Am I my brother's keeper?

JAN DEGELDER

We have noticed before that the Canadian Reformed Church Order is actually a relatively small document. What we have agreed upon as necessary to regulate our cooperation and to affirm our commitment to mutual accountability as federated churches is quite limited. And, in most cases, it is not very detailed. The Church Order does not cover every possible scenario. Many practical matters are left to the freedom of the local churches. Only two sections are somewhat of an exception to that rule. These stipulate matters in more detail than the rest.

The first such section is covered in Articles 3, 4, and 5. This section regulates the way to enter office, in particular (with some additional stipulations in Articles 7–9) the office of minister of the Word. The reason is that protecting faithfulness in the preaching and teaching of the church is a high priority. Since the Bible frequently warns against false teaching and preaching, the leadership of those who are called to teach and preach is crucial for the church. That's why we confess that "practicing the pure preaching of the gospel" is the first mark of a true and faithful church of Christ.[1]

The second topic that has led to fairly detailed stipulations is church discipline, in Articles 66–72. Dealing with persistent sin is critical for the church of Jesus Christ, which is to be a holy congregation and assembly of true believers.[2] This is so important that we confess "exercising church discipline for correcting and punishing sins" to be the third mark of a true church that governs itself according to God's Word.[3]

These two sections of the Church Order correspond to what we confess in Lord's Day 31 of the Heidelberg Catechism as the two "keys of the kingdom of heaven." Preaching and church discipline are the two keys to Christ's kingdom which underlines the significance of these two sections of the Church Order. In this column I'll be looking at the matter of church discipline in more detail.

BE HOLY FOR I AM HOLY

In applying discipline, the church defends the holiness of the church as a reflection of God's holiness. This conviction, that the church is to be holy, comes directly from the Bible. In his first letter, the apostle Peter calls the church a holy priesthood, a holy nation (1 Pet 2:5 & 9). For this reason, our creeds and confessions consistently refer to the church as "holy." It is set apart from the world and fully dedicated to the Lord and his service.

This sets high standards for those who belong to the church. To them the apostle Peter says: "as he who called you is holy, you also

[1] Belgic Confession Art. 29

[2] Belgic Confession Art. 27

[3] Belgic Confession Art. 29

“So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.”

be holy in all your conduct” (1 Pet 1:15). The flipside of that urgent call is the call to resist and remove from the church the destructive power of evil. This is just as urgent. The apostle Paul encourages the Corinthian congregation, “Purge the evil person from among you” (1 Cor 5:13).

All of this does not deny that sin is still a problem in the life of every believer (1 John 1:8). Every moment we live only by God’s forgiving mercy and undeserved love in Jesus Christ. Indeed, “there, but for the grace of God, go I” is a saying true for us all.

This does not imply that the church should shy away from applying discipline when a church member allows himself to be dominated by sin, while rejecting the call of God’s Word to repent. But it does mean that we can only apply church discipline with a humble attitude, driven by deep concern for the spiritual well-being of our brother or sister. Article 66 of the Church Order stresses that “discipline is of a spiritual nature.” Discipline always comes with an urgent call to repent, driven by desire for the sinner’s salvation. This makes clear that there is a strong connection between church discipline and pastoral care.

LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOUR AS YOURSELF

It is important to remember that church discipline, though a responsibility of the elders of the church, must always be rooted in active participation of the members of the congregation. It is true that formal, judicial steps can only be taken by the consistory. But discipline is not just a consistory matter. Eventually their role might become important, but that’s not where it starts. Article 67 makes this very clear: private admonitions must come *before* consistory involvement. And if, by God’s grace, private admonitions result in repentance of the sinner, the consistory should not even hear about it.

I think we all know this, but it is good to stress this and dig a bit deeper here. Why have so much emphasis on what Article 67 calls “private admonitions and admonitions in the presence of one or two witnesses?” We know where this expression

comes from. It is what is referred to as "the rule given by our Lord in Matthew 18:15–17" (Art 66). But then, one can apply this rule in different ways. For instance, I can visit and confront a brother to find that he refuses to listen. Then I take my two witnesses only to receive the same response, and in the end I hand it over to the elders. I might then think: *Now it's their problem, and no longer my business.* But that does not sound right, does it? Why not?

Let's remind ourselves of the basic biblical ground for Jesus's instruction in Matthew 18. We are all familiar with Jesus's summary of God's law: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind, and love your neighbour as yourself." This goes back all the way to the Lord's instructions in Leviticus 19, especially verses 17 and 18. We have to ask ourselves: Does this love drive me when I set out to apply Jesus's rule in Matthew 18?

After all, confronting and admonishing a brother or sister can be an intimidating challenge. Here the context in Matthew 18 is helpful. The urgency of going after your brother who is in the deadly grip of sin and reaching out to him with compassion (vv. 15–17) is emphasized by the passage just before: the parable of the lost sheep (vv. 12–14). Jesus points at the deep love and heartfelt concern that drives the search for the one out of the hundred that goes astray. And then he adds: "So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish." This is Jesus's focus: how can you not do whatever you can to save the sinner? The one who is stuck in sin is like that one lost sheep, heading for destruction.[4]

ONGOING INVOLVEMENT

When your brother or sister refuses to listen and repent, you may go home disappointed, but it's not the end. On the contrary, you double your effort. You pray and go again. And, in line with Jesus's instructions, if there is still no evidence of repentance, you choose witnesses to join you. This is not only to verify the facts. When they witness a clear hardening in sin, they will become fellow admonishers, intensifying the call to break with evil and seek God's forgiveness.

This echoes the words of the catechism, that those in the grip of sin "are first repeatedly admonished in a brotherly manner."[5] Such private admonitions do not lead to official steps. As mentioned earlier, official church discipline is the responsibility of the consistory. But even after a matter has to be reported to the elders because the private admonitions remained fruitless, the congregation continues to be part of the process.

To begin with, the work of the elders is not a reason for the original admonishers to drop the matter. And, although the consistory will need time for its own pastoral visits and admonitions without going public, that might change. If the sinner defiantly continues to harden himself in sin, eventually the consistory will inform the whole congregation about this, and not just the first admonishers. This process is described in Article 68 and is guided by the Forms for Excommunication which the churches have adopted for that purpose.[6]

It's good to give these steps some more attention, but that's for a next article. At the moment we are focusing on the role the members of the congregation have in this process. Article 68 makes very clear that when the consistory informs the congregation of a member living in unrepentant sin, it does so with the aim of mobilizing the congregation, to engage all the members in prayer and admonition. This is big and important. After the public announcement by the consistory, no member of the congregation can say: "'trying to seek and save this lost sheep is none of my business." On the contrary, as Article 68 puts it, "an excommunication may not take place without the cooperation of the congregation."

In our "I can do whatever I want, leave me alone" culture, applying discipline in this way is difficult. But God's Word stresses how essential it is. Just read Hebrews 10:26–31.

So then, am I my brother's keeper? Yes, I am. And so are you.

Jan DeGelder
Minister Emeritus
Redemption Canadian Reformed Church, Flamborough
jdegelder8@gmail.com

[4] See also James 5:19–20

[5] Heidelberg Catechism, LD 31, Q&A 85

[6] *Book of Praise*, 2014, 611–615