

“Only What Is Proper”

A Sermon on Article Thirty-Two of the Belgic Confession

Texts: Deuteronomy 16:21-17:7; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13

Article 32 – The Order and Discipline of the Church

We believe that, although it is useful and good for those who govern the church to establish a certain order to maintain the body of the church, they must at all times watch that they do not deviate from what Christ, our only Master, has commanded.¹ Therefore we reject all human inventions and laws introduced into the worship of God which bind and compel the consciences in any way.² We accept only what is proper to preserve and promote harmony and unity and to keep all in obedience to God.³ To that end, discipline and excommunication ought to be exercised in agreement with the Word of God.⁴

¹ 1 Tim 3:15 ² Is 29:13; Mt 15:9; Gal 5:1 ³ 1 Cor 14:33 ⁴ Mt 16:19, 18:15-18; Rom 16:17; 1 Cor 5; 1 Tim 1:20

There is no subject which brings as much tension as the subject of church discipline. While church discipline is always a difficult thing to do, it is something we must do. For a church which does not discipline erring members is a church which risks heresy in its midst, or which allows erring members to profess that they are Christ’s and then through shameful conduct bring disgrace to the master whom they claim bought them (cf. 2 Peter 2:1). While we are all sinners, we are not allowed to bring scandal upon the church, nor shame to its head, Jesus Christ.

We miss the whole point of church discipline if we see it as people often do, the self-righteous removing sinners from their midst. But that is not what church discipline is about. Church discipline is about ministers and elders who have been called to shepherd the flock, driving savages wolves away from the sheep. No one likes doing it, but it must be done.

We come to the last article in the Belgic Confession dealing with the doctrine of the church. In article thirty-two, our confession now fleshes out some of the practical ramifications of Paul’s exhortation to the church of Corinth, “*But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way*” (1 Corinthians 14:40). As we have seen, the New Testament teaches that local churches are to be governed by elders together with the minister(s), and that these same churches are to be served by deacons who ensure that no one in the congregation goes without. Collectively, these men form the church council, which conducts the day to day business of the church.

We have seen that the local church is the visible manifestation of Christ’s invisible body, and that God equips the members of his church for service by giving us gifts of the Holy Spirit for the common good. Since the church is so important to the well-being of every Christian, the New Testament has no category for someone who professes faith in Jesus Christ, but who is also not a member of the local church. Our

confession has also identified the three marks of a true church; the clear and consistent preaching of the gospel, the proper administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline. It is the third mark—church discipline—which is the subject of article thirty-two.

This will come as no surprise, but in our culture, church discipline is a very difficult topic to address. Since many of our contemporaries don't see the need to join a local congregation of like-minded believers, we should not be surprised that people are utterly dumbfounded when the church claims the right and the responsibility to discipline its members. To such people, this sounds positively cult-like and they simply cannot grasp the fact that this is commanded in the New Testament. But let us not forget that our doctrine of the church will manifest itself in a number of concrete ways. If we see the church as a voluntary organization that we can join or “unjoin” at will, we will not understand the right of the local church to discipline its erring members.

We should all understand that our doctrine of the church determines what comes from our pulpit, what we do on Sunday mornings during our morning worship, how we organize and govern ourselves as a congregation, as well as determine whether or not we are willing to submit to the yoke of Christ, who is the head of his church. That mutual submission to the yoke of Christ means that we must conduct ourselves both as individual Christians and as members of Christ's church in such a way that all that we do brings glory and honor to Christ. Church officers are to shepherd the flock (since they will give an account to the chief shepherd), the members of the church are to follow (since they too will give an account), and all of us should seek the peace and well-being of the body of Christ, not self-interest.

It is our view of the church which necessitates disciplining those who insist upon embracing false doctrine or behaving in such a way to bring scandal to the church of Jesus Christ. I am not referring to the struggle with sin which we all go through as part of the process of sanctification. Struggling sinners are not to be disciplined, but encouraged to continue the fight against sin. Rather, I am speaking of the willful attitude of someone whose conduct is completely inconsistent with that taught about the Christian life in the New Testament and who refuses to repent when confronted.

There has long been a debate among Reformed Christians about whether or not church discipline is of the essence of the church, or of the well-being of the church. Those who hold to the former position believe that a church which fails to discipline its members, ceases to be a true church. According to Revelation 2:1-7, the church in Ephesus risks having its lampstand removed if its members fail to repent of losing their love, each for the other. Those who hold to the latter view—that church discipline is not of the essence, but the well-being of the church—believe that even the undisciplined congregation in Corinth (to whom Paul sends his Corinthian letters) is still a church because the gospel was preached and the sacraments administered, although the Corinthian congregation suffered greatly because of its failure to discipline its members. But all Reformed Christians believe that church discipline is an obligation.

The first matter addressed in article thirty-two is the subject of the use and benefits of church ordinances, which is the right of a consistory to make decisions about those matters affecting its members. The second matter deals with the limits placed upon the church and its officers prohibiting them from binding the consciences of those under their care to things not commanded in Scripture. The third matter addressed is the necessity of exercising church discipline, along with the caveat that such discipline must be done in accordance with the word of God.¹ While this seems an odd addition, recall that at the time

¹ Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, p. 235.

our confession was written, the Roman church was so intertwined with the state, that civil punishment was often meted out for ecclesiastical offenses. With that bit of background in mind, let us now turn to article thirty-two of our confession.

The first point made by our confession is that the church at the local, region and national levels has the right and the responsibility to govern itself according to the word of God.

Our confession states, “we believe that, although it is useful and good for those who govern the church to establish a certain order to maintain the body of the church, they must at all times watch that they do not deviate from what Christ, our only Master, has commanded.” In the Reformed (or Presbyterian) view of church government, the consistory of the local church (the elders together with the ministers) possesses “original” authority. In other words, governing authority comes from local congregations, who, in turn delegate authority to govern to the larger bodies (such as regional assemblies—classis or Presbytery), and then, in turn, authority is delegated to national or international assemblies (synod or general assembly).

When this order is reversed and a denomination and its bureaucrats begin to dictate to local congregations what ought to be done, then Reformed church government is no longer faithful to its history, nor to Scripture. Through the delegation of authority, local churches (and regional and national churches) of like mind, establish rules and procedures so as to govern themselves so that everything is done decently and in good order, provided these rules are not in conflict with the word of God.

The right of local churches to govern themselves is taught throughout the New Testament. The New Testament is very clear that the church is to ordain ministers and elders in every congregation (which is the Reformed or Presbyterian understanding of church government). And yet, on the other hand, the Bible does not instruct these elders and ministers what to do in every possible situation. As you can imagine, there are countless contingencies and situations which can arise in the local churches. This is why God gives to each consistory the right as well as the responsibility to govern themselves and to decide what to do in each of these situations, provided it is in accordance with the word of God.

One passage where this can be seen is in 1 Timothy 3:13, where Paul writes that “*if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.*” Here, Paul assumes that the local church will make the correct decisions about how to conduct themselves in his absence. Why? Because the church possesses the word of God so that as the pillar and ground of the truth, the church has all that it needs for people to conduct themselves in accord with God’s revealed will.

One of the most important biblical passages in this regard is found in Acts 15, when the apostolic church faced a major decision as what to do about Gentiles who had come to faith in Jesus Christ. In verse 1, this situation is described; “*Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: ‘Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.’*” The men from Antioch were Jews who had embraced Jesus as Messiah, but who believed that Gentile converts to Christianity must live as Jews.

This brought about the conflict described in verse 2: “*This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.*” It is from the church assembly we see in Acts 15 that Reformed Christians argue for regional church government (presbytery or synod), in which ministers and elders from the churches gather together to decide controversial issues—in this case, the

problem of what to do with Gentile converts.

When Paul and Barnabas arrived in Jerusalem, we are told that

they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.' The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: 'Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.' The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them."

Having heard the testimony of Paul and Barnabas, the reflections of Peter, it was now James' turn to speak.

When they finished, James spoke up: 'Brothers, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: 'After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things' that have been known for ages. 'It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.'

From this, it should be clear that it was the assembled elders of the church who decided that the gospel was spreading among the Gentiles and that this was a genuine work of God.

The authority of church elders to make such decisions is clearly stated in verse 22.

Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers. With them they sent the following letter: The apostles and elders, your brothers, To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings. We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul—men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols,

from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.”

And so as we learn in verse 30, *“the men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message.”* But the key verse in this discussion is Acts 15:28, when we are told that, *“it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements.”* By making such decisions, based upon the word of God and the gospel, the church was doing the work of the Holy Spirit. God works through means, in this case through the actions of the Jerusalem assembly.

Based upon this biblical precedent, from the beginning, Reformed churches have governed themselves according to what is known as the “church order” which is, in effect, the constitution of our church. Drawn up in the years between the writing of our confession in 1561 and the Synod of Dort in 1619, Reformed church order deals with church officers and how they are elected, the authority of various church assemblies at congregational, regional and national levels, as well as doctrine and matters of worship, before setting forth how church members and officers are to be disciplined, along with the procedures to carry such discipline out. What Reformed church order attempts to do is to put a workable and limited form of church government in place in which elders rule, quite unlike that of so-called “canon law” of the Roman Church which covered every conceivable situation, but which buried the church under so many rules and regulations, that “canon” lawyers were required to both interpret canon law and apply it.

Our church order incorporates a number of biblical themes related to how we are to govern ourselves and solve disputes among Christians. In Matthew 16:19, Jesus gives to the church the keys of the kingdom, with the power to bind and loose. In Matthew 18:15-20, Jesus instructs Christians how to settle disputes among themselves. Both of these principles are incorporated into our church order and are expressly stated. In 2 Corinthians 13:10, Paul speaks against using authority harshly. Therefore, our church order provides protection against both authoritarian ministers and unruly individuals.

In Ephesians 4:11-16, Paul speaks of those offices given to the church and how this not only leads to maturity but will prevent us from being tossed back and forth by every wind of doctrine, enabling the church to grow strong and support itself. This is why our church order discusses the qualifications for ordination, how ministers, elders and deacons are to be elected and ordained, along with a description of their various duties and responsibilities. All of this is for our protection, so that things are done decently and in good order and so that Christ is honored and glorified.

The second point addressed in article thirty-three is that the church is forbidden from binding the consciences of its members to things not taught in Scripture.

Our confession puts the matter accordingly. “Therefore we reject all human inventions and laws introduced into the worship of God which bind and compel the consciences in any way. We accept only what is proper to preserve and promote harmony and unity and to keep all in obedience to God.” While the church has the right to organize and govern itself according biblical principles, there is a limit to what the church can command of its members. In the context in which our confession was written, these comments are aimed at Rome, which based a number of elements of church life solely upon church tradition—things which were either forbidden or not addressed at all in Holy Scripture.

Then there are the Anabaptists, who rejected all restrictions on its leaders so as to preserve the freedom

of the Holy Spirit. It was Jesus himself who tells us in Matthew 15:9, that we are not bound to the rules of men, especially in matters of worship. While Christ assigns to the elders of the church the authority to rule in his name, our Lord limits that authority to those things expressly revealed in Holy Scripture.

The comment regarding the rejection of human inventions and laws applies to specifically to things done in worship and became the basis for what later came to be known as the regulative principle for worship, which is set forth in question and answer 96 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*—“What is God's will for us in the second commandment? A. That we in no way make any image of God nor worship him in any other way than he has commanded in his Word.” Therefore, we worship God only as he instructs us to worship because humanly-devised additions or inventions inevitably lead toward idolatry. In practice, it is not right for any church, or for any consistory, to require something of God's people which is not commanded either directly or impliedly in God's word. This is why shortly after our confession was written, the English Puritans began to take issue with some of the ceremonies required by the Church of England in the *Book of Common Prayer*. A church cannot command something of its members, which God does not command in his word.

The regulative principle also explains why Reformed Christians oppose the adaptation of certain forms of popular culture (especially music and film) for use in public worship. God requires us to preach his word and administer his sacraments, not to focus upon images or other man-made contrivances used primarily for entertainment. This issue is not about traditional forms of worship versus contemporary forms of worship. The question is about appropriate forms of worship based upon what is commanded in Scripture versus inappropriate forms of worship, things which tend toward idolatry. And our confession is clear in this regard—“we reject all human inventions and laws introduced into the worship of God.”

The third point addressed in our confession deals with the necessity of exercising church discipline over erring church members.

Our confession states the matter as follows: “to that end [promoting what is in harmony with the word of God], discipline and excommunication ought to be exercised in agreement with the Word of God.” The details as to how this is to be done are set forth in our church order, which draws heavily upon texts such as Deuteronomy 16:21-17:7 in which Israel was commanded to cast out all evil persons from the within the midst of the believing community. Our confession also draws heavily upon Matthew 18:15-18 in which Jesus instructs us how to deal with disputes among Christians,

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

One other text which must be considered in this regard is 1 Corinthians 5:1-13. Here we have a situation in which a man in the Corinthian church was sleeping with his step-mother and the church did nothing about it. Incredulous that such a thing could be tolerated, Paul writes,

it is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. . . . Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?"

In fact, in verses 4-5, Paul goes on to give the Corinthians very specific instructions as what to do.

When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.

Paul's hope that excommunicating this particular individual will bring about his repentance so that he may yet be saved on the day of judgment. Thus church discipline is not only about protecting the church from the scandalous conduct of erring church members, it is about working towards the person's repentance.

But this is not all Paul has to say. Paul makes it very clear to the Corinthians, and to us as well,

I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. 'Expel the wicked man from among you.'

Thus expelling the unrepentant person from our midst is one of those difficult but necessary duties assigned to those who shepherd Christ's church. While we need not withdraw from our non-Christian friends, members of Christ's church are commanded to remove those from membership those who claim to be Christians, but who are sexually immoral, who steal and swindle, who are drunkards, and who engage in idolatry and are defiant and unrepentant when confronted.

There are three reasons given by Reformed theologians as to why excommunication is to be done. The first reason is to preserve the honor of Christ. Scandal is poison to the gospel and must be avoided or dealt with for, if for no other reason than to preserve Christ's honor. The second reason we excommunicate is to preserve the character of the church, not only to keep scandal at a minimum and preserve against hypocrisy, but to protect the sheep against wolves. The third reason has to do with the welfare of the offending party.² It may be necessary to allow a rebellious individual to suffer the full consequences of their behavior—including the shame of excommunication—so that things get so bad they come to a place where they will repent. This is always our prayer and focus of such an action.

What conclusions should we draw from this brief discussion of church discipline?

The first thing of which we need to take note is that in Matthew 18:15-18, Jesus lays down the basic principle of church discipline. If you have a dispute with someone, you go to them first. If you don't get satisfaction, you take a witness. If that doesn't work, you then take it to the church. Jesus does not allow you to gossip about the situation or to let the matter fester. The Lord commands you to deal with any and all disputes in the manner he prescribes.

The second thing to consider is that when we make our public profession of faith, we are agreeing to

² Beets, [The Reformed Confession Explained](#), p. 239.

place ourselves under the authority of the consistory, but only insofar as the consistory conducts itself according to the word of God. While God gives to the elders and ministers to authority to rule within the local congregations, he limits their authority only to things taught in the word of God. Thus both order and freedom of conscience are preserved.

Finally, God calls each one of us to regularly pray both those who lead and for those who err. The prayers of the congregation are a source of joy and strength to the ministers, elders and deacons, as are their prayers for the members of the churches they serve. Pray for the health of the church. Pray for its erring and struggling members. Pray that the church will be preserved from scandal, heresy and schism. Pray that the church will grow and that Christ will add new members to his kingdom.

Christ is the head of his church and we are members of his body. May we all seek to bring glory to the Savior who bought us and justifies, through lives filled with gratitude for the inestimable privilege of being called from darkness into light and becoming a member of Christ's body, which is his church. May we only do those things which are proper and fitting to those who are Christ's, and thereby bring him the glory and honor due his name.