching his disciples. In that story discipleship and discipline are bound together to the end that the gospel may advance in the world.

Second, the synoptic traditions that teach disciples accountability in their communities are not primarily interested in the convenience or efficiency wrought by discipline; they are urging disciples to conform to the will of God. Disciples and their churches are first and always to understand themselves

under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. "Where two or three are gathered in my name," Jesus says in Matthew 18:20, "there am I in the midst of them." It is the Father's will that no "little ones" should perish (Matthew 18:14). It is the Father who demonstrates forgiveness and wills it for servants (Matthew 18:23-35). It is the Lord who commands obedience (Luke 17:10). In receiving "little ones," the community of faith receives its Lord. Accountability taught in the gospels is to lead the church to please God, to do the will of God.

Third, discipline and accountability taught in the gospels is to lead the church to goodness in relationships within the community. Guarding and protecting the weak, going out after those gone astray, disciplining wrongdoers, repenting of wrongs done to one another, forgiving one another, humility—all these have to do with building good relationships and good community. ". . . be at peace with one another," says Jesus in Mark 9:50.

If disciples and accountability are indeed constituent of the gospel, then preaching and teaching from the synoptics can help the church realize that connection in its life and ministry. For example, what might Mark 9:33-50 teach church officers about the nature of their office and their individual and corporate roles in shaping the life of their community and church? How might Luke 17:1-10 help a new member class learn about both the problems and the possibilities of life together as obedient servants of God? One might take cues from the language and organization of Matthew chapter 18 for three sermons. Matthew 18:1-14 can be preached to help a congregation and its members sense responsibility for care and nurture of one another. Matthew 18:15-17 can help a church realize the necessity of discipline with care and respect for individuals and the church. To anyone living as a sinner among sinners in the church, the message of Matthew 18:21-35 is evident without saying more.

One might choose to pick up on catchwords and weave them through a sermon even as they are woven through the gospel narratives. What implications for community behavior do "child," "little one," and "brother" hold?

Yet again, one might utilize contrasts. The operative words referring to temptation and sin in the first half of Matthew 18, for example, are *skandalizo*, "causing to stumble," and *skandalon*, "stumbling block." In the second half of the chapter, sin is *harmartia*, "wrongful deed." The distinction between the two might help illuminate two nuances of discipline and accountability, namely protection (18:1-14) and correction (18:15-35). If the correction nuance is developed, though, it must be done alongside the corresponding gospel themes of restoration and forgiveness. Additional contrasts include greatness with humility, responsibility for the individual (sheep gone astray) with responsibility for community integrity (go and tell your brother his fault, etc.), and God's magnanimous mercy in contrast with our meager human mercy.

The importance of discipline and accountability in the life of the church is evident to anyone who is part of the church. Issues of disciplined life and accountability arise regularly. However, the relationship of disciplined life and accountability to discipleship and the gospel is not always so evident. The synoptic gospels provide good though oft-neglected biblical material for enhancing this part of the church's life. Preaching and teaching discipline and accountability from the synoptic gospels can be very fruitful. When we talk

about accountability and discipline in the church, these matters of faith and duty, of humility and service, of nurture and care, of repentance and forgiveness are of vital importance. More than occasionally we need to be reminded of them.

NOTES

¹ A. Harnack, quoted in Werner Georg Kummel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975), p. 118.

² Werner Georg Kummel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975), p. 121.

³ For discussion of the following by scholars see the commentaries, particularly:

F.W. Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).

E. Earle Ellis, "The Gospel of Luke," in *New Century Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1974).

Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Luke* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1984).

Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1970).

Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1977).