

Purpose of the Disciplines

As we begin the practice of the Christian Disciplines, we need to remember that our purpose is to come to a more complete and mature knowledge of God (as far as that is possible).

- We want to draw near to God and experience the depth of his love for us.
- We want to look at our Creator with awe, wondering at his majesty and his holiness.
- We want to recognize the outworking of his incomprehensible wisdom in the world.
- We want to appreciate Christ's work in such a way that it alters what we think, say, and do.
- We want to tangibly benefit our community from what we learn.

The disciplines are a means to realize who we are in Christ.¹ They help us put away our old habits and ways of thinking.² They help us acquire the mind of Christ.³ They help make us more like our Teacher, even if we don't surpass him.⁴ They are tools to help us know God better.⁵ We don't want to become puffed up with such knowledge.⁶ We want to be built up in faith (Col. 2:7). And yet faith doesn't come without understanding. It is not blind faith. It has Christ as its object.⁷ Therefore, learning all we can about Christ strengthens our faith, deepens our love, and causes us to persevere.⁸ Faith is not emotional. It is believing a series of propositional truths about Christ, passionately.⁹ Such faith will produce obedience (Jm. 2:20), which the disciplines will promote.

Christian Love

Faith is also expressed in love.¹⁰ Yet, Christian love is not merely emotional either. It is learning to express God's love toward others in tangible ways.¹¹ It is an array of actions by

¹ Matt 13:11 it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven,

² 1 John 3:7 Little children, let no one deceive you. He who **practices** righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous.

³ Rom. 12:2; 1Cor. 2:16

⁴ Matt 10:24-25 "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher, and a servant like his master.

⁵ John 17:3 And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.

⁶ 1 Cor 8:1-3 we know that "all of us possess knowledge." This "knowledge" puffs up, but love builds up. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God. ESV

⁷ Rom 10:4 For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

⁸ 2 Peter 1:5-10 giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins. Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble;

⁹ Jn. 3:16,18; 3:36; 5:24; 6:35,40,47; Acts 10:43; 13:38-39; 1Jn. 5:10

¹⁰ 1 John 3:10-11 This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother. NIV

¹¹ 1 John 5:2 This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. NIV

which we demonstrate the love of God.¹² It is the way we treat others because we grasp the extent of Christ’s love.¹³ We love because it is the right thing to do, and because it glorifies God,¹⁴ not because we get warm fuzzies from doing it. We don’t wait for the emotion to come before we are willing to do what is right.¹⁵ If anything, our motives become suspect if we draw attention to ourselves, or if we’re after personal glory from our actions. To *God* be all glory, laud, and honor.

I’m not saying that we shouldn’t derive pleasure from serving others, or that we should ignore their humanity and turn them into objects. I’m only saying that if personal gratification is our primary motivation for Christian service, it undermines our communion with God, which flows from serving others because of *Christ*. When we expect gratitude, or recognition, we either make the ones we serve the focus of our attention, or we draw attention to ourselves. When we do either of those, Christ does not receive all the glory due him. “Whatever you do, do it as for the Lord.”¹⁶ Mother Teresa was once asked how she could sustain the love and devotion she had for the needy of Calcutta. She smiled and said, “I do not see their faces. I see only the face of my Lord.” She served him *through* them, and she served *them* through *him*. ‘Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me’ (Matt 25:40).

Discipline as a way of life

Because there are a number of disciplines, in a number of traditions, which are practiced in varied ways, I thought it might be useful to differentiate the Protestant disciplines from both Catholic and Eastern traditions. Specifically, I want to distinguish them as *practical* disciplines rather than *mystical* disciplines. We are not talking about habits designed to lead us away from the world and into an emotional or meditative state, like the Buddhist *nirvana*. We are not taking the path of Thomas Merton, or Joseph Campbell, who thought Christ and Buddha were taking the same path to a higher state of being (bliss). That’s not what the disciplines are for.

Disciplines are habits and exercises intended to improve an area of competence. They are religious in nature, because they require repetition and ritual. The American Heritage dictionary defines discipline this way: “Training that is expected to produce a specific character or pattern of behavior, especially training that produces moral or mental improvement; also, a branch of knowledge or of teaching.” The idea that a discipline is a branch of knowledge or teaching is interesting. The Greek word for “disciple” is *mathetes*, a learner. Specifically, it is learning by use and *practice*. A discipline, therefore, increases our *practical* knowledge of something. Christian disciplines increase our knowledge of God using God’s word, but only as we apply it

¹² James 2:15-16 If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? James 2:17 Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

¹³ Eph 3:17-19 that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height — to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

¹⁴ Matt 5:16 Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.

¹⁵ 1 Peter 1:15 5 but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct,

¹⁶ 1Cor.10:31; Col. 3:17,23

to the way we live.¹⁷ God says in Mal. 3:10, Do what I tell you; “prove me in this;” see that my word is true, and my promises are trustworthy. Knowledge that is applied to further the kingdom will not puff up like knowledge that is acquired only to impress others. Therefore, we don’t pursue knowledge that will not improve our fellowship.¹⁸ Nor do we pursue second-hand knowledge. Knowing that the disciplines *ought* to work for us, or *do* work for others, will not edify us. We need to practice them ourselves. We need to personally train to gain the kind of knowledge that actually benefits us, and brings us into fellowship with God and with each other. We are in pursuit of knowledge for a targeted purpose. The moment we forget *why* we’re studying, we lose all the benefits of the disciplines. We become a clanging gong (1Cor. 13:1).

Matters of Indifference

In the last lesson, we learned that the foundation of fellowship and communion is having a shared body of truth. That body of truth contains distinctives of the Christian faith. If we do not believe those things, we are not Christian. Others things are not distinctives. Not believing them only creates variety within the church, not heresy. Differences between denominations do not involve the distinctives in that body of truth, even though they produce separate congregations, and even separate practices. But we do not share the same body of truth with cults, or other religions. We do not have biblical fellowship with them. What, then, is biblical fellowship?

J. Dwight Pentecost¹⁹ says, “The essence of fellowship between God and Adam in the Garden of Eden consisted of the mind of Adam in harmony with the mind of God; the heart of Adam in harmony with the heart of God; and the will of Adam in harmony with the will of God.” The mind, heart, and will of God, is the body of truth that the bible reveals. Those who subscribe to it enter into Christian fellowship with one another, and with God. Children of light subscribe to it. Children of darkness do not. “What communion does light have with darkness?”²⁰

Now, when we break fellowship in the Body, are we arguing over differences between light and darkness, or between shades of light? The answer to that question determines whether we are maintaining proper fellowship. Distinctives that define Christianity, and separate it from all other belief systems, are called *diaphora*, matters of consequence. Everything else is called *adiaphora*, matters of indifference.²¹ Christian maturity requires us to correctly distinguish between the two. Such discernment helps to preserve our unity and our doctrinal purity.

We don’t share the same body of truth with Roman Catholicism. It isn’t just another Protestant denomination. There are distinctives in its body of truth that are inconsistent with our

¹⁷ Matt 7:24-27 "Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. "But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall."

¹⁸ 1 Tim 6:3-5 If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. From such withdraw yourself.

¹⁹ Pentecost, J. Dwight, *Designed to be like Him* (Discovery House, Grand Rapids, 1994) p. 25

²⁰ 1Cor. 6:14 – The context is marriage, but as we’ve learned, the church is under a marital covenant with Christ. The principle is the same.

²¹ *Adiaphora* means, literally, without distinction. I am using *diaphora*, therefore, to refer to Christian distinctives.

own. Its view of justification cannot be reconciled with ours. They do not believe we are saved through faith alone in Christ alone. They believe that personal works are a necessary component of a believer's justification. That means the Roman Catholic view of the cross is so substantially different from the Protestant view, that we cannot have biblical fellowship with them, even though we may cooperate with them in other areas, such as charity.

Some think Christian maturity is becoming more inclusive, enlarging our fellowship by treating more things as matters of indifference. Others think maturity is becoming more exclusive, treating more things as matters of consequence. Both views presume that distinctives are dynamic, not static. They think these things change over time. What mattered yesterday may not matter today, or vice versa. This is the problem with trying to define orthodoxy. Orthodoxy is whatever the church declares it to be at a given point in time. As the declaration changes, the definition of heresy changes with it.

With the church splintered as it is, no single body of believers speaks on behalf of the whole church, to define a unified orthodoxy. Thus, non-denominational orthodoxy is either a matter of opinion, or else local churches establish their own. The original evangelical movement sought to orchestrate this assortment of Christian beliefs into a cohesive whole, but only succeeded in turning *orthodoxy* and *doctrine* into terms of derision: “We have no doctrine but Jesus...”²² When you couple this with the anti-intellectual atmosphere of postmodernism, you arrive at the sad state of Christian theology we see in the churches today. The great truths of the faith are largely unknown by the flock, and undeclared by the leadership.

Let's assume that diaphora, matters of consequence, are *static*. Say they are declared by Scripture, rather than by church creeds and confessions. After all, the only authority that creeds and confessions carry, comes from the bible itself. Thus, only references to biblical diaphora in our creeds and confessions may constitute orthodoxy for the church. Anything else is adiaphora. Anything contrary to biblical diaphora would be biblical heresy, by definition. Say that all of this is true. How are we to determine what constitutes biblical diaphora? This is where it falls apart and the fights break out.

Determining Diaphora

To determine what is and is not diaphora, we need to ask whether a passage concerns **who Christ is**, or **what he did** on the cross. If it does, then what we conclude from that passage will be diaphora, because it impacts the distinctives in our shared body of truth. If it does not speak to either of these, then it is adiaphora. What we conclude from adiaphora must not cause us to break fellowship with another believer who concludes differently. That would be trying to bind his conscience over matters of indifference. We did away with that sort of evil after the Reformation. Such matters are best left between the believer and God.²³

²² “Evangelical” has little theological meaning. It is a label attached to Protestants and non-denominational Christians in general. As a movement, evangelicalism is ecumenical in nature, seeking to set aside theological differences in hopes of creating ecclesiastical unity. In that sense, you cannot be both evangelical and reformed, because “reformed” means advocating the very distinctives that evangelicalism seeks to set aside.

²³ This rule is derived from the weaker-brother arguments found in 1Cor. 8-10

Two hot topics that fall under adiaphora are mode of baptism (immersion vs. sprinkling), and debt (leases and mortgages for church buildings). These issues address neither who Christ is, nor what he did on the cross. Therefore, it is wrong for a church to bind the conscience of any of its members in such matters. It is also wrong for a believer to break fellowship with their church over these matters.²⁴ Whatever our view may be, it cannot constitute spiritual heresy because it is about adiaphora. And yet churches and believers continue to break fellowship because of them.

Illogical Theology

Again, this may sound well and good, but what exactly does the bible teach about who Jesus Christ is and what he accomplished on the cross?²⁵ Well, if it was perfectly clear, we wouldn't have a conflict between Arminians and Calvinists, Dispensationalists and Covenant theologians, Premillennialists and Amillennialists. Even these camps don't maintain strict boundaries. What we have in the church today is a theological soup. We have a mixture of camps, not even a competition between camps. We seldom meet a full-blown Arminian. Instead we meet 3-point or 4-point Calvinists. Church councils condemned Arminianism. But what are we to do with these hybrids between Calvinism and Arminianism – Calminians?

I mentioned in Lesson 6 that Calvinist theology is logically “tight.” Calvinists say that if you drop any of the five points, you're an Arminian. Dropping any single point would be logically inconsistent. However, we don't break fellowship over logic.²⁶ When another believer doesn't articulate a logically consistent point of view, we point it out, remind them that Scripture is logically consistent, and suggest they reconsider their position. We leave it there. I wouldn't encourage such people to teach. Unfortunately, our seminaries do. This creates another problem.

People are graduating from our seminaries with an illogical, non-traditional theology. They are licensed to speak with authority to a naïve Christian community. They write books, host radio and television programs, establish parachurch ministries, form missions, and work as consultants – often without church oversight or accountability. Media popularity and book sales are creating a de facto orthodoxy for the church that is based on the teachings of such people. Consumerism is not only driving our form of worship, and the teaching we receive from the pulpit, it is now driving orthodoxy itself! What are we to do? Who is a dependable teacher? Where is the church's voice of authority?

The Authority of Scripture

The bible has always been, and continues to be, the only source of truth and authority for the believer. Authority does not come from the church, the writings of men, or the proclamations of modern prophets. Here is where we find the utility of John Robbins' reminder that *private*

²⁴ Yet for a local body of believers to live in harmony and unity, its leaders may have to choose one view over another, even though the subject matter is *adiaphora*. So they may teach and practice immersion, and yet accept the baptism of those who were sprinkled.

²⁵ Understand that inherent in who Christ is, is the doctrine of the Trinity. Inherent in what he did on the cross is the doctrine of imputed sin. Arguments over who he is and what he did on the cross has generated entire libraries. This is far from a simple black and white rule.

²⁶ Even so, the root word of logic is *logos*, the wisdom of God. It means conforming our thoughts and conclusions to an external, objective truth.

judgment is the forgotten battle cry of the Reformation.²⁷ The bible is our only rule of faith and practice. It presents an objective, knowable, reasoned source of truth. Let me ask you the same question that Jesus asked the expert in the law: “*How do you read it?*”²⁸ Your answer to that question may change as you become increasingly skillful in handling God’s word. And so you must “be eager to show yourself to God as approved, a workman who doesn’t need to be ashamed, rightly dividing²⁹ the word of truth” (2Tim. 2:15). This craftsmanship is where the disciplines are designed to lead you, because God’s word is your weapon and your shield.

²⁷ See Lesson 6, note 5 on page 2 of that lesson.

²⁸ Lk. 10:26

²⁹ The Greek indicates the ability to cut a straight line.