

Remaining questions

from Prof Gritters' Church Discipline class, Summer 2023

A note about church government questions: There are always difficult questions regarding church government and specifically church discipline. Synods in the past have always faced these knotty questions. Some old synods recorded such questions, and the answers given became strong precedent for the young churches in the years to come. Some questions, however, synods refused to answer because, for example, no rule could be made in some cases ('how can a consistory distinguish between public and private?'), or because the specific circumstances in each case would determine the answer.

At the end of each session opportunity was given to ask questions. Here, I answer a few of the questions that were not answered in the classes. Please remember that these answers are only my opinions, not dogmatic declarations; and that if synods were reluctant to answer some difficult questions, we also should learn caution in expressing ourselves with dogmatism.

Nevertheless, I offer some opinions. Judge them on the basis of principles derived from the Bible and the Church Order, and with God-given wisdom. (Note: the questions are my paraphrases of what I received, orally or in writing.)

1. *A scenario: A church member has some dissatisfaction with how a consistory is proceeding with discipline. He asks for the consistory minutes and reports so that he can judge the consistory's actions. Are there any guidelines for consistories to determine how much information may be given to such a church member?*

Ans:

- a. First, the office of believer gives members the right and even duty to approbate all discipline. From this point of view, consistories ought to give them as much as they can and may, to help the members judge the propriety of their actions.
- b. Second, it should go without saying that before official minutes are given, a consistory should ask such a member to appear at an elders' meeting or appoint a committee to speak to him. Perhaps he does not understand the circumstances, and a private meeting with him would help give him a clearer picture of the discipline case. There are risks in such meetings that should be avoided—for example, one elder saying too much about the case that may not be known. But face to face conversations are always best.
- c. Third, a dissatisfied church member should be able to give the elders good explanation of his dissatisfaction. The elders may judge his or her reasons. They ought to lean toward giving information to those who ask. This will help the members both trust the elders and learn that the elders have made good and careful decisions.
- d. Fourth, both classis and synod of the PRCA have ruled that a member does not have the right to *all* the documents in the consistory's possession (committee reports, sub-committee recommendations—some of which may have not been adopted, etc), but only the minutes of a case. Note well: Even when the consistory gives minutes, they may be required to redact some particulars, such as names.

2. *The Church Order requires consistories to make certain announcements about discipline, mentioned in CO article 77: the first, of discipline of a member without his/her name; the second, with his/her name; the third, of pending excommunication. This is well-understood. Is a consistory permitted to make other announcements about a discipline case—that is, in addition to the standard 3? We have in mind particularly difficult and lengthy cases.*

Ans:

- a. There is no rule forbidding further announcements about discipline. There is a general rule that appears throughout the church order that may apply: *When there is no rule, elders should do what is most edifying for the congregation.* There is a certain freedom consistories have to make judgements dependent on their particular circumstances (see, for example, articles 22, 62, 75, 77). Thus, if a consistory judges that the congregation would benefit from an announcement, they should feel the liberty to do so. Sometimes, in lengthy and difficult discipline cases, elders can sense the congregation's healthy desire to know more. A pastor can help this with carefully formulated congregational prayers. These prayers indicate that the pastor and elders are very conscious of and busy with the member under discipline. But at times, more than this may be helpful.
- b. Such an announcement about the progress of discipline should assure the congregation of the consistory's ongoing and careful labor and remind the members of their calling to pray for or visit the member under discipline. Perhaps the congregation would be helped to know why the case continues *status quo*. That is, why is not discipline lifted, or, on the other hand, why does the discipline not increase? Caution ought to be exercised about announcing developments in the case, which would make it difficult for the consistory to proceed in one direction or the other. That is, announcing that positive progress is being made could make it more difficult to increase censure if the case soon deteriorated. But this caution does not mean that a consistory could not formulate a very careful progress report.

3. *May a consistory announce the name of any sinner who has committed a public sin, or must classis always give permission to announce a name? VanDellen and Monsma (Church Order commentary) remind us that "the advice of classis is required as a safeguard against partiality, and in the interest of strict righteousness." A number of factors incline us never to announce any name without the permission of classis: a) love for the sinner; b) the greater difficulty for reconciliation once a name has been announced; c) the safeguard of multiple witnesses.*

Ans:

- a. There are too many unknowns in this question to be able to give a clear answer to the question. All these will have an effect on how the question is answered: 1) Is the sinner who committed the sin penitent or impenitent? 2) Is the sin a gross sin or a 'lesser' offence? 3) Is the sinner a present danger to the congregation or not? (for example, if the sin is sexual assault of minors, the question is not as difficult).
- b. Article 75 addresses the matter of publicly announcing the name of a *penitent* sinner: if there is difference of opinion in the consistory, the announcement may not be made

- without the advice of two neighboring consistories or the Classis. This article shows that the matter of publicizing names is so serious a matter that utmost caution must be exercised.
- c. In my lectures I suggested that it may be a matter of sanctified wisdom that consistories would seek the counsel of classis in *all* cases of announcing names of members who are under discipline, who left under discipline (perhaps even those who have committed public sins if the sinner is impenitent). A consistory could bring such a request to classis under the questions of Article 41: “Do you need the judgment and help of the Classis for the proper government of your church?” To get classis’ advice about announcing a name may have the added benefit of gaining the trust of the member under discipline: you, consistory, are exercising the most diligent care in the protection of his name.