



The elder and the administration of discipline

Again and again those who are called to be elders in the congregation of the Lord are faced with the matter of discipline. In the *Form for the Ordination of Elders* we read:

"As for their mandate, the task of the elders is, together with the ministers of the Word, to have supervision over Christ's Church, that every member may conduct himself properly in doctrine and life, according to the gospel. For this purpose they shall faithfully visit the members of the congregation in their homes to comfort, instruct, and admonish them with the Word of God, reproving those who behave improperly. They shall exercise Christian discipline, according to the command of Christ, against those who show themselves unbelieving and ungodly and refuse to repent. They shall watch that the sacraments are not profaned."

Elders who execute their office faithfully are, in certain cases, called to admonish, to suspend from the Lord's Supper, yes, even excommunicate members of the congregation.

Experienced office-bearers know how difficult this part of their mandate is. We will, therefore, pay some attention to this matter in a separate chapter. Do not expect a complete treatment of the theme "ecclesiastical discipline." We will restrict ourselves to the administration of discipline to erring members of the congregation. The discipline of office-bearers will not be considered. Only rarely would an elder be called upon to deal with the latter.¹

The Scriptures

Article 29 of the *Belgic Confession* calls the use of discipline "*for correcting and punishing sins*," a mark by which the true church is known. Indeed, the New Testament dearly proclaims that the church of Christ has to exercise discipline. The Saviour says to Peter, "*I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth, shall be loosed in heaven*" (Matthew 16:19). Peter, and in him the other apostles (c.f. Matthew 18:18; John 20:23), receives authority. He may pronounce to whom the Kingdom is opened and for whom the Kingdom is closed. The words "binding" and "loosing" are rabbinic terms for "determined by authority." These terms are used for the doctrinal authority of the rabbis. Binding means to declare as not permitted and loosing as being permitted.

*"In the exegesis of Matthew 16:19 we are on safe ground when we try to explain these words in the context of the preceding verses: to make binding and loosing statements made in connection with the entrance into the kingdom of heaven. Herein lies the heavenly reality: to whoever Peter announces entrance into the Kingdom, they will enter; to whoever he announces a closing of the Kingdom, the Kingdom will indeed be closed."*²

The question whether or not this authority belongs only to the apostles or whether through them it extends to the church and her office-bearers, has been much debated. Comparing Matthew 16:19 with Matthew 18:15-20 we must conclude that this authority has also been given to the church of today. Matthew 18 clearly deals with the life of the congregation.³

For the foundation of ecclesiastical discipline, Matthew 18:15-20 is extremely important. The Saviour describes how discipline should be administered in His congregation. In this matter there is first of all a calling for all the brothers and sisters.

"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone." The words "against you" are not to be found in the best manuscripts. It is not only a matter of a specific personal insult. The Saviour means sin in general. When we see a brother sin, we must not immediately make it a matter for the office-bearers. The administration of discipline begins with the congregation. Hidden, secret sins, may not immediately be made public. The admonition takes place in private. *"The expression, perhaps somewhat semitically tinted, is very strong. It must come from that personal word."*⁴

Often within the congregation there is the inclination to bother the elder with all sorts of questions. The elder, however, should be constantly aware of the rule the Saviour gives. When sin is hidden and has not caused public trouble, the congregation must go to work. Herein lies a task for the church member who has this knowledge.

If the brother who sins does not listen to the admonition of his fellow brother, one or two other congregation members should go with him and participate in the brotherly admonition. *"Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses, shall a charge be sustained."* These last words are taken from Deuteronomy 19:15. A judge in Israel could only consider a complaint, if it was brought before him by more than one witness.

*"The intention here is that when the sinner does not listen and the matter later has to be brought before the congregation (vs. 17), there should be no doubt about what has already been talked about **in camera**."*⁵

Also the second time the matter remains hidden. Only a few brothers know about it. F. W. Grosheide correctly writes: *"Brotherly consideration should dominate the order of the rules."*⁶ When the admonition in the presence of witnesses does not cause any change, then the matter must be brought to the congregation. This, of course, does not mean that the sin must be broadcast in the congregation, but that it is made known to the address of the congregation, the consistory. It should, however, not escape us that Christ formulates it as *"tell it to the church."*

From other places as well (e.g. 1 Corinthians 5) it becomes clear that ecclesiastical discipline is administered by the congregation. True, the elders act, but they act as instruments of the congregation. F. L. Rutgers remarks: *"They (the Reformed) saw the relationship consistory-congregation, as organs of the body. The power to walk, to see etc. has been given to the body, but for every function there are specific organs. The foot is not the organ that sees! So the elders are the organs through which the congregation acts. See Belgic Confession articles 30 and 31, and the Heidelberg Catechism question and answer 85."*⁷ *"When the sinner does not listen to the official admonition, he is to you as the gentile and the tax-collector."* Through public binding (vs. 18), the office-bearers must indicate that the sinner is outside the kingdom and no longer belongs to the congregation.

The Saviour concludes this section about discipline in His congregation with these remarkable words: *"Again I say to you, if two agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them."* We must understand these words in close connection with the preceding ones. They concern a prayer which asks for a correct procedure regarding Christ's authority, for a responsible administration of discipline. When "two agree on earth," i.e. unanimously call upon God, then their prayer will be heard. The unanimity is here mentioned as proof that what they desire of God in prayer is not arbitrary, but in agreement with the given rule of Christ.⁸ When office-bearers act according to the Word of Christ, He as the ascended one, works in them. He is present Himself and gives their act validity in heaven. Calvin emphasizes this. He writes:

*Now, that no one may despise such a judgment of the church or regard condemnation by vote of the believers as a trivial thing, the Lord has testified that this is nothing but the publication of his own sentence, and what they have done on earth is ratified in heaven."*⁹

A pericope which must be mentioned in this connection is 1 Corinthians 5. We cannot go into detail here. In various commentaries the exegesis of certain parts differs greatly. The case which Paul

presents is dear. There is in Corinth a brother who has a relationship with his stepmother. Instead of calling this brother to account, the congregation leaves him alone and continues to boast of their own spiritual welfare. Paul, however, calls the congregation to exercise discipline. In the congregation of the Lord such a sinner may not be left alone. The apostolic command is short and to the point. *"Drive out the wicked person from among you"* (vs. 13). It should be noted that Paul addresses the congregation. Even though Paul does not mention the office-bearers, the excommunication of the sinner in itself would have been a matter for the office-bearers. It, however, appears clearly how much the congregation is involved in the administration of discipline. She acts through her office-bearers. The policy of Matthew 18 is in effect here.

The exegesis of verses four and five is difficult. *"When you are assembled, and my Spirit is present with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus."* When Paul heard about the sin, he went into action. He sentenced the sinner. The Corinthians must now go into action as well. Together with the apostle they must deliver the sinner to Satan *"for the destruction of the flesh."* The question is: what does Paul mean with "flesh"? Does he mean sinful flesh, the wicked heart, or physical existence? F. W. Grosheide writes:

Therefore, we choose the exegesis that the work of the devil is not only permitted, but that under God's guidance, it is designated to destroy the wicked flesh. That could happen in such a way that the man living in the midst of sin recognizes the seriousness of his situation and stops to reflect on it. Or, that he has enough of the evil, that it embitters him, so that he cannot go on and is forced to stop. To be sure, the means that God can use are many. The sinner is brought to a change.¹⁰

Herman Ridderbos is of a different opinion:

It is, therefore, most likely that with "the destruction of the flesh" we should think of a sore, physical trial which the sinner, delivered to Satan, will experience (c.f. 2 Corinthians 12:17; Luke 13:16; Job 1, where suffering is described as the work of Satan). The phrase that follows indicates that, as a result, repentance and salvation is possible. Compare also a similar pronouncement in 1 Timothy 1:20.¹¹

The decision is difficult.¹² We do not make a choice. In each case it is clear that an excommunication from the congregation implies a handing-over to a satanic force, a living outside the beneficial effects of the Kingdom. The notes supplied with the Dutch translation, *"Statenvertaling,"* say about this text: *"For outside the congregation of Christ, Satan has his realm."*

This passage also teaches us about the purpose of church discipline. First of all there is the matter of keeping the congregation holy. Paul writes: *"Do you not know that a little leaven, leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened"* (vss. 6, 7). Secondly, the repentance of the sinner is intended: *"that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus"* (vs. 5b).

At the end of 1 Corinthians 5, Paul indicates what the attitude of the congregation must be with regard to the person who is excommunicated. The sinner must realize that he has been excommunicated, that he is outside the communion of saints. That is why the congregation may not associate with him (vs. 11). In this context Paul does not mean social association, but brotherly association (vs. 10). There can be no friendly relationships ("eating," vs. 11b). The sinner must feel that he is on the outside, so that he will repent.

According to the New Testament, the church is not only called to censure those who lead a sinful life, but also those who deviate in doctrine. Church discipline involves both life and doctrine. Correctly the Church Order gives as cause for church discipline *"both the purity of doctrine and the piety of conduct."* Paul writes in Titus 3:10: *"As for a man who is factious, after admonishing him once or twice, have nothing more to do with him."*

Instead of "who is factious" this phrase can also be translated as "heretic." According to the context, we are dealing here with people who deviate from the pure doctrine and thus endanger the unity of the congregation. Titus must reject a factious person after a first and second admonition. The words make us think of a certain procedure and remind us of Matthew 18:15-17.

*"If he, however, does not pay heed, then Titus must reject him, which points to a rule that concerns the congregation as a whole. In view of what follows and of Matthew 18:15-17, it is difficult not to understand this as a removal from the community of the church."*¹³

In Romans 16:17 we read: *"I appeal to you, brethren, to take note of those who create dissensions and difficulties, in opposition to the doctrine which you have been taught; avoid them."* Even though Paul gives no further rules, he adjures the Romans not to associate with heretics. They must be avoided. Here also we see that discipline in matters of doctrine must be exercised by the congregation of the Lord. Other texts could be mentioned, such as Galatians 1:8; 2 Timothy 2:17, 18; 2 John: 10; Revelations 2:14, 15. *"That heresy must be condemned constantly, is in itself a form of discipline, even though it does not concern certain persons, yet one is warned about their actions."*¹⁴

When we discussed Matthew 18:15-20, we wrote that the exercise of discipline begins in the congregation. Those who read about it in the New Testament are struck by the repeated call for mutual admonition.

M. H. Bolkestein remarks: *"An essential mark of pastoral care in the New Testament consists herein that it is done mutually by the members of the congregation. The congregation in the New Testament is not passive but active. She is responsible. She cannot lean upon the activities of the office-bearers. It is precisely the tenor of the work of the office-bearers to enable the members of the congregation to do their work, not to relieve them of it."*¹⁵

Paul calls the Colossians to; *"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom..."* (Colossians 3:16). Paul exhorts the Thessalonians: *"And we exhort you, brethren, admonish the idlers, encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with them all"* (1 Thessalonians 5:14). And in Hebrews 3:13 we read: *"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."*

The elders must see to it that this mutual admonition functions in the congregation. They must constantly point out this calling to the brothers and sisters. Calvin begins his treatment of discipline within the church with these striking words:

*The first foundation of discipline is to provide a place for private admonition; that is, if anyone does not perform his duty willingly, or behaves insolently, or does not live honourably, or has committed any act deserving blame - he should allow himself to be admonished; and when the situation demands it, every man should endeavour to admonish his brother."*¹⁶

The Essence

We do not find a precise description of church discipline in our *Church Order*. Voetius called it *"the personal and judicial application of God's will in order to awaken and disturb the sinner; and either prevent or remove the offences from the church."*¹⁷ H. Bouwman describes it as *"the maintenance of the rule of God's Word in the church."*¹⁸

No matter how precisely one wishes to formulate it, the administration of discipline concerns the proclamation of the Word. The individual person who has sinned and persists in it, is confronted with the seriousness of the Gospel. Of course also in the preaching on Sunday it is proclaimed to the unbeliever and those who do not heartily repent, that God's wrath and eternal condemnation rests on them as long as they do not repent (Lord's Day 31, *Heidelberg Catechism*). In a visit of admonition, this proclamation receives a very personal emphasis. The preaching for all becomes concretized. In a very personal manner, the office-bearers announce the judgment to the sinning brother and urge him to repent. The elder, who is called to do the visiting must, therefore, always

let the Word of the Lord speak. The person visited *"must become aware that he is adverse to God and His Word and not only to the consistory. Make it clear to him against which commandment of God he has sinned, point out the seriousness of his situation and that he does not want to listen to God."*¹⁹

The so-called visit of admonition is perhaps the most difficult part of an elder's task. On the one hand sin must be called sin, without regard of persons; on the other hand, the elder may never forget that he too is a sinner who must live by grace. Ardent love for Christ and for those who belong to Him will find words which will touch the heart of the brother. Rev. J. van Andel has said beautiful things about the admonition of a brother in his book *"De Gemeenschap der Heiligen"* (The Communion of Saints).²⁰

Following in the footsteps of Calvin, the Form for Excommunication gives a threefold purpose for church discipline, it *"is intended to make this brother (sister) ashamed of his (her) sins, and also to ensure that this corrupt member does not affect the whole body which is Christ's Church. Moreover, in this way the blaspheming of God's name is prevented."* The church must exercise discipline in view of God, His name is at stake, the congregation is His temple, (1 Corinthians 5:5b 2 Thessalonians 3:14b).

Finally, discipline must be exercised with a view to the congregation, she may not be seduced into sin, she must learn to fear wickedness, (1 Corinthians 5:6; 1 Timothy 5:20).

The emphasis has correctly been placed on the saving character of discipline. The power of the keys is exercised and the judgment is announced, in order that the sinner may repent from his error. Lord's Day 31 speaks of *"the Christian ban."* The original German text beautifully uses *"Christliche Busszucht."*²¹ This suggests a leading to penance and repentance. The exercise of discipline is not a means of getting rid of a difficult brother but a means to save a sinner. In the Form, excommunication is called the "last remedy."

Who?

There was much ado in the Reformed churches about the question: Does church discipline only concern confessing members or do members by baptism also fall under official discipline.²² The national Synod of Dordt (1578) judged that excommunication could only be applied to those who after confession were admitted to the Lord's Supper.²³ Baptized members, who after coming of age did not make profession of faith, were considered to have excommunicated themselves from the congregation and thus no longer belonged to the church.

That was also the judgment of the influential Voetius. á Lasco saw things differently. He was of the opinion that older members by baptism who refused to profess their faith had to be excommunicated.

The matter was dealt with at length at the General Synod of Middelburg (1896), as a result of a report by the professors Bavinck and Rutgers. In this report it was concluded:

"Baptized children are members of the church in which they have been baptized, albeit that they are not as yet full members. As members of the church they are automatically subject to church discipline. However, in keeping with their situation, this discipline can only be incomplete and it can only be exercised through admonition, reprimand and other such means."

Middelburg 1896 did not make any decision. The so-called *"doopledenstelsel,"* the creation of a legal interim position for "baptized" adults, however, was seen more and more as an evil which must be opposed prudently.²⁴ The General Synod of Sneek (1934) dealt with the matter. It formulated a number of guidelines for the discipline of baptized members according to which the churches should act.

In accordance with Scripture, the Reformed churches maintained that discipline must be exercised over the members of the congregation (c.f. Matthew 18:15; 1 Corinthians 5:12, 13). A member by baptism, however, is not admitted to the Lord's Supper and does not have the same rights as a confessing member. Therefore, the discipline of members by baptism must be in keeping with that. Sanctions applied to confessing members by the consistory cannot be applied to them. Because the guidelines of Sneek are unknown to most elders, I will cite the most important ones.

In the work among adult members by baptism, who in their obligation through baptism to a new obedience show themselves to be unfaithful, a distinction shall be made between those who have turned away, who are indifferent or hostile towards the Lord's Gospel and Law and who, in either doctrine or conduct, behave themselves as children of the world and those who are negligent with regard to the public profession of faith and the proclamation of Christ's death but otherwise participate in church life and whose conduct is inoffensive...

With regard to the adult members by baptism who had turned away, Synod pronounced:

As to the children of the covenant who have turned away, the oral, official appeal made to them to return to the Lord shall take place a number of times per year. If they withdraw themselves from oral admonition, then it shall be done in writing. When this repeated admonition, at the same time loving and firm, does not lead to repentance, the consistory will make the matter known to the congregation in a public meeting. The consistory shall do so in order that the congregation, to God's honour, the salvation of the sinner and for the sake of the church, can pray and work with the consistory with regard to the sad desecration of God's covenant.

In order to make clear the distinction between baptized members and confessing members, this public announcement shall only be made once. The announcement shall include a trial period, the length of which is at the discretion of the consistory. As a rule it should be at least three months. For the public announcement, which includes the name of the person, advice of Classis is required.

When the public announcement results in repentance, the announcement of it to the congregation shall coincide with the announcement that the baptized member confessed his faith to the consistory and wishes to be admitted to make public confession of faith in the midst of the congregation. When in the trial period, during which admonition will continue, there is no improvement in conduct and the consistory has become convinced that they are dealing with an unbeliever, they shall proceed to the last act of discipline and for its part end the membership. This will be done in a public meeting of the congregation. In cases of particularly offensive godlessness, the consistory can exclude a baptized member at age twenty-one. In cases of a persistent turning away, the consistory as a rule, cannot proceed to the last act before baptized members have reached the age of twenty-five. Before a public announcement and before the last act shall be administered, the person in question and his parents or next of kin shall be informed.

When a baptized member makes it expressly known in writing or orally that he/she withdraws from the communion of the church, the consistory shall try once more, in all earnestly, to dissuade him/her from this new sin of disobedience. When the member persists in his decision, no further discipline can be exercised and the consistory can confine itself to the sad announcement, in a public meeting, that this brother (sister) has withdrawn from the communion of saints to which he/she belonged by baptism. In no case and in no way may the consistory try to promote the withdrawal from the communion of the church.

With regard to those who are negligent the Synod declared:

Those who are negligent with regard to the public profession of faith and the proclamation of Christ's death and yet participate in church life and otherwise are inoffensive in conduct, the consistory shall continually admonish them in an instructive and appealing manner. This admonition shall take place a number of times per year. When this has no results, in that the

negligent member indeed continues to refuse to love the Lord, to accept the promises of the Lord and to live according to the demands of the covenant in new obedience, the consistory shall proceed to a public announcement. This disobedience of the clear commandments of the King of the Church, is too serious for just admonitions. This public announcement also requires the advice of the Classis.

Through the public announcement, the whole congregation is called to pray for and admonish these negligent children of the covenant and thus urge them to come to a firm choice. It is the calling of the congregation and particularly the overseers of the flock of Christ, to guide matters in such a way that the opposition to Christ's Gospel in her midst is more and more overcome. In order to do so, she must bring, with great zealousness and ardent love, the liberating message of Christ's grace to those who still live in uncertainty. For the honour of our King, who is a complete Saviour, for the maintenance of the holiness of the church as the gathering of true believers in Christ and for the earnestness of the calling of the covenant, the position of these negligent members may not remain constant. Yet the consistory may not proceed to the extreme remedy with them unless it appears clearly that it is not so much a matter of timidity, faulty insight and conscientious objections, but that decided unbelief is the cause for not publicly accepting holy baptism and the celebration of the Holy Supper.²⁵

Course of the exercise of discipline

The *Church Order* makes a distinction in articles 66-70 between secret and public sins. In older editions of the *Church Order* Article 72 reads:

When someone has sinned against the purity of doctrine and the piety of conduct; insofar as it is secret and has not given public offense, the rule which Christ clearly prescribes in Matthew 18 shall be kept.

This article indicates what the difference is between a secret and a public sin. A secret sin is a sin which has not (yet) given public offense. The matter has not been made known. In such cases, the elders must strictly see to it that the way of Matthew 18 is followed. Here first of all mutual admonition must function!

Article 72 (66), however, must be understood correctly. Secret sin does not mean, sin committed in secret, but sin which has remained secret and has not come to the attention of many people. Many public sins are committed in secret, e.g. sins against the seventh and eighth commandments. Even though these sins are committed in secret, they are not secret sins in the sense of the *Church Order*. F. L. Rutgers writes:

A description of the qualification "public" is not given. We cannot point to a definition or borderline. Sin which is known by one or two persons is not public, but we can continue that way. Where would the borderline be? There is also a difference between larger and smaller congregations. If something is known to five people in a smaller congregation, it sometimes can be called public, while it can be called secret in a larger congregation. The cases need to be distinguished. A firm rule cannot be given. Each case must be decided on its own.²⁶

When a definite sin has been committed a consistory may become involved in two ways:

- a) when the sin is of a public nature and gives offense to the congregation;
- b) when a brother, who has committed a secret sin, refuses to listen to the admonitions of the members of the congregation.

Of course the consistory always investigates the matter. If the complaint is correct, the consistory is called to exercise discipline. This begins with ecclesiastical admonition.

"This admonition is not the common brotherly admonition, as it takes place in the preaching or as the office-bearers admonish the whole congregation but a disciplinary admonition in

*which the sinner is rebuked in the name of the Lord and urged to repent and to desist from evil.*¹²⁷

It is important that the consistory sees to it that the formal side of the matter is always in order. The exercise of discipline requires great care! The brother who is admonished is entitled to know dearly what he is accused of and admonished for.

When someone stubbornly refuses to listen to the ecclesiastical admonition, the consistory must suspend him from the Lord's Supper. This suspension must also take place when someone has committed a "public sin." This suspension has a disciplinary character, in earlier days it was sometimes referred to as "the little ban." With this suspension the consistory proclaims that, as long as he remains in sin, the sinner has no part in the Kingdom of Christ (c.f. The Form for the Lord's Supper).

The churches have always known a suspension which has no disciplinary character. For example, when a member of the congregation has given offense by a public sin but immediately shows true repentance. In such a case it may be necessary, because of the offense experienced by the congregation, to suspend him from the Lord's Supper. Suspension can also be necessary when someone who has fallen into sin and has been admonished, repents just prior to the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

During this suspension, the official admonition of course continues. The consistory must continually speak with the sinner about the evil and call him to repentance. This continued admonition deserves to have the full attention of the elders. The Saviour says in the parable of the lost sheep: *"If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?"* In the admonition the elders must let the Scriptures speak. The sinner must know that he is dealing with God the Lord.

When the sinner obstinately continues in his evil way, the consistory must proceed to the final remedy namely, excommunication. What is decisive here is an obstinate continuance in evil. The unrepentant attitude must be dear. *"From the regulations about discipline it appears that the rule of the Reformed churches was and is, never to apply discipline in haste. Precisely for that reason it is emphatically stated that suspension from the Lord's Supper must be preceded by admonition and that the actual rejection of the admonition is the reason for applying discipline. Precisely, therefore, the suspension from the Lord's Supper is not immediately followed by excommunication but only takes place after several admonitions."*¹²⁸

The excommunication recognizes three degrees or admonitions. For the three admonitions I refer the reader to the *Form for Excommunication*.

It is important to note how the congregation is involved in the exercise of discipline. This is in complete agreement with Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5. Initially the congregation has only to pray for the sinner. At a later stage, the congregation must visit and speak with him.²⁹ The Church Order does not state how much time there shall be between the various admonitions. The elders ought to be long-suffering.

Voetius remarks: *"The practice of our churches ordinarily prefers slowness over speediness and haste in the strength of hope and expectation that from the side of some sinner or from the other side, something can interfere which will prevent or postpone the public execution and announcement."*¹³⁰

With the second admonition, the advice of Classis is necessary. This regulation does not violate the right of the consistory, the consistory only allows Classis to judge with them. The Classis should see to it that the sinner has been duly admonished and that discipline has been exercised according to the Scriptural rule. This advice of Classis is also needed with the last admonition. *"No one shall be excommunicated without previous advice from Classis."*

After the third admonition to the congregation, the actual excommunication follows. The *Form for Excommunication* reads as follows:

Therefore we, as the elders of the Church of God in this place, in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ excommunicate _____ from the Church of the Lord, because he (she) obstinately persists in his (her) sin.

He (she) is now excluded from the fellowship of Christ and from His Kingdom. He (she) may no longer use the sacraments. He (she) has no part anymore in the spiritual blessings and benefits which Christ bestows upon His Church. As long as he (she) persists in sin, let him be to you as a Gentile and an outcast.

The elders have to see to it that the congregation indeed excludes the sinner. No ties of friendship may be retained. He must feel that he is outside the communion of saints (c.f. 1 Corinthians 5:11). The Form, however, adds *"we exhort you, beloved Christians, not to look on him (her) as an enemy. On the contrary, by to warn him (her) as a brother (sister)."*

Reconciliation

Article 69 of the Church Order states:

When someone repents of a public sin or of a sin which had to be reported to the consistory, the latter shall not accept his confession of sin unless he has shown real amendment.

The consistory shall determine whether the benefit of the congregation requires that this confession of sin shall be made publicly and – in case it is made before the consistory or before two or three office-bearers – whether the congregation shall be informed afterwards.

With reconciliation is meant here the act of the consistory whereby a member of the congregation, who has fallen into sin and been placed under censure, after confession of sins, is restored to full membership. The censure is lifted and the way to the Lord's Supper is re-opened. This reconciliation shall in many cases take place before a committee from the consistory or before the consistory itself.

Whether or not it has to take place in public is left to the discretion of the consistory. Article 69 does not give a norm. The consistory must decide and take the honour of God's name and the edification of the congregation into account. It is a well-known fact that in earlier times young people who had to get married were required to confess their sin in the midst of the congregation. Some churches make a brief announcement, others keep the reconciliation a matter for the consistory only.

Article 69 mentions *"the benefit of the congregation."* Previously we saw already how all official work must serve the up building of the congregation. That edification must also guide the consistory in dealing with the matter of reconciliation. A certain sin can cause such a disturbance in and offense to the congregation that it becomes necessary to inform the congregation that the person concerned has confessed his sin. Wisdom and love towards the sinner and the congregation will show the way.

If there is no unanimity about the matter within the consistory, advice maybe sought from two neighbouring churches.

*"The word **advice** does not mean 'permission', for that would mean that the decision lies with the neighbouring churches. Neither does it say after advice as if it were up to the consistory to accept or reject the advice, but in agreement with the advice or judgment of the two churches. The intention is that the two neighbouring consistories meet and together come to a mutual agreement."³¹*

F. L. Rutgers has made clear that the history of the article shows that the intention in principle is the restriction of publicity.³²

Finally a few remarks about the readmission. Article 70 reads:

When someone who has been excommunicated repents and desires to be again received into the communion of the Church, the congregation shall be informed of his desire in order to see whether there are any lawful objections.

The time between the public announcement and the readmission of the sinner shall be not less than one month.

If no lawful objection is raised, the readmission shall take place with the use of the Form for that purpose.

Excommunication never means an irreversible sentence. It is the "final remedy." It is intended to bring the sinner to repentance. That is why the churches have a readmission into the congregation of Christ. The consistory must be convinced that the person who was excommunicated is truly penitent as shown in improvement and repentance. The ban was pronounced because there was an obstinate persistence in sin.

The congregation is also involved in the readmission. The intention of reconciliation must be announced to her. The action of the consistory must be supported and approved by the congregation. That the readmission as a matter of choice should take place before the celebration of the Lord's Supper, is not surprising.

"We must hold on to the significance of the Lord's Supper. In it the Christian communion culminates. There the communion of saints acquires its most external, visible form. And excommunication was, in the first place, excommunication from the Lord's Supper. In this article the central meaning of the Lord's Supper in the church is brought out."⁸³

Final Remarks

The exercise of discipline is a difficult and delicate endeavor. The elder can only fulfill this aspect of his mandate when he keeps in mind that he comes in Christ's name, that he has been sent. The exalted Christ has given the office-bearers to His congregation (Ephesians 4:11). All official authority and the exercise of that authority is tied to Him, directed towards Him and dependent on Him.³⁴

I will end with a quote from Willem Teellinck:

The elders must use all of their intellect and their pious compassion in order to become more and more able to fulfill their mandate. They must, therefore, continually pray to the Lord their God; therefore, they must diligently search the Holy Scriptures and other good books. They must speak often with one another about the Church and its individual members and what is wrong with them. They must examine themselves about their conduct, their family, conversation, social intercourse, clothing and all actions and behave themselves in such a way that the congregation is edified. Each elder must work, when the opportunity presents itself, he must redeem and manage his time zealously, so that one can confess to the Lord with heart and mouth that we treasure the eldership above all other activities; that it is the most important matter because it concerns in a particular fashion, God's honour and the edification of His Church, and man's soul and his salvation."³⁵

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- ¹ There is not much recent literature about church discipline. There is some truth in the remark of A. F. N. Lekkerkerker: "We find ourselves here in the undeveloped terrain of the Church's power of the keys." *Kanttekeningen bij het Hervormde Dienstboek*, IV, ('s Gravenhage, 1956), p. 61.
- ² Herman Ridderbos, *De komst van het Koninkrijk*, (Kampen, 1950), p. 312, 313.
- ³ Herman Ridderbos, op. cit. p. 317.
- ⁴ F. W. Grosheide, *Wat leert het Nieuwe Testament inzake de tucht?*, (Delft, 1952), p. 44.
- ⁵ H. N. Ridderbos, *Korte Verklaring van Mattheus*, II, (Kampen, 1946), p. 46.
- ⁶ F. W. Grosheide, op. cit. p. 45.
- ⁷ F. L. Rutgers, *Verklaring van de Kerkenordening van de Nationale Synode van Dordrecht van 1618-1619*, published by J. De Jong, IV, (Rotterdam, 1918), p. 39.
- ⁸ N. Ridderbos, *Korte Verklaring*, p. 47.
- ⁹ Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV-12-4.
- ¹⁰ F.W. Grosheide op. cit. p. 27, 28.
- ¹¹ Herman Ridderbos, *Paulus*, (Kampen, 1966), p. 527.
- ¹² Rudolf Bohren, *Das Problem der Kirchenzucht im Neuen Testament*, (Zollikon-Zürich, 1952), writes: "Es bleibt noch zu fragen, ob diese Rettung im Blick auf I Petr. 4,6 so zu deuten ist, dass dem *pneuma* (Geist) gepredigt wird. Wenn die Vorstellung von der Hollenfahrt Christi den Hintergrund zur Satansübergabe bildet; dann kommt der Blutschänder als Geist ins Gefängnis, wo er durch die Christus-predigt noch gerettet werden kann," S. 112.
- ¹³ Herman Ridderbos, *De Pastorale Brieven*, (Kampen, 1967), p. 298.
- ¹⁴ F. W. Grosheide, op. cit. p. 33.
- ¹⁵ M. H. Bolkestein, *Zielszorg in het Nieuwe Testament*, (The Hague, 1964), p. 94.
- ¹⁶ *Institutes*, IV-12-2.
- ¹⁷ Joh. Jansen, *De Kerkelijke Tucht*, (Arnhem, 1913), p. 135.
- ¹⁸ H. Bouwman, *De Kerkelijke Tucht*, (Kampen, 1912), p. 19.
- ¹⁹ W. A. Wiersinga, *Weid mijne schapen*, ('s Gravenhage, 1945), 4e dr. I, p. 94.
- ²⁰ J. van Andel, *De gemeenschap der heiligen*, (Kampen, 1904), p. 110f.
- ²¹ G. P. Hartvelt, *Tastbaar Evangelie*, (Aalten, p. 189, 190.
- ²² G.M. den Hartogh, *De tucht over doopleden*, (Zutphen, z.j.), gives an historic overview.
- ²³ "Maer dewyle de belydenisse des gheloofs ende ghemeynschap des H. Auontmaels een bysonder getuyghenisse is in der Kercke Gods, door het welcke de ghenen die tegen het verbont Gods ghesondicht hadden wederopghenomen worden (ghelyckeertyts de afvallighe Israelieten niet door een nieuwe besnydenisse maer door de ghemenynschap des paeschlams tot de ware Kercke Israels wedergebracht worden) soo salmen gheen afsnydinghe ghebruycken dan teghen de ghene in den welcken door het Auontmael des Heeren het verbont Gods op een nieu versegheft is," Part. vr. 47.
- ²⁴ G. M. den Hartogh, op. cit. p. 47.
- ²⁵ The Synod also drew up forms for public announcements.
- ²⁶ F. L. Rutgers, op. cit. p. 44.
- ²⁷ H. Bouwman, op. cit. p. 219.
- ²⁸ F. L. Rutgers, op. cit. p. 61.
- ²⁹ 2 Thess. 3:6 and 14 appear to point to an "in-house" rule which explains the association with members who are not as yet excommunicated.
- ³⁰ Quoted by H. Bouwman, op. cit. p. 224.
- ³¹ Joh. Jansen, *Korte Verklaring van de Kerkenordening*, (Kampen, 1923), p. 326.
- ³² F. L. Rutgers, op. cit. p. 47
- ³³ F. L. Rutgers. op. cit. p. 99.
- ³⁴ Soon Gil Huh, *Presbyter in voile rechten*, (Groningen, 1972), p. 156f.
- ³⁵ Jacobus Koelman, *Het ambt en de pligten der ouderlingen en diakenen*, ('s Gravenhage, 1837), p. 336.