

Rooted—A Journey Through the Westminster Confession of Faith

Session 50: Chapter 30~Of Church Censures

Introduction—A “censure” is a formal expression of disapproval. The Confession takes up matters related to church discipline in this chapter.

30. 1 The Lord Jesus, as king and head of his church, has appointed a government in it, to be administered by church officers, distinct from the civil authorities.

I. Church Government Preliminaries

A. The Lord Jesus is the king and head of his church (Isaiah 9.6-7)

B. Under Jesus are church officers, called in Scripture elders and leaders

- “Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.... Pay attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” Acts 20.17, 28
- “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.... Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.... Greet all your leaders and all the saints.” Hebrews 13.7, 17, 24

C. Church government is distinct from civil government. This distinction has not always been clear in the history of the church. “The church is not the religious arm of the state.”¹

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<sup>1</sup> Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, Banner of Truth Trust, Carlisle, 2014, p. 402.

*30.2 To these church officers he has committed the keys of the kingdom of heaven. For this reason they have authority to retain and to remit sins, to shut the kingdom against the unrepentant both by the Word and by censures, and to open it to repentant sinners by the ministry of the gospel and by releasing from censures, as the occasion requires.*

## II. The Exercise of Authority: The Keys of the Kingdom

A. In Matthew 16.13-19, a passage that speaks of Christ as preeminent and also of the church, Jesus gives the keys of the kingdom to Peter, as representative of the apostles, the leaders of the church.

B. This authority includes binding and loosing, i.e. retaining and remitting sins—making judgments as to whether sinners are unrepentant or repentant.<sup>2</sup> As Jesus said to the disciples after his resurrection:

“If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.” John 20.23

C. This is further clarified in Matthew 18.15-20, where Jesus instructs his disciples about church discipline.

D. Elders/leaders of the church have the responsibility to exercise authority “both by the Word and by censures” regarding the unrepentant and the repentant, “as the occasion requires.”

- “The preaching of the Word alone lets some people know where they stand before God. The reading and preaching of the Word is the most commonly applied tool of discipline, for it convicts us of sin and drives us to repentance. Usually this is enough for us. Sometimes we need the censures of the church to have matters further clarified for us.”<sup>3</sup>

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² Ibid, p. 403.

³ Ibid, p. 404.

30.3 Church discipline is necessary for reclaiming and gaining fellow Christians who are guilty of offences, for deterring others from committing similar offences, for purging the leaven which might infect the whole lump, for vindicating the honor of Christ and the holy profession of the gospel, and for averting the wrath of God which might justly fall on the church if it should allow his covenant and its seals to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders.

III. The Purposes of Church Censures

- A. For reclaiming and gaining fellow Christians guilty of offences
- B. To deter others from following down the wrong pathways
- C. Similar to “B” to prevent the spread of the “leaven” of sin from affecting the church
- D. To guard the honor of Christ, the gospel and the seals (sacraments)
- E. For averting the wrath of God’s corrective discipline (I Corinthians 11)

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*30.4 For the better attaining of these purposes, the officers of the church are to proceed by admonition, by suspension from the sacrament of the Lord’s supper for a time, and by excommunication from the church, according to the nature of the offence and the degree of the person’s guilt.*

### IV. Degrees of Discipline (Matthew 18.15-17)

- A. The process of redemptive discipline should begin with simple admonition but may increase to ...
- B. Suspension from the Lord’s supper
- C. Excommunication from the fellowship of the church (Matthew 18.17)

D. Contumacy—a stubborn and obstinate refusal to turn away from the practice of sin

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***Next Assignment: WCF 31.1-4
Confessing the Faith: pages 409-422***

A Debtor To Mercy Alone

(Augustus Toplady)

A debtor to mercy alone,
Of covenant mercy I sing;
I come with Your righteousness on,
My humble offering to bring,
The judgments of Your holy law,
With me can have nothing to do;
My Savior's obedience and blood,
Hide all my transgressions from view.

The work which Your goodness began,
The arm of Your strength will complete;
Your promise is yes and amen,
And never was forfeited yet.
The future or things that are now,
No power below or above,
Can make You Your purpose forgo,
Or sever my soul from Your love.

My name from the palms of Your hands,
Eternity will not erase;
Impressed on your heart it remains,
In marks of indelible grace.
Yes, I to the end will endure,
Until I bow down at Your throne;
Forever and always secure,
A debtor to mercy alone.