

The exercise of church discipline is perhaps the most painful of all the duties that elders in the church are called to perform. And to add to the woes of faithful elders, most modern churches simply do not practice church discipline. Churches that do are branded as authoritarian or cultish; and those who are disciplined would often simply leave the church for others, which would gladly receive them. This sad situation flies in the face the fact that faithful church discipline is one the three marks of a true church as given in the *Belgic Confession of Faith* (BCF 29); hinted in our own Confession (WCF 25.3) and agreed by most conservative Reformed churches. In other words, churches that fail to exercise church discipline have either ceased to be true churches of Christ, or are apostatising. This is so, for local congregations are manifestations of the body of Christ. As such, churches that fail to exercise faithful church discipline are destroying the testimony of Christ and blaspheming His name by allowing scandals to be attributed to His name.

Our present study is therefore an extremely important one.

On the Divine Right of Church Government

30.1 The Lord Jesus, as King and Head of His Church, hath therein appointed a government, in the hand of Church officers, distinct from the civil magistrate.¹

¹ *Isa 9:6–7; 1 Tim 5:17; 1 Th 5:12; Acts 20:17–18; Heb 13:7, 17, 24; 1 Cor 12:28; Mt 28:18–20.*

- There are two public structures of authority revealed in the New Testament: Civil government and Church government. We saw the institution of the Civil government in chapter 23. In this paragraph we see that Christ, as the King and Head of the Church (Isa 9:6–7), has appointed a church government with church officers, as distinct from the civil magistrate, *contra* Erastianism. The Scripture refers to these officers as ‘elders’: “Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine” (1 Tim 5:17; cf. 1 Th 5:12; Acts 20:17, 28; etc.).
- The form of Church government must be in accordance to what is taught in the Scriptures, for the Lord told His disciples to teach those they evangelised “to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Mt 28:20). There are essentially four forms of Church government in practice today:
 - a. *Papacy*, which teaches that the pope is the successor of Peter, the vice-regent of Christ, and is the visible head of the whole church. Under the pope are bishops who derive their authority from him.
 - b. *Episcopacy*, which does not have a pope, but nevertheless sees a distinction in rank among the ministers in the church. Authority is vested on bishops, archbishops, etc.
 - c. *Independency* or *congregationalism*, which asserts that every congregation forms a complete church and has an independent power of jurisdiction within itself, and therefore lodges the authority of church government with the congregation.
 - d. *Presbyterianism*, which unlike episcopacy maintains that every minister of the Gospel is on a level in respect of office and authority. Presbyterianism also teaches

that a particular congregation may be ruled by a session comprising all teaching and ruling elders in the church. But this church and Session are only part of a larger body of believers; and representative elders from the church may sit in a higher court known as presbytery which has jurisdiction over all the churches represented. Again, members of the presbytery may sit in the synod, which has authority over the presbyteries represented. Thus Presbyterianism teaches that there is a subordination of courts and that the higher courts may review, affirm or reverse the decisions of the lower courts.

- Though our Confession does not explicitly name the system that is favoured, it is clear that the Assembly had in mind Presbyterianism. This can be seen not only in the next chapter, but in the document entitled, *The Form of Presbyterian Church-Government and of Ordination of Minister*, which was written as an annex to the Confession.

30.2 *To these officers the keys of the kingdom of heaven are committed; by virtue whereof, they have power, respectively, to retain, and remit sins; to shut that kingdom against the impenitent, both by the Word, and censures; and to open it unto penitent sinners, by the ministry of the Gospel; and by absolution from censures, as occasion shall require.*¹

¹ Mt 16:19; 18:17–18; Jn 20:21–23; 2 Cor 2:6–8.

- The Lord told Peter on one occasion:

“And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Mt 16:19).

That He was referring to the power of church discipline is clear from the fact that the same idea is repeated in another context which is clearly about how to deal with an erring yet unrepentant brother:

“And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Mt 18:17–18).

This authority is restated in another way after the resurrection of the Lord:

“Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained” (Jn 20:23).

- From the latter two passages, it is clear that the authority is not just vested on Peter, but on the other Apostles, and on the permanent officers of the church, namely the elders who represent the particular congregations.
- But what does it mean by ‘binding’ and ‘loosing’ (of persons) or ‘retaining’ and ‘remitting’ sin as reflected in our Confession?
 - a. It must be noted that the phrase ‘kingdom of heaven’ or ‘kingdom of God’ is used in three senses in the Scripture, namely:

- (i) Christ’s mediatorial authority, or its administration, and the power and glory which belong to it, as when we ascribe to Him the “kingdom, and the power, and the glory” (Mt 6:13), or affirm that of “his kingdom there shall be no end” (Lk 1:33)
- (ii) The blessings and advantages of all kinds, inward and outward, which are characteristic of this administration, as when we say the “kingdom... is... righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost” (Rom 14:17),....
- (iii) The subjects of the kingdom collectively, as when we are said to “enter... the kingdom,” and speak of “the keys of the kingdom,” which admit to or exclude from this community. In this latter sense the phrase ‘kingdom of God,’ or ‘of heaven,’ is synonymous with the word ‘Church’ (see A.A. Hodge, *Outline of Bible Topics*, chap. 27).

It is in the third sense that Matthew 16:19 and our Confession speaks of the “kingdom of heaven.” Moreover, the phrase “whatsoever thou shalt bind *on earth*” suggests that the power to bind and loose or to receive or expel from membership has to do with the visible church, which is the kingdom of God on earth.

- b. Thus, it is clear that the power to “retain, and remit sins” is *declarative* rather than *absolute*. This is consistent with the fact that only God can forgive sin absolutely (Lk 5:21). Thus, our Confession tells us that the officers of the church have power “to shut that kingdom against the impenitent, both by the Word, and censures; and to open it unto penitent sinners, by the ministry of the Gospel; and by absolution [i.e., exoneration or vindication] from censures, as occasion shall require.”

In other words, the officers of the church (i.e., elders), are responsible to ensure discipline and purity in the church, and when Church discipline is carefully carried out, then, no manifestly unregenerate, unjustified person would be found in the kingdom of God on earth, which explains why out of the visible Church of Christ, “there is no ordinary possibility of salvation” (*WCF* 25.2). But since the members of the visible church are not confirmed in righteousness or sin, there is possibility of repentance on the part of those who are censured, and indeed repentance should be the aim of the every church censure. And when a person repents, then the officers of the church have the power and duty to absolve the censure and to receive the erring brother back into fellowship (cf. 2 Cor 2:6–8).

On the Necessity of Church Discipline

30.3 Church censures are necessary, for the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren, for deterring of others from the like offenses, for purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump, for vindicating the honor of Christ, and the holy profession of the Gospel, and for preventing the wrath of God, which might justly fall upon the Church, if they should suffer His covenant, and the seals thereof, to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders.¹

¹ 1 Cor 5; 1 Tim 5:20; Mt 7:6; 1 Tim 1:20; 1 Cor 11:27–34; Jude 23.

This paragraph outlines the purposes and importance of Church Discipline, namely:

- a. “For the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren”—“Of whom is Hymenæus and Alexander; whom I have delivered unto Satan, *that they may learn not to blaspheme*”

- (1 Tim 1:20); “To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, *that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus*” (1 Cor 5:5).
- b. “For deterring of others from the like offences”—“Them that sin rebuke before all, *that others also may fear*” (1 Tim 5:20).
 - c. “For purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump”—“Purge out therefore the old leaven, *that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened*. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us” (1 Cor 5:7).
 - d. “For vindicating the honour of Christ, and the holy profession of the Gospel.” Sin when allowed in the church greatly dishonours and blasphemes the name of Christ. Thus Paul indicted the Jews (members of the church under the old covenant) for their bad testimonies, “For the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you” (Rom 2:24). Thus Hymenæus and Alexander were “delivered unto Satan, *that they may learn not to blaspheme*” (1 Tim 1:20).
 - e. “For preventing the wrath of God, which might justly fall on the Church.” This is with specific reference to the use of the Sacrament: “if they should suffer His covenant, and the seals thereof, to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders.” The apostle Paul, in particular, speaks about how the Lord visits a church in wrath when sin is tolerated:

“For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world” (1 Cor 11:29–32).

On the Steps for Church Discipline

30.4 For the better attaining of these ends, the officers of the Church are to proceed by admonition, suspension from the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper for a season; and by excommunication from the Church, according to the nature of the crime, and demerit of the person.¹

¹ 1 Th 5:12; 2 Th 3:6, 14–15; 1 Cor 5:4–5, 13; Mt 18:17; Tit. 3:10.

- When our Lord taught about church discipline, He began right from the inception of an offence, and proceeded in four steps to the point of excommunication:

“Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee,

[1] go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.

[2] But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.

[3] And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church:

[4] but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican”

(Mt 18:15–17).

Notice that it is only in the third step, that what might have been a private dispute or a private observation of sin becomes an ecclesiastical matter to be dealt with by the church.

- Our Confession begins with this third step and suggests three possible actions,—“according to the nature of the crime, and demerit of the person,”—to take in censuring an erring brother:
 - a. *Admonition*—“Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us.... And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. *Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother*” (2 Thes 3:6, 14–15).
 - b. *Suspension* from the Lord’s Supper for a season. This is often known as lesser excommunication, or if you like, the “second admonition” (Tit 3:10). If the brother demonstrates genuine repentance after the period of suspension, he may be restored to the full privileges of church membership.
 - c. *Excommunication*—this is known as greater excommunication and involves declaring the offending party to be an unbeliever (“let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican”) and delivering “unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor 5:5). This does not consist, as Rome erroneously teaches, in literally handing over the soul unto the devil, but in casting him out of the Church into Satan’s kingdom, i.e., the world by revoking his membership.

—JJ Lim