

Chapter 12: Safe in the communion

A sour note?

In the fourth and last question we are asked: "Do you promise to submit willingly to the admonition and discipline of the church, if it should happen, and may God graciously prevent it, that you become delinquent either in doctrine or in conduct?" This is a question about church discipline. Isn't this question really a sour note in the form? All the questions are formulated positively. They are about the complete doctrine of salvation, about the covenant promises of God, about life in the only Saviour, about loving and serving the Lord, about a God-fearing life. And now, at the very end, we get this question: will you submit willingly to church discipline, if that ever happens?

Did we not talk about steadfastness, about perseverance of the saints? Even this last question starts positively. "Do you firmly resolve to commit your whole life to the Lord's service as a living member of his church? Surely that doesn't even refer to church discipline?"

And yet – the apostle Paul warns the Corinthians: if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall. (1 Corinthians 10:12) The apostle gives that warning just after he mentions the horrifying example of Israel in the desert.

How many privileges they had received from the Lord! The Lord had brought them out of Egypt, and shown them many mercies. Paul says up to five times that they *all* received these benefits. (1 Corinthians 10:1-4) But with *most* of them God was not pleased: they perished in the wilderness. (v.5) Therefore, if you think: nothing can happen to me, I'm standing firm, I can handle attacks, then the apostle says: you'd better watch out! Look at our fathers in the desert. Things seemed to go so well. But most of them came to a bad end. So don't be too quick in saying: "something like that won't happen to me, I am strong!"

Discipline is deliverance

Is discipline the only dissonant, sour note in the harmony of the good confession? Of course, there is discipline because of sin. Were there no sin, discipline would not be necessary either. Still, if we see discipline only as a dissonance we forget one aspect, which is that discipline is very firmly connected to deliverance, and is even a part of it. To our thinking discipline is hard and strict. But if that is the only way left to save us, then we should

thank the Lord God that he will leave no stone unturned to save us from perdition.

Discipline and love are not opposites. In the letter to the Hebrews we read (this is actually a quote from the book of Proverbs): "the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." (Hebrews 12:6; see also Proverbs 3:12) That was the theme of Proverbs: that men may get wisdom and instruction, and receive wise instruction. (Proverbs 1:2,3) In discipline the Lord shows his amazing long-suffering: he doesn't simply let go of the sinner, but calls him back from his ways, in love.

It is remarkable that the second key of the kingdom of heaven, church discipline, appears in the Catechism in the section on *deliverance*. That section on deliverance *finishes* with discipline. The last word speaks of mercy, "They are again received as members of Christ and of the church when they promise and show real amendment." (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 31, Q&A 85)

Respect the office

When we make profession of our faith, we complete a certain period of our lives. It means the end of catechetical instruction, since we receive that instruction to learn to understand our baptism. It is a farewell to catechism classes. But it is not a good-bye to the office-bearers who have been put in authority over us by the Lord! Once you have become a full-fledged member of the congregation, being full-fledged does not mean that you are now free from the authority of the office-bearers! In the letter to the Hebrews we find the admonition: "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account." (Hebrews 13:17)

Nowadays there is a tendency to recognize authority only where it has been demonstrated. After all, what right would any man otherwise have to put himself in authority over a fellow man? Those in authority must be answerable to the people, and if they cannot do that, their authority is worthless. Better dismiss them, they're good for nothing.

This is also how people dare to speak about the office-bearers in the church: they'd better look at themselves, those men on the pulpit and in the consistory bench! Who gives himself the right to exercise discipline over others?

But the office and authority of office-bearers are not of human invention; they are instituted by the Lord. This is stated very clearly in the Heidelberg

Catechism, in the explanation of the fifth commandment. God requires in that commandment "That I show all honour, love, and faithfulness to my father and mother and to all those in authority over me, submit myself with due obedience to their good instruction and discipline, and also have patience with their weaknesses and shortcomings, since it is God's will to govern us by their hand." (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 39, Q&A 104)

The Lord God reigns! In reigning he makes use of the role of father and mother at home, the employer at work, the government in the state, and the office-bearers in the church.

The Lord himself reigns! It is written of the exalted Christ that he has the keys of death and Hades (Revelation 1:18) and the key of David, who opens and no one can shut, who shuts and no one can open. (Revelation 3:7)

However, this mighty Saviour has put these keys in the hands of people. (Matthew 16:19; 18:18) They *are* sinful people, but they receive tremendous responsibility. And for Christ's sake we must listen to their admonitions, for they keep watch over our souls. They are responsible to God, who will call them to account for their work in their office!

Unlimited mandate?

Have the office-bearers in the church then been given unlimited authority? Must we blindly obey them? That would be in conflict with the word of the Saviour himself, "you have one teacher, and you are all brothers." (Matthew 23:8)

The office-bearers may not degenerate into tyrants, and discipline may not be exercised against those who live holy lives according to God's Word, but discipline must be used to punish sin.

In his third letter John shows what happens when the service of office turns into a show of power, when people no longer *serve*, but start *ruling* in the church. The apostle writes to a Gaius, member of the congregation who had difficulties under the abuse of power by Diotrephes. This Diotrephes loved "to be first" and refused to receive the apostle and also other brethren. (3 John 9,10) Then the apostle John says not to take part in this, and to maintain the communion of the saints, in spite of threats and judgments. (vv. 5,6,10)

So the office-bearers have not received limitless authority. They may never abuse their power. But alas, the bad example of Diotrephes has been repeated more than once in the history of the church. We need only think of the hierarchy in the Roman Catholic Church, and later also in the churches

that resulted from the Reformation. But the Lord once again opens the eyes and makes the "office of all believers" (Belgic Confession, Article 28) function properly to clearly distinguish the church. This is how it happened in the sixteenth century Reformation, in the secession and "doleantie" of the nineteenth century, and the Liberation of the twentieth century; indeed every time there is a reformation in the church.

Discipline starts with the congregation

Therefore it is not correct to think that discipline is only a matter for the church council. Christian discipline actually starts with self-discipline. Keep in mind the fact that we must examine ourselves! Besides that we can say: Christian discipline starts with the *congregation*! The Saviour himself clearly explained the way of discipline.

When you see a brother (or sister) sinning, you must not say: "there's a job for the minister", or "the elders had better do something about that". No, when you see that someone from the congregation commits a sin, you must go and tell him his fault privately. That means: you must say to him that he may not continue to commit that sin. It may be that you will win him, that he acknowledges his sin and *forsakes* it.

It may also be that he will not listen to your admonitions. You then must take one or two others along with you and speak to him again. Only when he still refuses to listen, the road opens to the church. That means go to the office-bearers of the congregation. (Matthew 18:15-17) If only we heeded this teaching of the Saviour more often, and if only we were more faithful in approaching those who err! Much trouble and misery might perhaps be prevented. Scripture repeatedly demonstrates that we must stir up and encourage each other, "let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works" (Hebrews 10:24). Unfaithfulness in attending the church services, and people threatening to slide from grace is addressed in the letter to the Hebrews; "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching." (v.25, NIV1984)

Road to salvation

It is terrible when a sinner hardens himself, when he refuses to confess and stop the evil, the sin he has committed. The moment then arrives at which the council is obliged to keep him from the Lord's Supper. If he continues to harden himself he must eventually be cut off from the congregation. Often it is a long road that the council travels with such a brother or sister. It is also a

road of many discussions, much admonition and warning, and many attempts to bring the person back from his straying ways.

May the LORD prevent that we ever travel this road with people! But we should realize that if ever we travel this road, it is a road unto *salvation*, not perdition. It is uncharitable to just let a brother go his way. He who does not maintain discipline, will himself be punished by the LORD. Just think of the story of Eli. He was blamed for not punishing his erring sons, who led a sinful life, "his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them." (1 Samuel 3:13) A church that does not maintain discipline is itself guilty of sin. The office-bearer who does not warn and admonish will have to give account, and he will be held responsible by God.

But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, so the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any one of them, that person is taken away in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at the watchman's hand.
(Ezekiel 33:6)

After all, admonition and discipline are meant to save the person involved, and not to cast him into perdition. That's why we must be so thankful that the overseers, the office-bearers of the church, carry out a *guard service*. We must not see that as a burden hindering us, but as a special care by our Lord, with a view to our salvation. We may have the certainty and the feeling of security: if ever I go astray or stumble, the LORD will surround me with the communion of saints for my protection.

As well, he, in his loving care over my life, provides office-bearers who approach me and summon me back. The Good Shepherd is busy returning to his flock the sheep that was in danger of getting lost!

"Then remove me from your membership!"

But often it happens that a congregation member who is summoned back no longer will receive the office-bearers. People do not want to admit their sin and their persistence in evil doing. They no longer wish to hear about it either. They are fed up with admonitions. They show the office-bearers out the door and tell them: "Then remove me from your membership!"

The office-bearers are perceived as bothersome men who repeatedly come and talk about the same things. However, it is not just *office-bearers* who have been insulted. No, the Good Shepherd has been shown out the door, he who is concerned for the sheep of his flock, who wants only to pick up the lost sheep and carry it back to the warmth and safety of his fold.

But the person who acts this way is in conflict with his own confession. He had promised, "if I should become delinquent in doctrine or life (may God graciously prevent it) I promise to submit willingly to the admonition and discipline of the church." It is terrible to be the *member under discipline* in the church. It is even worse to try and escape from discipline in the church, to try to withdraw from it. He who places himself outside the communion of the LORD will never find peace and security.

Last resort

Discipline is medicine, a remedy, even at its hardest. If it comes to excommunication from the church of Christ, we still call it the "ultimate remedy". We do not say: it is only the *church* which has excommunicated; God will surely be more merciful. No, we say: this is the last resort. This excommunication is intended to shame the sinner regarding his sins. This excommunication is also intended to ensure that the corrupt member does not affect the whole body which is Christ's church. The church then prays to the Lord: "Kindle in our hearts love and zeal that, by our admonitions as well as by our example, this excommunicated brother (sister) and others who live in unbelief may be brought back to You." And, if the LORD uses the admonitions and prayers of the church to bring the sinner to repentance, then he is welcomed back into the communion of the church with joy. Then the LORD is thanked for his grace to the sinner and implored that he will preserve him in his grace till the end. For God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but desires that the wicked turns from his way and lives!

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