

LESSON 25

Belgic Confession

Article 32

The Church Order

Church Discipline

General:

In this lesson we examine the need for and the limitation of a "church order," and we note the Scriptural norms to which such an order must be bound.

I. The Necessity of a Church Order

By common consent, the Churches (united in a Federation of Churches) have established "a certain order to maintain the body of the Church" (Article 32). These ordinances are compiled in the Church Order, adopted at the Synod of Dordtrecht, 1618-1619.

The Confession stresses that a Church Order is of importance over-against, e.g., the Anabaptist viewpoint which rejects all (humanly formulated) regulations and feels that the Church should be bound only to the "free guidance" of the Holy Spirit. Yet, Scripturally founded rules do not restrict the Holy Spirit's operation, but from the Godgiven framework within which He wishes to work. The Reformers taught that the correct abolition of the unscriptural order of the Romanist Church (the "Corpus Canonis Juris") should not tempt the Churches to go into the opposite extreme: total absence of Scripturally-sound ordinances, for this would cause the reformation to degenerate into revolution (anarchy).

The arrangement of specific ordinances, consisting of general rules for all the Churches, is found already in the "Apostolic era," see, e.g., Acts 15:28-29; 1 Corinthians 11:16.

The importance and function of a commonly accepted Church Order is given in the following considerations:

- a) "it is useful and good for those who govern the Church to establish a certain order to maintain the body of Christ"
- b) "to preserve and to promote harmony and unity and to keep all in obedience to God" (Article 32).

The necessity of a peaceful regulation of ecclesiastical life is clearly given in Scripture.

1 Corinthians 14:40, "But all things should be done decently and in order."

While defending the right of a Church Order (overagainst Anabaptist nihilism), this same article also warns against the opposite extreme: church life may not become *overregulated* and thus burdened by "human inventions." The rulers of the Church "must at all times watch that they do not depart from those things which Christ, our only Master, has commanded." There shall be no super-Scriptural bindings in doctrine, liturgy, or further regulations.

2. The Reformed Church Order

As mentioned previously, the Church Order of the Reformed Churches (in the Netherlands), originating during the time of the Reformation, was officially adopted by the Synod of Dordrecht, 1618-1619. It was prepared at the Convent of Wezel (1568) and has gained influence and prominence in the Reformed Churches ever since. This Dutch Church Order finds its roots in the ecclesiastical ordinances conceived by Calvin for the Church at Geneva and was further influenced by the Church Order of the Palatinate (Heidelberg, Germany).

This Church Order was set aside in 1816 (when a "territorial system" was introduced by the Dutch King) but the Churches of the First and Second Secession reinstated it to its former prominence. At their first Synod (Homewood-Carman, 1954) the Canadian Reformed Churches decided that a revision of this Church Order was necessary with a view to "the special Canadian situation." A complete revision of this Church Order was accepted at the Synod of Cloverdale, 1983.

The *contents* of the Church Order are set up as follows:

- a) the offices
- b) the assemblies
- c) worship (sacraments and ceremonies)
- d) discipline.

The new Canadian revision follows the same basic order of the one adopted at Dort in 1618-1619, be it that "the supervision of doctrine" is placed immediately after the section on the offices. This is considered to be more logical. A few remarks will be made on each section, while the matter of discipline will be discussed separately, since discipline is mentioned specifically in Article 32 of our Confession.

Ad a) the offices:

These articles regulate the manner in which office-bearers are to be elected (with emphasis on the cooperation and approbation of the congregation – see previous lesson), define the duties of the officebearers and determine the duration of the term of office. The clear anti-hierarchical trend of the Church Order is shown in the stipulation that the ministers, elders and deacons shall "maintain equality with respect to the duties of their office" and shall not "lord it over one another" (Articles 17 and 74 C.O.). In contrast to, e.g., the Presbyterian Church Order, the Reformed Church Order does not know of lifeeldership, but decrees that elders and deacons shall serve "two or more years" and that "a proportionate number shall retire each year." This rule was introduced by Calvin (already in 1541) to prevent the possible return of hierarchy in the Reformed Church.

Ad b) the assemblies:

The Scriptures show that each local Church is a complete and independent Church, yet that all the Churches are spiritually one in Christ, Who walks in the midst of them (Revelation 1, the mystery of the seven

lampstands). The Churches together, maintaining a federation, also meet in certain *assemblies*. We speak of *minor* assemblies (where less Churches are represented) and of *major* assemblies (where more or all Churches are present through delegates). The Church Order speaks of four assemblies:

- a) the consistory, a permanent body, consisting of the minister(s) and the elders, which meets regularly
- b) the Classis, consisting of delegates from the consistories, which as a rule meets once every three months
- c) the Regional Synod, consisting of delegates from the Classes, which meets once annually
- d) the General Synod, consisting of delegates from the Regional Synods which meets once every three years.

The only body which has a continuing, permanent function is the consistory, while the major assemblies are constituted and cease to exist at the conclusion of their business. This rule is, again, intended to avoid the emergence of "higher bodies" which receive hierarchical powers.

Note: This is somewhat different in the Presbyterian Church Order which grants permanent authority to a *presbytery* (comparable to our Classis) while local Churches have a "session" (meeting of minister and elders). The danger of hierarchy is unmistakably present here.

The authority of the major assemblies is a delegated one, and the Churches determine the *Agenda* of the meetings. At the assemblies, only "ecclesiastical matters" shall be dealt with, covering the following items:

- a) matters that could not be finished at a minor assembly
- b) matters pertaining to the Churches of the major assembly in common
- c) appeals of those who feel that they have been wronged by the decision(s) of a minor assembly (Article 31 C.O.).

Whatever is decided upon by *majority* vote shall be considered "settled and binding," unless "it is proved to be in conflict with the Word of God or with the Church Order" (Article 31 C.O.). No one's conscience shall be bound to anything which conflicts with God's Word!

Ad c) supervision of doctrine, sacraments and ceremonies.

In this section the Church Order regulates the following:

- a) subscription of all office-bearers to the Three Forms of Unity
- b) administration of Holy Baptism ("as soon as feasible")
- c) celebration of the Lord's Supper ("once every two or three months"). The sacraments shall be administered in a worship service with the use of the adopted liturgical forms.
- d) funerals
- e) days of commemoration (each year the churches shall remember the birth, death, resurrection, ascension of Christ, as well as the outpouring of the Holy Spirit).

- f) days of prayer
- g) Catechism preaching (every Sunday, ordinarily in the p.m. service)
- h) liturgy (Psalms and Hymns)
- i) marriage ceremonies.

3. Christian Discipline (Confession, Article 32; Church Order Articles 71-83)

The Church Order also emphasizes that Christian discipline is of a "spiritual nature," and has, as such, nothing to do with civil procedures. The purpose of discipline is threefold:

- a) to sanctify the holy Name of God and promote His glory (1 Peter 1:14-17)
- b) to reconcile the sinner with God, the Church and his neighbour; his own salvation (1 Corinthians 5:5)
- c) to remove the offense from the Church of Christ and preserve the Church from deformation (1 Timothy 5:20).

Even in its ultimate form of excommunication, discipline is meant to save the sinner and preserve the Church. It is an expression of God's *love*, and should therefore be accepted in meekness and gratitude.

Revelation 3:19, "Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten; so be zealous and repent."

Hebrews 12:10, ". . . He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness."

The exercising of discipline is not simply a matter of the office-bearers. It is first a responsibility of the members toward one another, Matthew 18:15-18; Colossians 3:16. Only a consistent hardening in secret sin and apparent public sin shall be dealt with by the office-bearers.

The Consistory shall adhere to the following procedure:

- a) suspension from the Lord's Supper
- b) first public announcement (without name, to "spare the sinner") in which the congregation is requested to pray for the repentance of the person involved
- c) second public announcement (after advice of Classis, with name and address of sinner) in which the congregation is requested to cooperate in admonishing the sinner
- d) final announcement: stating the date of the actual excommunication
- e) the excommunication itself.

The exact text of these announcements is prescribed in Forms adopted by the Churches.

Those who have been excommunicated may be publicly reinstated (also according to the accepted Form for that purpose) after they have

given evidence of their conversion and professed the same before Christ's Church.

In the case of elders and deacons, the advice of the neighbouring Church is required before these can be suspended or expelled from office. In the case of ministers, the advice of the neighbouring Church is needed only for the suspension, while the ministers may be deposed from office only upon the judgment of Classis with the advice of Deputies of Regional Synod. These rules are designed to promote justice and objectivity for the best interests of all parties involved.

The Lord Jesus has entrusted to His Church "the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven," Matthew 16:19; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 31. Christian discipline administered on earth according to Christ's command, meets His divine approval in heaven.

Matthew 16:19, "... whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth, shall be loosed in heaven."

With these "keys," the Kingdom of heaven is opened and closed, respectively for believers and unbelievers. We distinguish between two such keys:

- a) general discipline: the *preaching* of the Gospel
- b) particular discipline: the excommunication.

QUESTIONS (Lesson 25):

1. Against which two extremes does the confession warn in Article 32?
2. Why is a "Church Order" necessary?
3. What matters does the Reformed Church Order regulate?
4. Which "assemblies" do we know in the Reformed Churches?
5. What may be dealt with at "major assemblies"?
6. Which differences are there between the Reformed and the Presbyterian Church Orders?
7. Show some of the anti-hierarchical aspects of the Church Order.
8. What are the "Keys of the Kingdom of heaven"?
9. What is the purpose of Christian discipline?
10. Which disciplinary matters may the Consistory deal with?
11. Which "steps" must be followed in the process of excommunication?

ASSIGNMENT:

Memory Work: Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 31.

ARTICLE 33

THE SACRAMENTS

We believe that our gracious God, mindful of our insensitivity and infirmity, has ordained sacraments to seal His promises to us and to be pledges of His good will and grace towards us. He did so to nourish and sustain our faith. He has added these to the Word of the gospel to represent better to our external senses both what He declares to us in His Word and what He does inwardly in our hearts. Thus He confirms to us the salvation which He imparts to us. Sacraments are visible signs and seals of something internal and invisible, by means of which God works in us through the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore the signs are not void and meaningless so that they deceive us. For Jesus Christ is their truth; apart from Him they would be nothing. Moreover, we are satisfied with the number of sacraments which Christ our Master has instituted for us, namely, two: the sacrament of baptism and the holy supper of Jesus Christ.

ARTICLE 34

THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

We believe and confess that Jesus Christ, who is the end of the law, has by His shed blood put an end to every other shedding of blood that one could or would make as an expiation or satisfaction for sins. He has abolished circumcision, which involved blood, and has instituted in its place the sacrament of baptism. By baptism we are received into the Church of God and set apart from all other peoples and false religions, to be entirely committed to Him whose mark and emblem we bear. This serves as a testimony to us that He will be our God and gracious Father for ever.

For that reason He has commanded all those who are His to be baptized with plain water, *into the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*. By this He signifies to us that as water washes away the dirt of the body when poured on us, and as water is seen on the body of the baptized when sprinkled on him, so the blood of Christ, by the Holy Spirit, does the same thing internally to the soul. It washes and cleanses our soul from sin and regenerates us from children of wrath into children of God. This is not brought about by the water as such but by the sprinkling of the precious blood of the Son of God, which is our Red Sea, through which we must pass to escape the tyranny of Pharaoh, that is, the devil, and enter into the spiritual land of Canaan.

Thus the ministers on their part give us the sacrament and what is visible, but our Lord gives us what is signified by the sacrament, namely, the invisible gifts and grace. He washes, purges, and cleanses our souls of all filth and unrighteousness, renews our hearts and fills them with all comfort, gives us true assurance of His fatherly goodness, clothes us with the new nature, and takes away the old nature with all its works.

We believe, therefore, that anyone who aspires to eternal life ought to be baptized only once. Baptism should never be repeated, for we cannot be born twice. Moreover, baptism benefits us not only when the water is on us and when we receive it, but throughout our whole life. For that reason we reject the error of the Anabaptists, who are not content with a single baptism received only once,

and who also condemn the baptism of the little children of believers. We believe that these children ought to be baptized and sealed with the sign of the covenant, as infants were circumcised in Israel on the basis of the same promises which are now made to our children. Indeed, Christ shed His blood to wash the children of believers just as much as He shed it for adults. Therefore they ought to receive the sign and sacrament of what Christ has done for them, as the Lord commanded in the law that a lamb was to be offered shortly after children were born. This was a sacrament of the passion and death of Jesus Christ. Because baptism has the same meaning for our children as circumcision had for the people of Israel, Paul calls baptism the *circumcision of Christ*.

ARTICLE 35

THE SACRAMENT OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

We believe and confess that our Saviour Jesus Christ has instituted the sacrament of the holy supper to nourish and sustain those whom He has already regenerated and incorporated into His family, which is His Church.

Those who are born anew have a twofold life. One is physical and temporal, which they received in their first birth and is common to all men. The other is spiritual and heavenly, which is given them in their second birth and is effected by the word of the gospel in the communion of the body of Christ. This life is not common to all but only to the elect of God.

For the support of the physical and earthly life God has ordained earthly and material bread. This bread is common to all just as life is common to all. For the support of the spiritual and heavenly life, which believers have, He has sent them a living bread which came down from heaven, namely, Jesus Christ, who nourishes and sustains the spiritual life of the believers when He is eaten by them, that is, spiritually appropriated and received by faith.

To represent to us the spiritual and heavenly bread, Christ has instituted earthly and visible bread as a sacrament of His body and wine as a sacrament of His blood. He testifies to us that as certainly as we take and hold the sacrament in our hands and eat and drink it with our mouths, by which our physical life is then sustained, so certainly do we receive by faith, as the hand and mouth of our soul, the true body and true blood of Christ, our only Saviour, in our souls for our spiritual life.

It is beyond any doubt that Jesus Christ did not commend His sacraments to us in vain. Therefore He works in us all that He represents to us by these holy signs. We do not understand the manner in which this is done, just as we do not comprehend the hidden activity of the Spirit of God. Yet we do not go wrong when we say that what we eat and drink is the true, natural body and the true blood of Christ. However, the manner in which we eat it is not by mouth but in the spirit by faith. In that way Jesus Christ always remains seated at the right hand of God His Father in heaven; yet He does not cease to communicate Himself to us by faith. This banquet is a spiritual table at which Christ makes us partakers of Himself with all His benefits and gives us the grace to enjoy both Himself and the merit of His suffering and death. He nourishes, strengthens, and comforts our poor, desolate souls by the eating of His flesh, and refreshes and renews them by the drinking of His blood.

Although the sacrament is joined together with that which is signified, the latter is not always received by all. The wicked certainly takes the sacrament to his

condemnation, but he does not receive the truth of the sacrament. Thus Judas and Simon the sorcerer both received the sacrament, but they did not receive Christ, who is signified by it. He is communicated exclusively to the believers.

Finally, we receive this holy sacrament in the congregation of the people of God with humility and reverence as we together commemorate the death of Christ our Saviour with thanksgiving and we confess our faith and Christian religion. Therefore no one should come to this table without careful self-examination, lest by eating this bread and drinking from this cup, he eat and drink judgment upon himself. In short, we are moved by the use of this holy sacrament to a fervent love of God and our neighbours. Therefore we reject as desecrations all additions and damnable inventions which men have mixed with the sacraments. We declare that we should be content with the ordinance taught by Christ and His apostles and should speak about it as they have spoken.