

# The Teaching of Church Discipline in Reformed Confessions<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*Church discipline is a sensitive topic because it is directly related to the holiness of believers' lives within the church. Various theological angles have emphasized the importance of a proper understanding and faithful practice of church discipline. However, a comprehensive exploration of church discipline based on the Reformed confessions has not yet been sufficiently developed. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the doctrine of church discipline as articulated in the Reformed confessions, with particular attention to the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Confession, and the Westminster Standards. This study employs a dialectical and analytical approach to examine the teaching of church discipline within the Reformed traditions. The exploration of these confessional documents demonstrates that church discipline is not merely a corrective measure but an essential ecclesial practice. It serves to preserve the holiness and purity of the church, uphold doctrinal faithfulness, and reflect the church's identity as the body of Christ. Thus, church discipline is understood as a vital means through which the church faithfully lives out its calling before God and the world.*

**Keywords:** church discipline, Reformed, confessions

## Introduction

Church discipline is a less favourable idea to post modern's mind. Jonathan Leeman observes that church discipline "felt a little jarring" for nominal Christian. Usually, people do not see these two words go together.<sup>2</sup> One hand, church denotes love, mercifulness, and serving, the other hand, discipline connotes harsh and cruel treatments. Then, the practice of church discipline is assumed to be judging another person. Does not the Bible say, "Judge not, that you be not judged" (Matthew 7:1)?

Answering this question, John Calvin asserts that the entire sphere of church life should be subject to "discipline of moral."<sup>3</sup> Additionally, R. Albert Mohler Jr. has given a reminder that the church's neglect of the practice and consistency of church discipline is a failure of the

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<sup>1</sup> This article was first prepared as final paper for Westminster Standards and Reformation Creeds course in Doctor of Ministry Program at Reformed Theological Seminary, Summer 2025.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Leeman, *Is it Loving to Practice Church Discipline?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 9.

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), IV, XI, 1.

modern churches.<sup>4</sup> Jay E. Adams further describes church discipline in a positive tone as he explains that through church discipline God is taking control of His own church in pursuance of maturity and growth of its members. He continues by saying that church discipline will finally bring honour to God and become a source of peace in the church.<sup>5</sup> In other words, church itself will receive benefits when church discipline is practiced accordingly.

Few authors significantly contribute to providing valuable sources and expositions regarding this topic biblically, historically, and pastorally. Regarding biblical arguments, J. Carl Laney<sup>6</sup> and Daniel E. Wray<sup>7</sup> have laid out teaching foundations according to the Scripture. Meanwhile, Graham A. Duncan has surveyed the important teachings of church discipline through the historical exploration of Reformed fathers who established this doctrine.<sup>8</sup> Finally, the work of Adams guides its application at church.

Nevertheless, those authors do not unpack the teaching of church discipline from Reformed confessions. While acknowledging the historical complexity of each confession were written, this article would not discuss the angle so much. The purpose of this writing is to unfold the teaching on church discipline in Reformed confessions, especially Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, Canons of Dort, and Westminster Standards. Disposition of this essay is following Carl R. Trueman's conviction that every Reformed confessions are official teaching of Reformed faith, are strongly based on the Scripture, are helping church to remain focused and faithful on main thing, and are great reminders of the "succinctness" in Christian theology; the things that have been disregarded and discarded by what we call "contemporary culture."<sup>9</sup>

## Methodology

By using a dialectical and analytical approach, this paper will answer these two research questions. First, "What are the key elements of church discipline in the Reformed confessions?" This chapter will unravel the teaching of church discipline from these selected Reformed confessions, including Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, Canons of Dort, Westminster Confession of Faith, and Westminster Larger Catechism.

Second, "What are the implications of studying church discipline from the angle of the Reformed confessions?" This section will highlight two underlying implications of church discipline throughout the selected confessions.

## The Teaching of Church Discipline in the Reformed Confessions

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Albert Mohler, Jr., "Church Discipline: The Missing Mark," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 16, [https://cdn.sbts.edu/media/publications/sbjt/sbjt\\_2000winter3.pdf](https://cdn.sbts.edu/media/publications/sbjt/sbjt_2000winter3.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Jay E. Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline: A Right and Privilege of Every Church Member* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 17-18.

<sup>6</sup> James Carl Laney, "The Biblical Practice of Church Discipline," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 143 (October-December 1986).

<sup>7</sup> Daniel E. Wray, "Biblical Church Discipline," *Churchman* 110, no. 4 (December 1996). <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=3ee0a8c1-1fcf-3f23-875e-a964d5f522d1>.

<sup>8</sup> Graham A. Duncan, "Church Discipline – *Semper Reformanda* in Reformation Perspective," *HTS Theologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 66, no. 1 (September 2010). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v66i1.789>.

<sup>9</sup> Carl R. Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

Belgic Confession (1561)<sup>10</sup>

*ARTICLE 29: The Marks of the True Church*

We believe that we ought to discern diligently and very carefully, by the Word of God, what is the true church—for all sects in the world today claim for themselves the name of “the church.”

We are not speaking here of the company of hypocrites who are mixed among the good in the church and who nonetheless are not part of it, even though they are physically there. But we are speaking of distinguishing the body and fellowship of the true church from all sects that call themselves “the church.”

The true church can be recognized if it has the following marks: the church engages in the pure preaching of the gospel; it makes use of the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them; it **practices church discipline for correcting faults**.

In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and holding Jesus Christ as the only Head. By these marks one can be assured of recognizing the true church—and no one ought to be separated from it.

As for those who are of the church, we can recognize them by the distinguishing marks of Christians: namely by faith, and by their fleeing from sin and pursuing righteousness, once they have received the one and only Savior, Jesus Christ. They love the true God and their neighbours, without turning to the right or left, and they crucify the flesh and its works.

Though great weakness remains in them, they fight against it by the Spirit all the days of their lives, appealing constantly to the blood, suffering, death, and obedience of the Lord Jesus, in whom they have forgiveness of their sins, through faith in him.

As for the false church, it assigns more authority to itself and its ordinances than to the Word of God; it does not want to subject itself to the yoke of Christ; it does not administer the sacraments as Christ commanded in his Word; it rather adds to them or subtracts from them as it pleases; it bases itself on men, more than on Jesus Christ; it persecutes those who live holy lives according to the Word of God and who rebuke it for its faults, greed, and idolatry. These two churches are easy to recognize and thus to distinguish from each other.

*ARTICLE 30: The Officers of the Church*

We believe that ministers of the Word of God, elders, and deacons ought to be chosen to their offices by a legitimate election of the church, with prayer in the name of the Lord, and in good order, as the Word of God teaches.

So, everyone must be careful not to push himself forward improperly, but he must wait for God’s call, so that he may be assured of his calling and be certain and sure that he is chosen by the Lord.

As for the ministers of the Word, they all have the same power and authority, no matter where they may be, since they are all servants of Jesus Christ, the only universal bishop, and the only head of the church.

Moreover, to keep God’s holy order from being **violated or despised**, we say that everyone ought, as much as possible, to hold the ministers of the Word and elders of the church in special esteem, because of the work they do, and be at peace with them, without grumbling, quarrelling, or fighting.

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<sup>10</sup> Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Creeeds, Confessions, and Catechisms: A Reader’s Edition* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022).

*ARTICLE 32: The Order and Discipline of the Church*

We also believe that although it is useful and good for those who govern the churches to establish and set up a certain order among themselves for maintaining the body of the church, they ought always to guard against deviating from what Christ, our only Master, has ordained for us.

Therefore, we reject all human innovations and all laws imposed on us, in our worship of God, which bind and force our consciences in any way.

So, we accept only what is proper to maintain harmony and unity and to keep all in obedience to God.

To that end **excommunication**, with all it involves, according to the Word of God, is required.

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The Belgic Confession (hereafter BC) is one of the precious documents as it is outgrowth amidst severe sufferings and persecutions under Phillip II, King of Spain. The BC is a defence of Protestants who live in Low Countries (modern Belgium and the Netherlands). Guido de Bres, as the author of BC, defends to the Philip II that Protestants will obey God-ordained-king (ARTICLE 36), but will never deny its faith. He declares that there is only one church, united with the whole church under the same confession of ancient creeds (ARTICLE 9) that is “one, holy, catholic and apostolic” (ARTICLE 27) according to Nicaea confession.<sup>11</sup> Then, Guido de Bres himself was martyred by hanging six years after he wrote the BC.

As the true church is essentially “one, holy, catholic and apostolic,” Guido de Bres sets several “marks” to identify true church from false church or sects. Here, he follows and even goes further than what Calvin had already laid out.<sup>12</sup> He officially adds the practice of church discipline as one of the marks of true church (ARTICLE 29).

The BC teaches four concepts of church discipline. Firstly, *the holiness of the church is the main reason for practicing church discipline*. Based on his statement of the three marks of the true church, de Bres gives visible indications of whether it is a true church or a sect; that is its holiness. While true church will take a bold step to punish its member’s sin, the not-true church or sect will take the opposite, it “persecutes those who live holily” and those who “rebukes its error, covetousness, and idolatry” (ARTICLE 29). True church is marked by its commitment to holiness. Jansen comments that church commitment to holiness can be seen in some practices that are correcting faults and paying attention to the lives of the members. These two practices are also the practices of church discipline.<sup>13</sup>

Secondly, *the BC points out that office-bearers of the church hold authoritative power to execute church discipline*. ARTICLES 30 rules about church government. Specifically, the BC mentions office-bearers that are ministers, pastors, elders and deacons who have the authority to punish violations in the church and set some restrains for the transgressors among the church.

Since the authority of office-bearers is crucial, then it is vital to select qualified office-bearers to whom the BC identified as faithful men. The BC refers to Paul’s qualifications of church leaders that he has instructed to Timothy in 1 Timothy 3. This is what Leon van den

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<sup>11</sup> Allan J. Janssen, *Confessing the Faith Today: A Fresh Look at the Belgic Confession* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV, 1. Some argues that the original occurrence of the third mark is from Bucer, Peter Martir Vermigli, Beza and others.

<sup>13</sup> Janssen, *Confessing the Faith Today*.

Broeke emphasizes that the BC teaches that the office-bearer “is not just technical and administrative rule, but a matter of Reformed belief to ensure evil people are corrected spiritually and held in check.”<sup>14</sup>

Thirdly, *church discipline goes together with the first two marks: preaching the Scripture and administering the sacraments*. The three marks should not be viewed separately, yet as a unit of the true marks of the church. In ARTICLE 30, de Bres treats the three marks as a unit. Here, how to understand the unit of its three marks is as follows: The office-bearers of the church, called ministers, pastors, elders and deacons are the ones who preach the true doctrine everywhere (the 1st mark), likewise, they punish the transgressors (the 3rd mark) and also restrain the transgressor from joining some spiritual activities in the church. It could be interpreted, such as joining sacraments (the 2nd mark) implicitly. All the marks are integrated in such a way as a unit. This is what Janssen comments on this part by saying, “discipline exists only in relation to the first two marks as it pays attention to proper preaching and sacramental practice.”<sup>15</sup>

Fourthly, *excommunication and church discipline protect and preserve the church from division*. ARTICLE 32 emphasizes the urgency of church discipline. Church discipline and excommunication are needed if false doctrine is spreading and straying believers away from Christ, the only master of the church. Here, the BC expands its scope of church discipline. It needs not only on members’ moral of conduct but also the doctrine and teaching in the church. Broeke clarifies that the BC does not mean that all human invention and all laws are in vain and worthless. These are valuable and beneficial in themselves; it is necessary and important for they are related to Christ’s ownership over church and help believers to serve Him. However, if the opposite takes place in church, the BC strongly encourages office-bearers to take necessary action of exclusion, even excommunication, as the commitment of church discipline for the unity of the church is at stake.<sup>16</sup> If church leaders boldly discipline and excommunicate every false teaching in the church, then the unity of the church is maintained.

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<sup>14</sup> Leon van den Broeke, “To Keep God’s Holy Order: The Relevance of Reformed Governance in Article 30-32 of the Belgic Confession for Churches Today,” in *The Belgic Confession: Historical Background, Contextual Meaning, Contemporary Relevance*, ed. Albert J. Coetsee, Sarel P. van der Walt, and D. Francois Muller, Reformed Theology in Africa Series, vol. 14 (Cape Town, South Africa: AOSIS Publishing, 2023), 205. <https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2023.BK448>.

<sup>15</sup> Janssen, *Confessing the Faith Today*.

<sup>16</sup> Broeke, “To Keep God’s Holy Order.”

Heidelberg Catechism (1561)<sup>17</sup>

*Lord's Day 31*

QUESTION AND ANSWER 83

Q. What is the Office of the Keys?

A. The preaching of the holy Gospel and **Church discipline**; by which two things the kingdom of heaven is opened to believers and shut against unbelievers.

QUESTION AND ANSWER 85

Q. How is the kingdom of heaven shut and opened by Church discipline?

A. In this way: that, according to the command of Christ, if any under the Christian name show themselves unsound either in doctrine or life, and after repeated **brotherly admonition** refuse to turn from their errors or evil ways, they are complained of to, the Church or to its proper officers, and, if they neglect to hear them also, are by them **excluded from the holy Sacraments and the Christian communion**, and by God himself from the kingdom of Christ; and if they promise and show real amendment, they are again received as members of Christ and his Church.

Such persons, when promising and demonstrating genuine reform, are received again as members of Christ and of his church.

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The Heidelberg Catechism (shortened HC) is believed to have been written by Zacharias Ursinus as the primary author, and Caspar Olevianus as the second author. Frederick III, as the Elector of Palatinate at the time, is the one who asked to have a Reformed catechism or confession to have more Reformed direction among Palatinate regions.<sup>18</sup>

The HC is somehow clearer and bolder in its development of the ideas of excommunication compared to the BC. While BC does not provide a clear statement regarding to what extent the excommunication is practiced. It is believed that the HC is more straightforward regarding excommunication and withholding from joining holy sacraments and communion (Q/A 85).

As a comparison, the BC obviously mentions that the church office-bearers who are responsible for executing church discipline for those who are found guilty. However, the HC seems to miss identifying the ministerial order. Instead of giving a direct explanation, the HC provides a significant clue regarding its profile. The HC names church discipline as one of the "keys of Kingdom," alongside preaching of the Holy Gospel, which repentance may follow. Who holds the keys? The phrase "key of the kingdom" is taken from Jesus' saying to Peter in Matthew 16:19. The text itself explicitly states that Jesus is the holder of the key to the kingdom. Jesus has the ultimate power and authority to open and close His kingdom. The passage informs that Jesus has passed on the key to the apostles, and later to whoever was appointed by Him to oversee the government of His kingdom. In this perspective, the HC is

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<sup>17</sup> Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of the Evangelical Protestant Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1989).

<sup>18</sup> Joel R. Beeke cited Lyle Bierma's opinion that HC originally is purposed for educating children in sound doctrine. See Joel R. Beeke, "Holding Firmly to the Heidelberg: The Validity and Relevance of Catechism Preaching," in *A Faith Worth Teaching: The Heidelberg Catechism's Enduring Heritage*, ed. Jon D. Payne and Sebastian Heck (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2013).

in the same vein as the BC that church office-bearers have been given derivative authority from Jesus, the owner of the kingdom to open and close the door through preaching and church discipline.

There are four important elements of church discipline in the HC. First, *covenantal union is the foundation for church discipline*. The word covenant occurs five times in the entire catechism. Three of them are in Ursinus and Olevianus' words in Q/A 74 (2 times) and 82 (1 time). The other two are quoted from Jesus's own words in Q/A 77 and 79. Even though its occurrences only 5 times, scholars agree that HC has laid out a new form of German Reformed doctrine, that is covenant theology.<sup>19</sup>

The perspective of covenant theology has occurred from question answer 1. "What is your only comfort in life and in death? I am not my own, but belong . . . to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ." Here, the covenant idea has been presented; that is believers' union and belonging with and to Christ. The rest of the teaching in the HC is built upon the idea.<sup>20</sup>

Specifically in question answer 83 and 85, church discipline is linked to opening or closing the kingdom of heaven in terms of joining or it is restrained from sacraments. A believer is welcomed to the kingdom by the sign and seal of sacraments and vice versa. For the HC, sacraments are covenantal signs and seals of God's covenant grace (Q/A 69-71 for baptism and Q/A 75-77 for the Lord's Supper). The HC teaches both sacraments are God's sign and seal of His covenant grace (Q/A 66-68). It signifies and seals "the true internal union and fellowship all believers have with the Lord Jesus by faith, as well as with His grace and benefits, yielding for them justification, sanctification, and redemption."<sup>21</sup> Regarding this teaching, when a person is excommunicated, it means the person is restrained from the joining the covenantal sign and seal in sacraments. The person is excluded from God's covenant family. Once the person truly repents from sin, God's sacramental union welcomes the person back into the family (Q/A 85).

Secondly, *church discipline and excommunication require proper procedures*. This is one of the significant contributions of the HC in teaching how to administer church discipline and excommunication accordingly. Q/A 85 guides procedures on church discipline. The first step is repeated personal and brotherly correction to the transgressor. When the person refuses to repent, it is reported to higher levels of church authorities whose church leaders are involved. This is the second step. If the person remains in sinful life even after the leader's admonition,

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<sup>19</sup> Lyle D. Bierma, *The Theology of the Heidelberg Catechism: A Reformation Synthesis*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 90, <https://doi.org/10.35285/ucc3.2.2017.rev5>. Willem Verboom also mentions HC is closely tied to covenant theology of Reformed. See Willem Verboom, "The Heidelberg Catechism: A Catechetical Tool," in *A Faith Worth Teaching: The Heidelberg Catechism's Enduring Heritage*, eds. Jon D. Payne and Sebastian Heck (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2013), <https://www.heritagebooks.org/content/faithworthteachingsample.pdf?> Similarly, Michael G. Brown specifically elaborates the covenantal foundation (both covenant of grace and covenant of works) in Heidelberg Catechism. See Michael G. Brown, "The Covenantal Foundation of the Heidelberg Catechism," *Puritan Reformed Journal* 7, no. 1 (January 2015): 88-102, <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=aabff297-b073-3e21-b6f0-27209422e5c6>.

<sup>20</sup> Bierma, *The Theology of the Heidelberg Catechism*, 90.

<sup>21</sup> Theodorus VanderGroe, *The Christian's Only Comfort in Life and Death: An Exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. Bartel Elshout, ed. Joel R. Beeke (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2016), <https://www.pcabookstore.com/samples/13579.pdf>.

thus the office-bearers should exclude the person both from sacraments and community as stated in the third step.

The HC follows faithfully what Jesus has taught in how to reprove others for sin in Matthew 18:15-20. Jesus teaches to have personal admonition as the first step, and then involve other parties to correct the transgressor, and exclusion as the final step.

Proper procedures preserve the church from abusive practices of church discipline. Church discipline should not be used to cast a believer out from the community, unless it is because of a doctrinal or life issue. It should not be used for personal and subjective interests, such as 'like and dislike' feelings among members. It should be used for maintaining the purity of the church.

Thirdly, *the proper procedure of church discipline is administered by a familial approach*. The HC mentions "brotherly admonitions" in Q/A 85. This familial nuance is grounded from Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18:15-20 as well. As a spiritual family, the church should be the context or environment where the proper procedures of discipline are executed. The understanding that the violator who is about to be admonished is one of the brothers in the family of Christ emphasizes bonding as a body of Christ. It enriches perspective on church discipline in the HC. It is not only as a covenantal responsibility, but also as a familial counsel.

Derive from this familial approach, it is a heart-warming instruction that an opportunity to repent is opened throughout the processes and steps. The motive of familial love lies behind the proper procedures. Loving the sinner yet hating the sin goes together in these proper procedures. Then, it leads to the fourth concept.

Fourthly, *the aim of church discipline and excommunication is repentance of the transgressor*. Proper procedure of church discipline opens the chance for the transgressor to repent sincerely. This is the fundamental aim of church discipline and excommunication. It is repeating in Q/A 83. When it is practiced, it can open the door of the kingdom for believers, when the transgressor repents from his sin. Restoration will take place. The sinner will be received again as members of Christ and His church.<sup>22</sup> In any case, suppose the transgressor rejects turning the sin away, thus church discipline declares the person does not belong to Christ's kingdom anymore.

Canons of Dordt (1618-1619)<sup>23</sup>

*The Fifth Main Point of Doctrine: The Perseverance of the Saints*

*ARTICLE 14: God's Use of Means in Perseverance*

And, just as it has pleased God to begin this work of grace in us by the proclamation of the gospel, so he preserves, continues, and completes his work by the hearing and reading of the gospel, by meditation on it, by **its exhortations, threats**, and promises, and also by the use of the sacraments.

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The Canons of Dordt (abbreviated CD) is a written Reformed document, released in an international scale Reformed synod meetings in 1618-1619. The synod was held to respond to

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<sup>22</sup> Sebastian Heck, "'Washed from All My Sins': The Doctrine of Baptism in the Heidelberg Catechism," in *A Faith Worth Teaching: The Heidelberg Catechism's Enduring Heritage*, eds. Jon D. Payne and Sebastian Heck (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2013), <https://www.heritagebooks.org/content/faithworthteachingsample.pdf?>

<sup>23</sup> Van Dixhoorn, *Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms*.

a serious doctrinal dispute in the Netherlands against Remonstrance, the followers of Arminius.

Prior to the synodal meetings, Reformed teaching has directed churches in the Netherlands. However, Arminius and his fellow scholars spread an unbiblical paradigm of God's sovereign grace by declaring that God's election is conditioned by His foreseen faith of one, universal atonement of Christ, and resistible grace. This controversial teaching has become a serious dispute in the Netherlands Reformed churches.

The Dutch Reformed churches called for a solution. The synod was held in the city of Dordrecht. They succeeded in the result the CD that was signed by Reformed ecumenical representatives from 9 different countries. Delegations at the time made the CD had an international impact at that time.

Officially, the CD reaffirmed its doctrinal position toward BC and HC. In order to respond to Arminius' Remonstrance points of salvation, the synod released 5 points counter-remonstrance: that were total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saint. In addition, the CD announced rejection and condemnation against Remonstrance's teaching and ministers.

The historical background mentioned above displays the practice of church discipline. The CD is visible results when church discipline is administered. The HC has stated that both doctrinal and ethical life of church members are held accountable in Christ's kingdom. In this case, Arminian Remonstrance's teachings that stray the church away from Scripture should not be taken lightly. Although the term church discipline is nowhere throughout the CD explicitly, the CD is the model of exercising church discipline regarding false doctrines in a denominational degree.

As the main doctrinal teaching is about God's sovereign grace in salvation, the CD explains the doctrine of perseverance of believers and God's preservation upon them in the final heading (the fifth main point). Within this particular point, ARTICLE 14, two words are mentioned: exhortations and threats. The word of God is used to exhort and threaten the-already-believers in the church to preserve the faith. This refers to the concept of church discipline implicitly.

In addition to that, it is noteworthy a document signed also in the Synod of Dordt named Church Order of Dordt (1619). It provides a framework of ecclesiastical order and discipline alongside the CD. As the CD mainly deals with doctrinal discipline, Church Order of Dordt arranges more comprehensive guidance in addressing church discipline at large. Particularly on church discipline, Church Order of Dordt elaborates it in the fourth head under the title "Of Censure and Ecclesiastical Admonition."

Aligning to the HC, Church Order of Dordt specifically expands the themes by publishing three continuities of church discipline in the document. They are the procedures, the aim, and the suspension. As HC has emphasized, Church Order of Dordt follows obediently Jesus' instruction on the procedure of admonition (article 72-77): loving and personal exhortation as the first step, church leaders' admonition as the second step, and excommunication as the final step if violation remains. Other continuity is the aim of church discipline/excommunication. Reconciliation and restoration should be given when the person shows repentance (article 75 and 78). To add its continuity, Church Order of Dordt mirrors HC in suspending violators from the Lord's Supper sacrament (article 76 and 77).

Nonetheless, contrasted to the HC, Church Order of Dordt broadens the order suppose the violator is the office-bearer. Articles 79-83 guide the censure of leaders' violations in detail.

In this sense, despite position and office, every member of the church is held accountable for the purity of their doctrinal and moral life.

Referring to the CD, the key points of church discipline are putting the Scripture as a media in practicing church discipline. The fifth main point ARTICLE 14 says “the hearing and reading of the gospel” is used for “exhortations, threats” violator. The word of the Scripture is used to correct, warn, and exhort doctrinal error.

Matthew Barret explores that the word of Scripture functions as an important supplement to piety. He states that the CD teaches God’s sovereign grace and piety are two inseparable cause and effect relationships. It is God’s grace that enables believers to have a pious life. However, piety is an exercise. As an exercise, piety needs supplement in order to ensure constant godliness is formed within believers. This is where the word of God in various forms plays the role of exhortation and threatening through the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>24</sup>

The CD teaches that exhortation and threatening from the proclamation of the gospel function as God’s preservation upon believers. God will continue to preserve His people until His saving work is completed. In a similar perspective, church discipline should also be seen as God’s preservation upon believers.

Westminster Standards<sup>25</sup>

*Westminster Confession of Faith (1647)*

CHAPTER 30

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.
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.
3. **Church censures** are necessary for the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren; for deterring of others from the like offenses, 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.
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.

*Westminster Larger Catechism (1648)*

Q. 45. How doth Christ execute the office of a king?

A. Christ executes the office of a king, in calling out of the world a people to himself, and giving them officers, laws, and **censures**, by which he visibly governs them; in bestowing saving grace upon his elect, rewarding their obedience, and correcting them for their sins, preserving and supporting them under all their temptations and sufferings, restraining and

<sup>24</sup> Matthew Barrett, “Piety in the Canons of Dort,” *Puritan Reformed Journal* 3, no. 1 (January 2011): 250, <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=1705fec2-3cf5-3a4f-bccc-5f3ecfffd00b>.

<sup>25</sup> Van Dixhoorn, *Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms*.

overcoming all their enemies, and powerfully ordering all things for his own glory, and their good; and also in taking vengeance on the rest, who know not God, and obey not the gospel.

Q. 63. What are the special privileges of the visible Church?

A. The visible Church hath the privilege of being under God's special care and government; of being protected and preserved in all ages, notwithstanding the opposition of all enemies; and of enjoying the communion of saints, **the ordinary means of salvation**, and offers of grace by Christ to all the members of it in the ministry of the gospel, testifying, that whosoever believes in him shall be saved, and excluding none that will come unto him.

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The Westminster Confession of Faith (henceforth WCF) and Westminster Larger Catechism (hereafter WLC) receive the baton to consistently teach on church discipline from previous confessions. In the opening chapter/question answer on church censure, they echo the HC's idea of Jesus as the King and Head of the church and the keys of the kingdom (WCF) taken from Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18:17–18, John 20:21–23, and Revelation 1:18.

Along with the HC the WCF repeats Jesus' declaration that the practice of church discipline will open the kingdom to believers and close it to unbelievers. A.A. Hodge comments that by the authority received from Christ, the church "has power to receive into fellowship, and to exclude the unworthy from her own communion." By those who repent, the Kingdom's fellowship is opened, and it is closed for those who reject to repent, to whom Hodge says, "unworthy from her own communion."<sup>26</sup>

Five key concepts of church discipline in Westminster Standard are worth noting. Firstly, *church discipline is the manifestation of Jesus' kingship over the church*. The WCF CHAPTER 30/ 1 and 2 confess Jesus is the King and the Head of the church. Even though the keys of the kingdom belong to Jesus, He appoints them to church officers. By the agency of ordained church officers, Jesus himself has an ultimate power to open and close the door of the kingdom through the proclamation of the Word and censure. The WLC declares similarly. Q/A 45 clearly states that Jesus is the King. Hence, Westminster Standards declares a clear idea that one of visible manifestations of Jesus' kingship is church censure.<sup>27</sup> By the same token, G. I. Williamson states that church censure "is an actual administration of the power of Christ by which the kingdom of heaven is actually closed to the sinner unless and until he repents."<sup>28</sup>

The WLC supports the idea of linking church discipline to Jesus' kingly office. Q/A 45 explains this. Williamson divides into two scopes: visible and invisible scopes. His kingly rule in visible church calls out those who are elected to be His members of visible church, appointing officers, and giving church law and discipline. His kingly rules to the invisible

<sup>26</sup> Archibald A. Hodge, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1869).

[https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/aahodge/The\\_Westminster\\_Confession\\_of\\_Faith\\_A\\_C\\_-\\_A\\_A\\_Hodg.pdf](https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/aahodge/The_Westminster_Confession_of_Faith_A_C_-_A_A_Hodg.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> Johannes G. Vos comments question answer 45 that WLC teaches three domains of Jesus kingship: that are visible church, invisible church, and the world. See in Johannes G. Vos, *The Westminster Larger Catechism: A Commentary*, ed. G. I. Williamson (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 103.

<sup>28</sup> Gerald I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: For Study Classes*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004).

church are bestowing saving grace to His elect through the work of the Holy Spirit, giving reward of obedience to His elect, and preserving and supporting His people through suffering and persecution.<sup>29</sup> It is clear statement that church censure is one of Jesus' kingship rules.

The church has been built on Jesus' sacrificial and victorious work on the cross. He is the King and the Head of the church by defeating sin and its bondage. Consequently, transgressions and violations in church should not be treated casually. His kingship demands discipline from His members.

The second element is *the key to executing church discipline belongs to church officers, not the State* (CHAPTER 30/1). The WCF obviously distinguishes church from the state regarding those who have a different domain in executing their authorities. The key to censure is given to the church-offices, not the state. However, church-officers will have power to administer censure toward State officers if the state officers belong to a visible church.<sup>30</sup>

The WCF clearly follows what the Bible teaches on church order. Christ has appointed apostles, prophets, and teachers for apostolic teaching (1 Corinthians 12:28-29). As Christ ascended to heaven, apostle Paul mentions that authority is carried on by apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers (Ephesians 4:11). As the apostles of Jesus Christ passed away, the authority of teachings is forwarded by the Bible as God's word, while the administrative order is held by the elder and bishop (1 Timothy 5:17). In this perspective, Jesus hands over the key to church censure to its officers, which identified as elders and bishops, to execute the key with the same result as Peter and the apostle would have.<sup>31</sup>

The third point is that *church discipline benefits the church*. The WCF CHAPTER 30/3 goes further explaining why church censure is necessary to the church. There are lists of benefits of practicing church discipline. The WCF lists the benefits are

“for the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren; for deterring of others from the like offenses; for purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump; for vindicating the honour 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.”

Williamson notes 1 Corinthians 5's record is the ground of the benefit. As Paul instructs Corinthian church to discipline the offender (1 Corinthians 5:13), it is to bring the man into repentance (2 Corinthians 2:7) and restoration (v. 8). Church discipline will reclaim and bring the offender back to community (Matthew 18:15). Lacking discipline exercised within church

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<sup>29</sup> Vos, *The Westminster Larger Catechism*, 103-104.

<sup>30</sup> John V. Fesko opines this clear distinction arises caused by John Lightfoot's (1602–1675), observations and documentations on the assembly's sin at the time: such as “neglect of service, failures to attend the assembly, leaving early, numerous divines absenting themselves from the assembly's prayers, neglect in the amount of time given to debate, some speaking too much and others speaking too little, irreverent behavior, anger in debate, partisanship, and not conducting ministerial examinations in a serious manner.” Let alone sins of army such as “swearing, gaming, and drinking, as well as an overall lack of discipline.” George Gillespie (1613–1648) is the first inserts the distinction between power of church and magistrate in the assembly debates. John V. Fesko, *The Theology of the Westminster Standards: Historical Context and Theological Insights* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014). You may compare to Chad Van Dixhoorn, *John Lightfoot's Journals of the Westminster Assembly* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2023).

<sup>31</sup> Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith*.

will harm the offender and the church, as the WCF mentions “detering of others from the like offenses; for purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump.” It is better to maintain the purity of the Christ’s honour rather than facing God’s wrath in the end (Matthew 5:13). He states,

“It is more important to God that Christ be honoured and obeyed than that sinners be pampered. We must choose between the two: we must either maintain the honour of Christ at all costs, or else sacrifice the honour of Christ in order to satisfy the wishes of men.”<sup>32</sup>

Fourthly, *excommunication is the last resort in church discipline*. The WCF resonances church discipline procedures from previous confessions. It should be admonitions, suspending from the Lord’s table. If the violation remains, then excommunication may be necessary as the last exertion. “Prior to excommunication, as Christ instructed (Matthew 18:16–18), repeated earnest and tender efforts are to be made to encourage an erring brother to turn from his sin.”<sup>33</sup>

The focus of church discipline is not and never cast someone out of the community. The aims are always repentance and restoration which results in the transgressor returning to the community. As a brother admonishes his brother on his transgressions privately and lovingly, it is obviously excommunication is not the goal, but repentance.<sup>34</sup> Williamson suggests a condition to which excommunication is applied when there is persistence in sin without repentance. It is never as the aim, only if necessary.

Fifthly, *church discipline is a special privilege to enjoy*. The WLC is more proportionate in describing church discipline compared to previous confessions. As dealing with personal struggle both in doctrinal and moral aspects, it is unavoidable to view church discipline as one of the church challenges in practice. The BC, HC, CD and WCF highlight the task should be administered seriously, properly and carefully. However, the WLC provides another angle to see church discipline as a privilege to enjoy. God cares for His people. He protects and preserves His church throughout the ages. He designs His church to be enjoyed and celebrated by various means of salvation: sacraments, church discipline, public worship, and pastoral care.

Viewing church discipline as privilege to enjoy reminds reader to the Q/A 1 of the WLC. “What is the chief and highest end of man? Man’s chief and highest end is to glorify God and fully enjoy him forever.” Thus, Jesus himself is to be enjoyed in church discipline. The fact that Jesus the King has won over sin and its bondage, Jesus has given spiritual community and leaders as overseers, Jesus will receive whoever comes to Him in repentance is gospel truth to enjoy and celebrate.

#### Implication for Church Life

In the introduction section, this paper exposed two polars of arguments on church discipline. On the one hand, some perceive church discipline is negative and not-promising for church life. This group focuses on how church discipline is executed. They believe that the execution is always severe and end up on worse results for church life. This sounds more pessimistic regarding the outcome of church discipline.

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<sup>32</sup> Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith*.

<sup>33</sup> Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith*.

<sup>34</sup> Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith*.

On the other hand, some argue that church is necessary for the church. This group is optimistic and bold regarding its benefit for church life. They opine that practice of church discipline will help church to be an effective Christ' witness to the world. Reformed confessions consistently view that church discipline is essential to the maintain church purity and holiness. The confessions are also giving sufficient counsel to practice a loving and careful execution. Based on study on Reformed confessions, two implications are important to be highlighted.

The first implication, instead of optional, church discipline is truly Jesus' commandment. Since this is a commandment, church should consider church discipline as a way on how Jesus preserves His body. If church claims that Jesus as the king and the head of church, then practicing church discipline is an obedient to His commandment. Moreover, Reformed confessions keep referring Jesus' teaching on Matthew 18 to the ground of church discipline. However, its practice originally has been written in the Old Testament. Through the exploration on the story of Israel, we found out that God has proclaimed Himself as the holy God who punished and rewarded Israel. God always warns the Israel both individually and communally to live holy according to his command. Deuteronomy 8:1-6 says,

"The whole commandment that I command you today you shall be careful to do, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land that the Lord swore to give to your fathers. <sup>2</sup> And you shall remember the whole way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. <sup>3</sup> And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word<sup>1</sup> that comes from the mouth of the Lord. <sup>4</sup> Your clothing did not wear out on you, and your foot did not swell these forty years. <sup>5</sup> Know then in your heart that, **as a man disciplines his son, the Lord your God disciplines you.** <sup>6</sup> So you shall keep the commandments of the Lord your God by walking in his ways and by fearing him." (ESV, emphasis added)

In Deuteronomy 8:1-6, God obviously reminds Israel to behave as the holy nation. God does not let the elected people to follow the unbelievers' way of life. To maintain the purity, God upholds justice and truth by disciplining Israel whenever they disobey. Eric J. Bargerhuff emphasizes discipline as a God's love action toward Israel since his love is a picture of a fatherly love who is disciplining his own children (v.5).<sup>35</sup>

Furthermore, some records in the New Testament concern that discipline is necessary to accommodate brothers and sisters who fall into sin. The gospel of Matthew expounds Jesus' command to admonish our brother's sin in 18:15-20. In few records, apostle Paul also address churches to be dare in punishing sins and shepherding the sinners. In his letter, Paul reminds church in Corinthians to not let sins dwell in the community. To maintain church's purity and faith, Paul urges them to act and discipline the immoral brother (1 Corinthian 5:6-7). The similar case happens in church of Galatians and Colossians. Paul instructs church members of Galatians, "Brothers, if anyone is **caught in any transgression**, you who are spiritual **should restore him in a spirit of gentleness**. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted (6:1

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<sup>35</sup> Eric J. Bargerhuff, *Love that Rescues: God's Fatherly Love in the Practice of Church Discipline* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010), 4. This "father-son" relationship brings to mind Heidelberg Catechism which teaches admonition should be done brotherly (familial approach).

ESV, emphasis added). Meanwhile, Paul teaches in Colossians 3:16a, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom (ESV, emphasis added). In addition, the picture of the Lord as like a father disciplines His son is repeated in Hebrew 12:7-11, which says,

“It is for discipline that you have to endure. **God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?** <sup>8</sup> If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. <sup>9</sup> Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? <sup>10</sup> For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but **he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.** <sup>11</sup> For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.’ (ESV, emphasis added)

To sum up, both old and new Testaments affirm the significance of discipline for God’s people. In the Old Testament, God repeatedly disciplines Israel to maintain the community to be holy and God’s favour. Meanwhile, in the New Testament, Jesus himself who gave this command to his followers. It implies that discipline is how God concern on his people to be an example for other communities. Carl J. Laney once said, “The church that seeks God’s blessing cannot afford to neglect the purity of its body.”<sup>36</sup>

The second implication, the practice of church discipline is not about earning grace, but it is more a respond to the-already-received-grace. HC and Westminster Standards put church discipline into the perspective of covenant. Regarding covenant theology, it is beneficial to recall, the division of Roman Catholic and Protestant. Usually, the dispute between Roman Catholic and Protestant is on the concept of salvation, justification, sacraments and the authority of church order. However, both are also different on viewing church discipline. Roman Catholic regulates certain requirements to be fulfilled by the violator in order to forgiveness and restoration are given. Roman Catholic has the sacramental practices of confession and penance system to facilitate one’s reconciliation to God.

Roman Catholic believes that a violator should penance<sup>37</sup> through fulfilling certain standards to be received again in the Church. Sin harms the person and the church.<sup>38</sup> Thus, several activities of penance are compulsory to repair. Catechism of the Catholic Church (hereafter CCC) 1491 teaches there are three actions to fulfil penance: “repentance, confession or disclosure of sins to the priest,<sup>39</sup> and the intention to make reparation and do works of reparation.”<sup>40</sup> Forms of reparation usually fasting, prayer, and almsgiving.<sup>41</sup> It could also be

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<sup>36</sup> James Carl Laney, *A Guide to Church Discipline* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1985), 25.

<sup>37</sup> Jean-Hervé Nicolas, O.P. wrote an extensive work of theology of penance in *Catholic Dogmatic Theology: A Synthesis. Book 3: On the Church and the Sacraments*, trans. Matthew K. Miner (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press: 2024).

<sup>38</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1992, 1494.

<sup>39</sup> Roman Catholic believes priest is the only successor of apostles. Only priest can administer the ministry of reconciliation, and also to forgive sin in the name of Jesus. See in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1461 and 1495.

<sup>40</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1491.

<sup>41</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1434.

fulfilled by showing “concern for the poor, the exercise and defence of justice and right, ... revision of life, examination of conscience, spiritual direction, acceptance of suffering, endurance of persecution for the sake of righteousness.”<sup>42</sup> By fulfilling the requirement, grace is earned. By failing to fulfil the requirement, someone can fall out of grace.

Contrarily, Protestant, especially Reformed against the Roman Catholic’s scheme. Church discipline is started by understanding that each member of visible church is united in covenantal grace that has already received and fulfilled through the victorious work of Jesus. However, the tendency of sin remains in the mind and habit of believer. Church discipline is, as Carl Laney put it, a “confrontative and corrective measures taken by an individual, church leaders, or the congregation regarding a matter of sin in the life of a believer.”<sup>43</sup> Church discipline is a corrective measure whether a believer is living according to the grace received.

As mentioned earlier, both the HC and Westminster Standards discuss church discipline in the reality of covenant union. Thus, the HC sees the violation takes place in the covenantal relationship. Similarly, the Westminster Standards repeats the idea that church discipline is executed upon someone who is already a member of Christ Kingdom. In this sense, church discipline is not human effort to earn God’s favour and forgiveness. Instead, it is a corrective measure so as to live accordingly to God’s grace that has received.<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusion

Since the beginning, church discipline has been a concern among Reformed churches. Reformed Confessions as a historical record as well as a faith formulation recognize church discipline as an important commitment to its community of believers. Despite each confession having its own situation while it was written, church discipline was seen as essential practice for the church to maintain its holiness and purity as a body of Christ. The Belgic Confession expounds church discipline as one of the marks of true church. Heidelberg teaches that church discipline is practiced in a covenantal framework.

Meanwhile, three confessions, including the Belgic and Heidelberg Confessions, and Westminster Standards correspond that church leaders hold derivative authority from Jesus, the King, and the Head of the church to execute church discipline. In addition, the Heidelberg claims that the proper procedures are a critical element in upholding church discipline. Moreover, all three confessions also point out that excommunication of the transgressor from being partake in sacraments and communion is the final resort in this procedure. The particular purpose of this step refers to the transgressor’s repentance and restoration, so the person might return to church community.

Furthermore, the Canons Dordt’s document reveals that one historical event where the church confronts false teachings on God’s saving grace at the time. Then, the church finally imposed the censure on those who taught the false teachings. It is evidence that the practice of church discipline benefits the church since Reformed churches then formulated a valuable legacy of TULIP and has been preserved to maintain the true teachings. The Canons of Dordt produces the biblical-integrated teachings of God’s saving grace.

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<sup>42</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1435.

<sup>43</sup> Laney, “The Biblical Practice,” 354.

<sup>44</sup> Jeremy M. Kimble, “Two Views on Church Discipline: Protestant vs. Roman Catholic,” *9Marks* (blog), 26 September 2017, <https://www.9marks.org/article/two-views-on-church-discipline-protestant-vs-roman-catholic/>.

Proceeding from the study, Reformed confessions imply that church discipline is Jesus' command to obey. It is not human effort to earn grace, but the believers' response to the grace received.

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