



Mutual Censure in the Consistory

Article 81 of our Church Order reads: "The ministers of the Word, elders and deacons shall exercise Christian censure among themselves, and in love admonish one another with regard to the discharge of their office."

Its Focus

By mutual Christian censure is meant the inquiry that takes place under leadership of the chairman of the consistory at a meeting prior to the observance of the Lord's Supper. This mutual censure concerns the office bearer's discharge of his office. The discharge of the office is closely related to the personal relationship to the Lord and to fellow office bearers. Nevertheless, mutual censure does not focus on these relationships. Rather, in the first instance, mutual censure concerns the carrying out of the duties of office bearers.

The King of the church has not only entrusted the congregation to the care and oversight of the office bearers, but also the relationship of the office bearers to one another. In Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 5:2 Christ commissions the elders to take heed to and feed the flock of God, the church of God. From other passages we learn that office bearers must take heed to one another, to see that their work is performed in accordance with the will and ordinances of Christ. Think, for instance, of Galatians 2:11-14, where we read of Paul rebuking Peter "to his face" and "before them all." Consider also 1 Peter 5:2, 3, where Peter exhorts his fellow elders to discharge their task eagerly, gladly, and willingly, and to lead by example rather than to lord it over the flock.

Office bearers are sinful and imperfect persons, as are all Christians. They stumble and come short in many ways, as Peter did. There are sins of commission as well as omission. There are failures and errors; there is slackness and negligence. These things are especially grievous in the discharge of an office bearer because it can lead to the Name of the Lord being profaned and the congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ suffering harm. The corollary is also true: a faithful discharge of our duty--to the extent that that is possible--glorifies the Lord and edifies the body of Christ (cf. Eph.4: 12).

Its History

Although it is true that all members of the congregation are to exercise Christian censure among each other (cf. Heb.10: 25), Article 81 of the Church Order points out that the office bearers are to do so "with regard to the discharge of their office" (*italics mine*).

The practice of *censura morum* is a truly Reformed practice. The Roman Catholic Church and other churches may indeed exercise discipline with regard to office bearers, but it is always a more highly positioned member of the clergy that oversees and censures a lower member of the clergy in the hierarchy of the church. Churches that are in line with the Calvinistic Reformation have practised *censura morum* right from the start. It was particularly John Calvin who expressly insisted on it. During mutual censure as practised by Calvin, the names of the "Ministers of the Gospel" were mentioned one by one, and then the question was raised whether any one had some grievance against his doctrine, life or discharge of office. Even when Calvin was considerably older than some of the younger office bearers, he insisted that they too be given the opportunity to express lawful grievances against older ministers, without these younger men being considered

immodest and forward. Censura morum was emphasized as a necessary and proper ecclesiastical practice for appropriately restraining the ministers and furthering the right exercise of their office.

The National Synod of 's Gravenhage in 1586 left out the part that it had to take place prior to the Lord's Supper, as well as that it concerned doctrine and life. But it did stipulate that it should take place among all the office bearers. It specified the following: "The ministers of the Word, elders and deacons shall exercise Christian censure among themselves, and in love admonish one another with regard to the discharge of their office."

The question may be raised whether censura morum concerns the discharge of the office only and not the doctrine and life of the office bearer. In answer to this question it must be said that ecclesiastical censure concerns also doctrine and life. Yet the Synod of 1586 and the Synod of Dort 1618/19 wanted to put all the emphasis on the discharge of the office. Doctrine and life are not excluded from censura morum. However, they may only be mentioned if they interfere with a faithful discharge of the office and if the one who expresses the grievance has first personally and in love admonished his fellow office bearer.

The Timing

Ever since the Synod of 1586, the consistories were free to choose the timing. However, it has always been the custom to do so before the Lord's Supper. If, however, for some reason there is no celebration of the Lord's Supper in a congregation, then it is still needful to have censura morum four times per year.

Moreover, if real problems occur at censura morum and as a result issues are brought up which should have been dealt with beforehand, censura morum should be held earlier in order to avoid difficulties close to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. This probably was the reason the Synod of 1586 removed it as being necessary before the Lord's Supper.

The Proper Manner

In earlier centuries, following the insistence of Calvin and à Lasco, the office bearers had to leave the meeting by turns. During their absence the other office bearers were asked if there were any grievances against the way that particular office bearer discharged his office. If there was a lawful grievance, the office bearer concerned was called back in to the meeting and the matter was discussed with him and dealt with in a fitting manner.

This practice has merit. One speaks more freely about a fellow office bearer in his absence than in his presence. There is the danger that the brother against whom a grievance is raised is spared too much when he is present. But the practice of leaving the meeting also has some negatives. There is the grave danger of speaking evil about someone. This does not advance brotherly and ethical practices. In general, it is to be preferred that the censura morum takes place in the presence of all the consistory members. One should be courageous enough to openly express legitimate charges.

Which rule is the consistory to follow in cases where a grievance is raised? The Reformed Confessions and our Church Order, on the basis of God's Word should be followed while acting with great carefulness, much love and looking to the Lord for guidance. The purpose of censura morum is not to act in an unpleasant manner toward each other. Rather, we must seek the well being of God's church and the glory His Name. Censura morum is to be done in love. Admonitions are to be both given and received in love. That is the high requirement of God's Word and that is the order that should be maintained in the Church of Christ.

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Footnotes:

1. The main resource used was by J. Hovius, "Toelichting op de kerkorde: Censura morum", De Wekker 80, 152-153, 161-162, 176.
2. In Geneva censura morum was practiced only with regard to the ministers of the Word.
3. Following the approach of John Calvin, John à Lasco and Martin Micronius (in the Dutch Refugees churches in London, England), the churches of the Calvinistic Reformation in the Netherlands adopted the practice of censura morum. Initially, it was practiced at the classis level and not at consistory meeting because these were not held everywhere. The Convent of Wezel in 1568 declared that if there are "secret sins" on the part of the ministers of the Word and the elders, classis "shall censure them." They are to be ordered to "leave the meeting one by one, while all the other delegates shall take an oath of confidentiality." The ministers and elders would take turns leaving the meeting, during which time inquiry was made with regard to each of the ministers and elders separately and accurately as to how each one has conducted himself in his office. If anyone needs admonition, he shall be called back into the meeting and be admonished or reprimanded and punished commensurate to the severity of his sin.
4. John à Lasco, born in 1499, the son of a noble Polish family, composed one of the earliest complete Reformed Church Orders shortly after 1550. It provided the ground work, upon which many of the provisions of the Church Order were based in the Dutch Reformed churches in the second part of the sixteenth century and the first part of the seventeenth century; for instance at the Covenant of Wezel in 1568, the Synod of Embden in 1571, and the Synod of Dort in 1618.