

CHRISTIAN DISCIPLINE

Many of God's people lament the lack of discipline in the church these days. Yet, if true, this must be a surprising development. For the Synod of Dordt (with its many learned men) has concluded that it was one of the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Guido de Bres considered it one of the three marks of the true church. Zacharias Orzinus and Casper Olivianus also recognized discipline as a key to the kingdom of heaven and worked it out in one of the Lord's Days as they composed the Heidelberg Catechism.

Over the span of history the church has recognized the conclusions all these men came to as the truth of Holy Scripture. As a result, the church today has makes clear confession about what the Word of God says regarding this matter, this doctrine.

Article 66 of the Church Order of Dordt speaks about the Nature and Purpose of Christian discipline. It says:

Since Church discipline is of a spiritual nature and, as one of the keys of the kingdom of heaven, has been given to the Church to shut and to open that kingdom, the consistory shall ensure that it is used to punish sins against both the purity of doctrine and the piety of conduct, in order to reconcile the sinner with the Church and with his neighbour, and to remove all offense out of the Church of Christ - which can be done only when the rule given by our Lord in Matthew 18:15-17 is followed in obedience.

In article 29 of the Belgic Confession we read the same thing: "The true Church is to be recognized by the following marks: ... It exercises Church discipline for correcting and punishing sins."

The Heidelberg Catechism, in Lord's Day 31, Q/A 85, asks about this subject and answers in the following manner:

How is the kingdom of heaven closed and opened by church discipline?

According to the command of Christ, people who call themselves Christians but show themselves to be unchristian in doctrine or life are first repeatedly admonished in a brotherly manner. If they do not give up their errors or wickedness, they are reported to the church, that is, to the elders. If they do not heed also their admonitions, they are forbidden the use of the sacraments, and they are excluded by the elders from the Christian congregation, and by God Himself from the kingdom of Christ. They are again received as members of Christ and of the church when they promise and show real amendment.

Anyone who wishes to confirm the truth of these confessions can, of course, find their root in God's Holy Word. There we can find many places where the Holy Spirit inspires writers to pass on the necessity of discipline. We read, "You have declared this day concerning the LORD that he is your God, and that you will walk in his ways, and keep his statutes and his commandments and his ordinances, and will obey his voice;... 'Cursed be he who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.'" (Deut 26:17 & 27:26): and, "Any one who goes ahead and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God; he who abides in the doctrine has both the Father and the Son. If any one comes to you and does not bring this doctrine,

do not receive him into the house or give him any greeting;” (2 John 1:9, 10). Matthew 18 also gives clear instruction as to the proper manner of exercising discipline.

A reader of God’s Word will also have recognized that the lack of discipline complained about in the church today is not a new phenomenon. The Bible gives many examples of lack of leadership, of lack of teaching, of wrongful direction, of neglect, of improper behaviour among the leaders. The history of the people of God is rife with improperly exercised discipline, lack of discipline, and wrong discipline. Time after time the church strays from the truth when it neglects discipline. Surely, the very lack of discipline is a denial of the truth of Scripture.

With all this in mind, when we look around in the church today, are we comforted with what we observe? Do we recognize a people of God, locally, federatively, and even world wide, that lives within the boundaries God has so carefully and expressly placed in His Word and has so diligently led His church to recognize and confess? Or, do we observe a broadening of those boundaries beyond the limits God has established?

It may be useful to remind ourselves about some of the things involved in discipline. It is a word and concept that can have different nuances. We can correctly say that the discipline of Christianity is the doctrine of Holy Scripture. It is also correct to say that it refers to correction from wrongdoing and return to the ways of scripture.

The exercise of discipline is a long and ongoing process. The understanding of the correct or true doctrine of Scripture and correction of wrong or false doctrine is to be found in the reading, studying, and preaching of it. It is to be reinforced by the sacraments. Mutual discussion, comfort, admonition, and support among Christians will also help maintain a true faith and proper conduct. The injunctions of Matthew 18 further regulate the exercise of discipline in cases of wrong doing.

Only a brief reflection will already lead to the understanding that there are a number of places where things can deteriorate. When people express the lack of discipline it appears they are most often referring to the final steps of formal discipline. But should the cause not be sought much earlier on in the process? Would there be such a lack in formal discipline if the reading, studying and preaching of God’s Word was more diligently, faithfully and purely done? Does the Bible study that takes place lead to self-examination and repentance?

Does it lead to change in life-style, attitude and belief? Are we prepared to apply what we learn at men, women, or youth society? Or does it remain a good idea, but too difficult to implement? Are we prepared to take the proclamation we hear on Sunday and work it out on Monday?

When we recognize wrong ideas with a brother, do we patiently and considerately show him the error of his ways from God’s Word? Or do we pounce on him with our own ideas to prove to him his error and our correctness? It is a correct conclusion, and not one only recently come to, when we recognize a reluctance to discipline a doctrinally straying brother or sister. We can also concur with those who complain of a lack of consistency of discipline with life-style sins. But we must also conclude that full obedience in how we ourselves accept and apply God’s Word, will go a long way to correcting many of the wrongs we observe.

Why are we so often afraid of confronting the brother and sister who we know to have wrong ideas about what their children are permitted to do? Why do we speak more about the heresy of our brother with others in the congregation than with the brother himself?

Is it that we are afraid that we will hurt them? Or is it that we are afraid that we do not have the facts completely straight? Do we fear our lack of ability to properly show God's will in the matters with which we disagree with others?

Probably all of these questions have relevance to each of us at various times. Nevertheless, it is realistic for us to recognize the lack of discipline in our collective church lives. But it let us also reflect on how we can contribute to the problem and do not always fulfill our responsibilities towards our brothers and sisters, and ultimately toward our heavenly Father.

PdB

Christ's Church and our Calling

It is the duty of all believers, according to the Word of God, to separate from those who do not belong to the Church and to join this assembly (of God's true Church) wherever He has established it. They should do so even though the rulers and edicts of princes were against it, and death or physical punishment might follow. (Belgic Confession, Art.28)

That is not a small thing! It is important to ensure that one is at the correct church address. It is so important, according to the confession that you will even have to risk death because of it. And this is not just idle talk, since at the time these words were written it often came to that. Every Sunday morning you and your family had to make a choice; either go to the Roman Catholic church and listen to a sermon from a priest, or go to the Reformed church. And in those days the Reformed church was strictly off limits. Even if you had Reformed literature in your house you would be dragged off to prison.

Why was the choice of church so important? As long as you served God uprightly in your own heart and you didn't pay any attention to all those unbiblical superstitions, couldn't you, for the sake of the preservation of your life and that of your family, go to the Roman Catholic church? Maybe the priest was also someone who wanted only to follow the Bible and didn't care very much about what the pope thought. What would be wrong with that then?

In the confession the issue is not the belief of the individual person in the congregation or in the church. The issue is not what a particular minister might happen to think. Rather, the issue is about the church being church. The confession holds that there are some churches which must be called "false". Now that word "false" sounds very strong. In this context it actually means nothing other than "illegitimate", i.e. a church that Christ no longer recognizes as a legitimate gathering of His sheep.

Is that possible? Is it true that Christ will sometimes refuse to recognize churches as legitimate gatherings? Many people from the Hervormde Church (the large state church in the Netherlands) don't think so. They say: The church remains church of Christ. She is our mother - even if she becomes seriously ill. You don't abandon a sick mother, do you?

But haven't those same Hervormd people not left the Roman Catholic church? Astonishingly enough many don't think so! A month or so ago I spoke with Rev. Van Spanje (from the Hervormd church) who was holidaying in Katwijk. Whenever I speak with a Hervormd minister I cannot resist speaking about the doctrine of the church. Rev. Van Spanje explained that many - including himself - had learned at Sunday school and Catechism classes that the Reformed people had been forced out of the Roman Catholic church. You must never leave a church of your own free will. He did admit that this was somewhat of a coloured view.

What should we say? Luther was indeed kicked out. But that is not what happened to the Reformed. Just as our Confession states, it is the duty of every believer to leave any unlawful church and to join themselves to the lawful (= true) church. Rev. Van Spanje readily admitted that Hervormd people often skip over this part of their own history. In Hervormd circles this part of the confession is quietly ignored.

Personal Faith

But back to our original question! Is the address of the church truly as important as our confession makes out? Isn't it sufficient to have an upright personal faith and to belong to a reasonable local congregation?

A personal faith that comes from an upright heart is truly essential. I, myself, personally must learn to depend on Jesus Christ. I must learn to praise and thank Him for the forgiveness of my sins. Christ has paid the ultimate penalty for me. Christ, not me, was crucified for my sins. And, miracle of miracles, I learn that He has given me that personal faith, and regularly feeds it with His Word and Spirit. There is then a sudden change from "me" to "God".

When we have received that living faith in our hearts, then we have a personal relationship with God. It cannot be otherwise. For then Christ lives in our hearts through His Spirit. Then the Holy Spirit is part of our lives. That's why the Bible warns us as believers: "do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, in whom you were sealed for the day of redemption." (Eph. 4:30). The Spirit places God's mark on us. On the last day we may show that mark, "Look! This is a person for whom Christ as paid!"

But if I have such a personal relationship with God, through faith, then, surely, I wouldn't lose it just by going to another, what one might call a false or unlawful church, would I? No, but that wasn't the question.

I could pray to God in such a church too, and I could praise and thank Him there. Yes, but that wasn't the question either.

What is the question then? This: Do you sit in a gathering that Christ recognizes as His church? You can go and sit anywhere, and even praise God there. And Christ, if you have true faith, will continue to acknowledge you as one of His sheep. But does He acknowledge that gathering as His church? That is a completely different question.

Is that an important question? The first thing we can say is that true faith is underlined by the desire to obey and follow Jesus Christ in everything. If He asks me to honour Him in the church that He acknowledges as His own, then that's what I want to do.

What, then, is Christ's church? Doesn't He say, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." (Matt. 18:20)! Yes, He does say that, but there He is not speaking about the church. In that passage He is speaking to His disciples and promises them that when they follow the procedure for discipline (Matt.18:15-20) He will be with them. The "two or three" are witnesses concerning the unforgiven sin of a straying brother.

What is Christ's Church?

The confession correctly states that it is the gathering of true believers, and a gathering that God wishes to establish in every local place. Just before His ascension into heaven the Lord Jesus gave His great missionary mandate to his disciples. They had to go into the whole world with the gospel. That was the beginning of the New Testament church. We read about the institution of these new churches in every place in the Book of Acts. That's where we see the apostles traveling, preaching, and instituting churches. How does a church become instituted? By establishing a gathering of believers over which elders are placed who, in the name of Christ, feed this congregation (= gathering). The elders bear the final responsibility for such a local congregation or church (cf. Heb.13:17).

It is of such a local church that we are members. Each local church is a complete church of the Lord Jesus Christ, His body (1 Cor.10:17; 12:12ff and especially v.27).

How does Christ speak about His acknowledgement of these churches?

If you are a member of Christ's church, then you have also received responsibilities from Him. As a member of His church you must use your gifts for the upbuilding of this congregation, you must help ensure that He receives His rightful honour and that sin isn't tolerated there.

Christ rules over His local churches. We receive a good example of this in Rev.1-3. In Rev.1:9-20 John sees a vision of the glorified Jesus walking in the middle of the seven golden lamp stands, the seven churches of Asia Minor. In chapters 2 and 3 Christ writes letters to the seven congregations. Some of the congregations are comforted, some are warned. Of importance to our topic are the warnings.

Take, for example, the congregation in Ephesus (Rev. 2:1-7). She had lost her first love (v.4). The Lord calls her to repentance. Then He says, "If not, I will come to you and remove your lamp stand from its place, unless you repent." (v.5).

To whom is Christ speaking? He is speaking to the church/congregation as a whole.

What does it mean that He would remove His lamp stand? Then they would no longer be church of the Lord Jesus (cf. Rev 1:12-13, 20).

Sure, they would continue to come together and conduct worship services. They would still consider themselves to be a church of Jesus Christ. But Christ says, "I have removed my lampstand! I am no longer in your midst!"

Christ gives the same warning to the church at Laodicea. He reproves them for being neither hot nor cold. They have no zeal for the gospel. What does Christ say to them? "So, because you are

lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth.” What does that mean? Christ will no longer acknowledge this church, this congregation.

Just imagine that you were a member of one of those congregations! Just imagine if your congregation received such a letter from the Lord Jesus Christ. What would happen? You would do your best to become actively involved in the congregation, but, well, if the majority of the congregation didn't make any changes - what then? At a certain moment, if the congregation as a whole did not repent, the Lord would activate His warning. He would no longer acknowledge this congregation. If you want to remain true to Jesus you must now leave this congregation and join to one that He does acknowledge as His church. The church you leave behind will, most likely, continue to call itself a church of Christ. Likely there will still be sheep of Christ left behind, sheep who have not yet seen that Jesus no longer acknowledges that congregation as His church. That would be a sad thing, and you would certainly do your best to convince these believers that Jesus wants to be served in a church which He recognizes, a church which remains true to His Word.

It is, of course, not always easy to determine that a church is no longer acknowledged by Christ. Jesus does not give direct revelation about this. You will not receive a vision, or get a message from an angel. You must determine it for yourself, from what Christ has revealed about His church and His gospel in His Word. But if you notice that a church refuses to repent you cannot hold out until a new generation appears. The warnings for the churches of Ephesus and Laodicea were given to the congregations as they were at that time. Jesus warns them that if they do not repent he will spit them out of His mouth and remove His lampstand from them.

During the time of the New Testament you can already notice the beginnings of the church struggle. In his letters (in particular Galations and 2 Corinthians), Paul speaks about the activities of false preachers and apostles who preach in various places and establish churches. He calls their preaching a false gospel and says that their followers are cursed (cf. Gal. 1:6-9). Even in the first century the choice of a church was not easy, but surely important!

Our Choice of Church

When we look at churches around us such as the Reformed Churches (Synodical) and the Netherlands Hervormd Churches then two things soon become clear. Firstly, there are still many sheep of Jesus Christ to be found there - people who are truly believers and who want to serve God with their whole life. Secondly, these churches have organizationally become so tolerant that for years (in the Hervormd churches - for generations) the gospel has been completely denied. Yes, there are still many ministers who preach the true gospel. But the denial of the resurrection, of Christ's crucifixion for our sins must always be tolerated in these churches. There may not be any church discipline against such ministers because “doctrinal freedom” must be maintained. Even reasonably conservative congregations are not free from the consequences of this organizational denial of Scripture. All local congregations in both federations are strictly bound by the decisions of their liberal synods.

This article is not the place to expand upon the problems within these churches. But one point should be clear. If we pay close attention to what Jesus says about His churches in the New Testament then we cannot and may not acknowledge these churches as true churches of Christ. The

warnings of Christ in His Word have gone unheeded for years and for generations. There is no other possibility but that Christ has acted on His warnings.

Our Responsibilities

How does all this concern us? In the first place we are all responsible before Christ concerning the church-choice we make. If He has forgiven our sins by His crucifixion then He asks us to worship Him in a church that He acknowledges. But He asks more from us. We are all also responsible to use all our gifts for the building up of that church which He acknowledges. This means that we may not lean back in our lazy chair and leave all of the concerns of the congregation over to others, but that we honestly ask ourselves how we can be of benefit in building and sustaining Christ's church in this place. Last, but certainly not least, is our responsibility toward those sheep that remain in a church that Christ no longer acknowledges. With great care, wisdom and love we must exercise our calling to convince such people to consider their church situation and to call them to become members of a church that Christ does recognize. We may not keep silent about this matter. The love for Christ, as well as the love for these brothers and sisters must stimulate each of us to activity in this matter. Do you have Hervormd or Synodical friends, acquaintances or even family? If you remain silent about their church choice in order to "keep the peace" you rather show yourself to be love-less toward them. The love of Christ is a love that will put everything on the line in order to convince others to worship and thank Him in the manner He has demanded in His Word.

It may be that this means that you must study some more about the doctrine of the church and some more recent church history. Then do not neglect to do so. Surely your minister and elders are willing to give guidance when asked. Let us pray that our local churches become known, not as exclusive clubs with people who don't pay any attention to others, but as congregations that are actively busy with the Word of God, and always willing and ready to speak about it in the love of Christ - all in order to see to it that our Lord is honoured and worshipped. Let it be said of us - that's where you see the Spirit of God at work, that's where you find people who put the Word of God above all else. Only God can work that in us, through His Word and Spirit. Let us direct our efforts towards Him.

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Translated by PdB

Who is God?

This is definitely a question with which people occupy themselves. That is obvious from the many sects we find in the world today. But it is just those sects which ask: can we know who God is? Can we make positive statements about Him?

Well, we can't. In our own strength we don't know which way to turn. Neither by logical thinking nor by following our religious feelings will we arrive at God. We will only find the answer to the question "Who is God?", if we listen to Him. Listen to His Word, as we have received it in the Bible.

We will have to listen as God speaks. The Bible says so very clearly. Time and time again we come across the call: "Hear the Word of the Lord". if we don't listen to His Word our knowledge of Him remains deficient.

The apostle Paul draws this picture clearly in Acts 17. He is in Athens. He has explored the city, and has discovered altars for many idols and gods. There is even an altar for "the unknown god". We could say, for "God Unknown". So even "God Unknown" was served there; this shows how far the Greek idolatry had strayed from the true God.

For the true God does reveal Himself! Paul states in his letter to the Romans (1:20) that God's decrees have been revealed since the creation of the world, and from there God's eternal power and divine nature shine forth upon Man. In other words: God's power and majesty can be seen in His creation. As long as we don't close our eyes to it, as long as we accept creation as God's work and don't let our vision be obscured by our own ideas like the theory of evolution, for instance.

God Himself states clearly that He is the Creator of heaven and earth. They are the work of His hands. The Bible begins with that revelation. "In the beginning GOD created the heavens and the earth." (Genesis 1:1) He is also the Creator of Man. He made Man and thus has a rightful claim to him. God is therefore righteous, within His rights, to demand that we serve and love Him.

But isn't that asking a bit much. No, for when God created Man, He granted him so many gifts and possibilities that he could serve and love God of his own free will.

But what happened? Man abused this freedom and chose to oppose God. Soon after God created him, Man fell into sin and rejected God. In doing so, he defiled everything beautiful that God had made, himself most of all; because the choice against God meant a choice for death. God had warned that death would be the penalty for sin. God made this clear: "if man fails to acknowledge that he is Mine and that I have a rightful claim upon him, I will punish him with death, eternal death. I will break all bonds with Man."

You would think that God, having made this clear, would surely give up on Man, once Man rejected Him. But if we think this, we underestimate God; for after Man had fallen into sin, God revealed Himself as a merciful God, as a gracious God. He said, "There is salvation for man, though he deserves death. I am sending my Son, Jesus Christ, into the world, "that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16.)

Jesus Christ takes Man's guilt upon Himself, and bears his punishment. In this way, God, in His mercy, makes sinful people His children again. He brings them back to the life which they rejected and to which they could not possibly return in their own strength. In short, we are saved from death through Christ, because God is merciful and gracious. But if Man will not believe in Christ he has no future, other than eternal death, because God is also just. Therefore whoever rejects Christ as Saviour "will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him" (John 3:36).

This God, Who for a lost mankind gave His only Son as Saviour, Who shows such great love, does not leave the world which He created to its fate either. No, He cares for all His creatures.

Nothing can exist of its own power. No man, no animal, not even a bacteria or a virus. All these creatures exist because God cares for them. They exist as long as God allows them to. All creatures

have a place and a function of their own. Nothing is without significance although our knowledge is often too limited to discover the significance. But God made everything wisely and in His wisdom he has a purpose for all creatures and whatever happens to them in their lives. Everything serves the realization of the master plan that God has for His creation, and the radical renewing of heaven and earth. God's almighty power is working toward that goal. (Almighty means: God is able to do all that He wills.) He carries out His plan with Divine wisdom and so reaches His goal, because He has promised it, and He is faithful and true. We can rely on His promises, for He does what He says.

If, for example, He promises a Saviour to fallen Man, He really will give one. We received the Lord Jesus Christ, didn't we? When He promises a new heaven and a new earth, in which the consequences of sin, and even sin itself, will be wiped out, it will come to pass.

It must be obvious by now that whoever wants to know God must study His works. Whoever examines what He reveals about His works will become more and more impressed with God's greatness. His greatness, His majesty, His glory are immeasurable. We cannot comprehend it. Compared to this great God, we humans are puny creatures.

This is apparent, too, when He reveals Himself as three distinctly different persons. The one, true God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We cannot comprehend this either! Any attempt to explain it is doomed to failure, but we believe it, because that is how God has revealed Himself in His word.

Who is God? Part of the answer that the Bible gives has been put forward in this tract. We sincerely hope that in it you have heard the call to listen to what God himself says in His Word; that you will read the Bible.

You cannot disregard the one true God Who has revealed Himself in the Bible. For He says, "I alone am God No person or power on earth can claim equality with Me. Therefore I alone want to be worshipped and acknowledged as God. Therefore I want Man to place his trust in Me, in life and death. I want Man to listen to Me and to obey Me. Only if he does that will his life be secure forever."

For a poetic description of who God is, you might turn to some of the Psalms. For instance, read Psalms 8, 93, and 103.

Outreach Tract used by the Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott, Australia.

From the Nederlands Dagblad

Liberated in Canada, one with ex-CRC churches! The deputies for church unity of the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC) and the United Reformed Churches in North America (URC) seek sister church relations by the year 2001. They further suggest that they become one church by the year 2004. The CanRC are sister churches of the Liberated Churches in the Netherlands. The URC are formed by congregations who have, in recent years, left the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). With their 65 congregations and 14,500 members the URC is larger than the CanRC. The CanRC deputies accepted a plan by the URC to seek unity in three phases: to have correspondence, to recognize one another as sister churches, and finally complete unity. It is expected that the CanRC

will soon discuss the possibility of pulpit exchange.