

VIII A WOUNDING ENEMY OR A HEALING PHYSICIAN?

(SOME REMARKS ABOUT CHURCH DISCIPLINE AND ATTESTATIONS)

Maintenance?

Church discipline is a very important topic. It is called the third mark of the true church according to Article 29 of the Belgic Confession: "It exercises church discipline for correcting and punishing sins." Yet nowadays church discipline seems to be neglected everywhere. Already a century ago A. Kuyper complained that church discipline was going out of practice, "We do not exaggerate if we state that in the circles of the modern, the ethical, and irerical wing, church discipline is simply abolished and does not exist any more."¹

Now, a hundred years later, we have even more reason to complain. In some so-called Reformed circles it is said that the church may give a *iudicium* (disciplinary judgment) but the church must be very careful in connecting consequences to it. The consequences of a *iudicium* are always sentences, which lead to the execution of a judgment, and so would be the maintenance of church discipline.²

Former ages

As far as the period before Kuyper's time is concerned, was church discipline not for several ages the poor cousin of the Reformed Churches? Within a century after the Reformation of the 16th century, Rev. Otto Belcampius of Amsterdam complained that the whole country was full of idolatry and atheism. He wrote, "one considers heaven a fairy tale and a decorated fable. They consider hell as an idle dream."³ Then he asked the question, "Was there ever an age before in which the lofty and Almighty name of God was used so shamefully and frivolously? Cursing and swearing falsely is so common that it is not only heard from profane, worldly people, but also from members of the church. Was there ever before a time when the day of the LORD, the day of holy rest, was so despised, so profaned by all people in all places, as it is done now in this century?⁴ Then Belcampius arrives at the question, "If it is so terrible, why does the consistory not oppose this at all?"

The well-known Rev. Jacobus Koelman asked the same question. Quoting Calvin, he starts by saying that doctrine is the soul of the church and discipline is its strings. But what about church discipline in Amsterdam? Koelman formulates the following accusation, "The consistory is only concerned and active with the great sins, which are also punished by the government. But for the rest, the consistory does nothing. In the large congregation of Amsterdam nobody has been censured for 18 years, let alone excommunicated. Is that not a shame?"⁵

What Koelman said was indeed true. It appears that the last case of church discipline — in a long time — was in the year 1659. There was only a "blacklist" of those who were kept from the Lord's Supper, but there was no progress in church discipline. The list was only made for a reference in case someone asked for an attestation. For the rest, nothing was done. Besides, many people were quite unconcerned if the consistory denied them the Lord's Supper.

The notary Rosa had a child by his maid, but he did not at all mind the interdiction of the Lord's Supper. He reacted that the whole matter of church discipline was nothing else but hypocrisy and foolish grandeur. When visited at home he declared his intention to ignore the decision of the consistory and to participate in the Lord's Supper, "even if the executioner would stand behind him." Finally the consistory gave in after Rosa promised he was willing to abstain from the Lord's Supper three times.

It is remarkable that the consistory was actually only active in those cases in which the government also punished. A certain Styntje was placed by the consistory in the so-called spinning house — actually a prison for women. That was done for drunkenness and theft. Sophia Broeckman, who committed adultery when her husband was in Brazil, kept her company. Grietje Everts was scourged and banished for a period of six years because of theft. Another sister of the congregation was branded, being a whore. Also banished but without first being scourged was Geertrui Willingh who had stolen the basin from the Lord's Supper table. Another woman was placed on the scaffold with a plate on her breast, inscribed with the message, "This woman has falsely deceived the deacons of the Reformed Church."

Sometimes the ladies were locked in the spinning house on the request of the family, for no other reason that they were of "bad behaviour." In some cases more details were delivered. For example, Barbar Stroobach was imprisoned on the request of her mother because of drunkenness, and Catherina Daniels on the request of the deacons because she was said to be undisciplined and a slanderer.

Men were also punished by the consistory. Albert Hermans was placed on the scaffold because he kept a brothel. Hidde Tjerckx was taken in custody in the act of visiting a brothel. He apologized, saying that he did not know that it was a whorehouse. But he and the whore herself were put in chains.

It was also possible to escape going into custody. A member of the church who was a lawyer had apparently committed the same sin as Hidde Tjerckx, but he could buy his way out. He had to pay 300 guilders to the deaconry and promise that he would not practice law for one year. Joost Janszoon Cock, former keeper of the spinning house, on the other hand, was unable to pay the required sum and he was imprisoned.

Sometimes the consistory punished in a strange and cruel way. A man who had committed corpse robbery in 1677 was put into the pillory, clothed in a shroud with one foot in a coffin. The plate on his breast had the inscription, "Robber of dead."

In connection with all these cases there is a special case which I must tell you. That is the story of Jan Klaassen and Katryn. I think everybody knows the names, but do you also know that they really existed? Although church discipline was almost abolished in that time, Jan Klaassen and Katryn were censured in Amsterdam in 1686. In several places in the capital of Holland Jan Klaassen presented his puppet show. He amused many people with what was actually the representation of his own marriage life, which was far from ideal. He was not the only one who was guilty. His wife Katryn was a real Xanthippe and she was also a drunkard. The result was a complete breakdown in their relationship and Katryn left her husband. Then we read in the minutes of the consistory, "Katryn Pieters, seedy-looking, in drunkenness and living in a separate household, will be summoned. Her husband Jan Klaassen will also be summoned." But Katryn did not appear because the caretaker could not find her at her address. She had already moved. Jan did appear at the consistory meeting. He explained that his wife had left him and, as for himself, he was not willing to be reconciled with her. However, the following week both of them did appear before the consistory. Several evil doings were then mentioned. Jan had meanwhile committed

adultery and his wife continued to live as a drunkard. The consistory decided to place them under church discipline. After they were notified Jan and Katryn disappear from the minutes of the consistory for good. But they did not disappear from history. They never dreamt that they would become one of the most popular and well-known couples in Amsterdam!⁵

A Scriptural matter

Why do we tell all these stories? To stress that not only outside the Reformed Churches, but also in the circles of the Reformed Churches themselves, church discipline was either neglected or misunderstood. Deformation of the church meant time and again also deformation of church discipline. We have to rediscover that church discipline is really a Scriptural matter, which should not be lacking in the church of Jesus Christ.

It is not for nothing that it is confessed in Article 29 of the Belgic Confession as one of the marks of the true church, because it is based on God's Holy Word. In our edition of the *Book of Praise* no prooftexts are given, but in the Dutch edition of the "Gereformeerd Kerkboek" some texts from the New Testament are mentioned. I will come back to that but I first want to say that also texts from the Old Testament can be quoted to prove the necessity of church discipline.

Of course we have to bear in mind that during the old dispensation church discipline worked in a somewhat different way, especially with regard to what we confess in Article 25 of the Belgic Confession, where we read, "We believe that the ceremonies and symbols of the law have ceased with the coming of Christ, and that all shadows have been fulfilled." But in the same article we also confess that their truth and substance remain for us in Christ and that we still use the testimonies taken from the law to confirm us in the doctrine of the gospel.

There was not a sharp distinction between civil law and church polity in the old dispensation, so I will not refer to texts which deal with sins that are to be punished by the government. However, there are also other texts. I will start with Exodus 22:20, "Whoever sacrifices to any god, save to the LORD only, shall be utterly destroyed." That means, the sinner must be excommunicated, but in Old Testament terms it meant he had to die." Capital punishment was also involved when someone in Israel blasphemed the Name of the LORD, according to Leviticus 24:10-16. We can also point to Deuteronomy 13:6, 22:24 (in the case of violation of one's neighbour's wife) and 24:7 (concerning theft by one of the brethren). In all these cases discipline is to be transferred in New Testament terms as *excommunication*.

There are even more rules, however, concerning church discipline in the Old Testament. For instance what is written in Deuteronomy 19:15, "A single witness shall not prevail against a man for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offence that he has committed; only on the evidence of two witnesses, or of three witnesses, shall a charge be sustained." It is remarkable that in this text the word "any" is used three times: any crime, any wrong, any offence. In other words: there are no exceptions! Also in the Old Testament the aim of church discipline is "to put the evil away from among you," that is, from among the congregation. In this respect see also Deuteronomy 17:7 and 19:19. Church discipline then, is limited to the congregation.

It is also important that "evil" inside the church is not something impersonal. "It manifests itself in those who 'let themselves be governed by sin.'" Thus the apostle Paul can quote the verse from Deuteronomy by mentioning a *person*: "Put away from among yourselves that wicked *person*," 1 Corinthians 5:13, see also 5:2.⁵ The late Prof. B. Holwerda writing about the Old Testament expression "an abomination in Israel,"

pointed out that the phrase does not just mean that the sin took place on Jewish territory; it refers to unrighteousness “that severs the antithesis between Israel and Canaan. . . . These therefore are sins that radically abolish any difference between Israel and Canaan; sins which, since Jahweh did not accept them from the Gentiles, are all the more unbearable in Israel, and therefore are punished by death.”⁶

Much more could be said about church discipline in the Old Testament, but I will restrict myself to these examples. I pointed already to the fact that in 1 Corinthians the book of Deuteronomy is quoted. It is very clear from this passage in Corinthians that church discipline is necessary according to the apostle Paul. It is actually the *Church* of Corinth that is addressed by the apostle Paul saying, “Drive out the wicked person from among you.” It is remarkable that the expression “among you” or “from among you” is used three times in this chapter (verse 1, 2, and 13).

That the congregation must be involved in the whole matter of church discipline is also clear from Matthew 18:17. After having quoted the rule of the Old Testament concerning two or three witnesses, our Saviour Jesus Christ says in verse 17, “If he (the sinner) 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.” So there is active cooperation by the congregation itself. I think Prof. J. Kamphuis is right, saying: “This cooperation is not confined to the approbation of decisive acts taken by the church session; it also consists of activities that concentrate themselves, in faith, on the ‘sinner’ within the church.”⁷

There are also more passages in the New Testament which directly or indirectly enjoin church discipline. In Matthew 16:16-19 Christ gives Peter the power to bind and to loose. “Doubtless Christ here speaks to Peter as representative of all the apostles, for in John 20:23, this same power is attributed to all the apostles. However, the apostles are but the representatives of the New Testament church, and so we may conclude that in Matthew 16:16-19 and John 20:23 Christ charges the church to exercise discipline.”⁸ In other passages God’s Word tells us not to have fellowship with heretics and those who have forsaken the Lord (see for instance Titus 3:10 and 11; 2 John 10; and Revelation 2:14-16).

There are also passages which condemn intermingling of believers and unbelievers, the holy and unholy. For example, 2 Corinthians 6:14. “As will be understood, the necessity for ecclesiastical discipline is found particularly in the New Testament injunctions which demand its exercise. In other words, discipline must be maintained in the church because God commanded it. Besides the passages indicated the following may be cited: Romans 16:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:14; 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14; 1 Timothy 5:1, 2.”⁹

How is discipline to be practised?

How is church discipline to be practised? First, the general rule must be maintained that he who examines another person must first examine himself. With respect to this we are reminded of the clear words of the Form for the Celebration of the Lord’s Supper, “True self-examination consists of the following three parts: First, let everyone consider his sins and accursedness, so that he, detesting himself, may humble himself before God. . . . Second, let everyone search his heart whether he also believes the sure promise of God that all his sins are forgiven him only for the sake of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. . . . Third, let everyone examine his conscience whether it is his sincere desire to show true thankfulness to God with his entire life and, laying aside all enmity, hatred and envy, to live with his neighbour in true love and unity.”¹⁰ We must not overlook the third part. If any accusation is brought forward against a brother, it may never be done because of enmity, hatred or envy. The background must always be: true love and unity with him.

In the second place church discipline is to be practised by mutual discipline. The members of the church have to admonish each other.¹¹ Many passages in the Bible *prescribe* mutual discipline. For example, 1 Thessalonians 5:11, "Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing"; Hebrews 3:12 and 13, "Take care, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin"; Romans 15:14, "I myself am satisfied about you, my brethren, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another"

This mutual exhortation, urged upon us by Holy Writ, becomes mutual discipline when there is a specific transgression. For example, Galatians 6:1, "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted"; James 5:19, 20, "My brethren, if any one among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins."

Furthermore, it may be remarked that Scripture enjoins mutual discipline since all believers are anointed with the Holy Spirit, sharing the anointing of Christ, to be prophets, priests, and kings under Him.¹² Here we have the matter of "the office of all believers." So it is to be stressed that "New Testament believers should not be treated as minors who have no voice in matters (Roman Catholicism), but as having come to maturity, having definite rights and duties."¹³

Official discipline

We can say that "official, ecclesiastical admonition and discipline is but the continuation of mutual, believer's discipline. When the latter fails the former begins to function. . . . And when church members refuse to do their Christian duty toward each other and no longer admonish each other, but desire to leave it all to the consistory, then the backbone of church discipline is severely injured."¹⁴ The father of Doleantie church polity, F.L. Rutgers, said rightly, "The decay of discipline, which began already in the beginning of the 17th century, should certainly be attributed to a large extent to the fact that in the convictions of the church members this principle of our Church Order had been weakened."¹⁵

It is clearly said in Article 66 of the Church Order that the whole matter of Christian discipline "can be done only when the rule given by our Lord in Matthew 18:15-17 is followed in obedience."¹⁶ The article begins by saying that church discipline has a *spiritual* nature. We do not start out by taking all kinds of "measures," but with spiritual admonition. Hence our Belgic Confession states in Article 32: "We accept only what is proper to preserve and promote harmony and unity and to keep all in *obedience* to God. To that end, discipline and excommunication ought to be exercised in agreement with the Word of God."¹⁷ Both the confession and the Church Order stress that the church has to bow obediently before the Lord of the Scriptures and to handle the matter of church discipline in a spiritual way. The Heidelberg Catechism agrees with an obedient and spiritual way of admonition and discipline in question and answer 85 where it reads that those who "show themselves to be unchristian in doctrine or life are first *repeatedly admonished in a brotherly manner*."¹⁸

Threefold purpose

According to what we find in the Scriptures and what we confess in the church,

we say that church discipline has a threefold purpose: "1. to promote God's glory to the church and to those who are outside; 2. to protect the church against all association with Satan and his destructive power; and 3. to save the sinner from eternal perdition."¹⁹ Often the emphasis is placed on the sanctity of God and the sanctity of the church. That is indeed an important element. In this way also the Westminster Confession professes in chapter 30: "Church censures are necessary . . . for purging out that leaven which might infect the whole lump; for vindicating the honour of Christ and the holy profession of the gospel, and for preventing the wrath of God. . . ."²⁰ The element of the sanctity, the holiness of God, of the holy profession of the church, may not be forgotten. But there is also — and even connected with it — the element of *sanctity* of the church.

Already the church father, Augustine, stressed this element, especially over against the heresy of the Donatists, who declared the validity of the sacraments to be dependent on the personal holiness of the officebearers. They also declared themselves to be the only pure and holy church, over against the Roman Catholic Church.

In opposition to the Donatists, Augustine stressed the therapeutic element of church discipline. In a letter to Petilian, the Donatist, Augustine wrote that ecclesiastical discipline should not be disregarded and that nobody should be allowed to do exactly as he pleased, without limits, without a kind of healing chastisement. Augustine then quotes 1 Thessalonians 5:14 and 15 and he goes on to say, "when the apostle added the words, 'See that none render evil for evil unto any man,' he showed with sufficient clearness that there is no rendering of evil for evil when one chastises those that are unruly, even though for the fault of unruliness be administered the punishment of chastising. The punishment of chastising therefore is not an evil, though the *fault* be an evil. *For indeed it is the steel, not of an enemy inflicting a wound, but of a surgeon performing an operation.*"²¹

Often Augustine referred to church discipline as medicine. The believers need the medicine of the Holy Spirit. When church discipline is executed in love, gentleness may not recede from the heart. For what is more pious than a physician, bearing his iron tool? Without love, discipline is harmful. But the sinner is to be corrected in compassion and not killed by a murderer if church discipline is executed. The office-bearers are doctors, the words of Scripture are medicine and even severe discipline is a heavenly medicine.²¹

After Augustine, many dark ages followed, but it was especially the Reformer John Calvin who again understood so well the importance of church discipline. Calvin called church discipline "a delicate weapon."²³ Often Calvin quoted Augustine with respect to church discipline, especially in connection with Augustine's struggle against the Donatists. Calvin considered the Anabaptists of his days the Donatists of Augustine's time. "The Donatists . . . in an impious schism separated themselves from Christ's flock. The Anabaptists act in the same way today."²⁴

Calvin stressed that the church must maintain church discipline in obedience, and that the office-bearers have to be severe in that maintenance, "but we ought not to pass over the fact that such severity as is joined with a 'spirit of gentleness' befits the church. This gentleness is required in the whole body of the church, that it should deal mildly with the lapsed and should not punish with extreme rigor, but rather, according to Paul's injunction, confirm its love toward them (2 Cor. 2:8)."²⁵ Even excommunication is corrective. "Although excommunication also punishes the man, it does so in such a way that, by forewarning him of his future condemnation, it may call him back to salvation." Then Calvin quotes 2 Thessalonians 3:15: "Do not look on him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother" and he ends this section with the words, "Unless

this gentleness is maintained in both private and public censures, there is danger lest we soon slide down from discipline to butchery.”²⁶

Definition

Having discovered the various elements of church discipline in Scripture, in the confessions and in some writings, we can answer the question what church discipline really is. In his extensive work *Politica Ecclesiastica*, G. Voetius gives the following definition of church discipline: “The Ecclesiastical discipline is the personal and judicial application of the will of God in order to awaken and raise up the consciousness of the sinner and to prevent and to take away the offences in the church.”²⁷

H. Bouwman, in his treatment of church discipline, correctly remarks, “that we should not pay too much attention to the derivatives of terms such as ‘discipline’ (both *tucht*’ and ‘discipline’ in Dutch) because over time words receive a certain (interpretive) character.” He defines discipline as “the maintenance of the rules given by Christ.” Bouwman’s definition has the advantage of conciseness and shows more clearly than Voetius that “God’s Word stands central in the matter of discipline.”²⁸

Yet, Kamphuis has objections. In his opinion, Bouwman’s definition is too general as well as too superficial. “To be sure, the church has the task of maintaining the rule of God’s Word in the church. She, however, also has that calling outside ecclesiastical discipline, for instance through the teaching and admonitions in the preaching, in catechism classes and on family visits. We could also say that it is too superficial, for very little is said about the essence of discipline. At least an effort (attempt) should have been made to indicate clearly what God’s Word says concerning discipline.”²⁹ So Kamphuis comes to the following definition. Church discipline is “The judicial maintenance of the holiness of God’s congregation over against the destructive power in the lives of those in the congregation who are dominated by sin.”³⁰

In spite of several good elements in this definition, I also have criticism regarding this definition. Instead of the term *judicial* (which reminds me too much of civil law) I prefer the term, used in Article 32 of the Belgic Confession, and Article 66 of the Church Order, namely *obedient* maintenance. Obedient is a comprehensive word, namely obedient to the mandate, given in the Holy Scriptures by the LORD Himself. Moreover, I like to add to the holiness of the church also the *soundness* of the church, especially over against ideas of the Donatists, the Anabaptists, and the like. Finally, I miss something about the manner and the purpose of church discipline. Church discipline has to be executed in a spiritual and pastoral manner, and not without the congregation, just as we saw before. As for the purpose: the goal is in the first place not to destroy the sinner, but to save him. So I came to the following definition: *Church discipline is the obedient maintenance, in a spiritual and pastoral manner, in cooperation with the congregation, of the sanctity and sanity of God’s Church, over against the satanic power in the lives of those in the congregation who are dominated by sin, so making an effort to save them.*

What are the steps?

In this definition I like to emphasize the fact that church discipline is to be executed to those who are dominated by sin. That means, not to sinners as such. We are all sinners and only when we harden our hearts must one step after the other be undertaken. In Article 67 of the Church Order, consistory involvement is mentioned. This may only occur when the rule of Matthew 18 has indeed been executed, or when the sin committed is of a public character. The last case can differ, of course, in a small

or big congregation. Article 68 outlines the steps involved in church discipline. The first disciplinary step is suspension from the Lord's Supper. The last step of the procedure (and hopefully not the final step) is excommunication.

There is a "non-disciplinary" denial of admission to the Lord's Supper, namely, when a certain case — e.g. a quarrel between two church members — was not solved in time.

However, this article deals with disciplinary denial only.

It is a matter of course that those who have been denied admission to the Lord's Supper are not entitled to answer the questions asked at the administration of the sacrament of holy baptism; neither are they allowed to participate in the election of office-bearers.

All this means that whereas one's rights within the covenant community has not yet been denied him by excommunication, their execution is suspended. Here there is a parallel with the suspension of an office-bearer, (who is still an office-bearer) but is not permitted to execute the duties of his office.

It is a matter of the consistory's being aware of its calling to keep the congregation of the Lord pure and holy and at the same time being long-suffering towards the sinner. There must be room for "numerous subsequent admonitions."

This first disciplinary action is an initial step indeed. For the consistory has to watch the sinner's reaction: Will he repent? Is it clear to him from this "provisional excommunication" — as the denial of admission to the Lord's Supper is also called — what will happen if he continues in his sin?

The accepted form extensively shows us the seriousness of the excommunication: The sinner is in the Name and authority of Jesus Christ our Lord declared to be excluded from the fellowship of Christ and from His Kingdom. He (she) may no longer use the sacraments. He (she) has no part any more in the spiritual blessings and benefits which Christ bestows upon His Church. As long as he (she) persists in sin, let him (her) be to you as a Gentile and an outcast.³¹

This shall happen only with the advice of classis.

This ecclesiastical assembly acts in a supervising capacity. Its judgment regarding the necessity to continue the procedure of church discipline has to be the same as that of the consistory.

To state that such advice of classis may be neglected if only it has been obtained, would be a perfect illustration of formalistic reasoning. By "advice" is meant: "the concurring advice," as in Article 71. Latin has: *ex classis iudicio*. An eventual revision of the Church Order could easily clarify the text at this point.

This supervision is voluntarily accepted by the consistory because of the serious character of church discipline: It is a matter of life or death! The consistory, entrusted with the authority by the King of the church, has to be absolutely sure that they are on the right track.

Excommunication is often called "an ultimate remedy" (see under Article 66). Surely, it is executed for the well-being of the congregation, but first of all for that of a sinner, who — because of it — may recognize that it is his own obstinacy which keeps him from partaking of Christ and all His benefits, and may — as yet — repent.

This article also deals with what must be done between the first and the "last" disciplinary action.

First of all it presupposes that the admonitions are continued, as may be apparent from the words, "If he continues to harden himself in sin."

Next, the three public announcements to the congregation are mentioned.

The form our churches have adopted for this purpose covers in its respective parts

all the stipulations made here, whereby information is given about the above-mentioned attempts, the denial of admission to the Table of the Lord, and the many admonitions.

Three announcements are to be made:

1. the first one does not include the name of the sinner, in order to spare him.

The element of patience and long-suffering and the desire that the sinner may repent as yet may be apparent.

2. the second announcement includes the name. But it shall be made after consent has been given by classis (see under Article 73).
3. the third announcement informs the congregation about the imminent excommunication.

From the first announcement on, the congregation is urged to pray for the sinner. From the second on, they are asked to admonish him.

And all this "if he does not repent!"

By making these announcements — the time lapses between them is determined by the consistory — the silent consent (= again: consensus) of the congregation is obtained: Excommunication is a matter of the whole congregation, for her own holiness is at stake!³²

Non-communicant members

The second part of Article 68 is about the way church discipline regarding non-communicant members should proceed.

The sins of these members are not specified. They may consist of indifference and aversion to the covenant or even hostility to the service of the LORD.

The procedure is as follows:

The consistory has to admonish such persons. This is at the background of the words "In case a non-communicant member hardens himself in sin." When these admonitions reach the point that the person concerned does indeed harden his heart, a public announcement is made in which the name of the sinner is not mentioned. This, too, is intended to have the congregation pray for him or her.

A second such announcement is made after the advice of the classis has been obtained. It includes the name and the address of the person concerned, and the date at which the excommunication shall take place if there is no repentance.

The Church Order does not make any mention of a certain age. Not every youngster reaches the age of adulthood at a fixed time!

This means that the "good-Reformed" rule must be obeyed which says: Every case must be judged on its own merits. However, sometimes the sin of "scandalous godlessness" has led to excommunication at the age of 21, and indifference to the service of the LORD at the age of 30.

The terms "communicant" and "non-communicant members" on the one side and "excommunication" on the other, have only their sound in common. In order to prevent confusion it may be advisable to try to find other terms. "Baptized members" is not suitable either, because also the "confessing or communicant members" were once baptized!

The final sentence of the article regards the procedures concerning both communicant and non-communicant members.

The above-mentioned rule that every case shall be judged on its own merits means that no fixed time-limit between the various announcements can be set, and that this must be left to the discretion of the consistory.

Article 68 does not make mention of any forms for excommunication. However, they have been included in the *Book of Praise*.³³

“Again received. . .”

Previously I said that excommunication was hopefully not the final step in the procedure of church discipline. In Lord’s Day 31 the Heidelberg Catechism says, those who are excommunicated “are again received as members of Christ and of the church when they promise and show real amendment.” There is still the possibility of repentance and therefore also the possibility of readmission. Lord’s Day 31 is in the section of the catechism which deals with deliverance! The Church Order, too, discusses readmission in Articles 69 and 70. Repentance will create joy in heaven and on earth. In heaven among God’s angels, and on earth, within the congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

On all sides it is clear that church discipline is not a matter of revenge. I even like to avoid the term *punishment* because that directs us too much to civil law. The term discipline is clear enough. It involves spiritual and pastoral care. The different steps show that patience is involved and also that the purpose is to save the sinner, not to let him perish.

We can see the same in the Articles 71 and 72 of the Church Order. The church has to be very careful in the whole matter of suspension and deposition of office-bearers. However, when they are engaged in a serious sin, the church may not hesitate to suspend them, and also, in the case of hardening of heart to depose them. But again, the confederation of churches is involved. The office-bearers are protected as much as possible and every effort is to be made to prevent mistakes or an injustice from being done. Above all, the sanctity and the sanity of the church must be beyond discussion!

Attestations

Pastoral care is also involved in the matter of attestations. What is an attestation? Let’s begin by saying what an attestation is *not*. “It is not a membership statement or card which is on file with the church to which one belongs, and which can be claimed when the member sees fit, and then transferred to the church with which he desires to affiliate.”³⁴ Many people are under the false impression that an attestation is a kind of membership card.

When a person moves from one place to another, it is normally expected that he will join the congregation of the confederation of churches (or in case he is leaving for abroad — one of the sister churches), in that area. Then the individual asks for an attestation, namely a testimony from the church that he is leaving. In normal cases this testimony is a letter of endorsement, declaring that he is sound (here we have again the sanity of the church!) as to doctrine and life, and deserves to be received into the membership of the church he desires to join.³⁵

Actually the whole matter of attestations is very old. We read in the Acts of the apostles, when Apollos left for Achaia, he received a letter from the church at Ephesus. “The brethren encouraged him, and wrote to the disciples to receive him” (Acts 18:27). The apostle Paul actually wrote an attestation for Phoebe to the church at Rome: “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, that you may receive her in the Lord as befits the saints” (Rom. 16:1, 2). From 2 Corinthians 3:1 we learn that already in the times of the apostles, “letters of recommendation” played an important role.³⁶ In the beginning of the Reformation it was often dangerous to pass these letters along because of the inquisition, but already at the first Synod at Emden four articles dealt with the matter of “attestations or testimonies.”³⁷

In connection with the nature, the function and the value of attestations in church life I will try to answer seven questions.

Questions

1. *Is a person allowed to request an attestation if he does not move?*

Answer: F.L. Rutgers says, “No.” The consistory of a sister church may not have members *beyond the boundaries* of its local circles. No consistory may do that, because in that case proper supervision would be impossible.³⁸ H. Bouwman says the same, and he adds to that: “If an attestation is passed to somebody, it must always have a certain purpose. If it is as a testimony in the case of an office or occupation, or with a view to an exam, there is no reason to refuse. But in that case the attestation is a testimony with a certain purpose, and that must be mentioned on the attestation. In these cases it does not need to be announced to the congregation.”³⁹

2. *Is the attestation always to be handed over to the member who is moving, or is it to be sent directly to the church concerned?*

Answer: See Article 62, Church Order. According to Reformed church polity the local church is a complete church, and not just a portion of a whole. A member of the church is, therefore, only a member of a local church. If he moves he will receive on his request the testimony from the consistory and he has to pass this on to the consistory of the church to which he moved. The attestation is not to be sent to the “new” consistory. But it is very desirable that a letter be sent from the first consistory to the second, in order to inform them that someone is coming and also what his address will be. In case the member concerned is slow in passing on his attestation, the “new” consistory can visit him and ask him why they have not yet received his attestation.⁴⁰

3. *What should be done if a censured member requests an attestation?*

Answer: Also the censured member must receive an attestation, but a true testimony must be given. Already in the 16th century, regional and national synods stated that no violence might be done to the truth. For example, the Regional Synod of Alkmaar 1599 reiterated the decision of the Synod of Dort 1578 regarding the distinction between people without blemish and those who are blemished. Then, this synod continued, “testimony will be given according to the truth and according to the occasion.”⁴¹ It is also good to inform the new consistory in more detail about the specific situation, because sometimes it is not possible to write everything on the attestation.⁴²

4. *Are attestations of non-communicant members always to be sent to the consistory, also in the case of mature non-communicant members?*

Answer: See again Article 62 of the Church Order. We already mentioned that attestations involving communicant members are to be handed over to the applicants, while in the meantime it is proper that the consistory to where he is moving is informed. The attestations of non-communicant members shall be sent directly to that consistory. “The difference between these two ways of issuing attestations lies in the fact that in the case of a non-communicant member the “new” consistory is requested to take this member under its supervision and discipline.”⁴³ The non-communicant member is in ecclesiastical terms “under age,” even if he is an adult. In Dutch there is a distinction between *attestatie* and *attest* (in English that difference also exists but in ecclesiastical terms it does not work). An *attest* is a kind of certificate or statement, while an *attestatie* is a testimony or a confirmation of

truth. So in the case of non-communicant members the attestation is called *doop-attest* in Dutch. This is not to say that they do not yet belong to the congregation. It is rightly said in the “Form for the baptism of infants” that they must be baptized as heirs of the kingdom of God and of His covenant.⁴⁴ But it is right that their attestation is always sent to the consistory involved even when they are adults. It can also be stated, then, why they did not yet make profession of faith.⁴⁵

5. *How long is an attestation valid?*

Answer: Of course the period of validity cannot be indefinite. Already the Regional Synod of Alkmaar 1587 (and also that of Delft of the same year) decided that attestations should not be valid for more than three months, “unless there were sufficient reasons to act differently.”⁴⁶ The churches of the Secession decided in 1877 that the period should not be longer than one year and six months.⁴⁷ This was confirmed by the Synod of Rotterdam 1885.⁴⁸ In other words the length of validity can vary. It is true that after some months the attestation can have lost its significance. Since the date of issue many things can have happened. Bouwman suggests that some questions should be asked if someone waited quite long before he passed the attestation to the consistory. What was the reason for the delay? In such a case the person may be requested to declare that he agrees with the confession of the church. Alternately he may be admitted to the Lord’s Supper after a period of probation.⁴⁹

6. *Is every church obliged to accept all attestations?*

Answer: According to Reformed church polity each and every local church is an independent body. Therefore each and every consistory is free to criticize an ecclesiastical testimony. This happened especially in the period of conflict with the Arminians in the time of the Synod of Dort 1618/1619. Attestations of Remonstrants were not automatically accepted, until further investigation.⁵⁰ It can happen, therefore, that the consistory has reasons for further investigation before the person is admitted to the Lord’s Supper.

7. *Why are attestations to be announced to the congregation?*

Answer: On behalf of the office of all believers, the congregation must be involved in the whole matter of attestations. It is possible that there are objections against the doctrine or conduct of the member concerned. Members should request an attestation at least a couple of weeks before they move in order to give the congregation the opportunity to bring forward objections. It is a general rule that the request for an attestation is announced once to the congregation.⁵¹

But let the congregation be involved! Just as in church discipline, cooperation with the congregation is very important. The consistory must never become a kind of government or board that is separated completely from the members of the church. That is not a matter of mistaken democracy, but it concerns our behaviour in the church of Christ, in which all hierarchy is from the devil!

Notes

¹Kuyper, A., *E Voto Dordraceno 3*, III, Kampen: Kok, n.d., p. 265.

²Cf. Kamphuis, J., *Om de heiligheid van de gemeente*, Kampen: Van den Berg, 1982, p. 24ff. (English trans. in: *Lux Mundi* Vol. 5, No. 4, Dec. 1986, p. 10ff.; also in: *Diakonia*, Vol. 2, No. 5, June 1989, p. 70ff.).

- ³Evenhuis, R.B., *Ook dat was Amsterdam III*, Amsterdam: Ten Have, 1971, p. 26.
- ⁴Evenhuis, op. cit., p. 27ff.
- ⁵*Ibid.*, op. cit., p. 31ff.
- ⁶Holwerda, B., *Oudtestamentische voordrachten III. Exegese Oude Testament (Deuteronomium)*, Kampen: Van den Berg, 1957, p. 451; cf. ook J. Kamphuis, op. cit., p. 22, 31.
- ⁷Kamphuis, op. cit., p. 35.
- ⁸Monsma, M. and I. van Dellen, *The Revised Church Order Commentary*, 3 Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, p. 289; cf. also J. De Jong, *Verklaring van de Kerkenordening van de Nationale Synode van Dordrecht van 1618-1619: college-voordrachten van F.L. Rutgers over gereformeerd kerkrecht*, Rotterdam: Libertas, 1918, p. 10ff.
- ⁹Monsma/Van Dellen, op. cit., p. 289ff.; Rutgers (De Jong) op. cit., p. 14ff.
- ¹⁰*Book of Praise*, Winnipeg: Premier Printing, 1984, p. 595.
- ¹¹Van Rongen, G. and K. Deddens, *Decently and in Good Order*, Winnipeg: Premier Publishing, 1986, p. 91.
- ¹²Monsma/Van Dellen, op. cit. 290; cf. broader on the pastoral task of all believers: K. Deddens, *Een voortreffelijke taak*, Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1989, p. 79ff.
- ¹³Monsma/Van Dellen, op. cit., l.c.
- ¹⁴*Ibid.*
- ¹⁵Rutgers (De Jong), op. cit., p. 37.
- ¹⁶*Book of Praise*, p. 668.
- ¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 465.
- ¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 570.
- ¹⁹Jansen, Joh., *De Kerkelijke Tucht*, Arnhem: Tamminga, 1913, p. 183; cf. also: H. Bouwman, *De Kerkelijke Tucht naar het gereformeerd Kerkrecht*, Kampen: Kok, 1912, p. 172ff.
- ²⁰Clark, Gordon H., *What do Presbyterians Believe? The Westminster Confession: Yesterday and Today*, Philadelphia, PA, 1965, p. 252ff.
- ²¹Schaff, Ph., *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Vol. IV, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956, p. 598ff.
- ²²Weijland, H.B., *Augustinus en de kerkelijke tucht*, Kampen: Kok, 1965, p. 132ff.
- ²³Goumaz, L., *Het ambt bij Calvijn* (Trans. and intro. K. Deddens), Franeker: Wever, 1964, p. 129ff.
- ²⁴Calvin, J., *Institutes IV*, 12, 12, ed. John T. McNeill, *The Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. XXI, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967, p. 1239.
- ²⁵Plomp, J., *De kerkelijke tucht bij Calvijn*, Kampen: Kok, 1969, p. 76. Cf. J. Calvin, *Institutes IV*, 12, 8 and 9.
- ²⁶Calvin, *Institutes IV*, 10, 12.
- ²⁷Voetius, G., *Politica Ecclesiastica IV*, Amsterdam, 1676, p. 844, cf. J. Kamphuis, op. cit., p. 27.
- ²⁸Bouwman, H. *De Kerkelijke Tucht*, p. 18ff.; cf. J. Kamphuis, op. cit., p. 27ff.
- ²⁹Kamphuis, op. cit., p. 28ff.
- ³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 29.
- ³¹*Book of Praise*, p. 612.
- ³²Cf. Van Rongen/Deddens, op. cit., p. 95.
- ³³*Book of Praise*, p. 607ff.
- ³⁴Monsma/Van Dellen, op. cit., p. 258.
- ³⁵*Ibid.*
- ³⁶Cf. Bouwman, H., *Gereformeerd Kerkrecht II*, Kampen: Kok, 1934, p. 450.
- ³⁷*Ibid.*, op. cit., p. 451.
- ³⁸Rutgers, F.L. *Kerkelijke Adviezen II*, Kampen: Kok, 1922, p. 333.
- ³⁹Bouwman, op. cit., p. 453.
- ⁴⁰*Ibid.*, op. cit., 454.
- ⁴¹Bos, F.L., *De Orde der Kerk*, 's Gravenhage: Guido de Bres, 1950, p. 316.
- ⁴²Bouwman, op. cit., p. 454; cf. also Joh. Jansen, *Korte Verklaring van de Kerkenordening*, Kampen: Kok, 1923, p. 354.
- ⁴³Van Rongen/Deddens, op. cit., p. 89.
- ⁴⁴*Book of Praise*, p. 585.

⁴⁵Bouwman, op. cit. p. 459, gives as his opinion that it is possible to pass an attestation to an adult non-communicant member, but at the same time the consistory has to write on that attestation that the person concerned was disobedient by not yet making confession of faith. In any case a letter is to be sent to the new consistory according to his opinion.

⁴⁶Bos, op. cit., p. 321.

⁴⁷Bouwman, op. cit., p. 459.

⁴⁸Bos, op. cit., p. 321.

⁴⁹Bouwman, op. cit., p. 460.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, op. cit., p. 461ff.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, op. cit., p. 463.