

The Sinews of the Church

Biblical Principles concerning Church Discipline

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INTRODUCTION

It was not for nothing that the Lord Jesus discussed church discipline with His disciples. The church gathering work of Christ continues to be attacked by the devil. None of Christ's congregations is spared from this. But Christ, in His love for us, has given to His congregations a procedure for church discipline. He desires that His followers continue to fight against the devil and the temptations of this life. In church discipline he provides means by which we can help and further each other in our Christian walk. Church discipline is also a means for ridding Christ's church of hardened unbelief which reveals itself when there is a blatant refusal to engage in the struggle against sin. Let it be quite clear that church discipline (in a broad sense) is a means to be used *by all members of the church*. It is not only the responsibility of the elders. It is part of being a living community which desires to show all the facets of Christ's love in the daily dealings between the various members—a love shown by concern for one another, fellowship, help, prayer, and, when necessary, loving admonition.



The sinews of the church

The title of this article about various aspects of church discipline is a metaphor taken from Calvin. He says:

Accordingly, as the saving doctrine of Christ is the soul of the Church, so does discipline serve as its sinews, through which the members of the body hold together, each in its own place. (*Instit.* 4.12.1)

Church discipline therefore holds the body of Christ together. Although Calvin only spoke of two marks of the true church (preaching and the sacraments), he nevertheless considered church discipline essential. Without discipline the body of the Lord Jesus falls apart. A good reason for the Belgic Confession to consider discipline as the third mark of the true church (art. 29).

The importance of church discipline

We have seen that Calvin compares church discipline with the sinews of the body. Discipline holds the church together. Matthew 18 (see below) shows us that even private sin can become a matter for the church as a whole. Sin, if it is not reconciled, must eventually be made known to the whole congregation. The matter becomes important for the whole congregation because it is defiled by the presence of unreconciled sin, i.e. sin that has not been forgiven. Even private sin forms a threat to the unity of the church.

There is an important point for us here. A good understanding of church discipline is an effective biblical weapon against individualism—the crumbling of the church into loose fragments. The importance of the congregation as a body, as a corporate whole, is hereby underlined.

But there is also a danger for us here. When we think of corporate entities we often think in terms of structures. I mean this: That in our fight against individualisation we often deal with matters in a structural way by establishing committees and advisory boards. We should not be surprised to learn that in some churches there are even committees for brotherly admonition. Scripture does not speak about such a thing. To put it more strongly, Scripture deals with the matter in a completely different way. Church discipline *begins* and *ends* with the personal activity of the various congregational members. It is in this way that we truly learn to experience the communion of the saints.

DISCIPLINE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Although the New Testament is quite specific concerning the procedure for church discipline, we ought to realise that discipline for God's people did not suddenly appear on the scene with the coming of Christ. God had already in the law of Moses indicated how sin was to be dealt with.

In Leviticus 19:17-18 the Lord encourages His people to admonish each other in a spirit of brotherly love:

You shall not hate your fellow-countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbour, but shall not incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself; I am the LORD.

The LORD provides here a solution for ill-feeling towards brothers in the faith.¹ Instead of cherishing revenge, brothers receive the command to openly reprove each other *in a spirit of brotherly love*. If such reproof is not given to a brother in sin, there are dire consequences. The LORD counts that sin also against the brother who has learned of it, but refused to do anything about it.

But what had to be done when a sinner did not respond to brotherly admonition, but instead kept on continuing in his sin? In Numbers 15:22-31 a number of commandments are given which throw light on the procedure of church discipline in the Old Testament.² A distinction is made between “unintentional” sin which an individual may commit, and the sin which an individual does “defiantly.” As we shall see, the second category applies to those who continue in sin in spite of brotherly admonition. The text reads as follows:

But when you unwittingly fail and do not observe all these commandments, which the LORD has spoken to Moses, even all that the LORD has commanded you through Moses, from the day when the LORD gave commandment and onward throughout your generations, then it shall be, if it is done unintentionally, without the knowledge of the congregation, that all the congregation shall offer one bull for a burnt offering, as a soothing aroma to the LORD, with its grain offering, and its libation, according to the ordinance, and one male goat for a sin offering. Then the priest shall make atonement for all the congregation of the sons of Israel, and they shall be forgiven; for it was an error, and they have brought their offering, an offering by fire to the LORD, and their sin offering before the LORD, for their error. So all the congregation of the sons of Israel will be forgiven, with the alien who sojourns among them, for it happened to all the people through error.

Also if one person sins unintentionally, then he shall offer a one year old female goat for a sin offering. And the priest shall make atonement before the LORD for the person who goes astray when he sins unintentionally, making atonement for him that he may be forgiven. You shall have one law for him who does anything unintentionally, for him who is native among the sons of Israel and for the alien who sojourns among them.

But the person who does anything defiantly, whether he is native or an alien, that one is blaspheming the LORD; and that person shall be cut off from among his people. Because he has despised the word of the LORD and has broken His commandment, that person shall surely be cut off; his guilt shall be on him.

The first thing we notice here is the distinction between “unintentional” (also “unwitting”) sin that can be forgiven and intentional (“defiant”) sin which cannot be forgiven. Many translations are unfortunately rather misleading here. The Hebrew speaks literally of sin “in error” which stands over against “sin with a high hand.” Sin committed with a high hand is sin which has been openly and intentionally committed. One raises his hand, as it were, in defiance against the face of the LORD because he consciously desires to ignore God’s commands.

The category of “sin committed in error” is further explained in Hebrews 5:1-10 (concerning the task of the high priest). This passage speaks of the sins which can be forgiven (v.1). Those who have committed sins in this category are further described using the terminology of Numbers 15, that is, as “ignorant and

¹ In this article, for stylistic simplicity, masculine terms such as ‘brother’ refer to both brothers and sisters.

² It is not my intention to deal here with the redemptive historical place of these laws, which is, however, not unimportant. Numbers 15 forms a part of the five chapters which give us virtually the only information we have on the 38 years of wandering in the desert. We may surmise that these laws were given towards the end of these 38 years in order to encourage the new generation which had grown up. The first part of this chapter is comprised of supplemental laws concerning sacrifice. From these laws the new generation could gather that they would also soon be able to bring offerings to the Lord from their own harvest. The laws which we will consider here show that the way of forgiveness for sin and reconciliation with the Lord has been opened anew. Concerning the nature of the judgment against the adult men who had to die in the desert, see my article *Het geestelijk welzijn van de generatie die stierf in de woestijn* to be found at: <http://anderson.modelcrafts.eu/articles>

misguided” and “beset with weakness” (just as the high priest himself).³ This category of sin can be summarised as sin which is committed in ignorance, but also through error in one’s human weakness.

Sin “in error” is therefore sin for which there is genuine repentance. It may be that one’s motivation during the act of sinning was not good, but through a stricken conscience one is brought to repentance. There is in this case no hardening of the heart through which one consciously and defiantly (“with a high hand”) acts against the will of the Lord.

It is important to realise that “sin with a high hand” involves intentionally pitting oneself against God’s will and refusing to repent.⁴

The way to forgiveness, which the Lord provides in this law, looks forward to the coming of the Lord Jesus who has become our sacrificial lamb. In the Old Testament it was necessary to bring a sacrificial animal to the priest, to lean your hands upon its head and to confess your sin. Thereupon the animal would be slaughtered as a vivid picture of the fact that the death of another (Jesus Christ) pays the punishment for our sins.

But God ordained in His law that this way to forgiveness cannot be granted to someone who intentionally and consciously transgresses God’s law. Such a person has no right to bring a sacrificial animal. If there is no genuine repentance (and this is the essential point) then not only can the sin not be forgiven, but the sinner must be cut off from God’s people (that is, excommunicated, cf. 1 Cor. 5:13b).

The cutting off

Cutting off from among the people of Israel implied that one’s rights as an Israelite were removed. This could be accomplished in several ways: 1) by the execution of the death penalty in the case of a capital crime (cf. Exod. 31:14); 2) in rare cases when God specifically commanded the death penalty for a non-capital crime (cf. the case of the sabbath breaker in Num. 15:32-36) or executed such a penalty Himself (e.g. when the holy things had been violated, see 2 Sam. 6:6-7); 3) by exile (the normal meaning for the expression “cutting off”). Cutting off in the sense of exile was also sometimes executed by God Himself, whether individually as in the case of Manasseh (2 Chron. 33:11), or corporately as in the case of the exile of the people to Babylon.

The most important consequence of this cutting off was the fact that admittance to the temple of the Lord (and the sacrament of sacrifice) was cut off. There was therefore no possibility of becoming reconciled with Him.⁵

It is important to realise that “cutting-off” did not have to be permanent. The example of Manasseh is pertinent here. Manasseh had clearly sinned “with a high hand” against the Lord and the Lord had therefore let Manasseh be taken away in exile. But when Manasseh finally came to genuine repentance, the Lord restored him and gave him once more a position among His covenant people (see 2 Chron. 33:12-13).⁶

Cutting off or excommunication, even in the Old Testament, is a measure which remains valid *until the sinner comes to genuine repentance*. When repentance is evident the sinner may once again be taken up among God’s covenant people.

It is also important to realise that Numbers 15 does not provide a list of sins which ought to be considered as “sins with a high hand.” This underlines the fact that what is in view is one’s motivation and not necessarily

³ The letter to the Hebrews uses the Greek translation of Numbers 15 (the Septuagint).

⁴ It is possible that someone could intentionally sin against his neighbour in this manner (i.e. with a high hand) and yet not raise a high hand against God. If he is later confronted with the fact that his action was against God’s will, and because of this comes to repentance, then his sin can be forgiven.

⁵ Admittance to the temple was also forbidden to people who had become ritually unclean, but this is quite different to cutting off because of refusal to repent of sin.

⁶ It is, however, interesting to note that the rabbinic tradition contained in the Mishnah, *Sanh.* 10:2 records that Manasseh was said not to have inherited eternal life. When challenged by Rabbi Judah on this point, the reply was that although God restored the kingdom to him, his eternal life had become forfeited. Given the Pharisaic criticism of Jesus consorting with tax-collectors and sinners, who were willing to listen to his call to repentance, one wonders whether Pharisees accepted any repentance of those who had been definitively excommunicated.

the occurrence of a very serious misdeed. Nevertheless, it is so that when the Lord wishes to underline the importance of a particular commandment in the law, he adds a phrase warning that transgression of this law leads to cutting off from His people. The message here is that this commandment should be considered to be so clear that anyone who transgresses it must be considered to be an intentional and defiant sinner (i.e., one who sins “with a high hand”). The guilt cannot be atoned (cf. Num. 9:13; 15:31; 19:13) unless the sinner comes to a clear repentance (as in the case of Manasseh). Sins which are underlined in this way in God’s law are the following:

- An uncircumcised male, Gen. 17:14
- Eating leavened bread at the Passover, Exod. 12:15, 19
- Neglecting to observe the Passover for no good reason, Num. 9:13
- Making or using priestly anointing oil, Exod. 30:33, 38
- Working on the sabbath, Exod. 31:14
- Not purifying oneself after contact with a corpse, Num. 19:13, 20 (verse 20 could be intended for unpurified uncleanness in general)
- Eating peace offerings in an unclean state, Lev. 7:20, 21
- Approaching the holy gifts in an unclean state, Lev. 22:3 (this would seem to be the same as the above)
- Eating peace offerings after the stated period, Lev. 19:8.
- Eating the fat of a sacrificed animal, Lev. 7:25
- Eating blood, Lev. 7:27; 17:10, 14
- Killing an ox, lamb or goat without bringing it to the tabernacle as a sacrifice, Lev. 17:4, 9 (this was a temporary law rescinded upon entry into the promised land)
- Sins of Lev. 18 (incest, adultery, homosexuality, sex with a menstruating woman, child sacrifice, bestiality), Lev. 18:29; cf. Lev. 20:17-18
- Dedication of children to Moloch, Lev. 20:3, 5
- Turning to mediums and spiritists, Lev. 20:6
- Not humbling oneself on the day of atonement: Lev. 23:29
- Seeing or touching the “holy” things if one is not a priest, Num. 4:17-20 (this law is to prevent the cutting off of the Kohathites who are to carry these things, cf. Uzzah in 2 Sam. 6)

The effect of the cutting off was, as we have already shown, that one no longer had access to the temple of the Lord. In addition the fact that the unrepentant sinner had to leave the country also meant that normal social contact with this person was cut off. In Numbers 15 this kind of sinner is described as someone who blasphemes the Lord. This is not to say that every sinner “with a high hand” actually blasphemes God with his mouth, but that conscious continuation in sin, ignoring God’s call to repentance, *is* blasphemy of His name (cf. Rom. 2:24). Such a person may no longer remain in association with God’s people because the precious salvation which God provides for *all* sin is hereby despised. No one may create an exception for himself.⁷

The New Testament confirms the principles concerning this cutting off of “intentional” sinners. In Hebrews 10:26-31 we read:

For if we go on sinning wilfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment, and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge His people.” It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

⁷ In Ezra 10:8 we read that those excommunicated and exiled for refusing to divorce foreign wives who worshipped other gods had their property placed under the ban. This meant the destruction of their property as an offering to God (see Ezra 10:8). The ban was used only in cases of transgression of the first commandment (idolatry). This text does not therefore show that all exiled citizens were automatically relieved of their property.

DISCIPLINE IN THE SYNAGOGUE⁸

Although our sources for the disciplinary procedures of the Jewish synagogues all date from the time after the New Testament, we can nevertheless presuppose that the main lines of synagogue discipline outlined in the sources were applicable in the first century A.D.. The Lord Jesus Himself warned his disciples that they would be banned from the synagogues (Luke 6:22; John 16:2) and John reports the lot of one man, whom Jesus healed and who was later excommunicated (John 9).

Cases of discipline were handled on every second and fifth day of the week (Monday and Thursday) by a council of three men or sometimes even by a council of scholars (rabbis).⁹ If someone refused to submit himself to the decision of this council (the *beet din*, lit. ‘house of judgement’), he was ostracised from the community for 30 days. If he did not submit within the 30 days, he was ostracised for another 30 days. The term used for this ostracism (הגדה) was cognate with the biblical word for a person ostracised from the community because of serious uncleanness.

All Israelites were bound to shun an ostracised person, although it was permitted to speak to him, to greet him, to school him and to do business with him. Nevertheless one was not permitted to come too close to him or sit next to him. Needless to say it was also forbidden to eat with him. The temple was, however, not closed to him. This duty of shunning, which the ostracism brought upon a person, did not apply to his wife or children.

If an ostracised person repented and reconciled himself with God and his neighbour, the ostracism could be lifted.

If he had not shown repentance after 60 days he was placed ‘under the ban’ (*cherem*). In the Old Testament this was the most serious form of death penalty for sins committed against the first commandment (worship of other gods or profanation of God’s property). The example of Achan shows us that, after stoning, the guilty person’s body and all of his possessions were burned in order to devote them to God as burnt sacrifice. The synagogues, however, used this term (*cherem*) (to place ‘under the ban’) for the most severe form of excommunication.

A person who had been placed ‘under the ban’ had to be shunned more completely. He was not admitted to schooling and one was not to have economic profit from him (no business dealings). The sources are silent with respect to the length of the ban and the possibility of lifting it. See the comment in footnote 6 respecting the repentance of king Manasseh.

DISCIPLINE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The procedure which our Lord Jesus Christ gave to His disciples in Matthew 18:15-20 is fundamental to any discussion of discipline in the New Testament. This text will form the basis for our discussion of church discipline. At the same time a number of practical comments will be given on exercising discipline in Christ’s church.

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

The first point we need to make is the fact that the Lord Jesus here provides a procedure for dealing with private or secret sins. Public sins ought to be dealt with in a different manner, as we learn from Galatians 2 and 1 Timothy 5:20 (see also the Can. Ref. Church Order art. 67, 69). In Matthew 18:21 we notice that Peter understood that Jesus was speaking about sins “against yourself”:

⁸ See “Der Synagogenbann” in H. L. Strack; P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, 6 vols (München: C.H.Beck, 1926-1961) vol.4.1 pp.293-333.

⁹ It is interesting that Jews were expected to fast every week on both these same days (*Didache* 8:1, cf. Lk. 18:12). It is unclear whether there was any deliberate connection between the fasting and disciplinary procedures.

Then Peter came up and said to him, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?'

The two words “against you” are not found in every translation of Matthew 18:15. In any case, the context certainly shows that we are dealing with a sin which is known to you, but which is not known to others.

In Matthew 18 we have a good description by our Lord as to how we should deal with such a situation. The Lord commands three steps:

- 1) admonish the person yourself, privately,
- 2) take along one or two witnesses, and
- 3) make the sin known to the “congregation.”

If we are confronted with a particular (unresolved) sin, it is our biblical responsibility to confront the sinner with God’s Word. The proper execution of the first step is the most difficult and, at the same time, the most important moment in church discipline. It not only requires the proper courage, but also appropriate preparation.

If we know someone who has sinned—an unresolved sin—then we *must* take action (cf. Lev. 19:17-18). But that action begins with ourselves. In order to admonish someone in brotherly love we must first take counsel with ourselves and honestly ask ourselves a number of questions.

a) Do we have the right goal in mind? In other words, are we properly motivated out of love for our brother, even though it might be someone with whom we don’t really have a true friendship? It may be that we will have to apologise for not establishing a real brotherly bond in Christ with them in the past.

b) “Am I sure that I am not living in the same or similar sin?” It seems obvious, but we must be sure not to give the slightest impression of hypocrisy. The Lord Jesus already spoke about that when he warned his disciples about taking the splinters out of the eyes of our brothers when we have a beam in our own eyes (Matt. 7:3). At the same time we may not use such a consideration as an excuse. It is so easy to think, “Oh well, I am a sinner too. Wouldn’t it be very hypocritical of me to reprimand someone else?” The Lord has not established a holy elite to perform brotherly admonitions. It is a mandate for each member of the congregation. But if we truly believe that our own sin stands in the way at the moment, then we are obliged to resolve that first, and only then to go to our brother. For that matter, if you have unresolved sins to deal with you must also withhold yourself from the Lord’s Supper table until that has been dealt with!

Step one

Once we have determined that it is, indeed, our task to go to our brother, we must first pray for him and ask God for a blessing over the visit. In addition, we need to be properly prepared and therefore, if necessary, do some Bible study about the subject we are going to address with him. It is a serious business when we go to admonish someone. Therefore, it is necessary that we take our Bible along. After all, that’s what it is all about—obedience to the Word of God. Take good note of the fact that the Lord Jesus says, “Go.” It is not a matter in which you can just send a message, nor is it something that can be handled by telephone. “Go, and admonish him personally!” The person you need to admonish must perceive that you consider it a serious matter, but be careful, for you must also go with a humble spirit. It would, therefore, be good to explain your motivations to the person you wish to address, in order to make clear that it is a matter which concerns Christ’s honour and not that we feel ourselves to be better than the other. We must act with much love, wisdom and tact!

If we do not succeed in convincing our brother at such a visit, the Lord Jesus provides a second step. We must take one or two witnesses. And yet we ought also realise that nothing should prevent us from trying alone a second or third time. After your first visit the brother has opportunity to consider what you have said. You could make an appointment for a few days later to talk about it again. Only after it becomes clear that you will not be able to convince your brother, or if he stubbornly refuses to listen to you, must you proceed to the second step.

Step two

This step requires a careful selection of one or two brothers to come along and to try again. It is possible that after only one visit it becomes clear that no new ground will be broken with the addition of witnesses. On the other hand, the words of the Lord Jesus do not exclude repeated visits.

Step three

When we come to taking the third step we are confronted by the question as to what the Lord Jesus meant by the words “tell it to the congregation.” We should be careful here. It is too simplistic to just conclude that this means the consistory. That is not what the Lord Jesus is saying. On the other hand it does not do justice to the text if we conclude that we should immediately go ahead and publish all the details of the case to the whole congregation.

We should return, for a moment, to the context of the text. A few observations will suffice. To whom did the Lord Jesus speak these words? To His disciples. What did He mean, then, by the word “congregation?” Certainly not the church congregation as we know it. The New Testament church didn’t even exist at that time! It only came into existence after Pentecost. The Lord Jesus said to His disciples that if it came to such a point that one of them would not listen to the admonition of another (with witnesses), then his sin must be exposed to the whole gathering of disciples. He must be treated (unless he repents) as a heathen and tax collector.

It is remarkable that the Lord Jesus provides his circle of disciples with a discipline procedure which extends all the way to cutting off / excommunication. Jesus does not wish His disciples to bring such a discipline case to the elders of the synagogue in order that the sin be formally dealt with there and, if necessary, the sinner be formally excommunicated from his synagogue. This shows that the time had already come for a form of separation from the Jewish synagogues which did not wish to accept Jesus.¹⁰ We read in the Gospel of John how the Jewish synagogues even misused church discipline to excommunicate believers in the Lord Jesus (see Joh. 9:22; 12:42; 16:2)!

But how must we deal with this third step today? We must bear in mind what the Lord Jesus *later* instituted through His apostles, namely elders to be shepherds over His various congregations. These shepherds or elders have the responsibility to take care of the congregation. They must rule the congregation. According to Scripture they “watch over our souls” (Heb.13:17)—and do that with the authority of the Lord Jesus. That is why it is necessary for us, in this third step, to report our brother to the consistory. The elders must take on

¹⁰ John 16:2 shows us that there was not yet a formal separation. That would only come after Pentecost when every synagogue would be confronted with the question as to whether they would accept Jesus as the Messiah. If a synagogue did not accept Jesus, then (after Pentecost) a new church of Jesus Christ would be instituted (cf. Acts 18:5-8). Before Pentecost (when it was not yet possible to formally institute churches of Christ) Jesus provided the discipline procedure for the circle of His disciples as a step towards this formal separation. This was necessary because of the Pharisees’ rejection of Him as the Messiah and the fact that their doctrine closed the kingdom of God to men (Matt. 23:13; cf. Lk. 11:52).

Jesus had in fact already indicated that the confession of Him as the Christ would be the deciding factor for the legitimation of synagogues as churches of God when Peter made this confession. Jesus had taken his disciples away up north to the region of Caesarea Philippi and had begun asking them who people thought that He was. When Peter confessed that Jesus is the Christ, Jesus announced that He would build His church upon the rock (*Petra*—not *Petros*, the name of Peter) of this confession. He gave to the disciples the keys of the kingdom of heaven. That Peter is here a spokesman for the disciples is clear from Matthew 18:18 where Jesus repeated this grant using the plural form of “you.” The word “disciples” here is quite general and not restricted to the apostles (cf. Matt. 18:1). Jesus is speaking of the group of people (the “*ecclesia*,” v.17) who followed Him and His teachings.

That Jesus speaks here of “keys” is very significant. The Pharisees had closed the kingdom of God to men (Matt. 23:13; cf. Lk. 11:52), so Jesus gives the keys of this kingdom to His disciples who confess Him as the Messiah. Their preaching will bring men into the kingdom, not that of the Pharisees. The statement concerning “binding and loosing” refers to the forgiveness of sins which forms the centre of Christ’s Gospel (as is clear from the parallel passage in Joh. 20:23). The preaching of Jesus’ Gospel of forgiveness of sins in Him is the key which opens the door to the kingdom of heaven. The process of discipline which Jesus gave to the circle of disciples in Matt. 18 is the key which shuts the door to the kingdom of heaven for those who refuse to repent of their sins (cf. Heid. Cat. LD 31).

Only later (after Pentecost) did Jesus actually formally institute local churches and give them office bearers (elders) to shepherd the sheep and exercise authority in His name. In Matthew 18 Jesus forms a sort of *ecclesiola in ecclesia* (a small church within a church).

this matter and continue to try to bring the brother back from his sinful way. Reformed churches have together established a procedure for handling such admonition. We find that in the (Canadian Reformed) Church Order (Art. 66-73). If the consistory, as the result of its official visits, can not bring such a brother to repentance, then it is forced to withhold him from the Lord's Supper. This immediately shows how dangerous such a sin has become. The guilty person puts his own forgiveness and salvation on the line.

The congregation is not yet advised of the situation when someone is withheld from the Lord's Supper. The consistory still tries to bring the sinner to repentance without having to publicly expose his sin. Yet, if no repentance results, the consistory must proceed to the excommunication of the brother from the congregation of Christ. This is very sad, but failure to repent from a sin, whatever that sin might be, puts our complete salvation at risk.

The announcements to the congregation

Before someone is actually excommunicated from Christ's congregation there is a procedure consisting of three announcements (cf. *Book of Praise*, pp.607-614). Gradually the congregation is informed about the sinner and his sin (in accordance with the command of Christ in Matthew 18).¹¹ In the first announcement the congregation is informed that there is a brother with whom the consistory has been dealing. The nature of the sin (e.g. which of the 10 commandments is involved) is also made known and the congregation is called to prayer so that the (non-identified) brother might, as yet, come to repentance. At the second announcement the name of the person involved is also made known so that the congregation can seriously admonish the brother and pray specifically for him. Before such a second announcement can be made the classis must give its approval. This is a safety measure to ensure that the accused receives just treatment, that is, in order that his church membership not needlessly be terminated.¹²

The congregation is now really put to work. What needs to be done? First of all specifically to pray for the sinner. The name has been made known to the entire congregation. The children in the congregation have also heard it. It is thus most appropriate to pray for this straying brother at the meal table with the entire family present.

In the second place the whole congregation is called upon "to admonish this sinner continually in love" (*Book of Praise*, p. 611). This must take place with brotherly love and wisdom. Not everyone has to do this in the same way. We should take account of the following:

Two things may be concluded about the erring brother.

1) The fact that it has come to such an announcement means that the person in question has up to this point not said that he no longer wishes to be a member of Christ's church. Otherwise his membership would have been terminated by a different announcement.¹³ There is, evidently, still a certain bond with Christ's church—the same church of which you are a member. Even though the consistory has not yet been able to bring this person to repentance, he does not wish to break all ties. What an office bearer has not been able to achieve (perhaps because of the authoritative nature of his visits on behalf of the consistory and because of the negative view some people have of a consistory) may often be able to be accomplished by the loving and humble admonition of a simple brother.

2) Such an announcement is always made known in writing beforehand to the person concerned. The sinner knows that such an announcement will be made and has read the contents of it. In other words, he now awaits the reaction of the congregation (which is still his congregation).

¹¹ Although this procedure is not mentioned in q/a 85 of the catechism (printed in 1563), it was already known from J. à Lasco's *Forma ac Ratio* of 1550 (see J. Becker, *Gemeindeordnung und Kirchenzucht: Johannes a Lasco's Kirchenordnung für London (1555) und die reformierte Konfessionsbildung* [Leiden: Brill, 2007] 104-105).

¹² The classis functions here to check the procedure followed and not as a judicial court (see J. Kamphuis, *Om de Heiligheid van de Gemeente: De Kerkelijke Tucht* [3rd ed., Kampen: Vanden Berg, 1986] 185). The classis only functions as a judicial court when the (alleged) sinner himself appeals to the classis. At this point the classis may require both parties to be heard in order to make a judicial pronouncement. The seventeenth century church political expert G. Voetius loses sight of the distinction between the judicial function of a classis in an appeal and the checking of procedure for permission for the second announcement. When permission is asked for the second announcement Voetius advises the classis to send delegates to admonish the sinner in the name of the classis (*Pol.Eccl.* pars 3, lib.4, p. 919). This goes much further than the 'advice' spoken of in the church order!

¹³ For a discussion of the procedure for withdrawals see my article *Reformed Church Polity concerning Withdrawal* to be found at <http://anderson.modelcrafts.eu/articles>

In the nature of the case, brothers who know the sinner personally will be able to approach him in a more natural way. If we have never really known the erring brother, then there can be a feeling of helplessness. Wisdom and discernment are necessary. We need to bring the matter in prayer before the Lord. It is clear that we may not stand still and do nothing. Everybody has been publicly called upon to admonish the brother. If wisdom dictates that a personal visit is not really the thing to do, then we may consider whether or not writing a letter would be a good idea. We may then need to admit that we have never really gotten to know the brother properly and even that we feel regret about this. And indeed, if we do not know the brother well ourselves we ought to be very careful in what we say. We do not know the whole situation, but have only been given a summary of the brother's sin. We ought to admit this to the person concerned. We might consider telling the brother of our own struggle against sin, and of the joy in God's forgiveness, how God is at work in our own lives. In this way we attempt to encourage the brother not to let go of his faith in God, but to be bold enough to follow the Lord with his life. In any case we will need to assure him of our intent to receive him into the fold with open arms when he shows genuine repentance and a true desire to trust in the Lord.

There are no hard and fast rules for approaching a brother in sin. That much is clear. But the calling to admonish such a brother which comes through the announcement of the consistory may never be ignored. Jesus Christ calls upon all of us to follow Him. He died for us all. He is the one calling us to brotherly admonition because He desires that every believer be used to lead the straying sheep back to the flock.

Only when the consistory has determined that this admonition from the whole congregation has not moved the sinner will the third announcement be made. In this announcement the date is given when the person will actually be excommunicated.

Through these three announcements the church fulfils the command of Christ to publish the name and the sin of a member who refuses to repent. The procedure of these announcements takes account of the task which Christ has given to the local elders after Pentecost. This careful procedure has been laid out for a brother who desires to remain a member of Christ's church, but of whom the consistory is convinced that he, because of hardening in sin, can no longer remain a member. This procedure has been arranged in order to take care that no one is unjustly excommunicated.¹⁴

The excommunication of a brother from Christ's church is always a very sad affair. But we must not attempt to hide it or mince words by presenting the congregation with a short business-like announcement. The sadness of excommunication *must* be apparent. Only if the congregation sees and feels what the consequences of excommunication are, can it be motivated to pray for the person concerned. Both joy and sadness are to be shared by the members of Christ's church (Rom. 12:15).¹⁵

“As a Gentile and a tax collector”

The form for excommunication uses the words which Christ teaches us in Matthew 18:17 that the excommunicated person be “as a heathen and a tax collector.” This phrase shows us how the congregation is to treat this brother.

At the outset it should be noted that Jesus (and Paul), when discussing discipline, are specifically dealing with those who call themselves Christians and yet at the same time are living in unrepented sin. They are *not* talking about people who have not yet come to faith in Jesus Christ, nor are they talking about persons who may have left the church because they have discovered that they do not possess such faith. These people do *not* call themselves Christians. The concern with Jesus (and Paul) is with so-called ‘brothers’ who want to combine a verbal profession of faith with a life of deliberate sin. Such ‘sin’, however, may also be the sin of heresy (cf. 1 Tim. 1:18-20).

¹⁴ It is interesting to note that in the church order of the French Reformed refugee congregation in London, drawn up in 1578 by Rev. le Maçon, each of the three announcements were to be made only two weeks apart! See J. Becker, *Gemeindeordnung und Kirchenzucht: Johannes a Lasco's Kirchenordnung für London (1555) und die reformierte Konfessionsbildung* (Leiden: Brill, 2007) p.425.

¹⁵ Voetius argues that the form for excommunication approved by the churches can be replaced by a special form drawn up with the specifics of the occasion in mind (*Pol.Eccl.* pars 3, lib.4, p. 920). This replacement form may be drawn up by a synod, classis or even by the consistory itself. However, in the historic example which he provides (from 1620), both the officially approved form *and* a special announcement drawn up by the consistory were read to the congregation.

What does Jesus mean? Over the last century, especially in the Netherlands, it has become popular to explain this verse as follows: The Lord Jesus means that we should consider such a person as an unbeliever. He has become an object of evangelism. We must deal with this person in the same way that the Lord Jesus dealt with sinners and tax collectors.¹⁶

No matter how attractive this interpretation may be, we must make a number of critical remarks. In the first place the comparison with Jesus' association with sinners and tax collectors is false. Jesus associated expressly with those sinners and tax collectors who were willing to listen to Him. The sinners and tax collectors whom He gathered around Himself wanted to hear His words, the words concerning forgiveness and reconciliation with God.¹⁷ A brother who does not want to listen to Scripture, nor to those who bring the Word of the Lord Jesus, namely the elders, is in a completely different position.

In the second place, we should note that Jesus did not say, "let him be to you as the sinner and the tax collector." He said, "let him be to you as a *Gentile* and a tax collector." Now we all know how even the Lord dealt with Gentiles. He avoided them. He said that He had come for the lost sheep of Israel. Consider how He dealt with the Canaanite woman who begged Him concerning her daughter (Matt. 15:21-28). The Lord Jesus did not answer her *a word!* He even expressed agreement when His disciples wanted to send her away, "It is not good to cast the bread for the children to the dogs!" Only after she had shown her great faith in Him did He comply with her request.

Now it is not the intention of the Lord Jesus that we should accuse the excommunicated person of being a heathen. Many excommunicated sinners do not want to abandon their faith—that's why they so often seek membership in other church communities. They have not been excommunicated because they don't believe in anything anymore, but because they did not want to repent from a particular sin. Jesus says, "let him be to you *as* a Gentile (heathen) and a tax collector." He mentions two categories of people whom everyone in those days avoided. Jews did not associate with Gentiles. Nobody associated with a tax collector. It was not just that they were known to enrich themselves through usury, but more particularly that they were considered to be traitors for collecting taxes on behalf of the Roman occupiers.

We come to the conclusion that the Lord Jesus must have meant "avoid this brother. Don't associate with him. Behave just as you would to a Gentile and a tax collector." And we know from Scripture that true Jews (like Peter) would not even dare to eat with Gentiles (Acts 10:28).

The clinching argument for this (traditional) interpretation is the comparison with other passages of Scripture. In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul has just admonished the congregation for not excommunicating someone who practised a form of incest. He explains to them how they must not associate with such an erring brother and, at the same time, he clears up a misunderstanding.

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with immoral men; not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But rather I wrote to you not to associate with any one who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber—not even to eat with such a one. (1 Cor. 5:9-11)

Note that we are not dealing here with sinful people outside of the church, but with those brothers who think that they can continue to live in sin. They are the ones we must shun, with whom we may not even eat. When Paul says "not even to eat with such a one" he is referring to the common translation in his day of Psalm 101:5—"With the man of haughty looks and arrogant heart I will not eat!"¹⁸ That this command is not an exception, is clear from 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15.

¹⁶ See, for example, J. van Bruggen, *Matteüs* CNT (2nd ed., Kampen: Kok, 1994) 350. For the traditional interpretation see, for example, Calvin's commentary on Matthew 18:17.

¹⁷ Luke even tells us that tax collectors repented at the preaching of John the baptist (Lk. 7:29-30). They were thus looking forward to the Messiah and the coming of the kingdom.

¹⁸ This translation is based on the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament often used by the apostles.

If any one refuses to obey what we say in this letter, note that man, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not look on him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

In this text we also see a couple of additional elements that are important when we are dealing with someone who comes under church discipline. In the first place, even when someone is placed outside of the communion of the church a certain brotherly bond remains. Paul says, “warn him as a brother.” The sinner who is placed outside of the church is not dealt with as all other heathen. He has been baptised. He has been subject to the preaching of the Gospel in the midst of the communion of Christ’s church. This separates him from all other people in the world. He is not an object for evangelism, but for *brotherly* love.

In the second place, the fact that we must shun such a brother does not mean that any further contact is absolutely forbidden.¹⁹ We may admonish him and attempt to convince him of his sinful way. A preparedness to discuss faith life and his sin must remain the prerequisite for ongoing contact.

In the third place the shunning of the brother ought to bring him to shame. This third element also brings us to our final point.

The anticipated result

The Lord has given us this procedure of church discipline in order to try to reach the sinner. In Matthew 18:12-14 Jesus tells us the parable of the lost sheep. The shepherd stops at nothing to try to bring that one lost sheep back to the fold. The procedure for church discipline which follows has this same focus. First the straying sheep is admonished by several different persons. Finally, if, in spite of the many admonitions, the sheep does not repent, it is cut off. But even this action has as its purpose to convince the sinner to return. In 1 Corinthians 5:5 Paul lets the sinner be delivered to Satan “for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” By avoiding the sinner in our social activities (e.g. birthday parties, weddings, etc.) we shame him. In this way the *eternal* consequences of his actions become clear. The pain that is felt by the church members who must discontinue contact, as well as the pain of the sinner who is eliminated from the social circle, cannot be compared to the pain of an eternal separation. *This is a fact that must truly sink in.* For in this manner we still try to call the sinner back to salvation in Christ and to the communion with His Church. By the social shunning the sinner receives a foretaste of the eternal separation that will take place if he does not repent. It is never pleasant to consider such matters, but the Lord does give this demonstrative warning as the last weapon with which to call someone back. This is the method which the Lord Himself has prescribed. However, it is also a method which can be abused and was certainly abused in Jesus’ own day.

The Pharisees condemned Jesus for eating with tax-collectors and sinners (cf. Mark 2:15-17). In a way, their condemnation was understandable. Jesus was eating with those people who ought to have been shunned. And yet, in their condemnation the Pharisees had missed the point of church discipline. Shunning is *not punishment* for remaining in sin, it is intended to be a *loving call to repentance*. In rebuking the Pharisees’ condemnation, Jesus pointed them to the need for loving compassion in discipline (Matt. 9:10-13). The sinners and tax-collectors with whom Jesus associated were hanging on his lips. They were looking for a way back to God and keen to hear the message of a Gospel of forgiveness. It is clear that the Pharisees were not helping them to find that way back. Their social shunning was not conducted in loving compassion, actively seeking the repentance of the sinner (Lk. 5:30-32). As such it was condemned by our Lord.

It is clear then that social shunning can only work effectively if a number of factors are kept in mind.

In the first place, we ourselves must be motivated by true brotherly love for the sinner. Such a sinner must also be aware of this love and should be able to notice it. He should realise how difficult it is for us to follow the direction of our Lord in this matter, especially if a close friendship or family relationship is involved. We certainly do not “shun” a person because we take so much pleasure in it, or because *we* think it is such a

¹⁹ The church doors are not closed to someone who has been excommunicated. The worship services are public. See further G. Voetius *Pol.Eccl.* pars 3, lib.4, pp. 923-24 who not only confirms this but adds that this is the view of all Reformed people. Beza, however, judged that those who had been excommunicated ought not to be admitted to the worship services (see T. Beza, *Een godvruchtige en gematigde verhandeling over de ware excommunicatie en het christelijke ouderlingschap*, transl. by D. van Dijk (Goudriaan: De Groot, 1975, original edition 1590) 141.

suitable thing to do. No, we “shun” him because Christ has commanded us to do so and we have learned that above all we must love our Saviour and Redeemer and follow Him. No matter how difficult it is, we trust that He will bless His own established procedure if we put it into practice to His glory. But we do not have to hide the pain that this causes us, or to put it more strongly, the sinner must notice that we *miss* him and continue to *love* him. This means that we will try to explain our behaviour and “shunning” to the sinner in a very humble and loving manner. I have placed the term “shunning” in quotation marks on purpose. It is indeed true that such a sinner can no longer participate in the social activities of the other congregational members. But contact with this brother must continue to be sought. He must understand that there is real love and concern for him as a *fellow brother*. Wisdom will dictate that when we visit such a brother or have them over for coffee, we will not always speak about exactly the same subject. Still the discussion must make clear that there continues to be fraternal love in spite of the social restraint. We cannot permit ourselves to refrain from speaking about the Lord and His Church—although we do not have to hit him over the head with the same heavy reprimand every time.

Secondly, it is important that these aspects of our social intercourse with the brother are supported by the whole church community. Only if he notices that all his brothers in Christ feel and deal the same way with him will he begin to understand what the love for Christ in the lives of the true believers must mean. Only then can he begin to comprehend that the matter has *eternal* consequences.

In the third place, earnest prayer must be made by the congregation that this brother may repent, that the Lord will bless His own prescriptions regarding church discipline and that He will let it take effect in the heart of the person concerned.

There is, in conclusion, still one more purpose for excommunication from the Church of Christ and the consequent social shunning. It is, as Paul states in 1 Corinthians 5:6-8, the purification of the congregation of Christ. When we deal with discipline in this manner we all come to a realisation of how holy God is and how important His salvation is for our lives. Church discipline is also a sober warning for all of us about the hellish consequences of unforgiven sins. It makes us shrink in humility when we realise that we are granted permission to appear before God’s holy presence only because Christ has taken our punishment upon Himself. We continue to grow in our awe of God’s grace. To God accrues all glory and honour for the wonderful salvation which He has given us through the blood of His Son. May He restrain us from ever being unthankful for this marvellous gift.

Additional Reading

R. D. Anderson, “Reformed Church Polity concerning Withdrawal of Church Membership” to be found at: <http://anderson.modelcrafts.eu/articles>

J. Kamphuis, *Om de Heiligheid van de Gemeente: De Kerkelijke Tucht* (3rd ed., Kampen: Van den Berg) 1986.