

CHAPTER 30

OF CHURCH CENSURES

Church government

The first two paragraphs tell how the Lord Jesus has established the government of his church. It speaks in general terms. Particular details about the structure of church government are dealt with in the following chapter on Synods and Councils and in the Form of Government.

Church officers

“1. The Lord Jesus, as king and head of his Church, hath therein appointed a government in the hand of church-officers, distinct from the civil magistrate.”

The Lord has established a government in the church that Christians are called upon in the Bible to obey (Acts 14:23; 1 Cor 12:28; 1 Thess 5:12; 1 Tim 5:17; Heb 13:7, 17, 24).

This government of the church is separate from the civil government (Rom 13:1). For this reason, Christians in America have stood for the freedom of the church to operate apart from government oversight or regulation, and for church schools to be free from government control.

Power of the keys

“2. To these officers the keys of the kingdom of heaven are committed, by virtue whereof they have power respectively to retain and remit sins, to shut that kingdom against the impenitent, both by the word and censures; and to open it unto penitent sinners, by the ministry of the gospel, and by absolution from censures, as occasion shall require.”

Jesus conferred the power of the keys upon Peter and the other apostles, and to the officers of the church (Matt 16:19; 18:17-18; John 20:21-23). Peter was especially instrumental in opening the kingdom promises up to the Jews (Acts 2), the Samaritans (Acts 8), and the Gentiles (Acts 10-11). The other apostles and their followers have taken the gospel and established the church all over the world.

This power of the keys is not a magical power; rather, it is the authority to proclaim the gospel and administer church censure. Church officers who fulfill these obligations properly are

standing in God's stead in the church, and can know that God will confirm their decisions and actions in heaven.

Examples of the use of the keys of the kingdom are Paul's and the church's actions in 1 Cor 5:3-5 and 2 Cor 2:6-8, and John's in 3 John 9-10 (Diotrephes, by the way, provides an example of bad church discipline).

Church censures

Church censures are punishments administered by the church against those who sin against the Lord in some way that requires such action. They are altogether separate from civil punishments, and are totally spiritual in nature. The following excerpts from Chapter 1 of the Bible Presbyterian Form of Government make this point clearly:

“1. . . . We consider the rights of private judgment, in all matters that respect religion, as universal and unalienable: we do not even wish to see any religious constitution aided by the civil power . . .”

“7. That all church power, whether exercised by the body in general, or in the way of representation by delegated authority, is only ministerial and declarative . . .”

“8. . . . Since ecclesiastical discipline must be purely moral or spiritual in its object, and not attended with any civil effects, it can derive no force whatever, but from its own justice, the approbation of an impartial public, and the countenance and blessing of the great Head of the Church universal.”

This important principle of the separation of powers of church and state differs from the doctrine and history of the Roman Catholic Church (which turned heretics over to the state to be burned), and even of many European Protestant churches (including Lutheran and Reformed churches). God used the early history of our own country to help develop true freedom of religion, and to free the church from state control.

The last two paragraphs of this chapter of the Confession deal with church censures in particular.

Purpose of censures

“3. Church censures are necessary for the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren; for deterring of others from like offences for purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump; for vindicating the honor of Christ, and the holy profession of the gospel; and for preventing the wrath of God, which might justly fall upon the Church, if they should suffer his covenant, and the seals thereof, to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders.”

Our Confession lists six purposes of exercising church discipline:

1. Reclaiming offenders (1 & 2 Cor [cited above]; 1 Tim 1:20)
2. Deterring others (1 Tim 5:20)
3. Purging out leaven (1 Cor 5:7)
4. Vindicating the honor of Christ (2 Sam 12:14; Ps. 51:4)
5. Vindicating the holy profession of the gospel (1 Cor 6:1-7)
6. Preventing the wrath of God (Rev 2:14-16)

It is important that we remember these good results of church discipline when we are naturally reluctant to exercise it.

Types of censures

“4. For the better attaining of these ends, the officers of the Church are to proceed by admonition, suspension from the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper for a season, and by excommunication from the Church, according to the nature of the crime, and demerit of the person.”

These censures are supported by the Scriptures, and are followed by most Reformed churches.

- 1) Admonition (1 Thess 5:12)
- 2) Rebuke (a stronger form of admonition; Gal 2:11-14)
- 3) Suspension (2 Thess 3:14-15)
- 4) Excommunication (Matt 18:17; 1 Cor 5:4-5, 13; Titus 3:10)

In the Bible Presbyterian Church admonition and rebuke are delivered privately by the Session, and suspension and excommunication are announced publicly from the pulpit. In the case of excommunication, other churches are notified as well. Churches should support proper church discipline that is exercised by other churches; in this way the honor of the Lord and the purity of the church will be maintained.