

“THE FATHER’S DISCIPLINE.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Sermon Texts: Hebrews 12:5-11

Belgic Confession Article 32

Introduction:

Our Constitution of the United States of America and the first seven articles and 27 amendments are the shortest constitution in force in the world today.

Its first three articles secure the doctrine of the separation of powers. Our federal government is divided into three branches: the legislative; the executive; and the judicial. Articles Four, Five and Six establish the concept of federalism, describing the rights and responsibilities of state governments and of the states in relationship to the federal government.

The Constitution and the form of government that was established by it was written and instituted based on a very strong understanding of the sinful nature of mankind, that men are totally fallen, that sin permeates all we think and do, that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Our founding fathers set in place policies and principles that had checks and balances; with built in accountability. This was meant to limit government, to limit the powers of any one individual and to limit the power of the federal government over state’s rights. Our founding documents sought to carefully walk a balance between tyranny and anarchy, between the abuse of the rule of one person, and the rule of the mob.

Human nature being what it is needs structure, discipline and accountability. To do that you have to have laws and the force of discipline behind the laws to enforce them.

Where there is sin there is a need for rules and laws and obedience, and when this is broken, there is a need for discipline. This is true in our nation and in our cities and communities, this is true in the military, in schools, in all our homes and in our churches.

Article 32 of the Belgic Confession addresses these issues and principles in our churches under what we call church order and church discipline.

The officers or spiritual leaders of the church are responsible for the life and doctrine of the church, they are responsible to maintain peace, unity and order. They are to see that the Word is faithfully preached and the sacraments are faithfully administered and received.

In order to do all this they must be able to use the tool of good *church order* to keep order and the tool of spiritual *church discipline* when something is out of order.

Church Order.

Allow me to explain the difference between the creeds and confessions of our faith and our book of Church Order.

Our creeds and confessions get at the essence of our church, the essence of what we believe. Our creeds and confessions tell us what we must hold in common and what we must believe.

Our book of Church Order gets at what is beneficial for our church and states what we may do. It's subject to change over time and even at each Synod. Our book of Church Order is subordinate to our creeds and confessions which are subordinate to Scripture.

The problem that this article addresses is that during the first 1500 years of church history there grow up a huge administrative structure to the church and thousands of laws which became known as *Canon Law*. This was the collection of all the decrees of various councils, synods and popes. Layer upon layer upon layer of human tradition and manmade laws binding the lives and consciences of the people.

The Canon Law of the Roman Catholic Church is so extensive and detailed that there have to be canon lawyers specialized to guide people through it. I had a woman come to me earlier this year with a difficult case regarding divorce and annulment. I had to give written testimony on her behalf and I urged her to find the best canon lawyer she could.

In the time of the Reformation this massive body of Canon Law was rejected. It had become onerous and cumbersome, it placed a huge burden on the backs of the people. It was like what the Pharisees had done to the people back in Jesus' day.

Matthew 23:4 They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.

But when the Reformers threw off the burdensome Canon Law, they knew that no law and no order would lead to chaos. So the Reformers following the wisdom of Scripture developed what has become our book of Church Order.

Every denomination has a constitution, some form of church order, and some form of liturgy to guide their worship.

The Bible doesn't outline all the details of leading a local congregation. Wisdom and common sense must guide.

I Timothy 3:15 if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.

Because they had the Word of God and the Holy Spirit, Paul trusted them to lead the household of God well.

There are four main areas covered in our CRC Church Order covers four main areas for how we are to live together and organize ourselves and do things and take care of issues and problems like sin:

1. The Offices of the Church (Pastors, Elders, Deacons)
2. The Assemblies of the Church (council, classis, synod)
3. The Tasks and Activities of the Church (worship, education, pastoral care, missions)
4. The Admonition and Discipline of the Church (discipline of members and officebearers).

These are manmade guidelines, they are not spelled out specifically in Scripture. Article 32 gives two guidelines for how church order should be made.

First, the principles of church government should be useful and good, and should lead to order and unity.

Second, the principles they should not deviate from or contradict Scripture and what Christ taught.

This was happening in Colossae.

Colossians 2:20-23 If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— 21 “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” 22 (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? 23 These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

Whatever rules or laws are instituted cannot and must not **bind the consciences** of the people. Is it useful and edifying and does it tend toward the good of all? Is it helpful in carrying out and accomplishing the work of the Lord and is it consistent with the general teaching of Scripture? Then it is good and can be followed.

Church order is still important today. In our culture we have seen the rise for decades now of non-denominational churches and mega churches and emergent churches.

They are loosely formed and have no ties to other churches or denominations. Some of them talk about being led by the Spirit. Others follow the whims and wishes of the senior pastor who functions like a CEO.

This model tears down the authority of the church or practices church order in a way that is not conducive to unity and is not beneficial to the members and leads to potential abuse.

Why doesn't the NT lay down all the specifics of church order for the new and growing church? The NT gospel was given to be taken to all lands and all people through all generations. Only that which is true for all peoples in all times is given as authoritative and unchanging.

The specifics of how any given assembly might govern themselves and conduct themselves is left for mature and godly leaders to decide. The NT gospel is left free in this regard that it might flourish and thrive in different cultures and different times in history.

All of this ought to be done remembering that Jesus Christ alone is Lord and Head of His Church.

Church discipline.

Article 32 concludes with the necessity of church discipline.

Churches are always a mixed assembly of sinners, of sheep and goats, of wheat and weeds.

Church discipline is an essential mark of a true church and a key element in a church staying a true church. If anything and everything goes in a church it will soon no longer be a church. When discipline is weak the church will be weak, when discipline is strong, the church will be strong.

The church is for a certain kind of believer, those who say, "I believe, help my unbelief."
The church is for a certain kind of sinner, those who say, "Have mercy on me a sinner."
The church is for sinners who hear the gospel and respond with repentance and faith, who bear the fruit of repentance, who give evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts and lives.

In other words, we believe the gospel actually changes people.

People most often think that church discipline is a negative thing and leads to people leaving the church. But without it you don't have real unity of the Spirit around the Word of God. Churches wrongly think that church discipline will stunt their growth, when actually it is honored by God and leads to deeper spiritual growth and fellowship.

Peace and unity and growth aren't the fruit of no conflict, they are the fruit of obedience to God.

The purposes and reasons for the right administration of church discipline.

Hebrews 12:6, 9-11 For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."

9 Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? 10 For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his

holiness. 11 For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

What's the guiding principle? Love. What's the desired result? Holiness and righteousness. All godly discipline has this positive purpose and end.

Love for Christ; to uphold and vindicate honor of Christ

We are not free to bring public shame or scandal on the name of Jesus. The holy reputation of God is upheld when the elders exercise discipline.

Revelation 2:2-5 “I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. 3 I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for *my name's sake*, and you have not grown weary. 4 But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. 5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.

Love for the Church; purity of His church/holy character of church.

All of us must put the love of Christ's Church over our desires to just keep the peace by sweeping sin and issues under the carpet. We must preserve and protect the peace and purity and unity of the church by dealing with wolves in sheep's clothing and by dealing with those mocking the gospel by living in unrepentant sin and by dealing with those promoting false doctrine.

In I Corinthians 5 Paul urges the church there to remove the ungodly leaven of public sin to protect the church from the spreading cancer of sin.

Love for the sinner; benefit of the sinner. Seeks his spiritual welfare.

A very key element of church discipline is love for the individual and pastoral concern for his soul. Disciplining an erring member is not about self-righteously getting rid of bad apples. It's about bring about the fruit of righteousness and holiness.

All discipline seeks to reclaim the sinner. All discipline seeks to restore a sinner to fellowship with God and with God's people. Just as discipline in the home is meant to reclaim the heart of the child and to root out sin or error or folly.

Excommunication.

Church discipline has many facets and excommunication is only the last and final resort. Excommunication happens when a member is guilty of some public sin and refuses to repent or shows no signs of repentance, or whose character or actions brings dishonor to Christ or His

church, or refuses to acknowledge and submit to those in authority in the church, or denies some important doctrine of Scripture.

Excommunication is reserved for the unbelieving, those who throw off the faith or deny the truth; and for the unrepentant, those who refuse to give up their sinful practices.

A person who is excommunicated is experiencing on earth what he is in danger of eternally if he doesn't repent and believe. Even this very strongest form of discipline is an act of love meant to bring about repentance and reconciliation.

When a person submits to the loving discipline of the elders, their souls are saved, the people are blessed, Christ's name is honored and His church is built up.

Application and Conclusion.

Let me ask a hard question, the kind of question that makes us search our hearts. If you have fallen into serious sin, would you want someone to come to you and confront you?

Would you want something like what Scripture says to happen?

Psalm 141:5 Let a righteous man strike me—it is a kindness; let him rebuke me—it is oil for my head; let my head not refuse it.

Proverbs 27:6 Faithful are the wounds of a friend.

Galatians 6:1 Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.

James 5:19-20 My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, 20 let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

This is one of the roles of our spiritual leaders, to bring wise counsel and godly correction and reproof into our lives. If they don't who will? And if they do how should we receive it? It depends on if we are wise or not, if we are humble or not.

All members bear a responsibility to pray for and speak to those they know that are wandering from God, wandering from the faith, wandering from the straight and narrow path.

Pray for your church. We have a great and fierce enemy. He attacks from the outside and the inside. He comes as an angel of light and as a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Pray for our elders to be faithful and courageous and compassionate. Pray for those in error and those in unrepentant sin. Pray for the health of the body of Christ here, pray we will be spared from scandal, heresy, and schism.