

# Celebrating Sacraments

## Week 4 - Church Discipline

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### CATECHISM CORNER

#### Belgic Confession

#### Article 29

We believe that we ought to discern diligently and very carefully, by the Word of God, what is the true church- for all sects in the world today claim for themselves the name of "the church."

We are not speaking here of the company of hypocrites who are mixed among the good in the church and who nonetheless are not part of it, even though they are physically there. But we are speaking of distinguishing the body and fellowship of the true church from all sects that call themselves "the church."

The true church can be recognized if it has the following marks:

The church engages in the pure preaching of the gospel; it makes use of the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them; it practices church discipline for correcting faults.

In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and holding Jesus Christ as the only Head. By these marks one can be assured of recognizing the true church- and no one ought to be separated from it.

As for those who can belong to the church, we can recognize them by the distinguishing marks of Christians: namely by faith, and by their fleeing from sin and pursuing righteousness, once they have received the one and only Savior, Jesus Christ. They love the true God and their neighbors, without turning to the right or left, and they crucify the flesh and its works. Though great weakness remains in them, they fight against it by the Spirit all the days of their lives, appealing constantly to the blood, suffering, death, and obedience of the Lord Jesus, in whom they have forgiveness of their sins, through faith in him.

As for the false church, it assigns more authority to itself and its ordinances than to the Word of God; it does not want to subject itself to the yoke of Christ; it does not administer the sacraments as Christ commanded in his Word; it rather adds to them or subtracts from them as it pleases; it bases itself on humans, more than on Jesus Christ; it persecutes those who live holy lives according to the Word of God and who rebuke it for its faults, greed, and idolatry.

These two churches are easy to recognize and thus to distinguish from each other.

## **WHAT WE BELIEVE**

1. Read 1 Corinthians 5:1-13. What problem in the Corinthian church is Paul addressing in the text?
2. What is Paul's solution to the problem the Corinthian church is facing?
3. How does Paul expect those who are engaged in serious sin within the church to be treated differently than those who are outside the church and engaged in serious sin?
4. What is the "leaven" Paul is talking about? How does Paul connect the Lord's Supper to the sin in the Corinthian church?

### **Excommunication Form**

The forms for excommunication used by the Christian Reformed Church of North America are on the last page of this document.

## **GOD SPEAKS TO US**

1. Paul condemns serious sexual sin in the church and the congregation's arrogant, complacent response to it (verses 1-2). When have you tolerated or downplayed sin—either your own or in my community—rather than grieving over it as something that defiles Christ's body?
2. Our text calls for removing the unrepentant sinner from fellowship to protect the church and ultimately lead the person to repentance (verses 4--5). Have you ever witnessed or experienced unaddressed sin in a church setting? How should we respond when we encounter blatant, ongoing sin today?

## **GOD SPEAKS TO OUR FAMILY**

1. How do you encourage accountability and holiness in your family? Have you ever avoided addressing sin in a spouse, child, or relative out of fear of conflict?
2. What practical action can you take this week to help our household "celebrate the festival" with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth?

### **CALVIN ON CHURCH DISCIPLINE**

In such corrections and excommunication, the church has three ends in view.

The first is that they who lead a filthy and infamous life may not be called Christians, to the dishonor of God, as if his holy church [cf. Eph. 5:25-26] were a conspiracy of wicked and

abandoned men. For since the church itself is the body of Christ [Col. 1:24], it cannot be corrupted by such foul and decaying members without some disgrace falling upon its Head.

The second purpose is that the good be not corrupted by the constant company of the wicked, as commonly happens. For (such is our tendency to wander from the way) there is nothing easier than for us to be led away by bad examples from right living.

The third purpose is that those overcome by shame for their baseness begin to repent. They who under gentler treatment would have become more stubborn so profit by the chastisement of their own evil as to be awakened when they feel the rod. The apostle means this when he speaks as follows: "If anyone does not obey our teaching, note that man; and do not mingle with him, that he may be ashamed" [2 Thess. 3:14 p.]. b(a) Likewise, in another passage, when he writes that he has delivered the Corinthian man to Satan: "that his spirit may be saved in the Day of the Lord" [1 Cor. 5:5]; that is (as I interpret it), Paul gave him over to temporary condemnation that he might have eternal salvation. But he speaks of "delivering over to Satan" because the devil is outside the church, as Christ is in the church.

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## **GOD SPEAKS IN WORSHIP**

1. When you celebrate the Lord's Supper, do you carry sin that you might have grown comfortable with? How might that sin dull your heart's response to God's presence and dishonor the Table where Christ is proclaimed?

2. Read the Form for Excommunication (last page). What's your reaction to the form? How would you describe the form's tone? Is it good as it is, or would you add or take something away? If so, what?

## **HISTORICAL DISCIPLINE**

"While disciplinary action within the church had its controversial and contentious moments, it appears that for the first several centuries the church consistently sought to apply disciplinary measures according to the biblical witness. Indeed, the early church disciplined members both for the propagation of false doctrine and lack of moral purity. It was common practice in the early days of the church to announce disciplinary judgments on Sunday in the context of the church service. Tertullian, describing this event, states, "For judgment is passed, and it carries great weight, as it must among men certain that God sees them; and it is a notable foretaste of judgment to come, if any man has so sinned to be banished from all share in our prayer, our assembly, and all holy intercourse." Tertullian, as well as other church fathers, recognized the seriousness of the disciplinary process." ~Professor Jeremy Kimble

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## **REFORMED CHURCH DISCIPLINE**

In Reformed theology, church discipline and the Lord's Supper are intimately connected, both serving to guard the purity of the church and the holiness of the sacrament. Rooted in Scripture (especially Matthew 18:15-20 and 1 Corinthians 5, 11:27-32), discipline is viewed as

an essential mark of the true church, alongside the pure preaching of the Word and right administration of the sacraments. John Calvin emphasized that discipline prevents the profane from insulting Christ by partaking unworthily at the Table, and it protects the flock from corruption. In his Institutes, he described church discipline as necessary so "the wicked may not, by being admitted to the Lord's Table, put insult on Christ" and corrupt others. The process typically progresses from private admonition to public censure, suspension from the Lord's Supper, and, if unrepentant, excommunication. Suspension acts as a temporary barring from Communion, signaling serious sin requiring repentance, while excommunication fully removes one from church fellowship and the sacraments. This "fencing the table"-a common Reformed practice-ensures the Supper is administered only to professing believers in good standing who examine themselves (1 Cor. 11:28). Pastors publicly declare who may come: baptized, professing Christians not under censure, walking in faith and repentance. The goal is restorative, not punitive: discipline aims to bring sinners to repentance so they may again partake worthily.

The Belgic Confession Article 35 reflects this, teaching that unworthy partaking brings judgment, while discipline preserves the sacrament's integrity as a means of grace. Therefore, church discipline safeguards the visible church's witness and the Supper's spiritual nourishment, proclaiming Christ's death until He comes, only to those united to Him by faith.

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## **THE GOSPEL CALL**

1. How does the presence of "old leaven" (persistent, unrepented sin) in your own life or in the visible church weaken your personal evangelism? What steps can you take to pursue greater personal holiness so your life is a true witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ?

2. Paul clearly distinguishes: we are not to withdraw from immoral people in the world, but we are to judge and not associate with professing believers who persist in grave sin without repentance (verses 9-11). Are you building relationships with non-Christian - eating with them, loving them, sharing the gospel with them?

## **BONHOEFFER ON CHURCH DISCIPLINE**

That is what we mean by cheap grace, the grace which amounts to the justification of sin without the justification of the repentant sinner who departs from sin and from whom sin departs. Cheap grace is not the kind of forgiveness of sin which frees us from the toils of sin. Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all that he has... Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the

sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: "ye were bought at a price," and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. The Cost of Discipleship (pp. 44-45). (Function). Kindle Edition.

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## **Form for Excommunication (1982)**

*NOTE: This form, adopted for use by Synod of 1982, includes the three announcements that the Church Order then required before excommunication takes place. Synod 1991 revised the Church Order's section on discipline and removed the required steps of discipline, allowing local elders to discern how best to implement discipline, if needed. Synod 1991 also updated the forms for excommunication and readmission.*

### First Announcement

Beloved in the Lord, it is our painful duty as officebearers of this church to inform you that one of our fellow members, (name[optional] ), has committed the serious and offensive sin of (blank) and persists unrepentant to this day, despite our prayers and admonitions. Through his/her persistence, our brother/sister is breaking the covenant bond with the Lord and his people. Because sacraments are signs and seals of this relationship with our Savior and with one another, we have already been compelled to bar our brother/sister from participation in the sacraments.

As members of this church of Jesus Christ, we should be deeply concerned when one of our fellow members obstinately turns his/her back on the Christian way and refuses to repent. We are and remain responsible for one another (Gen. 4:9; Gal. 6:1-2; and 1 Cor. 12:12ff.). Therefore, let all of us pray that our brother/sister may respond positively to the admonitions of the church and return to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is seeking him/her in grace and faithfulness (Matt. 18:10-14; Luke 19:10).

### Second Announcement

Beloved in the Lord, we informed you previously that as officebearers of this church we barred a fellow member, (name) , from the sacraments. We did so because he/she committed the serious and offensive sin of \_\_\_\_\_ and failed to show true repentance despite our frequent admonitions.

With a heavy heart we must tell you that his/her suspension from the sacraments, and all admonitions since that time, have not produced in our brother/sister any evidence of a desire to be restored to the covenantal relationship with the Lord and his people.

We have discussed this matter with Classis (name), and were advised that if our brother/sister does not repent, we may proceed to the extreme remedy of his/her excommunication from the church of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, all of us are urged to continue to pray for our brother/sister and to plead with him/her that he/she may mend his/her ways and return to the Lord and his people in genuine repentance and faith. Our Lord does not wish that the sinner should perish but desires that he/she should return from his/her ways and live (Ezek. 18; Matt. 18).

### Third Announcement

Beloved in the Lord, the officebearers of this church have twice informed you of the sin committed and the offense given by our fellow member, (name). We informed you that our brother/sister was barred from participation in the sacraments because he/she failed to show true repentance.

Our loving concern since that time, however, has not led him/her to demonstrate any sign of true repentance and faith. Because he/she persists in breaking the covenantal relationship with the Lord and his people, we are compelled to proceed with the final step of discipline, namely, the excommunication of our brother/sister from the church of the Lord. If our brother/sister does not show any evidence of genuine repentance, he/she, to our deep sorrow, will be excommunicated in this church on (date). If any member of the church knows of any valid reason why we should not proceed, we urge that person to inform the consistory.

Let all of us continue to pray for (name) and to plead with him/her so that he/she may not harden his/her heart completely, but return to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, with true confession of sin.

### Excommunication

Beloved in the Lord, our fellow member, (name) , has brought discredit to the body of Christ by his/her sin, and in spite of the patient care of this church, remains unrepentant to this day. Accordingly, we as officebearers of this church are compelled with great sorrow to proceed with the final step of discipline, namely, his/her excommunication from the church of the Lord. We do this in obedience to the command of God in his Word (Matt. 18:15-18; 1 Cor. 5:1-5, 11-13; 1 Tim. 5:20).

This excommunication is necessary so that we may maintain the honor of God, remove offense from the church of Christ, and lead the erring one to repentance. We pray that this action may cause our brother/sister to seek forgiveness of sin, union with Christ, and restoration into the covenant family of God and his people.

### Prayer

Holy Father, we are humbled before you at this time. What we are about to do grieves us deeply. We do it, Lord, with fear and trembling, conscious of our imperfection, yet also of the responsibility you have given your church in using the keys of the kingdom. Grant that our action may build up your church and cause none to stumble. This we ask in the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

### Declaration

In the name and the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, we hereby excommunicate (name)

from the church of our Lord. We believe that God himself excludes him/her from the fellowship of Christ, the holy sacraments, and all the blessings of faith as long as he/she persists in his/her impenitence.

### Exhortation

Let all of us pray that the Holy Spirit grant (name) grace to recognize his/her sin, work in him/her genuine repentance, and restore him/her to fellowship with the Lord and his people (Ezek. 18:23, 32; 33:11; Matt. 18:10-14).

Let us be saddened by this event and warned to fear the Lord and live close to him and his Word. Today we clearly hear God's voice of judgment. Let us not harden our hearts (Ps. 95:8), but place ourselves under the discipline of our Master, who lovingly and firmly renews our lives through the ministry of his Word and Spirit.

Since we are assured that the Lord forgives, let us together call on him, confessing our sin and pleading for mercy (Ps. 130).

[To be concluded with an appropriate prayer.]

