Book Review: Love That Rescues

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Strikingly, the NT does not find a problem with Jesus’ temptations. It does not seek to show the relevance of Jesus’ temptations for us by relating Jesus’ impeccability to his temptability. Questions of the metaphysics of the incarnation are proper, and the Bible does address them. But the NT writers do not struggle to express the relevance of Jesus’ temptations. Instead, they stress Jesus’ actual, historical sinlessness as his qualification to save us now. He was punished in our place as the one who knew no sin (2 Cor 5:21). Abiding in him, believers are freed from the dominating power of sin (1 John 3:5; cf. 1 Pet 2:22–24). The exalted Christ carries with him the memory of his sufferings so that he can help those who are tempted (Heb 2:18). It is the exalted, glorified Christ, who is able to save completely just because he is “holy, harmless, undefiled, separated from sinners” (Heb 7:24–28). The credibility and relevance of his temptations and victory rest on divine testimony with all its mystery, not on our ability to explain the relation between the two natures at the level of Jesus’ consciousness. (Cf. John Murray’s statement, “…it may not be possible for us to give adequate expression in our formulæ, and particularly in the formula of Chalcedon, to all that is involved in our Lord’s humanness;” Collected Writings of John Murray [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977] 2:137).

McKinley shows that the struggles of theologians to answer the questions of Christ’s temptability and his impeccability have produced many false starts. It is no wonder. The answers, as far as there are answers, are already written in Holy Scripture. McKinley’s attention to Christ’s true humanity and to the rich ministry of the Holy Spirit to him (and I would add, now from him), are vital directions to be followed in the study both of Christology and soteriology. He would have done better to follow these, without eclipsing the reality of Christ’s one personality.

Surely the mystery of godliness, “God manifest in the flesh,” is so great that we must be limited by Scripture’s statements along with what are good and necessary consequences of them. That, as much as anything, is part of the scandal of the cross today, when much theology (though happily, not McKinley’s) wishes to have a Christ “from below.” Christ was tempted for us, and he obeyed for us, thank God.

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Eric Bargerhuﬀ (PhD, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) is the senior pastor of Clearwater Community Church in Dunedin, FL, and has written on what he believes to be a relatively neglected topic in both academic publications and church practice, namely, church discipline. This work, which is Bargerhuﬀ’s published dissertation, seeks to guide readers toward a greater understanding and application of this important ecclesiological practice through historical, exegetical, and theological analysis.

Chapter 1 serves as an introduction to the overall structure of the book, and it is here that Bargerhuﬀ declares his unique contribution in rightly understanding church discipline. He begins by lamenting the seeming gap that exists between the church and the academy. This work seeks to bridge that gap in relation to this particular topic, and it does so by showing the link from a proper theology of God to the way in which the church will then think and live. One aspect of God’s character is his love that, when properly understood, leads inevitably to the practice of a “fatherly” discipline within
the church. Bargerhuﬀ states as his thesis, “The church, as an embodiment of Christ empowered by the Holy Spirit, is authorized and obliged to exercise discipline as an expression of God’s ‘fatherly’ love toward the company of his redeemed children. When the church fails to do so, it is withholding one of God’s prescribed actions for the church whereby he embodies his forgiveness, grace, and love” (p. 9). In essence, the author seeks to stress the point that discipline is not retributive in nature but rather loving, remedial, and restorative.

The second chapter delves into several historical ﬁgures from various periods of church history dealing expressly with their views on the nature of church discipline. Bargerhuﬀ begins with Augustine, a Latin Church father who dealt with several controversial issues and groups, including the Donatists. Bargerhuﬀ notes that Augustine viewed church discipline as temporal chastisement, but remedial and corrective in its purpose. However, Augustine’s viewpoint on this matter is complicated in that he affirmed the union of church and state, which made the practice of discipline a civil affair, not merely ecclesial. Bargerhuﬀ also cites the Anabaptists, particularly Menno Simons, as helpful models of discipline within the church. The Anabaptists were a group that tightly linked discipleship to the idea of discipline, and thus Bargerhuﬀ notes some extremes in their zeal for a pure church; still, many from this group sought to discipline in a loving and restorative manner. The third ﬁgure surveyed is John Calvin who, like Augustine, lived in an era where the church and state were conjoined but who nonetheless labored to practice discipline in moderation with a gentle spirit for the restoration of the sinner. The ﬁnal person cited in this brief historical analysis is Friedrich Schleiermacher. He took an altogether different approach from the ones noted previously, focusing on the unity of the church and religious experience to the detriment of God’s holiness and the purity of the church. In summary, though Bargerhuﬀ cites from various points in church history, he believes there is an overarching theme regarding the nature and purpose of church discipline: Discipline, at its heart, is an act of love that seeks to win back the sinner and protect the church from harm.

After noting several historical ﬁgures that conceive of church discipline as a loving act in its very nature and purpose, Bargerhuﬀ transitions into the exegetical warrant for his thesis, beginning with the OT. He acknowledges that one cannot be comprehensive of the entire Bible when studying a topic of this nature; thus, he seeks to utilize several OT test cases of divine discipline. First, he refers to Israel’s discipline as outlined in Deuteronomy 8. The nation of Israel is in covenant relationship with God, and as such is subject to his discipline, though it will be an instructive and remedial discipline for his people. Next, king David is considered, speciﬁcally in the context of 2 Samuel 7. Here a covenant is made, and part of this covenant includes divine discipline should David, or the line of kings to come from him, disobey God and his word. Uzziah is noted as a speciﬁc individual who experienced God’s discipline for his disobedience. Finally, Bargerhuﬀ cites from Job, Psalms, and Proverbs in demonstrating that discipline can be both communal and individualistic in nature. From this survey he concludes: “Discipline in the Old Testament is depicted both as a medium for instruction and training as well as punitive chastisement and judgment upon sinfulness” (p. 76). He rightly notes the trajectory this idea of discipline in the OT takes toward the atoning sacriﬁce of Jesus (more on that in a later chapter) and affirms that whether one’s discipline is temporary and instructive or a ﬁnal and decisive judgment is dependent on whether or not one is living in covenant relationship with God.

Chapter 4 builds upon the data culled in the previous chapter and looks speciﬁcally at the metaphor of God as “father” in the OT and how this factors into the issue of discipline. Fatherhood language is found in each of the passages commented on in the previous chapter, and though it is not a metaphor used frequently in a linguistic
sense, it holds great importance in tracing God’s work throughout salvation history. God is a father to his people, and as such he disciplines them in a way that demonstrates his steadfast love and works to sanctify them so that their full adoption will eventually be accomplished. Bargerhoff helpfully demonstrates this reality from Hebrews 12, a passage that speaks explicitly regarding the fatherly love of God shown through discipline, which functions alongside of his redemptive-historical purposes to gather a people to himself.

Bargerhoff then takes a somewhat unexpected turn in the fifth chapter as he directs his attention to penal substitutionary atonement and its relationship to church discipline. This connection is brilliantly made as he demonstrates how the punitive side of God’s punishment for his people was stayed in the OT and done away with completely in the NT, specifically through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Bargerhoff deftly works his way through various controversies surrounding the penal substitutionary model of the atonement, showing that one cannot embrace God’s love without also embracing his wrath. After signifying the validity of this model of the atonement, Bargerhoff states, by implication of Christ’s work on the cross, “insofar as church discipline is charged with dealing with sin and error in the church, its nature and purpose is not punitive retribution, but is rather instructional, remedial, restorative, and reconciliatory” (p. 134). At the cross, retribution for sins of God’s people was carried out, which means that church discipline is not a punishment but should be seen as God’s grace extended in a restorative manner.

Chapter 6, which is the longest section in the book, serves as a culmination of the author’s exegetical/theological endeavors as he moves into key texts regarding church discipline in the NT. Bargerhoff focuses specifically on two of the more well-known passages on discipline (Matt 18:15–20; 1 Cor 5:1–13) and also gives helpful insights from an additional text dealing with God’s response to churches who refuse to exercise loving discipline (1 Cor 11:17–34). The issue of “the keys,” highlighted in Matthew 16:19 and 18:17, is helpfully commented upon, giving readers an acute awareness of the seriousness this practice entails, knowing that a church’s judgment has already been ratified in heaven. As with the previous chapters, stress is laid upon the fact that discipline is a loving procedure enacted by the church, which is acting under God’s authority for the hopeful restoration of the sinner and the purification of the community.

The final chapter of this work summarizes the overarching thesis and briefly sketches the previous chapters to show the line of argument taken in defending that thesis. The author concludes with several implications of this study that, though brief, are eminently helpful from both a theological and practical vantage point.

This work is a refreshing reminder of the necessity and the benefits of church discipline, and it contains a great number of strengths that should readily be lauded. Bargerhoff helpfully overcomes preconceived cultural notions of church discipline being an act of intolerant punishment, instead demonstrating that discipline is God showing a desire to forgive, restore, and rescue in a loving way. Bargerhoff also highlights several important tangential items—though they are certainly related to his primary topic—such as gender issues in relation to the fatherhood of God, the effect of postmodernism on biblical interpretation, and the necessity of penal substitution in light of recent arguments against this particular model of the atonement. While not his main focus, each of these items has received ample discussion in recent days, and Bargerhoff rightly touches on them in a way that is not exhaustive though genuinely helpful. Finally, he successfully bridges a real gap between church and academy by writing a work that delves into serious scholarly issues while also exhorting pastors and churches to apply rightly the truth of God as it relates to discipline within the church.
Overall, I believe Bargerhoff’s thesis to be absolutely correct, and he does an excellent job laying out his case that church discipline is a fatherly love intended to rescue the sinner. I would, however, note three criticisms of the author’s work that, while remarkably minor in comparison to the overall strength of the book, should be considered. First, Bargerhoff cites several Church fathers (Clement of Rome, Cyril of Jerusalem, Athanasius, and Augustine) as being proponents of the penal substitutionary view of the atonement. While I am certainly an advocate of penal substitution and believe it to be the primary model of the atonement, as does Bargerhoff, I would be a bit more cautious here in using the Church fathers in this sense. This has been a point of controversy for some time among theologians due to the fact that atonement models developed throughout church history and substitution was one of several prominent models of the atonement in the early church. Accordingly, though Bargerhoff cites Demarest’s work, *The Cross and Salvation*, and alludes to his historical treatment of penal substitution including several of the Church fathers (p. 115, n. 7), it would be helpful to see some brief primary source work here to defend his claim.

A second point needing further clarification is Bargerhoff’s view regarding the soteriological status of those who are put out of the church. In referring to the last step of church discipline explicated in Matthew 18, he avers, “The unrepentant one is turning his or her back on God's mercy, falling away from grace by not responding to God’s forgiving hand reached out to him or her by means of the confrontation process outlined in Matthew 18” (p. 136). He goes on to offer, “In saying that they are falling away from grace, I am not suggesting that a true believer could lose his or her salvation and the inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade, kept in heaven for him or her (1 Pet 1:4). . . . My point is that the unrepentant one is rejecting the blessing of the grace of God (cf. Gal 5:4), and in so doing is straining and grieving the fellowship he or she has with God” (p. 136, n. 68). While I agree with Bargerhoff that a true believer will not lose his or her salvation, I am left wondering what he means by “straining” one’s fellowship with God. Is an excommunicated person who never comes to repentance simply straining his or her relationship with God, or is there something more going on here in a soteriological sense? While loss of salvation is not possible, is exclusion from the church body a declarative sign of the excommunicated person’s apparent unbelief and need for repentance and faith in Jesus? While I believe Bargerhoff would affirm these sentiments, as seems to be the case in other sections of the book (e.g. pp. 150–51), it would be helpful if this idea were nuanced a bit more carefully.

Finally, and this relates to the previous critique, it seems that Bargerhoff is so intent on stressing the fact that church discipline is remedial, instructive, loving, and restorative, that the idea of judgment coming through excommunication receives short shrift. Certainly no one enjoys speaking of judgment and excommunication, but it does appear that Scripture speaks of a person undergoing exclusion from a local church as being considered a “tax collector” (Matt 18:17), and an “evil person” (1 Cor 5:13); as such, this last step of church discipline appears to be eschatological in nature. Excommunication is a declarative sign in the present of God’s future and final judgment, should the person not repent of sin and believe in Jesus for salvation (1 Cor 5:5). Churches must do this humbly under the authority of Jesus, knowing they are fallible, but they must strive for faithfulness in this action. I believe Bargerhoff would agree with this assessment (e.g. pp. 150–53); still, I would like to see this aspect worked more readily into the overall development of the book.

These critiques aside, I heartily recommend this book for those who desire to gain a more accurate conception of biblical church discipline. As previously stated, Bargerhoff has succeeded in traversing the typical gap that exists between church and academy, and as such scholars and pastors alike should read this book. Churches will also benefit
as they see the thread of God’s fatherly love exercised through discipline as a prominent theme that runs throughout the biblical canon. It is my hope that the words of this book will be heeded and applied in order that local churches might consistently show loving discipline for the glory of God’s name and the good of his people.

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One of the most controversial interpretive issues in the history of Christianity is the nature of the relationship between the church and Constantine. Following the so-called Edict of Milan of AD 313, the church went from a persecuted sect to the favored religion of the Roman Empire due to the power and political influence of this self-proclaimed Christian ruler. Moreover, within a decade or shortly thereafter, the faith became publicly dominant in a culture whose rulers just a few years prior were intent on its destruction. But what did the church gain and lose in this so-called bargain? Was the Empire “Christianized” as a result of Constantine’s conversion, or did the church prostitute herself to the state in the new arrangement?

Since the time of the Reformation, an enormous amount of ink has been spilled by innumerable scholars and churchmen in an effort to answer these and related questions. One of the most prominent to do so in the twentieth century was the Mennonite theologian, John Howard Yoder. He saw the Constantinian Revolution as a paradigmatic expression of the church’s unfortunate tendency to carelessly co-operate with the powers of the world and thus “fall” from her calling as a radical, counter-cultural community. One of the more specific ways Yoder localized this “fall” was the church’s adoption of violence during and after the Constantinian era. In his view, this was a wholesale lapse from the church’s prior practice of pacifism. And while Yoder seemingly minimized the role of Constantine in this process by stressing the church’s apostasy, he constantly mentioned him by name and centered much of his own theological scholarship in this part of Christian history. Consequently, his consistent promotion of the term “Constantinian,” as representative of the church’s fatal decline into worldliness, became an enormously influential intellectual construct that every contemporary theologian and church historian has been forced to interact with.

Peter J. Leithart is perhaps the most recent to do so. In this refreshingly honest work, Leithart not only provides a surprisingly accessible biography of Constantine but also a spirited work of theological engagement. As he notes early on, nearly everything about Constantine is disrupted, so he takes pains to review the most recent historical scholarship and paint a portrait that moves beyond past characterizations—and caricatures—of the man. Leithart does not negate Constantine’s personal character flaws or his onerous complicity in the death of numerous family members, nor does he sidestep the usual—and crucial—questions of the Emperor’s relationship to the church and his motivations for acting as he did. What he provides is a fascinating composite of an exceptionally gifted general cum shrewd political animal who became a genuine Christian. With this as a major foundation of his thesis, Leithart drives home in a variety of ways the point that Constantine’s conversion literally changed numerous religious and cultural practices in the Empire. These changes in turn facilitated a transformation of the political ethos originally based on the violent arrogance of Romanitas. Over