



Concerning the holiness of the congregation

A perilous undertaking?

The title of this first paragraph about ecclesiastical discipline comes in the form of a question. When, shortly after the Doleantie (1886), Abraham Kuyper (in his explanation of the Heidelberg Catechism) reached Lord's Day 31, concerning the keys of the Kingdom, he wrote that already in his days the second key of discipline was no longer used in the Protestant world. He introduced the situation as follows: "My church door no longer has a key. All, who want to can come in. Apart from ecclesiastical differences no one will show you the door. 'Open doors' is our slogan over against the confessional church."

A little later Kuyper emphatically underlines the lack of discipline once more. *"We don't say too much, when we claim that for the Moderns, Ethicals and Irenics the power of the keys no longer exists".* It appears that some of them take the first key, the ministry of the Word, seriously, but that does not justify the rejection of the second one. *"It is maintained more or less in the ministry of the Word, i.e. as constitutional pronouncement from the pulpit; but here also the concept of the ministry of the Word is distorted; and as an ecclesiastical court they no longer know the power of the keys."*

Kuyper does not speak here about the Reformed, even though a little further on in his explanation he criticizes the discipline practices of the Separated brethren. We may also note that the Reformatoral obedience of 1834 and 1886, in spite of its imperfections, resulted in a general revival, first in the administration of the offices in the church, and consequently also in the administration of discipline in the midst of the congregation. Yet the Reformed could have been mentioned among that first group when Kuyper sketched the perilous situation of church discipline.

Already two centuries earlier Jacobus Koelman, a leader of the "Nadere Reformatie", had heard that in Amsterdam *"no one had been excommunicated in eighteen years."* The expert on Amsterdam church history, Dr. Evenhuis, agrees with Koelman. We hear a prophetic *crie de coeur*, when Koelman writes: *"People won't believe, that the omission of the administration of discipline has been, is, and always will be the destruction of the (Dutch) church."* In this sentiment we have arrived at the heart of the "Nadere Reformatie" movement: the battle of faith to serve the church in continuing reformation and to maintain it as the holy house of the Lord. The complaint is taken up in the 18th century by the minister from Zwolle, Henricus Ravesteijn:

"Yet if we look closely at the present church situation, all, who are intelligent, and who as the faithful in the land sigh deeply about the horrors in the country and in the church, will weep bitter tears over the fact that church discipline or the Christian ban has been banished, and is counted among the abolished laws. One no longer catches only the little foxes that spoil the vineyard, but one even puts up with dogs and pigs. People have great difficulty rejecting heretics, but on the contrary nurture them in the bosom of the church, no matter what public or secret horror sentiments they harbour: and who does not know of the sorrows and difficulties faithful ministers so often experience, before they see well-known sinners become the subject of ecclesiastical and public justice. As far as morals are concerned, one tolerates public slanderers. Not only that, for when they are threatened by church discipline, they not only go to the civil authorities, but even to ecclesiastical persons for help. Alas, discipline, the soul of our church, seems to have moved out of the body. The church is for a large part not only dangerously ill, but is a corpse, which needs to be buried rather than cherished, so that it won't stink; those who try to heal the breeches are seen as disturbers of Israel and meet

with much opposition. Truly a deplorable and most damaging church decline for both church and country."

When in the beginning of this century (1912) H. Bouwman published *Church Discipline*, we hear the same complaints:

"It is lamentable that most churches, which find their origin in Calvin's action, have dropped the key of discipline over life and doctrine. Anyone, who with a little insight observes the history and present situation of the Presbyterian churches in Scotland, England and the U.S.A., and is not unfamiliar with the small Reformed denominations in other countries, will come to the conclusion, that, with a few exceptions, the keys of discipline, in the Scriptural sense, have disappeared."

Ecclesiastical practices and theological thought keep pace, or rather show the same decline. Berkhouwer points out in his second study *The Church* that in 1937 in Germany the doctrine of power of the keys no longer played a role in the general theological thought of the last one hundred and fifty years. The sketch of Bouwman is still a (sad) reality. We know of some exceptions, and in thankfulness we can mention among others, our sister churches in Canada and in Korea. More than in Bouwman's days these are "small" exceptions. Those who are familiar with the Reformed churches in Hungary, know how much the lack of power has made inroads there and that is not as a result of World War II.

The situation in The Netherlands after the Reformatory revival of 1834 and 1886 has increasingly changed. Secession and Doleantie in the former "Reformed churches" has, as it were, ceased to exist, also where it concerns the return to the "discipline of the fathers". The discipline farce involving of Dr. H. Wiersinga is a case in point. That, however, results in an intensified isolation for those churches, which continue to recognize the calling to exercise discipline.

It should also be considered that faithful administration of discipline in many cases means rowing against the stream. Even if it is done with patience and wisdom, obedience is almost automatically, opposed. It is unpopular in and outside the church. Lip service can be paid to its necessity, while in practice the church is ruled by lawlessness. The crisis in the Liberated churches in the sixties is here one of the decisive backgrounds. We, as church federation, were on the brink of the abyss, because of an unwillingness to administer discipline, especially doctrinal discipline over office-bearers. It is a perilous undertaking indeed.

Obedience of faith is needed for it. Therefore, before anything else we must think about the Scriptural foundations for Christian discipline. We hope to make a contribution to that in what follows, but nothing more than a contribution. We no longer have the opportunity to discuss these matters as broadly and deeply as Kuyper did. Against his ten articles we have only room for one, or at the most two articles. We will, however, try to give an overview of ecclesiastical discipline from our only norm, the Holy Scriptures. First, a few remarks about the foundation and rule of Christian discipline, and then about the practice.

1. Where do we find the norm for discipline?

1.1 Difference concerning the Old Testament

In the face of all uncertainties and questions, which can arise when the subject of church discipline is discussed, one thing is sure for the Reformed: the norm for the administration of discipline is the Word of God. Our common confession is abundantly clear on that point. When in Art. 29 the marks of the true church (among them church discipline) are given, they are summarized in the phrase: *"in short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God"*. In the next article it is confessed that this *"church must be governed according to the spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in His Word"*. In Article 32 it is narrowed down to discipline, when it is said that to keep all things in obedience God requires that *"discipline and excommunication ought to be exercised in agreement with the Word of God."*

The difficulties become apparent, when we ask the question: Where precisely can we find in God's Word what is normative for the exercise of discipline? We are a Christian congregation. A congregation of the New Covenant. We have our "rules for life" in the Holy Scriptures. Does our redemptive-historical position as church after Pentecost not really mean, that we can only go to the New Testament, and that the Old Testament with its ceremonial legislation, and punishments, remains a closed book?

One won't find such a sharp formulation very often. Yet there are pronouncements made by the Reformed, which go into that direction and, what is more important, govern the circumscription of church discipline.

It is remarkable that, for instance, F.L. Rutgers, the expert on church polity in and after the Doleantie, only mentions New Testament texts in his discussion about *"the texts of Holy Scriptures, where directly or indirectly it is spoken of church discipline."* After a summary there follows the separate remark:

"Already in the Old Testament there is talk of excommunication and removal from the nation and community and in the New Testament of ejection from the Synagogue."

In the seventeenth century, however, the church in The Netherlands treats that subject entirely different. In 1625 four theologians, Joh. Polyander, Andr. Rivetus, Ant. Walaeus and Anth. Thysius collaborated on the standard work of reformed doctrine: the *Synopsis purioris theologiae* (An overview of the pure theology). This book is a collection of "disputations" held with students. Number 48 by Walaeus deals with the discipline. At the beginning of his treatise, he writes about textual proof: *"That this power, namely of discipline, has been given to the church can be proven convincingly from examples in the Old as well as in the New Testament."* That is the eleventh thesis of his disputation. After that, in thesis 12 through 15, textual proof from the Old Testament is presented. Then in one thesis the same is done for the New Testament. It is remarkable that he maintains the bond with the Old Testament. This appears from the opening phrase of this thesis: *"From the New Testament it also becomes clear..."*

Finally, in the seventeenth, the following conclusion is drawn: *"From all these texts it is clear, that all those who dare to deny the power given to the church, which is supported by the Old and New Testament and the whole of Christian church, err seriously."* We find this same line of thought – the Holy Scriptures (plural!) is the source and norm for church discipline – with the "father" of our Heidelberg Catechism, Ursinus. It is still the case at the time of the "Nadere Reformation" (Continuing Reformation), of which Willem a Brakel gives witness in his book *De Redelijke Godsdienst* (Reasonable Religion).

This picture, however, changes in the 19th century as it appears from Rutgers. A. Kuyper is the central figure here. With all his might and thought he gave himself to the task of ordering ecclesiastical life according to God's Word. No detail escaped his attention. Church discipline, too, had to be administered again in keeping with that Word. We already heard him opposing his ecclesiastical-theological peers.

In laying the foundation of church discipline Kuyper, however, is hampered by his opinion of the church. The Old Testament can in fact not be the source nor the norm for the church discipline, because *"the institute, the church"* only came into being after Christ. The *"community of Israel in the Old Testament"* gives *"a living picture of the development of the whole of God's church"*, as this community *"represents a type of faith life for every Christian with its sufferings, struggles and triumphs"*. This "exemplary" opinion of God's revelation under the Old Covenant causes an impediment in the recognition of the Scriptures of this covenant as normative. *"Neither Abraham, Isaac nor Jacob were ever truly members of the ecclesiastical institute, because it simply did not exist."* In Lord's Day 21 of the Heidelberg Catechism we do not confess that the church is an institute (with the power of the keys), but that it is an organism. The influence of Kuyper was particularly great after the union of 1892.

We hear H. Bavinck argue in his *Dogmatics*: *"In the Old Testament there really was no church discipline"*. A.G. Honing states the same and H. Bouwman concludes in line with Kuyper: *"Consequently under the Old dispensation there cannot have been church discipline."* How remarkable this difference in attitude is between the Reformed of the 17th century and those of the 19th and 20th! Both share the conviction that the administration of church discipline is the right and duty of the church. Both firmly oppose those who do not wish to recognize that the consistory does not have the power to exercise "spiritual" discipline or excommunication.

The opposition changes in the 16th and 17th century, for then it were the followers of Erastus and the Remonstrants, who wanted to give the state all power in the church, even in matters of discipline. In the nineteenth century Kuyper protests against those who promote an "open door" policy. Through the ages, however, the Reformed position remains fundamentally the same.

But there is a difference and distinction in the foundation of this position: in the 16th and 17th century one argues from the unity of all the Scriptures. Kuyper and many others influenced by him, pay minimal and marginal attention to the Old Testament. At most one finds there "a preparation" for church discipline, but not church discipline itself there are no examples of real administration nor precepts. The discussion only gets underway when one has come to the precepts in the New Testament.

1.2 The Canon of the Old Testament

We have seen that the Reformed of the 19th and 20th century under the influence of A. Kuyper pay little, too little attention to the Old Testament in the matter of the church, her ministry and offices, and her calling to exercise church discipline. This becomes clear, when it was said that under the old covenant there existed no institutional church and, consequently, there was no church discipline.

Even though it seems that the lines are drawn clearly and without hesitation, the situation is far more complex. The influence of Kuyper, also when it came to his opinions concerning the church, were very forceful. Yet his line of thinking is here and there worked out differently.

At first it seems that Bavinck is completely of the same mind as Kuyper. It is, however, different from what it seems. While the latter repeats again and again that in Israel church and state were one, Bavinck sides with Kuyper's opponent Ph. J. Hoedemaker. *"It is, therefore, incorrect to say that church and state were one in Israel"*. Both can be distinguished in laws, precepts, offices and indeed in members from each other. In the same connection and on the same page of his book *Reformed Dogmatics* (IV 2, p. 426) Bavinck consequently writes

"strangers, through circumcision, could become citizens of Israel (Ex. 12:48), unclean persons and lepers remained citizens, even though they were banished for a time."

The schism of the kingdom also did not mean a split in the church. *"In spite of the schism the religious unity of the people could have been maintained"*. When Bavinck further on in his treatise writes: *"In the Old Testament there was really no church discipline"*, he clothes this pronouncement with much more reserve than Kuyper does. We also read in the same context *"even though uncircumcised, lepers and unclean persons were kept out of the sanctuary"*.

Soon after Bouwman published his book about church discipline (1912) and a year before dr. J. deJong would publish the lectures of F.L. Rutgers on the fourth chapter of the church Order, Rev. Joh. Jansen published an explanation of church discipline. In a note added to the Preface, he tells the reader that he had read Prof. Bouwman's articles on the subject in *De Bazuin*: *"In addition he had made thankful use of the lecture notes of Prof. Dr. F.L. Rutgers"*.

That is why it is remarkable that Jansen does not completely follow the opinions of Bouwman and Rutgers. He is very careful when he writes:

"New Testament discipline is essentially a development of the principles of discipline to be found in the Old Testament".

We would like to continue this line of thought that begins to appear with Jansen and Bavinck and once again tie in with the convictions put into words in the 16th and 17th century.

From our side we are grateful for Hoedemaker's objection to Kuyper's constructions concerning the church-as-institute being a non-existing entity. We, however, would like to distance ourselves from the people's church idea of Hoedemaker. He poses that child baptism in the folk church already says that: *"As soon as one says: to the church belong the believers and their seed, one has the germ of the people-church"*. Hoedemaker makes a logical mistake here, which can easily be discerned. That the children belong to the church, makes us recognize the church as folk, as God's people. Indeed the church is a people and, for example, not a society, of which one voluntarily becomes a member and where human decisions are the norm.

It is, however, not permissible to jump from *"the church is a people"* to *"the church is a people's church"*. The first pronouncement – the church is a people, believers with their children – is a consequence of the sanctification of the natural and creaturely relationships – marriage and family – by the Word of God and by making these created relationships function in the continuation of His salvation and the gathering of His church.

The second pronouncement (the church is a people's church), however, makes these relationships (family, tribe, nation) more or less determinative and dominative for the gathering of the church. What ought to be subservient becomes dominant. That is the world turned upside down. It is a reversal of God's order. Discipline according to the only Lord of the church, is caught in a fix of necessity. History has proven that, when after World War II Hoedemaker's people church-ideals were put into practice with the new church order. It suspended discipline for ten years and now, after a quarter of a century no one talks about it anymore.

This interpretation wishes to appeal to the word "peoples" in the words Christ spoke to his disciples just prior to his Ascension: *"...make all peoples my disciples and baptize them..."* But it is (conveniently) forgotten that the Saviour here instructs his apostles about church gathering work under the new dispensation. The distinction between Jews on the one hand and the (other) nations, on the other, has been taken away by Him. It would take concrete form in the office and calling of the apostle Paul in the history of salvation under the New Covenant. The universal aspect of the preaching of the Gospel does not exclude that the church, also by means of the administration of baptism, from the nations and from fallen mankind, is gathered in the way of a personal sense of responsibility and of a choice by faith. Matthew 28: 19 does not contradict Mark 16:15, 16 where Christ says:

"Go into all the world and preach the news to all creation (that is the universal!) Who ever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."
(that is the way of a personal responsibility).

Nor does Matthew 28:19 contradict Rev. 7:19, where John sees the multitude *"from every nation, tribe, people and language."* The universality of the new dispensation must not be confused with universalism, which damages the church in its character of *"holy congregation of true believers"* (Belgic Confession Article 27)

The necessary caution over against Hoedemaker should not make us forget that he correctly points out the close connection between the Old and New Testament and the unity of the total Revelation, which corrects the spiritual tendencies of Kuyper.

The New Testament in the matter of discipline finds its anchor, as it were, word for word, in the Old Testament. For the "admonition" of Matthew 18:15 see Leviticus 19:17. For the *"two or three witnesses"* of Matthew 18:16 see Deuteronomy 19:15. In 1 Cor. 5:13 the apostle Paul bases the New Testament excommunication on the Old Testament rule "expel the wicked man from among you" (cf Deut. 13:6; 17:7; 19:19; 22:24; 24:7).

The Old Testament has its own categories. In that they are unique. There was a unique relationship between God's congregation and the one nation Israel (cf. Romans 3:2; Ephesians

2:12). But within those categories the Old Testament full well recognizes the calling for disciplinary maintenance of the holiness of God's congregation over against the destructive power of sin. For that God gave the means, which suited the character of that dispensation.

We may with honour here mention the names of P. Deddens and B. Holwerda, who resolutely continued the lines of the 17th century *Synopsis*. Deddens requested his colleague Holwerda, professor of Old Testament, in the exegesis of Deuteronomy: *"to pay special attention to the justice, that the Lord commands to His church"*. Compliance with this request has enriched us with an important exegetical contribution to church law. Much was gained but there remains room for critical questions. That is, in my opinion, particularly evident in the explanation of the phrase *"the place, which the Lord shall choose"*. According to B. Holwerda that does not mean a central sanctuary in Jerusalem, but all those places, that are chosen by the Lord, no matter which tribe. Here Holwerda, in my opinion, identifies the justice of separate cities (Deut. 16:18) too easily with *"the independence of the local church"*. In that way, in his opinion, independence is banished, because the cities function within the nation Israel. Here he loses sight of the distinction between the Old and New Testament. For that matter: decentralization as such is not, willy-nilly, a consequence of the independence of each local church. Even a central ecclesiastical hierarchy can include decentralized elements in its administration in order for it to function better. That does not mean that the hierarchy has been affected. This criticism should be seen in the context of gratefulness and thankfulness for his work, which clearly shows that church law and discipline did indeed rule in the Old Testament.

All in all, we may conclude that the whole of Holy Scriptures are the source and rule for church discipline. In it we should keep in mind *"the different times and dispensations, to which the parts of God's revelation belong."*

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