

Bishop Wilson's Form of Excommunication

by J.H. Newman

The sermon emphasizes the importance of Church Discipline and the authority of Church Ministers in excommunicating sinners to bring them to repentance and reconciliation.

Scripture: Matthew 18:15, 1 Corinthians 5:1, 2 Thessalonians 3:14, Titus 3:10, Hebrews 12:5

Topics: "Church Discipline", "Excommunication"

Description

J.H. Newman preaches about the importance of Church Discipline, specifically focusing on the practice of excommunication for open sinners who refuse to repent and submit to the authority of the Church. He emphasizes that this discipline is a means of correction and restoration, not just punishment, with the ultimate goal of leading sinners to repentance and salvation. Newman explains the biblical foundation for Church Discipline, highlighting how it is a power given by Jesus Christ to His ministers to maintain order and purity within the Church. He stresses the seriousness of excommunication as a last resort to awaken sinners to their spiritual condition and lead them back to God's grace.

Transcript

It is well known that Bishop Wilson, who presided over the Church in the Isle of Man, from 1698 to 1755, was stirred up by Him who made him overseer, to revive the Primitive Discipline, and was remarkably blest in his undertaking. The principle of this discipline is, that no man who sinned openly, whether in creed or practice, should be allowed to remain in free and full communion with the Church; but should be censured, put to penance, suspended, or excommunicated, as the case might require. The following is the form he proposed to use, in inflicting the extreme punishment of excommunication.

My Brethren, and all good Christians here met together.

We are met upon a very unusual and mournful occasion.

We have hitherto (blessed be GOD) preserved, in some good measure, the ancient discipline of the Church; and notorious sinners have been prevailed upon to take shame to themselves in a public confession of their offences; and to desire the prayers of the Church for the grace that is necessary for a true conversion.

I am sorry to tell you, that there is a person now under the censures of the Church, who utterly refuseth to submit to this wholesome Discipline; being more concerned for the shame that attends his censures, than

he is for his salvation.

We have laid before you his crimes; and the Christian methods which have been made use of to bring him to a sense of his guilt and danger, and to oblige him to make what satisfaction he can for the scandal he hath given.

You will see how very long we have waited in hopes of bringing him to submit to the discipline of the Church; until at last our discipline begins to be slighted, as too weak for such offenders.

However, it ought not repent us we have waited with patience; when we consider with what mighty patience GOD himself waiteth to be gracious; and that the sentence of excommunication was never, in the primitive Church, executed hastily, nor until all other probable ways had been made use of without effect.

Now, this being the last remedy which the Church can make use of for awakening obstinate offenders, the whole Church ought to be satisfied upon what grounds, and by what authority, we pronounce this sentence; and what will be the effects of such a sentence when passed according to the will and appointment of JESUS CHRIST.

The Holy Scriptures tell us, that our LORD JESUS CHRIST, who came to seek and save His lost creatures, has appointed divers ordinances for the conversion and salvation of men.

For instance:—He has appointed Preaching, to draw men to Him; He has appointed the Sacrament of Baptism, by which we are admitted into His household the Church; and that of the LORD'S Supper, as a pledge of His love, and of our communion with Him. And lastly, He hath ordained Godly Discipline, that such who do not live as becomes their Christian profession may be reprov'd, corrected, and amended, or else cast out of His Church.

And all these ordinances are committed unto His Ministers, who are called His stewards; because to them He has committed the keys of His house and kingdom, that is, the Church; that they may admit such as are worthy, and that they may shut out such as behave themselves disorderly in His family.

JESUS CHRIST, I say, committed this power to His Apostles, and they to their successors; with this assurance from His own mouth, He that heareth you, heareth Me, and he that despiseth you, despiseth Me, and Him that sent Me.

So that you see, whosoever makes a jest of Church Discipline, makes a jest of an ordinance of GOD; and a man may as well despise the whole Christian Religion, as this power, which is as much the ordinance of JESUS CHRIST, as preaching, or the use of the Sacraments.

The most unlearned Christian will understand this, when he is asked, For what end he was baptized? He will answer, That he might thereby be made a member of CHRIST, a child of GOD, and an inheritor of the kingdom of Heaven.

But why does he believe that Baptism does give him a right to these blessings? Why; because JESUS CHRIST gave power to His Ministers to baptize all nations; that such as are baptized into CHRIST, have put on CHRIST; that is, are members of CHRIST'S body, which is His Church.

Now will not our LORD CHRIST, who has promised to own you for His children when His Ministers have admitted you into His Church by Baptism, will He not also disown you, when the same Ministers, acting in

His name, shall by the same power of the keys, shut you out of His Church?

For if you believe that they receive you into CHRIST'S Church by Baptism, you must believe that they shut you out as effectually by excommunication.

In short, every Christian, when he is baptized, is admitted into the Church upon a most solemn promise to live as a Christian ought to do; if he does not do so, those very ministers who admitted him are bound to exhort, to rebuke, and to censure him; and if these methods will not do, to excommunicate him; that is, to cut him off from the body of CHRIST, and from GOD'S favour and mercy:--not that he may be lost for ever, but that he may see his sad condition, and repent, and be saved.

The form of excommunication made use of by the Apostles of our LORD, was, by delivering offenders to Satan. Now, because this is laughed at by profane persons, who do not know the Scriptures, I will show you what that means. The Spirit and the Word of GOD has told us, that the devil has a kingdom and subjects, over whom he reigns; that is, over the children of disobedience,

That JESUS CHRIST has also His kingdom and subjects; and when the Apostles gained over any of the subjects of Satan unto CHRIST, they are said to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto GOD.

Now, when any of CHRIST'S subjects become rebellious, and refuse to be governed by the laws of the Gospel, His Ministers are bound to admonish them of their sin, and of their danger; and if they refuse to obey their godly admonitions, then to turn them out of that society of which CHRIST is the head; and consequently, such persons fall under the power of Satan again, who useth his subjects like slaves. And GOD permits him to do so, that sinners, if they are not utterly lost, may with the prodigal, when he was forced to herd with swine, see the state they are fallen into, and repent; and desire to get out of the snare and power of the devil; and be restored to the favour of GOD.

So that excommunication is made use of, not as a punishment only but as a remedy; that sinners, seeing the evil state they are in, being deprived of all hopes of salvation while they are out of the Church, may desire to be restored to GOD'S grace, from which they are fallen, that they may work out their salvation with more fear for the time to come.

But here I must take notice of one thing that often hinders the Discipline of the Church from having this good effect upon sinners. They are apt to say, If I am shut out of this Church I can go to another. Why has CHRIST more Churches than one? Is CHRIST divided? saith the Apostle. Do not all Christians profess to believe one holy, Apostolic Church?. And is not this Church a member of that holy Church? And have not the Ministers of CHRIST here the same authority from their LORD and PRINCE, as any other Christian Bishop; namely, the authority of binding, and loosing? And will not our sentence, when we proceed according to the rules which CHRIST hath given us, be confirmed in Heaven? If so, what advantage will a sinner get by going to another society, if after all JESUS CHRIST shall confirm the sentence of his former Pastor? And for want of being reconciled by Him, shall shut him out of Heaven?

It is true our Lord hath not given us any power to compel men by outward force, either to come into, or to continue in His Church; but will people for this reason despise the power which CHRIST has given us? They will hardly do so, if they know what St. Paul hath said upon this: "The weapons we use," saith he, "are not carnal, but mighty through GOD;" that is, GOD can humble the stoutest sinner, and make the power of His ministers effectual, when they use their Power for His glory, and according to His will.

You see, good Christians, that we take upon us no authority but what CHRIST has given us; what His Apostles exercised, and what we are bound by our most solemn vows to exercise.

Every Bishop, for instance, at his consecration, solemnly promises, that he will correct and punish disobedient and criminous persons within his diocese, according to such authority as he has by GOD'S word. What authority he has by GOD'S Word, you have already heard: and all serious Christians must acknowledge, that we should become adversaries to ourselves, to our Church, and our country, if we should suffer CHRIST'S discipline to fall into decay, while we are warranted and bound both by the laws of GOD and this land, to exercise it, especially when vices of this kind begin to grow upon us.

Only let us take care that we use this authority as the Apostle directs, for edification, and not for destruction.

And if we must be forced to shut this unhappy person out of the Church, let it be with the same compassion and reluctancy that a father turns his rebellious son out of his house, not with a design that he should starve and be lost for ever; but that being made sensible of the misery of being out of his father's house, he may more earnestly desire to return and be received into favour, and become a more dutiful child for the time to come.

GOD has infinite expedients to bring back sinners that are gone away from Him. We know how the prodigal son was brought to a sense of his condition by the miseries he met with when he was from under his father's care. How David's eyes were opened by a parable. How Manasseh became an instance of repentance, when in bonds. And we should not despair, but be confident rather that GOD will bless his own institutions in the hands of us His ministers, for the good of all such persons as draw these censures upon themselves. And it will be far from being severity to them, if by these means they may be brought to a sense of their evil condition, and "their souls saved in the day of the LORD JESUS."

This is the design of Church censures; and that they may have this good effect, the Apostle has given directions to all Christians not to accompany with such, that they may be ashamed. And our holy Church in her Articles, as you will find it in the thirty third Article of the Church of England, has declared in these words: That person which by open denunciation of the Church is rightly cut off from the unity of the Church, and excommunicated, ought to be taken of the whole multitude of the faithful, as a heathen and publican, until he be openly reconciled by penance, and received into the Church by a judge that hath authority thereunto.

Pursuant to which Article, the Church, in the eighty-fifth Canon, appoints, That all persons excommunicated, and so denounced, be kept out of the church by the churchwardens.

And in the sixty-fifth Canon, directs, That all such as stand lawfully excommunicated, shall every six months be openly denounced and declared excommunicate; that others may be thereby admonished to refrain their company and society, &c.

As for any temporal penalties or incapacities which an excommunicate person may be exposed to; these do not properly belong to the Church; they are no part of our sentence; they are altogether in the hands of the civil magistrate. Our sentence is purely spiritual; it is the sentence of JESUS CHRIST, and only concerns the good of the souls of those He has committed to our care. It is part of that ministry which we received by the imposition of hands, and which we most humbly pray GOD to enable us to exercise to His glory, to the putting a stop to the growing vices of the age, and to the edification of the Church of Christ,

which He has purchased with His blood. Amen.

THE SENTENCE.

It is with great reluctancy, GOD is our witness, and after many prayers to GOD for their conversion, that we proceed to this last remedy which CHRIST has appointed for the conversion of sinners.

But we hope you are not shut out, that you may ever remain out of the Church; but that you may become sensible of your errors, and return with more zeal to your Heavenly Father.

In the mean time we must do our duty, and leave the event to GOD.

In the name of JESUS CHRIST, and by the authority which we have received from Him, we separate you from the communion of the Church, which He has purchased with His blood, and which is the society of all faithful people; and you are no longer a member of His body, or of His kingdom, until you be openly reconciled by penance, and received into the Church by a judge that hath authority so to do.

When Persons excommunicated are received back into the Church.

I, an unworthy minister of JESUS CHRIST, by the same authority and power, even that of our LORD JESUS CHRIST; by which for thy obstinacy, and other crimes, thou hast been excluded from the communion of CHRIST'S Holy Church: By the same power, I do now release thee from that bond of excommunication, according to the confession now made by thee before GOD and this Church; and do restore thee again unto the communion of the Church of CHRIST: beseeching the ALMIGHTY to give thee His grace, that thou mayest continue a worthy member of the same unto thy life's end, through JESUS CHRIST our LORD. Amen.

OXFORD,

The Feast of St. John the Baptist.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/jh-newman/bishop-wilsons-form-of-excommunication/>

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