

Excluded from the Fellowship of Christ

In this article, we will have another look at the regulations the churches have adopted about “Christian Discipline” in Articles 67 and 68 of our Church Order. In the previous article, the focus was on how the members of the congregation must be involved in the discipline process. This is so important that Article 67 rules that a consistory may *only* deal with any matter of discipline when it has determined that private admonitions have remained fruitless.¹ It is not just the concern of the office bearers when the holiness of God’s church and the salvation of the unrepentant sinner are at stake. Discipline must be rooted in and start with the communion of saints. Yet discipline by the consistory is an important element to consider, with the understanding that discipline by the consistory can only work properly when the active participation of the congregation functions well.

When the consistory gets involved in a discipline matter, it does so as the official body that is authorized to make the decision to suspend someone from the Lord’s Supper, and eventually to exclude him or her from the fellowship of Christ. Jesus Christ gave the administration of the keys of the Kingdom to the elders in the church. Discipline and excommunication happen in his name. This means that something is happening that will have eternal consequences (see 1 Cor 5:4–5, Matt 18:18, John 20:23). These consequences are so serious and far-reaching that it can never be the responsibility of just one or two elders. All the shepherds of God’s flock together are the acting and judging body. This of course does not mean that the Lord is “automatically” bound by what the church decides—consistories can also err. In the end, every consistory decision will always be subject to God’s Word as the final rule and judge.

CARING SHEPHERDS

One safeguard here is that the consistory cannot base its decisions on the report of private admonitions. It does have its own responsibility to verify the facts. To do due diligence and act justly, impartially,

and fairly, the consistory must spend time thoroughly investigating the accusations. This would include hearing the one who has been accused. He or she is entitled to a fair hearing and must be allowed to give a full account of his or her version.

The actual facts and circumstances, the true course of events, must be established beyond any doubt. This is the LORD’s own instruction in Deuteronomy 17:4 and Leviticus 19:15. Only then is the way open for ongoing admonitions by the elders, and—if there is no evidence of repentance—the decision to suspend the unrepentant sinner from the Lord’s Supper. It goes without saying that all of this should be carefully recorded in the minutes of the meetings and communicated in writing to the sinner in a timely fashion.

The heading of Article 68 is “excommunication,” but it is not only about this final step of excluding someone from the fellowship of Christ and his kingdom. It also includes the steps and stages that lead to this, if there is no repentance. Excommunication is called “the ultimate remedy.” This expression is used in the Form,² but unfortunately not in our Church Order. That would have been helpful as a permanent reminder that the purpose of church discipline is not to get rid of difficult people, but to reconcile the sinner with the church, his neighbour, and God. A church that does not apply discipline may look merciful, but it’s not. By letting an unrepentant, hardened sinner go their chosen way without admonition, they show that they don’t really care for their salvation.

PROVISIONAL EXCOMMUNICATION

The first disciplinary step is suspension from the Lord’s Supper. There is more to it, but it is named after the most visible part. The point is that the “rights” someone has in the covenant community are not taken away, but are suspended. He cannot exercise those rights. Beside participation in the Lord’s Supper, it also includes answering the questions at baptism, voting for office bearers, and being nominated for office. This measure is hopefully temporary,

¹ The only exception mentioned in Art. 67 is when “the sin committed is of a public character.” I will not discuss this aspect. Many have tried to give a definition of what constitutes a public sin as distinct from a private sin, but that has proven to be very difficult.

² *Book of Praise*, Winnipeg, 2014, pp. 613–615

because it is used with the hope that the “ultimate remedy” can be avoided.³

This step is not mentioned in the Bible. The biblical command is to remove the evil from the congregation, but the details of the procedure are not prescribed. Zeal for the holiness of the congregation can therefore make room for patience, while urging the sinner to repent. This is possible, based on God’s gracious patience with each one of us in our reconciliation in Jesus Christ. This implies that suspension from the Lord’s Supper should not be just a formal pit-stop on the way to real excommunication. The serious intention of this suspension is to create more time for urgent appeals, with admonitions from God’s Word. This step is sometimes called “excommunication minor” or “provisional excommunication” to stress the seriousness of what is happening. It is not without reason that the Form speaks about “continuing” and “many” admonitions.

Yet, patience is not unlimited. A provisional excommunication is just that: provisional, temporary. Every situation is different, and thus Article 68 rules wisely that it is up to the consistory to determine the time between the various steps. But one cannot remain part of the congregation but suspended from the Lord’s Supper forever. Eventually it must come to the moment that either the sinner repents or hardens himself in his sin. In other words, this either leads to applying Article 69 of the Church Order (Repentance) or the second part of Article 68.

DEFINITIVE EXCOMMUNICATION

When it becomes clear that there is continued hardening in sin, and consistent refusal to listen to admonitions, it must come to the “excommunication major” or “definitive excommunication” step. This second disciplinary step begins with involving the whole congregation. Again, the considerations of the consistory are decisive to determine when that time has come. Outside pressure in the form of church members who challenge the elders (e.g. “when are you going to do something about this?”) should be ignored. Nevertheless, involving the congregation by means of public announcements does bring the matter to a decisive stage: it is time to reach for the ultimate remedy for the salvation of the sinner.

This stage is marked by increasingly intense involvement of the congregation, as the moment of excommunication comes closer. This is done by means of three public announcements, to be made before the actual act of excluding the sinner from the fellowship of Christ and from his kingdom. Article 68 gives a brief description

of how these three announcements should differ. But the best way to get a good understanding of the severity of what is happening is a careful reading of the form.

Article 68 does not indicate that excommunication shall take place with the use of the form adopted for that purpose. I am not suggesting that consistories will (or should) try to get away with making up their own forms, but it is remarkable and somewhat puzzling that it isn’t specified, especially since, for all other occasions for which liturgical forms are adopted, it is mentioned explicitly that those forms shall be used.⁴

With these three public announcements the consistory is increasingly mobilizing the congregation for the salvation of the sinner. The first announcement is a call to pray for him, without knowing who he is. Then, when the name is made known with the second announcement, it urges the congregation not only to pray, but also to reach out in love to the person. And finally, when the date is set and announced for the excommunication to take place, the need for prayer and loving admonitions are impressed on the congregation as even more urgent.

THE JOY OF REPENTANCE

Yes, discipline is the official responsibility of the elders. But it is not just a “clergy” matter. On the contrary: Article 68 does not stress without reason that *the excommunication may not take place without the cooperation of the congregation*. Consistory and congregation share the responsibility for maintaining the third mark of a faithful church.

This picture of a praying and admonishing congregation throughout the discipline process makes clear that the call to repent goes out till the very end. During the whole process, confession of guilt and repentance remain possible at any time. When that happens, it will end the procedure. Even after the excommunication has become a fact, the call for repentance remains. Those who return to Christ will find the door of the church open. That’s why we have also Article 70 in our Church Order! 



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³ Compare it with what the CO regulates in Art. 71 as “suspension and deposition of office bearers.” A suspended office bearer is still an office bearer but is not allowed to act as one. Only a deposed office bearer is no longer an office-bearer.

⁴ See Art. 56 (sacraments), Art. 3 (ordination), Art. 63 (marriage), and Art. 70 (readmission).