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CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Introduction

Accordingly, as the saving doctrine of Christ is the soul of the church, so does discipline serve as its sinews, through which the members of the body hold together, each in its own place. Therefore, all who desire to remove discipline or to hinder its restoration -wether they do this deliberately or out of ignorance- are surely contributing to the ultimate dissolution of the church. ... Therefore, discipline is like a bridle to restrain and tame those who rage against the doctrine of Christ; or like a spur to arouse those of little inclination; and also sometimes like a father's rod to chastise mildly and with the gentleness of Christ's Spirit those who have seriously lapsed.

Calvin, Institutes, IV-xii-1

1. Scripture

The church of the Lord is holy because the holy God dwells in her midst.

Ex. 19 : 6

... you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'

Lev. 11 : 44

I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy.

Lev. 20 : 26

You are to be holy to me; for I, the LORD, am holy and have set you apart from the nations to be my own.

Isa. 6 : 3

And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty;

Luke 1 : 49

for the Mighty One has done great things for me -- holy is his name.

Eph. 5 : 25, 26

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word,

Rev. 15 : 4

For you alone are holy.

The LORD is holy. This means that He is far removed from sin, hates all sin and has nothing to do with it. For this reason He will not tolerate anything unclean in His presence. At the same time He shows His holiness in that He overcomes and breaks down the power of sin by His grace. In the Old Testament we see both elements of holiness in connection with the tabernacle or temple. On the one hand people were forbidden to come close to the ark. This emphasizes that God's holiness means He has nothing to do with sin. On the other hand the LORD made it possible for the Israelites to come in His presence through the shedding of blood. This was symbolized to the people e.g. by what took place on the Day of Atonement (Lev.16). In the New Testament we learn that Christ's death sanctifies the church. The holiness of the congregation is seen in that she is set apart by the mercy of God to serve Him. The congregation can live as a holy nation when she lives from the grace of the LORD. As a result discipline has as goal to remove from the church what is unholy. This sinner has to be called to repentance. If he refuses he is to be excommunicated. He will be excommunicated on account of his unwillingness to repent. Discipline is always aimed at repentance. What needs to be punished is the unwillingness to break with sin and live from the grace of God. The justice of church discipline is therefore not vindictive but aimed at the justice of God (See Deut. 17). God's own dealings with His people show how much patience He has.

The church is duty bound to defend and protect this holiness. The LORD calls His people to remove all evil from their midst. Because this evil can be in the form of sinful deeds as well as sinful words, discipline has to punish sins against both "the purity of doctrine and the piety of conduct."

Numb. 25 : 10 - 13

The LORD said to Moses, "Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, has turned my anger away from the Israelites; for he was as zealous as I am for my honor among them, so that in my zeal I did not put an end to them. Therefore tell him I am making my covenant of peace with him. He and his descendants will have a covenant of a lasting priesthood, because he was zealous for the honor of his God and made atonement for the Israelites.

Deut. 17 : 7

The hands of the witnesses must be the first in putting him to death, and then the hands of all the people. You must purge the evil from among you.

Joshua 7

Then Joshua, together with all Israel, took Achan son of Zerah, the silver, the robe, the gold wedge, his sons and daughters, his cattle, donkeys and sheep, his tent and all that he had, to the Valley of Achor. Joshua said, "Why have you brought this trouble on us? The LORD will bring trouble on you today." Then all Israel stoned him, and after they had stoned the rest, they burned them. Over Achan they heaped up a large pile of rocks, which remains to this day. Then the LORD turned from his fierce anger. Therefore that place has been called the Valley of Achor ever since.

Rom 16:17

I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them.

1 Cor 5:2

And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?

1 Cor 5:5

Hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.

1 Cor 5:13

God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you."

1 Cor 6:9-10

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

Gal 5:19-21

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

2 Thes 3:6

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us.

2 Thes 3:14

If any one does not obey our instructions in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed.

Titus 3:10

Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him.

2 John 1:10

If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him.

Rev. 2:20

Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols.

Rev.22:14-15

"Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

The Word of God calls us to admonish each other.

Prov. 17:10

A rebuke impresses a man of discernment more than a hundred lashes a fool.

Prov. 27:5 - 6

Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses

Prov. 27:17

As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.

Prov.28:23

He who rebukes a man will in the end gain more favor than he who has a flattering tongue.

Luke 17:3-4

So watch yourselves. "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."

Gal.6:1-2

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

At the same time the elders have the task to supervise the congregation

Ezekiel 33:1-7

The word of the LORD came to me: "Son of man, speak to your countrymen and say to them: 'When I bring the sword against a land, and the people of the land choose one of their men and make him their watchman, and he sees the sword coming against the land and blows the trumpet to warn the people, then if anyone hears

the trumpet but does not take warning and the sword comes and takes his life, his blood will be on his own head. Since he heard the sound of the trumpet but did not take warning, his blood will be on his own head. If he had taken warning, he would have saved himself. But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet to warn the people and the sword comes and takes the life of one of them, that man will be taken away because of his sin, but I will hold the watchman accountable for his blood.' "Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me

Matt 16:19

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

Matt 18:18

Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

Luke 15:4

What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it.

John 20:23

If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Acts 20:28-31

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!

When the overseers do not fulfil this task the people will suffer the consequences.

Jer. 5 : 5 - 6

So I will go to the leaders and speak to them; surely they know the way of the LORD, the requirements of their God." But with one accord they too had broken off the yoke and torn off the bonds.

Therefore a lion from the forest will attack them, a wolf from the desert will ravage them, a leopard will lie in wait near their towns to tear to pieces any who venture out, for their rebellion is great and their backslidings many.

The aim of all discipline is repentance.

Ezek 33 : 10-11

"Son of man, say to the house of Israel, 'This is what you are saying: "Our offenses and sins weigh us down, and we are wasting away because of them. How then can we live?" ' Say to them, "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?"

Hosea 2 : 13 - 16

I will punish her for the days she burned incense to the Baals; she decked herself with rings and jewelry, and went after her lovers, but me she forgot," declares the LORD. "Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her. There I will give her back her vineyards, and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she will sing as in the days of her youth, as in the day she came up out of Egypt. "In that day," declares the LORD, "you will call me 'my husband'; you will no longer call me 'my master.'

Luke 15:7, 10

I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent. In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Heb.12:11

No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

James 5:19-20

My brethren, if any one among you wanders from the truth and some one brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

2. Confessions/Church Order/Forms

2.1. Belgic Confession

The Belgic Confession deals with church discipline within the context of the doctrine of the church. It is one of the marks of the church (Art. 29). In Article 32 the discipline is combined with the order of the church. Another way in which discipline comes to the surface in the Belgic Confession is the rejection of heresies, e.g. in Art. 9, 12 and 13.

- Art. 9 The doctrine of the Holy Trinity has always been maintained and preserved in the true Church since the time of the apostles to this very day, over against Jews, Muslims, and against false Christians and heretics such as Marcion, Mani, Praxeas, Sabellius, Paul of Samosata, Arius, and such like, who have been justly condemned by the orthodox fathers. In this doctrine, therefore, we willingly receive the three creeds, of the Apostles, of Nicea, and of Athanasius; likewise that which in accordance with them is agreed upon by the early fathers.
- Art. 12 Therefore we detest and reject the error of the Sadducees, who deny that there are any spirits and angels; and also the error of the Manichees, who say that the devils were not created, but have their origin of themselves, and that without having become corrupted, they are wicked by their own nature.
- Art. 13 We therefore reject the damnable error of the Epicureans, who say that God does not concern Himself with anything but leaves all things to chance.
- Art. 29 The true Church is to be recognized by the following marks: It practises the pure preaching of the gospel. It maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them. It exercises Church discipline for correcting and punishing sins. In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and regarding Jesus Christ as the only Head. Hereby the true Church can certainly be known and no one has the right to separate from it.
Those who are of the Church may be recognized by the marks of Christians. They believe in Jesus Christ the only Saviour, flee from sin and pursue righteousness, love the true God and their neighbour without turning to the right or left, and crucify their flesh and its works. Although great weakness remains in them, they fight against it by the Spirit all the days of their life. They appeal constantly to the blood, suffering, death, and obedience of Jesus Christ, in whom they have forgiveness of their sins through faith in Him.
The false church assigns more authority to itself and its ordinances than to the Word of God. It does not want to submit itself to the yoke of Christ. It does not administer the sacraments as Christ commanded in His Word, but adds to them and subtracts from them as it pleases. It bases itself more on men than on Jesus Christ. It persecutes those who live holy lives according to the Word of God and who rebuke the false church for its sins, greed, and idolatries.
- Art. 32 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. 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. To that end, discipline and excommunication ought to be exercised in agreement with the Word of God.

2.2. Heidelberg Catechism

In the Heidelberg Catechism church discipline is one of the keys of the Kingdom of heaven. It is to be used to close and open the kingdom. Q/a 85 closes the second part of the Catechism, the one that deals with our redemption (Lord's Days 5 - 31). This shows that discipline is a means to keep someone in the grace of God. The Catechism also pays attention to the steps which must be followed in the process of discipline.

85. Q. How is the kingdom of heaven closed and opened by church discipline?
A. According to the command of Christ, people who call themselves Christians but show themselves to be un-christian 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.

The Catechism connects discipline to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. The church has to guard the holiness table and this implies discipline.

81. Q. Who are to come to the table of the Lord?
A. Those who are truly displeased with themselves because of their sins and yet trust that these are forgiven them and that their remaining weakness is covered by the suffering and death of Christ, and who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and amend their life. But hypocrites and those who do not repent eat and drink judgment upon themselves.

The Catechism stresses the responsibility we have as congregation when it comes to discipline. If the church knowingly allows sin the whole communion is affected.

82. Q. Are those also to be admitted to the Lord's supper who by their confession and life show that they are unbelieving and ungodly?

- A. No, for then the covenant of God would be profaned and His wrath kindled against the whole congregation. Therefore, according to the command of Christ and His apostles, the Christian church is duty-bound to exclude such persons by the keys of the kingdom of heaven, until they amend their lives.

2.3. Canons of Dort.

The Canons of Dort mention discipline in the context of our regeneration and preservation.

Chapter 3/4, Article 17

The almighty working of God whereby He brings forth and sustains this our natural life does not exclude but requires the use of means, by which He according to His infinite wisdom and goodness has willed to exercise His power. So also the aforementioned supernatural working of God whereby He regenerates us, in no way excludes or overthrows the use of the gospel, which the most wise God has ordained to be the seed of regeneration and the food of the soul. For this reason the apostles and the teachers who succeeded them, in the fear of the Lord instructed the people concerning this grace of God, to His glory and to the abasement of all pride. In the meantime, however, they did not neglect to keep them, by the holy admonitions of the gospel, under the administration of the Word, the sacraments, and discipline. So today those who give or receive instruction in the Church should not dare to tempt God by separating what He in His good pleasure has willed to be kept very close together. For grace is conferred through admonitions, and the more readily we do our duty, the more this favour of God, who works in us, usually manifests itself in its lustre and the more directly His works proceed. To God alone all glory, both for the means and for their saving fruit and efficacy, is due throughout eternity. Amen.

Chapter 5, Article 14

As it has pleased God to begin this work of grace in us by the preaching of the gospel, so He maintains, continues, and perfects it by the hearing and reading of His Word, by meditation upon it, by its exhortations, threatenings, and promises, and by the use of the sacraments.

2.4. Church Order

From the beginning the Reformed Churches have realized the importance of discipline. The Church Order of Dort deals with it in a separate section, the Articles 66 through 73. These articles contain the Biblical principles for church discipline and deal with the process of discipline. It must be kept in mind that these articles were not written in order to cover every possible case. We need to apply these articles in each case in a spiritual manner.

Art. 16 - The Office of the Minister of the Word

... and further, with the elders, to keep the church of God in good order, to exercise discipline, and to govern it in such a manner as the Lord has ordained.

Art. 22 - The Office of Elder

They shall exercise Christian discipline according to the command of Christ against those who show themselves unbelieving and ungodly and refuse to repent and shall watch that the sacraments are not profaned.

Art. 66 - Nature and Purpose

Art. 67 - Consistory Involvement

Art. 68 - Excommunication

Art. 69 - Repentance

Art. 70 - Readmission

Art. 71 - Suspension and Deposition of Office-bearers

Art. 72 - Serious and Gross Sins on the Part of Office-bearers

Art. 73 - Christian Censure

2.5. Liturgical Forms and Prayers

The churches have adopted forms for excommunication, one when it concerns a communicant and the other when it concerns a non-communicant member. These forms also spell out the announcements to be made to the congregation. A striking feature of these forms is their urgent appeal to all the members of the congregation to break with sin and live a holy life. Added to these forms of excommunication is the Form for Readmission. This highlights the fact that discipline, including excommunication, is meant to bring about repentance.

Besides these Forms, we also find references to Church Discipline in the Form for Public Profession of Faith, Form for Lord's Supper and Form for the Ordination of Ministers, as well as the Form for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons.

Form for the Public Profession of Faith

"Do you promise to submit willingly to the admonition and discipline of the Church, if it should happen, and may God graciously prevent it, that you become delinquent either in doctrine or in conduct?"

Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper - Invitation and Admonition

... all who either in word or conduct show themselves to be unbelieving by leading an offensive life. While they persist in their sins, they shall not take of this food, which Christ has ordained only for his believers; otherwise their judgement and condemnation will be the heavier.

Form for the Excommunication of Non-Communicant Members

Form for the Excommunication of Communicant Members

Form for Readmission into the Church of Christ

Form for the Ordination of Ministers of the Word

Fourth it is the duty of the minister of the Word, with the elders as stewards of the house of God, to see to it that in the congregation all things are done in peace and good order. Together they shall supervise the doctrine and life of the membership and *tend the flock of God, not as domineering over those in their charge but being examples to the flock*. In doing so they are to shut and open the kingdom of God by Christian discipline, according to the charge given by Christ.

Form for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons - Mandate of the Elders

They shall exercise Christian discipline, according to the command of Christ, against those who show themselves unbelieving and ungodly and refuse to repent. They shall watch that the sacraments are not profaned.

Prayer 3 - A Public Confession of sins and Prayer before the Sermon

We also beseech Thee, gracious God, to bring back to Thyself in true repentance all who depart from Thy truth, that we all with one accord may serve Thee through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

3. Purpose and Goal

The Belgic Confession speaks about discipline in the context of maintaining the body of the Church (Art. 32). The Heidelberg Catechism connects discipline to the closing and opening the Kingdom of Heaven, and the guarding of the Lord's Table. The Church Order has a more detailed description of the purpose and goal of church discipline:

... 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 offence out of the Church of Christ.

According to the Form for Excommunication the purpose is as follows:

This excommunication is intended to make this brother (sister) ashamed of his (her) sins, and also to ensure that this corrupt member does not affect the whole body which is Christ's Church. Moreover, in this way the blaspheming of God's Name is prevented.

J.Kamphuis gives this definition of church discipline: "It is the judicial maintenance of the holiness of God's congregation over against the destructive power in the lives of those in the congregation who are dominated by sin." (See Diakonia vol. II, No.4, page 71)

We may conclude that the goal of church discipline is:

- to serve the honour of God,
- to keep the church pure, and
- to bring sinners to repentance.

4. Self Discipline

Church discipline involves mutual discipline, as the Lord Jesus taught in Matthew 18. Mutual discipline, in turn, involves self discipline. How can I admonish others if I do not fight sin in my own life. How can I speak about the joy of a reconciled God, if I do not experience this in my own life. The Lord Jesus taught this need for self discipline in Matthew 5:29-30. Scripture as a whole speaks about the need for self-discipline.

Prov 25:28

Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control.

Matt 5:29-30

If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

John 12:24-25

I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

2 Tim 1:7

For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.

Titus 2:12-13

It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope-- the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ,

The Word of God shows that this call to self discipline applies to all.

Titus 2:2

Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance.

Titus 2:4-6

Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God. Similarly, encourage the young men to be self-controlled.

The Lord Jesus Himself speaks about this self discipline.

Matt 10:37-39

"Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

Luke 9:23-24

Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.

Self discipline is anchored in the death and resurrection of Christ, and thus also a fruit of the Spirit.

Rom 6:6

For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin--

Gal 5:22-24

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.

2 Pet 1:5-8

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Self discipline is then also a requirement for office-bearers.

Mark 9:35

Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."

Acts 20:28

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.

Titus 1:8

Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined.

1 Cor 9:25-27

Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

1 Tim 3:2

Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,

Paul speaks about this self discipline in a very personal manner.

2 Cor 4:7

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

2 Cor 12:7-10

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Our Confessions address the need for self-discipline too. It is striking that Art. 29 of the Belgic Confession not only mentions discipline as one of the marks of the true church, but also as a mark of the Christian.

Those who are of the Church may be recognized by the marks of Christians. They believe in Jesus Christ the only Saviour, flee from sin and pursue righteousness, love the true God and their neighbour without turning to the right or left, and crucify their flesh and its works. Although great weakness remains in them, they fight against it by the Spirit all the days of their life. They appeal constantly to the blood, suffering, death, and obedience of Jesus Christ, in whom they have forgiveness of their sins through faith in Him.

The Heidelberg Catechism speaks about this self discipline in many questions and answers.

70. Q. What does it mean to be washed with Christ's blood and Spirit?
A. To be washed with Christ's blood means to receive forgiveness of sins from God, through grace, because of Christ's blood, poured out for us in His sacrifice on the cross. To be washed with His Spirit means to be renewed by the Holy Spirit and sanctified to be members of Christ, so that more and more we become dead to sin and lead a holy and blameless life.
88. Q. What is the true repentance or conversion of man?
A. It is the dying of the old nature and the coming to life of the new.
89. Q. What is the dying of the old nature?
A. It is to grieve with heartfelt sorrow that we have offended God by our sin, and more and more to hate it and flee from it.
94. Q. What does the LORD require in the first commandment?
A. That for the sake of my very salvation I avoid and flee all idolatry, witchcraft, superstition, and prayer to saints or to other creatures. ... In short, that I forsake all creatures rather than do the least thing against His will.
109. Q. Does God in this commandment forbid nothing more than adultery and similar shameful sins?
A. Since we, body and soul, are temples of the Holy Spirit, it is God's will that we keep ourselves pure and holy. Therefore He forbids all unchaste acts, gestures, words, thought, desires, and whatever may entice us to unchastity.
113. Q. What does the tenth commandment require of us?
A. That not even the slightest thought or desire contrary to any of God's commandments should ever arise in our heart. Rather, with all our heart we should always hate all sin and delight in all righteousness.
123. Q. What is the second petition?
A. *Thy kingdom come.* That is: So rule us by Thy Word and Spirit that more and more we submit to Thee. ...
124. Q. What is the third petition?
A. *Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.* That is: Grant that we and all men may deny our own will, and without any murmuring obey Thy will, for it alone is good....
127. Q. What is the sixth petition?
A. *And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.* That is: In ourselves we are so weak that we cannot stand even for a moment. Moreover, our sworn enemies -- the devil, the world, and our own flesh -- do not cease to attack us. Wilt Thou, therefore, uphold and strengthen us by the power of Thy Holy Spirit, so that in this spiritual war we may not go down to defeat, but always firmly resist our enemies, until we finally obtain the complete victory.

In the Canons of Dort we meet several references as well

Chapter 1, Article 12 The Assurance Of Election

The elect in due time, though in various stages and in different measure, are made certain of this their eternal and unchangeable election to salvation. They attain this assurance, however, not by inquisitively prying into the hidden and deep things of God, but by observing in themselves, with spiritual joy and holy delight, the unfailing fruits of election pointed out in the Word of God -- such as a true faith in Christ, a childlike fear of God, a godly sorrow for their sins, and a hungering and thirsting after righteousness.

Chapter 5, Article 2 - Daily Sins Of Weakness

Therefore daily sins of weakness spring up and defects cling to even the best works of the saints. These are for them a constant reason to humble themselves before God, to flee to the crucified Christ, to put the flesh to death more and more through the Spirit of prayer and by holy exercises of godliness, and to long for the goal of perfection until at last, delivered from this body of death, they reign with the Lamb of God in heaven.

Chapter 5, Article 4 Saints May Fall Into Serious Sins

The power of God whereby He confirms and preserves true believers in grace is so great that it cannot be conquered by the flesh, yet the converted are not always so led and moved by God that they cannot in certain particular actions turn aside through their own fault from the guidance of grace and be seduced by and yield to the lusts of the flesh. They must therefore constantly watch and pray that they may not be led into temptation. When they do not watch and pray, they not only can be drawn away by the flesh, the world, and Satan into serious and atrocious sins, but with the righteous permission of God are sometimes actually drawn away. The lamentable fall of David, Peter, and other saints, described in Holy Scripture, demonstrates this.

Chapter 5, Article 5 The Effects Of Such Serious Sins

By such gross sins, however, they greatly offend God, incur deadly guilt, grieve the Holy Spirit, suspend the exercise of faith, very grievously wound their consciences, and sometimes for a while lose the sense of God's favour — until they return to the right way through sincere repentance and God's fatherly face again shines upon them.

Chapter 5, Article 12 This Assurance Is An Incentive To Godliness

So far, however, is this certainty of perseverance from making true believers proud and complacent that, on the contrary, it is the true root of humility, childlike reverence, genuine godliness, patience in every conflict, fervent prayers, constancy in the cross and in the confession of the truth, and lasting joy in God. Further, the consideration of this benefit is for them an incentive to the serious and constant practice of gratitude and good works, as is evident from the testimonies of Scripture and the examples of the saints.

The liturgical forms give attention to self-discipline. The Form for Baptism begins with reminding us that baptism signifies the impurity of our souls, "so that we may detest ourselves, humble ourselves before God, and seek our cleansing and salvation outside of ourselves." This comes back in the Form for Lord's Supper in the part that deals with self-examination. In the Form for the Public Profession of Faith we are asked whether it is our heartfelt desire to forsake the world, and to crucify our old nature. The Form for the Excommunication of Communicant Members warns the congregation to resist evil from the very beginning.

5. The Rule of Matthew 18

The expression "the rule of Matthew 18" is well known in church life. You can hear it being said, "You must follow the way of Matthew 18," meaning that the person involved should go to the one who is sinning and call him to repentance. It can also happen that a consistory or a major assembly refuses to deal with a matter because the rule of Matthew 18 has not been followed. When Lord's Day 31 is to be discussed at catechism class, the students will also have to learn about the rule of Matthew 18. At church visitation the question can be asked, what does the consistory do to ensure that the rule of Matthew 18 followed? From all these examples we learn that the expression "the rule of Matthew 18" is known. Yet, I question how well this rule functions among us. How many consistories deal with situations of discipline that come to them in the way of Matthew 18? I would be inclined to say, not that many. One could say, that is because it works so well. Is this so? I am not so sure. Could it also be that this rule is not used enough? This can have all kinds of reasons, we are not sure how to go about it, we look up against it, we have been disappointed by it. This leads me to a next question, How well do we know how to use the rule? It can be easy for an office bearer or a consistory to say, 'go the way of Matthew 18,' but does the member know how to do it? What do we do to help one another in this regard?

5.1. What is the rule of Matthew 18?

In Article 66 of the Church Order we come across the expression "the rule given by the Lord in Matthew 18:15-17." In this article we agree that church discipline is of a spiritual nature, is one of the keys of the kingdom of heaven and is to be used to punish sins against both the purity of doctrine and the piety of conduct. Its purpose is to reconcile the sinner with the church and to remove all offence out of the church

of Christ. From this already it is clear that church discipline is an indispensable part of church life. But then Art. 66 C.O. add that this discipline can only function properly when the rule given by the Lord in Matthew 18:15-17 is followed in obedience. Combining the beginning of this article with its concluding words we may say that the more important discipline is, the more important the rule of Matthew 18 becomes. The church cannot function without proper discipline (Art. 29 B.C.), and discipline can only be proper when the rule of Matthew 18 is followed in obedience. This works the other way as well. If the rule of Matthew 18 is not followed in obedience then this has consequences for the proper functioning the discipline in the church, yes for the character of the church.

The Church Order underlines the necessity to follow this rule when it brings out that the rule of Matthew 18 is not a human rule, but is given by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, the Head of the church. One cannot say, "I don't feel up to it," or, "I am not capable of it." We are under obligation to follow it.

Let's have a closer look at this rule. As the expression itself says, this rule is found in Matthew 18. Now when we use a text we must always be aware of its context. Here too. In verse 1 we read that the disciples had been arguing over the question who the greatest is in the kingdom. A question that reveals a typically human attitude, wanting to be the first, the best, the greatest. The Lord Jesus first takes a child and had it stand among them, to teach His disciples humility. The greatest in the kingdom is he who knows his place before God. As a child has to learn this, so do adults. But then the Lord Jesus goes on with telling the parable of the lost sheep. This means that the parable is also part of the answer to the question, "Who is the greatest?" A lost sheep is not the best, the greatest in the flock. On the contrary, it is the one who straggles behind or, goes its own way. Why would the Lord use this parable? To change the mind set of the disciples. They are concerned about being the first and the greatest. Their concern is to be the first one to reach finish. With this parable of the lost sheep the Lord says, "Remember, you don't run alone. You are part of my flock. Rather than be all concerned about being the first, you should be concerned about those who are coming behind. The stragglers have to come in too. You are not going all by yourself, you belong to each other. Do not loose each other."

How easy isn't to lose each other. We go our own way. We are concerned about our own lives. We see each other on Sundays, smile and say a few common places, but that is it. Then we lose each other. It is so easy. It is much harder to hold on to each other, to seek out the other, yes to gain the other. Yet that should be our concern. The rule of Matthew 18 is not an administrative matter. It should never become something you do to make sure you can put in X in the box that asks, "Have followed the way of Matthew 18? If yes move to next line." It has to do with the care and love we have to show to one another. We belong together as members of the congregation through the precious blood of Christ. The Lord uses the term "brother." The rule of Matthew 18 functions within the communion of saints.

The Lord Jesus instructs His church to show care and love when your brother is in danger of being lost. He says: "Go and show him his fault." (vs. 15) The aim is to bring this brother back to the communion of the flock. If he listens, says the Lord, wonderful, you have won over your brother. If he does not listen then brings others and try to convince the sinner to give up his sin. If this still does not work then bring it to the attention of the church. This is the basic rule of Matthew 18. The Church Order has worked this out further.

5.2. Why this rule?

Why does the Lord give this rule? Why do we give it such a prominent place in the Church Order? To answer this question we can use the context of Matthew 18, namely, our aim is to care for each other. No one should be lost. Our human inclination is to leave each other. The Lord Jesus calls us to care for each other and in this way He continues His work. Also here counts what we confess in Canons III/IV, 17 that grace is administered through admonitions. The Lord uses the communion with each other to keep us in communion with Him.

We can also answer the question by referring to Art. 66 C.O.. The purpose of discipline is to reconcile the sinner with the church and his neighbour and to remove all offence out of the church. The rule of Matthew 18 is given for the honour of God, the well-being of the church and the salvation of the sinner. This is in line with Lord's Day 31 of the Heidelberg Catechism. Lord's Day 31 deals with the keys of the kingdom of heaven. This Lord's Day is the last one in the part that deals with our redemption (L.D. 5 - 31). Discipline is a means given by God to keep us in this redemption. Sin can be so deceptive, so destructive. We can so easily underestimate the power of sin and over estimate ourselves. This is why we need each other. Discipline is an instrument of love.

All this is also connected to the confession that the church is holy. The church is set apart by God for Himself. As He is holy so the church must be holy. We also confess that the church is the communion of saints. The Catechism explains this as having communion with Christ and with each other (L.D. 21). These two elements should not be separated. Our relationship with Christ determines our relationship with the brothers and sisters, and the other way around, our relationship to each other is anchored in the relationship with Christ. This communion shows by helping in times of need, it also has to function in a situation when someone falls into sin. Sin breaks down and destroys communion. It breaks down relationships. It leads to the attitude of "Am I my brother's keeper?" Satan know that if he can drive a wedge between brothers, this will lead to distance between the believer and God. He will do his utmost to break down the communion between members of one body. He can use for this purpose things like, lying, gossip, slander, greed, pride, selfishness, jealousy etc. With the rule of Matthew 18 the Lord Jesus mobilizes this very same communion to stop these attacks. He uses the communion of saints to fight the destructive power of sin. Instead of coming to us Himself and confronting us in person, He uses my brothers and sisters.

There is another passage which needs our attention to as well, namely Galatians 6:1-5. In chapter 5 of the letter to the Galatians Paul has spoken about the fruits of the Spirit and the works of the flesh. We are all quite familiar with these words. Paul has also said that these two are opposite to each other. Chapter 5 verse 17: "For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want." The believers fall into sin. This is why Paul says in vs 1 of chapter 6, if someone is overcome by sin, you go and seek to restore the brother. You don't stand by and let things happen, but you go and seek to bring the person back. This must be done in a spirit of gentleness. This approach to your brother shows the fruit of the Spirit in your life. You show your love in pointing out the sin helping the other. This is why he says in vs. 2 "Carry each other's burdens." These burdens are connected to this being caught in sin. Is sin indeed not a burden that can weigh a person's life down? Think of what David says in Ps. 32: 3 and 4: "When I kept silent [i.e. did not confess my sin], my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;" When you see your brother under such a burden, don't keep on walking, but help your brother lift that burden so that together you can walk onward. You may need your brother's help in the future (see vs. 1 and 3).

Paul adds that in carrying each other's burdens you fulfil the law of Christ. Did Christ not come to take the burden of God's wrath off our shoulders, then we must help one another as well. Note the use of the word law in this regard. To carrying each other's burden is a law of Christ. It is not a hobby, to be left to those who in our eyes are good in doing this. It is a law for us all. If we once more keep in mind the context, namely the struggle between the flesh and the Spirit, then we note that although it may seem that the flesh has the upper hand -someone is caught in a sin- the victory belongs to the Spirit of Christ. How does the Spirit show this victory? In that we follow the way of Matthew 18.

The conclusion is clear, the Church Order is correct when it places an strong emphasis on this rule. The Lord Jesus Himself teaches us that belonging to Him also means admonishing one another in a brotherly manner.

5.3. How to use this rule?

In the previous part we looked at why the rule of Matthew 18 is given. We saw that this rule is an expression of the love we have for each other. But does it indeed work that way? Do we indeed use this rule, and do we use it in love? One can hear disappointing reactions. "This is not for me to do." "Who am I to tell someone else?" "I tried but it backfired. The person became angry and holds it against me that I did this." "I spoke in good faith, but my words were twisted." I came with the right motives, but next thing you know you are accused of being a busybody." Such discouraging reactions can have as a result that we stop using this rule. But if we do that, then church discipline cannot function properly either. For this reason we will look at how to use this rule. In this part we will not give the final answer to all possible questions, but rather give some helpful pointers to reflect on.

How should the rule of Matthew be applied? We have already seen that it must be done out of love, in a brotherly manner. This should come out in the way we approach the other. It should come out in our words, as well as in our deeds. Think of what we saw in Galatians 6:1 "But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted." This comes back in verse 3: "If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself." When we know in our own lives how destructive and hurtful sin then we are more inclined to warn the other. When we in our own lives know what it means to live from the grace of God through the confession of sins, we are the more inclined to help our brother or sister experience the same. This is indeed a general answer. To be more specific let's use the words of Matthew 18 :15-17.

"If your brother sins against you, ..."

As already mentioned, it is the brotherhood which is in focus here. This does not deny the fact that we can also call unbelievers to repentance, but the basis on which this is done is different. The brother we may approach as a brother in the Lord. There is a common bond and this bond is threatened by the sin of the other. To a brother we can appeal on the basis of God's work in Jesus Christ. The Lord also uses the word sin. This is important. In order to approach the other in the way of Matthew 18 it must involve a sin. We should be able to show from the Word of God what the other did wrong. This means that we should not come with our own opinions or ideas.

Much has been written about the words "against you." This is not the place to go into detail on this point. Those interested can read up on this in the various commentaries. Certainly this is an important point, but the focus of the text is not so much on the person against whom the sin has been committed as well as on what to do with the one who has committed the sin.

"... go ..."

The Lord Jesus comes with a very simple command: "Go to your brother." Go means exactly that -- go. You have to go to the person involved. It does not suffice to tell others, so they can do something about it. Each situation is different. It can happen that it concerns a person you meet every day. Then it may not be so difficult to speak to him. It can also concern a person whom you do not meet often. Then do not wait till you think there is a good opportunity, for such an opportunity can take a long time. And just when you think it is there, the person is gone again, or someone else joins you. It is better to then make an appointment with the person. It may be necessary to call the person in order to set a place and time. There is nothing wrong in indicating why you want to come, but the matter itself should be discussed face to face. The phone is not meant to admonish someone. Go means indeed go

"... and show him his fault, ..."

The purpose of going to your brother is to show him his fault. You do not go for a nice chat over a cup of coffee. The sin has to be pointed out. How can you show this? With the Word of God. Showing the fault of the other requires honesty. It is not enough to suggest or hint and hope that the other gets the hint. Honestly and love go together. To cover up or excuse is not showing love. The sin has to be pointed out clearly and honestly, in a manner and attitude that shows love for the other.

When you meet begin with making sure that you have the facts straight and that you are clear about the situation. The meeting should not be started with accusing the other. First ask questions to make sure that the other indeed said this, or did this. Listen well and make sure you understand. It does not hurt to repeat what the other has said in your own words. "Is this what you are saying?" And then say what you have heard. These questions will lead to dealing with the matter itself. For once the facts are established then the question how to square with what we learn from the Bible, is next.

When you go, you have to be prepared to show from the Word that what the other does or says is against the law of God. Show means make it clear. It is more than stating your case. True, whether you can convince the other is another matter. This is why we should not ask too quickly the question "Do you agree?" First we have to ask "Do you understand?" For if I think it is a sin, but in the eyes of the other it is not, then I may have to explain more. This shows that discipline can involve instruction. It can be that the person involves needs to be further instructed in the Word of God. It can also be that the person is unwilling, but then also we have to show what the Bible teaches. As said earlier we do not come to enforce private opinions, we must come with the Word of God. The confessions are a wonderful help in this regard as well. This is especially so when we are dealing with a communicant member, because we can bind this member to these confessions. Hopefully in this way it comes across that it is not a matter of you against me, but how can we together bow before the Word of God.

"... just between the two of you."

This admonishing is to be done "between the two of you." The matter does not have to go further. We are called to protect the reputation of the other. The ninth commandment and the rule of Matthew 18 are connected. Rather than gossip and slander we ought go to each other. Rather than talk to others about, we ought to speak to the person involved. Leave the matter there. Love covers a multitude of sins.

"If he listens to you, you have won your brother over..."

After the facts have been established and the sin is shown the call to repentance is in place. This call flows from what has been discussed already. The question is whether the person involved is willing to admit that what was said or done was indeed wrong before the Lord. Is the person involved also willing to break with what is wrong? We do not have to go on our knees before one another, we must go on our knees before the Lord. It can be good to point out the beauty of repentance. Take for example what we read in Psalm 32. The LORD does forgive the sins of those who in true repentance come to Him.

Discipline may need time. We have to know when to stop. It may take some time for the other to be convinced. In the Heidelberg Catechism we say that those show themselves unchristian in doctrine or life are "repeated admonished in a brotherly manner." (L.D. 31) We should not give up after one visit. We may have to repeat what we have said in previous visits. If you have to come back, make this clear at the end of the visit. It can be helpful to set a certain time, rather than leaving it open. If there is indeed the willingness to acknowledge sin before the Lord and the willingness to fight against sin, then this must be brought before the Lord in prayer. If the repentance is not there it would still be proper to end the visit with prayer. Be careful not to misuse prayer. It does not hurt to say ahead what you will pray for. If prayer is impossible, then pray afterwards by yourself and tell the person that this is what you are doing.

"But if he will not listen, take one of two others along, ..."

If repeated visits do not have the desired result, then others will become involved. Again this is something the person involved should be made aware of. The purpose of involving others (one or two) is to intensify the appeal to the sinner. If necessary, these witnesses therefore become involved in the process of calling to repentance. The elders can only deal with the matter when at least two witnesses indicate that the member involved is unwilling to repent. Also these visits with a witness may have to be repeated before it can be reported to the elders. The Lord Jesus says in verse 17, "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church;".

5.4. Obstacles on the way of Matthew 18

The rule of Matthew 18 does not always function the way it should. This can be because we are hesitant to use it, or we do not know how to go about it. It can also be because the member who admonishes does so in the wrong way, or the members who is being admonished frustrates the process. We all know that good communication requires wisdom and patience. If this is the case when the relationship is relaxed, how much more when the relationship is tense. When it does not function the way it should, it is easy to point to the other. However, we should be willing to look at our own words, actions and motives. We will deal with some of the obstacles that can may the way of Matthew 18 difficult to travel.

Having said that the rule of Matthew 18 does not always function the way it should, we do well to realize that this rule is followed more often than we perhaps notice. If someone tells you something about another member, you may say, "Why don't you go and speak to the other?" Or, when children come home from school with all kinds of stories about others, many a parent will say, "Are you sure? Why don't you talk to the person involved?" You see here again the connection with the ninth commandment. Yet there can be several obstacles in the way of Matthew 18.

Not welcome

You try to arrange a visit, but the visit is cancelled. The best is to try to set up another visit and express the hope that it will be possible to meet. Or, you try to arrange a visit but the other is unwilling. Call display and answering machines don't make it any easier in this regard. If the unwillingness to meet persists it may be necessary to involve the help of others and the church. The sin itself doesn't need to be disclosed, but help may be needed to be able to visit the member involved. If a visit is arranged and comes about, your attitude will do much to help the other get over his apprehension.

Denial

The person involved denies having said or done the things you heard of saw. If there is no proof and no others who have seen or heard it, then the matter ends right there, for it is your word against the others. Then we leave the matter in the hands of the Lord. If we do have proof, or there are witnesses, then it may be necessary to call them in as well.

Anger

It can happen that the member who is approached becomes angry. Since you are the one who visits, keep calm and do what you can not to aggravate the situation. At the same time know your limits too. If the anger does not subside, it may be necessary to stop the discussion because it is impossible to reason with the member involved.

Attack

The person who is admonished can try to turn the tables on you in attacking you and bringing up things that you have done. You can use such attack as evidence that you are no better. We are all sinners, but we have to learn to confess our sins and repent. If these attacks continue make clear that this sidesteps the issue. At times the attacks can become personal. Be careful not to become personal yourself. Try to stand above it. You are not there to defend yourself, but to fulfil the law of Christ, and seek a lost sheep.

Evasion

Sin is deceptive. Sin tries to find excuses and ways out. This can also show in these visits. The discussion can get bogged down into disputes about details, end up in a yes-no controversy, or go off topic. Be aware and prepared for it. Such evasion does not have to be done out of a malicious motive, but it can happen so easily that we loose the main point. During the visit keep the main point in mind. This can mean that you don't answer certain question or reactions. It can mean that you have to stop a confusing discussion and return to the main point.

Breakdown of communication

There are obstacles of another kind as well. We think we understand each other, whereas in fact we talk beside each other. Just because the other is using the same terms or expressions does not mean that you agree. Even when the other says "Yes" does not mean there is agreement. We need to ask simple questions to make sure we have the same things in mind. "What do you mean with?"

Another problem can be that we do not listen carefully. We may latch on to a word and sentence of the other says but we fail to keep in mind the whole context. This easily happens in a normal conversation, certainly also in these visits. It may be good to repeat what you think the other has said, and ask whether you indeed understand him correctly. It can also happen that we use the time the other is speaking to formulate our own thoughts again. This does make for good communication.

A third obstacle can be that we come across too strong, or not strong enough. Both are possible. It is good to be strong, but there is a proper time and setting for it. Not being strong enough may lead the other to think that the sin isn't that bad after all. Let the Word of God speak. His Word is direct and at the same time comforting.

5.5. Attacks on the rule of Matthew 18

Not only can there be obstacles in the way of Matthew 18, there can also be attacks on this way. There can be things in our lives and in the life of the congregation that will harm the proper functioning of this rule.

We have referred to one already, namely, gossip and slander. This can do so much damage to the proper functioning of discipline. Not only does gossip leave the sinner under the burden of sin, we also give the member a bad name in the communion of the saints. It breaks down communion. There is more to this. Gossiping means the end of all confidentiality. If there is not confidentiality, why would the other open up? It can happen that we tell others what we know and in that way sooth our consciences. At least I did something. But that does not help the sinner. This slander can also come from the one who is being admonished. Then the words of the one who came to visit are twisted, or the motives are placed in a suspicious light. It is done to get back at the other or to stop the admonitions.

Another attack is improper closure of the matter. This can mean that we stop too soon. We do not follow up on the visits, and although there was no repentance, we let the matter rest. It can also mean that we come back to a matter after it has been closed. Although both persons involved have concluded that the matter is resolved yet the one who fell into sin continues to hold the visit against the one who visited, or the one who visited keeps on talking about it. When repentance has occurred the matter should be gone.

A third attack is the fear to judge. We live in a world that claims that judging is wrong. This attitude is nice excuse for sin to continue. We should not give in to this nor be afraid to judge if need be. Our judgement ought to deal with the confession or life of the other and must be based on the Word of God.

A four attack is peer pressure. We do not dare to admonish because of what the others will think about us. This applies to all ages. We all like other people to think highly of us, admonishing does not seem to fit in this. We know things of each other but we refuse to deal with it. It starts already at a very young age. Children can lie about things, so as not to expose a fellow student. Connected to this is that blood is often thicker than water. It is much easier to see what is wrong with someone who is not related to you. The closer the blood tie, the more difficult it is to be objective. Exactly for this reason we can be so thankful that the Lord gives us to each other, so that we can help each other in the struggle against sin.

5.6. Conclusion

Carry one another's burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ. It is a wonderful command, it is necessary command. It is a command that goes against my human nature. The Lord has poured out His Spirit on the

congregation to help us fulfil this law. Every one falls short, also when it comes to using the rule of Matthew 18. It can only be followed when we let the Spirit work in us and ask for God's help and wisdom. I mentioned the difficulties involved in going this way not to discourage, but to encourage. Mutual discipline is a gift of our Lord. The love of Christ controls us so that we may speak the truth in love, seek the well being of each other, and serve the glory of our God.

6. The Process of Church Discipline

The Belgic Confession (Art. 30) as well as the Church Order (Art. 66) highlight that church discipline is of a spiritual nature. The elders do not have a physical sword. The Lord has given a spiritual one to the church, the Word of God. Discipline must be exercised on the basis and with the power of His Word. In addition, the aim of all discipline is repentance. In this section the so-called "steps" of discipline will be discussed.

6.1. Brotherly Admonitions

The Church Order distinguishes between private and public sins. In the case of a public sin the matter can come directly to the consistory. When is a sin public? A sin is public when it is committed in public, and/or the sin is known to the public. A sin is also public when the consequences of the sin will become public. In case of a private sin the rule given by the Lord in Matthew 18 must be followed. This rule was discussed in the previous section.

6.2. Secret Censure

This is the stage when the consistory becomes involved. When the consistory is made aware of a sin it has to establish whether this is a private or a public sin. If it is a private sin then it must ascertain whether private admonitions and admonitions in the presence of witnesses have remained fruitless. This means that the consistory has to speak with the sinner, as well as with those who have admonished him. Also when a member of the consistory knows of sin and it is private he has to follow the rule of Matthew 18. He may not put it on the table of the consistory just like that. In the case of a public sin the elders do not have to ascertain whether Matthew 18 has been followed.

Once the consistory deals with a situation, the first things the elders have to do is determine the nature of the sin involved. It is indicative that with each situation of discipline the consistory indicates which commandment is involved, lest we bind one to something that goes over and above Scripture or even against Scripture. Those who are being disciplined have the right to ask for the Biblical basis for the discipline.

The consistory must be careful in the use of the fifth commandment in this regard. If the sin concerns another commandment and the member involved refuses to heed the instructions and admonitions of the consistory we should not be too quick with adding sin against the fifth commandment to the other sins. This is for two reasons. In the first place this unwillingness to heed the admonition flows from the other sin. To be sure, it is wrong to reject these admonitions and in visits this can be pointed out, but it does not form the basis of the discipline. It is better to keep on focussing on the initial sin and the unwillingness to repent from it. The other reason is that as consistory we have authority from the Lord, and must be careful to use this when defending our own position. Members do not have the authority which the overseers have, thus we must be patient.

Would it be correct to discipline a member on the basis of what we confess? The confession is a summary of the Word of God and as such has derived authority. It has authority because it is a summary of God's Word. When members make profession of faith they pledge to maintain this doctrine and to reject what conflicts with it. It is indeed possible to base the discipline of a member on what we confess, but then we must be prepared to give the Biblical foundation for this confession.

The consistory now becomes involved in the admonishing of the sinner. If after several admonitions it is clear that the sinner does not want to repent, he shall be barred from the Lord's Supper. This is what is called "silent censure." The congregation as a whole does not know about it. This silent censure means that the communicant member is not allowed to exercise his rights as a member, i.e. not partake of the sacraments or be involved in the process of election. This withholding is the decision of the whole consistory and not of a particular elder. It is the duty of the consistory to visit a member who is being withheld before each Lord's Supper celebration, to call the member to repentance and if no repentance is forthcoming to inform the member that he is not allowed to partake of the Lord's Supper.

The Reformed Churches also know of a one time abstention which is not disciplinary in character. If, for example, just prior to the Lord's Supper serious allegations are voiced concerning a member and the consistory has no time to deal with the matter, the person involved can be withheld from the Lord's Supper. It can also be that a member has sinned and just before the Lord's Supper repents of the sin. The consistory can also deem it proper, with a view to the congregation, to withhold the member from the Supper of the Lord. This one time abstention is indeed only for one time, and has to either be dropped or lead to proper discipline.

6.3. First Public Announcement

The first public announcement is made after repeated admonitions by the elders have not led to repentance. The member involved must be notified of this. This first public announcement only mentions the sin, not the name of the sinner, and asks the congregation to pray. With this announcement the consistory involves the congregation in requesting its prayers. In the process of discipline the congregation and the consistory are both involved. Each has his own task and place, but at the same time need each other.

6.4. Second Public Announcement

If continued admonitions do not result in repentance the consistory has to move on to the next step, the second public announcement. This announcement goes further than the first. In addition to the sin also the name and address of the person involved are mentioned. This is done so that the members of the congregation now can visit the sinner and call him to repentance. This second announcement can only be made after the consistory has received the concurring advice of classis. The member involved must be notified that classis will be involved. This stipulation is an added safeguard that the discipline is indeed for the right reason and done in the proper manner. If classis gives its concurring advice the second announcement does not have to be made immediately. The consistory can use this concurring advice to increase the pressure on the sinner to repent. If no changes are apparent the second announcement should be made. It is wise to notify the immediate family belonging to the congregation prior to the announcement.

When a case is presented to classis for advice, some personal information about the member involved must be disclosed, such as age, communicant or non-communicant, married or not, but no names must be revealed. Rather, the delegates to classis must be able to prove to classis that the sin is worthy of discipline, that the person obstinately refuses to heed the admonitions and that the consistory has repeatedly admonished the person. The delegates should have a prepared outline of the process of discipline in this case, a list of dates of visits and decisions.

Before a discipline case comes to classis the sinner involved has the right to appeal to classis if the member involved feels that he has been wronged. After several admonitions the consistory could make him aware of this possibility and must be prepared to help the person in presenting the case so that it is indeed fairly represented. The appellant must supply the consistory with a copy of the appeal so that the consistory as a whole can also prepare for classis.

When a sinner indicates that he appeals to classis the process of discipline does not proceed, which means that the admonitions continue but the next step is delayed. The sinner involved must then indeed appeal to classis. If classis judges that the discipline is correct the sinner has the right to appeal to the next major assembly. Again the process of discipline will be delayed by this. After regional synod has judged the matter the consistory need not wait with proceeding with discipline. Much depends on the attitude and behaviour of the sinner, as well as the nature of the sin involved.

6.5. Third Public announcement

The third public announcement is again made after repeated admonitions. At this time not only the sin, the name and address are mentioned, but also the date of excommunication. The congregation is again called to pray for and address the sinner in the hope of repentance.

6.6. Excommunication

Excommunication is the final remedy given to the church to bring a sinner to repentance. As the form shows, excommunication is a very serious matter, for in the name of Christ the church closes the kingdom of heaven (see Heidelberg Catechism, L.D. 31). The seriousness of this matter must also be made clear to the sinner.

Once a sinner has been excommunicated, he is no longer part of the communion of saints. This will have to be felt by the one who has been excommunicated in the hope that repentance may come about as yet. This does not mean that we have to treat the one who is excommunicated as an enemy, but deal with him in such a manner that it can be felt by the one involved that something is broken. In this regard we should avoid two extremes the one is that we do as if the person does not exist, the other is that we do as if nothing is the matter. Because this is not an easy matter the elders may have to talk about and give direction about this on home visits to family and friends of the one who has been excommunicated.

6.7. Repentance

The aim of all discipline is repentance. In fact it is not the sin which is disciplined, but the unwillingness to repent. This leads to the question, what is repentance? The word used in the Bible means to turn around and to return to the Lord and His Word. It is to admit that what has been done or said was wrong, and to amend your life. Repentance is a wonderful event in the lives of all God's children. We should not be ashamed of repentance. When the Lord Jesus says that there is joy in heaven with God and His holy angels when a sinner repents then certainly there should be joy in the congregation when this happens.

The Church Order cautions the consistory to make sure that the repentance is genuine. The sad result of a broken world means that words can be fake. It can be easy to say "I am sorry." Not only must the sinner say that he repents, it also has to show. Since on account of the refusal to repent the trust is broken, this trust can be restored in the deeds which show the genuineness of the words. The consistory has to be careful not to make repentance too difficult in asking too much. This can happen when we bring in more issues than the original sin. At the same time the consistory should not compromise the demand of God's Word either. Repentance has to be complete. If it isn't the process of discipline may slow down, but should not be terminated. There has to be a repentance from the sin that was committed.

In certain situations the repentance of the person is announced to the congregation. This is done to let the congregation know that the relationship with the Lord is restored. For restoration with the Lord, also means the relationship with the members of the congregation is restored. The announcement of repentance builds the communion of saints. No one is allowed to hold this sin against the person any longer.

When should the repentance be announced to the congregation? The consistory has to judge whether it will serve the benefit of the congregation. If the process of discipline has reached the second announcement or past it, the name will be known to the congregation and it is clear that mentioning the

repentance, including the name of the one involved will benefit the congregation. If the sin is of a private nature and the discipline has not reached the second announcement, then there is little benefit in letting the congregation know. If the sin is of a public nature and the discipline has not reached the second public announcement, the consistory must determine whether the repentance and the name of the one involved should be mentioned. Mentioning the repentance but not the name does not really benefit the congregation and could promote gossip and slander rather than stop it. Besides mentioning the repentance and the person involved the announcement could also contain the following elements: instruction concerning the importance of repentance, the call to fight against sin and temptations, the warning not to sin against the ninth commandment, and the call to accept the person involved.

The confession of sin also be done in a public worship service. We should not too quickly dismiss this possibility. Sin is a powerful force and all members have to struggle with it in their lives. What is more wonderful than to hear from someone that the grace of the Lord is more powerful than sin. To make this confession in public will help the acceptance of the person within the communion of saints. Such a public confession should focus of the power of God's grace in the life of this brother or sister, so that the congregation can give thanks to God for His mercy.

6.8. Readmission

Excommunication is not the last step. There is always the hope and prayer for repentance and thus for readmission. This has to be done properly and therefore the church has adopted a Form for this purpose.

7. Non-communicant members and Discipline

The Church Order distinguishes between communicant and non-communicant members when it comes to discipline. We also have two forms for excommunication. This is a recent development. In 1983 General Synod Cloverdale adopted this distinction in the Church Order and these forms. In the history of the Reformed churches the matter of discipline of non-communicant members has been much discussed. There were those who maintained that because children belong to God's covenant and congregation as well as adults, the discipline applies to them as well. They maintained that since the Lord calls them to follow Him they must be disciplined if they refuse to obey the Lord. There were others who maintained that because non-communicant members have not made a promise you cannot discipline them. You can take note of the fact that they have withdrawn, but you cannot discipline them in the way the church disciplines communicant members. This discussion has come to a conclusion in the decisions of Cloverdale 1983. The churches have agreed to treat non-communicant members as members who by baptism are called to a life of faith and obedience and thus ought to be disciplined when they refuse to repent. At the same time the churches realize that there is a difference when compared to communicant members and this has been kept in mind as well.

Already in the 1930ies the churches in The Netherlands dealt with this matter. We can learn a lot from the Reports and Guidelines drawn up by the General Synod of Sneek 1940, and amended by Synod Utrecht 1943. The following is gleaned from these Guidelines.

When we speak about non-communicant members we must distinguish between children and teen-agers who have not yet made profession of faith on the one hand and adults who are disobedient to the call of the covenant and have not made profession of faith on the other hand.

With regard to the children and teenagers the consistories must see to it that by the preaching and home visits the parents are urged and helped to bring up their children in the fear of the Lord, according to the vow given at baptism. The consistory shall also see to it that by means of sound and applicable catechism instruction, the heirs of God's kingdom and of His covenant are taught the principles of a godly life and thus are led to a conscious acceptance of their baptism. If children before adulthood reveal an unchristian lifestyle the consistories shall, as much as

possible with the help of the parents, oppose the violation of God's covenant by admonitions in order to bring about a commitment to new obedience.

With regard to adult non-communicant members the consistories shall give relentless pastoral care to those members who in their lives show that they have no desire to know the ways of the Lord. The Synod mentioned the following sins in this regard: ungodly words and/or deeds, open rejection of the doctrine of the church and/or offensive behaviour and willfully neglecting the public worship services and the catechism instruction. In such situations the help of the parents must also be sought. The oral admonitions by the office bearers must take place several times per year. When there is no response to oral admonitions several written admonitions shall be given. If this does not help then the consistory shall proceed with public announcements.

In cases of exceptional offensive ungodliness the consistory may terminate the membership of a non-communicant member at the age of twenty one. As a rule the consistory shall not proceed to the final disciplinary steps before the non-communicant member who stubbornly turns away reaches the age of twenty five. When a non-communicant member gives oral or written notice of withdrawal from the church the consistory shall seriously try to dissuade him from this additional sin of disobedience at least once. If the non-communicant member persists in his decision further discipline may not be exercised and the consistory will confine itself to the sorrowful announcement in the public gathering of the congregation that the person involved has withdrawn from the church of which he was a member by baptism. Under no circumstance is the consistory allowed to encourage withdrawal from the church. The evangelization work by the church must also specifically be directed towards former non-communicant members.

Those who continue to be negligent with regard to publicly professing their faith and proclaiming the death of Christ and yet partake in church life and whose lifestyle for the rest gives no offense shall be continually be admonished by the consistory in an upbuilding manner. If these urgent admonitions do not show results and those negligent continue in their actual refusal to love the Lord, to accept for themselves the promises of the covenant and to live, by grace, in new obedience according to the demands of the covenant, then the consistory shall proceed to a public announcement. This disobedience to the clear commands of the King of the church is too serious to only be dealt with by admonitions which are kept confidential. The consistory may not yet proceed to the extreme remedy in regard to the negligent unless it is clear that not extreme shyness, lack of insight or conscientious scruples, but definite unbelief is the cause of not coming to the public acceptance of Holy Baptism, and to the celebration of the Holy Supper.

We conclude:

- non-communicant members are also members of the congregation and thus are under our supervision;
- by their baptism they have been set apart by the Lord and thus are called to serve Him;
- discipline must be exercised when it becomes clear that they by word and/or deed reject the promises and demands of the covenant;
- this discipline proceeds slower than in the case of a communicant member because the person involved has not made a public commitment.
- as much as possible this discipline should involve the parents.

8. The discipline visit

The discipline visit is usually not an easy visit. It is important to realize that we come because we are sent by the LORD. If we do not warn the sin comes on our heads (see Ezekiel 3). It is equally important to keep in mind that the LORD has no delight in the death of sinners, but in that they repent and be saved. What applies to all visits, certainly applies to the discipline visit: we need the help and guidance of the Lord.

8.1. The character of this visit

Discipline visits have been made in many different situations and circumstances. They have been made in homes, in coffee shops, in an atmosphere of willingness to listen or in a hostile atmosphere. In that sense each situation is unique. No matter the situation or the circumstance the visit is meant to bring about repentance through brotherly admonitions. This is therefore not a visit with a social character, with time for small talk. For this reason the overseers should come as quickly as possible to the matter, and not stay a long time after the visit has been conducted. Socializing after such a visit can blur the focus and character of such a visit. We must stay focussed. This has to be kept in mind as well during the visit. Avoid side issues, detours and road blocks, remind yourself of the character and purpose during the discussion. At the same time the elders must keep in mind that they are instructed to make this visit. The instruction comes from the Lord, through the consistory. It is important that the consistory give the brothers clear instructions and that the elders make clear that what they say is the judgement of the consistory.

8.2 Arranging the visit

In arranging the visit we must be open and direct. The person involved should know who is coming and why. If it is impossible to arrange a visit because the person cannot be reached, the elders can try to go unannounced. If the reason for not being available is unwillingness it may be necessary to mail a letter. If upon arranging a visit, the person involved requests that a witness be present, then this request should be granted, provided the other person does not interfere with the discipline.

8.3. Conducting the visit

Elders must be aware that they come in the Name of the LORD. This can become clear in directing the person to the Word of God in order to point out the sin, the need for discipline and the urgency of repentance. Ahead of time the elders should discuss how to approach the visit. It is true that the discussion can take unexpected turns, but the main goal should be clear in the minds of those who visit. They should also discuss whether to open and close with prayer and Bible reading. To open with prayer and Bible reading is good, but not always necessary. To end with prayer is important. With regard to this prayer it must be made clear to the person involved what the contents of the prayer will be. We should not bring up matters in prayer that have not been addressed in the visit. Be careful not to use the prayer as a way to attack the person, or to get even. If the person refuses to pray or if prayer is impossible due to circumstances it is important that the elders pray together after the visit.

During the visit the elders must make clear to the sinner what the sin is. If there is ignorance then further instruction is necessary. Such instruction can take time. The elders have to judge whether the willingness is genuine or a tactic to stall the process of discipline. If there is unwillingness to repent the demand of the Word of God must be repeated. As overseers we must make sure that what we say is clear. Ask the sinner whether he/she understands what you say. We cannot make a person agree, but we must do our best to make it as clear as possible. If the person involved understands what the elders say then our task has been fulfilled.

Keep the purpose in mind during the visit. It is easy to get on side roads. This can be done on purpose, or without realizing it. Also keep in mind that you are dealing with this sinner. The person involved can point to other situations or things in our lives. That does not take away from the point of calling to repentance. After all the point is not perfection, but willingness to repent. Do not be too easily offended either. It is important to stay calm. In a way it is better to deal with someone who becomes emotional, than one who remains totally indifferent. If a discussion becomes emotional things can be said that are not correct. Do not jump on every thing, but stick to the main issue.

8.4. Reporting the visit

The visit must be reported on at the consistory meeting. At least two elders who were participated in the visit must be present in order to do this. In the Minutes the date of the visit must be recorded as well as the conclusion of the elders and the decision of the consistory how to proceed. The reporting is

confidential. It would be wrong if information about the visit is known in the congregation because of a leak in the consistory. The member involved is allowed to speak about the discipline, but not the consistory members. This can lead to awkward situations, especially when what is said is not true. Consistory members may feel the need to defend the Consistory. Confidentiality is more important and should determine what we say or not say.

In reporting it can be helpful to formulate the summary of the visit with the person involved, especially when it involves a difference of opinion. The member involved is not at the meeting to defend himself, thus we have to be very careful that we give a proper report.

9. Withdrawal of Church Membership

It can happen that during the process of discipline a members indicates that he wants to withdraw as member of the church. The consistory can only deal with such a request when it is made before at least two elders or is submitted in written form to the consistory. The elders shall do their utmost to persuade the member involved that withdrawing is not pleasing in the eyes of the Lord. As we confess in Article 28 of the Belgic Confession, it is contrary to the ordinance of God. It is self-willed service and thus sin against the second commandment. At no point should elders encourage withdrawal. If the person persists the consistory has no other option but to deal with this request. This request prevents the elders from further using the keys of the kingdom of heaven. It shortchanges the process of discipline and is completely contrary to its purpose.

How are the elders to deal with this request? It is within the lines of Reformed church polity to maintain that no one can of his own volition terminate his membership in the church of Christ. Christ has given the authority over the congregation into the hands of the elders. Just like the decision to be part of the congregation is not within the power of the individual, but is a decision of the elders, so also termination of membership is a decision of the elders. To be sure, the decision of the elders for admission or withdrawal is based on the request or stated intent of the person involved. No one can be admitted to the church against his will, and no one can remain a member against his will. But the decision that a person has lost all the right connected to members is made by the consistory. The fact that the final decision lies within the power of the elders, gives the elders the opportunity to involve the congregation. In acquiescing to a withdrawal, the elders are to involve the congregation. Rather than placing the congregation for an accomplished fact, the consistory can encourage the congregation to call the member to repentance. Here are two announcements that could be used.

1st Announcement

Brothers and sisters,

On _____ the Consistory received a notice of withdrawal from brother (sister) _____ which we now make known to you. This request is contrary to the ordinance of God. The Consistory has urgently appealed to the brother (sister) to repent of this sin. Despite these appeals he (she) still maintains his (her) decision to withdraw. We hereby call upon you, the congregation, to speak with this brother (sister) and to appeal to him (her) to reconsider his (her) decision. The Consistory encourages you to admonish this brother (sister) in a brotherly manner, that he (she) may realize the importance of maintaining his (her) place in the communion of the saints. May the Lord bless our combined effort and work in his (her) heart that our brother (sister) may realize his (her) sin and repent.

If our brother (sister) does not indicate a change of heart on this matter, the final announcement of withdrawal will be made in _____ weeks.

2nd Announcement

Brothers and sisters,

The Consistory has previously made known to you that brother (sister) _____ no longer wants to be part of the communion of the church of the Lord. After final appeals by you and the Consistory to repent of this sin, brother (sister) _____ has not indicated a change of heart in this matter. The Consistory now with sadness makes known that brother (sister) _____, contrary to the ordinance of God, has withdrawn from the communion of the church of the Lord. The Consistory further declares that by this act of withdrawal all his (her) entitlements to the privileges and promises bound up with church membership, have ended.

10. Discipline over Office-bearers

The Church Order also deals with discipline of Office-bearers. See the Art. 71 and 72. In the suspension and deposition of office-bearers the neighbouring church and the federation of churches (Classis and Deputies of Regional Synod) are involved. This is done to protect the congregations against office-bearers who misuse their office. It is also done to defend the honour of Christ's name. Office bearers must be above reproach. The involvement of other churches is needed to protect the office-bearers lest they for the wrong reasons would be suspended by the council.

Art. 73 speaks of mutual Christian censure exercised by the minister, elders and deacons. This censure is with regard to the execution of their office. If there is a personal matter between office-bearers they must follow the rule of Matthew 18. Art. 73 deals with a situation in which the office-bearer needs to be admonished with regard to the execution of his office so that we can work together fruitfully for the glory of the Head of the Church and the well-being of the congregation. Four times per year Art. 73 C.O. is placed on the Agenda, usually the last Council meeting before the Lord's Supper. The use of Art. 73 is not restricted to this. Any office-bearer can at any time request that this be placed on the Agenda.

11. Discipline and Attestations

What happen when a member who is under discipline moves away? As a rule the person will receive an attestation which will inform the church he or she is going to of the sin and the process of discipline. The information may not be more than the member involved has been told. If the person moves without asking for an attestation the elders will urge the person to ask for one. If that gives no solution the consistory in that area will be notified by letter that one of our members is residing there and it will be asked to take up contact if possible. If that does not have any result, the congregation will be informed that this person is no longer a member of the congregation. If the person moves to an area where there is no church, attempts will be made to contact the person, if this is impossible or there is no answer then the congregation will be informed that the person involved is no longer a member of the congregation.

What happens when a person who is under discipline comes to another consistory? (see also 2 - 4) The new consistory must honour the attestations issued by a sister church. If someone comes who is under discipline we must honour this. At the same time, because the person submits to the oversight of the new consistory, it has the right to investigate the matter. If it agrees with the discipline, the new consistory will continue with the discipline where the previous consistory left off. If repentance comes about, it would be helpful to let the previous consistory know.

12. Evaluation

1. What does it mean that the church is holy and how is this related to church discipline? How can we bring this across to the congregation?
2. What is the connection with the Lord's Supper? How does this function in this congregation? How do we as office-bearers bring out this connection?
3. How does discipline function as a key of God's kingdom? What is the connection between church discipline and preaching in this regard?
4. What is the importance of self discipline? How can we help the members (families) of the congregation in self discipline? See also the marks of the Christian in Art. 29 of the Belgic Confession.
5. Mutual discipline is connected to the rule given by the Lord in Matthew 18:15-17. How does this rule function? How often do matters come to the consistory in the way of Matthew 18? What can we do to improve this?
6. Discipline has as goal repentance. What is true repentance? What is forgiveness? Do we confess our sins? How can we as office bearers help the members in this?
7. Is there a danger that we rank sins regarding piety of conduct "higher" than sins against the purity of doctrine? How much do we as office bearers warn against false doctrine? To turn it around, what about the accusation which can be heard at times, that our churches are strict when it comes to doctrine, but easy going when it comes to "piety of conduct"?
8. With regard to the piety of conduct, is one sin greater than another? Are we consistent in dealing with sin?
9. How many communicant members are under discipline? How often are these members contacted? How is the congregation involved?
10. How many non-communicant members are under discipline? How often are they contacted? Are the parents involved in the discipline? How is the congregation involved?
11. In Art. 27 of the CO we agree that in order to ward off false doctrines and errors, the office-bearers "shall use the means of instruction, of refutation, of warning, and of admonition, as well in the ministry of the Word as in Christian teaching and family visiting." How does this function? Are there dominant sins against which the consistory must particularly take action?
12. Does Art. 73 function as it should?
13. Does the church have a task with regard to those who in the past have withdrawn themselves or have been excommunicated?
14. Are there things in connection with this chapter which should have our attention? How will we deal with them?

13. Literature

J.Kamphuis, Concerning the Holiness of the Congregation in Diakonia, Vol. II, no. 3, 4 Vol.III no 1, 2.
 A.N.Hendriks, A Few Remarks about Church Discipline, in Diakonia Vol. II, 2
 A.N.Hendriks, The Elder and the Administration of Discipline in Diakonia Vol.IV, no.1
 J.J.Arnold, The Living Church , chapter 4 "Some Notes on Mutual Discipline".
 R.D. Anderson, "Reformed Church Polity Concerning Withdrawal of Church Membership" see <http://www.spindleworks.com>

See also Commentaries on Church Order.

Outline

Chapter 2-2

Service of Mercy

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THE SERVICE OF MERCY

Introduction

The Form for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons speaks of both "the ministry of mercy" and "the service of charity." The expression "the ministry of mercy" refers to the calling of the deacons, whereas "the service of charity" refers to the task of the congregation. This shows that deacons and congregation are both involved in the work of mercy, though each has his own task. With regard to the Deacons we speak of "ministry," since it involves those ordained to office. With regard to the members of the congregation we speak of "service." Combining the two expressions from the Form for Ordination, explains the title of this chapter: the service of mercy. In this chapter we will deal with the task of the deacons, and of the congregation towards those in need. In the chapter about the communion of saints we have dealt with some of the elements that will demand our attention in this part as well. Although the communion of saints includes more than the service of charity, there are several connections. The service of charity is especially concerned with the care for those who are suffering, who are "under the pressure of sickness, loneliness, and poverty."

1. Scripture

This part is divided in three sections. First we will deal with the mercy of God, then the mercy shown by the congregation, and thirdly the mercy shown by the office-bearers, in this case, the deacons.

1.1. Mercy of God

The LORD God reveals Himself in word and deed as the God of mercy.

Ex. 34 : 6

And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness

Mercy is the feeling of compassion for the other who is in need or help. In the context of the covenant it is the LORD's compassion for sinners. It is often connected to His steadfast love and faithfulness. This shows that this mercy is not based on anything God's people have done, but is founded in the LORD's faithfulness to His word. The LORD's dealings with Israel are a powerful demonstration and proof of His mercy.

Ps. 103: 6 - 8

The LORD works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed. He made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel: The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.

The ultimate proof of this mercy is the coming of the Son of God.

Luke 1 : 68, 72

"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. ... to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant.

Not only was the Lord Jesus Himself the proof of God's mercy, He also showed the mercy of God in how He dealt with God's people.

Mat. 11:4-5

Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: [5] The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy* are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.

Mat.20:28

just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Mark 8:2-3

"I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. [3] If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance."

Titus 3:4-5

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, [5] he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.

1.2. The Service of Mercy

Already under the Old Testament the LORD commanded His people to show mercy to the needy. Because He is the God of mercy, He wants His people to be merciful.

Micah 6:6-8

With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

To teach His people this service of mercy the LORD gave several laws to take care of and protect the needy, the fatherless and widows.

Deut.15:4

However, there should be no poor among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you,

Deut.15:11

There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.

Lev.19:9-10

"When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God.

Lev.23:22

"When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God."

Leviticus 25:35-37

"If one of your countrymen becomes poor and is unable to support himself among you, help him as you would an alien or a temporary resident, so he can continue to live among you. [36] Do not take interest of any kind* from him, but fear your God, so that your countryman may continue to live among you. [37] You must not lend him money at interest or sell him food at a profit.

Deut.24:10-13

When you make a loan of any kind to your neighbor, do not go into his house to get what he is offering as a pledge. Stay outside and let the man to whom you are making the loan bring the pledge out to you. If the man is poor, do not go to sleep with his pledge in your possession. Return his cloak to him by sunset so that he may sleep in it. Then he will thank you, and it will be regarded as a righteous act in the sight of the LORD your God.

Deut.24:15

Pay him his wages each day before sunset, because he is poor and is counting on it. Otherwise he may cry to the LORD against you, and you will be guilty of sin.

One of the reasons for God's punishment during the time of the prophets is their refusal to take care of the needy.

Isa. 1:23

Your rulers are rebels, companions of thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts. They do not defend the cause of the fatherless; the widow's case does not come before them

Isa.10:2

to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless.

The Lord Jesus reminded God's people of this call.

Mat. 9:13

But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.* For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'

Mat. 23:23

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices--mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law--justice, mercy and faithfulness.

Mark 10:43-44

Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.

John 13:15

I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you

He showed the importance of this service of mercy with the parable about the sheep and the goats.

Matthew 25:40

"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

The apostles continued this instruction of the Lord Jesus, calling the church to show mercy. They also gave the example, e.g. in the collection for the needy in Judea.

Rom.12:8

if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

2 Cor.8:14-15

At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, as it is written: "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little."

Gal.5:13

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature*; rather, serve one another in love.

Gal. 6 : 10

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

Heb. 13:16

And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

1 Tim.6:18-19

Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

James 2:13

because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!

1 John 3:16-18

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

1.3. The Ministry of Mercy

"For the sake of this service of love, Christ has given deacons to His church. When the apostles realized that they would have to give up preaching the Word of God if they had to devote their full attention to the daily support of the needy, they assigned this duty to seven brothers chosen by the congregation." (Form for Ordination of Elders and Deacons) The task of these seven brothers was not identical to the task of the deacons today, but the task of the deacons finds its beginning in the work of these seven brothers.

Acts 6:1

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food

The apostle Paul gave instruction concerning the task of the deacons.

1 Tim. 3:8-10

Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons.

It seems that also the services of others, especially widows, were used for this service of mercy.

1 Tim.5:9

No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband,

Finally, the apostles gave leadership in the collection for needy brotherhood in Judea.

Acts 11:29

The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea.

Rom.15:25-26

Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there. For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem.

Rom.15:31

Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea and that my service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there,

2 Cor.9:1

There is no need for me to write to you about this service to the saints.

2 Cor.9:12-13

This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.

2. Confession/Church Order/Liturgical Forms

2.1. Belgic Confession

In the Belgic Confession the care for the needy is mentioned in connection with the communion of saints and the task of the office-bearers

Art. 28

They must submit themselves to its instruction and discipline and bend their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ, and serve the edification of the brothers and sisters, according to the talents which God has given them as members of the same body.

Art. 30

and also that the poor and all afflicted are helped and comforted according to their need.

2.2. Heidelberg Catechism

The Heidelberg Catechism points out the task to show mercy in connection with the communion of saints and the 4th, 6th and 8th commandment

Q. 55

What do you understand by *the communion of the saints*?

A.

First, that believers, all and everyone, as members of Christ have communion with Him and share in all His treasures and gifts.

Second, that everyone is duty-bound to use his gifts readily and cheerfully for the benefit and well-being of the other members.

A. 103

that I diligently attend the church of God, ... to give Christian offerings for the poor.

A. 107

God commands us to love our neighbour as ourselves, to show patience, peace, gentleness, mercy and friendliness toward him, to protect him from harm as much as we can, and to do good even to our enemies.

Q. 111

What does God require of you in this commandment?

A.

I must promote my neighbour's good wherever I can and may, deal with him as I would like others to deal with me, and work faithfully so that I may be able to give to those in need.

2.3. Church Order

Art. 23 The Office of Deacon

The specific duties of the office of deacon are: to see to the good progress of the service of charity in the congregation; to acquaint themselves with existing needs and difficulties, and to exhort the members of Christ's body to show mercy; further, to gather and manage the offerings and to distribute them in Christ's Name according to need. they shall encourage and comfort with the Word of God those who receive the gifts of Christ's love, and promote with word and deed the unity and fellowship in the Holy Spirit which the congregation enjoys at the table of the Lord.

2.4. Liturgical Forms

Form for Public Profession of Faith

Fourth, do you firmly resolve to commit your whole life to the Lord's service as a living member of His Church?

Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper

By the same Spirit we are also united in true brotherly love as members of one body. For the apostle Paul says, *Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.* As one bread is baked out of many grains and one wine is pressed out of many grapes, so we all, incorporated in Christ by faith, are together one body. For the sake of Christ, who so exceedingly loved us first, we shall now love one another, and shall show this to one another not just in words but also in deeds.

Form for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons

The whole section that explains the Ministry of Mercy.

Charge:

You deacons, be faithful and diligent in the gathering of gifts and distribute them cheerfully to those who need assistance, especially to the widows and orphans. Do good to all men, especially to those of the household of faith. Support those who are burdened with cares or who are lonely. Give in your ministry of mercy a good example to the congregation of the service to which all are called by Christ Jesus.

Form for the Solemnization of Marriage

Work faithfully in your daily calling, that you may support your family and also help those in need.

2.5. Prayers

Prayer 2. A Prayer for all the needs of Christendom

We remember before Thee all those whom Thou art chastening with poverty, imprisonment, physical illness, or spiritual distress. may it please Thee to heal the sick and to restore soundness of mind to the mentally ill.

Surround those who are handicapped in body or mind with thy care and bless all that is done to help them. Lift up those who are cast down. Be a Comforter to the widowers, a Protector to the widows, a Father to the orphans. Show thy love to the lonely, Thy strength to the weak, Thy grace to the dying, Thy sustaining power to the bereaved. Grant that all trials may yield the peaceful fruit of righteousness. Glorify Thyself in the faith, love, and endurance of all those whom Thou hast called to Thy eternal glory in Christ.

Prayer 9 and 10. Prayer for the Sick and the Spiritually Distressed.

Prayer 11, A Morning prayer

Comfort the distressed and show thy mercy and help to all who call upon Thy holy Name in sickness and other trials of life.

Prayer 12 An Evening Prayer

Bestow comfort and rest upon all that are ill, bowed down with grief, or afflicted with spiritual distress. Thy steadfast love endures for ever. Do not forsake the works of thy hands.

Prayer 15 An Opening Prayer for the Meeting of the Deacons.

3. Goal and Purpose

The Lord calls us to show hospitality, generosity, and mercy, so that the weak and needy may share abundantly in the joy of God's people. No one in the congregation may live uncomforted under the pressure of sickness, loneliness, and poverty. This determines then also the task of the deacons. It is their responsibility to see to the good progress of this service of charity in the church. The goal in all this is that in this way God's children will increase in love to one another and to all men.

4. History

We learn from Acts that in the church right after Pentecost there was a genuine care for each other. At the same time we also read in the letters of the apostles several admonitions to show mercy for each other, which indicates that this care was not always practised the way it should have been. The subsequent history of the church shows that the service of mercy had its ups and downs. In general one can say that as deformation set in, this was also seen in the service of mercy. The opposite is true as well, when the Lord gave reformation the service of mercy changed for the better.

In the Middle Ages things change. We see the emergence of hierarchy. The bishop took all the power to himself. Many of the other offices became superfluous. The deacon was kept in name, but he was no more than a helper of the bishop. At the same time the doctrine of salvation by good works placed the service of mercy in a meritorious context. Showing mercy was a means to earn salvation. With the Reformation both elements changed. The deacon received his office back. The Reformed churches made sure that in the Church Order his office was properly spelled out. In addition, the service of mercy was placed in the context of God's mercy in Christ for us. You see this e.g. in the connection between the work of the deacons and the Lord's Supper. The service of mercy is the service of thankfulness.

The Articles of Wesel of 1568 give evidence of the Reformed approach

Chapter V - Of the Deacons

[1.] It is completely certain from the testimony of Scripture that the office of deacon is that they serve the tables, that is, they come to the help of the poor in their needs and provide them with what is necessary by gathering the alms.

[5.] It would be beneficial when especially in the larger congregations, two kinds of deacons are appointed. The first will apply themselves to the gathering and distribution of the alms and take care at the same time, that if any goods are bequeathed to the poor, these will be requisitioned in a legal manner and faithfully will be distributed to the beneficiaries. [6.] The other part will mainly take care of the sick, wounded and those in prison. Besides the gift of faithfulness and zeal, these [deacons] should be endowed also with the gift of comforting and with more than a general knowledge of Scripture. They will diligently ask the elders whether there are sick and weak in their wards who need comfort and uplifting.

In the 19th century the service of mercy was attacked from another side. The government took it upon itself to do this work. The 19th century witnessed the industrial revolution. Many people moved to the cities, and ended up living in appalling circumstances. Add to this the increasing secularization and the stage is set for the government to take care of the social welfare of the nation. It must be said that many Christians who were concerned about the poverty and secularization set up charitable organizations. These organization did a lot of good work. This does not do away with the sad reality that the church did not always see her task. In the Netherlands this changed with the Secession of 1834 and the Doleantie of 1886. Again it was seen as the task of the church to take care of the needy. Men like Prof.L.Lindeboom and Dr.A.Kuyper worked hard to make the churches once again aware of its calling.

5. Today

In order to stimulate the service of mercy in our situation we have to have a good understanding of the world in which we live, and the needs we meet. Our society is characterized by prosperity and social safety. The government promises to take care of us from cradle to grave. Even if we are in the midst of cut backs, this philosophy remains the same. At the same time we note that we live in a society which, to use the words of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 24:12, is increasingly growing cold. The words of 2 Tim.3 : 2-5 apply to our society. Men will become lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive etc.

Living in such a world has influence on us and we do well to note what is happening in society around us. To mention some elements. Our world is characterized by mobility, hurry and speed. People move easily, and communication breaks down boundaries. The result is that personal relationships become shallow. We also witness a terrible selfishness. It seems that the idol worship of the past now culminates in the worship of "self". Much entertainment, for example, is oriented on "self." We are told not to judge others, in order words, to leave each other alone. The result is loneliness. Indeed this is where the worship of "self" ends up: utter loneliness. Our society is also adversely effected by the prosperity we have. Materialism has a hay day. People live for bread and games. Another element that we should not overlook is the change in work environment. With the coming of the computer technology the work place has changed. It is no longer so that once you know a trade you can keep it for the rest of your life. The skill and experience of older people are of no value anymore. In fact it becomes increasingly difficult for older members of society to find work. Last but not least, we witness the breakdown of the family unit. This is partly because of the teachings of feminism. The fact that so many mothers go out to work has also contributed to the break down of the family. Another reason is the push to legalize so-called alternative ways of living together. The family is no longer the place where the next generation is prepared for the task ahead.

All these things influence us as well, and has consequences for the service of mercy. On the one hand we can say that this service is so necessary in a world which is growing cold. On the other hand, we witness also among us the results of individualism, materialism and changes in the family. Government social assistance programs can form a direct attack on the communion of saints. In helping the members to show mercy we must also open their eyes for these things. We have ask the members whether they see the need of others and understand what they can do to show care for the other members. We have to stress that we have to come to know each other, and must be willing to be known by others. We have to speak about the (false) claim of the state to give security. We have to discuss whether and how we use government programs and why it is that people rather go to Social Services than to the deacons.

6. Calling of Congregation

The Lord calls us to show hospitality, generosity, and mercy, so that the weak and needy may share abundantly in the joy of God's people. No one in the congregation may live uncomforted under the pressure of sickness, loneliness, and poverty (Form for Ordination). The charge to the congregation is: Take care that the deacons have sufficient means to fulfil their ministry. be good stewards of all that the Lord has entrusted to you. Remember Christ, your example in serving the church of God.

The Form speaks about showing hospitality, generosity and mercy, so that those who are in need and are suffering may share in the joy of our redemption in Christ. The focus of this calling is in the first place with regard to the brothers and sisters in the church. It is not easy to assess how this functions in the congregation. Do the members show hospitality to those who are needy? Is there generosity toward those who are in need? Does the service of mercy continue in this congregation? It is not easy to answer these questions because so much is done that is not necessarily noticed by others. This is good, because the service of mercy is not done to impress others, but to show the love of Christ. Yet, it can happen that we come across a situation where this service of mercy is not functioning as it should. It can happen that lonely members complain about the lack of company, or that there are those who have a hard time to make ends meet feel that what is given is not given cheerfully. It will be good to address this calling of the congregation on visits. The visits by the elders and deacons as well as the preaching and catechism teaching have to give help and direction in this regard. We should not hesitate to give the example ourselves. At times it can be necessary to organize means in which we can serve one another. The services and talents of others in the congregation can be employed in this way. The Deacons can stimulate this work. M.Assink gives a helpful chart in this regard, which is added to this chapter.

The members of the church also have an obligation in view of the need in this world. Scripture teaches us to do good to all men. This can involve donations for charitable causes, giving to local food drives or disaster relief. The Deacons can stimulate this as well.

7. The Lord's Supper

Both the Form for Ordination and the Church Order say that the Deacons shall promote with word and deed the unity and fellowship in the Holy Spirit which the congregation enjoys at the table of the Lord. In this way God's children will increase in love to one another and to all men. The table that signs and seals God's mercy is the basis for the service of mercy in the congregation. We have communion with Christ through the Holy Spirit. But by "the same Spirit we are also united in true brotherly love as members of one body." "For the sake of Christ, who so exceedingly loved us first, we shall now love one other, and shall show this to one another not just in words but also in deeds. Both elders and deacons can appeal to the celebration of the Lord's Supper in encouraging the congregation in the service of mercy.

8. Evaluation

1. There are several organized ways in which those who are in need can be taken care of. How do we involve the services and talents of the members? Are the Deacons involved in this?
2. Each congregation has its own composition. Are there members who need special attention, e.g. elderly, handicapped, lonely? How is this functioning?
3. How can we better understand the needs which members face?
4. How can we help the members to grow in love to one another and to all men?
5. Is there an awareness of the need in our society/world? How can we stimulate this?
6. Are there matters which you want to bring to the attention of the meeting? Why? What can we do about them?

12. Literature

- P.Y.DeJong, The Ministry of Mercy For Today, reprinted in Diakonia, I,2 - IV,3
 C.VanDam, The Diaconal Task, some old testament roots and their continuing significance, in Diakonia, II,2
 B.Nederveen, The Task of the Deacons for Today, in Diakonia, V,1
 A.N.Hendriks, The Congregation and her Diaconate, in Diakonia, IV, 2
 M.Assink, Diaconate with Perspective, Diakonia, VIII,2-XI,1

NEED		HELP	
Circumstances	Possible results	Deacons	Congregation
Chronic illness	house-bound becoming lonely	comfort draw up a visiting roster	regular visits domestic help
Old age	decreased mobility fewer contacts illnesses becoming lonely	comfort being alert to hidden needs investigate vacation prospects	doing chores/errands showing concern being a ready listener
House-bound	becoming lonely fewer contacts	visiting roster investigate vacation prospects	regular attention doing the shopping
Unfit for work	diminishing contacts feeling worthless financial problems	making contacts investigate work alternatives financial support	involvement showing concern
Unemployed	feeling useless fewer contacts disruption of family relations	sympathy & empathy sensitive to money problems encourage self- employment	showing concern direct involvement
Physically Handicapped	impaired mobility diminishing contacts	scheduling of transportation doing chores/errands recording worship services	showing concern
Financial problems	hidden poverty increasing debts	helping to budget financial support	invite the children birthday extras
Living alone	feeling lonely being lonesome	giving comfort inform congregation	making contacts (e.g. by way of hobbies) giving attention (e.g. prepared meals)

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Outline

Chapter 2 - 3

Evangelism

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"SO EVERY ONE WHO CONFESSES ME BEFORE MEN ..."

Introduction

The words of the title for this chapter come from Matthew 10:32. The Lord Jesus sent the twelve apostles into Israel and gave them the mandate to preach the gospel of the Kingdom. In fulfilling this mandate they will face opposition. This should not make them afraid, much less cause them to stop their work. For, says Christ, whoever confesses Me before men, I will also confess before My Father. The Lord Jesus spoke these words in the context of a specific mission. Yet we do not go wrong when we apply these words to the task of the church which is built on the foundation of the apostles. The church has to confess the Name of God in all of life. When the church faces opposition because of it, the church should not shrink back, for whoever confesses Christ's name before men, Christ will confess his name before the Father. The call to confess applies to the congregation as a whole as well as to the individual members in their daily lives.

1. Scripture

1.1. The Word

God reveals Himself by His Word. We know God as a speaking God. (See Deut.4) His Word is the good news concerning man's redemption. After man fell into sin the LORD God did not abandon this world but came with His Word. He promised redemption from sin. Christ obtained this redemption by His death. The gospel of Christ must be proclaimed, with the demand to repent and believe.

Isa 52:7-10

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!" Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices; together they shout for joy. When the LORD returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes. Burst into songs of joy together, you ruins of Jerusalem, for the LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. The LORD will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God.

Luke 4:17-21

The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

1.2. The Word is for all

The Word of God is a power of God for salvation to every one who has faith (Rom.1:16). The Word is not for a select few, but for all. Although in the Old Testament the LORD revealed His Word to only one nation (Ps.147) He certainly did not abandon the other nations. When the LORD God called Abraham He said, "by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves" (Gen.12:3). The prophets of the Old Testament addressed the nations as well as Israel. The prophet Jonah had to go to Nineveh. We come across several examples in the O.T. of outsiders who received a place in Israel by confessing their faith in the God of Israel, e.g. Rahab and Ruth.

Isa 49:6

"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."

Acts 2:11

Cretans and Arabs, we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!"

Acts 4:12

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

Rom 1:16

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation to every one who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.

We learn from the Bible that the good news has to go to God's people Israel, the wayward, and the unbelievers. For the first, the good news going to Israel, see the section about preaching (1 - 6). In the second place, the LORD by His Word calls back those who have known His Word but refuse to obey.

Jer.4:1-2

"If you will return, O Israel, return to me," declares the LORD. "If you put your detestable idols out of my sight and no longer go astray, and if in a truthful, just and righteous way you swear, 'As surely as the LORD lives,' then the nations will be blessed by him and in him they will glory."

Mat 15:24

He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

Rev.2:5

Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.

Thirdly, the Word is also for those who do not know God. It is through the preaching of the Word that they come to know Him and His salvation.

1 Tim. 2:1,4

I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

1 Pet 1:23-25

For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For, "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever." And this is the word that was preached to you.

1 Pet 2:9-10

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

1.3. Preaching

The Word of the Lord is to be proclaimed with authority. The Lord Jesus entrusts His apostles with this mandate prior to His ascension. It is by the preaching that Christ will gather His people. When the Bible speaks about preaching it refers to the official proclamation by those who have been called for this task.

Mat. 28: 18-20

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in* the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Rom.10:14-17

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?" Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.

1 Thess. 2:13

And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.

Acts 11: 13-14

'Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.'

1.4. The Word and the believer

The Word of God is a power in the lives of the believers(1 Peter 1:23). The word has to dwell richly in the believers. Whatever they do, whether in word or deed, they have to do it in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him (Col.3:15-17). We are called to be prophets that is to confess the name of Christ in all of life. Our duty is to apply the Word of God to today's situation. Our lives must reflect the obedience to the Word. We have to live worthy of the gospel so that outsiders may see our good deeds and praise our Father in heaven.

Ps. 40:9

I proclaim righteousness in the great assembly; I do not seal my lips, as you know, O LORD.

Ps.22:22

I will declare your name to my brothers; in the congregation I will praise you.

- Joel 2:28 "And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions.
- Col.4:5,6 Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.
- 1 Pet 3:15 But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect,
- Mat. 5:16 In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.
- 2 Cor.3:3 You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts
- 1 Pet 2:9-12 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.
- 1 Pet 3:1-2 Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives.
- Titus 2:5 to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God.
- Titus 2:8 and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us.
- Titus 2:10 and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive.

2. Confession / Church Order / Liturgical Forms

2.1. Belgic Confession

The Belgic Confession does not directly address the calling of the church in regard to those who have become estranged from the gospel or have never heard about the Lord. The Confession does speak about the rescue of fallen man, the calling of the church to preach the gospel, and everyone's duty to join the church.

Art. 17

We believe that, when He saw that man had thus plunged himself into physical and spiritual death and made himself completely miserable, our gracious God in His marvellous wisdom and goodness set out to seek man when he trembling fled from Him. He comforted him with the promise that He would give him His Son, born of woman, *to bruise the head of the serpent* and to make man blessed.

Art. 28

We believe, since this holy assembly and congregation is the assembly of the redeemed and there is no salvation outside of it, that no one ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself, no matter what his state or quality may be. But all and everyone are obliged to join it and unite with it, maintaining the unity of the Church. They must submit themselves to its instruction and discipline, bend their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ, and serve the edification of the brothers and sisters, according to the talents which God has given them as members of the same body.

To observe this more effectively, 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 wherever God 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.

All therefore who draw away from the Church or fail to join it act contrary to the ordinance of God.

Article 29

The true Church is to be recognized by the following marks: It practises the pure preaching of the gospel. ... Those who are of the Church may be recognized by the marks of Christians. They believe in Jesus Christ the only Saviour, flee from sin and pursue righteousness, love the true God and their neighbour without turning to the right or left, and crucify their flesh and its works. Although great weakness remains in them, they fight against it by the Spirit all the days of their life. They appeal constantly to the blood, suffering, death, and obedience of Jesus Christ, in whom they have forgiveness of their sins through faith in Him.

2.2. Heidelberg Catechism

The Heidelberg Catechism stresses both the importance of preaching and the calling of each believer to show thankfulness in obeying the Lord in all of life.

Q/A 32. Why are you called a Christian?

Because I am a member of Christ by faith and thus share in His anointing, so that I may as prophet confess His Name, as priest present myself a living sacrifice of thankfulness to Him, and as king fight with a free and good conscience against sin and the devil in this life, and hereafter reign with Him eternally over all creatures.

Q/A 65. Since then faith alone makes us share in Christ and all His benefits, where does this faith come from?

From the Holy Spirit, who works it in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel, and strengthens it by the use of the sacraments.

Q/A 84. How is the kingdom of heaven opened and closed by the preaching of the gospel?

According to the command of Christ, the kingdom of heaven is opened when it is proclaimed and publicly testified to each and every believer that God has really forgiven all their sins for the sake of Christ's merits, as often as they by true faith accept the promise of the gospel. The kingdom of heaven is closed when it is proclaimed and testified to all unbelievers and hypocrites that the wrath of God and eternal condemnation rest upon them as long as they do not repent. According to this testimony of the gospel, God will judge both in this life and in the life to come.

Q/A 86. Since we have been delivered from our misery by grace alone through Christ, without any merit of our own, why must we yet do good works?

Because Christ, having redeemed us by His blood, also renews us by His Holy Spirit to be His image, so that with our whole life we may show ourselves thankful to God for His benefits, and He may be praised by us. Further, that we ourselves may be assured of our faith by its fruits, and that by our godly walk of life we may win our neighbours for Christ.

Q/A 122. What is the first petition?

Hallowed be Thy Name. That is: Grant us first of all that we may rightly know Thee, and sanctify, glorify, and praise Thee in all Thy works, in which shine forth Thy almighty power, wisdom, goodness, righteousness, mercy, and truth. Grant us also that we may so direct our whole life -- our thoughts, words, and actions -- that Thy Name is not blasphemed because of us but always honoured and praised.

Q/A 123. What is the second petition?

Thy kingdom come. That is: So rule us by Thy Word and Spirit that more and more we submit to Thee. Preserve and increase Thy church. Destroy the works of the devil, every power that raises itself against Thee, and every conspiracy against Thy holy Word. Do all this until the fullness of Thy kingdom comes, wherein Thou shalt be all in all.

2.3. Canons of Dort

The Canons of Dort highlight the character and importance of the preaching.

Chapter 1, Article 3 The Preaching Of The Gospel

So that men may be brought to faith, God mercifully sends heralds of this most joyful message to whom He will and when He wills. By their ministry men are called to repentance and to faith in Christ crucified. For *how are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent?*

Chapter 2, Article 5 The Universal Proclamation Of The Gospel

The promise of the gospel is that whoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish but have eternal life. This promise ought to be announced and proclaimed universally and without discrimination to all peoples and to all men to whom God in His good pleasure sends the gospel, together with the command to repent and believe.

Chapter 3/4, Article 8 The Earnest Call By The Gospel

But as many as are called by the gospel are earnestly called, for God earnestly and most sincerely reveals in His Word what is pleasing to Him, namely, that those who are called should come to Him. He also earnestly promises rest of soul and eternal life to all who come to Him and believe.

Chapter 3/4, Article 6 The Need For The Gospel

What, therefore, neither the light of nature nor the law can do, God performs by the power of the Holy Spirit through the word or ministry of reconciliation, which is the gospel of the Messiah, by which it has pleased God to save men who believe, both under the old and new dispensation.

2.4. Church Order

Our current Church Order has no article that deals with this topic. The older version listed as part of the elders' duty "to exhort others in respect to the Christian Religion." (Old Art. 23) The Churches in the Netherlands have the following in their Church Order: "The aim of evangelism shall be to call those who do not know the Lord or who have become estranged from Him and His service, to join the congregation of Christ by making public profession of their faith according to the Reformed doctrine. The consistories shall see to it that the work is done in accordance with this aim."

2.5 Forms

In the Form for the Ordination (or Installation) of Ministers of the Word we find that the duties of the minister includes to "teach the Word of God to the youth of the church and to others whom God calls." In the Form for the ordination (or Installation) of Missionaries we read:

He [i.e. the Lord] calls His sheep not only from Israel but also from all the nations, and leads them to His fold, that there may be one flock, and Shepherd. ... It is the calling of the church ... to move people to believe in Christ crucified. From the time of the apostles, the Holy Spirit has commanded the church to set men apart for the work to which He has called them.

In Prayer # 2, we pray "May everyone by word and deed magnify Thy holy Name. To this end send faithful servants into Thy harvest."

3. Purpose

In reflecting on the purpose we can concentrate on three areas:

- a. To spread the knowledge of God and His Word.
- b. To call those who do not know God or who have become estranged from the Lord and his service to join the congregation of Christ by making public profession of their faith according to the Reformed doctrine.
- c. To equip the members of the congregation to confess the Name of Christ in all of life and be able to give account of the hope that lives in them.

4. History

We know very little about the manner in which the members of the congregations of the first centuries after Pentecost were involved in what we today call evangelism. What we do know is that the gospel spread. In spite of persecution the church grew. The blood of the martyrs was often the seed of the church. It is true that this is the work of the Lord, at the same time it involves people. We do not find in the early church a defined system of how to approach unbelievers. There were the apologists, men who defended the truth of the gospel in writing, but one gets the impression that the gospel spread in a natural way. It was part and parcel of the lives of these believers to live according to the gospel and to speak about the gospel to others.

In the Middle Ages and the time of the Reformation we do not find a systematic reflection on evangelism either. There was perhaps no need for it, because in spite of all the struggles connected to the Reformation, Europe was generally a Christian society. There were struggles about crucial points of doctrine, but there was no struggle about the question whether God exists or whether the Bible is the Word of God.

This changes in the 18th and 19th centuries on account of the growing industrialization and secularization. Because of the industrialization many existing structures in society fell away. People, for example, moved to the city, away from their ancestral places. The social upheaval that followed this process of industrialization caused many to wander away from the church. In addition, these centuries witnessed a growing secularization. Modern man was of the opinion that he did not need God. The Bible was not accepted as the Word of God. The miracles were looked down upon as fairy tales. The birth and resurrection of the Lord Jesus were considered inconsistent with the findings of science. Many wanted no part of the church or the Christian faith, others were members only in name. To make matters worse, there was a terrible lack of church discipline in many churches.

This called for a reaction. There were those who felt that people who had turned their back to the church or were members in name only needed to be reached and called to repentance. Since discipline was not administered properly, they decided on their own initiative to reach these delinquent members with the gospel. This was called "home mission." It referred to the effort by members of the church or by a private organization to reach out to those who had been baptised but had turned their backs to the Lord and His service.

This "home mission" started in Germany, but was taken over in many other countries. In England this led to the rise of Methodism. The Methodist movement also wanted to reach those who were member only in name. What is distinct with Methodism is its stress on mass events, instant change, a strict method of conversion and the lack of directing people to the church. Methodism gained a tremendous influence in North America. Many of today's approaches to evangelism have their roots in this movement. This shows e.g. in the use of mass events and mass media, the stress on regeneration, on personal experiences, the free will of man and the lack of church consciousness.

The Reformed Churches in the Netherlands have opposed the Methodist movement from the start. At the same time as these Methodist revivals came about, the Lord had given two Reformations (1834, 1886) within the Reformed churches in the Netherlands. In returning to the Word and the Confession the churches also returned to the proper use of discipline. If one is a member but does not live as a member he has to be called to repentance and if there is not repentance, discipline has to be exercised. This return to scriptural discipline took away one of the main reasons for birth of home mission and Methodism. At the same time the Reformed churches did not lose sight of those who once belonged to the church, who carried the sign of the covenant but had become estranged from the service of the Lord. The Reformed churches were convinced that this work of calling them to repentance should be done under the leadership of the church. This was stressed to ward off the Methodist influence. Not the personal experience should be in the centre, but the call to obey the Lord of the covenant in being joined to His church. This work of evangelism flourished in the years 1860 - 1890. After this the work slowed down because of a difference of opinion on who must do the work and how the work should be done.

Moving on now to the 20th century, in 1923 Rev. K.J.Kapteyn published a brochure in which he concluded:

1. The New Testament does not speak about a command to the church to practise organized evangelism, neither can this command be deduced from biblical facts.
2. The New Testament, however, clearly indicates, that the Christian has the task to show that he is a child of God in every day life and in the contacts he has with the world.
3. This attitude and walk of life must be accompanied by speaking about the Gospel when the opportunity arises. In this way Christians give account of the hope which lives in them. This is the natural way of evangelism.
4. Sunday school work, the spreading of the Bible and evangelistic literature should or could be linked together more naturally. Societies and organizations must be an aid to Christians so that they do what they are called to do. (From Diakonia, I, 4, page 8)

The churches discussed the matter of evangelization also at the broadest level. The General Synod Utrecht of 1923 decided that:

1. Evangelism has as purpose to call to the Lord and also to His church those who are estranged from God's Word and the service of the Lord
2. According to Scripture this work of calling straying people belongs to the task of the church of Christ.
3. This means that evangelism is bringing the Word of God, and this must be done in agreement with the confessions of the reformed churches in the Netherlands.
4. The intentional (i.e. organized) evangelism should be done by, or at least be under the guidance of the consistory. For the work of evangelism the consistory should make use of the God-given gifts and powers within the congregation, which are particularly suited to this kind of work. (From Diakonia, I, 4, p.2,3)

In answer to this decision many churches appointed local evangelism committees. Some saw this as a proper development, others maintain that because of this the active involvement of the congregation herself was taken away.

After the Liberation of 1944 the Reformed Churches dealt with the matter of evangelism as well. It was questioned whether it was indeed the task of office bearers to be involved in organized evangelism. Many felt that it is the task of the office bearers to equip and encourage the congregation to live according to gospel. In this way the whole congregation is the salt of the earth (Matthew 5). To organize certain projects was up to the members. In the same way as members work together in matters of education and politics, so they can and may work together in evangelism. In addition there was a growing interest on part of the youth to be involved in the work of evangelism.

Since this was not in line with the direction of Synod 1923, the churches took another look at the whole matter. In 1975 General Synod Kampen formulated the following guidelines:

1. It belongs to the nature of the church of Christ, by means of the gospel entrusted to it, to seek those who are strange to, or are estranged from, God and His service. According to the apostolic command the church prays to God, its Saviour, for all mankind, because He wants all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim.2:1,3,4). The church desires to reach people with the Word of God and to call them to communion with Christ and His people (Canons of Dordt II,5)
2. The office-bearers shall make the members of the congregation aware of this calling and shall equip them for this calling by means of the preaching, the catechism instruction and home visits.
3. The consistories shall continue to oversee the work of the congregation members with their supervision and instruction.
4. Public activities may not be undertaken without consultation and approval of the consistory.
(From *Diakonia*, I, 4, page 3)

Synod Kampen of 1975 saw the calling to evangelize as applying to the whole congregation. It used as proof texts: 1 Cor.1:5; Eph.6:15; Phil.1:27; 2:15,16; Col.4:5,6; 1 Pet 2:9 3:15 and 4:16.

This approach to evangelism also founds its way also into the Church Order of the Dutch churches: "The aim of evangelism shall be to call those who do not know the Lord or who have become estranged from Him and His service, to join the congregation of Christ by making public profession of their faith according to the Reformed doctrine. The consistories shall see to it that the work is done in accordance with this aim."

This whole discussion has not bypassed the Canadian Reformed Churches either. Rev.G.vanDooren published a booklet (Get Out!) that stressed the need to become more involved in evangelism. Others cautioned for such an approach (See e.g. P.K.A.DeBoer, in *Clarion* 32, 1, Jan.14, 1983). There is an Evangelism Taskforce which publishes a bi-annual magazine Outreach, and Evangel which appears four times per year and is meant to be distributed to outsiders. We also notice in our churches an increased interest in reaching out to others, and, and relief work in other countries.

A few comments yet on the century in which we live. Whereas in the previous century the churches were dealing with those who once were a member or who had been baptised, but were estranged from the church and the gospel, today we deal more with outright unbelievers. The secularization that started in previous centuries has continued at an alarming rate. No longer can we address our nation as a wayward covenant people, but rather, as outright unbelievers. We can notice an increase in opposition and even hatred against what is Christian and the values of Christianity. We live in a society that once knew God but now defies Him. The Lord is preparing it for the day of judgment. The church should then not be afraid to speak of this coming judgment as well. There is a difference in dealing with a society that has not heard of the Lord and a society that has rejected the Lord.

In addition to being confronted with growing unbelief in our society, we also witness a growth in other religions, such as Muslims and Hindus. This is due to immigration but also to unbelievers trying to find meaning and purpose to life. The question has to be asked what duty we have towards them.

In reaction to the secularization of our society we witness an evangelical movement which is very vocal. It places much stress on action and personal conversion. Much work is done by private enterprises, which carry the name of 'ministry' but are not at connected to the church. The term "ministry" is disconnected from the church and its offices and applied to different duties, such as, for example, relief work or Bible translation. These organization do much wonderful work at the same time we should not forget that their basis is often not in line with the Reformed confessions. The materials produced by many of these so-called 'ministries' reflect this as well. There is the real danger is that as we use this material, we also take over ideas, or methods that are not in agreement with the Reformed faith. We need to discern.

5. "Confess Me before Men"

What is now the task of the church and of the members? What direction do we have to give as office-bearers?

5.1. Word of God

The Word of God is a power unto salvation. This Word is not for a select few, but must be proclaimed to all men without discrimination. If God desires all men to come to the knowledge of the truth and so be saved then this means that the Word has to go out. The church is not allowed to keep this Word to herself, but as the pillar and bulwark of the truth, has to hold it up in this world. The promise that whoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish but have eternal life, ought to be proclaimed universally and without discrimination to all peoples and to all men, to whom God in His good pleasure sends the gospel, together with the command to repent and believe (C.o.D. II,5) This proclamation of the church will also prepare the world for the final judgment. There is as such no difference between doing this close by or far away. The Word has to go to far away countries, but must also be held up in our own area.

The church has received the Word of God. When we speak of "the church" we can think of the office bearers, appointed by Christ to give leadership and direction. But we can also think of the congregation, the members. As Reformed churches we do not maintain a clergy-laity distinction. True, we distinguish between their respective tasks, but at the same time maintain the underlying unity. The Word is not the sole possession of the office-bearers, they have to administer it. Neither is it up to each member to do with the Word whatever he wants (See e.g. 1 Peter 1:23-25 and 2 Peter 1: 20-21). He receives, reads and speaks about the Bible as a member of the Body of the Lord. The special offices are not in opposition to the office of all believers, nor does the office of all believers do away with the need for the special offices. Rather they must work together, with their own tasks and responsibilities. The question whether evangelism is to be done by the church or by the members has to be answered in this light.

5.2. Task of Church

What is the task of the church? The Church has to preach the Word. The keys of the Kingdom of heaven have been entrusted to the church. The office-bearers speak as ambassadors of Christ. They receive their authority from Christ. Isaiah 52 and Romans 10 teach us that this preaching is the official proclamation by the servants of Christ ordained for this purpose. We should use the term "preaching" in connection with the official work. This is supported by what we read in Matthew 28. The task to preach is connected to the task to baptize, which indicates that we are dealing with the official task of the church. The confessions use the word preaching then also in this sense (See L.D. 25 and 31). It is not the task of the members to preach. C.o.D. II,5 connect the proclamation also to the sending of the gospel by God. In Prayer #2, we pray that every one by word and deed may magnify the holy Name of God. But then we add: "To this end send faithful servants into Thy harvest and equip them to discharge diligently the duties of their office." The official call to repent and believe is to be announced by those who have been ordained to this task. We

maintain that faith is worked by the preaching of the Gospel. For this reason the church can call a missionary to work in this area.

5.3. Task of the Believers

What is then the task of the members? Do they have a calling? Yes, they certainly do. Their calling is to live according to the Word, to confess the Name of Christ in all of life. The believers have to witness and speak about the good news in Christ. They are to do this in the environment and surroundings that they live and work. This witnessing includes words as well as deeds. In fact, it is not right to separate these two. Words have no meaning if they are not supported by deeds. This is exactly why within one's own surroundings these deeds and words can have effect. Outsiders not only hear but also see that God's Word rules our lives. This is also why evangelism in the community we live and work in is so important. The people we talk to can see how we live with the Word in our daily lives. We can also invite them to come along to church to hear the proclamation of the Word.

The Lord Jesus uses the word "confess" in Matthew 10. To confess means literally, to repeat the Word of God. This is an important element in our confrontation with evangelicalism. The focus is not in the first place on our personal experiences, we speak about the reality God's work in the Lord Jesus Christ. To witness is to state the facts, in this case the facts of salvation and to do so in a way that shows we have been personally changed by them. Yes, God sent His Son. Yes, He died on the cross for sinners like us. Yes, He rose and is now seated at God's right hand for our benefit. Yes, He will come to judge the living and the dead. Yes, I believe in Him, for there is no other way to salvation. Witnessing is to speak of the facts of salvation and to state that they are true. Therefore this witness is to be in harmony with the Reformed Confessions. In the Reformed Confessions we summarize God's work of redemption. This means that evangelism must be done according to the Reformed faith. What we want to show and teach others is the Reformed faith. As in all other areas of life, so also here we are bound to what we confess.

All this means that the emphasis is on the daily lives of the members. We are not opposed to organized projects as such, but the strength of evangelism lies in showing your faith and speaking about it in our daily lives. When outsiders see and hear who we are and how we live and work then they can be won for Christ. This is what we have to stress as overseers. The harmony between the special offices and the office of all believers is that the elders encourage and equip the members for this service, and that, from their side, the members direct those whom they speak with to the church.

5.4. Organized Evangelism?

What about organized projects? Are members allowed to organize evangelism projects? Synod Utrecht 1923 said it was not right. Synod Kampen 1975 said it was right on the condition that it is done in consultation with and approval of the consistory. The texts used by Synod Kampen to show the task of the congregation, are not clear in this regard. They point to the task of the believers to live and speak according to the gospel, but do not deal with organized projects. At best one can say that they do not forbid organized projects. There is no direct scriptural command which demand organized projects. Nor do we find any example of such a project in the Bible. The other side is, of course, there is no scriptural command that forbids such projects. All this should make us careful to conclude that one has to be involved in such projects or that one may not be involved in them. Each project should be evaluated on its own merit. The consistory has to see to it that what is done is indeed in harmony with the doctrine of the Word of God. Are members then allowed to organize a project? Yes, provided it is in line with what we confess. We need to keep in mind that the members of the congregation have different talents and gifts. Not all the members need to be involved in evangelism, those who have gifts in this regard can do this, others may have gifts to work within the congregation. In order to reach out, it is important that the congregation itself is strong and vibrant. Each member has his own place and talents within the function of the church.

5.5. The task of the Elders

General Synod Kampen 1975 stated that the office-bearers shall make the members of the congregation aware of this calling and shall equip them for this calling by means of the preaching, the catechism instruction and home visits. Synod added that the consistories shall continue to oversee the work of the congregation members with their supervision and instruction. The elders have a task with regard to guests that attend our worship services. They can welcome them and make sure they are aware of the way a worship service takes place. When regular guests want to receive further instruction, often the minister takes care of this, but there is no reason why elders cannot be involved in this.

6. Home Mission Committee

The elders are called to encourage and equip the members in their calling to confess the Name of Christ in all of life. This must be addressed in preaching, catechism instruction and home visits. Most churches have an evangelism committee. Having a committee can be helpful, but should not take the initiative of the congregation away. It is important to have a clear mandate for the Committee and a open line of communication with the Council.

The mandate of the Committee is found in the section **Mandates and Regulations**.

7. Evaluation

1. Do we have questions about the Scriptural and Confessional material?
2. Do we agree on the purpose?
3. How are we fulfilling our task to be a pillar and bulwark of the truth?
4. How can we make people aware of this?
5. What initiative is directed to those who have left the church?
6. Do we agree on the task of the church and the congregation?
7. How can we help the congregation?
8. Do we agree on the task of the elders?
9. Review the mandate for the Evangelism Committee. Are changes necessary?
Is the mandate maintained? Does the Committee function as it should?
10. Are there matters that need our attention? Why? How will we deal with them?

8. Literature

- S.Cnossen, Organized Evangelism: a controversial matter, in Diakonia, 1,4
Evangelism and Church Polity report to Synod 1987 of Free Churches of Australia, in Diakonia, 1,4
P.K.A.DeBoer, Evangelism or Home Mission, in Clarion 32, 1 (Jan.14, 1983)
G.VanDooren, Get Out!
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FEDERATION - GIFT & CALLING

Introduction

To belong to a federation of churches is both a gift and a calling in the Lord Jesus Christ. His prayer "that they may be one" is the basis for our unity within the federation as churches. In this chapter we will pay attention to both the gift and the calling in belonging to a federation of churches.

1. Scripture

1.1. Old Testament

We confess that the Son of God gathers the church from beginning of this world (Heidelberg Catechism, L.D. 21). This shows the close connection between the Old and New Testament. The church of the New is the continuation of Israel of the Old Testament. In spite of this underlying unity we cannot in a simplistic way place an equation mark between Old and New. In terms of our topic we must be aware of an important change from Old to New. Under the Old Testament the people of God was not only a spiritual unit but also a political nation. The last element disappears in the New Testament. The church is being gathered from all nations. This does not render the Old Testament useless to help us understand the gift and calling connected to being part of a federation of churches. The way the LORD dealt with His people Israel teaches us how He deals with the church today.

The people of Israel consisted of twelve tribes. These tribes were united through God's gracious work. They walked together through the Red Sea. They travelled together to the promised land. Even the way they walked and camped showed this unity (see Numbers 2 and 10)

Joshua 4:20-22

And Joshua set up at Gilgal the twelve stones they had taken out of the Jordan. He said to the Israelites, "In the future when your descendants ask their fathers, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them, 'Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.'

Psalms 68:24-27

Your procession has come into view, O God, the procession of my God and King into the sanctuary. In front are the singers, after them the musicians; with them are the maidens playing tambourines. Praise God in the great congregation; praise the LORD in the assembly of Israel. There is the little tribe of Benjamin, leading them, there the great throng of Judah's princes, and there the princes of Zebulun and of Naphtali.

1 Kings 18:31

Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD had come, saying, "Your name shall be Israel."

Together the tribes received the promised land.

Joshua 4:20-22

And Joshua set up at Gilgal the twelve stones they had taken out of the Jordan. He said to the Israelites, "In the future when your descendants ask their fathers, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them, 'Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.'

Judges 1:3

Then the men of Judah said to the Simeonites their brothers, "Come up with us into the territory allotted to us, to fight against the Canaanites. We in turn will go with you into yours." So the Simeonites went with them.

They had to see to it that each tribe could keep its inheritance.

Numbers 36:7

No inheritance in Israel is to pass from tribe to tribe, for every Israelite shall keep the tribal land inherited from his forefathers.

Judges 21:7

"How can we provide wives for those who are left, since we have taken an oath by the LORD not to give them any of our daughters in marriage?"

Together the tribes had to worship the Lord. The people on the east side of the Jordan were not allowed to forget the people on the other side, or the other way around.

Joshua 22:24-27

"No! We did it for fear that some day your descendants might say to ours, 'What do you have to do with the LORD, the God of Israel? The LORD has made the Jordan a boundary between us and you--you Reubenites and Gadites! You have no share in the LORD.' So your descendants might cause ours to stop fearing the LORD. "That is why we said, 'Let us get ready and build an altar--but not for burnt offerings or sacrifices.' On

the contrary, it is to be a witness between us and you and the generations that follow, that we will worship the LORD at his sanctuary with our burnt offerings, sacrifices and fellowship offerings. Then in the future your descendants will not be able to say to ours, 'You have no share in the LORD.'

Also in times of reformation the call to repent had to go to all the tribes.

2 Chronicles 30:1

Hezekiah sent word to all Israel and Judah and also wrote letters to Ephraim and Manasseh, inviting them to come to the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem and celebrate the Passover to the LORD, the God of Israel.

1.2. New Testament

Following Pentecost the distinction between Israel and the other nations fell away. The gospel was to be proclaimed throughout the world. We learn from the book of Acts that the Lord gathered His people in Asia Minor, Greece and Rome. Although these churches are dispersed throughout the world yet they are united in Christ.

1 Pet 1:1-2

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance.

James 1:1

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations:: Greeting.

The word "church" in the New Testament is usually applied to the local congregation. That local congregation is the body of the Lord. At the same time these local churches are united.

1 Cor. 1:2

To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ--their Lord and ours:

2 Cor. 1:1

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God in Corinth, together with all the saints throughout Achaia:

This belonging together comes out also in the few instances in which the term "church" in the singular is used to refer to all the churches together.

Matthew 16:18

And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

Acts 9:31

Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.

The unity between the churches is in Christ.

Gal 3:28

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

The vision which John sees in the Rev.1 shows that each church is a lampstand on its own, but at the same time these seven lampstands are united in Him who stands in the middle of them.

Rev 1:12-13, 20

I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone "like a son of man," dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. ... The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

We find instances in which this bond functioned, e.g. in the acceptance of letters of recommendation, in sharing letters from the apostles, in informing each other.

Col 4:16

After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea.

Gal 2:9

James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews

2 Cor 3:1

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you?

Rom 16:1

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant* of the church in Cenchrea

Acts 18:27

When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. On arriving, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed.

One beautiful example of this communion between churches is the financial help that was given by the churches in Greece and Italy to the needy churches in Judea

Acts 11:29-30

The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

Rom 15:26-27

For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings.

2 Cor 8:8-10

I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. And here is my advice about what is best for you in this matter: Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so.

We may conclude that the bond between churches is both a gift and a calling in the Lord Jesus Christ. Each local congregation which He brings together is bound to Him and has to obey Him. But because Christ's gathering work is not limited to one place, each church is duty bound to seek unity with the other churches. Because Christ prays that His disciples be one, each church which belongs to Him will seriously seek this unity. At the same time this bond with other churches may never infringe on the place of the local church before Christ.

2. Confession / Church Order / Liturgical Forms

2.1. Belgic Confession

The Belgic Confession recognizes that the church gathering work of the Lord is not limited by time or place. This unites the churches in the true faith.

Art. 27

Moreover, this holy Church is not confined or limited to one particular place or to certain persons, but is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world. However, it is joined and united with heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith.

2.2. Heidelberg Catechism

The Heidelberg Catechism brings this catholic element out as well.

54.

Q. What do you believe concerning the *holy catholic church* of Christ?

A.

I believe that the Son of God, out of the whole human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, defends, and preserves for Himself, by His Spirit and Word, in the unity of the true faith, a church chosen to everlasting life. And I believe that I am and forever shall remain a living member of it.

2.3. Canons of Dort

The Canons speak about the church in light of the power of Christ's redemptive work.

Chapter 2, Article 9 , The Fulfilment Of God's Counsel

This counsel, proceeding from eternal love for the elect, has from the beginning of the world to the present time been powerfully fulfilled, and will also continue to be fulfilled, though the gates of hell vainly try to frustrate it. In due time the elect will be gathered together into one, and there will always be a Church of believers, founded on the blood of Christ. This Church shall steadfastly love and faithfully serve Him as Her Saviour (who as bridegroom for his bride laid down His life for her on the cross) and celebrate His praises here and through all eternity.

2.4. Church Order

Later in this chapter we will deal with some of the articles of the Church Order. Now we will concentrate on the character of the Reformed Church Order.

"These articles, which regard the lawful order of the church, have been adopted with common accord." (Art. 76 C.O.) The churches have voluntarily come together in a federation of churches, in obedience to the command of Christ. Having made these promises voluntarily, does not mean we can take or leave them as we like. These promises are binding. We may expect of all the churches that they abide by these promises. We may bind each other to them. In this way order and peace is maintained in the churches. The Church Order is not a straight jacket but a means to keep good order in the churches. This order is a fruit of the cross of Christ and a benefit for the life of the churches.

The Church Order functions as the formula for cooperation, or as the rule to maintain peace and order. It protects the authority of the local church, and at the same time defends the bond which we have as churches. The Reformed Church Order guards on the one hand against hierarchy, and on the other hand against independentism. It is against hierarchy. In joining the federation the churches retain their own place and authority as church of the Lord Jesus Christ. No church is therefore allowed to lord it over another church. No major assembly may lord it over the churches. See e.g. articles: 15, 30, 37, 74. At the same time the churches realize that having entered this covenant voluntarily, they are bound by their promises. Local churches may not go their own way ignoring the order reached by common consent. See e.g. articles: 4, 9, 26, 46, 48.

These two elements are in balance when the churches live in submission to the Word of God. Article 31 is an example of this. The churches have voluntarily agreed that whatever is decided by a majority vote is to be considered settled and binding. Each church is duty bound to help execute these decisions. The same article, however, not only allows any one who feels himself wronged to appeal, but also leaves the opening that when a decision is proved to be in conflict with the Word of God or with the Church Order the church is not bound to that decision. If this is the case the church has the duty to appeal such a decision.

2.5. Liturgical Forms

The Liturgical Forms themselves are a proof and a fruit of living in a federation. The churches have together adopted these Forms. The local church must then also use them.

3. Purpose

The purpose of a federation is to express the unity we have in Christ. In such a federation we have duties and privileges:

- to assist each other,
- to fight the good fight together,
- to keep each other from deviating from the truth.

The goal of the local congregation is to function faithfully in this federation and to share in all the duties and privileges.

4. Major Assemblies

One aspect of a federation is the convening of major or broader assemblies. These terms "major" and "broader" are significant. We do not speak about higher or lower assemblies, since this would mean that the higher assembly has more authority than the lower assembly. We speak about major or broader because these assemblies involve more churches. They may only deal with matters that are properly brought to their tables. The agenda of the major assemblies is made up by the churches. When the assembly has finished its agenda it ceases to exist.

The major assemblies have to give account of their decisions to the churches. The consistories receive the Acts of the major assemblies and have the duty to scrutinize these in order to establish that the decisions are indeed in accordance with God's Word and the Three Forms of Unity. If a council is convinced that a decision does not meet this requirement it is duty bound to appeal this decision providing grounds why it cannot consider a particular decision as settled and binding.

4.1. Classis

The Classis is the major assembly to the Council. Neighbouring churches form a Classis. A Classis is convened as a rule every three months. A classis deals with matters such as, appeals, proposals, approbation of calls, church visitation, advice in disciplinary or other matters and delegation to Regional Synod. At each classis the churches are asked whether the ministry of the office-bearers is being continued, whether the churches honour the decisions of the major assemblies and whether they need the judgement and help of classis for the proper government of their church.

The Regulations of Classis can be found in **Mandates and Regulations**.

4.2. Delegation

As a rule Council delegates two elders as delegates to a Classis, with one or two alternates. The minister, if possible, attends each Classis. The elders take turns, according to date of ordination. If an elder is unable to be delegated Council can decide to skip him or to delegate him to the next Classis. The delegates have to present a Letter of Credentials in order to have a vote.

Letter of Credentials:

The Council of the Canadian Reformed Church at _____, in its meeting of _____, has delegated to the Classis _____ to be convened, the Lord willing on _____ at _____, the brothers _____ with as alternate(s)

The Council has authorized these brothers to deal with all matters that have been legitimately brought to this Classis, and they are to do this in total submission to the Word of God, in faithful adherence to the Confessions of the Church, and with loyal observance of the adopted Church Order. According to Article 31 of the Church Order the Council on its part promises to abide by all decisions which have been taken by majority vote, unless it is proved to be in conflict with the Word of God or with the Church Order.

Wishing your Assembly the wisdom from above through the guidance of the Holy Spirit,
Signed by chairman and clerk
Date

Each year one Classis has to delegate three ministers and three elders to Regional Synod. If possible Council submits names of brothers of this Consistory who can be delegated.

4.3. Church Visitation

As part of belonging to a confederation, the churches are called to see to it that the purity of doctrine is maintained, and to help each other in word deed. The churches have agreed upon this in Art. 46 of the Church Order, which deals with church visitation.

The church visitation is a means to watch over and serve each, not a way to interfere with what belongs to the local church, nor to lord it over other churches. As churches in one federation we are accountable to each other. This requires wisdom and discretion from the side of the visitors and openness from the side of the consistories with deacons or councils.

Once each year the Church Visitors meet with the Council. This is announced twice to the congregation so that any member who wants to bring a matter to the attention of the visitors must notify the Council. Members may not bring a matter to the visitors that they have not prior to this brought to the Council or to the Consistory. In preparation for the visitation Council deals with the Guidelines. The answers which will be given to the visitors are not personal opinions but the judgement of the Council. If a member disagrees

with the answer of the Council he can ask to make his view known to the visitors. If a member cannot be present at the visitation he has to notify Council and prepare a written statement for the visitors to explain his absence.

The Guidelines for Church Visitation can be found in **Mandates and Regulations**.

4.4. Regional Synod

Once each year a Regional Synod is convened. Regional Synod East is made up of: Classis Ontario Central, Classis Niagara, Classis Northern Ontario and, Classis Western Ontario. Regional Synod deals with matters that could not be finished in Classis and appeals concerning decisions of a Classis. Regional Synod also appoints Deputies ad Art. 48. At the last Regional Synod before the next General Synod delegates shall be chosen to that General Synod. The churches are requested to submit names of elders who are can be delegated.

The Regulations of Regional Synod East can be found in **Mandates and Regulations**.

4.5. General Synod

The General Synod shall be convened at least once every three years. Each Regional Synod delegates to this synod four ministers and four elders.

The Regulations of General Synod can be found in **Mandates and Regulations**.

5. Matters that Involve the Federation

The Church Order requires the involvement of the federation in the following matters:

- Ordination and installation of ministers (Art. 5)
- Releasing ministers (Art. 9)
- Dismissal, retirement, release of ministers (Art. 11, 13, 14)
- Constitution of a Consistory (Art. 40)
- Places without a Consistory (Art.41)
- Counsellor (Art. 45)
- Discipline (Art. 68, 71, 72)

6. Matters that Belong to the Churches in Common

There are also matters which belong to the churches in common. These are dealt with by General Synod. In certain cases General Synods have established Deputies. These Deputies are appointed by Synod and must report to Synod. Matters that belong to the churches in common are:

- Eligibility for the Ministry (Art.4, 5, 7, 8)
- Training for the Ministry (Art. 19, 20)
- Archives of General Synod (Art. 43)
- Relations with Churches Abroad (Art.50)
- Contact with other federations
- Book of Praise, Psalms, Hymns, Text of Creeds/Confessions, Forms. (Art. 55, 56, 63)
- Church Order (Art. 76)

For the mandates of Board of Governors and other synodical deputies see Acts of latest General Synod

7. Attestations

Belonging to a federation includes duties and privileges. One of these is issuing and receiving attestations. An attestation is a testimony by a consistory concerning the life and doctrine of a member. It is usually issued when a members moves to another place and will join the church in that place. The consistory which issued the attestation informs the other consistory about the member. It includes not only a judgement of doctrine and life, but also statistical information. At times the consistory can decide to add a note to the attestation, or a add a letter to the attestation. This is done when there are concerns about the

person, or the member is under discipline. The person involved should be aware of what is stated in the attestation, or in the letter attached to it. A request for an attestation is announced to the congregation.

Because we live in a federation we accept the attestation issued by sister churches. If the member is under discipline then we accept him or her as such. This would mean that this consistory continues the discipline where the previous consistory left off. At the point of accepting the attestation the "new" consistory has its own responsibility and may deal with the person as it deems proper in the light of Scripture. With regard to notations on an attestation, these should be discussed with the person involved. A consistory should not put on paper judgements which have not been brought to the attention of the member involved.

If a guest wants to attend Lord's Supper the consistory requires a written statement of the other consistory that the person is a member in good standing.

8. Pulpit Exchange

As part of our federation we accept each other's ministers. They are allowed to preach and administer the sacraments. If the minister is suspended, or deposed, the churches in the federation must be informed. The Church Order at the same time makes clear that the consistory has the jurisdiction as to who is allowed on the pulpit. A minister from a sister church may not demand to be allowed. But the consistory is allowed to ask ministers who belong to the federation to lead in worship services.

9. Evaluation

1. Do we agree that the Lord calls us to be part of a federation?
2. Do we agree with the conclusions and goals?
3. Do we see the federation as a gift and a calling?
4. Is the fact that we belong to a federation alive in the congregation? How can we stimulate this?
5. Is this congregation fulfilling its task within the federation?
6. Is enough time given to the decisions of major assemblies? Or too much time?
7. Does the delegation to Classis run smoothly?
8. Are there things that need our attention and why? If so, what could we do?

10. Literature

Bound Yet Free, Readings in Church Polity, Edited by J.De Jong, Winnipeg, 1995
Commentaries on the Church Order
C.Bouwman, The Spiritual Order for the Church. Winnipeg 2000
W.W.J.VanOene, With Common Consent, Winnipeg 1990
G.VanRongen & K.Deddens, Decently and in Good Order, Winnipeg 1986

Outline

Chapter 2 - 5

Visits

Introduction

1. Visits to the Sick
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VISITS BY OFFICE-BEARERS

Introduction

In this chapter we deal with the special visits office-bearers may have to bring. In chapter 1-1 we already discussed the home visits and the diaconal visits. These visits are not the only visits an office-bearer brings. They also visit those who are ill, who receive a baby, who want to profess their faith, who want to be married, who are in special and/or difficult circumstances. There are also welcome and disciplinary visits. Some of these visits are discussed in other chapters of this Handbook:

For visits to parents in connection with the birth of a baby: see 1-3

For visits with those who want to profess their faith: see 2-6

For disciplinary visits: see 2-1

For visits with couples who want to be married: see 2-7

This leaves the following visits: to the sick, to those in special circumstances and the welcome visit.

1. Visits to the sick

1.1. Who are involved?

The sick visit involves the member who is ill and the office-bearer. Of course, also members in the congregation bring sick visits, but our attention now is for the visit by minister, elder or deacon. Who receives such a visit? Not every member who is ill is visited. These visits are for members who are ill for a longer time, are seriously ill or, are bound to home and cannot come to church for several weeks in a row. Also those are in hospital need to be visited. In the Form for Ordination of Ministers of the Word we read: "It is also his duty to visit the members who are sick and sorrowing. Thus comforting and admonishing he shall call the whole congregation to the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." In the Form for Ordination of Elders and Deacons the elders receive the mandate to visit the members in their homes to comfort them with the Word of God. The Deacons are instructed to show the mercy of the Lord. Usually the minister visits those who are seriously ill, not able to go to church or in hospital. If he is unable to visit them, he will notify the elders who then will make the visit. Some elders do already visit in their ward those who are seriously ill. The deacons visit those who are sick for a longer time as well.

Each illness is different and each person deals with illness differently. Some illnesses are temporary, others are terminal. Some can accept sickness, others have a hard time with it. It can even change during the time of the illness, in that initially the brother or sister can accept the sickness, but as the sickness wears on it becomes more difficult, or the other way around. It is not always easy for a healthy person to put himself in the position of one who is ill. The sick member is bound to bed or home, whereas the visitor will leave the room or home and be again in the hustle and bustle of life. It is important that as visitors we try to understand what those who are ill go through. For although each sickness is different and each member deals with it in a different way yet we have to keep in mind some of the common effects of being sick. Sickness takes a person out of regular life. The member who is ill is suddenly in a totally different situation. Life goes on without the one who is sick. This can lead to feeling disorientated. Your regular routine is gone and this can give an unsettled feeling. Then there are the concerns that can make life difficult for the patient, concerns about the family members, who have to take care of the patient, or have to do without the input of the patient, concerns related to health, concerns whether the medication does its work, concern because it seems that doctors have no time for the patient. All these things can effect the sick member and even change the way a person may react if he were healthy. As office-bearers we have to try to have an understanding of this, and at the same time help the patient to accept also this hardship from the hand of the Lord.

1.2. The purpose of the visit

The purpose of the visit is to be with the person, show care and help the patient to deal with the illness in faith. This means that a sick visit is usually a personal and focussed visit. This purpose brings with it other elements as well, such as showing interest in the life and situation of the one who is ill, maintaining the contact between the patient and the congregation, filling the gap brought about by not being able to attend the regular worship services.

1.3. What is the reason for the visit?

The Lord Jesus, who is the Chief Shepherd, came to this world to heal and restore a broken world. He preached the gospel of the Kingdom and healed many of their illnesses. These healings pointed to the power and the reality of the redemption from sin by His death. Because sickness is a result of sin, the Lord showed His power in healing those who were sick.

Mat 8:16-17

When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases."

Mat 9:1-6

Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over and came to his own town. Some men brought to him a paralytic, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, "This fellow is blaspheming!" Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, "Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. . . ." Then he said to the paralytic, "Get up, take your mat and go home."

Mat 9:35

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.

The Lord Himself was filled with compassion for those who were suffering. He gives His servants the task to care for the sheep. In the visit by the office bearer the sick member is confronted with the care of the Chief Shepherd for the sheep that is in trouble.

Ezekiel 34:15-16

I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice

Acts 20:28

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.

Matt 25:39-40

When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

1.4. How does the Bible speak about illness?

We cannot bypass the question how the Bible speaks about sickness. In general it can be said that sickness is the result of our fall into sin. To be more specific we note that God uses sickness also - to show us our sinfulness

Ps. 32:3-4

When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped

1 Cor 11:30

That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.

-to test us

Ps. 119:71

It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.

Isa 38:17

Surely it was for my benefit that I suffered such anguish. In your love you kept me from the pit of destruction; you have put all my sins behind your back.

Heb 12:11

No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

James 1:2-4

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

- to glorify God

John 9:3

"Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.

John 11:4

When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it."

- to be a blessing for others

2 Cor 1:3-4

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God

1.5. The "Why?" question

The member who is sick can struggle at times with questions. Why am I sick? Is the Lord punishing me? Why does He continue to do this? Why does it take so long? We should not ignore these questions, because they are not wrong in themselves.

Ps. 10: 1

Why, O LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?

Ps. 13:1

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?

Ps. 44:23-25

Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever. Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression? We are brought down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground.

The LORD allows us to ask the question Why? as long as we ask Him and not seek the idols.

2 King 1:2

Now Ahaziah had fallen through the lattice of his upper room in Samaria and injured himself. So he sent messengers, saying to them, "Go and consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron, to see if I will recover from this injury."

2 Kings 1:16

"And he said to us, 'Go back to the king who sent you and tell him, "This is what the LORD says: Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are sending men to consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron? Therefore you will not leave the bed you are lying on. You will certainly die!" ' "

Because sickness is a result of sin, we may never take sickness for granted. In sickness we come in confrontation with the destructive powers of the devil.

Acts 10:38

how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

2 Cor 12:7

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.

We learn from the Word of God that illness is a result of sin. We also know of instances in the Bible where it is revealed to us that a particular sickness is a punishment for a particular sin. We do not receive such revelations anymore. Although it could be true that the Lord is warning the person involved, yet we have to be careful not to accuse the sick person of a sin. At the same time we may use the opportunity to deal with the guilt we all have because of sin, and that we all have to repent before the LORD. The Lord can use sickness to teach us that we rely on Him. He can use it to bring us closer to Him, provided we accept in faith what He gives. To quote from one of the prayers for the sick and spiritually distressed:

"Gracious Father, we beseech Thee to grant us that grace of Thy Holy Spirit, that He may teach us truly to know our misery and to bear patiently with Thy chastisements. If based on our merits these chastisements should have been ten thousand times more severe. We believe that they are not evidence of Thy wrath but of Thy fatherly love towards us, that we may not be condemned with the world."

1.6. The contents of the visit

The contents of the visit is determined by its purpose. We have to show interest in the life of the other. The visit is also means by which the Lord helps His children to deal with their illness in faith. The office-bearer may help, comfort and encourage the member who is ill. This must be done with the Word of God and prayer.

1.6.1. The Word of God

In order to help the member who is sick the Word of God has to be opened. The Word speaks about the brokenness of life because of our fall into sin, but it also speaks about the restoration of life through Christ. The Word of God speaks about the Comforter who makes us cry "Abba, Father." The Word of God lifts up the broken hearted and binds up the wounds that smart. To be patient in adversity we must live from the Word of God. The Word of God reveals the promises of the Lord. In our speaking this richness of God's Word has to come out. In the visit we can refer as well to the sacraments of Baptism and Lord's Supper. Also in adversity we have to use the treasures of the sacraments.

Rom.5:3-4

Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.

James 1:2-4

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

The use of the Bible is not a quick text here or there, but the use of a text or passage within the context of God's Word. The Confessions can be of great help in this regard. (See e.g. B.C. Art.13, 17, 20, 26; H.C. Lord's Days 1, 7, 9, 10, 16, 17, 18, 22, 45; C.o.D. V,8, 10) In the confessions the church has summarized the true and complete doctrine of salvation, the only comfort in life and death. The Confession also speaks about God's work in our lives in His electing love. He who began this work in us has promised to complete it as well. In the struggles with the Why? question we may point to the promises of the Lord to preserve His children.

Ps. 138:7-8

Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life; you stretch out your hand against the anger of my foes, with your right hand you save me. The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me; your love, O LORD, endures forever— do not abandon the works of your hands.

1 Cor. 10:13

No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

2 Tim.4:18

The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

1 Peter 5:10

And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.

It is advisable that the one who visits has a passage in mind when he comes. At the same time he should be flexible enough to use another passage if the discussion with the patient gives occasion for this. In situations of prolonged illness it can be helpful to read with the sick member a particular Bible book or passages from it. Not only does this give direction to the visits, but it is also wonderful to see how both patient and visitor benefit from this. New treasures of God's Word come to the surface. A third possibility is to connect the reading to the sermons. If the minister makes visits to the sick he may want to discuss the text for the following sermon he is to preach. This binds the sick member to the congregation and the worship service and it helps the minister as well, as it gives him valuable input.

1.6.2. Prayer

Besides the reading of God's Word, prayer is an important part of the visit. The intercession in the worship service is important as well, but the prayer on the visit is of a more personal nature. Following what we confess in Lord's Day 45 of the Heidelberg Catechism we can say that this prayer must reflect our gratitude to the Father for all His benefits and a petition for His grace and Holy Spirit. This prayer in order

to be pleasing must also reflect the proper respect, humility, trust and thankfulness which is required of all our prayers. In order to lead in prayer the office bearer must listen carefully to the Word of God, - the reading must be used in the prayer - and the needs of the person. The prayer does not have to be restricted to the situation of the member who is sick but can also include the needs of others. In the Book of Praise we have two beautiful examples of a prayer for those who are ill.

It can also be necessary to speak with the patient about the importance and function of prayer. The Lord wants us to pray so that we may recognize Him as our God and Father. We must pray for a blessing over the means that are used for healing or treatment. We may also ask for healing. We know that the prayer of God's people is powerful in its effect. Healing is given upon the prayer of God's children.

Ps. 27:8

My heart says of you, "Seek his face!" Your face, LORD, I will seek.

Ps. 50:15

and call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me."

Ps. 62:8

Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge.

Mat 7:7

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.

Luke 18:1

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.

Rom. 12:12

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.

James 5:13-18

Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

1.7. Difficulties in the visit

Not every sick visit is a success. It can be a disappointment for patient and/or office bearer. This can have a variety of reasons, some beyond our control, and other avoidable.

One of the most important requirements for a good visit is that the visitor listens well. A visit will go wrong when the patient receives the impression that the office-bearer is not listening, let alone understands the difficulties that the patient is going through. The visitor has to show interest in the situation of the patient. Some of the detail may seem boring to the visitor but can be of great importance for the patient. The visit can go wrong when the visitor does not ask the proper questions or asks questions that lack sensitivity. A visit can go wrong when the visitor speaks more about his own problems or people he knows who had similar problems, rather than letting the patient speak. A visit can go wrong when we use superficial statements, which do not address the needs of the patient. A visit can go wrong because the visitor is afraid to address the difficult questions or is afraid that the patient will break down. A visit can go wrong because the visitor has an aversion to sickness and is very uncomfortable in a hospital room. As office bearers we have to examine ourselves, and if we notice these things we have to work on correcting them.

Also from the side of the patient there can be things that can derail a visit. When the patient is so wrapped up in this/her own situation that there is no listening ear for what the visitor has to say. A patient who is very critical of the visit or the visitor can make a visit difficult as well. If the visitor first receives a reprimand for not coming sooner, the visit already starts on a sour note. Another difficulty that can occur is the fact that the patient does not listen and keeps on talking, to the point that there is hardly any time for Bible reading and prayer.

It is fair to say that when both visitor and patient are willing to listen to each other and to the Word of God the visit can be fruitful for both. Yes indeed both. In fact, it is not unusual that the office bearer receives strength from the patient.

1.8. The set-up of the visit

There is no prescribed set-up for a sick visit. Each situation can vary so much. Sometimes you have the time for a good talk, other times you only have a few minutes. At times you can speak in the privacy of a home, in other cases you are in the busy traffic of a hospital. The health of the patient is also a factor that plays a role.

Yet, there are some elements that are important for a sick visit. The visit must reflect interest for the life, concerns, and situation of the other. This means you ask about the well-being of the patient. At times you have to do this in a careful way, lest you by asking the question, 'How are you doing?' open a flood gate of information which does not really help the visit.

Because this visit is meant to help and encourage the question must be addressed whether the patient is able to receive this sickness from the Hand of the Lord. Again, the question must be asked in accordance with the situation and in a pastoral manner. At times it may be good to ask the question directly, at other times you can come to the question in a round about way. In cases of prolonged illness this question should not be asked each visit. At the same time do not forget that the way the sick members deals with sickness is not always the same. It can change from day to day, even from hour to hour. For this reason the question about being able to accept this trial from the Lord's Hand should not be forgotten in cases of long term illness.

Then, the visitor has to bring the comfort of God's Word. A fourth element is prayer. We have addressed this already in the previous section.

There are other elements that can be addressed during the visit, though not as essential as the previous ones: family involvement, and information about church life. The visits by the office bearers can be one of the few links the patient has with the outside world.

The length of a sick visit depends a lot on the condition of the patient and the circumstances of the visit. On the whole a sick visit should not be too long. Especially in situations of severe illness the visit must be short and to the point. At the same time, it should not be done in a hurry. The member should get the impression that the office bearer takes time for this. It is good to have a time limit in your mind as visitor, but do not be enslaved to this.

A sick visit can be brought by one office-bearer, he can even do it with his wife. It is not a visit that has to be reported on as e.g. a home visit. When a member is in the hospital the visit can take place outside the regular visiting hours. Most hospitals allow this for office-bearers.

2. Visits to those in special and difficult circumstances

The title of this paragraph covers a large and varied area. What are we dealing with in special and difficult circumstances? That can be birthdays and anniversaries, but also handicaps or death in the family. With regard to happy occasions, the minister visits the older members on or in connection with their birthdays. Ward elders usually visit such occasions as well. With regard to handicapped members, it is helpful for Council to have a schedule for visiting. Each handicapped member should be visited at least once per month by an office bearer. With respect to those who are grieving a visit is in place as well. If some one loses a member of the immediate family, the minister or ward elders bring a visit to comfort the family.

3. Welcome visit

New members are welcomed in the congregation by means of a visit by the ward elders. Although this visit is not the same as a home visit, yet it also has an official character. It is the official welcome in the congregation.

Such a visit is preceded by the handing in of an attestation. This is of importance for the visit. A good attestation is a beautiful document, something to be thankful for. The fact that members who move in are willing to submit to the oversight of the church is something wonderful as well. These believers do not want to live by themselves but see their task to be joined to the body of Christ. It can be helpful to deal with these two elements at the visit. It will give the ward elders insight in the spiritual life of these new members. If the attestation indicates a concern or gives information about discipline then the elders have to ask for further clarification. This will be reported to the Consistory.

Secondly, the welcome visit allows the ward elders to gather information about the member, or family and their work situation. Without becoming busy bodies, we like to know something about new members. The elders can find out as well whether there are special concerns, e.g. with health or family.

A third element of the welcome visit is to introduce the new member or family to this congregation. It will be helpful to take a current Directory along. It contains the names of the other members. This can lead to a discussion about the communion of saints. The Directory also mentions the various organizations, Bible study, school etc. The discussion can deal with the value of being involved in these. In this way the elders can show the many privileges that come with belonging to a congregation, as well as the obligations.

Because this is an official visit, it would be proper to conclude with prayer. The elders need not report on this visit except that it was brought. Unless they feel that certain matters should come to the attention of the Consistory.

4. Evaluation

- Have we overlooked any visits in this chapter?
- Do we agree with the purpose and reason?
- Do we agree with the contents and set-up?
- Are the sick visited faithfully?
- How are the sick visits received by the congregation?
- Are those in special situations visited?
- Do the welcome visits function well?
- Are there difficulties or problems in connection with any of these visits?
- If so, what can we do to improve on this?
- Are there matters which you want to bring to attention of the meeting? Why? How should we deal with them?

5. Literature

Outline

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CATECHISM INSTRUCTION

Introduction

The Word of God speaks about children. It also speaks to children. This is because the Lord God has made His covenant with the believers and their children. In this way the Lord continues to gather His Church. He gives His promises to children no less than to adults. Because children do not know of their riches, they need to be taught. This instruction takes place at home, in school and in the church. This chapter deals with the official instruction of the youth of the church in the doctrine of salvation.

1. Scripture

The Bible teaches that children of believing parents belong to God's covenant and congregation. Under both the Old, as well as, the New Testament, the children fully belonged to the people of God.

Genesis 17:7

I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you

Exodus 12:37

The Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Succoth. There were about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children.

Exodus 13:1

The LORD said to Moses, "Consecrate to me every firstborn male."

Ps. 22:10

From birth I was cast upon you; from my mother's womb you have been my God.

Ps. 71:6

From birth I have relied on you; you brought me forth from my mother's womb. I will ever praise you.

Ps. 127:3

Sons are a heritage from the LORD, children a reward from him.

Ps. 144:12

Then our sons in their youth will be like well-nurtured plants, and our daughters will be like pillars carved to adorn a palace.

Ezekiel 16:20-21

"And you took your sons and daughters whom you bore to me and sacrificed them as food to the idols. Was your prostitution not enough? You slaughtered my children and sacrificed them to the idols.

Mark 10:14, 16

When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.

Acts 2:39

The promise is to you and to your children

Acts 21:5

But when our time was up, we left and continued on our way. All the disciples and their wives and children accompanied us out of the city, and there on the beach we knelt to pray.

The Bible also teaches us that there is a need to instruct. This instruction applies to all members of the church, but especially the youth.

Hosea 4 : 6

my people are destroyed from lack of knowledge. "Because you have rejected knowledge, I also reject you as my priests; because you have ignored the law of your God, I also will ignore your children

Dt.6:7

Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

Eph. 6:4

Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord

We receive the indirect information that this instruction indeed took place.

Luke 2:46

After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.

Rom. 2:18

if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law;

Acts 18:25

He had been instructed in the way of the Lord

Gal.6:6

Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor.

This instruction was meant to give practical insight also, as we can see in the book of Proverbs.

Proverbs 3:1-2

My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart, for they will prolong your life many years and bring you prosperity

The third element to be considered is that the church has to hand over the apostolic traditions to the next generation.

Deut. 31:12-13

Assemble the people--men, women and children, and the aliens living in your towns--so they can listen and learn to fear the LORD your God and follow carefully all the words of this law. Their children, who do not know this law, must hear it and learn to fear the LORD your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess."

Ps. 71:17-18

Since my youth, O God, you have taught me, and to this day I declare your marvelous deeds. Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, O God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your might to all who are to come.

Ps 78:4-7

We will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done. He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our forefathers to teach their children, so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands.

2 Thess 2:15

So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.

2 Tim 1:13-14

What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you--guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.

On the basis of the above we can draw several conclusions:

1. Our children are holy, that is, set apart by the Lord to serve Him. They have the promise of the covenant no less than adults. They have to learn how rich they are and what is required of them through instruction.
2. In teaching the youth of the church the Lord continues to gather, defend and preserve His church. This teaching is the task of the church, and thus under supervision of the overseers. The church of today (minister) hands over to the church of the future (youth) what we have received in the past (doctrine).
3. The youth of the covenant must be instructed in the fear of the Lord. The knowledge they gain must be used to serve God in His kingdom as prophets, priests and kings. This instruction must therefore address the way we live before God. For to know God is to love, obey and trust Him.

2. Confessions / Church Order / Forms

2.1. Belgic Confession

The Belgic Confession speaks of teaching in connection with the Bible.

Art. 5

We receive all these books, and these only, as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith.

Art. 7

We believe that this Holy Scripture fully contains the will of God and that all that man must believe in order to be saved is sufficiently taught therein. The whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in it at length.

2.2. Heidelberg Catechism

The Catechism was written as a "textbook" for the instruction of the youth. It speaks about the call "to know" God and His promises. It also shows that children need to know this no less than adults.

- Q. 2 What do you need to know in order to live and die in the joy of this comfort?
 A. First, how great my sins and misery are;
 second, how I am delivered from all my sins and misery;
 third, how I am to be thankful to God for such deliverance.
- Q. 22 What, then, must a Christian believe?
 A. All that is promised us in the gospel, which the articles of our catholic and undoubted Christian faith teach us in a summary.
- Q. 59. But what does it help you now that you believe all this?
 A. In Christ I am righteous before God and heir to life everlasting.
- Q. 74. Should infants, too, be baptized?
 Yes. Infants as well as adults belong to God's covenant and congregation. Through Christ's blood the redemption from sin and the Holy Spirit, who works faith, are promised to them no less than to adults. Therefore, by baptism, as sign of the covenant, they must be grafted into the Christian church and distinguished from the children of unbelievers. This was done in the old covenant by circumcision, in place of which baptism was instituted in the new covenant.
- Q. 94. What does the LORD require in the first commandment?
 Further, that I rightly come to know the only true God, trust in Him alone, submit to Him with all humility and patience, expect all good from Him only, and love, fear, and honour Him with all my heart.

2.3. Canons of Dort

The Canons of Dort speak about instruction in the context of conversion and that it pleases God to use means to bring this about.

Chapter 3/4, Article 17 The Use Of Means

So also the aforementioned supernatural working of God whereby He regenerates us, in no way excludes or overthrows the use of the gospel, which the most wise God has ordained to be the seed of regeneration and the food of the soul. For this reason the apostles and the teachers who succeeded them, in the fear of the Lord instructed the people concerning this grace of God, to His glory and to the abasement of all pride. In the meantime, however, they did not neglect to keep them, by the holy admonitions of the gospel, under the administration of the Word, the sacraments, and discipline. So today those who give or receive instruction in the Church should not dare to tempt God by separating what He in His good pleasure has willed to be kept very close together. For grace is conferred through admonitions, and the more readily we do our duty, the more this favour of God, who works in us, usually manifests itself in its lustre and the more directly His works proceed. To God alone all glory, both for the means and for their saving fruit and efficacy, is due throughout eternity. Amen.

2.4. Church Order

The Church Order stipulates that the Minister has to instruct the children of the church. It also mentions the requirement that in order to come to the table one must make public profession of faith. Catechism instruction is the road that leads to the Table of the Lord.

Art. 16 The office of Ministers of the Word

.... also to instruct the children of the church in the doctrine of salvation.

Art. 61 Admission to the Lord's Supper

The consistory shall admit to the Lord's Supper only those who have made public profession of the Reformed faith and lead a godly life.

2.5. Forms

Form for Baptism

Therefore, infants must be baptized as heirs of the kingdom of God and of His covenant; and as they grow up, their parents have the duty to instruct them in these things.

Third, do you promise as father and as mother to instruct your child in this doctrine, as soon as he (she) is able to understand, and to have him (her) instructed therein to the utmost of your power?

Form for the Public Profession of Faith

We thank the Lord our God for the grace given us by adopting us to be His children. We acknowledge His love and His power by which He instills in His children the desire publicly to profess their faith in Him in the presence of His holy church, so that they may receive admission to the holy supper.

Form for Ordination of Ministers

He shall teach the Word of God to the youth of the church and to others whom God calls, for the Holy Scriptures are able to instruct them for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

Prayer # 6 A Prayer after the explanation of the Catechism**3. Purpose**

The purpose of catechism instruction is to instruct the youth of the church in the doctrine of salvation so that they may give an answer to their baptism and be admitted to the Lord's Supper.

This leads to several additional purposes:

- a new generation gains knowledge about the Lord, His Word and work;
- a new generation may serve God in their calling as Christians;
- to help the youth participate in the worship of God's Name.
- pastoral interaction between the minister and the youth of the church.

4. Catechism teaching and preaching

The catechism teaching and preaching are closely connected. Yet the two are not identical. The catechism lesson should not become a sermon, nor the catechism preaching a youth service. In catechism instruction the emphasis is on instruction and explanation. At the same time it should not become a course in Reformed doctrine either, for that would take the pastoral element away. The catechism sermon should be a lecture, but must remain proclamation of the gospel and the opening of the kingdom of heaven. Although it is true that the catechism sermon does have a more "teaching" element and is also more directed to the youth of the congregation than the sermon on a free text..

There is another connection between the catechism preaching and the catechism as well. The catechism instruction helps the youth of the church to understand the sermons, especially the catechism sermons. This can be noticed when the teaching and preaching deal with the same Lord's Day. The instruction helps the students understand these sermons, and applies what they have learned to their lives. This would mean that if the catechism preaching would disappear, the catechism teaching loses its context. Or, if in catechism class we focus on popular topics and leave out the catechism as textbook, the students will lose the connection with the sermons. This connection between preaching and teaching functions best when the minister himself teaches the classes.

5. The Task of the Parents

The instruction of the youth is primarily the task of the parents. This is clear from the texts in the Bible mentioned under point 1. At the same time the priests and prophets in Israel had a responsibility as well. Each, the parents and the office-bearer, has his own task, yet without ignoring the other. When this is done in harmony and obedience the youth will benefit. In the time of the Reformation this parental task was stressed once again. We know that in certain places, four times per year the elders would come to the homes to ask questions of the students as a means to ensure that the parents would fulfil their duty. At the same time the task of the official instruction by the church was not forgotten either. So also today, the fact that the office-bearers instruct the youth may not take away from the responsibility of the parents. As overseers we must see to it, not only that the parents support the work done in the catechism class, but also that they themselves are diligent in instructing and teaching their children the doctrine of salvation.

Parental support is crucial for a proper functioning of the catechism instruction. This support is shown by informing the minister when a student cannot attend, making sure that the students know their catechism and by willingness to deal with problems. In the past years the minister has brought the written exams home to the parents. This helps strengthen the bond between parents and minister.

6. The Catechism Class

6.1. Curriculum

The curriculum of the catechism instruction is determined by the goal of this instruction. The students are instructed in the doctrine of salvation as it is summarized in the Heidelberg Catechism. This teaching will deal with understanding what the Catechism says and the implication of this doctrine for the daily lives of the students. The sacraments form the back drop to this instruction. The students have to learn to understand their baptism, be helped to use it, so that they may go to the Lord's Supper. The fact that the three parts of the Catechism coincide with the three points of self-examination emphasizes this even more. The teaching must pay clear attention to the promises and obligations of the covenant. The curriculum is the responsibility of the consistory. This is part of the supervision over the catechism instruction.

In light of the goals mentioned under point 3, the catechism instruction is also a means to teach the youth of the church to appreciate the doctrine of the church and the historical background of the confession. Our children may know that they are not the first ones to learn and say this. Church history is not taught in catechism currently. The reason for this is that this is done in the elementary as well as the highschool. Last, but certainly not least, the catechism instruction must pay attention to the lifestyle of God's children. The unity between confession and lifestyle has to come out in the teaching.

The curriculum is added to the section Mandates and Regulations.

6.2. Memorization

Memorizing the Catechism is a helpful way to help the youth come to know the terms and expressions of the confession. True, there are terms and concepts that especially the younger students do not fully understand. (Although not only the younger students.) The minister has to explain them in his teaching according to their level of understanding. There are students who have a hard time or even cannot memorize. The instructor has to keep in mind the abilities of the students. In case a student does not know the memory work, the parents and if it persists the elders will be involved.

6.3. Attitude

The students are taught respect for the Word, the confession, and the offices in the church. This has consequences for attitude, dress and behaviour in class. The dress and behavior has to reflect the importance of the instruction. The attitude of the youth is also partly determined by the way the minister approaches them. The minister has to keep in mind that these young people are sheep of the flock that he is called to shepherd.

6.4. Instructor

In the Form for Ordination the minister is charged to teach the youth of the congregation. This does not mean that someone else cannot do it. Due to the number of classes or other obligations it may be necessary to have others teach. Though this is not wrong in itself, the minister has the first responsibility. Catechism Instruction is also pastoral work. The minister comes to know the youth of the church by this work.

6.5. Class

There are many practical aspects to Catechism Instruction which depend on the amount of students, the facilities and the available time. A classroom should have a blackboard and proper desks or tables for the students. The recommended size of a class is 12-15 students. This number is manageable from a teaching point of view, and small enough to keep it personal. The time per class is from 45 - 55 minutes.

7. Profession of Faith

Article 61 C.O. stipulates that the consistory shall admit to the Lord's Supper only those who have made public profession of the Reformed faith and lead a godly life. When a student wants to make public profession of his faith, the consistory:

1. Visits these young members to speak about their motives.

The visit about the motives can be approached from different angles. The main point is that the elders can ascertain that the member wants to make profession for the right reasons, i.e. out of love for the Lord. It will be helpful to ask questions that go further than the simple yes and no answers. For further information see below.

2. Interviews them before the consistory about their knowledge of the Reformed faith.

The interview before the Consistory focusses more on the knowledge of the Reformed faith. The capabilities of the student will determine the depth of the questions. Admission to the Lord's Supper is not based on the knowledge of some facts, but on faith in the Lord. At the same time we may expect of members who have been blessed with a good understanding a certain amount of knowledge. The members must also be able to give account of the faith toward outsiders. This interview begins and closes with prayer. The instructor usually asks most of the questions, but the others also have opportunity to ask questions.

3. Announces the names of those who want to make profession of faith

This is done to involve the congregation. In the announcement prior to the public profession we give opportunity to bring in valid objections. This should not become a formality.

8. Visit with those who want to profess their faith

It is the task of the elder to examine the motives of those who want to profess their faith. This is not to be taken lightly, since making profession of faith involves an oath. Members should not profess their faith out of custom, but out of a sincere love for the Lord. One possible approach to this visit is to take the Form for Public Profession of Faith and discuss the questions together, what they mean and what faithfulness to them involves. This visit by the elders should not stay at the "Yes" and "No" level, nor should it turn into a social conversation. The elders have to make sure that certain matters are discussed. The member who is interviewed must be given opportunity to speak. The elders must ask clear questions, and not answer these before the student can respond.

Here follows an outline of such questions. These are not to be used as a check list, but as helps for a fruitful discussion.

1. Begin with asking the question that is expected, "Why do you want to make profession of faith?" The student should be able to give a specific and personal answer. Use the answer to continue the discussion, while keeping in mind what are good motives and what are not.
 - Why do you want to make profession of faith?
 - When and how did you come to this conclusion?
 - How did you involve your parents in this?
 - If someone asked you, "Am I ready to make profession of faith?", how would you help that person? What makes a person ready to do this?
 - Does making profession of faith change your life? Explain.
 - Why is professing your faith done in public?

2. The Form for Public Profession of Faith is found between the Form for Baptism and the Form for Lord's Supper. This is a good stepping stone to talk about baptism and Lord's Supper. Does the person have an understanding of the promises given in baptism and do they function in his/her life? Is the person looking forward to celebrating the Lord's Supper?
 - What has making profession of faith to do with baptism?
 - What did the Lord promise you in your baptism?
 - How did the LORD show His love and power in your life?
 - We baptize infants, what does this tell you about your position before God?

How often do you apply and work with your baptism? In which situations? Consider that the Lord gave us the sacraments because He is mindful of our doubts and weaknesses. Why do you ask admission to the Lord's Table? Do you look forward to going to the Lord's Table?

3. To believe is to give the answer of faith. This is why the first promise which is made concerns the Word of God. It will be good not only to ask whether the person accepts the Bible as the Word of God but also to ask about the use of the Bible, personal Bible study. Connected to the Bible are the confessions. How does this young member regard the confessions? To say I accept the Bible as the infallible Word of God, has consequences for the future. The basic rule in the church is to be more obedient to God than to man. This is not always easy.
 - What do you confess concerning the Bible?
 - How do you use the Bible in your personal life?
 - What do you do in order to gain a better insight in the Bible?
 - What do you think is meant with the expression "the doctrine of the Word of God"?
 - How important are the confessions in your life?
 - You will promise to steadfastly continue in this doctrine, to reject all heresies and errors. What does this mean and how is this possible?
 - How important in your life is the preaching of the Word, and how does this reflect in your attendance and participation in the worship service?

4. The second question deals with the promises of God's covenant and baptism. We have already addressed this in point 1. It also mentions the first two parts of the catechism, the knowledge of sin and redemption in Christ? You can use the Lord's Days of the Heidelberg Catechism as background for your discussion.
 - What is sin? How do you know you are sinful?
 - How sinful are we?
 - What does it mean to confess your sins?
 - How do you fight with a free and good conscience against sin?
 - Do you grieve over your sins? What does it mean to grieve?
 - How do you work with the confession that we are still inclined to all evil?
 - Why does the Bible show us our sin?
 - How are we redeemed? What is redemption?

5. This leads of course to the third part of the catechism, the thankfulness. Do you love the Lord. In the catechism the third part is used to explain the ten commandments and the Lord's prayer.
 - Do you love the Lord?
 - What does it mean to love Him?
 - What does it mean in your life to forsake the world and crucify your old nature?
 - In which way does your life show that you love the Lord?
 - Are others able to notice it on you?

6. The last question of the Form is not to be overlooked. You could say that the willingness to serve the Lord is now applied very concretely in being a member of the church. We receive salvation within the communion of the church. For the sake of our own salvation we must remain within his communion.
 - Why do you want to profess your faith in this church?
 - What is the church?
 - Why do you need the church?
 - How can you be a living member of the church?

In which way does this determine the way you use your money, establish your friendships, conduct your dating, and prepare your marriage plans?

You will promise that you will submit to the admonition and discipline of the church. What gives you the courage to make such a far reaching promise?

7. When you look at all these promises, it may indeed seem that this is impossible. Therefore do not forget the text at the end of the Form. The fifth chapter of the Canons are also very helpful in this regard. We cannot do it alone. The Spirit has to help us. But He has revealed that he works in us by the Word. Close the meeting with the riches of God's promises of which both baptism and Lord's Supper are a sign and seal.

9. Guidelines how to report on a visit to the catechism class

As a rule, twice per season the elders come to visit the catechism classes. This shows the supervision of the consistory over the instruction of the youth. This is beneficial for minister as well as students. The elders must report on these visits at the next consistory meeting. The report deals with general information, the contents and format of teaching, the students' attitude, behaviour etc., and can include comments and suggestions.

9.1. General information

The elders should be able to report that the catechism instruction is progressing properly, ie. the minister is teaching the classes, the doctrine of salvation is taught, the attendance is good. These are matters that can be discussed with the minister before or after the class.

9.2. Teaching/Teacher

Does the contents of the teaching live up to the goals mentioned under point 4? To mention some elements that are of importance here (not every question applies to each lesson, but they may help in evaluating the classes as a whole):

- Is the catechism explained?
- Is the explanation clear and to the point?
- Is the Bible used to show the meaning of the confession?
- Is the confession applied to the lives of the students?
- Is there attention for the theme "our only comfort"?
- Is the level of instruction too high or too low?
- Are the students encouraged to think?
- Is the connection to other parts of the doctrine clear?
- Is the lesson in harmony with the Reformed Confession?

The format of the lesson must have the attention of the elders as well. Each teacher has his own way of teaching, but yet the overseers must see to it that the format serves the overall purpose. It can also be that in dealing with this problems come to light and can be addressed.

- Does the minister keep the attention of the students?
- Does he keep order?
- How does he use the time?
- Is he open for questions and reactions from the students?
- Does he respect the students?
- Does he stick to his lesson plan?
- Does he use old lesson plans, or make new ones?
- Is the presentation fitting with what is taught?
- Is there a good atmosphere in class?

9.3. Students

The students are an important component in the catechism instruction. They are the ones who must learn and benefit from this. During the time that a young member is in catechism class he or she goes through a crucial stage in his/her life, from children they become adults. This process of maturing brings with it its own struggles. During their years of catechism instruction the attitude of students can change, for the better or for the worse. Their involvement and participation will also vary because of this. Some of the elements the elders can pay attention to are:

- Do they know their catechism?
- Do they participate
 - in listening
 - in answering
 - in asking questions
 - in singing/ praying
- Do they show respect for the Word of God, the confession?
- Do they show respect for the minister?

9.4. Comments

In the end the report has to conclude whether the instruction is done properly yes or no. The report has to be more than, it was enjoyable, or it was a waste of time. It is true that the bottom line is whether the instruction is in accordance with the Word of God. But the elders can be of help as well when they also give their evaluation, or give suggestions. If there are areas of weakness or outright concerns they should be identified so that they can be addressed. Hopefully in this way the role of the elders gains on meaning and the catechism instruction is not the sole responsibility of the minister but done under the supervision of the church.

To help the reporting it would be good to use a Form that can be filled in and put in the archives. In this way there is a written proof and it becomes easier to follow up on suggestions. A Form for reporting is added to this chapter.

10. Other Classes

10.1 "Those whom God calls"

The Form for Ordination of Ministers lists as one of the duties of the Minister that he "shall teach the Word of God to the youth of the church and to others whom God calls, for the Holy Scriptures are able to instruct them for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ." The Form makes special mention of those whom God calls. They are persons who want to be joined to the church. It is the task of the Minister to instruct these persons.

The Form gives the general rule. The way this is worked out depends in many ways on the situation. It makes a difference whether you are dealing with an older or younger person, whether you are dealing with someone who has never been raised with the Bible or someone who knows the Bible, whether they have been member of another church, or have never been a member of any church. It also makes a difference whether the person comes because of a relationship or simply because he/she wants to join. It is therefore difficult to indicate how long a person should be taught. It is not unreasonable to expect the instruction in the Catechism to last for two years and then an additional year to deal with the other confessions and prepare the person for profession of faith. This gives the person time to become acquainted with the doctrine of the church and the life of the congregation. This gives the overseers time to see whether the person is genuine in his or her desire. As a rule the instruction takes place by the minister, but at times it may be necessary to involve others. Often the initial instruction is done on a personal basis, though later on in the process the person, if possible, can be integrated in the regular classes. It is important that the elders ask and/or receive regular updates on the situation.

10.2. Instruction of Handicapped

Handicapped members belong to the congregation no less than all the others. There are many different handicaps. For some there will be no hindrance to take the regular catechism class, for others instruction may be difficult or superfluous. Some handicapped members can be part of the catechism class, even though they cannot do everything that the others are able to do, others will need special instruction. Each situation has to be evaluated on its own merit. The consistory must be aware that also the instruction of these members is under their supervision.

11. Evaluation

1. Are we in agreement with regard to: Scriptural data and Purpose?
2. Review the curriculum. Are there any matters that need our attention? If yes, how will we deal with them?
3. How is the contact between minister and parents?
4. How many students are there? How many classes?
5. Review the arrangements for the classroom. Are there any changes needed? How will we deal with them?
6. Do the elder visit regularly? Does the reporting function well?
7. Are there older young people who have not made public profession of their faith? What do we do for them?
8. If there are students who are challenged, how are they being taught? How does this work?
9. Are there "outsiders" who are being taught? How is this work progressing?

12. Literature

Outline

Chapter 2 - 7

Marriage

Introduction

1. Scripture
2. Confessions / Church Order / Forms
3. Purpose
4. Mixed-Courtship
5. Marriage Course
6. Engagement and sexuality
7. The Wedding
8. Marriage and Children
9. Being Single
10. Marriage Difficulties and Divorce
11. Our Place as Office-bearers
12. Evaluation
13. Literature.

MARRIAGE

Introduction

"Marriage is an institution of God which pleases Him, and must therefore be held in honour among all". This is the summary of what the Word of God teaches us about marriage according to the Form for Marriage. Marriage is not a human invention, but a gift of God. It is so special that He uses marriage as an image to describe the unique relationship between Himself and the Church.

1. Scripture

The LORD instituted marriage in Paradise. We read about this in Genesis 2.

Gen 2:18-25

The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field. But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

The Lord God said that it was not good that man should be alone. He had no suitable helper. Not only to have fellowship, but also to fulfil the mandate to be fruitful and multiply. Since man cannot be fruitful and multiply all by himself, the LORD God made a helper fit for him. Together as husband and wife, as male and female, they can serve the Creator.

The LORD God also brought the woman to the man. The Form for Marriage concludes from this that also today the Lord gives husband and wife to one another. Since they are united by His hand, nothing shall separate them in this life. The answer of Adam to God's gift is:

The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man."

The conclusion is:

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

There are three elements to this conclusion: leaving, being united and, becoming one flesh. The fact that a man leaves his father and mother shows that a new stage in a person's life starts with marriage. This is not to say that parents have nothing to say anymore, but the husband's task is in the first place toward his wife. Together they are now a new family. The second element, "be united," indicates that marriage is a close and lasting bond. This unity is based on and expressed in the vow made at the time of marriage. The last element, becoming one flesh, shows the result of this belonging together, the two become one unit. The sexual union is one way in which this oneness is expressed and experienced.

Genesis 2 ends with the words that both man and woman were naked and not ashamed. God made them male and female. The difference in sexuality is therefore also a gift of God to be received from Him and to be enjoyed in thankfulness to Him.

God's beautiful creation was destroyed by man's fall into sin. This fall, as described in Genesis 3, has consequences for marriage. To mention some: Eve did not see her place as the one to follow, but took the lead. (1 Tim.2:14) Adam did not fulfil his task as head and stop his wife.

Genesis 3: 16, 17

To the woman he said, "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life.

After the fall into sin we see the terrible reality of the misuse of marriage, in polygamy, abuse, violence and divorce. The gift of sexuality is effected by the fall into sin as well. After Adam and Eve have eaten of the

tree they realize they were naked. They become ashamed. Sin warps and perverts the wonderful gift of sexuality. The LORD God gives clothing to Adam and Eve so they can continue to fulfil their task.

The LORD did not relinquish the gift of marriage and sexuality to the devil. His plan is to use the marriage bond to gather His church and increase His covenant. Marriage and sexuality are within the reach of His work of redemption. The LORD who redeems His people from bondage also said: "You shall not commit adultery." There are many other laws as well given to protect marriage and warn against the misuse of sexuality. Several of these laws can be found in Leviticus 18-22.

Lev. 18 : 6

" No one is to approach any close relative to have sexual relations. I am the LORD

Lev 18:22-24

Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable. Do not have sexual relations with an animal and defile yourself with it. A woman must not present herself to an animal to have sexual relations with it; that is a perversion. Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled.

Deut 22:5

A woman must not wear men's clothing, nor a man wear women's clothing, for the LORD your God detests anyone who does this.

Deut 23:18

You must not bring the earnings of a female prostitute or of a male prostitute into the house of the LORD your God to pay any vow, because the LORD your God detests them both.

In the wisdom literature of the Bible we hear (and sing) about marriage as well. There is the Song of Solomon, which is a love song. It is a song that speaks of this love and shows its depths and beauty.

Song of Songs 8:6-7

Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away. If one were to give all the wealth of his house for love, it would be utterly scorned.

In the Book of the Psalms love and marriage have a place as well. Psalm 45 is a love song made for the wedding of a king. Psalms 127 and 128 speak of the beauty of family life and the blessings of receiving children.

The book of Proverbs wants to teach God's people the fear of the LORD, also when it comes to marriage. We find in it warnings against the misuse of sexuality, as well the praise of a good woman. He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favour from the LORD. (18:22)

Proverbs 5 : 3-10

3 For the lips of an adulteress drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil;
4 but in the end she is bitter as gall, sharp as a double-edged sword.
5 Her feet go down to death; her steps lead straight to the grave.
6 She gives no thought to the way of life; her paths are crooked, but she knows it not.
7 Now then, my sons, listen to me; do not turn aside from what I say.
8 Keep to a path far from her, do not go near the door of her house,
9 lest you give your best strength to others and your years to one who is cruel,
10 lest strangers feast on your wealth and your toil enrich another man's house.

Proverbs 5 : 15-19

15 Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well.
16 Should your springs overflow in the streets, your streams of water in the public squares
17 Let them be yours alone, never to be shared with strangers.
18 May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.
19 A loving doe, a graceful deer-- may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love.

Prov 6:23-29

23 For these commands are a lamp, this teaching is a light, and the corrections of discipline are the way to life,
24 keeping you from the immoral woman, from the smooth tongue of the wayward wife.
25 Do not lust in your heart after her beauty or let her captivate you with her eyes,
26 for the prostitute reduces you to a loaf of bread, and the adulteress preys upon your very life.
27 Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned?
28 Can a man walk on hot coals without his feet being scorched?

29	So is he who sleeps with another man's wife; no one who touches her will go unpunished.
Prov 7:4-7	
4	Say to wisdom, "You are my sister," and call understanding your kinsman;
5	they will keep you from the adulteress, from the wayward wife with her seductive words.
6	At the window of my house I looked out through the lattice.
7	I saw among the simple, I noticed among the young men, a youth who lacked judgment.
Prov. 19:14	
14	Houses and wealth are inherited from parents, but a prudent wife is from the LORD.
Prov 31:10	
10	A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies.
Prov 31:30	
30	Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.

In speaking through the prophets the LORD used the metaphor of marriage to describe His relation with Israel.

Ezek 16:8

"Later I passed by, and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign LORD, and you became mine.

The prophets had to admonish the people of Israel on account of its unfaithfulness. Since marriage and sexuality falls within the reach of God's redemption, unfaithfulness to the LORD also has consequences for marriage. It is not for nothing that the LORD uses the image of a prostitute to describe unfaithful Israel. Many of the prophets exposed sins against the seventh commandment and called the people of Israel to repentance.

Ezek. 16 : 15

But you trusted in your beauty and used your fame to become a prostitute.

Hosea 1:2

When the LORD began to speak through Hosea, the LORD said to him, "Go take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD.

The prophets also used the image of marriage to describe God's faithfulness toward His people.

Hosea 2:14, 16

Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her. In that day, declares the LORD, you will call me 'my husband.'

The last prophet of the Old Testament, Malachi, addresses the matter of marriage too.

Mal 2:13-16

Another thing you do: You flood the LORD's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask, "Why?" It is because the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not [the LORD] made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. "I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel, "and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment," says the LORD Almighty. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith.

In the days of Malachi, the men of Israel divorced their Jewish wives and married good looking pagan girls. (Similar situation can be found in Ezra and Nehemiah) For this reason the LORD does not want to receive the offerings of God's people anymore. He is displeased. And when the people ask why, the LORD answers that the people have broken their marriage covenant. Marriage is called a covenant. Marriage is a bond before the LORD, and to be understood within His covenant with Israel. This is also seen in the fact that the LORD speaks about the children. He wants the children of the covenant to grow up in the fear of His Name. But through these divorces and remarriages they grow up to serve the idols. The passage then also ends with the clear statement that God hates divorce.

The Lord Jesus Christ came to redeem this world from the dominion of sin. He does not abolish marriage, but places it again in its original setting. He also shows the depths of God's redemption.

Matt 5:27-32

"You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into

hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

Matt 19:3-9

Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate." "Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.

The Lord also forgave the sins of those who sinned against the seventh commandment.

John 8:7-12

When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

The apostles follow the teaching of the Lord Jesus. The redemption by Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit must rule marriage.

Heb 13:4

Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.

1 Pet 3:1-7

Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear. Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.

The apostle Paul writes in several of his letters about marriage. In 1 Corinthians 7 and 11 he gives many instructions about the relationship between husband and wife. Other examples are:

Col 3:18-19

Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.

1 Tim 2:13-14

For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.

1 Tim. 4 : 3-5

They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.

In the letter to the Ephesians Paul explains the mystery of the relationship between husband and wife in referring to the relationship between Christ and His church.

Eph 5:22-33

Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church-- for we are members of his body. "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." This is a profound mystery-- but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

We learn from this passage that the relationship between husband and wife must be in the Lord. As Christ is the Head of the Church so the husband is the head of his wife. As the Church has to submit to Christ so

the wife has to submit to the husband. As Christ's headship shows in self denial and sacrifice, so also the love of the husband must be self denying love.

The Bible teaches us that marriage is a temporary gift. On the new earth there will be no marriages anymore. The family unit will not longer be necessary for the total number of elect has been reached. This does not mean that we will lose something. On the contrary, the communion on the new earth will be perfect, that is better than we have on this earth and it will be for singles and married alike..

Matt. 22:30

At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage;

2. Confession/Church Order/Forms

2.1. Heidelberg Catechism

The Heidelberg Catechism deals with marriage in connection with the seventh commandment.

- Q. 108 What does the seventh commandment teach us?
 A. That all unchastity is cursed by God. We must therefore detest it from the heart and live chaste and disciplined lives, both within and outside of holy marriage.
- Q. 109 Does God in this commandment forbid nothing more than adultery and similar shameful sins?
 Since we, body and soul, are temples of the Holy Spirit, it is God's will that we keep ourselves pure and holy. Therefore He forbids all unchaste acts, gestures, words, thought, desires, and whatever may entice us to unchastity.

2.2. Church Order

The Church Order stipulates the following in Art. 63:

The consistory shall ensure that the members of the congregation marry only in the Lord, and that the ministers - as authorized by the consistory - solemnize only such marriages as are in accordance with the Word of God.

The solemnization of a marriage may take place either in a private ceremony or in a public worship service. The adopted Form for the Solemnization of Marriage shall be used.

2.3. Forms

The Form of Solemnization summarizes the Reformed teaching about marriage. Because Rome had made marriage a sacrament and forbade the priests to marry, the Reformed Churches had to teach the people the biblical approach to marriage.

See Van Rongen Our Reformed Church Service Book 1995, Inheritance Publications

Prayer # 2

O LORD, take us and our dear ones into Thy care and keeping. Watch over our families. Strengthen the expectant mothers and grant them a good delivery. Bless the bond between husbands and wives, and parents and children. Be with those married couples whom Thou, in Thy wisdom, dost not give children. Bless them and cause them to be a blessing in the midst of Thy household.

3. Purpose

The purpose of marriage is

- a. that husband and wife shall live together in sincere love and holiness, helping each other faithfully in all things that belong to this life and to the life to come.
- b. that by marriage the human race is to be continued and increased, and, under the blessing of God, husband and wife will be fruitful and multiply.

The goal of the work of the overseers is to make sure that the members marry in the Lord as well that those who are married live in accordance with the Word of God.

4. How do we deal with mixed courtship?

The Lord instructs his people to marry "in the Lord" (1 Cor 7:39). The elders are instructed to ensure that this takes place (C.O. art 63). This instruction of the Lord applies to all who are married and who prepare for marriage. The Lord compares marriage to the relationship between him and the church (Eph 5). This teaches us how special the relationship between husband and wife is. It also teaches us that unity in the

Lord is essential for marriage. Within this context the elders come to deal from time to time with the fact that members start a relationship with a non-member. How do the elders have to approach this? What does the Bible teach? What do the elders have to say to those involved in this relationship? What is the place and function of the parents? This paper seeks to answer these questions, in the awareness that each situation is unique and that though we need clear guidelines at the same time we need wisdom to work with what the Lord teaches us.

Mixed courtships are not just the concern of the ward elders, but of the consistory as a whole. It will be important to be clear on the position of the consistory so that elders can draw one line when visiting and teaching. The congregation has to know too that consistory wants to be clear and consistent.

4.1 What do we mean with “mixed courtship”?

The words “mixed courtship” refer to a courtship of a member of the congregation with one who is not a member of a Canadian Reformed church or one of its sister churches. The non member can be a member of another church (e.g. Roman Catholic, Pentecostal) and have some understanding of the Bible, but can also be a person who is not at all affiliated with a church and has little to no knowledge of the Bible. The word “courtship” indicates that we are dealing with a relationship of love between a man and a woman. It is a relationship in which two want to get to know each other with as purpose to build a lasting relationship, i.e. marriage.

The bigger picture.

The pastoral attention for those who are in a “mixed courtship” is part of a larger picture. The larger picture is that the elders (and deacons) need to visit and extend their pastoral care to all couples who prepare for marriage. The instruction of the Lord to marry in him has many implication for all couples. Elders are not finished when both are members of the a Canadian Reformed church or a sister church. They have to address the faith life of the couple, how they show their love for the Lord in their relationship, the motivation for marriage, and how they as an engaged couple live with the Lord in their relationship, to mention a few items. Elders do well to have an open discussion about these matters with a couple that is dating and/or preparing for marriage.

The bigger picture includes sustained pastoral care for single members. It would not be proper that as long as the member is single the elders pay little attention, whereas as soon as a non-member comes into the picture, the elders come down hard on the member. It will be difficult to teach this member because the elders have not worked on establishing a trust relationship with this member. The pastoral care for single young members is extremely important.

The bigger picture of mixed courtship involves family and friends. At times the parents are aware of the relationship, at times they are not. The more they can be involved the better it is. The pastoral care over the families includes encouraging the parents to help their children live a life of obedience to the Lord. This involves also the question how to deal with (young) people we meet and work with who are not part of the church. How can we teach our children to stand up for their faith in these relationships? How can we encourage them to build relationships within the communion of saints?

4.2 Scripture

In this part we want to consider what the Bible teaches about mixed marriages. We will look at the Old Testament first and then focus on the New Testament.

Old Testament

In the first chapters of the Bible the LORD reveals that marriage is instituted by Him. Marriage is not a relationship between just two people, but is a relationship between a husband and a wife under the rule of the LORD God. Husband and wife are to live together in dependance on the LORD God. He uses

marriage for His glory and His kingdom. The LORD God gave to husband and wife a mandate (Genesis 1:28). This mandate can be fulfilled in dependence on the LORD and being united in serving him. This instruction which we find in the first chapters of the Bible determines how husband and wife are to live in their marriage. It also determines the choice of a partner. Abraham was aware of this when he instructed his servant to find a wife for his son Isaac from among his own and not from among the Canaanites (Gen. 24). Rebecca says the same to her husband Isaac about Jacob their son (Gen.27:46). When Israel enters the land of Canaan the LORD makes very clear that he doesn't want the Israelites to intermarry with the Canaanites. In Deut.7:3-4 we read: "Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you."

True, there are examples of outsiders becoming part of Israel, think e.g. of Rahab (Joshua 2) and Ruth. The LORD is not opposed to others joining his people. It should be noted, however, that Rahab did not join Israel because she was in love with an Israelite man, but because she confessed her faith in the God of Israel. She put her trust in him and wanted to be part of his people. Ruth married an Israelite, but she too, upon going to the land of Israel confessed her faith in the LORD and showed it in her actions, and so received Boaz as a husband. The church is not opposed to others joining the church, but maintains that marriage is not a reason to join the church nor should courtship be seen as means to evangelize. A person joins the church in obedience to the call of the Lord. There instances in the Old Testament that men married non-Israelite women without this being condemned or leading to negative consequences. Moses e.g. married a non-Israelite. Israelites were allowed to marry women, virgins, they had captured from other nations (Deut 21). That was not forbidden, but the LORD voices His condemnation when these women do not let go of their religion and refuse to follow God's commandments.

The history of Israel shows that it did not listen to the LORD. The kings are a good example of this. How come Solomon ended up going the wrong way in the end of his life? Because of the foreign wives he had married. And what a misery did Ahab bring into Israel by marrying Jezebel. Ezra admits in his prayer that one of the reasons for the captivity was mixed marriages (Ezra 9). Mixed marriages is not a minor detail but a serious threat to the identity of God's people. This why both Ezra and Nehemiah are so appalled that after returning from Babylon the people fall back into the same sin. In Ezra 9 & 10 and Nehemiah 13 we read that the foreign women had to be sent away. The context also shows that these women were not willing to serve the LORD. They taught their children the language of their pagan culture. The LORD is concerned about next generation. He does not want his children to be taught the ways of the idols, but seeks godly offspring (Mal 2:14). For this reason he opposes mixed marriages.

New Testament

What does the New Testament teach about marriage and dating? After Pentecost the gospel went out into the world and many gentiles came to faith. It was not uncommon that one partner in a marriage would come to faith, but the other did not. From 1 Corinthians 7 we learn that this lead to questions. We get the impression that Paul is dealing with people who have been married for some time. They started their marriages as unbelievers, but because of their conversion find themselves in a marriage with an unbeliever. Does this mean that the marriage is it finished? The answer is No. Marriage is a deep bond, even when a believer finds himself married to an unbeliever, the marriage is not over. If the unbelieving partners is willing to respect the believer, they must stay together. In this context Paul says that the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband and the other way around. Who knows how the Lord may use this relationship? (See also 1 Peter 3:1) However, if the unbelieving partners makes serving the Lord impossible, then a separation can come about.

In the end of 1 Corinthians 7 the apostle addresses the question of a new marriage. The situation is that of a widow. She is allowed to marry anyone she wishes, but the new marriage must be in the Lord (vs.39).

This instruction the church takes seriously, as we see e.g. in Art. 63 of the Church Order where we stipulate that the consistory has to “ensure that members marry only in the Lord.”

What does the expression "in the Lord" indicate? To mention three aspects:

- the marriage relationship must be based on faith in the Lord;
John 15:4,5,7 “Remain in me, and I will remain in you. ... I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in Him, he will bear much fruit; ... If you remain in me and my words remain in you ...” To be “in” the Lord is to believe in him as the Christ of God.
- the marriage relationship must reflect the willingness to obey the Lord;
John writes “Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them” (1 John 3:24). This is also why the instructions for husbands and wives, parents and children are “in the Lord” (1 Cor.11:11; Eph.6:1; Col.3:18). Their obedience to these instructions shows that they are in the Lord.
- in all the trials they meet, husband and wife have to depend on the Lord.
In our fight against the schemes of the devil we need to be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power (Eph.6:10). This means that we must completely rely on him. “Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain. (1 Cor.15:58) This dependence on the Lord shows in a humble attitude.

More aspects could be mentioned, but these three already show that believing in the Lord and obedience to the Lord is central for every Christian marriage. The instruction of art 63 C.O. is fully in line with this.

Another passage in the New Testament that highlights the importance of marriage is Ephesians 5:22-33. This passage highlights the “bigger picture,” the unique relationship between Christ and the church. It teaches us that marrying “in the Lord” is fundamental for a Christian marriage. It is in Christ that we see our place as husband or wife. It is by the Spirit of Christ that we can obey these instructions. The teaching of the Bible is clear, we must marry in the Lord and the Lord is opposed to mixed marriages.

4.3. Objections

As they deal with mixed courtships, elders can run into several objections. A few are mentioned and addressed here.

Objection 1

“But I am not dating an unbeliever, he/she just happens to be non Canadian Reformed. What’s wrong with that?” Or the non-member can challenge the elders, “do you mean that I am not a believer?” What do we do with this objection? What if the non-member claims to be a believer (though perhaps not going to church) or belongs to a church we do not recognize as faithful? Would we be opposed to such a relationship because we must marry in the Lord? Yes we would because to marry in the Lord indeed includes unity in church membership. We have to keep in mind that “in the Lord” involves obedience to the Lord, who is the Head of the Church. The New Testament speaks about the Lord Jesus as the Head of the Church. Christ even identifies himself with the Church. When Paul is stopped on his way to Damascus the Lord Jesus speaks to him and asks him, “Why are you persecuting me?” Paul was persecuting the church, but the Lord Jesus says that Paul is you are persecuting him. The church is the body of the Lord Jesus. There is a very close connection between Christ and the church. The church is the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. “In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.” (Eph.2:21) To marry in the Lord involves obedience to him. This obedience applies to every aspect of life. To use the words of Art. 28 BC, it is to submit ourselves to the instruction and discipline of the church, bend our “necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ, and serve the edification of the brothers and sisters ... as members of the same body.” Unity in marriage is based on unity in obedience to the Lord. This unity

comes out in being able to sit around the same Lord's Supper table. "There is one body and one Spirit ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph.4:4-6). "In the Lord" means belonging to Christ by true faith and showing this in serving the Lord as a living member of his church. Is this not what we promise when we make public profession of faith? The fourth question in the Form for the Public Profession of Faith reads as follows: "Fourth, do you firmly resolve to commit your whole life to the Lord's service as a living member of his Church?" The formulation of this fourth promise shows that serving the Lord with your whole life cannot be separated from being a living member of the church. The choice of a partner for life is certainly part of serving the Lord, and thus also part of being a living member of the church. It goes against this promise to marry someone who is not a member of the church. The central point is obedience from the heart to this instructions of the Lord.

Objection 2

"The words of 1 Cor.7 speak of marriage not of courtship. Though marriage is wrong, dating is not. It can even be a way to bring someone to church." It is true that 1 Cor 7 speaks of marriage. We should be aware of this and not simply equate mixed marriage with mixed courtship. This does not mean, however, that these words have nothing to say for courtship. On the contrary, since courtship has marriage as goal, the words of 1 Cor 7 have consequences for (all) courtships. The text focusses on the point when the relationship becomes permanent and cannot be undone anymore. The implication is: let this goal determine how you look at and prepare for marriage, including the choice of a partner for life. come this far. The words of 1 Cor.7 are then also of great importance for teaching our children. The message has to come across very clearly that you should not build a lasting relationship with someone when you are not united in the Lord. The purpose of dating is not to bring someone to church, but to prepare for the task of, under his blessing, raising God's children. At the same time it is very well possible that by means of contact with a boy or girl in the church the Lord brings someone to the faith. In our approach we should not make this impossible.

Objection 3

"But there are others who did it and look their relationships turned out OK." Again it is true that there those who have joined in this way and have become faithful and reliable church members. We can be thankful that the Lord has led their lives this way. It must also be said that there are also those who have left the church because of a mixed courtship. However, numbers is not the point. We confess that nothing happens by chance. We also maintain that this does not take away our responsibility. What the LORD has determined in his (hidden) will is not our norm. He wants us to obey his revealed will. In Deut 29:29 the Lord makes this very clear.

At the same time we need to stress that the warning against mixed courtships is not to be seen and understood as a condemnation of all those who have joined the congregation after a mixed courtship. They are not second class members! When they joined, they were asked for the reason. We trust that it was for the right reason. A relationship with a boy or girl is no reason. The only reason is the willingness to obey the Lord Jesus. Once they join they are fully a part of the communion of the saints. The fact that they were received and welcomed into the congregation is not to be seen as an approval of their initial relationship. If the Lord uses a relationship that started in this way for a good purpose then we can be thankful for what He has given. At the same time this does not annul the clear command of the Lord. We have to obey the revealed will of the Lord. In preaching, teaching and home visits we have to keep on reminding the congregation of the revealed will of our God.

4.4 How to deal with it?

How are the elders to deal with a mixed courtship? The following points are meant to give direction to the approach of the consistory. First a few general points will be listed and then more specific.

1. Elder must be active and pro-active.

Consistory work tends to go rather slowly. Without wanting to delay the process, yet a few month can easily pass before a follow-up visit can be made. Visits have to be reported on and the Consistory meets once per month. After this is can take time before the elders can meet again with the couple involved. In the meantime the relationship is developing. The sooner the elders deal with it and the more they are “on the ball” the better it is. The purpose of this paper is to help the elders in this, for it spells out the approach we would like to take. By agreeing to this paper, the elders can quicker address the matter. Having said this, the elders have to make sure that repeated visits take place for this will show either willingness or unwillingness.

Not only are the elders to be active, they have to be pro-active as well. By meeting regularly the single members in their ward the elders establish rapport with them. This can prevent delay in the process due to unfamiliarity. If an elder hardly ever meets a member but comes with strong admonitions when there is a courtship, the admonitions will not have the same affect as when there is a relationship of trust. The elders have to be pro-active in another way as well, in dealing with when visiting families with teen agers. Explaining what the Bible teaches about marriage and courtship will be helpful for later in life.

2. The teaching has to be clear.

The elders have to make clear that a mixed courtship is not in line with what the Lord requires. The preaching and catechism instruction has to explain this as well. As elders we have to address it when we visit the families in their homes. The teaching concerning marrying in the Lord is part and parcel of teaching that we have to live in the Lord. This starts at home with the parents. It starts at a very basic level, namely teaching children to build relationships with other that are “in the Lord.” This applies to the relationships at home between siblings, but also to friendships at school or in the neighbourhood. To give a consistent message is important and will help later on in life. To be more concrete, parents have to teach their children that in dealing with their friends in school or in the neighbourhood they have to put into practice what it means to be “in the Lord.” We do not teach that our children are better than others, but they have to learn to show in their lives that they belong to Jesus Christ. By baptism they are distinguished from the children of unbelievers (L.D. 27, q/a 74). Clear instruction on this can be very helpful for the rest of the child's life. It also conveys a message about dating and courtship. You do not build a dating relationship with someone who is not one with you in the faith. The opposite is true as well. If parents give the message that there is no difference with others when it comes to neighbourhood and sports, then it becomes harder to understand why dating is out of the picture. The elders have to remind the parents of their duty in this regard and if need be, instruct the parents.

3. This teaching has to be applied in a pastoral way.

If we all obeyed the Lord the way we should, elders would not have to deal with difficult situations. However, we live in a broken world. This is not an excuse for sin, but we need to keep it in mind when dealing with a situation that is wrong and working towards correcting it. We have to be clear in our teaching and pastoral in our application of it. God himself gives the example in this regard. He never “watered down” his teaching and instruction for his people. At the same time he showed so much patience in working with his people. We know our God as the holy God. His law reveals his holiness. He revealed his will very clearly. We see this e.g. in the book of Deuteronomy. But we know him also as the God who keeps in mind that we are frail, and is willing to work with sinners like us. He is indeed slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The books of Judges, Samuel and Kings show how patient the LORD is. In the New Testament we see the same approach for example in Hebrews 5:11-14.

Certainly in the area of marriage the LORD allowed things in Israel, of which he himself says later, it shouldn't have been that way. The Lord Jesus refers in that context to the hardness of their hearts. Growth in obedience doesn't happen instantly, but takes time and patience. Yet in all of this the LORD did not change his teaching about marriage. What this means is that in preaching and teaching we have to be

clear as what the Lord has revealed. At the same time we have to be patient and persistent in applying it. Patience in applying it is not a denial of the teachings of the Bible and patience may not obscure the direction the Lord gives in his Word. Patience recognizes that the congregation is not made up of perfect people, but of sinners who have promised to live by the commands of the Lord. The willingness is not equally strong in all members. Elders have the task to encourage and stimulate this in a loving way. The question office bearers are faced with is, How do we in this situation work with all involved to bring about obedience to the teaching of the Lord?

4.5 The elders have to meet with all involved.

It is important to meet as soon as possible with a member who is in a mixed courtship. It is also important to meet with the parents as well as with the non-member. In these visits we have to be honest and open in a pastoral way.

The Member

The elders have to begin with making sure that their information is correct. If it is and the member is dating someone outside the church they have to find out whether the member is aware that a mixed courtship is not pleasing to the Lord. If the member is not aware of it, teaching and instruction is in place. The elders have to show the member what the Lord requires in his word. It has to be made clear that at this point the relationship is not "in the Lord." The relationship is not in line with what the Lord expects of a relationship. Does the member understand this and is the member willing to acknowledge this?

If the member is aware that the Lord is not pleased with a mixed courtship, the question is in place why the member has gone ahead, allowing his emotional relationship to go ahead of the relationship with the Lord. Personal feelings are placed before the demand of the Lord. It gives the impression that one will listen when he agrees and likes what he hears, but goes his own way when he doesn't like what the consistory says. This could be a reason for concern. In the first commandment we are demanded to forsake all creatures rather than to do the least thing against God's will (see Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 34). In the second commandment we are required to serve God in accordance to His word, and not in the way we think is best. The call of the Lord Jesus is radical: "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me." (Matthew 10:37-38). When dealing with a communicant member the promises made at profession of faith can be brought into the discussion as well. Does the member that having this relationship goes against the promise made?

In meeting with the member, the elders will hopefully get a better understanding of the spiritual life of the member and the kind of relationship the member is involved in. Is the member willing to admit that it was wrong to start this relationship and is the member willing to bring this relationship in line with what the Lord asks? In this way the elders can hopefully also determine whether they should indicate that the relationship should be terminated. If there is not the willingness to admit wrong and to bring the relationship in line with what the Lord requires, then further admonitions are in place. This should not be left till a later point. The longer the relationship is in existence, the harder it can be do terminate it. Teaching and instructing with the Word of God is an essential part of these visits. It has to be clear to the members that what the elders require is what the Lord requires. Faith and the obedience of faith is worked by the Holy Spirit through the use to the Word.

The parents

The role of the parents is of such importance that when there is a relationship with a person who does not belong to the church, the elders should, if at all possible, involve the parents. Without question, this must be done when the child is a non-communicant member and still lives at home because the child is under the authority and responsibility of the parents. Involving the parents is also important when the child is a

communicant member and still lives at home, though the elders will deal more directly with the child who is a communicant member and appeal to the promises made. If the child is no longer at home, the elders do well to have contact with the parents. Elders need the support of the parents, just as the parents need the support of the elders. This will strengthen the instruction and admonition. The opposite is true too. If the parents do not teach their children "to marry only in the Lord" then the work of the elders becomes difficult. If the parents justify the actions of their children after the facts, the supervision by the elders becomes more difficult.

It is not uncommon that the consistory finds out about a courtship when it is already a fact and the parents, perhaps reluctantly, have already acquiesced to it. It can also happen that the parents are unaware of a relationship, but others in the family are, however, they do not make an issue of it. It is important to address this. Why were parents and/or family members not more vigilant? Why did they not involve the elders sooner? What can we do to encourage such vigilance? If the elders find out after the facts, it becomes difficult to convince a member not to enter into such a relationship. The relationship is already a fact and to demand that the relationship be terminated doesn't sound very friendly. As a result it can happen that the elders are expected to make the best of the situation, or even that they are blamed for a negative approach because they oppose the relationship. In all this we do well to realize that the cause of it all is that the member has entered into the relationship against the advice of elders and hopefully also parents.

The non member

A courtship involves two parties. Thus when a mixed courtship comes about the elders are no longer dealing with one but with two persons, though the second is not under their supervision. The non-member cannot be blamed for this relationship. We welcome guests to the church, also guests who come because they feel attracted to a young man or lady in the church. In dealing with our member and admonishing him, the impression can easily be given to the non member that we do not welcome him or her. To the person who is not a member the concerns of parents and elders may seem strange, even come across as a personal rejection or as a negative judgement on the non member's character. The elders have a task toward the non-member to assure that the latter is not the case and explain why they oppose this courtship. The person has to feel welcome in the worship services. The church has to make clear its willingness to teach and instruct the non-member.

Questions

Dealing with mixed courtships is a pastoral matter and will vary from situation to situation. Each visit and approach will be shaped by aspects that are specific to that situation, making it difficult to give general direction how to conduct these meetings. Yet some guidelines can be helpful.

1. It will be helpful to first get a good understanding of the situation:
 - Who is the other person?
age, family situation, work etc.
 - How did they meet each other?
This can tell you something about the persons and their relationship
 - How long has this relationship lasted?
Have the elders been kept in the dark for some time?
 - Is our member attending the church of the other?
 - Is the non member attending our services?

2. Questions about mixed courtships.
 - What does it mean that we must marry in the Lord?
 - Why is the Lord so opposed to mixed marriages?
 - Is the member aware of the position of the consistory?

- If not - then teaching is in place
If yes - then why did you go ahead?
- What did the parents teach?
 - If the parents have warned against it, why go ahead?
 - Was advice asked from elders prior to beginning the relationship?
If no - why not?; If yes - why not follow it?

3. Now more specifically about the member who entered into this relationship
- Do you realize that what you did was not in line with what the Lord requires?
 - Does this grieve you?
 - Do you realize what you have done to the non-member?
 - Are you willing to bring your relationship in line with what the Lord requires? How can we do this?

4.5 Caution

As elders we have to be pastoral. To be pastoral includes to have a eye for the dynamics of the situation. Thus a few words of caution are in place:

- It is easy to end up in an adversarial situation. It is our task to keep the ways of communication open as much as possible.
- Let the Word of God speak, so that it doesn't come across as elders using their authority to enforce their rules.
- In dealing with the parents we have to be aware that it can be painful for parents to deal with the wrongs of their children. Parents can excuse or justify their child.
- We must be aware that as elders we may come across too mechanical or even rigid. It is easier to deal with someone else's child than your own. We have to be clear and firm, without making it impossible for the member involved to open up and admit wrong.
- We should be prepared to admit that we have not approached it in the best way or have come across in the wrong way.
- It can be that the relationship between this child and his parents has been strained in the past and the parents do not know how to approach their child. A rigid approach will not help to reach these parents and their child.
- The elder can be influenced in his view and approach by what has happened or is happening in his own family.
- Do not under estimate the emotions of a person who feels that there is no partner in the church, who has been hurt by previous situations or who feels that he or she may end up alone.
- Do not fall too quickly for the excuse, "We are only friends." A courtship has marriage as purpose.

All these elements show that we need to ask the Lord for wisdom and insight to deal with these situations in a way that pleases Him and benefits those involved.

4.6. Break it off?

Should elders say to a member in a mixed courtship that he has break off the relationship? We have to avoid easiness on two sides, easiness in simply forbidding any relationship and easiness in accepting whatever a member does. If there is no willingness to obey the Lord and to bring the relationship in line with his will, the elders may have to advise that the relationship be terminated. This is certainly the case when beside the mixed courtship there are other issues involved as well, e.g. church attendance or life style. If, however, there is willingness to become obedient then we have the task to work with this. In each situation the elders have to judge what is the best. It may be wise to ask the couple to slow down their relationship lest their emotions will run ahead of the process to show willingness to submit. Cooperation with the parents is essential in this regard.

If the non member indicates a willingness to submit to the discipline and instruction of the church, the elders have to work with this. The non member has to submit for the right reasons. It takes time to ascertain this. The elders have to give non member also a realistic opportunity to show his or her willingness. For example the elders can indicate that they will be monitoring the church attendance and in their visits with the non-member will speak about the sermons. Other examples are instruction, involvement in church life, attending study societies. These suggestions have to be realistic, so that the non members feels a sincere willingness from our side that he or she becomes part of the congregation. It would also be helpful the involve the congregation in dealing with the couple. Inviting the non member should be encouraged and the name of the person made known to the congregation. Ongoing contact with the couple and encouraging contact with the congregation will help the non-member to feel at home and provide the support this couple needs. Under the blessing of the Lord we may together stand in awe of the wonderful mercy of our God and the ways by which he draws people into fellowship with him.

5. Marriage Course

As part of the preparations for marriage the couples participate in a marriage course. It can be done with several couples at the same time, or just with one couple. This course is usually taught by the minister. In case the church is vacant it could be done by elders as well. This course is part of their task to ensure that couples marry in the Lord.

The course could address the following:

1. Marriage
 - the meaning and purpose of marriage
 - Bible passages that speak about marriage
 - divorce?
2. Communication
 - what is communication?
 - importance of listening
 - how to deal with misunderstandings and problems in relationships
 - abuse
3. Family Life
 - explain the Banns
 - what is the function of a family
 - the extended family
 - task of husband and wife
 - aspects of family life:
 - family worship, atmosphere in the home, finances, work, entertainment, church, school.
4. Marriage and Sexuality
 - what does the Bible teach about sexuality?
 - connection between marriage and sexuality
 - marriage and children
 - honeymoon

6. Engagement and sexuality

We have seen that marriage is a precious gift of God and must be held in honour by all. It is a gift with a specific purpose. This has to be taught in church, by means of preaching and catechism instruction. It also has to be taught at home by the parents. We live in a society that is pre-occupied with sexuality and has no difficulty with marital unfaithfulness. In such an environment we must teach our children what God says in His Word about sexuality and marriage. As elders we should not be afraid to address this at the home visit. We may ask about the way the parents prepare their children for marriage and how they help them

deal with the information that is available in the world. A question about the use of the media is not out of place.

Sexuality is a gift of the Lord. It must therefore be received and can be enjoyed in obedience to Him. Sin has destroyed so much when it comes to the use of sexuality. Sexuality includes more than sexual intercourse. It involves how one deals with his own body and the body of the other. The Bible teaches that the sexual union between a man and a woman belongs to marriage. The marriage bond is the basis on which a man and a woman may give themselves to the other, and in which the conception of life can be received with thanksgiving. Couples who engage in pre-marital sex go against the will of the Lord. They rob themselves of something very special and have to deal with feelings of guilt and shame. Although contraceptives can prevent the conception of life, it does not change the fact that it robs the marriage of something very special. It is not enough to say that intercourse before marriage is wrong, we must also help our children deal with sexuality as a whole. That is especially the task of the parents. As overseers we can encourage the parents in this regard.

At times it happens that an unmarried couple expects a child. Usually the couple approaches the elders/minister to confess their sin. The elders must realize that there is a disciplinary aspect as well as a pastoral aspect to this. The disciplinary aspect deals with the sin and the repentance from sin. The pastoral aspect deals with how do handle the situation and guide the couple involved in a scriptural manner.

When dealing with such a couple it is important to ask direct and straight forward questions. It makes a difference whether we are dealing with a couple falling in sin after a long struggle, or a couple whose relationship centres around sexuality. In how far has this sin affected their mutual relationship? Has the one forced this on the other, for example? How have they brought this before the Lord? And how have they spoken about this with the parents? What does it mean to repent?

As elders we must keep in mind that it is easy to obtain contraceptives. This couple that has fallen into sin will perhaps be ridiculed by others who "played it safe". It is important to deal with this as well. The elders should not be naive. We may direct the couple to the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. We all sin, we all have to learn to confess our sin. Then we may know that the relationship with the Lord is restored again.

The Church Order says that the consistory shall determine whether the benefit of the congregation requires that the repentance is announced. Since the results of this sin become public, it can be beneficial to announce both the sin and the names of those involved. The congregation may no hold the sin against this couple anymore. The importance and function of such an announcement should be discussed with the couple.

The question whether the two should get married should receive ample attention. Just because there has been sexual intercourse and life has been conceived does not automatically mean that a marriage has to follow. The basis of the marriage should not be the expectation of life, but the willingness to enter a marriage "in the Lord". Although it is preferable that the two marry, it can happen that they don't or that the marriage is postponed. The couple should be aware too that a marriage is not "of course".

7. The Wedding

7.1. Preparation for the wedding

The couple who plans to get married usually notifies the elders. The overseers have already spoken with the couple or will as yet do so, and if the report of that visit is positive they will indicate to the couple that they have no objections.

For the Reformed churches marriage not a sacrament. In the Reformation it was therefore no longer seen as a duty of the church but rather of the state to solemnize marriages. The church would ask a blessing over this. This was never fully realized in practise. Although it was a civil act, yet the church was involved. Under French occupation this changed, the solemnization became the responsibility of the state. The European countries, such as Great Britain (and its colonies) that were not subjected to French occupation kept the practice as it was. This is why we still have it that the minister solemnizes marriages. In regard to the Canadian law, the ministers is authorized by the government to do this. As churches we have also stipulated that he can only do this when the consistory gives its approval. This also means that if a couple gets married before the justice of the peace the church will accept such a marriage as valid.

7.2. Banns

Two Sundays prior to the wedding the banns are announced. The civil law states that it must be done at least five days before the wedding in an official gathering. As churches we have the custom to announce the Banns two weeks in a row. If no objections are brought in the minister can sign the Form that indicates this. If the marriage takes place in a sister church, the consistory has to sign a form that functions as proof for the publication of the Banns.

7.3. Ceremony

The Church Order allows for the solemnization to take place in a private ceremony as well as in a church service. The majority of weddings are done in private ceremonies. If it were a church service the council would have an input in the order. As a private ceremony much of the order depends on the couple and the officiating minister. The ceremony consists of two essential parts, the address and the solemnization. In the address the word of God is explained and applied to the situation. Some ministers allow couples to choose the text, other ministers do not. During the ceremony the couple will receive a wedding Bible. The church to which the bride belongs is responsible for the wedding bible. It is given by the minister or by an elder.

7.4. Follow up

When the couple that is married leaves the congregation to take up residence elsewhere and join a sister church, no follow up is necessary. When the couple lives in this congregation, it is good to make a visit as ward elders to welcome them as a family in the ward some months after they are married. At this visit their involvement in the congregation and financial obligations can be discussed as well.

7.5. Miscellaneous

Many aspects of a wedding ceremony are coloured by culture and fashion. This is why you see changes over time as well. As such these changes do not have to be wrong. They too must be judged by the Word of God. At the same time we must be vigilant as well. To give two examples. A stag and doe is normal in our society. It is a fund raiser for the bridal couple organized by the best man or friends. It often involves drinking and dancing. It is starting to happen in our circles too, also involving excessive drinking, worldly music and dancing. Elders can address this in a visit with the couple prior to the wedding.

Another example is the need for a honeymoon. It is seen by many as an integral part of the wedding. This is fed by the media which likes to portray an unrealistic image of the honeymoon. Also among us it is more and more considered to be part of a wedding to go to far away places. The result is that the Sunday is often used for travelling or away from the church. Also this is something that should be addressed by the minister in the marriage course, or the elders at their visits.

8. Marriage and Children

The Bible speaks very highly about marriage. God gave marriage to mankind so that man would not be alone. The LORD also gave marriage to increase the human race. The Bible speaks no less highly about the gift of children as it does about the gift of marriage. The Bible teaches us that children are a gift from

the LORD. Psalm 127 vs.3 reads: "Lo, sons are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward." And Psalm 128:3 says "Your wife will be like a fruitful vine, within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Lo, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the LORD." Clearly children are seen as a gift from God.

Children are a gift from God because life is a gift from God. The beginning of each life is a miracle of God's almighty power. We know about this beginning more than previous generations because of the insights of medical science. That should make us stand in awe of the miracle of life even more. Modern man uses the knowledge of this beginning to control that beginning. Terms such as "planning," and "making children" are used. There is a danger in this. Life is and remains the gift of God. We confess the Holy Spirit to be the Lord and Giver of life. It is He who creates that beginning. It is not an accident, but His work.

God gave a helper to man, so that together they could fulfil the mandate of filling this earth. Indeed God could have taken stones and made children from them, but He did not. He ordained it this way. He would crown the love of husband and wife in the gift of children. Thus the human race is to be increased. God's providence involves the actions, the love of husband and wife. God also put boundaries in place here, e.g. in that the woman's childbearing years extend to a certain time of her life.

These children come into this world as helpless little creatures. If they would be left alone they would certainly die. A child needs parents. Thus the Lord in His wisdom made it so that a child would receive parents, first of all to take care of him, to feed him, to cloth him etc. But as the child grows us then the task expands to instructing, teaching, disciplining, and preparing him to function in God's creation. Normally speaking a child needs the protection of a home, the solid foundation of a marriage in order to grow up in the fear of the LORD. This is how the child will grow up to become a responsible person in church, and society.

In Israel the gift of children was also connected with the coming of Christ. In Paradise God has connected the coming redemption to the gift of children, for the seed of the woman would destroy the seed of the serpent. To have no children was a shame, for that meant that your family would not be there when the Messiah would come, and therefore the Lord made rules that if a man died without having children his brother had to marry his wife, or that if a man only had daughters the family name could continue through them. To mention one more example, the Lord stipulated that one who was recently married did not have to go into the army for a year, in this way he would not die without having raised a child.

We have dealt with marriage and with the gift of children. Now what about the connection between the two? Let's go back to the purpose of marriage. We saw there was a twofold purpose, namely, to be together and to receive children. Keep in mind that this is a twofold purpose. We are not talking about one purpose. If you enter marriage only to receive children and regard the being together as less important then you are mistaken. If you see the love between husband and wife only as a means to conceive children then you hurt your relationship. On the other hand we should not separate these two either, as if you can have the one but not the other, for then you separate what God in His wisdom has connected. The Lord gives love between husband and wife, and also gives the gift of sexuality to express this. At the same time He uses this intimate contact for the conception of new life.

The church of Rome has traditionally emphasized that the purpose of sexual intercourse is the conception of children. This leads to a negative approach to sexuality, as if that in itself is not good and can only be good when its purpose is the conception of new life. On the other hand, in our society it is very normal to want the pleasures of sexuality, but not the consequences or responsibilities of a new life. It is very easy to obtain contraceptives. The danger here is that sexuality becomes lust.

Since children are conceived through sexual intercourse, we should then also conclude that such intercourse is not proper for engaged couples, or for a boy and a girl that are going out. There is in that relationship no framework to receive a child, then a child should not be conceived either. God Himself tells this, a man shall leave his father and mother, cleave to his wife, and become one flesh, in that order. It is easy to prevent conception, there is the pill, condoms are easily available, and no one will know that intercourse has taken place. God knows. He has given the gift of sexuality within the bond of marriage, when we separate what He has put together His gift will not be a blessing for us.

This connection between marriage and children as an order given by God also means that we believe that it is not right to want to be a single parent. Also that is happening in our world. A woman decides to have a baby, but does not want a husband. This will seriously harm our society.

How about it if you want to get married but do not think it wise to have children. There are many reasons given for this. To give an example, a couple has been going out for some years already. He is studying and cannot pay for a family at this point. To give up the study means to let go of a future career. She is earning an income to pay for his studies. If she would become pregnant she could no longer pay. To wait longer with marriage could lead to many frustrations or sinful practices. So why not marry and decide not to have children for a while. Another might say, my wife is just beginning her career, now to give this up and have children would be unfair, doesn't the Lord want us to use our talents.

Why is it that these questions come up today? It cannot be denied that previous generations did not deal with it, the way we do. Yet, they had their difficulties too. In fact if you compare, we have it better. We have better care, better housing etc. Could it be that the better we have it, the harder it becomes to trust in the Lord? Or, do we ask these questions because this is what we hear and read in the world that we live in? We are children of our time. Our society is very open, two children no more. It even legalizes abortion, the evidence of selfishness. Now we do not agree with what this world says and does, but yet some of this thinking we can take over, some of that selfishness. We may let the number of children be determined by what we regard as quality life. We must be aware of the wiles of the devil. It is good to discuss this question but also be prepared to say, that the reason for these questions could come from worldly ways of thinking. Sometimes we look too much at the answer, not enough at the question.

There is no text in the Bible that says you must have so many children, nor do we read that a couple may postpone the receiving of children for a while. Yet the teaching of the Bible is clear. Marriage and the conception of children are connected by God Himself. If we separate what God has joined together we must have good, biblical reasons. Reasons that can stand up before the Lord. The reasons given above are not good reasons. Though it may not be intended this way, they come down to selfishness, wanting the pleasures of marriage, but not the responsibility. The Bible says, marriage means to receive children, the Form for Marriage says the same. At a marriage it is even put in prayer before the Lord, "if it pleases Thee to give them children confirm Thy covenant to them and to their seed."

If a couple doesn't want to take the responsibility of receiving children then they should not marry. If they feel it is not proper to wait with marriage, then they should take the consequences and trust that with the help of the Lord we come through them. It may mean changing your studies for the time being, or it may mean to ask for financial help from family or other sources. When you enter marriage you do so in the confession of God's strength, then you may also rely on His help. When in the Form for Marriage we quote Ps. 128, blessed is every one who fears the LORD, who walks in His ways! You shall be happy and it shall be well with you, then we are dealing with the Word of God. Who would dare to say that these words are not true?

In the discussion about these matters you notice at times that the situation in a marriage is used to prove that a couple is allowed to say no to children in the beginning of their marriage. This comparison is not

correct. The question whether you can enter marriage while not wanting to receive children, is a different question than when in a marriage we are faced with the question how to fulfil our responsibilities before the Lord. In the latter, not marrying is not an option anymore. It is too simplistic to put the two situations at the same level.

Also married couples have to realize that God has joined together the loving of each other and the receiving of children. Also they must realize that to receive children is a mandate. We should not be too quick in saying, sure we understand, you should not have anymore. The Bible speaks in so many ways about the blessing of children and the help He gives to those who rely upon Him. A married couple should also be aware of the pressures of this society, and let their thinking and deeds be ruled by God's Word.

Yet, it can happen that a married couple has to come to the conclusion that it would be better not to receive more children. This usually happens when the physical or mental condition of the woman is seriously effected. To come to this decision would require proper medical advice. It would be good also to involve the office-bearers of the church in this. If we stand right before God then it should be possible to speak about this with the servants of the Lord. There is no standard rule for office-bearers how to respond to this. It is a personal matter, a matter which the couple has to be able to face the Lord with their decisions. As office-bearers we can help them in this.

9. Being Single

To have to go through life alone is not easy, especially when others are married and have children. These single members can be easily hurt by insensitive comments made by those married. We are not referring to a teenager who doesn't have a boy or girl friend, but adult members in the congregation who do not have a husband or wife.

Although marriage is an institution of God which pleases Him, those who remain single their whole life are not disobedient. Under God's providential care it can happen that one never receives a partner. This is not necessarily their fault, but God's providence. When He places this on our road, He will give us His help as well. The thought that one may be left without a partner should never make one look for a partner outside the church.

In the second place although being single is not always easy, also single members of the church can have fulfilling lives. They are taken up within the church of Christ and there receive a task. In addition let us not forget that we are on the way to a new earth where marriage will not exist anymore. That means for us today, although marriage is a gift of God, you can also serve Him thankfully without it.

10. Marriage Difficulties and Divorce

We have seen the beauty of marriage. However, marriage is not always peaches and cream. There can be strife and confrontation. True, there are many marriages that are happy marriages, also when at times there are disagreements. There are also marriages where it seems impossible that husband and wife live together. There are marriages which have been broken.

Now every marriage has its ups and downs. The Form is quite realistic when it says those who are married will face trouble, experience difficulties and afflictions. It is not for nothing that husband and wife are told to heartily forgive each other their sins and shortcomings. We are sinful human beings, therefore no marriage relation will last, unless we daily repent and live from the grace of God. No marriage is perfect, because we are all imperfect. No husband and wife are truly compatible, the grace of God has to help us to remain faithful to our promises. The more we know ourselves to be sinners before God, the more we are willing to forgive the other. In case one of the partners is unwilling to forgive, the question is legitimate whether he or she sees his or her own sins. But every marriage has its difficulties. In a good, functional marriage the difficulties are overcome and even become stepping stones

to a better understanding of each other. In a dysfunctional marriage the difficulties, though perhaps ignored, form a stumbling block and it bears the marriage down.

The Form for Marriage calls marriage a "state." The word state is not very current anymore, but it points to a position you have in life. Think e.g. of the previous centuries which knew different states in life, you had the nobility, and the common people. Once you were born as a noble man you would always remain a noble man, that was your state in life, a place that was assigned to you. So also marriage is a state, it is a position which God assigns to husband and wife.

We stress this because all too easily can people approach marriage from the experience of the people involved, their love and dedication. Now certainly there should be love, but marriage is much more than a feeling of belonging together. It is a state of belonging together. A state does not depend on what I like or don't like about it, but on what God demands. As long as you are not married no one forces you to love the other. This changes when you enter the state of marriage. Then you come under the command to love each other. It becomes your duty.

In practice this means that husband and wife have to make it a conscious effort to love the other. To be faithful to each other does not come by itself. Their aim may not be to get as much as possible, but to give as much as possible, for then you will receive in return. This is why it can be wrong to ask the question whether two love each other when they have major problems in their marriage. It might be better to ask whether they are committed to their vows and are willing to live according to what they have sworn. And when they feel that the love is not as strong anymore as before, then together they must work towards growth. This is our duty. Of course you can only do this when together you bow before our Father in heaven. For as heirs of His grace we will receive His aid and protection, even when we least expect it.

The command to love is something the world cannot understand. It sees love simply as an emotion. You cannot command it. If it is there, fine, if it isn't, then you separate, or divorce. It does not take much to be divorced from your spouse. As believers we become more and more confronted with the question, are we allowed to divorce when it doesn't work anymore? The answer is very simply. The Bible clearly indicates that God hates divorce. Marriage is not a temporary agreement, but a lifelong bond. Why would we otherwise pledge that we will love the other and be faithful to him or her, for as long as we shall live? And the question whether divorce for certain reasons is allowed really bypasses the main thrust of God's Word. God loves marriage too much to give us a whole list of regulations in His Word on which basis we can divorce. With all discussions about divorce we should always remember, God hates it. He hates it so much that if it happens that two persons end up be separate they are not allowed to marry again. Paul says they must remain separate or be reconciled. Paul bases this on the teachings of our Lord which we find in Matthew 19. What God has joined together, let no man put asunder. And whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery.

The Pharisees come to the Lord Jesus to test Him, and ask Him whether it is permissible to divorce your wife. The Lord plainly says No. When God brings two people together, who can separate them? Only God, by death. The Pharisees have their answer ready. Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to put her away?

But the Pharisees misused Moses. Notice what the Lord answers: Moses allowed divorce because of your hardness of heart. The Pharisees said Moses commanded this certificate of divorce, the Lord answers, He allowed it. That means it was in existence already. Moses left it, for the sake of the hardness of heart. It is a shame that it had to be allowed. This brings us to Deuteronomy 24: 1 - 4. When you read these verses carefully then you will find that the main part of the sentence is at the end, the former husband may not remarry his former wife. A return is impossible, after she has become the wife of another. Moses does not make a command regarding this letter. He was confronted with the terrible reality that people divorced

and did as if marriage could be broken at any time. Moses knew he could not change this overnight. Therefore the LORD gave rules to control a chaotic situation. Indeed that law was there. But says the Lord Jesus, it should never have been there. From the beginning it was not so. God hates divorce. He showed that also in Dt. 24 when He limits divorce as much as possible. The Pharisees misused this rule. The opening Moses allowed they saw as an opportunity to end marriages. But Christ brings His people back to that beginning: no divorce, no second marriage.

The Lord says more, whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, except for unchastity, or adultery. The Lord gives an exception to the rule that speaks about divorce and remarriage. The whole matter is different when you are dealing with adultery. In the Old Testament adultery was punished by death. The Lord so ended one's life and marriage by death. Why such severe punishment? Because marriage is such an intimate relationship. To have a sexual relationship with a third party breaks the marriage. It was customary in the days of the Lord to use the certificate of divorce for adultery. The death penalty was not used anymore. Christ still says, in case of adultery you marriage is broken so completely that a divorce and remarriage is permissible.

On the basis of this the Reformed Churches have always maintained that adultery can result in divorce and the so-called innocent party is allowed to remarry. It can result. It does not have to. It is always better to be reconciled with each other. Also after adultery has been committed. Think of the comparison of Eph. 5. Husband and wife are compared to Christ and His Church. How often did not the LORD receive his Bride back after she had committed adultery with other gods? In addition, we should be careful in using the expression "innocent party" because often it very difficult to say who is guilty and who is innocent. The man who commits adultery can do so because his wife ignores him.

Within the Reformed tradition there is also another situation in which divorce and remarriage can be permitted, when one of the partners is an unbeliever. To be more precise when the unbelieving partner demands from the believer to give up the faith, or walks away because he or she cannot live with a believer. Paul says in 1 Cor 7, such a person is not bound. As long as the unbelieving party agrees to live together then you must stay together, but if it becomes impossible to live your life as a child of the Lord, the believer is not bound. There is disagreement about this word "not bound." Some say it means she is free of the man and can remarry. Others believe that it means the believers should not become a slave of the unbeliever, let him or her go.

We may conclude the following: Marriage cannot be broken by husband or wife. Only death separates them. God hates divorce. He commands love and faithfulness. When there are problems in marriage husband and wife have to bow before the command of God. Do we then ask the impossible? No, for God never asks from us, what He does not promise to us, first of all. If it does not work then this is never to be attributed to a lack of God's grace, but to the stubbornness of our sinful nature. God has promised His help, and therefore we can fulfil His will. Yet it can happen that two persons cannot live together, in spite of their own willingness and all attempts to bring them together fail, and thus, end up separate. This is wrong, but at times there is no other way because of the brokenness of this world. However, these two are not allowed to remarry.

The elders of the church will be involved in such broken situations. They have to show pastoral care, be prepared to teach what a Christian marriage is all about and admonish if need be. For if husband or wife are unwilling to be reconciled discipline has to be applied on the basis of the sixth commandment. Also when two divorce whereas there is no adultery involved the church is called to admonish and call to repentance. Also in case the civil court pronounce two people divorced this does not mean that the church has to accept this. Then there is still the call to repent.

11. Our Place as Office-bearers

How do we as office-bearers have to deal with all this? We have to start with recognizing our limitations. We are office-bearers and not marriage counsellors. We have to be willing to refer couples to professionals. At the same time we have to see our strength. The Lord Jesus has entrusted us with the keys of His kingdom. We help, encourage or admonish with the Word of God.

As office-bearers we come to deal with marriage problems in one way or another. Often we get involved too late. This happens, because we do not know about it, because we are not sensitive to the symptoms, or because the people involved still cover up the problems. However, once we become aware of the problem, we are expected to solve it. At times when you try to help you get part of the blame too yet. On the whole it is best in a marriage dispute that we try to remain as neutral as possible. We do not help the couple with our immediate judgements about their disagreements, unless of course an obvious violation of God's law is involved. Laying blame is an easy way to evade the real problem. The two involved have to learn to communicate, to respect each other and understand each other.

Marriage trouble can also cause trouble in the consistory, perhaps of family relationships, or other ways. Marriage trouble can cause friction between churches, the one consistory will allow things the other does not. People with marriage problems tend to move from one congregation to the next. In addition, as office-bearers we should be careful that the troubles do not affect our own marriages. Seeing and hearing so much trouble should not take the joy out of our own relations. Nor, should we become cynical. We know it so well when it comes to others, but don't live up to it in our own marriages. In both instances we must realize that the key to a good relationship is not that we makes no mistakes, but that we live from the grace of God.

Our task as office-bearer starts already before marriage. Troubles in marriage often go back to difficulties in the engagement time. Our task is to make parents aware of how to talk with their teenage children, as well as speaking to couples ourselves. A home visit for a couple is not a luxury. In these discussions we should speak about their relationship, their perception and understanding of each other, and what binds them together. We must speak about the worship of God, prayer and studying God's Word. The desire to begin marriage in the Name of the Lord must be a real desire. We must speak about the command to love that comes in marriage, that God hates divorce, about the headship of man, the command to be fruitful and multiply. Though not always easy, also the sexual aspect of the marriage must be discussed. Troubles in marriage have roots also in the sexual relationship. Premarital sex is disastrous for a relationship.

The married couples need our help and encouragement as well. Prevention is also the best medicine here. When just married the couple has time for each other, but when they receive children then it can become too difficult and busy to have time for each other. Career can cause friction, as well as the upbringing of the children. In our home visits we should not be afraid to ask specific questions about the marriage. If the marriage is good they will appreciate these questions. If they refuse to answer, then there is something wrong.

How do we deal with situations where there are troubles? The first thing is listen and try to understand the situation. This means before saying what you think should be done, listen, and listen to both sides, try to place yourself into the other's situation and what makes them reason the way they do. Are they indeed disagreeing about the real issue, or is there a deeper problem in this marriage? In dealing with difficulties the Word of the Lord must be clearly applied. Marriage is a life long bond. God requires that husband and wife love each other and should be willing to forgive each other. We may tell them that to love each other, that is to live according to the promises that we have made. In case of a major rift we have to see whether from both sides there is willingness to work towards reconciliation. This reconciliation can take time but the willingness must be there, in line with the sixth commandment.

What is not allowed, nevertheless does happen. A husband and wife may end up separate. In light of 1 Cor. 7 we must say that this is wrong. That does not mean that we cannot have understanding for a situation, nor does it mean that we use the Word of God as a whip to put them together again. It may need a lot of wisdom, time. Even then it can happen that we come to the conclusion that the situation is unbearable and the partners must remain separate. Both should promise not to seek divorce, but use the time to work towards reconciliation.

Husband and wife must see their relationship as being "in the Lord." Problems in marriage are often related to problems in their lives with the Lord. Unwillingness to repent, hatred and anger, are often related to not seeing one's own sins before God. It is mandatory that as office-bearers we ask husband and wife how they see their relationship between them and God. We are not saying, if you believe all your problems will be solved, thus if you still have problems your faith is not strong enough. We put it the other way around, problems between two humans has often a deeper root, namely a problem in the communication with God. Do the husband and the wife see their place in marriage as a place before the Lord?

With regard to abuse in marriage, see chapter 3 - 4

Marriage is an institution of God. It is a wonderful gift of our Lord. However, our sins so often come in the way. Nevertheless the Lord does not demand the impossible when He says that marriage is a life long bond. Life long faithfulness is possible for those who live from God's grace, who daily confess their sins, who focus their eyes on the promises of Christ and His coming. They know that we are on the way to a new earth where there will be no marriage anymore, where we will celebrate the marriage feast of the Lamb.

12. Evaluation

- What are we doing as office-bearers to promote the honourable place of marriage?
- How do we speak about marriage at home visits?
- How do the parents instruct their children in regard to marriage and sexuality? What can we do to help them?
- Are there concerns with regard to the mandate to be fruitful and multiply?
- Are we vigilant enough when it comes to mixed courtships?
- Is there a marriage course in place? Does it cover the necessary areas? Do the couples participate in them? Are there any suggestions?
- Are there items you want to bring to the attention of the meeting? Why? What should be done about them?

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Outline

Chapter 2 - 8

Elders

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THE ELDER

Introduction

Article 2 of the Church Order reads: "The offices are those of the minister of the Word, of the elder and of the deacon." In this chapter we will deal with the office of the elder.

1. Office

When we speak of an office we refer to an official charge received from the Lord with the view of building up the congregation. An office has three components: a calling from the Lord, authority from the Lord and, a specific task for building up the congregation. The Lord Jesus as the Head of the church, has entrusted the care of His congregation in the hands of the overseers. The overseers are therefore servants of the Lord given to the congregation to take care of the congregation. We reject a democratic model, as if the office bearers are elected representatives and the members can tell them what to do. We also reject the dictatorial model, as if the office bearers can do what ever they want. Elders serve the Lord in serving the congregation.

2. Scripture

The LORD Himself takes care of His people as a Shepherd.

Ps 23:1

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.

Ezek 34:11-12

"For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness.

In the Old Testament the LORD entrusted elders with the care for His people.

Exod 3:16

"Go, assemble the elders of Israel and say to them, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers-- the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob-- appeared to me and said: I have watched over you and have seen what has been done to you in Egypt.

Num 11:16

The LORD said to Moses: "Bring me seventy of Israel's elders who are known to you as leaders and officials among the people. Have them come to the Tent of Meeting, that they may stand there with you.

These elders had to govern the people according to God's law. They spoke on behalf of the LORD.

Deut 27:1

Moses and the elders of Israel commanded the people: "Keep all these commands that I give you today.

Deut 31:9

So Moses wrote down this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and to all the elders of Israel.

The Bible also uses the term watchman in this regard. The watchman's duty is to obey the one who appoints him and warn the sinner.

Ezek 3:17-21

"Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to a wicked man, 'You will surely die,' and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his evil ways, he will die for his sin; but you will have saved yourself. "Again, when a righteous man turns from his righteousness and does evil, and I put a stumbling block before him, he will die. Since you did not warn him, he will die for his sin. The righteous things he did will not be remembered, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the righteous man not to sin and he does not sin, he will surely live because he took warning, and you will have saved yourself."

In the New Testament we read that the Lord Jesus calls Himself the Good Shepherd.

John 10:11

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

John 10:3

The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

John 10:14

"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me--

John 10:27

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.

After His resurrection the Lord Jesus gives the care of His flock in the hands of His apostles.

Matt 18:18

"I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

Eph 4:11-16

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

The apostles in turn appointed elders in each congregation.

Acts 14:23

Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.

Titus 1:5

The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.

They instructed these elders in their task, reminding them of their duties toward the Lord Jesus and the congregation.

1 Pet 5:1-4

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers-- not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

Acts 20:28

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.

The congregation has to recognize these elders as servants of the Lord.

Heb 13:17

Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.

Because of the importance of this task the churches had to take care that overseers were above reproach. An elder who is not above reproach would harm the name of the Church of the Lord, yes the honour of the Lord Himself.

1 Tim 3:1-13

Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap. Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well. Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.

Titus 1:5-9

The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you. An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless-- not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he

can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.

The task of the elders is described in terms of comforting, encouraging, instructing and admonishing.

1 Thes 2:11-12

For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

Acts 15:32

Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers.

1 Thes. 5:14

And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.

Elders are charged as good shepherds and faithful watchmen to be diligent in governing the church, in comforting the distressed and in admonishing the wayward. They have to take heed that the congregation abide by pure doctrine and lead a godly life.

3. Confessions, Church Order

3.1. Belgic Confession

The Belgic Confession mentions the elders in the articles dealing with the government of the church.

Article 30 The Government Of The Church

We believe that this true Church must be governed according to the Spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in His Word. There should be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments; there should also be elders and deacons who, together with the pastors, form the council of the Church.

Article 31 The Officers Of The Church

Ministers of the Word, in whatever place they are, have equal power and authority, for they are all servants of Jesus Christ, the only universal Bishop and the only Head of the Church. In order that this holy ordinance of God may not be violated or rejected, we declare that everyone must hold the ministers of the Word and the elders of the Church in special esteem because of their work, and as much as possible be at peace with them without grumbling or arguing.

3.2. Heidelberg Catechism

The task of the elders is referred to in the Catechism in connection with the admission to the Lord's Supper and the use of the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Q. 81. Who are to come to the table of the Lord?

A. Those who are truly displeased with themselves because of their sins and yet trust that these are forgiven them and that their remaining weakness is covered by the suffering and death of Christ, and who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and amend their life. But hypocrites and those who do not repent eat and drink judgment upon themselves.

Q.82. Are those also to be admitted to the Lord's supper who by their confession and life show that they are unbelieving and ungodly?

A. No, for then the covenant of God would be profaned and His wrath kindled against the whole congregation.

Therefore, according to the command of Christ and His apostles, the Christian church is duty-bound to exclude such persons by the keys of the kingdom of heaven, until they amend their lives.

Q.83. What are the keys of the kingdom of heaven?

A. The preaching of the holy gospel and church discipline. By these two the kingdom of heaven is opened to believers and closed to unbelievers.

Q.84. How is the kingdom of heaven open and closed by the preaching of the gospel?

A. According to the command of Christ, the kingdom of heaven is opened when it is proclaimed and publicly testified to each and every believer that God has really forgiven all their sins for the sake of Christ's merits, as often as they by true faith accept the promise of the gospel.

The kingdom of heaven is closed when it is proclaimed and testified to all unbelievers and hypocrites that the wrath of God and eternal condemnation rest upon them as long as they do not repent.

According to this testimony of the gospel, God will judge both in this life and in the life to come.

Q.85. How is the kingdom of heaven closed and opened by church discipline?

A. According to the command of Christ, people who call themselves Christians but show themselves to be un-christian 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.

3.3. Church Order about the Elder

The Church Order spells out the task of the elder (Art. 22), but there are many articles in which the elder comes in the picture.

- Art. 3 Calling
- Art. 22 The Office of Elder
- Art. 24 Term of Office
- Art. 25 Equality to be Maintained
- Art. 26 Subscription to the Confession
- Art. 27 False Doctrine
- Art. 38 Consistory
- Art. 57 Baptism
- Art. 58 Schools
- Art. 61 Admission to the Lord's Supper
- Art. 63 Marriage
- Art. 64 Church Records
- Art. 67 Consistory Involvement (in Discipline)
- Art. 71 Suspension and Deposition of Office-bearers
- Art. 72 Serious and Gross Sins on the Part of Office-bearers
- Art. 73 Christian Censure
- Art. 74 No Lording It over Others

4. Calling to Office

The first question the elder has to answer at his ordination is: "Do you feel in your heart that God Himself, through His congregation, has called you to this office?" The Church Order says in the opening sentence of Art. 3: "No one shall take any office upon himself without having been lawfully called thereto." The process of a lawful call is outlined in the Church Order and the local Regulations. The combination of the question at the ordination and the requirement of the Church Order show that there is a formal aspect to the call to office (the election and appointment) as well as a personal aspect (do you feel in your heart). The second is a matter between the brother and the Lord. It is possible that one appointed cannot accept this appointment. He will have to give the reasons why, and council can judge these reasons, but in the end, he has to be able to say that he feels in his heart that God Himself has called Him.

The approach to calling and ordination shows the spiritual nature of the office in the church. We do not "run for office" and organize an election campaign. We do not push ourselves at the expense of others, but wait for the Lord to call us by means of the process the church has adopted. Humility is one of the requirements for office. At the same time this approach to the call to office highlights the obligation and comfort we have as elders. The obligation is to obey this call, unless there are weighty reasons, and fulfil this office to the best of our ability. The comfort lies in the fact that the Lord has called us and we did not push ourselves. With the call He will also give the ability to fulfil it. As office-bearers we do not defend our own honour, but the honour of our Lord. He is pleased to use our labours, though done with many imperfection, for the coming of His Kingdom. As elders we can feel incapable at times, but then our comfort is that He has called us.

5. Duties of the Elder

The Form for Ordination and Article 22 of the Church Order stipulate that elders are called:

1. To have supervision over Christ's church, that every member may conduct himself properly in doctrine and life, according to the gospel.
For this purpose they shall:

- faithfully visit the members in their homes to comfort, instruct, admonish, reprove them with the Word of God;
 - exercise Christian discipline;
 - watch that the sacraments are not profaned.
2. As stewards in the house of God to take care that all things are done decently and in good order.
 3. To assist the minister of the Word with good counsel and advice.
 - They are charged with the supervision over the doctrine and conduct of ministers.
 - They shall permit no strange teaching.
 - They must watch that no wolves enter the sheepfold of the Good Shepherd.
 4. To train themselves in godliness and diligently search the scriptures.

6. To have supervision

6.1. To visit

It is the task of the elders to see whether and how the Word of God rules the lives of God's people. They have to apply God's Word to the needs and situations in the home they are visiting. This supervision is not limited to certain areas. As our lives before the Lord includes everything, so also the care of the Lord through the supervision of the elders. Elders have to know what is going on in the lives of those entrusted into their care. The most important means in this care is the visit. The elders have to faithfully visit the members in their homes. When they visit they must have open ears.

This visiting includes

- the yearly home visit
See further 1-1 Home Visits
- the discipline visit
See further 2-1 Discipline
- the special visit
See further 2-5 Special Visits

It is not limited to these. It will be beneficial if elders visit the families in their charge in a less formal way. It is important that there is an open relationship between the families and the elders.

6.2. Discipline

Elders are charged to exercise Christian discipline. This discipline is to be exercised in obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ and His Word. This discipline is over those who either in word or deed show that they are disobedient and refuse to repent. See further 2-1 Discipline.

6.3. Sacraments

The elders have to watch that the sacraments are not profaned. This means they have to see to it that those who present a child for baptism do so for the right reason and that they admit to the Lord's Supper only those who are entitled to participate. This calling involves

- visiting parents prior to baptism;
See further 1-3 Holy Baptism
- examining those who want to be admitted to the Lord's Supper;
See further 2-6 Catechism
- accepting attestation of guests from sister-churches;
See further 1-4 Lord's Supper, 2-4 Federation
- admonishing those who live in sin and keep them from the table.
See further 1-4 Lord's Supper and 2.1 Discipline

7. Stewards in the House of God

The church is the household of God. All things must be done decently and in good order because God is a God of order. Thus the peace of the church is protected. In order to fulfil this task the elders together with the minister form the consistory and together with the deacons form the council.

See further 3 - 3 Congregation and Office-bearers

3 - 5 Council and Consistory

8. Assist the Ministers of the Word

There are differences between the elders and the minister when it comes to calling and term of office, but nevertheless elders are no less than ministers and ministers are not higher than elders. The minister is an elder too. Thus the elders have supervision over the work and personal life of the minister. As part of this task the elders visit the minister in his home twice per year, they visit the catechism classes and evaluate the preaching

See further 1-4 Preaching/Prayer

2-6 Catechism

The Form also states that the elders must watch diligently that no wolves enter the sheepfold of the Good Shepherd. The elders are to guard the pulpit. This is why in Art. 15 of the Church Order we read: "No one shall be permitted to preach the Word or to administer the sacraments in another church without the consent of the consistory of that church." The elders allow a minister to preach. They can also barr a minister from the pulpit when they believe he is unfaithful to God's Word and the Reformed Confession.

Besides supervision the elders have to assist the minister with good counsel and advice. This advice takes place at the consistory meetings, but can also be done in personal conversation. An open relationship between elders and minister is important for congregation and consistory.

The minister and his family receive an annual home visit just like all the other families in the congregation. When elders make this visit they should approach it the same way as the other visits. They have to see whether and how this family lives from the Word of God. At the same time they do well to keep in mind the special task of the minister and that the lives of the wife and children are affected by his ministry. Some of the questions that may be asked are:

- Is there harmony between the preaching and the minister's personal life?
- How do his wife and their children look at this?
- How does the minister use his time? Is there time for the family?
- How does the family of the minister function in the congregation?
- How does the minister deal with his workload? Because the work of a minister is never finished, is he discouraged when confronted with these limitations? How can the elder help him?

9. Major Assemblies

The elders are also involved in the major assemblies. Each church delegates the minister and an elder to each classis. In case the church is vacant or the minister is prevented from going, two elders will be delegated. Also at regional and general synod, half the delegates are elders. To attend regional and general synod requires more time and not all elders are able to go. As a rule council submits the names of the brothers who would be able to serve at a regional or general synod, to the assembly that has to decide on the delegation. With regard to classis, it is the best the elders take turns in going.

10. Train themselves in godliness and diligently search the scriptures

The elders must live from the Word and show the power of this Word in their own lives. Elders can only do their work well when they train themselves in godliness and diligently search the scriptures. To train yourself in godliness means to apply the will of God in your own life, to submit your life to the law of God and show fruits of thankfulness. Besides this they also have to search the scriptures. The word search is used here. This is more than read. To search is to study diligently in order to find the treasures of God's

Word. This is to be done in the elder's personal life, together with his family. The study societies are a great help here as well.

11. Evaluation

1. In having supervision over the church how does it show in the execution of the office that it is of a spiritual nature? Are there matters that need particular attention in the supervision?
2. Are the elders diligent in fulfilling their offices?
3. How do the elders train themselves in godliness?
4. Is there good cooperation between the elders and the minister? Between the elders and the deacons?
5. Are the elders involved in the major assemblies?
6. Are there items you want to bring to the attention of the meeting? Why? What should be done about them?

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