



Pastor's Page

On the Ball

It was a dark January night in Great Yarmouth as I huddled round my trusty radio determined to drive away the winter blues. I was on a schools mission with the Saltmine Trust and for me a great way to spend this free evening was to listen to the football commentary between Manchester United and Crystal Palace. But as I followed the match one incident caused the rest of the game to fade into insignificance. During a tetchy second half Eric Cantona, the fiery Frenchman was sent off for kicking another player during a tackle. As he was walking back to the changing rooms he suddenly leapt at a fan, aiming both feet at his chest! He then threw several punches, before police, stewards and other members of the crowd managed to pull him off. Cantona later claimed that the fan, Matthew Simmons, (I can assure you we're not related!!) shouted racial insults and threw a missile at him as he walked off the pitch. The media and the football world were unanimous in their condemnation of Cantona's kung fu-style attack on this fan. He was sentenced to two weeks in prison which was reduced to 120 hours community service for the attack. Manchester United took disciplinary action and fined the player £20,000 and banned him from playing football for nine months. He was also stripped of his captaincy of the French national team and lost his place in the side.

However, that's not the end of the story because on his return from suspension in October 1995 he scored the goal that clinched a vital draw for Manchester United against Liverpool. After that his form was the best witnessed at Old Trafford for 25 years. He was outstanding as his goals won yet another League and Cup double for United in 1996. By the end of the season he had assumed the team captaincy, and scored the only goal of the Cup final before leading the team to receive the old trophy. He was also named "Footballer of the Year" by the sports writers, many of whom had argued for his exile only months before! More importantly, it was the final proof that in Manchester United Eric Cantona had found the home that had seemed so elusive in the troubled first half of his career. And, I suggest that his football redemption came about because the disciplinary action he received was meted out by a club who never lost faith in him.

Discipline and disciplinary action are not the most popular topics today in Western society, where we are encouraged to practice tolerance at every level. As Stuart Murray says in his book **"Church Discipline"**; *"Contemporary Western culture prides itself on being liberal and tolerant of everything except intolerance! The individual is responsible for deciding how to live and nobody has the right to challenge this. The idea of absolute standards and of being part of a community where there is accountability to one another does not fit well into this non-confrontational cultural climate. Churches that practice church discipline may be regarded as sects. Practising church discipline may require churches to embrace the reality of being counter-cultural."*

As Christians we do have absolute standards to follow and we do have a responsibility to help each other to live by these standards. This is a vital part of discipleship. As the writer to the Hebrews says; "God disciplines us for our good that we may share in his holiness" (Heb 12:10b) Church discipline should therefore be good news for all disciples because it comes from the God who loves us and has redeemed us. (Zeph. 3:17)

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