

Belgic Confession 32 – Discipline Saves people from Hell

Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ: Let me ask a question before we begin. If you tell your child to do something and there is no sanction if he doesn't do it, do expect that child to be more obedient in the future? No! He will grow up to love his own way...and you end up being frustrated...and the relationship breaks down! And when the family is weak, the church then becomes weaker! Similarly, today you will learn from God about the need and nature of discipline in the church.

Our headings are:

Why is it necessary to Discipline?

How can elders avoid having to Discipline?

What is the proper way of Discipline?

Our goals are: **That you might gain courage to give or to take God's discipline so the church of Jesus Christ will be stronger, that it will spread, and that Christ will be honored.**

Why is it Necessary to Discipline?

In the meantime we believe, though it is useful and beneficial that those who are **rulers** of the Church institute and **establish certain ordinances** among themselves for maintaining the body of the Church, yet that they ought studiously to **take care that they do not depart from those things which Christ, our only Master, has instituted.**

1. There are people in the church who call themselves Christian but are indeed hypocrites.

a. Some show hypocrisy in their talk. They say they believe, but they gossip, insult, use unkind words, or are ashamed to speak of Christ's goodness.

b. Some show hypocrisy in their walk. They say they believe, but are willfully absent from worship, they are not honest in business, or they show a lack of love for their spouses and children. God demands that belief, talk, and life unquestionably match.

c. Some are hypocrites because they take comfort in the fact they were baptized and become complacent in their lives.

2. So why bother with those who are delinquent in doctrine and life, why meddle in other people's lives?

a. God demands discipline by leaders in order to restore the wanderer – the one who has strayed from the true path. This means discipline must **not be exercised for personal vendettas**– to get even. In the past, RC's punished people because they preached truth.

This is how Luther was pushed out of the church. But the Lord taught that **discipline was for restoration**- that the soul to be saved from hell. **Force applied changes the person's direction.** Discipline may be painful, but it saves!

Matthew 18:8 "If your hand or foot causes you to sin, **cut it off and cast it from you.** It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire.

God loves you too much to leave you when you stray. It is a sign of hate, the wise man said, not to discipline a child. Also...

Hebrews 12:6 For **whom the LORD loves He chastens...**

b. God demands discipline in order to keep the church pure. He said: "Be holy, for **I am holy.**" Children must reflect parents. God keeps you pure through discipline.

1Peter 1:18 knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, **19 but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.**

Remember the warning God gave Ezekiel in Chapter 33. Sound the trumpet lest the people be destroyed! (A house without discipline brings trouble to the whole house...even the ones who are innocent!)

c. God demands discipline in order to bring honor to himself. Unruly children bring shame. When God disciplines you, you will thank him for your discipline – maybe later, **but you will thank** him. And when others see how God disciplines the son he loves, they will praise him as well.

How can elders avoid having to Discipline?

And therefore we **reject all human inventions**, and all laws which man would introduce into the worship of God, **thereby to bind and compel the conscience** in any manner whatever. Therefore we **admit only of that which tends to nourish** and preserve concord and unity, and to keep all men in obedience to God.

1. In order to avoid having to discipline, the elders of the church must ensure the faith of the people is strong...faith that comes through faithful proclamation of truth.

To ignore faithful preaching is to sentence the believer to certain discipline.

2. In order to avoiding having to discipline, elders of the church must ensure they do not make human inventions as law.

What are possible some such human inventions? A church that forbids divorce in all cases, or requires that the innocent person takes back and an adulterous spouse...or requires members to attend non-required worship services...or a church that forbids taking an oath in a legal situation as in court...or a church that sets an age for Profession of Faith...

So listen to your minister and the other preachers here who bring you God's Word and to elders who oversee our preaching!

What is the Proper Method of Discipline?

For this purpose, **excommunication or church discipline is requisite**, with all that pertains to it, according to the Word of God.

1. The church, which is run by the elders who have possession of the keys of the kingdom, enforces discipline on the wanderer to restore him, period.

So elders must always **watch their motives!**

In the hierarchical system, discipline is carried out by the bishops, archbishops, etc.
One man makes the decisions.

In the congregational system discipline is carried out primarily by the congregation (this is why congregational churches like “shunning” those under discipline. Shunning is abnormal cruelty. But they have nothing else.

In Reformed churches discipline is carried out by the elders – a plurality of elders.
And even when cases get too difficult, elders seek the advice of other elders from other congregations.

2. What kind of discipline are elders instructed to use?

Elders discipline by admonishing, restraining, and excluding (excommunication) those who act as if they were non-Christians. The church does not have, it never had, and neither should it be seeking, to acquire corporal discipline.

3. If elders do not discipline, they show their lack of care for the brethren and lack of love for the Lord.

1Corinthians 5:1 It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles—that a man has his father’s wife! 2 And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned...

Can you imagine what the young people thought who were looking at the elders condoning of sin in Corinth? Imagine how harmful that was to them! **What were outsiders saying about this new religion?** Would they want to enter a kingdom that did not appear to be different from the one in which they were?

What striking similarities today! How elders show hate to their congregations when they refuse to discipline!

So don’t resist your pastor and elders when they ask you about your life. You must be accountable to your elders for what you believe, how you live, how you worship, and how you raise your family. We want to make sure you are walking in God’s ways. That is God’s charge to us. God will punish us if we fail to oversee your lives.

4. The Lord gave a clear outline to follow-starting with you-to restore your erring brother. He taught this doctrine more clearly than most doctrines.

Matthew 18:15 "Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, **you have gained your brother.**" 16 "But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' 17 "And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.

Talk to the erring brother...take witnesses if he would not repent...turn discipline over to the elders if he still does not repent. If the person still refuses to repent, he is excommunicated **until he repents.**

So discipline starts with you! Do not to go to the elders when you discover someone's sin. And do not to ignore sin and say: "I don't want to be involved." God puts that obligation on every Christian. You are part of one family! Who sees his sister trying to put her hand on the hot stove and pretends he doesn't see? That would be cruel.

5. While Mt 18 is a sufficient, the Lord was pleased to give more details about the method for discipline.

1 Corinthians 5:4 In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are **gathered together**, along with my spirit, with the **power of our Lord Jesus Christ,** 5 deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. 11 But now I have written to you **not to keep company** with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person.

The elders who exercise discipline **must do so with unity** and **with prayer for guidance** from the Holy Spirit. Now look at the follow up situation of that man that the Corinthians had to discipline:

2Corinthians 2:6 **This punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man,** 7 so that, on the contrary, **you ought rather to forgive and comfort him,** lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow. 8 Therefore I urge you to **reaffirm your love to him.**

What joy this restoration brought to the church! What a testimony to the world!

6. Elders must not exercise discipline with a heavy hand.

While there are bad sheep there are also bad shepherds. But God wants elders to know there are some members who are weak and are easily drawn away by sin. Their sins may not be sins of mature deliberation. So not every sin puts one under discipline. Further, some may sin in ignorance and elders teach rather than discipline. A mild rebuke is useful. Remember the parable of the Lord going to search for his 1 lost sheep of 100. What wondrous love the Savior has for his children! (These principles apply to your home as well.)

2Thessalonians 3:14 And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. 15 Yet do not count him as an enemy, **but admonish him as a brother.**

7. Elders and the church must always be ready to forgive the repentant as Christ does.

Jesus told a parable of a man who was forgiven great debts by a king and the forgiven man then threw a man into prison who owed him very little. That man did not understand forgiveness. Elders are called to remember their own great forgiveness through Jesus as they exercise discipline over others. The Prodigal Son's father accepted his repentant son and the father's family experienced great joy.

Luke 15:20 ...But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. ²² "But the father said to his servants, 'Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. 23 'And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry;

Conclusion:

The elders of the church are called to carefully, patiently, and fully carry out discipline. They must do this to correct the erring brother, they must do this in order to keep the church pure, and they must do this because proper discipline honors the Lord. They must not impose undue requirements that crush the brother. The Lord loves his church and wants her to be kept pure. If the rebellious one does not submit to Christ's discipline he must be excommunicated from Christ's church until he repents.

Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ:

1. Thank the Lord he cares enough for you to punish you. He saved you and now he keeps you through discipline.

2. Pray that your elders will have the wisdom and courage to carry out proper discipline.

3. Be a part of the process of discipline. If you see someone erring, show him his faults and win him back.

4. And remember that by participating in discipline you are helping to advance the cause of Christ's kingdom throughout the world. You are his through blood and baptism; work for him.

Finally, if you are not a Christian you have something much greater to worry about than not having someone to care for you: you have to worry about eternity in the fiery pit of hell. Yet, if you call on God and ask him to make you his child because Christ took your punishment, he will hear you!