



The description of church discipline

The definition

What are we really dealing with, when we speak about church discipline? How can we describe the discipline? That question is of great importance. This is clear, in the first place, from the church history of our own time and in our own country, but also, albeit in a totally different manner, it is no less clear from our 16th and 17th century "ecclesiastical papers".

What does church discipline mean? And how must the church exercise discipline? With regard to those questions many today say that the Reformed churches went too far, when, in 1926, they exercised discipline in the conflict over the infallibility of God's Word with Geelkerken. They were also accused of overstepping the boundaries in 1944 when they deposed professors, ministers, elders and deacons by the dozens. Many argue that this was traumatic for the churches. Consequently the churches are very leery of burning their fingers again.

Thus, in order to rescue something from the bankruptcy of Reformed administration of discipline, the distinction was made between justiciable and judicial discipline. In the former it was sufficient for the churches (before hand) to come with a *judicium*, that is to make a pronouncement about the deviation of doctrine. In the latter it should be followed by a judicial act, the act of suspension and dismissal from the office and eventually also the further administration of discipline to office bearers as members of the congregation.

However, this distinction serves as nothing more than a safety-valve. "Look the church is doing something. She (seemingly) defends the truth and blocks error." It has, at the same time, the advantage of preventing a church schism.

This opinion is also propagated in the church community (now known as Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken) which broke with the Reformed churches in 1967. So, for example, in the case of Rev. B. Telder a dissenting judgement should have been sufficient. This example does not mean that the Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken have formulated such a judgement. It is purely theoretical.

The distinction between justiciable and judicial is to be rejected because it misuses the confession of the church in order to escape the force of discipline. There is, indeed, a distinction between the two keys of the kingdom of heaven, about which Lord's Day 31 speaks. Not everything that falls under the admonition and chastisement of the preaching (the first key), is reason to apply discipline (the second key). But whoever uses the first key in order not to use the second key, has failed in both parts of ecclesiastical practice. So it is with the distinction justiciable and judicial. They are nice and important words, but they only serve to cover up a guilty and impoverished situation. Traditionally, the Form for Installation of Ministers in the Reformed churches speaks another language.

As far as contemporary history is concerned, it seems that discipline is a dark riddle rather than an instrument of the kingdom of light and life! We arrive in a completely different world when we turn to our "ecclesiastical papers", namely the Church Order and the Belgic Confession.

These documents contain an honest acceptance of church discipline, according to God's Word, without a theological cleverness that would provide us with an escape route. The brothers who came together at the so-called Convent of Wezel in 1568, in the midst of persecution and dispersal, set out the basis for Reformed church government. They knew themselves to be guided

by obedience to God's Word when they included church discipline. They began their explanation of it as follows: *"one must take care that discipline is never neglected in a newly formed church. How beneficial and necessary this is! The institution of it, as well as the teaching of it, by the Lord Christ and His apostles, the practice of it in the Apostolic and early church and our daily experience in the matter clearly show this."* The general Synod of Emden (1571) said the same thing, namely, that the escape route invented by the distinction justiciable and judicial was illegitimate.

"We feel that church discipline or Christian punishment ought to be maintained in each congregation. Therefore, the office of the ministers of the Word is not only to teach, admonish and chastise publicly, but also in particular to admonish everyone to do his duty, which also the elders are permitted to do."

The churches of those days felt the need to describe the nature of discipline further because the government of that day was afraid that the Reformed would go the way of the Pope and the Medieval church in their discipline. They were afraid that the church, with its powerful weapon (excommunication), would interfere in secular politics. That is why the Reformed churches repeatedly emphasized that church discipline did not exempt anyone from an earthly judge. For that reason in our "ecclesiastical papers" the spiritual character of the discipline receives the emphasis. The Church Order does that in the older version, when the "Christian punishment" is called "spiritual". In doing so, it clearly follows the example of the Belgic Confession, which in Article 30 speaks about the "spiritual order", by which the church must be ruled. One of the elements of that rule is *"that evil men are disciplined in a spiritual way and are restrained."* These are important pointers necessary to establish the boundaries of discipline and to discern its true nature.

Yet, in all of that, we still do not have a clear definition of church discipline. We find it, however, repeatedly with the practitioners of church law. So Voetius gives the following definition in his monumental work *Politica Ecclesiastica*: *"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."*

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 words over time receive a certain (interpretive) character. He defines discipline as *"the maintaining of the rule of God's Word in the church"* and *"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.

Yet, there are objections. In my 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. Even when Bouwman goes into detail the definition is lacking.

He introduces his subject as follows: *"the church has to take care that the confession of truth and the rules of Christ are maintained, and must work towards the goal that the congregation and her members walk according to the Lord's precepts. We must keep in mind this care when we speak about church discipline."*

Also in this it becomes clear again that Bouwman speaks too generally. Why are preaching and catechetical instruction to the youth of the church not included? In addition, the antithetical element (over against sin and its working in the congregation) does not receive attention and the judicial aspect, that gets a place with Voetius, is lacking.

With the latter I wish to link up because we wish to proceed from a unity of the Old and New Testament. For me it is of the greatest importance to state clearly that discipline deals with "*the holiness of God's congregation*".

That is why we understand discipline as: "*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.*"

The elements of the definition

When we describe church discipline as the judicial maintenance of the holiness of God's congregation over against the destructive power of sin in the lives of members of the congregation, we place over against each other:

The holiness of God's congregation and The destructive force (power) of evil.

We juxtapose these statements, because we confess that they oppose each other (c.f. 1 John 2:20, 3:3 and 4:7-10) as light opposes darkness, as the breaking through of life opposes the destructiveness of death. However, those two realities are not separated to that degree that the congregation is not threatened by the destructive power of evil! On the contrary, the necessity of discipline is precisely rooted in the reality of that threat. Before we briefly elaborate on the terms of our definition, a general remark should be made. Discipline is intended to "*purge the evil from among you*", i.e. from the congregation (Deuteronomy 17:7; 19:19). The jurisdiction of discipline is limited by the boundaries of the congregation. That is why in 1 Corinthians 5:12, 13 the distinction is made between "*those outside the church*" and "*those inside*".

The evil inside the congregation is not an impersonal matter. It manifests itself in the congregation, in those who "*are ruled by sin*". In that sense the apostle Paul quotes an Old Testament precept in the above mentioned passage and uses it to point out the person: "*Expel the wicked man from among you*" (1 Corinthians 5:13, cf 5:2). The Church Order regularly speaks about "*the sinner*" as the object of church discipline. The Church Order does not do this in order to deny that sin is still a terrible power in the life of the believer (Psalm 51, 1John 1:8), but to typify a brother or sister who has surrendered to sin. He is a "sinner" because he lets himself be ruled by sin (increasingly so by rejecting the admonitions of God's Word). Cf. James 5:20. Then the blood of Christ does not wash away the unrighteousness (1John 1:9) and the heart is not cleansed from a guilty conscience by sprinkling (Hebrews 10:22). Then the threat of sin will establish itself in the congregation and begin to exercise its destructive power. For sin is always an active power, as the devil, the evil one (Matthew 6:13), "*A murderer from the beginning*" (John 8:44), "*a roaring lion looking for someone to devour*" (1 Peter 5:8). Therefore, sin is or can become a direct threat to the congregation. In connection with the phrase "*an abomination in Israel*",

B. Holwerda writes that "*here is meant not just a sin, which took place in the territory of Israel, but also an iniquity by which the tie with Jahweh (the Lord as God of the Covenant of grace) is abandoned and the antithesis with Canaan is denied in principle ... They are **quatalis** sins, which radically wipe out the differences between Israel and Canaan and which, because Jahweh could not tolerate them from the heathens, are the more intolerable when done by Israel, and thus are punished with annihilation.*"¹

What concerns the God of our salvation is that un-confessed and gross sins cancel the antithesis with "*this world*" (John 8:23) particularly in the concrete walk of life (1 Peter 4:2-4).

That is why over against the horribly destructive power of evil stands "*the holiness of God's congregation*". The maintenance of that is the subject of church discipline.

Every term, however, is open to misunderstanding and misinterpretation. That is also the case with this central fact in our description of church discipline. The holiness of the congregation may be misunderstood. Holiness may be seen as a quality of the born-again congregation who must defend their own possession against the attacks from the outside. In that way church discipline is a

means of self-defense. It becomes a means by which the spiritual elite separate themselves. We must particularly guard ourselves against such a corruption of discipline. There is a sharp antithesis between the Anabaptists "ban" and reformed discipline.² It is antithetical in character. It is also an opposition which can be noticed in practice again and again. For that reason we must always use the Scriptures as a lamp which will show us the path of discipline. By that light we can see what it means for the congregation to be holy.

From ancient time the church confessed herself to be holy and that is echoed by the Belgic Confession which confesses that the church is *"a holy congregation and assembly of the true Christian believers, who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ"* (Article 27). Article 28 also speaks about this *"holy assembly"*.

The congregation is not holy of herself, but by virtue of God's covenant. She is the *"assembly of the Lord"* (Deuteronomy 23:1), *"church of Christ"* (Acts 20:28, 1 Corinthians 11:22; Galatians 6:16, 2 Thessalonians 1:4, 1 Timothy 3:15).

The holiness of the congregation and of her members (Psalm 72:2; 1 Corinthians 7:14) finds her only explanation in the fact that she belongs to the holy God (Exodus 13:2, 1 Peter 2:9) and that He as the Holy One dwells in the midst of Israel, in the midst of His congregation (Exodus 29:45, Isaiah 12:6, cf. 1 Corinthians 14:25 et. al). In and through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit this is the reality of life for God's congregation (Isaiah 63:10, Acts 5:3). It is a reality which in the new dispensation makes each local church God's temple (1 Corinthians 3:16, cf. Ephesians 2:22). So in a very personal way the admonition: *"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you"* (1 Corinthians 6:19), clearly indicates the congregation as the dwelling place of the Spirit. That is clear from the plural that the apostle uses with "is in you". In the holiness of God's congregation we are dealing with the holiness of God Himself.

What do the Scriptures mean by that? We know that God's holiness stands over against sin. Surely, more can be said. J. Ridderbos discussed God's holiness in the second volume of his book, *Het Godswoord der profeten*. Briefly summarized he states that God's holiness concerns itself in particular with His "Being God", His divine loftiness and majesty.³ In His holiness He turns against sin (Isaiah 6:3-5). At the same time, however, He, as the Holy One, is Israel's Redeemer (Isaiah 43:5, 47:4 etc.). He not only stands over against sin, He conquers it as well. In His holiness He in the final analysis seeks the eschatological redemption and holiness of the congregation (1 Thessalonians 5:23). He seeks it in the hallowing of His name (Matthew 6:9). Sin blocks the road to God. He, however, fashions His way to His final glory and on that way He takes along the people *"on whom his favour rests"*. He does this by means of a critical sifting throughout church history: *"let him who is holy continue to be holy"* and *"let him who is vile continue to be vile"* (Revelation 22:11). The indwelling of the living and holy God in his congregation propels the gathering of the church to her completion, while in all His glory God is enthroned above her.

In this living, dynamic whole, church discipline finds its place, that is, the reason for the fact that discipline is not timeless. It has an antithetical and at the same time a dynamic character. For with this weapon the church stands at the front line which by no means has become a bunker war. She resists the poisonous, active presence of the devil and sin and she promotes the holy and sanctifying presence of the living and redeeming God!

The holiness of God is the urgent reason for the sanctification of the congregation. So speaks the Old and the New Testament. The apostle Peter correctly uses the Old Testament (Leviticus 11:14) for the New Testament church: *"But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy'"* (1 Peter 1:15, 16). The word "just" in the beginning of the quotation should have our attention! It indicates a yardstick, i.e. that the Holy God Himself is the yard stick for the holy walk of the congregation.

Greijdanus comments on this text: *"kata (Greek for just) indicates the norm, the yard-stick, c.f. verses 2 and 3. For the believers the world and her sinful mode of thinking and living cannot be the norm, but they in all things must conform to God's norm. Kata means here*

more than a certain similarity, it means to say, that believers must measure up and correspond to God and His holiness".⁴

The opposition to such a life can be found in the recurrent phrase in the book of Judges: "everyone did as he saw fit" (Judges 17:6, 18:1, 19:1, 21:25). Here human high-handedness, being a law unto oneself, is sketched as the cause for church destruction and church dispersion. The whole of the second half of the Book of Judges sketches the history of a church which is ruined by lack of discipline. For the benefit of the people, God is asked to endow the king with His righteous justice (Psalm 72:1, 2), so that the mountains will bring prosperity to the people and the hills fruits of righteousness. That justice, according to the Old Testament promises, will be fulfilled in David's great son, the Messiah (Isaiah 11:3f, 32:1, Jeremiah 23:5, Zachariah 9:9). This Son of David, our Lord Jesus Christ, has given the administration of the keys of the kingdom to the congregation and its office bearers (Matthew 18:15-18). That is the reason for including the word "judicial" in our definition of church discipline: church discipline is the judicial maintenance of the holiness of God's congregation. Church law may not be equated with secular law, even though, without a doubt, the one can learn from the other and we in broad lines ought to be informed about current disciplinary law.

The close connection which ought to exist between the administration of discipline and pastoral care pleads against such an equation. Against it pleads also the proper place of the active, co-operation of the congregation as such. Such a co-operation exists not only in approbating what the consistory does, but also in the faith activity of the believers, which concentrates itself on the "sinner" in the congregation.

This does not take away from the fact that the congregation is the people of the kingdom of heaven, over whom the justice of the great King must and may be administered. To think that discipline can be typified with "juridical" is incorrect. Equally incorrect is the attitude as if the judicial element as such is the ruination of church discipline. Church law, and in particular church discipline, would then be formal and cold matters in which the love of Christ cannot be seen. Then the church of Christ would not be recognized in church law particularly in church discipline. We place over against that our confession which states that in the City of Christ, in Jerusalem, "the thrones for judgment stand", that too in this dispensation of Pentecost makes her a city "that is closely compacted together" (Psalm 122).

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¹ B. Holwerda, *Dictaten Deuteronomium*, p. 451.

² Cf. the engaging chapter "Anabaptist ban and reformed discipline" in J.H. Wessel, *De leer stellige strijd tussen de Nederlandsche Gereformeerden en Doopsgezinden in de zestiende eeuw*, Assen 1945, pp. 67-107, and my *De tragiek der revolutionaire gematigheid*, in *Verkenning II*, Goes (1964), pp. 42-50.

³ J. Ridderbos, *Het Godswoord der profeten II*, Kampen 1932, p. 93.

⁴ S. Greydanus, *De brieven van de apostelen Petrus en Johannes en de brief van Judas*, Amsterdam 1929, p. 65.