

Lesson 23 **CHURCH DISCIPLINE, EXCOMMUNICATION**

23.1 **Church Discipline**

According to Lord's Day 31, the kingdom of heaven is opened and shut by the keys of the kingdom, namely the preaching of the Word and church discipline. The proclamation of the gospel in itself has a disciplinary element, (general discipline). Besides the message of salvation, the LORD has also instituted measures for the specific discipline of members who stray from God's Word (particular discipline).

1. **Purpose** of Discipline

Discipline was also maintained in the Old Testament, Exodus 22:20; Leviticus 24:11-16; Joshua 7:1f. The purpose of discipline was to show the seriousness of the God's demands. The LORD called His people to be holy, and discipline was meant to preserve and maintain the holiness of the His people, Leviticus 19:1-4; Numbers 16, and to save sinners. In the New Testament, discipline serves to maintain the holiness of the Church, 1 Corinthians 11:27f; 1 Peter 1:14f. Discipline is also meant to save the sinner from eternal judgment, 1 Corinthians 5:5.

2. **Range** of Discipline

Discipline must be applied to all members of the congregation, both communicant and non-communicant. All members are called to live a holy life, and renounce the life of sin. However, particular concern and attention is given to communicant members so that the table of the Lord may not be profaned, 1 Corinthians 10:21, 22. Also,

discipline covers all aspects of life, both doctrine and conduct, Philippians 4:9.

3. **Means** of Discipline

a. Preaching of the Word (general discipline)

The Word of God is a two-edged sword, proclaiming salvation and eternal life to all who repent and believe, while pronouncing abiding wrath and guilt upon those who do not confess their sins and turn to the gospel, 2 Corinthians 2:15, 16; Hebrews 4:11f. The LORD administers blessing and curse through His Word.

b. Church discipline (particular discipline)

Properly speaking, church discipline has two aspects, excommunication and readmission. The sinner who persists in errors and a sinful walk of life must be removed from the body of Christ, 1 Corinthians 5:1f. However, a sinner who repents must be readmitted into the church, 2 Corinthians 2:6f. Specific liturgical forms have been adopted for this purpose.

23.2 **Excommunication**

Excommunication is administered out of love for the sinner, in order to move him to repentance. Therefore it must always be applied and regulated in the way of love. Every step possible must be taken to preserve the name of the sinner, and not do him any undue harm. At the same time, the table of the Lord must be kept holy. The steps of church discipline and excommunication are outlined in the Church Order.

1. Brotherly Admonitions

The keys of the kingdom are given to the whole congregation. In the case of private or secret sins, mutual admonition is always the first step in church discipline, Matthew 18:15f; Romans 15:14.

2. Secret Censure

If the initial admonitions do not lead to repentance, the matter must be reported to the elders, who, once the truth of the accusations has been ascertained, engage in repeated admonitions, 1 Thessalonians 5:12-14. If there is still no repentance, the sinner is kept from the table of the Lord. However, to protect his name and position, the matter is not made public.

3. First Public Admonition

This step is, properly speaking, the beginning of excommunication, also called the extreme remedy. Here the sin is announced and the congregation is exhorted to pray for the sinner. The congregation is involved in excommunication, and it also acts through the elders. The name of the sinner is not made public.

4. Second Public Admonition

If admonitions and prayers still do not lead to the repentance of the sinner, the elders must proceed to announce the name of the sinner along with the offence. Once again, prayer is urged upon the congregation. This time the name of the sinner is announced, and congregation is also called to visit and admonish the brother who sins. This step cannot take place without the advice and approbation of classis.

5. Third Public Admonition

In this final announcement, the date of the excommunication is announced. It usually follows one week after the final announcement. Here again, the congregation is urged to be involved in the process by means of prayers and visitations.

6. Excommunication

According to this act, the member is excluded from the fellowship of Christ, and from the use of the sacraments. While the congregation is admonished to avoid all fellowship with the sinner, he is to be admonished as a brother, 2 Thessalonians 3:14, 15. Also, continual prayers and admonitions are enjoined upon the congregation. The excommunicated person may still be saved in the day of Christ, 1 Corinthians 5:5.

7. Readmission

The goal of church discipline is to save the sinner. Therefore we always hope and pray for the conversion of the sinner. The repentant sinner is to be received into the fold with joy and gladness, after he shows consistent fruits of repentance and conversion in his life, 2 Corinthians 2:7.

Exercises Lesson 23

I. Reference Passages

Study and Review: Belgic Confession, Article 32.
 Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 31.
 Canons of Dort, III/IV. 17; V. 14.
 Form of Excommunication, Readmission.

II. Review Questions

1. What is the purpose of church discipline?
2. When may a matter of church discipline be brought before the consistory? What rule must we follow?
3. What attitude must prevail in the application of church discipline? Prove your answer from Scripture.
4. What is the task of the congregation in church discipline?
5. How does the preaching of the Word also function as a means of discipline?
6. List the different steps of church discipline.

III. Extra Questions

1. Explain the relationship of church discipline to the Lord's Supper.

2. Why are there many steps in excommunication, and only one step in readmission?
3. Was church discipline also exercised in the Old Testament? Explain your answer.