

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 4 – Chapter 12 – Part 1

THE DISCIPLINE OF THE CHURCH: ITS CHIEF USE IN CENSURES AND EXCOMMUNICATIONS

In this chapter Calvin will look at three topics. The first is the purpose, means and limits of church discipline. The second is the issue of fasting as an act of penance. The third is that of the history and role of marriage and celibacy for clergy.

Summary: Calvin begins with two preliminary comments about church discipline. The first is that he is going to divide the issue of spiritual discipline between discipline for clergy and discipline for laity. The second is that spiritual discipline is necessary because “...no house, which has even a small family, can be kept in proper condition without discipline, it is much more necessary in the church, whose condition should be as ordered as possible. Accordingly, as the saving doctrine of Christ is the soul of the church, so does discipline serve as its sinews...But let pastors and presbyters (elders) be especially watchful to do this, for their duty is not only to preach...but to warn and exhort in every house...whenever they are not enough in general instruction...” (pg. 1229-30).

Calvin continues with a step by step process for discipline of the laity. Step one is to “provide a place for private admonition” (pg. 1230). Calvin desires that all spiritual correction begin in private, between clergy and parishioner. Step two, if step one does not work, is to “admonish a second time in the presence of witnesses” (pg. 1231). Finally, step three, if the first two steps don’t work, is to call the person before a “tribunal of the church, that is the assembly of the elders, and there be more gravely admonished...in order that he may submit and obey” (pg. 1231).

In addition, there are other distinctions that Calvin makes. The first is between private and public sins. If the sins of a person are between two people alone, then correction ought to be done in private. If the sins of a person are public, meaning that they are “...those witnessed not by one or two persons, but committed openly and to the offense of the entire church” (pg. 1234), they will need to be dealt with publicly. The second distinction, differentiates between “light and grave sins” (pg. 1231). Light sins (gossip, etc.) are only in need of mild correction. Grave sins, which include sins such as adultery, theft, robbery, sedition and perjury, may need to be dealt with by removing the person from the church if they do not repent and seek forgiveness. Calvin argues that these steps are necessary in order that God not be dishonored, that the good in the church not be corrupted by the “company of the wicked” (pg. 1233) and that people be led to change their ways.

Calvin is aware of the possible negative impact of spiritual discipline and so he encourages clergy and elders to take great care in how they administer it. As much as possible for light sins it ought to be no more than verbal chastisement which is “mild and fatherly” (pg. 1234) and even the most severe form of discipline ought to be “...joined with a spirit of gentleness” (pg. 1236).

Finally, Calvin acknowledges that excluding someone from the church has no impact on their eternal destiny and that the church ought to continue to pray for those persons. This is because “...God, whenever it pleases him, changes the worst men into the best, engrafts the alien, and adopts the stranger into the church” (pg. 1237).

Reflection: Church discipline has always been a thorny issue in the life of the church. Most clergy and laity dislike anyone poking their noses into their personal life, whether in Calvin’s time or ours. The issue however, is that if we, the church, are the body of Christ, then there ought to be some boundaries in terms of beliefs and actions. In terms of boundaries of belief, we state that to become a member, persons must acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Savior. In terms of actions, we will not allow members of the church to do harm to or harasses others. The church is to be safe place for all. When a problem does arise, we follow the 3-step outline that Calvin lays out; first individual conversation, then conversation with a clergy and an elder and only in extraordinary circumstances (this has only happened once in my thirty-two years of ministry) is it brought before the elder board (session) for consideration.

Questions:

1. What do you think of the three-step process for church discipline?
2. What do you think of Calvin’s differentiation between public/private sins and light and grave sins?
3. What “public sins” do you think might need public correcting?