

# DAILY MEDITATIONS ON THE BELGIC CONFESSION

by pastors of the Protestant Reformed Churches of America

MIC (P) 093/07/2014



**NOV**

**Articles 32-33**

### **Article 32: The Order and Discipline of the Church.**

*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 they ought studiously to take care that they do not depart from those things which Christ, our only Master, hath instituted. 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. For this purpose, excommunication or church discipline is requisite, with the several circumstances belonging to it, according to the Word of God.*

**November 6 – The Usefulness of Ordinances**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

I Corinthians 11:16: “But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God.”

The Bible does not set forth in detail how the church should be organized in every age and culture. This does not mean that the Bible gives the church freedom to do whatever she desires, believe whatever she wants and worship however she pleases. The church is not governed by public opinion or pragmatism (the idea that what works well should be done), but by the Word of God. However, the Bible is neither a systematic theology, a directory for public worship, nor a church order. Instead, the Bible is the Word of God, the revelation of who God is, what He has done for us in Jesus Christ, and how we must live in thankful response to His love.

We can contrast how the church was governed in the Old Testament with the government of the church today. Isaiah writes, “For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little” (Isa 28:10). The Old Testament church was like a little child which had to be led by the hand and taught by means of pictures. She was spiritually immature because she did not yet have the outpoured Spirit of Christ (Gal 4:1-7). Therefore, God imposed upon Old Testament Israel detailed ordinances, laws and rules which hemmed her in on every side, determining every aspect of her life. In the Old Testament, God determined the times and manner of worship, what the people wore and ate, what was clean and unclean for them, and many other details. Parents know that a little child needs rules for everything. When a child grows, the rules are relaxed and there is more freedom. When a child becomes a man, he can determine for himself the details of his life according to the rules of God’s Word. In the New Testament, God’s church has come of age, and with the freedom of the Spirit, lives without certain defined parameters (Gal 3:23-25). This has implications for the life of the church.

Art. 32 declares that “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.” Some Christians do not like ordinances. And they refuse to accept the ordinances determined by the officebearers unless they can agree with every single one of them. The more extreme among this kind of Christian refuse to join any church and criticize many of the practices of the church as pagan because they cannot find a text of Scripture which explicitly supports any given practice.

Perhaps some examples will help. Where ought the church to meet? Churches have met in private homes, in the temple in Jerusalem, in rented rooms or halls, in the open air, and today many erect their own buildings. Surely this should be a matter of Christian prudence. At what time on the Lord’s Day should churches have their worship services, and what should be the exact order of worship? Apart from general principles, the Bible does not determine these things.

Let us not confuse proof texts with principles. We must all agree on the principles of church government and on the elements of worship, but many of the details fall under the category of Christian liberty. Nevertheless, without ordinances the church cannot function efficiently. And surely it is wiser that the officebearers decide some of the details rather than there being a disorderly “free for all” every Sunday.

Let everything be done decently and in order (1 Cor 14:40) is our motto!

**November 7 – The Rulers Instituting Ordinances  
by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Romans 12:8: "... he that ruleth, with diligence"

Yesterday we noticed that ordinances are useful and beneficial for the smooth running of the church. Today we take note of the fact that "those who are rulers of the church" should institute and establish these ordinances.

No organization can run smoothly unless there is a clear distinction between the rulers and the other members of the church. A congregation which elects officebearers must let them rule (I Thess 5:12-13; I Tim 5:17; Heb 13:17; I Pet 5:1-3). This means that the members gladly submit to the decisions made by the officebearers without murmuring or complaining. One example is the time of the worship service. The elders of the congregation determine at what times the church meets for public worship on Sunday. Everyone will have his preference in the congregation. The members might even make suggestions. But, if after carefully considering the needs of the congregation, the elders decide on the times of 9.30 a.m. and 6 p.m., it would be folly for some of the congregation to arrive at 12 noon. Nor should a member grumble and complain that he wanted the worship service at a different time and then refuse to come to church because the time is not ideal for him. The church consists of many members. It is impossible to please everyone all of the time. For the sake of the church's peace, let the members submit to the decisions of the elders. These ordinances, says Art. 32, are "for maintaining the body of the church" and should be that which "tends to nourish and preserve concord and unity." Another example is the order of worship. Those details are not set down in Scripture. In some churches, the reading of Scripture occurs immediately before the sermon. In others, the sermon is separated from the reading by the singing of a Psalm. The important thing is, the order of worship having been decided by the elders, that all the members worship in the same manner. Paul criticizes the disorderly coming together of the Corinthians in this regard (I Cor 14:26, 33, 40). A third example is the church budget. The Biblical principles are that the pastor be supported financially so that he can devote himself to the work and that the church care for the poor in her midst (I Cor 9:14; I Tim 5:18). The many activities of the church—such as evangelism, catechism of the youth and even the upkeep of the church's property if it has any— require money. The rulers of the church should determine how much money the church needs, applying the biblical principles of prudence and stewardship, and the members of the church should contribute according to ability (I Cor 16:1-2; II Cor 9:7).

Some Christians disagree with this approach. They believe that everything in the church should be decided by the people in common. This view of church government is called congregationalism. The congregation, and not the elders, rules. Such an approach fails to do justice to the offices which Christ has appointed. Officebearers have real authority in the congregation.

Let the elders rule diligently. They do it for our own good and for the maintenance of the body of the church. Let us esteem them and live in peace in the church of Christ.

**November 8 – Not Binding or Compelling the Conscience**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

I Corinthians 8:12: “But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ.”

Art. 32 contains a warning for all officebearers who seek to make rules for the maintaining of the body of the church. Do not bind or compel the conscience! Take care studiously not to depart from those things which Christ has instituted! Do not introduce human inventions! This is the danger when men begin to make rules for the church. A man-made rule can become more important and more binding than the Word of God. The Reformation churches understood this very well and were very concerned to maintain the freedom of conscience.

The conscience is the testimony of God in the consciousness of every man, either accusing or excusing him in his actions. By the conscience even the heathen without the Word of God know that they have done something wrong. Because of conscience, every culture has an established morality or moral code. Every culture of man knows that to murder is evil, to steal is wicked and to commit adultery is a sin against the Creator God (Rom 2:15). Therefore, every culture of man has laws to punish evildoers to one degree or another. A guilty conscience is very difficult to endure because it accuses the sinner before God. Men seek all kinds of relief—except repentance towards God and faith towards Jesus Christ—to escape the accusations of their guilty conscience. Some men have even so defiled their conscience that it has lost much of its sensitivity to evil. They are deeply hardened in sin and wickedness (I Tim 4:2; Tit 1:15). Other men—usually weak believers—have an uneducated, uninformed or overly sensitive conscience. They imagine that some activity, which God has not condemned, is sin. Therefore they cannot perform that activity with a good conscience. For example, some imagine that to drink wine or to eat meat is sin. Others, having a better grasp of Christian liberty, eat and drink (in moderation) without qualms (Rom 14; I Cor 8).

Throughout the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic church bound, compelled and tyrannized the consciences of men with rules. For example, the church mandated times for fasting—at Lent; and the church insisted that no meat could be eaten on Fridays. There were many more ways in which the church ruled over the people—often hanging the threat of damnation over them if they stepped out of line. In fact, the pope himself could place an interdict upon an entire people, if the king defied him! This would stop ecclesiastical activity e.g. no masses could be said, no confessions heard, and this was fearful for Medieval people as it meant no means of grace and therefore no salvation. The Pharisees bound consciences in the day of Christ. They added to and expanded the laws of Moses to include ridiculously detailed prohibitions and obligations. This was particularly true concerning the Sabbath Day. For the Pharisees, to heal or to do good on the Sabbath Day was evil (Matt 12:1-14; John 5:1-17, 9:1-16). Christ excoriates the Pharisees for this: “Ye lade men with burdens grievous to be borne, and ye yourselves touch not the burdens with one of your fingers” (Luke 11:46).

The church must take care, therefore, never to impose rules upon the members which might wound their consciences. “They ought studiously to take care that they do not depart from those things which Christ, our only Master, hath instituted.” These considerations must be paramount in the consistory when rules are contemplated. Is this rule necessary? Will this rule offend the conscience? How will this rule minister to the needs of the church?

Let all things be done for the edifying of the body. Then the church will have peace.

**November 9 – The Believer’s Right to Appeal and Protest**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

I Corinthians 6:5: “... Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you? no, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren?”

Reformed church government is not a tyranny but the benevolent rule of Jesus Christ in His church. Because the Lord has chosen to rule the church through officebearers, who, even with the best of intentions, remain fallible and sinful men, there are possibilities that the elders might impose rules upon the congregation which are not biblical and which wrongly bind and compel the conscience. The *Belgic Confession* recognizes that there is that danger even with the wisest and most godly of elders. For this reason there is the warning of Art. 32, “they ought studiously to take care ...” Some might wonder what redress a church member has when he believes that the elders have overstepped the bounds of their authority and made an unbiblical decision. No officebearer in Christ’s church has the authority to contradict the will of Christ as revealed in Scripture. What can the church member do?

There are several principles at work here. First, the presence of the special offices of pastors, elders and deacons in no way annuls or contradicts the office of believer. Every Christian shares in the anointing of Christ by the Holy Spirit and is therefore a prophet, priest and king (Acts 2:17-18; I John 2:27). No officebearer can hinder the believer’s relationship with Christ. Second, the conscience of the believer may not be violated by any church ordinance. The believer may not be forced against his conscience to comply with an ecclesiastical ordinance. The believer’s conscience must be regulated by Scripture alone. Third, there is the possibility for every church member to appeal a decision of the consistory beyond the elders of the local congregation. In Reformed churches, there are broader assemblies of the church. Delegates from the area congregations form a *classis*; and delegates from various classes form a *synod*. Presbyterians call these assemblies *presbytery* and *general assembly*. The biblical principles behind broader church assemblies are found especially in Acts 15.

Imagine the following scenarios. A church member has heard something from the pulpit with which he disagrees, believing it contradicts the Scriptures. A church member disagrees with a decision made by the consistory in an ordinance for the maintenance of the body of the church. A church member feels aggrieved about the consistory’s decision concerning church discipline. As a member of Christ’s church, the believer has the right to approach the consistory and lodge an official complaint (often called an appeal or a protest). The consistory will then discuss his complaint and make a decision. Perhaps the consistory will agree with the church member and change their original decision. Perhaps the consistory will not be convinced by the appeal of the church member. Perhaps the consistory will even convince the church member that he is mistaken and he will withdraw his appeal. If all parties can be satisfied from the Word of God, agreement is reached and peace maintained. On the other hand, perhaps the consistory disagrees with the church member. That member has the right to bring his complaint to the meeting of classis and all the way to synod.

Let no one say, therefore, that Reformed church government tramples on the rights of church members.

**November 10 – The Nourishing of Concord and Unity**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Philippians 2:14: "... Do all things without murmurings and disputings:"

Yesterday we began to look at what redress a member of a Reformed church has when he feels aggrieved by the consistory's decisions. We noticed that the member has the right to protest or appeal the decisions of the officebearers. We insisted that the member has the right to the freedom of his conscience. In this meditation, our focus shifts from the *rights* of the church member to his *responsibilities*.

In a fallible church with fallible, sinful officebearers, there can be, even with the best intentions, times when there is friction between the officebearers and the members. We remember here the teaching of the *Heidelberg Catechism* in LD 39, Q&A 104: that I "submit myself to their good instruction and correction with due obedience; and also patiently bear with their weaknesses and infirmities, since it pleases God to govern us by their hand." This has application not only to parents, but also to officebearers in the church. This has several implications.

First, the church member must not be a complainer, always seeking for some reason to oppose the elders. He must bear patiently with the elders' weaknesses. "Do all things without murmurings and disputings" (Phil 2:14); "Let us not be desirous of vain glory, provoking one another, envying one another" (Gal 5:26). There are many things in the church which, although they might not be done according to our personal preference or convenience, are not sins. The calling in such situations is to learn to be content.

Second, when the member has a legitimate complaint, he must complain in an ecclesiastical manner, that is, in a church-orderly way. There are people who behave in disorderly ways: they openly accuse the elders of base motives, they seek to stir up a faction in the congregation against the elders or they air their grievances before the ungodly world, ruining the good name of the church. This is the grievous sin of schism. If a complaint is serious enough to bring to the consistory's attention, let it be done in a way which seeks the glory of God and the peace of the church.

Third, let the complaint be brought humbly, with the recognition that the elders might be right and the church member might be mistaken. Proverbs 18:17 says, "He that is first in his own cause seemeth just; but his neighbour cometh and searcheth him." It is the responsibility of the church member not to prove *to himself* from the Word of God that a given doctrine or practice is false, but to prove *to the church*, whether to the consistory, classis or synod, that the church has erred in a doctrine or practice.

All of these assume, of course, that we are speaking of a true church. In an apostate or false church, it will not take long to discover that neither the people nor the officebearers care what the Word of God says. When a concerned member has lodged a formal, ecclesiastical protest (assuming that the church still retains some semblance of biblical church government) and when the church has rejected the Word of God, the member can leave the church in good conscience and seek a church which faithfully adheres to the truth.

The final judge in all ecclesiastical disputes is the Word of God. Every member and every officebearer must humble himself before the will of God as it is revealed in Scripture. When that is done, there will be unity and concord in the truth.

**November 11 – Rejecting Human Inventions**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Mark 7:7 “Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.”

“And therefore, we reject all human inventions, and all laws which man would introduce into the worship of God.” In previous meditations we have noticed that Art. 32 teaches that the leaders in the church should make various laws and ordinances for the church. These ordinances concern the “maintaining of the body of the church” and must be only “that which tends to nourish and preserve concord and unity, and to keep all men in obedience to God.” We considered some examples, taking note of the caution not to bind the consciences of men by unnecessary and oppressive rules. We also noticed the rights and responsibilities of church members who think themselves aggrieved. Let us apply wisdom and love in all these things.

It is one thing for the elders to determine the time, venue and order of the worship services. It is another thing for the elders to introduce *innovations* into the worship of God itself. It is one thing for the elders to determine the budget of the church. It is quite another for the elders to extort money from the members or to seek to rule their lives.

Art. 32 gives expression to the Reformation principle called the regulative principle of worship. Who determines how God shall be worshipped in His church? The answer is that God Himself determines it. We may only worship God according to what *He* has commanded. This means that we do not add to His worship.

Some teach that if God forbids something you should not include it in worship, but that if something is not expressly forbidden it is permissible in worship. The regulative principle goes further. If something is *not expressly commanded* it may not be included in the worship of God. The elements of worship are clear from Scripture: the reading and preaching of the Word of God, prayer, praise, confession of faith, sacraments, benediction and the giving of alms. How these elements are applied, and the order in which they are to be used, are open to some interpretation. But to these elements we are not at liberty to add our own ideas. The regulative principle shuts the door against all human innovations which plague the churches today.

Applying this principle, the Reformation purged the church of choirs, incense, altars, clerical vestments, holy water, consecrated oil and many other innovations which had crept into the worship of God. These things are not forbidden in Scripture, but because there is no warrant for them in the Word of God, they were rightly removed from the church’s worship. Apply this principle to some modern worship practices. Youth bands, choir concerts, drama, puppet shows, props and many forms of entertainment could—and should—be swept away if we rejected all human inventions in the worship of God.

It is a mark of the false church to corrupt the worship of God with unnecessary additions. The question is not, “What is wrong with it?” The question is rather, “Where has God commanded this?”

Not even the officebearers of the church may add to the worship of God.

**November 12 – Church Discipline**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

I Corinthians 5:13: "... Put away from among yourselves that wicked person."

Art. 32 is entitled, "The Order and Discipline of the Church." We turn now to consider the subject of church discipline.

Church discipline has fallen into disuse. Many Christians are opposed to it. They suppose that it is out of place in our modern, inclusive, tolerant world. Nevertheless, the Bible clearly demands that the church use discipline. A church which refuses to use church discipline not only disobeys Christ, but sows the seeds of her own destruction.

The purposes of church discipline are three. First, Christ commands church discipline so that God is glorified. God is glorified by the holiness of the church. When all things are done according to God's Word, when sinners are saved and begin to obey God out of thankfulness, when redeemed sinners adorn the doctrine of the Gospel with good works, God is glorified. But God's name is dishonoured when sin is tolerated in the church. The world will see an unholy church and mock God. Today, much of the church is scandalously unholy in doctrine and life. Men preach error as they please and without constraint. Churches receive men and women who live in open, flagrant sin as members of the church, and without qualms allow them to partake of the Lord's Supper. The *Heidelberg Catechism* warns against this in LD 30, Q&A 82: ["God's] wrath is kindled against the whole congregation" when His covenant is profaned. God's wrath was evident in Corinth: "For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord" (I Cor 11:30-32).

Second, Christ commands church discipline for the sake of the church's purity. "Evil communications corrupt good manners" (I Cor 15:33). To allow a person to live in sin openly encourages the spread of sin throughout the congregation. Paul uses the figure of leaven. Leaven, when mixed into dough, spreads through the whole lump (1 Cor 5:6; Gal 5:9). Sin, when allowed to spread unchecked, corrupts the whole church. One who loves the church will not permit this to happen. Christ, who loves the church, commands that the wicked member be put out of the congregation by church discipline (Matt 18:17).

Third, Christ commands church discipline for the sake of the sinning member. Many think that the elders take some kind of pleasure in putting a person out of the congregation. Nothing could be farther from the truth! It is with a heavy heart and many tears that the church, through her officebearers, puts away a member. But the church uses the means of discipline for the restoration of the sinning member. For this reason, the church has traditionally called excommunication, which is the final step in discipline, the "extreme remedy."

The Lord is pleased to use church discipline for the good of the church. It is good for the church that unbelievers and hypocrites be expelled. It is good for the church that members who walk in the way of sin be admonished, rebuked and even excommunicated. It is good for the church that she has a reputation as a church which takes sin seriously and insists on holiness among her members. And it is good for the church when God is pleased to use discipline to turn a member from the folly of sin to reconciliation with the church and with God Himself.

**November 13 – Church Discipline Is Requisite  
by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

I Corinthians 5:2: “And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned ...”

The Corinthians harboured in their midst a man who was guilty of open, flagrant sins against the seventh commandment of God. He was living in fornication with his stepmother. “It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father’s wife” (I Cor 5:1). This sin was so scandalous that even the Gentiles blushed at the idea of it. Yet the church in Corinth did nothing about it. Paul was shocked and wrote to the church that this man must be put out of the church by Christian discipline.

In Ephesus, a young pastor Timothy was labouring in the Gospel ministry. There were two heretics in the congregation, openly denying the faith and teaching doctrines to subvert the truth. They had made shipwreck of the faith, and were a risk to the other members in the church. Paul named these two men and delivered them unto Satan “that they may learn not to blaspheme” (I Tim 1:20; I Cor 5:5). “delivered unto Satan” means church discipline.

These two passages teach us that those who refuse to walk in the doctrine and life of Christianity must be placed under church discipline, and if they do not repent, they must be excommunicated. However, very few churches today practice church discipline.

Paul highlighted the reason in I Corinthians 5:2, “ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned.” To be puffed up is to be proud. The Corinthians were proud when they should have been ashamed. Perhaps they were proud that by their tolerance of sin, they displayed the grace of God. Perhaps they were proud because they considered themselves to be an open, tolerant, affirming, inclusive church. Perhaps they were proud because they were more “loving” than another “judgmental” church. Instead, they ought to have mourned. They ought to have mourned that their sin was so well known it was the subject of the heathens’ gossip (“reported commonly,” v1) and that the sin which they tolerated was so vile that even the promiscuous pagans of Corinth were shocked by it (“fornication as is not so much named among the Gentiles,” v1). They ought to have mourned that the name of the church, and therefore the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, was blasphemed among the wicked. Behold the “holy church” of Corinth! They ought to have mourned that the sin would soon spread through the congregation and destroy it as gangrene spreads through the body and eventually kills it (II Tim 2:17).

There are reasons for mourning in the church today. The statistics are shocking. For example, among evangelicals, divorce statistics are higher than among the general population. Divorce and unbiblical remarriage after divorce are tolerated and promoted. Rare is the church today which even knows what church discipline is. And when a church does dare to begin the process of discipline, more often than not the member under discipline leaves to join another church where he is permitted to join, no questions asked.

Let us not think ourselves wiser than God. Paul excommunicated that wicked man in Corinth for the glory of God, the good of the church and for the man’s salvation. Does the church of which you are a member practise discipline? Be thankful for that mark of faithfulness and pray for your elders in that difficult work.

**November 14 – Private Sins and Admonitions**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Matthew 18:15: “Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone...”

“Excommunication or church discipline is requisite, with the several circumstances belonging to it, according to the Word of God.” That is all that Art. 32 says about church discipline. Previous articles have mentioned the subject also: one mark of the true church is “church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin” (Art. 29). Government is necessary in the church, among other things, that “transgressors [be] punished and restrained by spiritual means” (Art. 30). However, our *Confession* does not elaborate. Instead it directs us to the Biblical principles. A wise church will adopt a church order so that the various circumstances of discipline and the procedure are determined from the Word of God.

Church discipline concerns sin in the congregation but not all sins necessarily become the occasion for church discipline. If every sin was brought to the attention of the elders to be dealt with by them in official church discipline, there would be no end to the elders’ work! Life in the church is the life of fellowship in the truth. But because we are all sinners, there are times when sin begins to affect the relationships between the members. Although all sins are serious, we do not address all examples of sin in the same manner. Sometimes it is best to cover a sin, to refuse to bear a grudge concerning it. Perhaps a fellow church member does not greet you as you might desire, or speaks in a bitter, impatient tone. There are a thousand ways in which we can offend one another if we are ready to take offence! “And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins” (1 Pet 4:8). “Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye” (Col 3:13). “In lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves” (Phil 2:3). If we applied these principles to our life in the church among the members, how blessed life in the church would be! Certainly there is no need to run to the elders to demand discipline for every minor irritation which fellow saints cause one another in the church.

Some sins, however, because of their nature, are more serious. Christ commands us to forgive our brethren when they repent. Peter asked the question once, “Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?” (Matt 18:21). With the suggestion of seven times, Peter thought that he was generous. Christ answered, “I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven” (v22). In the same chapter Christ gives guidelines on how to deal with a sinning brother when the sin is so serious that we cannot simply cover it up with love. These guidelines refer only to private sins, sins in which no other party is involved and sins about which no one else knows.

First, we must approach the sinning brother and admonish him in private. This means that we do not make his sin public or the subject of gossip. If he repents, the issue is closed: “thou hast gained thy brother.” (v15) But what happens if the brother does not repent?

We will consider that in future meditations.

**November 15 – Public Sins**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

I Timothy 5:20: “Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear.”

We continue to look at church discipline “with the several circumstances belonging to it, according to the Word of God.” We noticed yesterday that not all sins are censurable sins. This is not because all sins are not damnable or serious. They are. But not all sins require the elders formally to exercise church discipline. We also began to examine the way of Matthew 18.

But before we continue, we answer one misapplication of Matthew 18. The Lord’s directions here apply only to *private* sins. A private sin is, as Christ describes it, a fault “between thee and him [the sinning brother] alone” (v15). No one else knows about or is affected by this sin. A public sin is different. Often men appeal to the way of Matthew 18 to avoid public rebukes for public sins. For example, a man publishes a heretical book, preaches false doctrine on the radio, broadcasts heretical views on the internet or writes something heretical in the newspaper. Sometimes a Christian will respond to public heresy with a public rebuke or will publish his answer in various media. This is perfectly good and proper because when that man went public with his views, his behaviour does not come under the provisions of Matthew 18. Paul dealt with the public sin of Peter this way, although Peter was no heretic. “But when I saw that they walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel, I said unto Peter *before them all ...*” (Gal 2:14). Paul did not write Peter a private letter of admonition nor did he take Peter aside into a corner. A public sin required a public rebuke. Elsewhere, Paul named and shamed men in the congregation whose heresies endangered the church. “Of whom is Hymenaeus and Alexander; whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme” (I Tim 1:20). Doubtless, the friends and family of these two men were not pleased with Paul’s approach. Nevertheless, this way was necessary for the peace and purity of the church. In another epistle Paul named Hymenaeus, Philetus, Demas and Alexander as sinners whose evil deeds must be exposed as a warning to others (II Tim 2;17, 4:10, 14-15). John did the same by exposing the evil deeds of Diotrephes (III John 9).

The application of these words is clear in letters to Timothy and Titus: “Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear” (I Tim 5:20) and “This witness is true. Wherefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith” (Tit 1:13).

Sins in the church can become public in various ways, and when such sins *do* become public, the way of Matthew 18 is no longer appropriate. Some sins, by their very nature, cannot be hidden for long. An obvious example is premarital or extramarital sex when the woman becomes pregnant. Another example is a sin where a church member has transgressed the law of the land and has been caught by the civil authorities. His sin will be front page headlines the next day in the local newspaper! Another example is where the sin of a member has become the occasion of (sinful) gossip either in the church or in the world.

When a sin is so public that even the world knows about it or when, as Paul writes, “it is reported commonly ...” (I Cor 5:1) that such sin exists in the congregation, the elders must act with firm, loving, Christian discipline for the glory of God, the purity of the church and the salvation of the sinning member.

This is a difficult, often thankless, but necessary work.

**November 16 – But If He Will Not Hear Thee**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Matthew 18:16: “But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more...”

The first step in the way of Matthew 18 is private admonition. When a brother sins against you, and when there is no one else involved or affected by the sin, then go to him and tell him his sin. Do that only after prayer, after carefully searching your own heart; and with much humility, tell him what his sin is (he may not even have realized it), urge him to repent, and pray with him, if this is appropriate. Make every effort to be reconciled to the brother. If he repents, “thou hast gained thy brother” (v15). Then you must assure him that you forgive him; both you and he must be reconciled at the foot of the cross together. And, when you forgive him, this means that you will never bring up his sin again, never hold it against him, and never treat him in the light of that sin. Also that private sin must be kept private *forever*. Remember the proverb: “He that covereth a transgression seeketh love; but he that repeateth a matter separateth very friends” (Prov 17:9).

Reconciliation is wonderful. Sadly, it is not always achieved at the first attempt. It may be necessary for you to approach the brother more than once. Your admonitions to him may need to be repeated. Christ does not specify this in v15. However, when it becomes apparent that the brother is stubbornly refusing to repent of his sin, it is time for the next step which the Lord sets forth. Bring one or two witnesses. Clearly, these witnesses cannot be witnesses of the brother’s sin. If they had been witnesses of the sin, the sin would not have been a strictly private one. These witnesses must be trusted fellow believers whom you can tell about the sin (and tell only them; do not be tempted to make the brother’s sin the subject of gossip) so that they can come with you when you admonish him and be witnesses to the brother’s *impenitence*.

Your arrival with your witnesses ought to give the brother pause. He ought to see, first, that you love him. Never may you approach your brother in a haughty, self righteous manner, as if you are better than he. Never may you display the Pharisaical attitude. “Why beholdest thou the mote [speck] that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?” (Matt 7:3). “The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are ...” (Luke 18:11). Instead, you must display real concern for his spiritual welfare, “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness, considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6:1-2). The brother ought to be able to see that rather than allow him to be ruined by his sin, you cared enough for him to risk losing his friendship and favour in the very difficult calling of rebuking him. “Open rebuke is better than secret love” (Prov 27:5). “Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him” (Lev 19:17). He ought to see, second, when you arrive with your witnesses, that you take his sin seriously. His folly has brought him to the second step of Matthew 18!

If the brother repents in front of your witnesses, you have gained him. If not, you have reliable testimony to bring to the elders of the brother’s impenitence. With a heavy heart, and with confidence in the Lord’s will, you tell it to the church, that is, to the representatives of the church, the elders.

**November 17 – Tell it to the Church**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Matthew 18:17: “And if shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church ...”

We have been examining the way of discipline, beginning with Matthew 18. We have noticed that this way is appropriate only for private sins. The church must deal with public sins in a different manner. The first and second steps having been taken (and the brother remaining impenitent in his sin despite repeated admonitions), the next step is to “tell it unto the church” (v17). This does not mean that we make a public announcement of the brother’s sin to the whole church. One important principle in church discipline is to keep the sin as private as possible for as long as possible. There is, of course, an important exception: if the brother has committed a crime as well as a sin, there is an obligation to report that to the appropriate authorities. Ideally, the brother should be advised to confess his crime and accept the legal consequences of his actions. The reason we seek to keep sins (in the case where they are not crimes) private is to spare the brother’s reputation and to save him from shame. The church in Matthew 18:17 is the consistory of the local congregation. This is clear because Christ goes on to speak about binding and loosing, which is the work of the elders (v18-19).

Therefore, at this stage in the discipline process, a maximum of four people know about the sin: the brother, the two witnesses and you, the one who has admonished the brother. You and your witnesses must go to the meeting of the consistory. You must explain to the consistory several things. First, you must explain to the elders the nature of the sin. This will include what was done and when. Second, you must explain to the elders what you have done. This will include how you have admonished the brother and when. Third, you must identify your witnesses, who must then verify that they have witnessed the admonition and impenitence of the brother. Then you must leave the matter with the elders for their further investigation. They may desire to question you or your witnesses further. Having fulfilled your Christian calling, you and your witnesses still must not make the sin public. It will only become public at a later stage in the disciplinary process, if the brother does not repent.

The brother will now receive a visit from the elders who will desire to speak to him about his sin. The elders will do this only after carefully examining the evidence which you and your witnesses have brought. Elders must be very careful to follow Proverbs 18:17, “He that is first in his own cause seemeth just; but his neighbor cometh and searcheth him.” Having satisfied themselves that the brother has indeed sinned and that he remains impenitent, the elders will admonish the brother. They will come with the Scriptures and teach the brother the error of his ways. The brother must not spurn the admonitions of the consistory. These men are the officebearers of Christ’s church, and therefore Christ’s representatives whose calling is to rule in the congregations. These men watch for the souls of the members (Heb 13:17).

If, even at this stage, the brother repents, the consistory will bring it no further. The brother has been won! Great must be our rejoicing in that case. And, since the sin was never public, the consistory will not make the sin and the repentance public.

But, if after being often brotherly admonished, that man shall neglect to hear the church (v17), discipline must be brought to the next step.

**November 18 – The Steps of Church Discipline**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Titus 3:10: “A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject;”

A sin which began as a private sin against you alone has now reached, through the proper way laid out in Matthew 18, the attention of the elders. The Bible does not lay out for us in detail how the elders should proceed. In fact, if anything, the Bible appears to move very quickly to excommunication: “But if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican” (Matt 18:17). Paul writes, “a man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject” (Tit 3:10). Whatever happened to the “forgive thy brother seventy times seven” policy of Matthew 18:22? It might seem more like a “two strikes and you’re out” policy! Notice, however, in the first place, that forgiveness is only appropriate when the brother repents. When the brother repents, forgiveness must be full and free. With repentance, we must desire forgiveness, work towards it, pray for it, and refuse to harbour bitterness in our hearts; but we cannot extend forgiveness to an impenitent person. Notice, in the second place, that the admonitions of Titus 3:10 are official, and indeed, public, admonitions. Paul does not mean that after telling a brother twice, we cut the brother off. He is not saying that the elders visit the brother only twice. These two public admonitions come only after weeks, even months, of repeated, patient instruction and admonition in private. The one who is rejected in Titus 3:10 is a stubborn, impenitent sinner who is “subverted... being condemned of himself” (v11).

In Reformed churches, the first step of official discipline by the elders, which takes place after a number of private admonitions, is silent censure. The sinning brother is not permitted to come to the Lord’s Table. This prohibition is silent, secret and discreet. Only the elders know about it. It is not announced to the congregation. This silent censure is not the same as excommunication but will lead to it if the brother remains impenitent. A man under discipline cannot partake of the body and blood of Christ (I Cor 11:27).

The next step is the “first announcement.” Reformed churches generally make an announcement in the worship service that there is a member under discipline. The announcement includes the nature of the sin: “a sin against the [...] commandment.” But it does not yet include the name of the member that he may be spared. The congregation is asked to pray for the unnamed individual. The “second announcement” takes place only after further private admonitions by the elders and the advice of classis. This is necessary because in the second announcement, the brother will be *named*. Therefore the consistory must take earnest heed that the case warrants such a public announcement. The brother will also have the opportunity to make an appeal at the meeting of classis. You can see how thorough the process of discipline is. The church does not prematurely reject people without a fair procedure. If classis approves, the consistory will admonish the brother further and, if he still does not repent, the congregation will be informed that the brother (whose name will now be announced) is walking in sin. Following this, a date will be set for the brother’s excommunication from the church.

Sadly, few cases of discipline even reach the stage of the second announcement. Many leave the church in an attempt to escape the discipline of the elders. In so doing, they break their membership vow and further increase their guilt.

May God graciously forbid that this should happen with us!

**November 19 –Excommunication**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

I Corinthians 5:5: “To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh...”

Excommunication is a word rarely heard today. It is a word which ought to make us shudder. Very few churches practice it. In many churches, there are no elders, and no oversight of the life and doctrine of the congregation. In fact, in many churches, there is no official membership list. People come and go, believe what they want and live as they please without any concern for the Law of God. But a true church with discipline, as Christ Himself demands it, will not tolerate such sin in her midst. The real Christ is not the affirming, accepting, indulgent Christ who never condemns sinners or their sins. The real Christ is the Christ of Scripture, the holy Son of God, who wills to have a holy church (Eph 5:26-27; Tit 2:14). Those who are unholy have no place in the congregation of God’s people. In fact, Christ condemns churches which do not practice discipline: “But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam” (Rev 2:14). “So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes, which thing I hate” (v15). “Thou sufferest that woman Jezebel ...” (v20).

We have also seen that there must be no rush to excommunicate. Prior to excommunication—which may God graciously forbid—there is the way of Matthew 18, and the patient, painstaking work of the elders in admonishing, rebuking and praying for the erring brother. Let no one say that Reformed church elders simply throw a man out of the church!

Only after many warnings and not a few tears (Acts 20:31; Phil 3:18) do the elders move to actual excommunication. To excommunicate is to remove from the communion of the church, and therefore to place outside the kingdom of Christ. Paul calls this a delivering unto Satan (I Cor 5:5; I Tim 1:20). This is the bitter consequence of sin, and a warning to us all. “But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death” (Jam 1:14-15). “Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall” (I Cor 10:12). Excommunication means that the excommunicated person is no longer a member of the church and in particular he is barred from the use of the sacraments. Christ says about such a person that we are to count him as “an heathen man and a publican” (Matt 18:17). This means that we can no longer have fellowship with him. This will be very painful, especially if the excommunicated person is a family member or friend, and it is very painful for the entire body to lose a member. “And when one member suffer, all the members suffer with it” (I Cor 12:26).

Excommunication takes place in the worship service as a public act. In Reformed churches, a specific form is read. The occasion is solemn as the entire congregation, through the instrumentality of the officebearers, puts away the wicked person from among them. This final step is necessary for the glory of God, the good of the congregation and even for the salvation of the sinner. Excommunication is the extreme remedy.

Nor must we think that excommunication is the end. In the way of repentance, even after excommunication, there can be restoration. And for that the church prays, even as she excommunicates one of her members at the command of Christ.

### **Article 33: The Sacraments.**

We believe that our gracious God, on account of our weakness and infirmities, hath ordained the sacraments for us, thereby to seal unto us His promises, and to be pledges of the good will and grace of God toward us, and also to nourish and strengthen our faith, which He hath joined to the Word of the gospel, the better to present to our senses both that which He signifies to us by His Word and that which He works inwardly in our hearts, thereby assuring and confirming in us the salvation which He imparts to us. For they are visible signs and seals of an inward and invisible thing, by means whereof God worketh in us by the power of the Holy Ghost. Therefore the signs are not in vain or insignificant, so as to deceive us. For Jesus Christ is the true object presented by them, without whom they would be of no moment.

Moreover, we are satisfied with the number of sacraments which Christ our Lord hath instituted, which are two only, namely, the sacrament of baptism and the holy supper of our Lord Jesus Christ.

**November 20 – The Sacraments Given For Our Weakness.**  
**by Rev Martyn McGeown**

Mark 9:24: "... Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief!"

In the preaching of the Gospel, which is the chief means of grace, our God declares to us that we have full and free salvation in His Son, our crucified and risen Saviour, Jesus Christ. He promises to us who believe that He is our God for the sake of Christ; He pledges Himself to be our Father; and He promises us the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Through believing we receive that salvation, and enjoy covenant fellowship with God.

But our God knows that we are weak. He remembers that we are dust (Psa 103:14). The truth of gracious salvation is so astounding, and our sins are so great, that we are tempted in our weakness to doubt, and even to tremble in fear. Has God *really* forgiven my sins, even mine?

With this reality of our weakness, the *Belgic Confession* begins its treatment of the sacraments: "Our gracious God on account of our weakness and infirmities hath ordained the sacraments for us ..." The word sacrament is not found in the Bible, but that is true for many theological words. It comes from the Latin *sacramentum*, which means an oath or a pledge. A soldier would swear a *sacramentum* to his superiors; or litigants in a court case would deposit a *sacramentum* with the judge pending the court's decision. One who gave a *sacramentum* was promising something. God has given us sacraments to confirm His promises to His church. We notice already that the sacraments are God's gifts. They are not, in the first place, pledges which we make to God, but pledges which He makes to us.

God has already made us exceedingly precious promises. They come to us in the Gospel. But because of our weakness He has added sacraments to the Gospel promises to confirm them. Perhaps an illustration might help. In marriage, a couple makes promises to love, cherish and be faithful to one another. But to those promises, they add a wedding ring. The ring is not the marriage, nor is it the promise. When husbands or wives take off their rings—to go swimming, let's say—they are still married. But the ring on the finger is a constant reminder to married people of their marriage, a token of their love. And when an unmarried man looks at a woman's hand and sees a wedding ring, he knows that she is married and he may not become romantically involved with her.

Thus it is with the sacraments. They are pledges or tokens of God's faithful friendship. They are not added to the Word because the Word is insufficient, but because our faith is weak and faltering, and mixed with much unbelief and doubt. The sacraments are the wedding ring of Christ to His church. The church treasures these sacraments, jealously guards them, and uses them until her Bridegroom returns.

**November 21 – Satisfied With Two Sacraments.**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Mark 7:7: “Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.”

It is a sad fact of church history that the gift of sacraments—the wedding ring or token of love and friendship which Christ has given to the church—has been an occasion of deep division and bitter dispute among Christians. One of the issues of disagreement between Roman Catholics and the churches of the Reformation is over the *number* of the sacraments.

Protestant churches believe that Christ has given us only two sacraments—baptism and the Lord’s Supper. The Roman Catholics have added five more—confirmation, penance, holy orders, matrimony and extreme unction. Three of these (confirmation, penance and extreme unction) are not found in the Bible; and two (holy orders [ordination of office bearers] and matrimony) are found in the Bible, but they are not sacraments.

A sacrament is not simply any ordinance or ceremony. Foot washing (John 13:14), for example, is not a sacrament; greeting with a holy kiss (II Cor 13:12) is not a sacrament. A sacrament must be instituted by Jesus Christ Himself. Just as only the husband has the right to give the bride a wedding ring—and no other man is at liberty to give her another wedding ring, nor is she at liberty to make herself a wedding ring—so only the Heavenly Bridegroom, Jesus Christ, ordains sacraments. Not even the Apostles may ordain new sacraments for the church, much less the pope and his clergy. We have clear teaching that Christ instituted baptism (Matt 28:19) and the Lord’s Supper (Luke 22:19; I Cor 11:23-26). But where did Christ institute the five additional “sacraments” of Rome?

Rome’s view of salvation requires her to have many sacraments. For Rome, sacraments are the chief way in which God gives grace, which is a kind of spiritual virtue worked in the heart which makes a person righteous. Thus, grace itself is redefined by Rome! Grace in the Bible is unmerited favour, which comes to us by virtue of the finished work of Christ. Grace in Rome is spiritual virtue. The initial grace is unmerited, but further increases of grace are *merited* through a proper use of the sacraments. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) states, “No one can merit the initial grace of forgiveness and justification at the beginning of conversion. Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, *we can then merit for ourselves and others the graces* needed for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, and for the attainment of eternal life (paragraph, 2010).

The Roman church is like a hospital which has various medicines for the soul. Rome offers a “cradle to grave” sacramental salvation plan. Each of the seven sacraments gives a kind of grace: justifying, sanctifying, strengthening grace, but this grace can be resisted and lost. However, Christ has never promised to give grace in these ways. The sacraments do not dispense grace as a doctor dispenses aspirin. The sacraments strengthen faith.

Rome’s additional sacraments are unnecessary. Baptism is a sign and seal of the beginning of covenant fellowship with God in Christ. The Lord’s Supper is a sign and seal of that life which we enjoy within the covenant with God. We are baptised once and we feed on Christ by faith throughout our lives. We need nothing more. Therefore with the *Belgic Confession* we declare, “We are satisfied with the number of sacraments which Christ our Lord hath instituted.”

**November 22 – The Seals of God’s Promises.  
by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Romans 4:11: “And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised ...”

Sacraments are seals. We are all familiar with seals. Take some paper money out of your wallet and look at it carefully. It has a seal on it. This is a mark stamped on the money to prove to you that it is real, legal tender produced by the government. It is therefore not counterfeit money printed on a criminal’s printing press. Or look at an official document—perhaps a letter from a government department, or a diploma issued by an accredited university. There will be a signature and a seal on that document, a stamp of authenticity. By looking at the seal you know that the document is genuine, not a forgery. Seals were also common in the ancient world. When a king sent a letter, he would take off his signet ring, stamp it into wax and seal the letter. This would be a guarantee that the letter in question really came from the king; and an unbroken seal indicated that no one had tampered with the letter in transit. The contents of the letter could then be read and believed with confidence.

In Romans 4, we read that circumcision was a seal given to Abraham to strengthen Abraham’s faith in God’s promises. Before God gave the seal of circumcision, He had already given the promise, which Abraham had believed “yet being uncircumcised” (v11). In Genesis 15, two chapters and thirteen years *before* the institution of circumcision, Abraham “believed in the LORD and He counted it to him for righteousness” (Gen 15:6). Therefore, we know that Abraham was not saved through circumcision. He was saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in the righteousness of the coming Messiah. Circumcision was added later—thirteen years later—to confirm God’s promise to Abraham and to all God’s believing people in the Old Testament.

Circumcision, therefore, was to Abraham what New Testament sacraments are to us.

But we should remember that a seal by itself is meaningless and useless. A seal must seal or authenticate something! It would be absurd to place a stamp of authenticity on a blank piece of paper. That is effectively what is done when we elevate the sacraments above the Gospel; when we imagine that we can use sacraments without first believing the Gospel; and when we believe that we can replace the Gospel with the sacraments. That was the mistake made by many in Christ’s day who trusted in circumcision without believing the Gospel of grace. Without the Gospel promise, circumcision is merely mutilation of the flesh. Without the Gospel promise, our sacraments are meaningless rituals. What a wedding ring is without a marriage—a meaningless band of gold—the sacraments are without Jesus Christ and His promises in the covenant. But a wedding ring is precious to a bride, because it seals the bridegroom’s love to her. Thus we view the sacraments.

**November 23 – Pledges of God’s Goodwill and Grace.**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Genesis 17:11: “... and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you.”

The sacraments cannot be understood without the covenant. There is much confusion about God’s covenant among Christians. Quite simply, God’s covenant is a *relationship* of friendship, a bond of fellowship which God makes with His elect people in Jesus Christ. It is not an agreement which depends on us, but a relationship which God brings about, establishes and preserves by His grace alone. When God makes the covenant, He declares to His people, “I will be your God and you will be my people.” This is the covenant formula common in Scripture. In the covenant, God promises to be a God to us, and to our children after us, in their generations, for an everlasting covenant. God promises to love us, to bless us, to forgive our sins, and to bring us into His own fellowship. God’s covenant is established by Jesus Christ, who shed His blood to make us the friends of God; and it is realised in time by the Holy Spirit who gives us the life of Christ and sheds God’s love abroad in our hearts.

God’s covenant—which, remember, is the relationship itself—comes to us with promises. Those promises are rich and gracious. Those promises come to us through the preaching of the Gospel. Those promises are for the elect—and their elect children—and are received by faith.

We must understand what a promise is. A promise is a solemn declaration that something will be done by another. God’s promise is His solemn declaration to give salvation to His people in Jesus Christ. God’s promise is absolutely certain because it is *God’s* promise. Many promises made by men are lies, or they are made with good intentions, but for various reasons cannot be fulfilled. A father might promise his daughter that he will take her to the park, but then his car breaks down, it begins to rain and he is to break his promise. God’s promises are not like that, because God is never thwarted by circumstances outside of His control. God’s promise does not depend on us: He does not say, “I will give you salvation if you do ...” A conditional promise is not certain; God’s *unconditional* promise is.

God desires that His covenant friends know, and are confident of, and therefore enjoy His promises. Therefore, our merciful Father has, in addition to the preaching, given the sacraments “as pledges of His goodwill and grace toward us.” A pledge is a promise, a solemn, binding promise to do something. Think of charity pledges: when a man pledges a sum of money to a charity during a fundraising, he promises to pay that sum of money to the charity. The charity can therefore be confident of the goodwill of that person to give. The sacraments are given as pledges. Do you want extra assurance that God is *really* your God and that He will *really* do the things He has promised? Then use the sacraments with faith.

Notice that the sacraments are not pledges of what we will do for God, or of what we have done. That is the error of many. Sacraments are the pledges of what *God* will do for us and of what He has done. The sacraments come to us from our gracious God. How could we then doubt His goodwill and grace toward us?

**November 24 – The Sacraments Nourishing Our Faith.**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Luke 17:5: “And the apostles said unto the Lord, increase our faith”

What is the relationship between the sacraments and *faith*? Remember what faith is: a spiritual bond which the Spirit creates in our hearts uniting us to Jesus Christ; and that activity whereby we receive for truth everything which God has revealed in His Word and lean in confidence upon Christ alone for all our salvation. We do not work faith in ourselves. The Spirit does. Therefore, we believe that faith is the “gift of God” (Eph 2:8; Phil 1:29). God works that faith in our hearts by the preaching of the Gospel. There we hear about Christ, and there we hear the very voice of Christ.

Sacraments, then, do not create faith in the hearts of unbelievers. And for that reason sacraments are of no spiritual benefit to unbelievers at all. On the contrary, sacraments, which are pledges of God’s goodwill and grace to us, only serve to harden unbelievers in their sins, and thus they increase their condemnation.

This truth of the Reformed Faith is the antithesis of the Roman Catholic view of sacraments. In Rome, the sacraments work more or less automatically. The Latin phrase by which Rome expresses this is *ex opere operato*. These words mean “from the work done.” The idea is that the sacrament is effective by virtue of the performance of the act of administering it. Therefore, although faith is useful and beneficial, it is *not necessary* for the sacrament to give grace. Roman Catholics believe that every sacrament gives grace as long as the recipient does not willfully resist God. This view was developed to assure the people that the sacrament does not depend on the holiness or good intention of the priest administering it, but in practice it has come to mean that sacraments dispense automatic grace to all who partake of them, no matter how wicked they might be.

Automatic grace in every sacrament! With this view of sacraments, the preaching of the Gospel—by which God works faith in us (Rom 10:17) —becomes unnecessary. Why have preaching when you can go through a sacramental rite and thus receive grace? Preaching, especially doctrinal preaching which imparts the true knowledge of God, falls by the wayside. But Peter writes, “Grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (II Pet 3:18). The idea is “grow in grace by growing in knowledge.”

Sacraments cannot dispense automatic, easy grace the way a pharmacist dispenses aspirin. Sacraments are for believers who desire to have their faith strengthened and nourished. Unbelievers may not use the sacraments. They must repent and believe, and then join the church and use the sacraments for the increase of faith.

God nourishes our faith through the sacraments, not by directing our faith to the sacraments themselves, but by directing our faith to *Christ crucified* who is set forth both in preaching and in the sacraments. Anything that diverts our eyes from Christ is not only *not* a means to strengthen faith, but is spiritually harmful.

Let us use the sacraments—but only in faith!

**November 25 – Sacraments Joined to the Word.**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Hebrews 6:17: “Wherein God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath.”

Yesterday, we looked at the relationship between the sacraments and faith. Faith is closely connected to the Word—“faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God” (Rom 10:17). But, how are sacraments connected to the Word? Art. 33 explains the relationship thus: “[God] hath joined [the sacraments] to the Word of the gospel, the better to present to our senses.”

The Word comes by hearing. Although we *see* the minister while he preaches, the primary way in which we receive the Word is through our *ears*. The sacraments appeal to our other senses, especially to our sight, but also to our sense of taste, touch and even smell. We see the element of water sprinkled in baptism and the elements of bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper broken and poured out; and we taste and handle these elements of the Lord’s Supper. These are added to the Word as an additional confirmation of what God teaches us in the Gospel.

But imagine that a person walks into our worship service near the end just as the minister is sprinkling water on the candidate for baptism or is distributing pieces of bread and the cup of wine. Imagine that that person has never heard of Christianity, has never opened a Bible, and has never heard a sermon in his life. Will he have any inkling of what is going on? In other words, are the sacraments—which are so meaningful and rich to us who have heard and believed the Word—not meaningless without the Word to explain them? That is why we insist as Reformed churches that the sacraments be administered in the public assemblies of God’s people, on the Lord’s Day, in a worship service, accompanied by preaching. That is why we have the practice of reading a liturgical form—the *Form for the Administration of Baptism* or the *Form for the Administration of the Lord’s Supper*—when we use the sacraments. These two forms contain a wealth of solid instruction on what the sacraments are.

Moreover, the sacraments do not teach us anything which the Word does not teach us. It is not that the Word teaches us the Gospel, and the sacraments give us something extra. Both the Word and the sacraments give us Christ, but in different ways. The sacraments are not something mysterious for the hyper spiritual or the “initiated.” Every believer may and should partake of the sacraments.

Finally, the sacraments never teach us anything contrary to the Word of the Gospel. It is not true, for example, that the Gospel teaches us salvation by particular, sovereign, efficacious grace, and then the sacraments contradict that message by teaching us that salvation is by works. There is and must be harmony between the message of the Gospel and the sacraments. Thus we see the close connection between the Word and the sacraments as marks of the true church. When the preaching is unfaithful, the administration of the sacraments will be corrupted. But where the true Gospel is preached, and the sacraments are faithfully administered according to the same Word of God, *there* God blesses the means of grace to our hearts.

**November 26 – The Sacraments Appealing to Our Senses.**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Psalm 34:8: “O taste and see that the LORD is good: blessed is the man that trusteth in him.”

Some have complained that Reformed Christianity is so centered on the Word of God, on hearing the preaching, that we neglect the other senses of the believer. This, of course, is not true. The Lord knows that we are creatures who see, taste, touch and smell. In the Old Testament, the worship was sensual, that is, it appealed to the senses. The New Testament is less so. The primary organ is the ear.

However, God has not neglected our other senses. This does not mean that we need to invent sensual ways to worship God. We will not, for example, be using images as books to the laity; we do not need overhead projectors or power point presentations to enhance our worship. We will not add drama, sketches and skits, or puppet shows to teach (or entertain) our congregations; nor do we need elaborately decorated sanctuaries or sweet-smelling incense to improve our experience of salvation.

But the Lord *has* given us “visual aids.” They are called the sacraments. And since God has ordained them, we know that they are truly “visual aids,” that is, things which we can see (“visual”) which truly do help (“aids”) us to understand spiritual realities. God has promised to help our infirmities through these things, not through things we might invent to titillate our senses. God has not promised to strengthen faith through images, dramas or liturgical dances. In fact, God is offended at human innovations in His worship.

Consider what beautiful aids God has given us. In baptism, we see water being applied to a little baby or to an adult convert. This teaches us that, just as water washes away the filth of the body, so the blood and Spirit of Christ wash away the filth of sin. In the Lord’s Supper, we see the loaf of bread being broken, and we see the red wine being poured out. And we are immediately reminded of the broken body and shed blood of our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross which is our very salvation. And then we take the bread, we handle it, we smell it and we taste it; and we taste, smell and swallow the wine. These very simple actions teach us a profound truth: just as by eating and drinking bread and wine, we are nourished physically, so by eating and drinking the body and blood of Jesus Christ by faith, we are nourished spiritually unto eternal life.

Let us use these visual aids—and no other—in the church of Jesus Christ.

**November 27 – Visible Signs**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Isaiah 7:11: “Ask thee a sign of the LORD thy God; ask it either in the depth, or in the height above.”

The most complete definition of sacraments given Art. 33 is that they are “visible signs and seals of an inward and invisible thing.” We have already examined what a seal is—the guarantee of the authenticity of something. With reference to the sacraments, they are seals, because they are God’s stamp of authenticity, confirming what He has already promised in His Word.

Sacraments are also signs. A sign is some visible object or action which points to a higher reality, which, in the case of the sacraments, is a spiritual, invisible reality. A sign is also a message without words. We have all heard the saying, “A picture is worth a thousand words.” A sign (a picture) can communicate a message without using words. Many road signs are like this: they have no words but every driver instantly recognises what they mean. Other signs have words but still point to a higher reality. Take a sign pointing towards the airport. It tells you in which direction the airport is; and usually how far away it is. If you follow the sign you will arrive at your desired destination.

The Gospel is a message of invisible, spiritual realities in words. Jesus Christ, the object of our faith, sits at the Right Hand of the Father; we cannot see the blood of Christ which was shed for our salvation; and the Holy Spirit who applies the blood of Christ to us, thus cleansing us from our sins, is invisible. None of us have ever seen any of those things. The Gospel proclaims the truth of our salvation—and especially the forgiveness of sins in the blood of Christ—and the sacraments signify it, or make it known to us *by signs*.

The Lord has given two signs. The first is baptism which is the sign of the washing away of our sins. It has other meanings too, because all of God’s signs are rich signs, but washing is its primary meaning. When the water of baptism is applied to a baby or to an adult convert in the public worship service by an ordained man who preaches the Word, baptism is a sign of the washing away of sins. We “see” by faith the washing away of our sins as we contemplate the sacrament. But when you take a shower, that is not a sign of the washing away of your sins. That is not baptism—it has not been designed by God to picture the washing away of your sins and to seal the same by the Holy Spirit who strengthens faith in your heart. The second, the Lord’s Supper, which is a sign of Christ feeding our souls by His crucified body and shed blood by faith. But, perhaps you eat a large meal at home and are greatly nourished by that. That is not a sacrament—by that, Christ does not feed you with His crucified body and shed blood. Not all washings and not all meals are sacraments.

These signs are designed—as we shall see—to direct our faith away from ourselves to the one sacrifice of Christ accomplished for our salvation on the cross.

**November 28 – What Sacraments Signify.**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Hebrews 12:2: “Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith ...”

According to Art. 33, the sacraments are signs of mainly two things: “that which [God] signifies to us by His Word, and that which He works inwardly in our hearts.” Here, again, we see a beautiful harmony between Word and sacrament. What the Word proclaims, the sacraments signify and seal.

Our salvation is both objective and subjective.

By objective, we mean that which is done *outside of us* and is done *for us*. Christ died on the cross for us; He rose again for our justification. This truth of what Christ has done for us is signified and sealed to us in the two sacraments. The sacraments teach us about the whole of our salvation. We see in baptism a beautiful picture of the removal of the guilt, filth and pollution of our sins. Water washes away dirt; the blood and Spirit of Christ wash away sin. In the Lord’s Supper, God gives us another picture: as the minister breaks the bread and pours out the wine, we see a picture of the awful sufferings of our Saviour on the cross. “This is my body which is broken for you. This do in remembrance of me” (1 Cor 11:24).

By subjective, we mean that which is done *in us*, what the Spirit works *in our hearts*. The sacraments signify and seal unto us that invisible, spiritual life which we have in Christ. Titus 3:5 speaks, for example, of “the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost.” And in the Supper, the Spirit signifies and seals that invisible, spiritual nourishment of our souls as we feed by faith on Jesus Christ. That is, the sacraments teach us about sanctification.

All of these show us that the sacraments are signs and seals of what *God* does, not of what *we* do. Baptism is, among other things, a sign of our entering the kingdom of God. We do not enter it by an act of our own, but by the gracious act of God “who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son” (Col 1:13). It is also a sign of our being buried into Christ and our being raised again with Him (Rom 6:3-4). But we do not bury ourselves into Christ, nor do we raise ourselves from spiritual death. Everything is the gracious work of our God. For this reason, we reject the notions of those who teach that baptism is primarily a testimony to what we do in receiving Jesus as Saviour. Some have even said that baptism is a visible sign of an invisible decision! Nothing could be further from the truth.

Let us, then, understand what the sacraments signify, and receive that by faith.

**November 29 – The Spirit’s Work in the Sacraments.**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

John 3:8: “... but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.”

The sacraments are real means of grace because the Holy Spirit is pleased to strengthen faith by them. Without the Holy Spirit, the sacraments are and do nothing. Moreover, the preaching and the sacraments are the *only* means which the Holy Spirit has promised to use. Fanatics and hyper-spirituals despise these means to their own hurt. Those who neglect church membership and a diligent use of means cannot expect to thrive spiritually. We must not expect, therefore, to grow in grace by going for strolls in the forest or gazing at the ocean, “getting close to God through nature.” We *do* expect to grow in grace—and with good reason because God has promised it—by using the Word and sacraments.

How the Spirit works in the sacraments is in many ways mysterious. We can rule out a few errors in this connection. There is no inherent power in the elements of water, bread and wine to impart any spiritual benefit to us. The sacraments do not work like magic. We reject all forms of “sacramental sorcery.” The Spirit does not work in the water to give it magical, sin-cleansing properties. Nor does He change the bread and wine into something else—the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Moreover, as we have seen, the sacraments do not dispense grace automatically. At the same time, their efficacy does not *depend* on our faith. God’s work never depends on our work. On the contrary, we depend on God for the beginning, strengthening and continuance of our faith. Christ is “the author and finisher of our faith” (Heb 12:2).

At the same time, we must resist the temptation to say that the sacraments are *mere* signs. This was the error of Zwingli, one of the earliest Reformers. He overreacted to Rome’s errors and stripped the sacraments of their meaning. For Zwingli, the Lord’s Supper was only a remembrance and Christ is not present *in any sense*. The sacraments, then, were not means of grace—they did not nourish and strengthen faith. How could they, if they did not bring Christ? Art. 33 warns against an impoverished view of the sacraments: “the signs are not in vain or insignificant, so as to deceive us.” Will a man give his bride a wedding ring of fool’s gold? How much less will our God give us empty sacraments with no substance?

The Spirit, in a way which surpasses our understanding, takes hold of ordinary water, bread and wine, and so works in them that by them He strengthens and nourishes our faith by directing us more and more to Jesus Christ. Does He *need* the

sacraments to do this? Not at all. Nevertheless, He is pleased to use them. Let us, then, not be wiser than God by despising these gifts of His grace.

**November 30 – The Sacramental Union.**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

I Corinthians 10:4: “... they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ.”

In our treatment of the sacraments, we have seen various relationships. We have examined the relationship between the sacraments and faith—the sacraments strengthen preexisting faith; we have noted the relationship between sacraments and the Word—the sacraments are added to the Word to confirm its promises, and depend upon the Word to explain them; we have set forth the relationship between the sacraments and the Holy Spirit—the Holy Spirit is pleased to operate through the sacraments to make them real means of grace. Now, we look at something called the “sacramental union.” That theological term does not appear in the *Belgic Confession*, but much confusion in connection with the sacraments will be avoided if we make note of it here.

By sacramental union we mean that there is a definite relationship between the sign (the sacrament) and the thing signified (the reality of covenant salvation in Jesus Christ). The relationship is not one of *identity*. That would mean that the sign *is* the thing signified, that the water of baptism is the washing away of sins itself—or even the blood and Spirit of Christ—and that the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper are spiritual nourishment—or Christ’s actual flesh and blood. If the relationship were identity, we would have no sign, only the thing signified. A sign points to something else—it is not that thing to which it points. How foolish would a man be to park his car beside a sign of an airplane, and imagine that he had arrived at the airport! Equally foolish are those who imagine that the sacraments are what they signify.

Instead, the sacramental union means that, because of the close connection or association between the sign and the thing signified, the one is called after the name of the other. This is rather common in Scripture, but it ought not confuse us. God speaks this way with respect to Old Testament ordinances: “My covenant shall be in your flesh” (Gen 17:13); “Christ our Passover is sacrificed” (I Cor 5:7); “The Rock was Christ” (I Cor 10:4). Because of the close “sacramental union”, circumcision is called the covenant, and both the Rock and Passover are called Christ. The same is true of the New Testament sacraments: “This cup is the new testament in my blood” (Luke 22:20); and “the washing of regeneration” (Tit 3:5). We know, of course, that neither the cup itself nor the contents of the cup are the testament; and we know that the water of baptism is not regeneration. We do not confuse the sign with the thing signified or the sign with the reality.

Failure to appreciate this language of sacramental union in Scripture leads to the deadly errors of Rome, for, as we shall see, Rome *does* teach that baptism really washes away sin, and that the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper become the actual blood and blood of Jesus Christ in a kind of magical way. Relationships are important, especially relationships in theology.

Let there be no confusion, therefore. Let us use the sacraments without superstition but to our edification and growth in grace.

**December 1 – Christ, The True Object of the Sacraments.**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Song of Solomon 1:2: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine.”

The sacraments point to Christ and to His perfect work. They are holy pledges of Christ’s eternal love to His church —more than once we have called them the wedding ring of the heavenly Bridegroom to the bride, the church. Other theologians have called the sacraments the kiss of Christ. These are all beautiful expressions.

But what bride would be so focused on the wedding ring on her finger as to neglect the Bridegroom Himself? The wedding ring has no meaning at all without the Bridegroom who gives it. Therefore, the sacraments must never be used to draw the devotion of the bride away from Christ, but always to deepen the ardent love and passionate longing of the bride for the Bridegroom.

The Bible tells us that as soon as the church was espoused to Christ, the Bridegroom left her to go to heaven. This was not cruel abandonment of the church by Christ. He ascended to heaven to prepare a place for us; and He will be absent from His bride for a short while until everything is ready—once all the elect are gathered, and all the enemies of our Lord are defeated, then Christ shall return to consummate the marriage and the eternal marriage supper of the Lamb shall take place (Rev 19:9). In the meantime, the bride of Christ must remain faithful to Him. She does this by heeding His voice in the preaching. How the voice of the Bridegroom thrills the heart of the bride! But she also has the sacraments to confirm her — that wedding ring which is a constant reminder to her of that precious relationship with the heavenly Bridegroom. When she meditates upon the promises of Christ by looking at the ring, she says, “I am married. My Lord has promised to return. I will be faithful to Him.” What comfort and assurance her wedding ring is to her on those long lonely days when the Bridegroom is absent!

Thus everything which the church does, including the sacraments, must lead her to Christ. Without Christ and our covenant relationship with Christ, the sacraments are meaningless and empty. But the sacraments are not given to us “to deceive us,” says Art. 33. How so? “Jesus Christ is the true object presented by them, without whom they would be of no moment.” The sacraments, in beautiful but mysterious ways, point to Christ and His work on the cross, and in this way, by the power of the Spirit, they strengthen our weak and faltering faith as we wait for our Bridegroom’s return.

What a gift God has given us in the sacraments!

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Christian Literature Ministry  
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Covenant Evangelical Reformed Church  
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