

‘DISCIPLINE’ versus ‘FREEDOM’

In modern times the word ‘discipline’ has taken on a sinister meaning. No matter in which social context it appears, we fear it. Yet the dictionary tells us that discipline is the ‘training of mental, moral, and physical powers by instruction, control, and exercise’. This would seem a laudable undertaking. The Bible tells us how important discipline is. We can read the instruction of our God to Jeremiah when He says, “So you shall speak all these words to them, but they will not listen to you. You shall call to them, but they will not answer you. And you shall say to them, ‘This is the nation that did not obey the voice of the LORD their God, and did not accept discipline; truth has perished; it is cut off from their lips” (Jer.7:28). So we see how the lack of discipline causes truth to perish.

Yet, the basis of society, for those with whom we share it, is freedom and liberty. The same dictionary defines freedom as ‘the liberty to move or act without outside interference, coercion, or restriction’. Everyone does what seems right in his own eyes.

All of life follows either one or the other of these paths. Either there is discipline in our lives or we live in freedom. For those who follow God’s Word life is a training of their mental, moral, and physical powers by instruction, control, and exercise; while for those who follow Satan life is the freedom to move or act without outside interference, coercion, or restriction.

In Scripture the Holy Spirit tells us that true freedom means to be loosed from the yoke of slavery to sin: “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal.5:1). But to the world this is foolishness. They define freedom as we have seen above.

But how do we, Christians, members of the body of Jesus Christ, fare in this antithesis of freedom and discipline? It appears that in every corner of our life worldly freedom has influence. Let’s take a look!

In the Church

Everyone believes that the Bible is the Word of God and that it is infallible. But not everyone believes that it should be translated as literally as possible. There should be freedom to allow dynamic equivalents. Some would go further than others, but there is a slackening of the discipline of Bible translating.

Most in the Church accept what the Confessions teach. They subscribe to them *because* they are faithful to the Word of God, they summarize it. But there are also those who believe what the Confessions teach *in so far* as they summarize Scripture. In the past mutual discipline would be exercised by members among one another and from the pulpit. But this does not happen everywhere. There is some freedom in the Church about how we view the Confessions.

Church membership used to be very straight forward. A Christian ought to remain or become a member of the Church of Jesus Christ. Such membership was not based on the friendliness of the members there, or their personalities, but on the truth that is confessed and taught there. But today membership seems freer. If we are unhappy about something in one congregation it appears that

we may move to another. If we want to change federations some would have us refrain from speaking against such moves. They believe that the Church ought not to discipline in these matters, but that Christians ought to have the freedom they appear to need and want.

Life style matters are also dealt with by the Church. Scripture instructs the Church to deal with sin in the love of discipline. But such discipline is often interpreted as misunderstanding, not caring, dislike, punishment, etc. As a result consistories at times appear afraid to discipline according to the Word of God. Often focus is forced on the false dilemma of love versus discipline instead of the love of discipline that ought to be applied.

In Church preaching is to have the central place. God's Word must be the focus. But often overtures are made to alter the liturgy with the result that the focus is blurred. Voices can be heard that suggest that members should be more involved so that they can exercise their freedom to express what God has worked in their lives.

But discipline must be maintained! God has appointed elders to rule the Church. He has called ministers to preach the gospel - not in a haphazard manner, but in a disciplined manner. The Churches have agreed that the full gospel of salvation must be proclaimed and have therefore decided that the Heidelberg Catechism must be preached once per Lord's Day. In this way all the aspects of our faith will come to the fore over the period of a year.

We believe that Church Discipline is one of the marks of the true church. Let us stand on guard that we maintain this mark. Let us not become permissive for the sake of society or give the false impression permissiveness would somehow more correctly show the love of God. We have all been charged to discipline in love, but that does not mean that the call to obedience can be reduced or modified.

In the Schools

Most of us are familiar with Christian schools; one of the prime concerns of those who work there is the lack of respect for teachers by students. This goes hand-in-hand with the inability of the teachers to discipline the children. Of course, we should not become alarmists, and we should recognize that there are many children in our schools who do have respect for the teachers and who do respect the discipline that is meted out by those teachers. But we should be alarmed by the increasing number of children who do not.

Being a place where the children of the congregations spend much of their day together, school is also a place where many differences come to the fore. Variations about what is allowed in one home and not allowed in another are often raised for discussion. And more often than not the lowest common denominator wins out. It is easier to allow some marginal thing that others are already allowing than to go and speak to those parents to discuss the wisdom of such a practice. Such a discussion would, however, be the proper exercising of mutual discipline.

Of course, the discipline that is exercised in the Church and the home must be followed up on in the schools. The truth and infallibility of Scripture and the faithfulness of the Confessions must radiate through all the instruction that is given in our parental schools.

In the Home

As the core of society, the family is the breeding place for so much of what happens everywhere else. If there is no discipline, no training, no schedule, no rule in our homes there is very little likelihood that we will find it in our schools, the churches, and society. Proper respect for authority begins with proper respect for parents. Titles and respectful language should be taught in the home and they will continue to be used outside of it. Chores and homework done systematically and regimentally will breed organized and respectful adults.

Discussion about the truths of Scripture from very early on will continue with discussions about the controversial matters as children grow up and it will result in a family relationship where difficulties can be spoken about and not hidden. A child that is properly taught and corrected at a very early age will be a much more manageable teenager than one who is left to 'discover' reality and truth for him/herself.

The same holds true for instruction in the matters of faith. A person who from their early youth is involved in the works of their heavenly Father will much easier depend on Him for their whole life than those who have witnessed a Sunday only religion.

Training versus Non-Interference

Right at the outset of our lives God asks our parents to promise to instruct us in the doctrine of Scripture and to have us instructed in it to the utmost of their power. From then on they begin the arduous task of teaching us about schedules (feeding times and sleeping times), rules (you must say at least 'Amen' before and after eating), and correction (don't touch this and don't put that in your mouth). They teach us about God and Jesus. They read to us the stories in the Bible. We are trained in right and wrong, good and evil. Eventually we go to school. There we receive even more training. The creation of our God is explained to us in so many different subjects. Each having rules and guidelines put there by our heavenly Father. Our parents also send us to Catechism classes where the minister trains us in the teachings of God's own words to us. Of course, we have been going to Church two times every Sunday with Mom and Dad and brothers and sisters for years already. As we get older we begin to understand what God wants us to do with our lives. We want to start taking responsibility for our own actions. Instead of being guided, directed and corrected by our parents and teachers we want to live the life God has planned for us. We want to publicly profess our faith. To do so we must be examined by the rulers God has placed in His church. They must determine if we have been trained (in doctrine and conduct) well enough. And even then we must 'promise to submit willingly to the admonition and discipline of the Church'.

But there are so many who believe that such an upbringing is coercive and restrictive. They will have children when they feel like it. They believe that a young baby should be fed when it wants to and sleep when it so desires. They believe that new human beings should discover the world for themselves; they should believe what ever they want to believe and live as they please so long as they do not interfere with the freedom of others.

And just as with everything else, some of that worldly attitude seeps into the disciplined world of the Christian. And because we live right in the middle of that world we have a real tough time

recognizing such seepage. When we finally see it, or it is pointed out to us, the worldly practice has become so normal that we hardly recognize that it ought to be foreign to us. That's when we say 'Oh, don't be so old fashioned, you talk just like my mother or father talked thirty years ago'. And so right that is! Things *are* changing. Discipline within Christianity is waning. Over the years instruction of the truth of Scripture, the control of the parameters set out in God's Word, and the exercise in Christian life style are loosing their edge - not everywhere and not in every way, but a little here and a little more there.

Let us pray, without ceasing, for the discipline to live our complete lives in the manner God instructs us to in His Word. So early in history He taught this to His people when they had to rely on Him for their daily food and did not have the freedom to eat whatever their heart desired. "And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know; that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but that man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD." Deut.8:3. Later, Paul instructs Titus, and in him all of us too. "For the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men, training us to renounce irreligion and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world, awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ," Titus 2:11-13.

PdB

'MUSIC' and 'NOISE'

In a recent article, Br. Selles outlined some arguments which support the use of rock music as a legitimate medium for the praise and worship of God¹. He proposes (if I understand Br. Selles correctly) that the music we choose to listen to should be judged on its intent. If the intent of the music is to glorify God, then there is no reason why we may not listen to and sing that music. It is like a book. If the intent of a book is to glorify God, then it can be read with a clear conscience, but if that book blasphemes God and promotes the disobedience of his commands, then we should not read it. The *intent* of the book is what is important and on which basis it should be judged. Also with music, the intent is the key point.

There is a very subtle flaw in this reasoning. For how does Br. Selles judge the intent of rock music? He discerns its intent from the lyrics. I am confident that Br. Selles is able to discern the intent of these lyrics, but that is not the point. We are not interested in the intent of the **lyrics**; we are concerned with the intent of the **music**. How are we to discern the intent of rock music?

To begin with, though music is a medium, it is not comparable to other media like words, books, newspapers, radios, or TVs. To ask what the intent of these media is would be silly. These media by themselves have no particular intent, so to ask what their intent is would be like asking whether yellow is square or round. Such questions are best left to the Zen Bhuddists. These media only convey the intent of the one who uses them. I can use the radio to convey a completely different intent than my unbelieving neighbour. Music is not like this. I cannot use a sad piece of music to

¹ Reformed Polemics, Vol. 3 #8, Polemics and Music - A Response

convey whatever intent I choose for it; a sad piece of music will not bear a cheerful intent. Music conveys words by attaching them to its notes, but its notes are themselves muted words. A sequence of words has the ability to define thoughts, ideas, and feelings and bring them to other people. A sequence of notes has this same ability, even if not with the same sharp definition. Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture describes the crashing din and glorious triumph of battle as good, or even better than I could with any construction of words. Does any medium exist which is better suited to, without the aid of words, communicate a deep melancholy, a soaring excitement, or even a clashing discord?

Music, then, has its own message, its own thoughts, ideas, and feelings to convey, which are separate from the message of the lyrics. So any discussion of the intent of the lyrics, while necessary, does not address the issue which we mean to understand, namely what the intent of rock music is.

Perhaps I can illustrate my point better with an example. A person can communicate in more ways than one. He is able to speak to someone and use words to define his thoughts. But he can also use, to a more limited extent, gestures and facial expressions as media for these thoughts. Usually a person's gestures and facial expressions are employed to more clearly illustrate and reinforce his words, but this does not mean that the intent of gestures and expressions is defined only by the words which they communicate. Gestures and expressions can have an intent which is completely opposed to words which are spoken at the same time. I can be very persuasive and say that my mom's cooking smells delicious, but if my face is wrinkled up into an expression of distaste, then my mom will not believe me. By themselves, my words carry conviction. The expression on my face, however, robs my words of their intent by displaying a different opposed intent. My mom can choose to ignore my expression, but then she is deceiving herself.

So it is with music. The intent of the music is usually meant to enhance and compliment the intent of the lyrics, but this does not have to be so. It is possible to mix words and lyrics which have different intents. When this is done, the result is unsatisfactory. The message of the lyrics is contradicted by the intent of the music. A person deceives himself if he ignores the intent of the music and focuses only on the message of the lyrics.

Br. Selles and others wish to redeem rock music by coupling it with good Christian lyrics. This is a noble design; I was once persuaded of its worthy cause myself. But can this really be done? The notes of music are muted words with their own message and intent. If the intent of rock music is ungodly, have I removed this intent by adding words of godly intent?

Having said all this, we have yet to accomplish our objective which was to determine the intent of rock music.

Screwtape, a fictitious demon from the mind of C.S. Lewis, once made the following statements about Noise. Heaven (is DD) the region where there is only life and therefore all that is not music is silence. Music and silence---how I detest them both! Ever since (Satan DD) entered Hell, all (of Hell DD) has been occupied by Noise---Noise, the grand dynamism, the audible expression of all that is exultant, ruthless, and virile---Noise which alone defends us from silly qualms, despairing scruples and impossible desires. We will make the whole universe a noise in the end. We have already made great strides in this direction as regards the Earth. The melodies

and silences of Heaven will be shouted down in the end. But I will admit we are not yet loud enough, or anything like it. Research is in progress...² This is an unusual perspective because it comes from the side of the Enemy, but it shows us that Noise is not just an annoying phenomenon. It is a symbol, a result even, of the Devil's intent to destroy creation and bring disorder where God has created order.

Scripture does not seem, at first glance, to have a negative opinion about noise. We find many references in the psalms to a joyful noise³ In I Ch 15:28 there is reference to the 'noise of the psalteries'. These uses of the word noise, however, could easily be replaced with the synonym, 'sound'. We may not quote these passages in support of the general propagation of noise in the sense that C.S. Lewis means. He had in mind a different definition; a vain, clamorous, chaotic, confusing, disagreeable tumult.

Perhaps there is little room in reformed polemics for the thoughts of an author like Tolkien, but I am reminded of a passage he wrote where great powers strove together and their wills were revealed in two opposing themes of music. He writes of these types of music. The one was deep and wide and beautiful, but slow and blended with an immeasurable sorrow, from which its beauty chiefly came. The other had now achieved a unity of its own; but it was loud, and vain, and endlessly repeated; and it had little harmony, but rather a clamorous unison as of many trumpets braying upon a few notes. And it essayed to drown the other music by the violence of its voice...⁴ The second type of music is that of rebellion. This is the idea which C.S. Lewis had in mind.

There is no doubt that the chaotic Noise which Lewis and Tolkien describe is the enemy of the grand music and deep silences of Heaven. Chaos is the opposite of order and the quencher of thought. God is a God of order and should be the subject of our meditation. Noise, in the sense which we have briefly discussed, breaks down order and hinders meditation.

Rock music at its heavy-metal, head-banging, slam-dancing extreme is Noise, a screeching, banging, howling, cacophonous, rebellious discord--in the words of C.S. Lewis, an exultant, ruthless, virile dynamism . (Remember that we are speaking about the *music* only). From this extreme we go gradually down the scale; there is less of the disorderly distracting intent of Noise, and more Music with redeemable intent. But the issue becomes blurry here again. At what point can we say that enough Noise, with its chaotic, discordant intent, is filtered out for music with a good intent to be heard. This is not an easy question, but it is made easier if we compare it to tuning the radio.

If you set your radio to a wavelength on which nothing is broadcast, you get static. Static is chaotic and noisy; it makes us wince. When you turn the tuning dial, you will eventually come to a station with music, or news, or the weather forecast. Now, ask yourself this question; at what point have I filtered out enough static to understand what the radio announcer is saying? You will realize that

² Lewis, C. S., (1942). The Screwtape Letters. pp. 113,114. London: HarperCollinsPublishers.

³ Ps. 66:1, Ps. 81:1, Ps. 95:1,2, Ps. 98:4,6, Ps. 106:1

⁴ Tolkien, J. R. R., The Silmarillion. p. 17.

this is an unnecessary question. No one removes just enough static to barely make out the words--- unless, of course, we are dealing with an extraordinarily lazy person. We filter out as much static as we possibly can so that we get as clear a sound as possible. The same principle should be applied to Music and Noise. Why search for the illusive point where enough Noise is filtered out to barely discern music with an intent that is godly or redeemable? It is much more logical and profitable to search for music in which there is as little Noise as possible---none at all even. Paul speaks of this principle when he writes, everything is permissible---but not everything is beneficial (I Cor. 10:23). It is possible to make out the words of the radio announcer through a certain amount of static, but it is preferable to simply tune your radio better, a statement which born out by the fact that most people wouldn't think twice about doing exactly that. It is permissible, I suppose, to listen to music where we can barely discern the good intent through the strident Noise, but it is so much more beneficial to listen to music where the intent is clear and good and not hampered, much less contradicted, by a tumultuous, distracting disorder.

The most extreme levels of rock are just Noise. There is nothing orderly, upbuilding, or praiseworthy about it. (I am thinking here of Heavy Metal and other similar styles.) The more we do away with the chaotic and rebellious intent of Noise, the farther we go from these extremes. Now we are faced with another question. When we have done away with as much of the Noise as possible, is there anything left of rock music? You remove as much static as possible when you tune your radio. If we do the same for Noise and Music, will we remove ourselves completely from the rock genre?

Dave de Boer