

David Dickson's
Truth's Victory Over Error
Chapter XXX. (Part 3.)
Of Church Censures.

QUESTION II.

ARE Church Censures necessary for reclaiming, and gaining of offending brethren; for deterring of others from the like offences; 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 sinners?

Yes. 1 *Tim.* 5.20. 1 *Tim.* 1.20. 1 *Cor.* 11.27, to the end; *Jude* 23rd verse.

Are the Officers of the church for the better attaining of these ends to proceed by Admonition, by Suspension from the Lord's Table, for a season, and by Excommunication from the church according to the nature of the crime or scandalous offence, and demerit of the Person?

Yes. 1 *Thess.* 5.12. 1 *Cor.* 5.4, 5, 13. *Matth.* 18.17-18. *Titus* 3.10.

Well then, *Do not the Socinians, Anabaptists, Quakers, and other Sectaries err, who deny that any church censures should be inflicted upon offenders?*

Yes.

Do not likewise the Erastians err, who maintain, there should be no suspension from the Lord's Table or excommunication from the church?

Yes.

By what reasons are they confuted?

(1) Because, the *power of the keys*, is given to the *Ministers of the church*, wherewith not only by the *preaching of the Word*, but also by *church censures*, they open and shut the *kingdom of heaven*; as will appear by comparing these places of Scripture together; *Matth.* 16.19. *Matth.* 18.17-18. (2) Because, he that *offends publickly*, and after *Admonition* persists *pertinaciously* in his sin, should be esteemed as a *Publican and Heathen*, *Matth.* 18.17. (3) Because, the *Apostle says*, if any man obey not our *Word* by this *Epistle*, note that *man*, and have no *company* with *him*. Note *him*, that is, either by

excommunication, or some other note of *church censure*, 2 *Thess.* 3.14. (4) Because, the *Apostolick church*, being moved by the same reasons (which now are) used the *power* of the *keys*, and excluded from the *Sacrament*, men that were manifestly *contumacious*, and *wicked*, 1 *Cor.* 5.2-5. And 1 *Tim.* 1.20. 2 *Thess.* 3.6,14. (5) Because, the *Apostle says*, them that sin (to wit publicly) *rebuke before all*, that others also may fear, 1 *Tim.* 5.20. (6) Consider the *various ends of Ecclesiastical censures*, as the reclaiming of *offending brethren*, and the rest of them, which are set down in the Question.

Old Testament Passages Relevant to Church Discipline

1 Sam. 2.29. Exod. 12.15. Lev. 13.46. Ezekiel 22.25-26. Psalm 101.4-7.

Other Resources to Consult

1. In the “Directory for Church Government” drafted by the Westminster Assembly, there is a section titled “The Directory for Church Censures.” This, with the First and Second Books of Discipline of the Church of Scotland, are standard expressions of what was intended in a more particular sense, by the censures and discipline used by the Presbyterian churches of the Reformation. Some excerpts from the Westminster Assemblies Directory demonstrate their intentions:

“Excommunication being a shutting out of a Person from the Communion of the Church (and therefore the greatest and last censure of the Church) ought not to be inflicted without great and mature deliberation, nor till all other good means have been assayed.”

“Such errors as subvert the Faith, or any other errors which overthrow the power of Godliness, if the party who holds them, spread them, seeking to draw others after him; and such sins in practice, as cause the Name and Truth of God to be blasphemed, and cannot stand with the power of Godliness; and such practices as in their own nature manifestly subvert that Order, Unity, and Peace, which Christ hath established in his Church; Those being publicly known, to the just scandal of the Church, the sentence of Excommunication shall proceed according to the Directory.”

“But the Persons who hold other errors in judgment about points wherein Learned and Godly men possibly may, or do differ, and which subvert not the Faith, nor are destructive to Godliness; Or that be guilty of such sins of infirmity, as are commonly found in the Children of God; Or, being otherwise sound in the Faith and holy in Life (and so not falling under censure by the former Rules) endeavour to keep the Unity of the Spirit in the bond of Peace, and do yet out of Conscience not come up to the observation of all those Rules, which are or shall be established by Authority for regulating the outward Worship of God, and Government of his Church, we do not decern to be such against whom the sentence of Excommunication for these causes should be denounced.”

2. George Gillespie’s book, “Aaron’s Rod Blossoming” is a defence of Church Discipline in opposition to the arguments of Erastians who did not want to acknowledge any discipline should be instituted besides the Magistrates punishments.

3. The Informatory Vindication (1687) details how Covenanters maintained a functional discipline among themselves, even during periods when they lacked ministers, elders, & organized congregations.